

# The irresistible rise of English in Luxembourg

## A demolinguistic and sociolinguistic approach

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For a few decades, English has been gaining importance in Luxembourg. But is there empirical evidence to underpin this commonsense opinion? This paper discusses data coming from some of the few sociolinguistic surveys that have appeared over the years and from the first and only linguistic census conducted in Luxembourg by STATEC in 2011.<sup>1</sup>

### Sociolinguistic insights

“Who speaks what language to whom and when?” is the mother of all sociolinguistic questions and the title of a pioneering article of Joshua Fishman published in 1965 in the journal *La linguistique*.<sup>2</sup> In the same issue Jean-René Reimen applied Fishman’s method to the Grand Duchy and discussed the use of Luxembourgish, French and German in 20 different domains of language use. English was not mentioned at all – not even in the context of listening to music or watching movies, which is proof that in the 1960s Reimen thought of English as exoglossic to the trilingual speech community of Luxembourg.<sup>3</sup>

Reimen’s work was based on his impressions as a member of the speech community and some qualitative expert interviews. The first quantitative sociolinguistic survey with a large sample (N = 1000) was conducted in 1983.<sup>4</sup> It provides an overview of language use in 24 different domains. Less than one percent of the respondents had English as first (0.7%) or second mother tongue (0.2%). These figures seem plausible as, at this point, 0.6% of the population were British. One percent of the population used English at home, more than three percent with friends and family and some 20 percent used English when travelling abroad. English was also present in media consumption (newspaper 3%;

books 11%; cinema 17%; discs 41%): five percent spoke, seven percent wrote and nine percent read English at work.

This survey was initiated by the Ministry of Education as a response to the wave of immigration that began in the 1970s and which was perceived as a challenge for Luxembourg’s educational system in general and especially for the teaching of French. This explains why it was piloted by the *Commission Ministérielle chargée de définir les Objectifs de l’Enseignement du Français* (COF). Since then the population of the Grand Duchy has grown tremendously. Between 1981 and the present day, the overall resident population has increased by 62% and the number of foreigners has nearly tripled. Today, 48% of the resident population are non-nationals.

Due to the growth of the financial sector and the increasing number of officials of the European Union, the structure of the immigrant population has changed – not only in terms of education, but also of countries of origin. The proportion of foreigners from non-francophone countries has risen faster than the overall immigrant population and has multiplied by four. Today, the rate of people in the resident population coming from either English-speaking countries or countries with a long-standing tradition using English as main foreign language is higher than ever. But the increasing importance of English in Luxembourg is mainly an ecolinguistic side effect of globalization: English has become the lingua franca of the financial

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sector and other economic sectors, not to mention higher education and science. Since the enlargement of the European Union in 2004 through the simultaneous accession of 10 countries, it is definitively the most important working language of the EU institutions.<sup>5</sup>

The comparison of a sociolinguistic survey conducted in 1997 and its replication in 2008 allows to monitor language use during this decade.<sup>6</sup> Figure 1 shows the results for English stemming from the answers to the question: “What language do you speak best, second best etc.?”

The two bars at the left show the answers of the Luxembourg nationals. Virtually nobody says that English is their best-spoken language and almost half of the Luxembourgers indicate English in the fourth place. This seems plausible, as the overwhelming majority of them has Luxembourgish as mother tongue and learns German as first and French as second foreign language in school. The fundamental difference between 1997 and 2008 is the doubling of English as third spoken language: In 2008, 8% percent are more fluent in English than in French. This may be due to the growing number of Luxembourgers who have not attended Luxembourg’s trilingual school system (e.g. naturalized immigrants) and the tendency of the young generation to turn away from French.

The two bars at the right show the rise in English proficiency among the foreign population including unskilled migrants and top-level expats. Thus, the difference between the two bars rather reflects the structural change in the immigrant population than an increase of individual language competences.

### The 2001 linguistic census

Linguistic demography or demolinguistics is the statistical study of languages, mainly concerned with the composition of the population by language groups. It is well established in multilingual countries, especially when different language communities are officially recognized and have specific rights, as is the case in Canada or Switzerland. The main data sources of demolinguistics are language censuses. On the one hand, they are more precise and permit a finer breakdown of the results than surveys, e.g. by residence or by profession (see below). On the other hand, they are more expensive and they do not contain as many language-related questions as sociolinguistic surveys.

In 2011 STATEC carried out the first linguistic census in Luxembourg,<sup>7</sup> asking two questions about language use. First: “Which language do you think

in and know the best?” The single answer allowed will be designated in the following as main language, which is not equivalent to the mother tongue for all people. In 2011, the main language spoken by residents was Luxembourgish (55.8%), followed by Portuguese (15.7%), French (12.1%) and at a much lower level by German (3.1%), and Italian (2.9%). 10 018 respondents stated English as their main language (2.1%). All other languages were mentioned by less than one percent as main language. Two limitations should not be ignored: 1) The number of non-nationals has increased by 28% since 2011 and the rates of the different nationalities have changed – and accordingly the main languages, 2) By definition, the numerous cross-border commuters are not counted in the census.

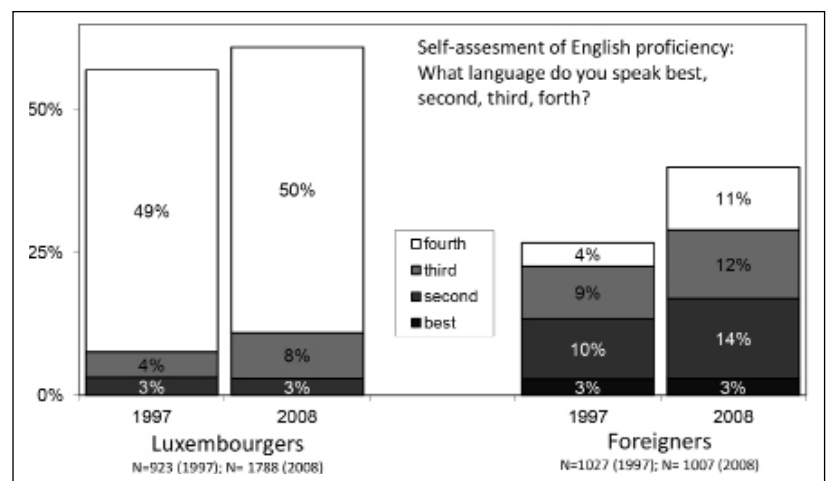
The second question was: “Which language(s) do you speak on a regular basis?” With the two sub questions: 1) “At home, with close relations; 2) at school or at work?” with several answers possible. This question must not be misunderstood as a self-assessment in language proficiency. 21.0% of the respondents speak English on a regular basis in at least one of the contexts. The corresponding figures for Luxembourgish: 70.5%; French: 55.7%; German: 30.6%; Portuguese: 20.0% and Italian: 6.2%.

The “language use at work”-question reveals a completely multilingual and segmented labor market. As shown by figure 3 for the use of English by economic activity (NACE): 64% of the employees of the finance and insurance sector speak English regularly, compared with 5% in agriculture.

A much more in-depth analysis was done based on the language profiles for different jobs and busi-

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Figure 1: Evolution of self-assessed English proficiency (1997-2008)



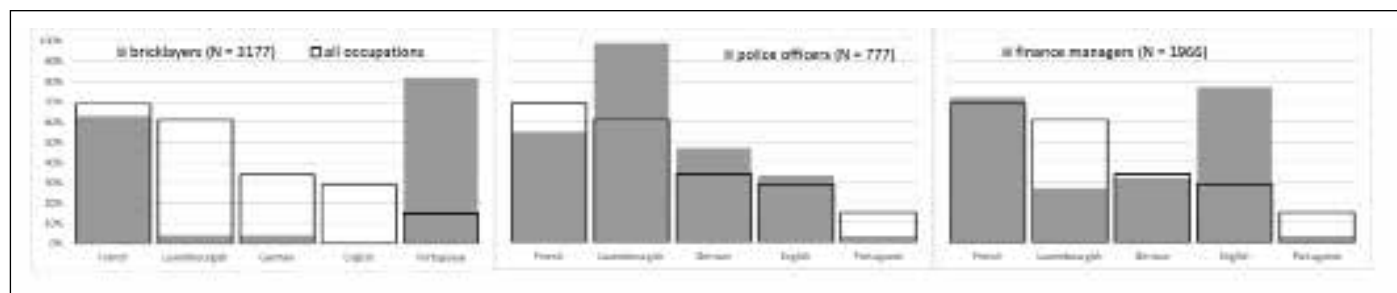


Figure 2 : Languages spoken at work – Comparison of typical language profiles with the general profile

nesses. 351 occupations were identified using the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO 08), a classification based on both tasks and skill-levels.

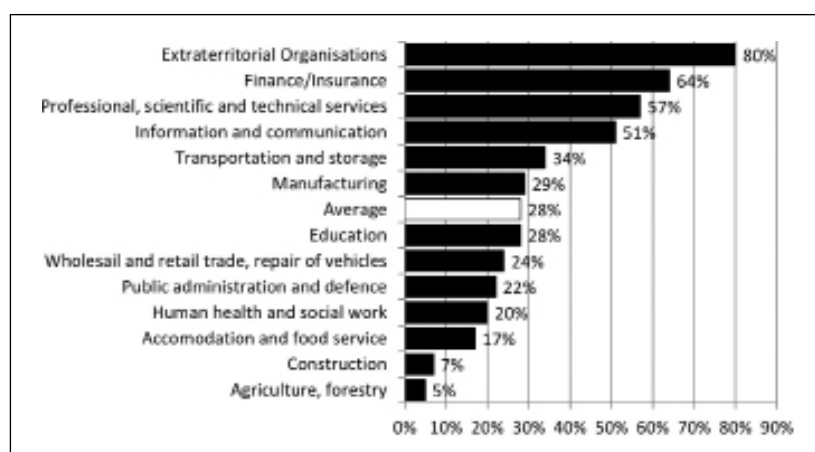
Most bricklayers speak Portuguese and French at work. On average, they use regularly 1.58 languages at work. This is less than the average of 2.51 languages used by police officers. This profession is typical for Luxembourgish trilingualism. Almost every police officer speaks Luxembourgish, followed by French (55%) and German (47%). English is used by 33% of the police officers on a regular basis. Finance managers use English (77%) and French (72%) much more often, but they use fewer languages at work (2.31) than police officers do.<sup>8</sup>

At this point, we cannot go into the actual statistical investigation of the 351 professions, but can only outline the main conclusions: French is not only the language that is used most often in the labor market, it is also the one most evenly distributed across all economic sectors and professions. It thus represents the actual *lingua franca* of Luxembourg's economy. As for French, but at a much lower level, the use of German does not depend much on the occupation of the speakers.

The main distinctive characteristic between the professions is the use of Portuguese, English, and Luxembourgish: Portuguese dominates in low-skill jobs while English dominates in high-skill and well-paid jobs. Luxembourgish combined with French, German, and English is characteristic for the public service, human health and social work sectors.

Language use and main language are proxies for nationality and migration background, but there is certainly no one-to-one corollary between those variables. As shown by a last finding: The stereotype of French nationals as strictly monolingual is, at least in the Grand Duchy, not at all accurate. Only 91.5% of them declare French as their main language, while 4.1% declare Luxembourgish and 0.7% English as such. At home, 14.9% of them speak Luxembourgish and 10.0% speak English. At work, 15.3% speak Luxembourgish and 44.9% speak English. ♦

Figure 3 : Use of English at work by economic activity



1 Short version of a paper presented at the conference "Mapping English in Luxembourg", 9 June 2017, University of Luxembourg.

2 Joshua A. Fishman, "Who speaks what language to whom and when?" in: *La linguistique*, (2) 1965, pp. 67–88.

3 Jean-René Reimen, "Esquisse d'une situation plurilingue, le Luxembourg", in: *La linguistique*, (2) 1965, pp. 89–102.

4 COF, "Enquête sur les habitudes et besoins langagiers au Grand-Duché de Luxembourg", in: *Courrier de l'Éducation Nationale (Série Évaluation)* 1986. Cf. Fernand Fehlen, *BaleineBis. Une enquête sur un marché linguistique multilingue en profonde mutation / Luxemburgs Sprachenmarkt im Wandel*. Luxembourg, SESOPI Centre intercommunautaire, 2009, pp. 61–76.

5 Fernand Fehlen, "Englisch in Luxemburg. Eine Herausforderung für die traditionelle Dreisprachigkeit", in: *forum* (362) 2016, pp. 30–34, [www.forum.lu/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/362\\_Fehlen.pdf](http://www.forum.lu/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/362_Fehlen.pdf).

6 Fernand Fehlen et al. (ed.), "Sondage Baleine, une étude sociologique sur les trajectoires migratoires, les langues et la vie associative au Luxembourg", in: *Recherche Etude Documentation* (Hors série 1) 1998. And Fehlen (2009), see footnote 3.

7 Fernand Fehlen and Andreas Heinz, *Die Luxemburger Mehrsprachigkeit. Ergebnisse einer Volkszählung*, Bielefeld, transcript, 2016. French resumés of some chapters have been published in the STATEC-series *Premiers Regards* (N°13/2015 and N°17/2015) and *Regards* (N°10/2016 and N°11/2016) <http://www.statistiques.public.lu/fr/publications/index.php>.

8 An Excel-file with all 351 language profiles can be downloaded here: <http://orbilu.uni.lu/handle/10993/26877>.

9 Fehlen & Heinz (2016 : 63–119) and Fernand Fehlen and Andreas Heinz, "Regards sur les langues au travail", in: *Regards* (11) 2016.