

# What place for English in Luxembourg's trilingual language regime?

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Since the middle of the 20th century, English has gained increased importance on both the global and European level and become a 'global *lingua franca*'<sup>1</sup> or a 'hypercentral language'<sup>2</sup> holding together the different languages of the global language system. The rapid spread of English results notably from the generalization of compulsory secondary education. According to Alastair Pennycook, 'globally we are seeing trends towards greater use of English at primary level in many school systems, as well as a trend towards the use of English medium instruction in secondary science and technology classes. From Chile to Korea, we have seen major proposals for the greater use of English across the educational system'<sup>3</sup>. These developments raise the question to what extent Luxembourg is affected by the global trend towards English. Historically, Luxembourg's trilingual language constellation, with French and German as languages of the administration and Luxembourgish as national language since 1984, has indeed left relatively little space for English. Over the last decades, more recent migration movements have however contributed to further complexify the Luxembourgish language situation by adding a layer of exogenous linguistic diversity to the historic endogenous multilingualism. As a result, citizens' language repertoires have become more heterogeneous, the balance of power between the languages in presence has shifted and there is an increased gap between

the *de jure* and *de facto* multilingualism in Luxembourg. The aim of this article is to analyse to what extent these contemporary trends have contributed to increase the role of English in Luxembourg and to assess whether English may become a second *lingua franca* alongside French in Luxembourg.

Apart from the 1984 law on language regime, explicit language policy measures are very rare in Luxembourg and are more or less limited to the field of education and language teaching. While language use is not regulated by law<sup>4</sup> and is in theory free, Fernand Fehlen has shown that there is a single 'legitimate language competence' requiring an 'an in-depth knowledge of Luxembourgish, in the dialect of the centre (*koinè*), with frequent borrowings from the French language [...] A good knowledge of school French, written practice being as least as important as oral one. [...] Knowledge of German is required, but (too) good command of German skills is not well looked upon. German is used to write down what is thought or said in Luxembourgish'<sup>5</sup>. English has so far played a rather limited role inside this legitimate language competence. This is mirrored in the field of language education policies, where Luxembourg can be considered an outlier compared to the other European countries: in all EU countries, except in Luxembourg, the United Kingdom and Ireland, English is the foreign language learnt by most students in primary and secondary education. Eurostat data shows that currently 79.4 % of pupils in the EU start learning English already in primary school, while in Luxembourg pupils have their first English classes only in lower secondary education<sup>6</sup>. It should be noted that significant differences in ac-

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**Table 1: Proportion of students learning English**

|                   | EU average | Luxembourg |
|-------------------|------------|------------|
| Primary education | 79.4 %     | 0.00 %     |
| Lower secondary   | 97.3 %     | 54.0 %     |
| Upper secondary   | 85.2 %     | 72.1 %     |

Source: Eurydice 2017

cess to English lessons remain between general education sections and vocational tracks.

Despite the increased importance of English as global *lingua franca*, Luxembourgish education policies continue to prioritize the teaching of French and German, in order to reproduce the existing trilingual constellation. An attempt to strengthen the role of English was however made in the 2010 reform proposal of upper secondary education. According to the Ministry of Education, 'the importance of English has become such for the vast majority of academic and professional fields, that we need to equip pupils with solid competences in this language'<sup>7</sup>. Minister of Education Mady Delvaux-Stehres' proposal to make English a compulsory language for all pupils in upper secondary education spurred protest from language teachers' associations and trade unions, who acted as veto players preventing policy change in the field of education. In the arguments put forward by the teachers consulted in the reform process, the attachment to the Luxembourgish official trilingualism and the preservation of the equality between languages are a central theme<sup>8</sup>. Teachers from the Athénée thus stated that 'all three languages should be treated equally. It is unacceptable to favour one language over the others'. In the same way teachers from the Lycée Aline Mayrisch argued that 'making English compulsory threatens the equilibrium between the three languages in the Luxembourgish education system' and that 'pupils' affinity for German is not taken into account'. The French teachers' association APFL underlined that 'French is the most important language on the labour market' and claimed that 'the reform proposal should take into account the local language needs rather than global trends'. For the teachers union Syndikat Erziehung und Wissenschaft (SEW), unlike French, English is not an official language in Luxembourg' and Luxembourg should resist 'the Anglo-Saxon economic and financial lobby'. Beyond these arguments, it can be argued that the protection of vested interests played undoubtedly an important role in teachers' defence of the status quo. What is at stake behind the foreign

languages taught is indeed the allocation of current and future resources and positions inside the education system.

While there are no changes regarding the position of English in the general education curricula, the rapid development of an English language schooling offer over the last years represents a novelty. What is new is that English language schooling is no longer the preserve of private institutions (such as Saint George's International school, the European school, the International school of Luxembourg), but is taken in charge by state funded public schools. From the beginning of the schoolyear 2017-2018, pupils may follow their entire curriculum from primary school to the A-Level or International or European Baccalaureate in English at the International school Michel Lucius, the International school of Differdange or the Athénée de Luxembourg<sup>9</sup>. This development can be linked to the strategic positioning of Luxembourg on the international market. English language schooling represents indeed a unique selling point for branding Luxembourg as location for global business and finance after Brexit. In 2013 and 2015 the Ministry of education already conducted two surveys evaluating the need for English schooling for expatriates' children in Luxembourg. In the conclusion of the latter can be read that 'there is an urgent need to further increase the schooling offer in Luxembourg with diversified options on primary and secondary school level. The surveys clearly reflect that the demand for English schooling is high. This is further reinforced by the inscriptions for the previously established IB and A-levels within several Luxembourgish public schools and the interest for the International school in Differdange'<sup>10</sup>.

Beyond the field of education, English plays *de facto* already an important role in a number of social fields where the use of language is not specified by law. This is notably the case in higher education: among the 43 Master's degree programmes offered by the University of Luxembourg, 17 are taught entirely in English, and in 20 more, English is one of the languages of teaching alongside French and/or German<sup>11</sup>. English is also the only language of communication of the Luxembourg National Research Fund. English further plays an increased role as language of the administration as is used as language of communication with the public. In both local and state administrations, a number of brochures and information leaflets are translated into English in order to accommodate the needs of a population that is more and more linguistically heterogeneous and does not necessarily speak one of the three official languages. This is especially the case in Luxembourg City, which is characterized by a particularly high

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proportion of foreign residents and linguistic diversity of its population. Deviating from the official trilingualism, Luxembourg City's official magazine 'CITY' is hence published in French and English. Overall, English is gaining importance in the field of media and culture, with the monthly magazine *Delano*, aimed at Anglophone expats and the *Luxemburger Wort*'s online edition in English. Finally, data from the 2011 census has revealed the importance of English at work. The use of English as working language varies significantly according to the level of qualification as well as between professional branches. Without surprise, English is overrepresented in certain branches of the private sector, such as international organizations, finance and insurance, science, information and communication<sup>12</sup>.

Despite the overall increase in the visibility of English, it remains that the number of people using English in their everyday life is far below those using French, Luxembourgish or German in Luxembourg. This is also mirrored in the perceptions of the usefulness of the different languages measured by a Eurobarometer survey in 2012. When asked about the languages other than their mother tongue most useful for their development, 72 % of respondents mention French, 47 % cite German but only 40 % name English<sup>13</sup>. Here again, Luxembourg does not follow the trend observable at the European level, where English is seen as most useful language by the highest percentage of respondents, i.e. 67 %. The picture looks however different when people are asked about the usefulness of the different languages for the future of their children. While 63 % of respondents cite French and 27 % mention German, English is the language that is named by most respondents, i.e. 71 %.

All in all, the diversification of migration and processes of internationalization have contributed to strengthen the role of English in Luxembourg over the last two decades. The impact of this trend varies however strongly between regions of the country as well as between professional sectors. So far, the policy reaction to this trend is limited to education policies targeting specific groups of expatriate population, while there is no change in general language or language education policies. Despite the absence of change in language legislation, a number of *de facto* accommodations for English speakers are made. While English is overall perceived positively and seen as language of the future, the attachment to Luxembourg's official trilingualism remains strong, which leads to conclude that radical policy shifts in favour of the promotion of English seem unlikely in the near future. At the same time, as the population will continue to be more and more linguistically di-

verse, the role of English as *lingua franca* between individuals with different language repertoires can be expected to further increase in the future, especially in and around Luxembourg City. ♦

- 1 Philippe van Parijs, *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World*, Oxford University Press 2011.
- 2 Abram de Swaan, *Words of the World: The Global Language System*, Cambridge, Polity, 2001.
- 3 Alastair Pennycook, "The future of Englishes: one, many, or none?" in: Andy Kirkpatrick (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of World Englishes*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2010, p. 677.
- 4 With the exception of the administration and justice.
- 5 Fernand Fehlen, *Le sondage 'Baleine': une étude sociologique sur les trajectoires migratoires, les langues et la vie associative au Luxembourg*, Luxembourg, SESOPI - Centre intercommunautaire, 1998, p. 16, translation by the author.
- 6 European Commission, *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe - 2017 Edition: Eurydice report*, 2017, p. 168. [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/images/0/06/KDL\\_2017\\_internet.pdf](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/images/0/06/KDL_2017_internet.pdf), accessed on June 30, 2017.
- 7 Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Formation professionnelle, *Document d'orientation pour une réforme des classes supérieures de l'enseignement secondaire et secondaire technique*, 2010, p. 34, translation by the author.
- 8 The following quotations stem from the official positions expressed by the teachers of different schools and trade unions and associations in the consultation process organized by the Ministry of Education in May 2010. These documents were made publicly available on the Ministry's website and have been archived by the author in 2011. All translations to English were made by the author.
- 9 <http://www.men.public.lu/fr/actualites/grands-dossiers/systeme-educatif/offre-internationale/fr/english-school-offers.pdf>, accessed on June 30, 2017.
- 10 Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Formation professionnelle, *English schooling survey results*, 2016, p. 5. <http://www.men.public.lu/catalogue-publications/themes-transversaux/statistiques-analyses/offres-scolaires/english-schooling/en.pdf>, accessed on June 30, 2017.
- 11 [www.uni.lu/studies/masters](http://www.uni.lu/studies/masters), accessed on June 29, 2017.
- 12 Fernand Fehlen, Andreas Heinz, *Die Luxemburger Mehrsprachigkeit*, Bielefeld, transcript, 2016, p. 66.
- 13 European Commission, *Europeans and Their Languages: Special Eurobarometer 386*, 2012, p. 69-82, [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_386\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_386_en.pdf), accessed on June 30, 2017.

**Table 2: Question: Thinking about languages other than your mother tongue, which two languages do you think are the most useful for your personal development?**

|        | English | French | Germ. | Span. | Chin. | Ital. | Russian |
|--------|---------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|---------|
| EU av. | 67 %    | 16 %   | 17 %  | 14 %  | 6 %   | 5 %   | 4 %     |
| Lux.   | 40 %    | 72 %   | 47 %  | 3 %   | 0 %   | 1 %   | 1 %     |

Eurobarometer 386, 2012.

**Table 3: Question: And for children to learn for their future?**

|        | English | French | Germ. | Span. | Chin. | Russian | Italian |
|--------|---------|--------|-------|-------|-------|---------|---------|
| EU av. | 79 %    | 20 %   | 20 %  | 16 %  | 14 %  | 4 %     | 2 %     |
| Lux.   | 71 %    | 63 %   | 27 %  | 5 %   | 9 %   | 0 %     | 1 %     |

Eurobarometer 386, 2012.