



Regional or minority languages in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (French-speaking Community), Belgium: a case study



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Policy

In Belgium, powers that are not federal are shared between communities and regions. For the Walloon language area, the regions and communities concerned are the Walloon Region and the French Community, known as the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. Although Belgium has not signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML), the Wallonia-Brussels Federation recognises seven endogenous regional languages (ERLs): Walloon, Picard, Lorrain (or Gaumais), Champenois, Moselle Franconian (Luxembourgish), Carolingian Franconian and Brussels Brabantian (Flemish). The [*Decree of 24 December 1990, on the endogenous regional languages of the French Community*](#) undertakes to preserve these languages and to encourage their scientific study and use.

The practice arising from this policy tends to be based on the general objectives of the public authorities of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation: collaboration between levels of power; equal access to culture for all citizens; the implementation of cultural policies at local level; raising awareness of languages and diversity in schools.

Where are the seven ERLs spoken?

A map showing where the seven languages are spoken can be found [here](#).

Walloon is spoken in the province of Walloon Brabant (excluding the municipality of Rebecq), the province of Namur (excluding five villages: Bohan, Membre, Bagimont, Sugny and Pussemange), the province of Liège (excluding the communes under the jurisdiction of the German-speaking Community and the communes of Baelen and Plombières), the province of Luxembourg (excluding the arrondissements of Arlon and Virton), and the arrondissements of Charleroi, Anderlues, Écaussines, Froidchapelle, Gozée, Lobbes, Ham-sur-Heure/Nalinnes and Thuin. The Walloon language area also extends to several localities in the Givet area of France as far as Fumay.

Picard is spoken in the districts of Ath, Mons, Mouscron, Soignies (excluding the municipality of Écaussines), Thuin (excluding the municipalities of Anderlues, Froid-

¹ Compiled by David Little on the basis of information provided by Julien Noël, Ministry of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation; <https://www.federation-wallonie-bruxelles.be>, <http://www.languesregionales.cfwb.be>

chappelle, Lobbes, Ham-sur-Heure/Nalinnes and Thuin), and Tournai and the municipality of Rebecq. The Picardy language area also extends into northern France.

Lorrain (or Gaumais) is spoken in the arrondissement of Virton. The Lorrain linguistic area also extends to the departments of Meurthe-et-Moselle, Meuse, Moselle and Vosges in France.

Champenois is mostly spoken in France. In Belgium, it is spoken in a very small area in the extreme south of the province of Namur. Five villages are usually mentioned – Bohan, Membre, Bagimont, Sugny and Pussemange – but the exact boundaries of this linguistic area are still a matter of debate.

Moselle Franconian (Luxembourgish) is spoken in the borough of Arlon. Moselle Franconian is mostly spoken in Luxembourg and Germany.

Carolingian Franconian is spoken in seven Walloon municipalities: Plombières, Kelmis, Lontzen, Welkenraedt, Raeren, Eupen and Baelen. Of these, only three are under the jurisdiction of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (Plombières, Welkenraedt and Baelen), while the other four are under the jurisdiction of the German-speaking Community of Belgium. Carolingian Franconian is mostly spoken in Germany.

Brussels Brabantian is spoken in the Brussels region and falls within the remit of the Flemish Community, which provides its own support for the language.

Numbers of speakers

In Belgium, language censuses have been banned since 1961, so there are no official figures. Nowadays, estimates tend to refer to ERLs in Wallonia collectively; the overall figure most often quoted is 360,000.²

Domains of use

Table 1 shows in which domains the seven ERLs are used.

| Language \ Domain of use | Family | Community | Leisure/sport | Arts and entertainment | Work | Public life/politics | Religion | Education |
|--------------------------|--------|-----------|---------------|------------------------|------|----------------------|----------|-----------|
| Walloon | * | * | * | * | | | * | |
| Picard | * | * | * | * | | | | |

² This estimate was arrived at by Michel Francard, quoted by Anne-Sophie Leurquin and Caroline Quevrain, “Le wallon n'est pas une langue qu'on spotche”, in *Le Soir*, 2 March 2018: “Today, even if we don't have official figures for linguistic practices in Belgium, we estimate that around 10% of Walloons practise or are in contact with one of the four regional languages [...] this still represents around 360,000 people”.

| | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|--|--|--|
| Lorrain (or Gaumais) | * | * | * | * | | | | |
| Champenois | * | * | | | | | | |
| Moselle Franconian (Luxembroughish) | * | * | | | * | | | |
| Carolingian Franconian | * | * | | | | | | |
| Brussels Brabantian | * | * | | * | | | | |

Print media

In 2023, seven Walloon-language periodicals that appear monthly, bi-monthly or quarterly received a public subsidy; their average circulation is 300 copies.

The Walloon language occupies very little space in the daily press today, though some regional dailies, such as *L'Avenir*, continue to devote a weekly column to the language and translate their front pages and certain other pages into Walloon once a year to coincide with the Fêtes de Wallonie in September.

The remaining six ERLs do not have a regular presence in the regional press, though the quarterly *micRomania* occasionally devotes space to Champenois. Speakers of Moselle Franconian and Carolingian Franconian may find that their language is served by the regional press in Luxembourg and Germany respectively. In 2023, one Brussels Brabantian periodical received a public subsidy: the biannual *Dem Brusselsse Sproeke*, with a print run of 50 copies

Broadcast media

There are no longer any programmes in the ERLs on the radio and TV channels of RTBF, the French-speaking public broadcasting corporation, but a weekly radio programme, *Stoemp Pèkèt et des rawettes*, is devoted to all the regional languages of Wallonia and Brussels.

The eight local television stations operating in the Walloon linguistic area and the three local television stations active in the Picard language area devote varying amounts of airtime to content in Walloon and Picard respectively. Overall, however, the presence of both languages in broadcast media is weak.

Lorrain, Champenois, Moselle Franconian and Carolingian Franconian currently have no presence in broadcast media in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation.

Print publishing

Between 2000 and 2023, more than 450 books were published in Walloon, 82 were published in Picard, and 25 were published in Lorrain. In the same period, only four books were published in Champenois, though two edited volumes included chapters in

Champenois: *Le Voyage en Oïlie* (CROMBEL, 2015) and *Le Petit Prince polyglotte en francophonies* (co-published by CROMBEL and Tintenfaß, 2023); and there has been only one book in Moselle Franconian, published by the Service des Langues régionales endogènes of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. For details of all these publications, see [this bibliography](#).

There have been no print publications in Carolingian Franconian since 2000.

As regards Brussels Brabantian, publications are more often found in Beulemans (a mixed language that incorporates French vocabulary in a Brabantian grammatical structure) than in Brussels Brabantian. On this subject, see Paul Aron's article "[L'invention du marollien littéraire](#)".

Online publications

As of 22 May 2024, there were 12,341 Walloon-language articles on Wikipedia and more than 800 Walloon-language documents on [Wikisource](#). In addition, four Walloon-language journals are available on the [revues.be](#) platform.

It is not possible to estimate the number of online publications in Picard that are directly related to Wallonian speakers of the language. As of 23 May 2024, the [pcd.wikipedia.org](#) portal contained 5,722 pages relating to Picard in France and in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation.

The [www.frego-et-folio.be](#) website provides access to a number of books in Lorrain, some of which have [audio versions](#).

No online publications have been found in Champenois, Moselle Franconian, Carolingian Franconian and Brussels Brabantian.

Civil society/politics

None of the seven ERLs plays a role in political life or public debate, though Walloon continues to play a role in certain charitable organisations, such as the [Société Royale Moncrabeau](#) in Namur. Walloon also plays an important role in folklore and carnival societies. Picard has a presence in folk societies, particularly groups that keep Picard cabaret alive, and in carnivals. Brussels Brabantian plays an important role in the identity of Brussels, especially via the activities of the [Théâtre royal de Toone](#), a traditional puppet theatre.

Support from NGOs

Walloon – Some twenty not-for-profit associations support the Walloon language, its theatre and its literature, though with varying degrees of intensity. The following are active across the whole of the Walloon linguistic area: the [Association Royale des Ecrivains et](#)

[Artistes de Wallonie](#), only some of whose activities involve the Walloon language; the Belgian Romance Committee of the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages (CROMBEL); [Li Ranteule](#), which brings together those who favour the establishment of a unified version of Walloon; the [Société de langue et de littérature wallonnes](#); and the [Union culturelle wallonne](#), which brings together the provincial federations of Walloon-language theatre groups.

Picard – The not-for-profit [Maison de la Culture in Tournai](#) has developed a number of initiatives to support the Picard language: fortnightly workshops, a collection of books, activities in schools, etc. In addition, a number of theatre companies and the [Royale Compagnie Du Cabaret Wallon Tournaisien](#) include promotion of the Picard among their activities. The Romance Language Committee of the Belgian Committee of the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages (CROMBEL) also regularly publishes literary works and philological resources in or about Picard.

Lorrain – Two associations support the language: [L'Académie des patois gaumais](#) and the [Musée de la parole en Ardenne](#); one supports Moselle Franconian, the [Arelerland a Sprooch association](#), though its activities are currently very limited.

Brussels Brabant is supported by the [Académie pour la Défense et l'illustration du Parler Bruxellois](#), which publishes the bimonthly *Dem Brusselsse Sproeke*.

Role in the education system

Subject to certain conditions, the [Decree of 24 January 1983 on the use of a Walloon dialect in primary and secondary education in the French Community](#) permits the use of ERLs in schools. However, none of the seven languages is present in the educational system as language of instruction. The educational reform launched in 2014 has added to the school curriculum an introduction to languages that includes the regional languages of Wallonia.

Walloon and Picard are taught outside the educational system, and Walloon is taught at third level (see below). There are no reports of teaching in Lorrain, Champenois, Moselle Franconian, Carolingian Franconian and Brussels Brabantian.

How are teachers of ERLs trained?

Currently only the [Haute École de la Ville de Liège](#) offers training for future teachers of Walloon. The training consists of two compulsory courses: an introduction to Walloon language teaching and language awareness (2 credits), and didactics of Walloon and language awareness (2 credits). Some associations, such as Joëlle Spierkel's Centre de Recherche en Éducation et Environnement, provide short courses and workshops for teachers of Walloon.

Teacher training is not available for the other six ERLs.

Teaching/learning materials

Walloon – Several associations have specialised in developing Walloon teaching/learning materials: the [Centre Hainuyer d'Animation et de Documentation du Wallon à l'École \(CHADWE\)](#) for the province of Hainaut; the [Centre de Recherche et d'Information du Wallon à l'École \(CRIWE\)](#) for the province of Liège; the [Centre d'Information et de Documentation du Wallon et Gaumais en Luxembourg \(CIDWEL\)](#) for the province of Luxembourg; and the [Centre d'Information pour le Wallon à l'École en province de Namur \(CIWEN\)](#). However, the last two of these associations are no longer active. The Centre de Recherche en Éducation et Environnement (CREE asbl) has been producing teaching materials for the last ten years. The [Service des Langues régionales endogènes de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles](#) occasionally publishes teaching materials, but this is not its primary function.

Picard – The [Maison de la culture de Tournai](#) has developed and distributed teaching materials in Picard, but they are not suitable for the whole of the Picard language area.

Lorrain – The library of Virton has recently developed teaching materials for Lorrain with financial support from the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, but they are not widely available.

Teaching/learning materials are not currently available for Champenois, Moselle Franco-nian, Carolingian Franconian and Brussels Brabantian.

Teaching approach

There is no officially sanctioned approach to the teaching of ERLs. However, the preferred approach aims to develop phonological awareness, metacommunication and metalinguistic skills, and openness to linguistic and cultural diversity. This approach is described in detail in [Éveil aux langues](#), published by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. The university diploma “Enseigner le picard: langue, littérature et culture” (Teaching Picard: language, literature and culture), recently created by the Université de Picardie Jules Verne in Amiens (France), could serve as a basis for this approach, but no steps have yet been taken to adapt it to Wallonia.

Main challenges

The main challenges facing the ERLs are discontinuity of inter-generational transmission, lack of visibility in public spaces, indifference on the part of public authorities and the media, and scarcity of human and material resources devoted to their preservation and promotion. For most of the languages the number of speakers is now very small.

Additional information

Walloon – The Walloon language is more affected than the other regional languages of Wallonia by koineisation, the process by which a new variety emerges from contact with neighbouring dialects. This phenomenon has long been observed in certain towns in Wallonia: Namur, Liège, Charleroi, etc. Since the 1990s, Walloon has also been affected by a project to develop a standard written form (“rifondou walon”). This project was poorly received by some of those involved on the ground and has been a source of tension ever since.

Language label – Inspired by similar initiatives in France (“Ma Commune dit Ja!”, “Òc per l'occitan”, “Ya d'ar brezhoneg”, etc.), the Wallonia-Brussels Federation has developed a label for municipalities called “Ma commune dit Oui aux langues regionals” (My communes says yes to regional languages). To date, 51 of Wallonia's 262 communes have been awarded the label, which commits them to concrete action in four areas: communication; culture; education; and signage, tourism and economic life. Of these 51 communes, 42 are in the Walloon language area, six are in the Picard language area (Tournai, Brunehaut, Frasnes-lez-Anvaing, Ellezelles, Silly and Mons), one (Virton) is in the Lorrain language area, one (Attert) is in the Moselle Franconian language area, and one (Plombières) is in the Carolingian Franconian language area. The award of the label to the other communes in these last three areas appears to be an important lever for action to promote their languages.

Brussels Brabantian – The Romance Committee of the Belgian Committee of the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages (CROMBEL), which receives structural support from the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, has included Brussels Brabantian in two series it is co-publishing with the German publisher Tintenfaß: [Mes mille premiers mots](#) and translations of [Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's Petit Prince](#). Such cooperative action plays an important role in giving visibility to languages which today have very few speakers. It should be noted that CROMBEL plays a similar role for languages and authors outside the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, reserving space for European minority languages in its periodical [micRomani](#).