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Language Maintenance and Shift in Highly Multilingual Ecologies

A Case Study of the Chinese Communities in Brussels

多语生态环境下的语言保持和转换

以布鲁塞尔华人社区为例

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Abstract

Brussels is an officially French-Dutch bilingual city, yet in reality, it is profoundly and increasingly multilingual. Earlier research on the linguistic situation in Brussels has predominantly focused on the competing dominant languages, resulting in very limited scholarly attention to smaller language communities. This paper addresses this blind spot by exploring the language repertoires, proficiencies and practices of members of the Chinese communities. Linking insights from language ecology to the study of language maintenance and shift, and informed by the questionnaire data, we

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discuss how the changing sociodemographic backgrounds of the participants affect the language maintenance and shift of the whole Chinese communities. Our results do not reveal a traditional pattern of shift toward the dominant majority languages, but rather hint at a community-level shift toward more complex multilingual repertoires with an increased role for English and Mandarin, in tune with Brussels' increasingly international and multilingual context at large.

Keywords

language ecology – language maintenance and shift – multilingualism – Brussels – Chinese communities

摘要

布鲁塞尔是以法语和荷兰语为官方语言的双语城市，但实际上它的多语制越来越深化。早期关于布鲁塞尔的语言状况研究主要描述相互竞争的强势语言，而少数族群的言语社区往往很少受到学界关注。为填补这一研究空白，本文探讨了华人社区成员的语言能力、熟练程度和语言实践。本文结合了语言生态学、语言保持和转换的研究视角，基于问卷调查的数据，讨论了社会人口不断变化的华人社区的语言保持和转换情况。我们的研究结果并没有显示出整个华人语言社区传统地向主流语言转换的模式，而是展现了其向更复杂的多语资源转变的模式，这种转变尤其凸显了英语和普通话在华人社区中日益重要的地位，也反映出布鲁塞尔日渐国际化和多语化的大环境。

关键词

语言生态 – 语言保持和转换 – 多语制 – 布鲁塞尔 – 华人社区

1 Introduction

Brussels was originally a predominantly Dutch-speaking city, but over the course of the 19th century it has shifted to be a bilingual French-Dutch and in practice dominantly Francophone place (De Metsenaere 1988; Witte and Van Velthoven 1998). It is only in recent decades that institutional French-Dutch bilingualism has evolved into an increasing multilingualism situation (Beardsmore 1980; Mettewie and Janssens 2007; Verlot and Delrue 2004; Witte and Beardsmore 1987). As an increasingly international, multiethnic and

multicultural city, the Brussels Capital Region accommodates a highly diverse population in many respects. According to official statistics, over a third of the population has a foreign nationality (BISA official statistics 2020) and more than six out of ten residents were *not* born in Belgium (International Organization for Migration 2015), and there is an even larger group with a family migration background – according to some estimates even up to 87 percent (Hertogen 2017).

This demographic diversification in Brussels has led to a highly complex linguistic situation, consisting of multiple overlapping layers. While French and Dutch both enjoy the status of co-official languages in Brussels, French remains the dominant lingua franca in daily communication: the number of speakers who claim to speak “good” or “excellent” French is nearly three times as great as that of speakers claiming to speak “good” or “excellent” Dutch (Janssens 2018: 22). Besides, French is gradually spreading into families without any historical ties to the Belgian Francophonie, especially “youths who were born in Brussels with ‘allochthonous’ background (meaning their parents were born outside of Belgium) [who] are increasingly shifting to the use of French in their new family units” (Janssens 2008: 1, 2018: 41). Different from the dominance of French, Dutch had historically suffered from “misidentification and relatively low prestige” (O’Donnell and Toebosch 2008: 158) until after World War II, when the socio-economic situation of Flanders started to thrive and national legislation greatly improved the status of Dutch. Dutch, at least *de jure*, enjoys equal co-official status with French in the capital city, and has become popular as a school language among non-native speakers of Dutch in recent years, due to the strong position of Dutch-medium education (Janssens and Vaesen 2015). An increasing number of non-Dutch speakers are aware of the importance of Dutch in this multilingual environment, as the instrumental and economic value of the language is perceived to be high (Janssens 2018: 127). English, although not a (co-)official language, has also acquired relatively strong importance in Brussels, both as a global language and as a dominant lingua franca in international communication, particularly with NATO or the EU institutions housed in the city (Verlot and Delrue 2004). The long-standing competition between French and Dutch has been overshadowed by the rise of English as a supposedly “neutral” third language to bridge the communication gap between French and Dutch speakers (O’Donnell and Toebosch 2008), although in practice, English has already replaced Dutch as the second most spoken language in Brussels (Janssens 2018: 22). It is common for both French and Dutch speakers to have higher proficiency in English than in the other co-official language (Van Parijs 2007).

Beneath the surface of these competing co-official and dominant languages, however, lies a vast array of larger and smaller immigrant heritage languages

(HL hereafter) being spoken on a daily basis, albeit often exclusively used in the families or organizations directly linked to specific communities. The latest language survey in Brussels shows that approximately a third of all families in the city has at least one home language other than Dutch or French, and in about 20 percent of all cases, neither of the two official languages of the region is spoken at home (Janssens 2018: 40). In spite of the city's rich multilingualism beneath the surface-level lingua francas French, English and Dutch, earlier research on the linguistic situation in Brussels has generally centered more on the conflict and competition between the two official language groups than on immigrant language minorities. Such HL groups in Brussels, especially the smaller ones, thus often remain invisible or are rendered invisible, and even "erased" (Irvine and Gal 2000), amid tensions between the major languages, receiving significantly less scholarly and societal attention. This paper aims to address this blind spot by focusing on communities using Chinese languages as HLs in the city as well as exploring their language repertoires, proficiencies, and practices within the larger and changing multilingual environment.

Beneath this broad aim, this paper intends to offer valuable insights into the processes of language maintenance and shift at the community level. Language maintenance refers to "a speaker, a group of speakers or a speech community continuing to use their language in some or all spheres of life," whereas language shift implies "the change (gradual or not) by a speaker, a group of speakers or a speech community from the dominant use of one language in almost all spheres of life to the dominant use of another language in almost all spheres of life" (Pauwels 2004: 719). Traditionally, language maintenance and shift are usually examined at the individual level, linked to language use by members of different generations (e.g. Fishman 1964, 2001, 2013). Our study, however, focuses on the maintenance and shift at the level of the heritage language speech community as a whole, which is in line with the language ecological approach to be discussed in more detail in Section 3. The framework of language ecology highlights the interplay of languages, their speakers, and the broader social environments in which language use takes place. As we will argue, this is highly relevant regarding our focus on Chinese communities with an interest in how processes of language maintenance and shift of the communities are shaped by the changing linguistic makeup of Brussels in general, and more in particular, by the changing sociodemographic backgrounds of the communities' members in Brussels.

Besides, it is our observation that in current literature with a strong Anglophone perspective, most cases of language maintenance and shift are associated with a situation in which there exists merely one clear majority language as a target variety. The situation in Brussels is eminently different in that

the context in which these minority languages exist is profoundly multilingual, both on an institutional level and in everyday practice. With a pervasive multilingual reality and with three dominant languages all exerting different pressures in various fields such as schools and international institutions, several languages with high prestige coexist and present possible targets for language shift. Against this background, and using data from a questionnaire survey, we will attempt to construct a profile and establish patterns of language repertoires and proficiencies of members of the Brussels Chinese communities. We will also examine their language practices in various social domains, with a particular focus on intergenerational transmission. Those findings will then be linked to the sociodemographic profile of the participants (e.g. age, occupation and education) in order to obtain a picture of language maintenance and shift in the Chinese communities across time. In doing so, this paper will cast new light on the language maintenance and shift of a smaller immigrant community in the dynamic multilingual environment of Brussels.

In what follows, we will first provide some information about the historical and sociodemographic background of the Brussels Chinese communities under discussion and give a brief description of language ecology as a broader theoretical framework. Then, we will introduce our research methodology by describing our survey as well as our sample of respondents. Next, we will show and elaborate on the most important results, focusing on (a) multilingual repertoires of speakers in the Chinese communities, (b) language proficiencies and the perceived importance of different languages, and (c) domain-based linguistic choices, with a special emphasis on the speakers' multilingual practices across domains as well as languages used in the family domain and the wider communicative contexts. Finally, we will conclude with a discussion about and a reflection on the broader significance and implications of these findings.

2 Chinese Heritage Language Communities in Brussels

People of Chinese origin generally have a long history of overseas migration, and their presence in Europe and Belgium is by no means new (Benton and Pieke 1998; CEOOR 2005; Li 2002). Chinese migration to Brussels is largely in line with their movement to Belgium (Pang and Vandecandelaere 2012: 9). A first yet relatively small group of Chinese immigrants came to Belgium in the interwar period and mostly consisted of seafarers from Guangdong and Fujian, as well as groups of traveling peddlers from Zhejiang (Vandecandelaere 2013: 308). The first sizeable flow of Chinese immigrants arrived in Belgium after the

Second World War, leading to more permanent settlement and the formation of communities (Pang 2008: 87; Pang and Vandecandelaere 2012: 9). However, most of these immigrants came from the former British crown colony Hong Kong and from Taiwan, given the severe restrictions on migration from the communist mainland. Most early Chinese immigrants worked in the catering sector, some of whom became successful local entrepreneurs in the so-called golden 1960s and 1970s (CEOOR 2005: 2). The need for relatives and friends as helpers or companions led to chain migration (Pang and Vandecandelaere 2012: 10), but it is only after the migration controls were relaxed with the advent of the reform and opening policy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) that a new and very diverse flow of Chinese immigrants came to Belgium. While previous Chinese immigrants mostly came from a limited number of areas – Qingtian, Wenzhou, Hong Kong and Taiwan in particular, Chinese migrants from the 1980s onwards originated from all parts of the PRC (Pang 2008), a diversification which was further supported by the arrival of Chinese communities from a variety of Southeast Asian countries (Liu Huang 2014). In addition to the traditional catering sector, many new migrants were engaged in economic niches such as the leather and garment industry, import and export, construction and renovation, and domestic work (CEOOR 2005: 15). While Cantonese was the dominant lingua franca in many Chinatown areas before this diversification took place, Mandarin is assumed to have taken over this position since the 1980s (Wang and Van de Velde 2015: 121). Presumably reinforcing this shift is the trend whereby, in recent years, Chinese students and researchers, skilled workers and business people have made up a large flow of migration, directly related to the rapid economic and social development of the PRC, and to an array of governmental policies in economy and education that encourage international studies, academic communication and foreign trade (Pang 2008).

Pang's study on the Chinese communities in Brussels has revealed a highly heterogeneous socio-economic profile of the Chinese immigrants "in terms of time of arrival, region of origin, educational attainment, migration motives, residence status" (Nicholls 2012: 399; Pang 2012: 88). The older immigrant groups speaking various dialects are usually less educated and mostly originate from Wenzhou and Qingtian, along with a small group of Hongkongers, Taiwanese, and "twice" immigrants from (for instance) Indonesia or Vietnam. In contrast, more recent immigrants generally have higher educational attainment levels and hail from all over the PRC. Motivations for migration range from seeking refuge and pursuing one's fortune in the earliest waves of migration to looking for jobs and business opportunities, reunifying with family members and studying more recently. Chinese immigrants in Brussels are, consequently, mostly made

up of low-skilled workers, merchants, and asylum seekers on the one hand, and students, researchers, and professionals on the other hand (Pang 1993, 2008).

The number of Chinese nationals in Belgium has significantly increased in recent decades. In 2019, 12,930 residents with Chinese nationality were officially registered in Belgium, with nearly 22.6 percent residing in the Brussels Capital Region (BISA official statistics 2020). This amounts to over 2,900 Chinese citizens in Brussels, roughly 0.2 percent of the total population of the city. However, these statistics exclude those Chinese immigrants who have taken Belgian nationality and also children of Chinese parents who were given Belgian nationality at birth as well as undocumented Chinese. As a result, the Chinese communities in Brussels have, in effect, far more members than the official nationality-based statistics reveal, and some locals who grew up within the communities have estimated that there were about 20,000 to 30,000 residents of Chinese descent living in Brussels. Nonetheless, even with these enlarged numbers, the Chinese communities remain very small, representing merely 1.5 to 2.5 percent of the total population, and are negligible compared to larger immigrant groups such as Romanians, Moroccans, French or Italians.

3 Language Ecological Perspectives on Language Maintenance and Shift

In studying language practices within the Brussels-based Chinese communities, the theoretical framework of language ecology is adopted to inform our understanding of language maintenance and shift in a multilingual context. Language ecology underscores the importance of the environment where numerous languages are present by analogy with the ecosystem: ecology is understood as a metaphor to be transferred to languages, which are dynamically co-existing in a given geographical or social space (Blackledge 2008; Haugen 1972; Steffensen and Fill 2014). Just as genuine organisms in nature, contact and competition between languages also often happen in a given ecology due to the relative power relationships that are inherent in the use of any given set of languages (Haugen 2001[1972]: 57; Mackey 2001: 67). Similarly, entities at the bottom of the linguistic hierarchy such as minority HLLs have to struggle for their maintained use under the pressure of dominant languages (Mühlhäusler 2010). Understanding how different languages negotiate positions to coexist in different settings and under different circumstances thus becomes a prime goal of language-ecological research.

The ecological approach attempts to re-orient linguistics research toward linguistic practices as an integral part of societal human activity, away from

static and decontextualized structuralism, but rather focusing on “the complex web of relationships between the environment, languages, and their speakers” (Wendel 2005: 51). In this regard, scholars, for example, Haugen (2001[1972]: 57), have argued that the ecology of a language is partly psychological in terms of speakers, and partly sociological in terms of the social attribution of the language. That means that the use, maintenance and development of a language in a given ecology, on the one hand, relies on individual speakers who decide whether or not to learn a certain language, use it and pass it down; on the other hand, they are also conditioned by the broader societal context in which languages acquire different social values and functions influencing individual speakers’ language behaviors. Therefore, the study of language ecology takes a particular interest in “how languages are shaped and changed by their environment, and reciprocally, how the environment is shaped by languages” (Wendel 2005: 51). The linguistic and social environment, the languages involved, and their speaker bases are intimately interactive (Garner 2005: 97).

The above stance is especially relevant in the present paper, given our central argument that the processes of language maintenance and shift of the Chinese communities in Brussels are influenced by the external linguistic environment in Brussels, while, at the same time, being shaped by the changing sociodemographic profiles of Chinese immigrants coming to the city at different periods, as discussed in Section 2. This motivates our perspective on language maintenance and shift as a process to be studied at the community level, which differs from using the traditional apparent-time construct to delve into specific changes in language use across different generations within families (e.g. Hulsen 2000; Li 1994); we attempt to show how the complex linguistic repertoires of Chinese HL speakers as a group, which we can observe today, can be linked to macro-level changes across time within the communities at large as well as within the broader urban context in which they operate. As such, in our study, the ecology of the languages used in the Chinese communities in Brussels is manifested in both the attitudinal and behavioral preferences of its ethnolinguistic group, as indicated by their language repertoires and their domain-based language use, but under the constant influence of the larger linguistic makeup of the city. To map out the patterns of language use, we also drew on Fishman’s domain analysis (1972) to structure the data on the participants’ language practices, as “domain” is a useful approach to examine how the language repertoires of speakers of different sociodemographic backgrounds are exploited in different locales with different interlocutors. By exploring the relations between the language practices within the Chinese communities, the socio-demographical backgrounds of their members, and the surrounding competitive multilingual environment, the approach we

choose will help us better understand the language maintenance and shift of a smaller immigrant minority group in a given multilingual context with more than one prestige language.

4 Research Methodology

4.1 *Instrument*

A questionnaire survey was used to collect the data on the language repertoires, proficiencies and practices of members of the Chinese communities. Our questionnaire was inspired by previous studies such as Marian et al. (2007), Tsai (1997) and Xiao (1992) and it included the following sections:

1. sociolinguistic background information on the respondents, including gender, educational background, occupation, nationality, and years of residence in Brussels;
2. language repertoires, using self-reported measures of language proficiency in different languages and language varieties;
3. patterns of language use in different domains and with different interlocutors, such as parents, spouse, children, friends, colleagues, and neighbors;
4. a brief section on attitudes concerning different languages' relative importance and attitudes toward HL maintenance in general.

Section 1 featured open questions, whereas the questions in Sections 2 and 3 were presented using an 11-point Likert scale. For Section 4, respondents were offered a number of statements on language and multilingualism (e.g. "the more languages a person can speak, the better," and "it's important to pass Mandarin on to one's children") to which they were asked to provide a measure of agreement, also on an 11 point Likert scale.

The questionnaire was made available in four languages, Mandarin, English, French and Dutch, and was given in the language chosen by the individual respondent. Participants were also given an informed consent form with additional information on the study and concerning the use of their anonymized data for research purposes afterward.

4.2 *Procedure*

The survey was conducted in the Brussels Capital Region between November 2017 and June 2018. A face-to-face method was adopted for ensuring valid responses. We chose convenience sampling on the basis of availability, as building a representative sample for such a dispersed group is impossible, especially given the lack of detailed reference statistics for the population of

the Chinese communities as a whole. To gain access to participants, the first author, who acted as the interviewer, visited Chinese-run restaurants, shops, supermarkets, hotels, churches, and schools, and participated in a number of ethnically oriented activities and events organized by local Chinese organizations and the Chinese embassy.

As for the main inclusion criterion for participants, we used an ethnic self-categorization approach, recruiting any respondent who self-identified as – at least partly – “Chinese” or “of Chinese heritage.” This was motivated by the consideration that formal criteria such as nationality, country of birth or home language would only help reach a part of the entire community envisioned and that, as Extra and Yağmur (2004: 31 & 51) argued, those criteria often suffer from “intergenerational erosion,” while a “self-categorization approach recognizes that a strong ethnic identity is not limited to just first- and second-generation immigrants.”

4.3 *Participants*

We collected 200 valid responses to our questionnaire. Given the very limited demographic data on the Chinese communities under investigation (BISA official statistics 2018), we believe our sample does reflect the overall makeup of the community population in terms of the most important social characteristics, in line with the fairly heterogeneous image of the Brussels-based Chinese communities. Table 1 presents a wide range of important demographic variables in our sample. The gender distribution of the participants is fairly balanced, and the vast majority of the respondents are Chinese nationals, with only 20 percent of Belgian citizens of Chinese origin. Just as is the case in terms of the composition of the Chinese communities at large, the Chinese nationals in our sample originate from all over mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and countries in Southeast Asia, with the largest group hailing from Zhejiang province (20%). Around half of all respondents have been long-term residents in the city (5+ years),⁴ while the other half are more recent arrivals. The sample is relatively young ($M = 37.5$, $SD = 13.7$), with over half of all respondents under 40 years old. The majority of the respondents are well-educated with a BA or higher degree, although our sample also includes nearly 40 percent of respondents with a secondary and lower educational level. As for occupation, about a third are students, including international students (80.9%) and students who grew up in Belgium (19.0%). The other categories, such as professionals (15.5%), self-employed (24.0%), and unskilled workers (23.5%),

4 Immigrants who work and reside legally and continuously in Belgium for five years can apply for the EU long-term residency status.

TABLE 1 The demography of respondents (N=200)

Gender	Female	57.5%
	Male	42.5%
Nationality	Chinese	77.5%
	Belgian	20%
	Others	2.5%
Age groups	17–29	37.5%
	30–39	26.5%
	40–49	19.0%
	50+	17.0%
Occupation	Students	31.5%
	Self-employed	24.0%
	Unskilled workers	23.5%
	Professionals	15.5%
	Unemployed	5.0%
	Retired	0.5%
Education level	Primary	8.0%
	Lower Secondary	7.5%
	Higher secondary	23.0%
	Bachelor's or equivalent level	29.0%
	Master's or equivalent level	27.0%
	Ph.D. or equivalent level	5.5%
Duration of residence in Brussels	3 months–1 year	16.5%
	2–5 years	32.5%
	6–15 years	25.0%
	16+ years	26.0%

virtually reflect the composition of the communities at large. The majority of self-employed (91.8%) and unskilled workers (65.2%) have been living in Belgium for more than 5 years. But a large number of professionals (58.1%) and students (88.9%) are newcomers. Different from most professionals who tend to continue living in Belgium (83.9%), a third of students are determined to go back to China when they finish their studies.

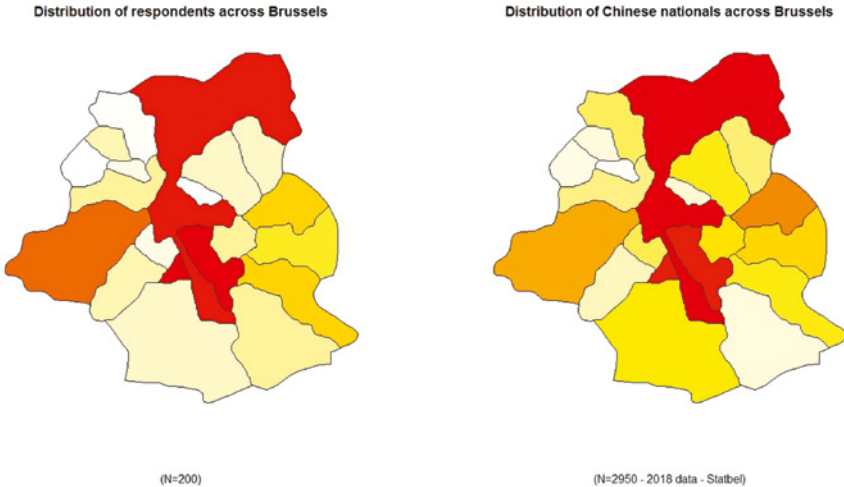


FIGURE 1 Distribution of respondents in our sample (left) and officially reported Chinese nationals across Brussels (right)

In addition, comparing the geographical distribution of our respondents with that of Chinese nationals across the Brussels Capital region in Figure 1, we can see that our sample well reflects and accordingly corresponds with the geographical spread of the communities; our sample reflects the large concentrations of the Chinese communities' members in the central Brussels capital district and the neighboring commune of Ixelles (in red), where the traditional Chinatown area and the two main universities are located, as well as in the richer Woluwe communes in the (south-) east of the Region, which hosts the Chinese embassy, and the more working-class district of Anderlecht in the West, which is home to a large number of mostly Wenzhounese and Qingtianese wholesale businesses.

As we want to be able to detect patterns of variation and change over time, we will focus specifically on respondents' age, splitting our informants into four age groups (under 30, 30–39, 40–49, and 50+). With a strong awareness that language use and proficiency change across one's life span, we take age as “a window into the past by interpreting the older respondents' speech as representing the speech of a former era” (Dollinger 2015: 176), and we also interpret age as a function of residency in Belgium. In fact, there is a strong correlation in our data between age and duration of residency in Belgium ($R = 0.71, p < 0.0$).

Furthermore, the age differences also reflect the changing nature of Chinese migration to Belgium, particularly regarding occupation and level of education, as discussed in Section 2. The less educated respondents in our sample tend

to be older and thus longer residents in Belgium (mean age for respondents without a BA degree or equivalent: 43.8), while better-educated respondents are usually much younger (mean age with BA degree: 33.6). Also, the mean age for self-employed (47.4) and unskilled workers (41.5) is noticeably higher than that of students (26.0) and skilled professionals (38.1). Older respondents with a longer residency thus tend to be less educated and are usually self-employed or unskilled workers, while younger respondents and more recent arrivals are more likely to be higher-educated professionals or students. Thus, in addition to a focus on age, we will also include occupation and level of education as independent variables in the analyses below.

5 Results

5.1 *Language Repertoires*

Contrary to the traditional image of the Chinese communities as being fairly closed and monolingually oriented toward HLS, our results reveal that an overwhelming majority of respondents report using three (38%), four (24%) or even five (7.5%) languages on a daily basis in Brussels, as demonstrated in Figure 2. Monolingual language users (2.5%) hardly exist in the Brussels Chinese communities, and even bilinguals make up only just over a quarter of the total (28%). The median number of languages does not differ across age cohorts (Mdn = 3), occupational classes (Mdn = 3), and levels of education (Mdn = 3). The normality of multilingualism is also reflected in very favorable

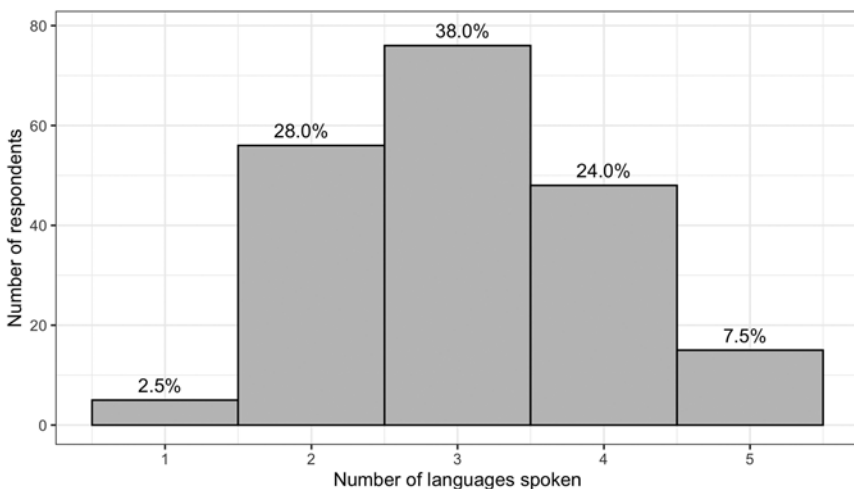


FIGURE 2 Number of languages spoken

TABLE 2 Number and percentage of respondents claiming the use of the languages in question (top 5)

Language	Respondents	Percentage
Mandarin	199	99.5%
French	143	71.5%
English	138	69.0%
Chinese dialects (<i>grouped</i>)	78	39.0%
Dutch	42	21.0%

attitudinal data: no less than 71 percent of respondents completely agree with the statement that “the more languages spoken, the better,” giving it the highest possible agreement score on the 11-point Likert scale. All of this shows that multilingual practices are a powerful fact of life within the Brussels Chinese communities.

When it comes to actual languages spoken, based on self-reported lists in descending order of frequency of use, Table 2 shows that the most ubiquitous language in the Brussels Chinese communities is Mandarin. This dominance is also supported by highly positive attitudes toward Mandarin: when asked to rate different languages in terms of importance on a scale of 0 (not at all important) to 10 (extremely important), 61.5 percent of all respondents gave Mandarin the highest importance score ($Mdn = 10$). This implies that Mandarin is now solidly regarded as the common intra-community lingua franca among a diverse heterogeneous group of community members coming from many different regions in China.

As Table 2 also demonstrates, besides the dominance of Mandarin in everyday use, approximately 70 percent of respondents claim that both English and French are part of their daily language repertoires, and both languages are equally important ($Mdn = 8$ for both languages). This reflects the linguistic situation in Brussels, in which more than one important majority or dominant language coexist, even if English has no co-official status in Brussels. The motivation for the adherence to French and English is clearly utilitarian, as reflected in very high agreement ratings for the attitudinal statements “speaking the majority language opens doors for the future” (67 percent of respondents in maximal agreement, i.e. an 11/11 score) and “speaking the majority language makes my daily life easier” (70.5 percent in maximal agreement). Dutch, as the second co-official language in Brussels, is clearly much less important than English and French for members of the Chinese communities and is only part of one-fifth of the respondents’ repertoire.

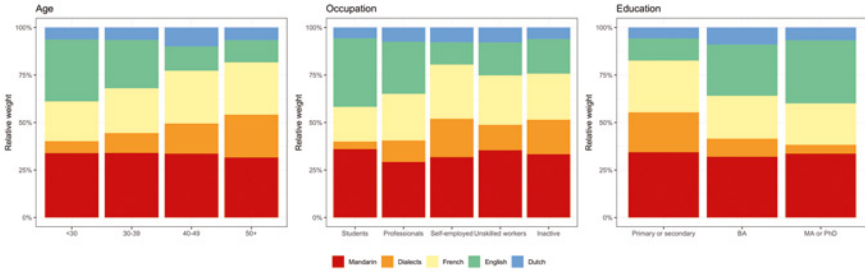


FIGURE 3 Language repertoires per age group, occupation, and level of education

In addition to non-Chinese languages, many respondents also mention the use of Chinese dialects and minority languages in China (most notably Tibetan, by 3.5 percent of the respondents). Grouping the Chinese dialects together makes them the fourth major group in the language repertoire of our respondents, following Mandarin, French and English, with the recognition that dialect use may still be underreported. The most frequently mentioned dialects are Wenzhounese (14%), Cantonese (12%), Qingtianese (5%), Shanghainese (3.5%), and Hokkien (2%). Dialects are still seen as highly important by those who speak them (Mdn = 10), but much less so by the mostly younger speakers who no longer use them (Mdn = 2.5).

Figure 3 shows the relative importance of each of the five main languages (i.e. Mandarin, Chinese dialects, French, English and Dutch) in the language repertoires of different age groups, occupational classes, and levels of educational achievement. Looking at the distribution across the four age cohorts, we can see that the position of Mandarin is surprisingly stable, indicating language maintenance of the whole communities over time: both older and younger respondents indicate to very similar degrees that Mandarin is part of their language repertoire. The variation is also very limited across occupations and different levels of educational backgrounds, and the relative weight of Mandarin surpasses that of other languages in each category, except for the student and better-educated groups, for whom Mandarin is as prominent as English.

However, a clear shift across age cohorts is observed for the Chinese dialects: their presence in speakers' repertoires decreases with age, and is especially limited among recent community members coming to Brussels as students. French is also important as a local lingua franca for all groups, in spite of low self-reported proficiency (cf. below), and the importance of Dutch is limited across the board. The weight of English, however, is clearly increasing. Its presence surpasses that of French for younger community members, especially highly educated students and skilled professionals, while French is clearly more important among older generations, and especially for self-employed local business owners.

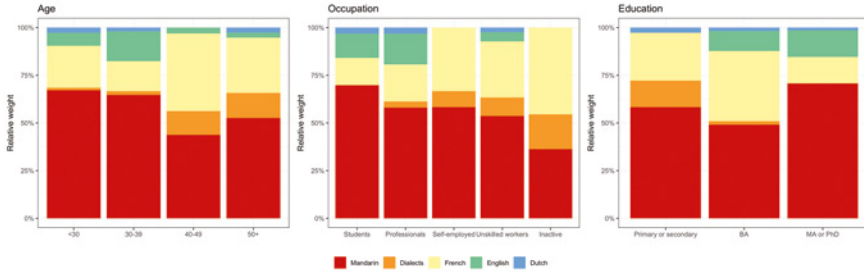


FIGURE 4 Most frequently used language per age group, occupation, and level of education

However, concerning the language which respondents indicated they used most frequently in daily communication, a different picture emerges (Figure 4). Here, the dominance of Mandarin is even more evident. Its overall importance is strongest for the younger, better-educated students, and lower for older respondents, where Chinese dialects take over the slightly lower position of Mandarin. This indicates that the Chinese dialects almost never serve as the most frequently used language of communication by respondents under 40, but they remain relatively strong among older people, typically those without a university degree, and typically self-employed, unskilled workers or inactive speakers. The overall proportion of non-Chinese languages is similar across age cohorts, but here we also see clear differences when comparing English and French. The use of English as the most widely used language is, not surprisingly, most prominent among better-educated professionals and students with a higher university degree. However, in spite of the relative importance of English in the respondents' overall language repertoires, French clearly surpasses English as the main language in use across the board. Older respondents in particular hardly use English as their most spoken language, and it is completely absent for self-employed and inactive respondents, as well as for speakers without a university degree.

5.2 Proficiency and Importance

The data for self-reported language proficiencies, in considering only those respondents who report at least some proficiency in the language in question, mostly follow the language use patterns discussed in the previous subsection, albeit with some notable exceptions. Most respondents best command Mandarin and Chinese dialects. For the former, the respondents claimed very high speaking and writing proficiency levels, both receptive and productive (overall proficiency: Mdn = 10, M = 9.1; speaking: Mdn = 10, M = 9.4; listening: Mdn = 10, M = 9.5; writing: Mdn = 10, M = 8.6; reading: Mdn = 10, M = 9.2). For the latter, oral proficiency was reported as the highest, with

slightly lower proficiency scores for writing skills (overall proficiency: Mdn = 10, M = 8.9; speaking: Mdn = 10, M = 9.1; listening: Mdn = 10, M = 9.4; writing: Mdn = 10, M = 8.6; reading: Mdn = 10, M = 8.8). Overall, this suggests that dialect proficiency is decreasing among the younger generations. High proficiency in Mandarin is also reflected in high importance scores for this language: on an 11-point Likert scale, the respondents rate Mandarin as extremely important (Mdn = 10, M = 8.7), while Chinese dialects score much lower (Mdn = 7, M = 6).

The self-reported proficiency in non-Chinese languages, however, is relatively low, especially against the information discussed above that there were positive attitudes toward English and French and both were frequently used; yet, relatively high importance scores were accorded to both languages (Mdn = 8 and M = 6.4 for French; Mdn = 8 and M = 6.3 for English). The respondents seem to have a better overall command of English (Mdn = 7) than French (Mdn = 5.2). Proficiency in English rises in the younger age cohorts, while that in French is reported slightly higher by the older respondents. Less surprisingly, the respondents' knowledge of Dutch is even more limited (Mdn = 3.6), which may be related to their perception of Dutch as an unimportant language, quite contrary to more generally positive attitudes toward Dutch in Brussels as an important language in the economic domain and for employment opportunities (Janssens 2018); Dutch is also accorded very low importance ratings (Mdn = 0, M = 2.6), as reflected in low motivation to learn Dutch: while around a third of all respondents reported to have previously taken French language classes, only six percent of respondents had ever taken a Dutch language course. This further shows that the official bilingual situation, conditioned by the specific language-political settings in Brussels, does not at all reflect the use or importance of languages in the actual language ecologies of specific communities within the city.

5.3 *Multilingual Practices Across Domains*

To gain a better understanding of the language maintenance and shift of the Chinese communities, it is crucial to investigate the members' linguistic choices in various domains. First, in this subsection, we will consider the speakers' multilingual practices across domains by investigating the number of languages spoken to different circles of interlocutors. In the next two subsections, we will then consider which languages are most used per circle of interlocutors, focusing first on the family domain, and then moving on to the wider communicative contexts of friendship, work and neighborhood.

As Table 3 shows, the family domain is most monolingual, albeit with the clear exception of communication with children. A large majority use only one language with their parents (70%) and spouse (69.5%). Note that many

TABLE 3 Number of languages used with different interlocutors

Number of languages spoken	Parents (n=50)	Spouse (n=131)	Children (n=87)	Colleagues (n=170)	Friends (n=199)	Neighbors (n=154)
1	70%	69.5%	47.1%	50.6%	16.1%	71.4%
2	24%	23.7%	41.4%	40%	56.8%	21.4%
3+	6%	6.8%	11.4%	9.4%	27.1%	7.1%

first-generation migrant respondents have parents who still live in China, which we excluded, as we wanted to focus on the language practices within the Chinese communities in Brussels. For the respondents with children, however, a bilingual or multilingual upbringing (52.8%) is more the norm than a monolingual upbringing (47.1%). Comparing their language use with parents, spouse and children on a generational scale, we can see a clear shift from monolingual patterns as the norm with parents, toward more diverse language use with spouses, and very multilingual patterns with children. This already indicates that, rather than observing language shift from one language to another, we are witnessing a shift from monolingual to multilingual repertoires in the family domain.

Communication with neighbors also reveals a mostly monolingual pattern of use. This monolingual orientation, however, is not reflected in communication with friends, with whom we see very strong multilingual repertoires in use: about 84 percent of our respondents claim to use two or more languages in contexts with friends. Also, in spite of the traditional image of Chinese immigrants working in small ethnically oriented family businesses, for instance, in the catering industry or wholesale, communication with colleagues is also often conducted bilingually or multilingually. All in all, these numbers confirm the highly multilingual orientation of the Chinese communities discussed earlier, especially in public domains.

5.4 *Intergenerational Transmission and the Family Domain*

When looking more closely at the family domain, focusing only on the use of each of the five main languages (Table 4), we can observe the strong position of Mandarin. While Chinese dialects still have their place in the home context, especially in communication with the parents of our respondents (50%), Mandarin actually gains ground in communication with one's spouse, and is even more strongly favored for intergenerational transmission, as witnessed

TABLE 4 Percentage of respondents using each language in the family domain

Languages	Parents (n=50)	Spouse (n=131)	Children (n=87)
Mandarin	58%	63.4%	81.6%
Chinese dialects	50%	32.8%	27.6%
French	18%	21.4%	47.1%
English	6%	18.3%	5.7%
Dutch	6%	3.1%	6.9%

by the much higher percentages of Mandarin-versus-dialect use with children (81.6% versus 27.6%). Whereas language use with parents, spouse and children reveal a solidly decreasing pattern of shift in apparent-time for the Chinese dialects (50% – 32.8% – 27.6%), the opposite is true for Mandarin (58% – 63.4% – 81.6%). This suggests that Mandarin is increasingly regarded as an important language for the future, as good command of Mandarin will bring various benefits to the next generation in terms of keeping in contact with family and relatives in China and offering business or employment opportunities. On an attitudinal level, this is confirmed by a strong consensus among our respondents that intergenerational transmission of Mandarin is very important, and the HL is seen as a primary marker of identity: 79.5 percent of respondents give a maximal agreement score (11/11) to the statement that “it’s important to pass Mandarin on to one’s children”, and an overwhelming majority also agree with the statements “I feel proud to be a speaker of Mandarin” and “to be Chinese means one must be able to speak Mandarin” (80.5 percent and 79 percent of all answers showing a positive agreement score of 6 or higher).

Whereas non-Chinese languages only take up a relatively limited place in communication with parents, we can see their increased importance in communication with spouses, and the very strong position of French in communication with one’s children. The relatively high use of French with children (47.1%), combined with the very strong position of Mandarin (81.6%) and the earlier observation that communication with children is bilingual or multilingual in a majority of cases (52.8%), reveals that the Chinese communities do not experience a typical pattern of a three-generation shift from one minority language to one majority language, but is rather marked by a shift toward ever more multilingual repertoires, also in the family domain. Whereas English is used frequently with partners (18.3%), however, it is marginally important as a language of intergenerational transmission (5.7%), to an even more limited

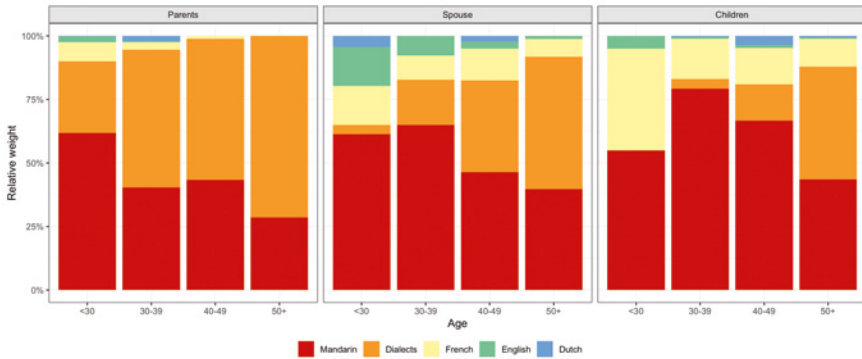


FIGURE 5 Language use in the family domain

degree than Dutch (6.9%) – which may, to some extent, reflect the importance of the Dutch-medium educational system in Brussels.

In considering the relative weight of each language in the family domain per age group, as presented in Figure 5, we can confirm the strong position of Mandarin as the main HL for each age group, except in communication with parents, where the dialects still hold an advantage for people of 30 or older. Here, we can observe a pattern of language loss for the Chinese dialects, but it is mostly Mandarin that stands to gain from this: Mandarin takes over from the Chinese dialects as the most important home language. In communication with one's spouse, both English and French become important for young people, presumably reflecting an increasing trend of exogamy – whereas the combination of Mandarin and a Chinese dialect was a common pattern of communication between partners in the older generations, younger members of the Chinese communities often use Mandarin alongside French or English. It is also this group of younger multilinguals who frequently use French – but not English – in communication with their children, often in combination with Mandarin.

5.5 *Friendship, Work and Neighborhood*

As we noted earlier, multilingual communication is the norm in the domains of work (colleagues) and leisure (friends). This may not be surprising, given the fairly wide communicative space of these domains, which may also explain the more monolingual language use with neighbors. As Table 5 shows, French is used most frequently (59.1%) with neighbors, although many also report that they use English (31.2%) and/or Mandarin (29.9%). This reflects the strong position of French as a “public” intergroup lingua franca all over Brussels, possibly substituted by English in the case of those unable to speak

TABLE 5 Percentage of respondents using each language with friends, colleagues and neighbors

Languages	Friends (n=199)	Colleagues (n=170)	Neighbors (n=154)
Mandarin	91.5%	61.2%	29.9%
Chinese dialects	22.6%	8.2%	11.7%
French	49.7%	42.4%	59.1%
English	43.2%	42.9%	31.2%
Dutch	7.5%	5.9%	5.2%

French. However, the relatively solid position of Mandarin here, outside the intimate circle of the family, may also reflect the clustered housing concentrations in Chinese neighborhoods (cf. Figure 1), making Mandarin the medium of communication within local ethnic networks. Friendship networks for members of the Chinese communities are, to some extent, ethnically oriented as well, as evidenced by the fact that Mandarin is the most commonly used language when talking with friends. However, as we have already concluded from Table 3, bilingual and multilingual communication patterns far exceed monolingual ones with friends, and this is reflected in a balanced use of both French (49.7%) and English (43.2%).

When the data is split up per age cohort, as presented in Figure 6, we can see how dialects still play a limited role in communication with friends inside the Chinese communities, but this decreases among younger respondents. Nonetheless, Mandarin and Chinese dialects remain dominant in communication with friends in each age cohort, indicating the importance of ethnic friendships within the Chinese communities. Although French is the main lingua franca for communication with neighbors and friends who do not speak a Chinese language variety for the older respondents, English is increasingly taking over this role among younger people. That reflects our earlier observation that younger respondents score higher on self-rated proficiency for English, whereas older respondents score better for French.

In the workplace, we see similar multilingual patterns, with high use of Mandarin (61.2%), as well as English (42.9%) considerably surpassing French (42.4%). Regarding the differences between age groups, the high use of Mandarin, French and English with colleagues reflects the heterogeneity of the communities, with older, earlier members who work in more ethnically oriented businesses (e.g. catering) using more Mandarin and French

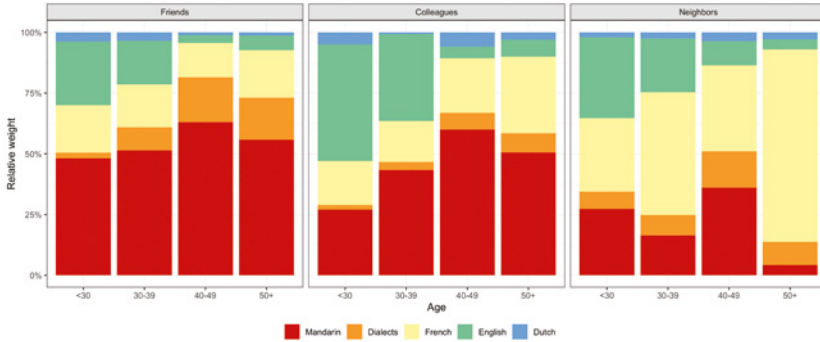


FIGURE 6 Language use with friends, colleagues and neighbors

in communication with colleagues. This stands in contrast to more recently arrived and younger members working in more international environments, where they use English – and only to a lesser extent, French – as their main professional lingua franca, sometimes in combination with Mandarin in their contacts with coworkers of Chinese origin. Dutch remains relatively marginal, both in the workplace and in other public domains.

6 Discussion

Our results reveal that multilingualism is an everyday reality in the Chinese communities in Brussels, as reflected in the actual multilingual practices and multilingualist ideologies. Multiple languages dynamically co-exist and co-evolve in the Brussels Chinese communities where Mandarin, Chinese dialects, English, French, and Dutch all keep a fairly high profile yet for very different reasons and in different domains. However, HLLs have assumed a slight dominance in this ecology, which is indicated by high proficiency and high use in almost all domains. Mandarin, in particular, is the most frequently used language in the family domain and other key social networks, such as friends and colleagues. Moreover, we can detect the shifting language practices and repertoires at the community level, as evidenced by the patterns of language use across different sociodemographic groups. The recently-arrived, younger, better-educated members of Chinese communities, usually professionals and students, prefer using Mandarin in the intimate communicative spheres (e.g. family and friends) and tend to use English in the more public communicative domains, especially in the workplace. In contrast, the early-arrived, older, less educated members, usually the self-employed and the unskilled workers, prefer using dialects in the intimate communicative spheres and using Mandarin

and French in the wider communicative domains. The data on language practices across three generations, i.e. parents, spouses, and children, also offer a deeper insight into the patterns of change. Chinese heritage families see a shift away from Mandarin or dialects as the exclusive means of communication within the family, yet not toward simple adoption of French or any other dominant language instead, but rather toward increasingly multilingual family repertoires. This tendency has similarly been observed as an overall pattern for other HL communities in Brussels at large (Janssens 2018). Different language choices dominate for different generations of interlocutors: in communication with parents, Mandarin and Chinese dialects remain strong; in communication with spouses, English and French also make up a sizeable group in addition to Mandarin and dialects; in communication with children, Mandarin and French play a central role. This hints at a language shift in progress for Chinese dialects within the communities owing to the influx of younger and more Mandarin-oriented speakers, but high rates for Mandarin, as well as growing additional importance of French and English, also inside the family domain.

Our analyses of language practices across different social groups provide a glimpse of the languages in the ecology of the Chinese communities. The rise of Mandarin and English in recent years has been changing the power relationship of languages coexisting in the Brussels Chinese communities. Mandarin, beyond doubt, is replacing dialects and becoming the prestige language within the Chinese communities, as indicated by the fact that most newcomers and well-educated members use it and most respondents are trying to transmit it to the next generation. English is also becoming more popular as a language for outgroup communication among recently arrived, younger, well-educated members who are attracted by plenty of opportunities brought about by the international role of Brussels, in line with the overall rise of English as a “contact language” in the city at large (Janssens 2018: 37). Good command of English helps this kind of group to live, study and work comfortably in Brussels, virtually enhancing the covert prestige of English within the communities. The shift of the power relationship among languages in recent years also reflects the fact that the pattern of language practices within the Chinese communities in Brussels is undergoing a change from a more regional orientation in the past to a more ethnic but broader Chinese orientation, which, at the same time, is also truly international.

From a theoretical perspective, the dynamic process of formation of those patterns testifies to the value of the language ecology framework that explains the complicated interactions between environment, language and ethnolinguistic groups. The environment has an important influence on the speakers' preference for certain languages, thus further shaping the presence

of languages in the given communicative space. In our study, there is no doubt that language practices within the Chinese communities have been affected by the dynamic linguistic makeup in Brussels where there are three well-recognized and competing dominant languages. French is definitely a lingua franca throughout the city and gradually spreading into non-French families. The co-official language, Dutch, receives a strong preference in the education and job market in spite of being the main minority native language in Brussels. The increasing importance of English in the city in recent decades is reinforced by the international position of Brussels and conflicts between French and Dutch. Different from most Anglophone countries or officially monolingual countries, these three prestige languages dominating the linguistic landscape of Brussels provide more potential targets for language shift. As a result, the language ecology of the Chinese communities confirms the presence of these competing dominant languages in Brussels. French is often spoken by longer-standing and lower-educated members of Chinese communities in external communications, and it is the only language that threatens the intergenerational transmission of the HLLs in Chinese families owing to its official and institutional role in Brussels. English is often used by newcomers and highly educated members, especially in working and studying contexts. The growing importance of English in the Chinese communities indicates that Brussels' changing linguistic landscape has a direct impact on the language shift of the whole communities. However, unlike French and English, which are widely recognized and used, Dutch is relatively invisible in the Brussels Chinese communities, although it is perceived as one of the dominant languages in Brussels.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that the competition between dominant languages in Brussels' unique linguistic situation may allow HLLs to survive and even flourish. It has been documented that smaller HLLs with little support are indeed vulnerable in situations with one clear dominant language, for instance, in English-dominant countries such as the U.K. (e.g. Kandler, Unger and Steele 2010), the U.S. (e.g. Wiley and Lukes 1996), Australia (e.g. Smolicz and Harris 1977) and Canada (e.g. Edwards 1995). Some scholars also note that speakers of Chinese heritage languages tend to swiftly shift to the dominant language or English-dominant bilingualism in Anglophone countries where English is hegemonic both as a local and as a global language (e.g. Chik 2010; Clyne and Kipp 1999; Li 1994). However, in Brussels, we argue that a competitive multilingual language ecology in which the HL is situated probably supports HL maintenance rather than shift in implicit or subtle manners. The explanation could be that conflicts of major languages seem to lessen the pressure on the language minorities so that a HL has the chance to keep serving the key communicative roles within the ethnic community. Moreover,

although official policies to support HLLs in Brussels are largely lacking, recent initiatives launched by the Brussels Government to promote multilingualism in 2020 may yield more opportunities for HLLs to develop (Gatz 2020).

Except for the favorable external environment, the flourishing of HLLs – especially Mandarin – in the Chinese communities is inseparably linked to the strength of the newly arrived ethnolinguistic group, which is well-educated and has a good command of Mandarin. With the rapid expansion of the communities in Brussels, the maintenance of Mandarin enjoys considerable advantages in light of status factors, demography factors, and institutional support. The increasing population of Chinese immigrants from all over China in Brussels and the recent arrivals of professionals and students definitely improve the socioeconomic status of Chinese communities' members and add the demographic advantage of the ethnolinguistic community. The fact that Mandarin is being increasingly considered as an important language worldwide owing to China's emerging economic power only enhances its prestige within the Brussels Chinese communities. This phenomenon is equally evident in other Chinese communities in diasporas worldwide, for instance, in Australia (e.g. Kipp 2008; Mu 2013), Canada (e.g. Duff and Becker-Zayas 2017; Guo and DeVoretz 2006), the U.K. (e.g. Ganassin 2020; Li and Zhu 2010), the U.S. (e.g. Xiao 1992; Zhang and Slaughter-Defoe 2009) and Malaysia (e.g. Chong and Wang 2009; Wang and Chong 2011). In Brussels, with the continued influx of new immigrants and stronger institutional support from the ethnic community, Mandarin is already dominant in the community language schools, self-organized Chinese media and diverse ethnic-oriented Chinese organizations, which are considered as the three pillars of diasporic communities, dedicated to the maintenance of heritage language and culture (Li 2016: 6). As Potowski (2013: 13) comments, "only continued immigration" is sustaining the HLLs and resisting the language shift to dominant languages.

In summary, our findings show no traditional language shift to one or two dominant languages in the Brussels Chinese communities but a shift to a more complicated multilingual repertoire, with an increased role for English and the rise of Mandarin at the expense of Chinese dialects. This is because of the dynamic interactions between the complex external environment and the ethnolinguistic group.

7 Conclusion

This study has surveyed the language repertoires, proficiencies, and domain-specific linguistic choices of members of the Chinese communities in Brussels, in an attempt to understand the language maintenance and shift of the Chinese

communities. By linking these results with the changing sociodemographic backgrounds of the participants, we have observed changes in the patterns of language practices that are in tune with Brussels' dynamic multilingual and increasingly international setting. Broadly, by delineating the interactions between environment, speakers and languages, we conclude that language maintenance and shift in the Chinese communities are shaped by the external linguistic reality in Brussels and the migration patterns of their members. In terms of HL maintenance in the city, we assume that the presence of and competition between multiple dominant languages have probably given rise to the maintenance of Mandarin, with the support of its own ethnolinguistic groups.

However, we acknowledge that the present study has some limitations. First, the sample size of the present study is relatively small ($N = 200$), and care should thus be taken not to generalize the results of the sample to the population as a whole. Second, the questionnaire survey was the only method adopted to investigate language practices and should ideally have been complemented by other more qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and on-site observations, in order to tap into deeper attitudes or ideologies. Despite these limitations, however, we firmly believe that our study has illustrated an exceptionally interesting example of HL maintenance and shift in Brussels with empirical evidence and has contributed to broadening the understanding of the nature of diverse language practices of given immigrant communities in a multilingual place such as Brussels. In this regard, linguistic diversity, as a routine facet of society, has the great potential to be further explored and utilized as an asset to promote a true sense of multilingualism. The insights gained from our study into the relationships between environment, speakers and languages have also helped illuminate the complexity of the maintenance of HL. As Li and Duff (2014: 221 italic in original) remind us, instead of assuming any aspects of "habitus 'inherited' wholesale through biological and cultural transmission or socialization, any discussion of HL *maintenance* should carefully examine the appropriation, (co)construction, adaptation and hybridization" in the given sociolinguistic contexts. It is therefore our expectation that the present study has important broader implications for the language maintenance and shift of other minority immigrant communities.

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