



Sue Goossens, Université Libre de Bruxelles

Embracing multilingualism, facing new dilemmas: Linguistic friction at a self-declared multilingual school

Although officially a bilingual city with French as a lingua franca, education in Brussels is either in French or in Dutch. In recent years, however, Dutch-medium education has been welcoming an increasing number of pupils with non-Dutch speaking backgrounds, as a result of the growing importance of Dutch in the capital's bilingual service economy. Dutch-medium education is often seen as an unofficial route towards bilingualism in the form of Dutch-language immersion. Faced with this new influx, many Dutch-medium schools have amplified their efforts to remain Dutch islands in a Francophone ocean. My research, however, focuses on a Dutch-medium secondary school in Brussels that, contrary to other schools, has decided to embrace multilingualism, albeit without abandoning its mission to provide high quality Dutch-medium education.

On the basis of ethnographic fieldwork, I will argue that these contradictory concerns lead to a 'light' conception of multilingualism, in the sense that the school's language policy does not envision hybrid language practices and only allows languages that are deemed economically valuable, with a strong emphasis on Dutch. I will show that pupils and teachers had ambivalent responses towards the school's linguistic diversity. Pupils insisted on the importance of (learning) Dutch and considered their Dutch language skills to be limited, but would laugh at their classmates' imperfect use of Dutch. While teachers were open towards other languages, they also voiced concerns about pupils' slow progress in Dutch. The position of French in Brussels influenced the implementation of the school's language policy, in the sense that staff *and* pupils denounced the frequent use of French as often as they engaged in it and condoned it. Moreover, they equally tolerated and problematized imperfect use of Dutch.