

Amira-Louise Ouardalitou

## Language use in public administration in Luxembourg

### Abstract

Luxembourg is well known for both its multilingualism and its international and linguistically diverse population. A significant number of its working population commute into Luxembourg each day from Belgium, France and Germany, returning home each night. So how is this multilingualism manifested? And how do local government departments and ministries communicate with – and indeed cope with – such a linguistically diverse population? This is particularly pertinent when considering official documents and communications – are they written in one specific language, e.g. Luxembourgish?

The Grand-Duchy is a multilingual country, where a multinational society lives and works. Therefore Luxembourg is destined to be a paradise for languages, something which is reflected in the law. Each citizen decides which language will be used at home, but the official languages of the country, *Luxembourgish (L)*, *German (G)* and *French (F)*, are clearly defined. Hence it is interesting to look at the theory and practice of language use in the public administration departments of Luxembourg.

Luxembourg is a country with many international identities. The population of Luxembourg as at 1 January 2015 was 562,958, of whom 304,279 were Luxembourgers and 258,679 were foreign citizens. The demography is illustrated below in chart 1.

Total	562,958		
Luxembourgish	304,279		
Foreign citizens	258,679	Portuguese	92,100
		French	39,400
		Italian	19,000
		Belgian	18,800
		German	12,800
		UK	6,000
		Dutch	4,000
		Other EU	29,600
		Outside of the EU	36,000

Chart 1: Population of Luxembourg

Most people come from a Romance-speaking country. The Portuguese community consists of 92,000 people; the French community of 39,400; the Italian community of 19,000; and the Belgian community of 18,800. 12,800 residents have German nationality, 6,000 people come from the UK and there are 4,000 citizens of the Netherlands. Other EU Member states are represented by a further 29,600 inhabitants and 36,000 come from outside of the EU (see STATEC 2015a). In addition, in 2013 there were 161,300 commuters who worked in Luxembourg: 40,700 Belgians, 79,900 French and 40,900 Germans (see STATEC 2015b).



Fig. 1: Homepage of the Community Centre on the internet

The homepage of the national Community Centre on the internet is available in five languages: French, Luxembourgish, German, English and Portuguese. This reflects the multilingual situation in Luxembourg, ie the three official languages of Luxembourg, then Portuguese (representing the biggest proportion of foreign citizens), and finally English which is used as a global language by other foreign citizens.

## 1. Luxembourg's multilingualism as regulated by law

General language policy is regulated in Luxembourg by law. In the language law of the 24th February 1984, the first article declares that the national language of Luxembourgers is Luxembourgish, although that doesn't mean that everybody who has a Luxembourgish passport can actually speak or write very good Luxembourgish (see *Languages in School*). Article 2, on the language of legislation, specifies that legislative acts and their executive regulations are written in French. When the legislative and regulatory acts are accompanied by a translation, only the French text is authentic. Articles 3 and 4 deal with administrative and judicial languages. Administrative and contentious or non-contentious judicial matters can use Luxembourgish, German or French, subject to special provisions on certain matters. Article 4 also states that should a citizen submit any formal application in Luxembourgish, French or German, the administration should wherever possible,

use for its response the language chosen by the applicant. The answers should be within the bounds of possibility (see Service Central de Legislation 2015).



Fig. 2: Official homepage – the administrative guide of the Luxembourg government

The official homepage of the administrative guide of the Luxembourg government gives residents the choice between French and German. Although Luxembourgish is an official administrative language, it does not appear in the choices. However, businesses can choose between French, German and English, even though English is not legally an official administrative language of Luxembourg.

The Luxembourgish language has not yet been written into the current Constitution, but will be added to the new one. The House of Representatives handed the following suggestion to the Council of State: “Art. 4 (1) The Language of Luxembourg is Luxembourgish. The law stipulates the use of *Luxembourgish*, *German* and *French*”. (Proposition de révision portant instauration d’une nouvelle Constitution – Document Nr. 6030, 03.10.2015). The date when this law will come into force is not yet known.



Fig. 3: The official homepage of the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg

The official homepage of the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg is available in three languages, French, German and English, even though English, again, is not an official language according to the law. Nevertheless it is used as a lingua franca for non-Luxembourgish residents.

## 2. Multilingualism in Luxembourg

The use of the official languages in Luxembourg was clearly mapped by a survey in 2004. French was used by 99% of the 1,708 people surveyed as their first language; Luxembourgish by 82% as their second language; and German by 81% as their third language. The letters in the chart stand for the languages: F=French, L=Luxembourgish, G=German, E=English, I=Italian, P=Portuguese, S=Spanish, D/F=Dutch/Flemish.

Nation	N	F	L	G	E	I	P	S	D/F	Other
Lux.	1,044	99%	99%	99%	80%	32%	11%	18%	12%	5%
Port.	298	98%	50%	39%	38%	25%	100%	29%	2%	4%
Other	366	97%	62%	68%	77%	45%	16%	28%	23%	19%
Total	1,708	99%	82%	81%	72%	34%	28%	22%	13%	7%

Chart 2: Language use by nationalities in Luxembourg (Fehlen 2009, 77)

1,708 people were surveyed to classify the languages most frequently used. Of the 1,044 Luxembourgish nationals, 99% answered that they were able to use the three official languages of Luxembourgish, German and French. Of the biggest foreign community in Luxembourg, the Portuguese, 98% answered that they were able to use French, 50% were able to use Luxembourgish and 39% were able to use German (see Fehlen 2009, 77). However the use of languages in everyday life is more complex, because the three official languages of the country, L (Luxembourgish) and G (German) and F (French) are not the only ones in spoken and written use. Luxembourg is a country of immigration, and so additional languages are used in everyday life. As well as Portuguese and Italian, these include English and various languages from the former Yugoslavia (see Gilles et al. 2010, 64).

In 2011, 476,614 people were asked in a census from STATEC and Fernand Fehlen (Fehlen et al. 2013b) et al. which language they use most in their everyday life (see Chart 3). 55.8% of the residents of the Grand-Duchy speak Luxembourgish as a main language, 15.7% speak Portuguese and 12.1% speak French. Among Luxembourg nationals, 88.8% speak Luxembourgish as a main language in everyday life, 4.2% speak French and 1.1% speak German. However only 8% of foreign citizens speak Luxembourgish in everyday life. French is used by 23.4% and German by 5.9% (see Fehlen et al. 2013b, 1).

Language	Frequency	Percentage
Luxembourgish	265,731	55.8%
Portuguese	74,636	15.7%
French	57,633	12.1%
German	14,658	3.1%
Italian	13,896	2.9%
English	10,018	2.1%
Other languages	40,042	8,4%
Total	476,614	100%

Chart 3: Frequency of the languages in Luxembourg (Fehlen et al. 2013b, 1)

### 3. Luxembourg and the EU

Luxembourgish is the only national language without official EU status, but it is enshrined in the law of the country and will soon be written into the constitution, so that citizens have the right to make enquiries in the national language. Luxembourg could ask for the Luxembourgish language to have official EU status, but this would be without an official EU translation service, and if a translation were required, the state of Luxembourg would have to pay the costs.

### 4. Language in court

French is the exclusive legislative language. Judgments and letters are in French (more of a tradition), but evidences can be in the three official languages: Fr. – Ge. – Lu. Some judges accepts also English, but if not, there must be an official translator. The lawyer can plead in the 3 official languages: Fr. – Ge. – Lu. If the opposing party doesn't understand, they need to find an official translator in their language. Mostly French or Luxembourgish, German is rare. In practice, the judges and prosecutors often take in their texts quotations from the police report, which is usually written in German. This is the case especially in penal cases. The guilty party always gets a translator to defend himself if he can't speak any of the three official languages. An appeal can be requested in every language of the country.



Fig. 4: Homepage of the government

Nowadays, although the spoken language and the speeches in Parliament are in Luxembourgish, the written texts are in French. Also, it is worth pointing out that the homepage of the Luxembourgish government is only in French.

## 5. Languages at school

At school, children are taught the alphabet in German, and during the 2nd year of primary school they start learning French. Nevertheless, teaching staff normally speak Luxembourgish to children (see Presse- und Informationsamt der Luxemburger Regierung 2008). Nowadays, primary school teachers take the lead by writing letters to parents in Luxembourgish; or if two languages are required, Luxembourgish and French (see Fehlen 2009, 45).

However, this elevation of Luxembourgish as a national language has hardly practical consequences, either with regard to a further standardization either to an increased use in the school system, in which the media only serves as an auxiliary language in the classroom. (Gilles 2010, 64)

In addition, at school, parents, teachers and education authorities can request an intercultural mediator who translates into languages other than French, German, Luxembourgish and English. The languages a mediator can be called to translate are: Albanian; Creole (*Cap Verde*); Chinese; Italian; Iranian; Portuguese; Serbo-Croatian; Russian; and Arabic. More languages are available on demand. Mediators can help in class with oral and written translations and all types of information regarding education (Men.lu 2015).

## **6. Languages in everyday life**

There is a difference between spoken and written languages in Luxembourg, especially amongst Luxembourg nationals. Most official communications are written in French, but spoken mostly in Luxembourgish. The local population request more and more frequently to be served in their national language, Luxembourgish. This is particularly pertinent in everyday life when frequenting shops, as many of the workers are actually border workers and rarely speak Luxembourgish at all; rather, French is the most common language for communication.

In their private correspondence, Luxembourgers express themselves in Luxembourgish up to 40% of the time, in French 35% of the time and in German 2% of the time. As for age, young people under 25 write in Luxembourgish up to 67% of the time, and only 22% of the time in French and 6% in German. Even though Luxembourgish is virtually absent from schools, the use of written Luxembourgish is increasing, especially amongst the younger and well-educated Luxembourgers who tend to use Luxembourgish whilst the less educated typically prefer German (see Fehlen 2009, 45). Social media has helped to promote and encourage the momentum towards writing in Luxembourgish and the population has more recently started to answer e-mails in Luxembourgish, but written letters are still most often in French. The profession with the most written correspondence in Luxembourgish is teaching (see Fehlen 2009, 46).

## **7. Conclusion**

The Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg has three official languages, Luxembourgish, French and German, which have been part of language legislation since 1984. Each language has its status. Luxembourgish is the national language, but does not have an official EU status, French is the legislative language, and the administrative languages are Luxembourgish, French and German.

Luxembourg has 562,958 citizens of whom 304,279 are Luxembourgish people and 258,679 are foreign residents. The country is multinational, with many languages being used in everyday life. As well as the official languages, the level of use of English and Portuguese is also high. For example, the national Community Centre website is in five languages. Besides the three official languages (Luxembourgish, French, and German), there is also Portuguese, which represents the largest foreign community in Luxembourg, and English, which is a lingua franca for other foreign citizens. More and more websites are becoming trilingual or even multilingual.

Likewise, at school the government takes into account the linguistically diverse population. Parents with a native language which is not one of the three official languages get help by being offered an official translator. Moreover, Luxembourg-

gish is occupying an increasingly important role, culminating in it being formally written into the new Constitution. In the Luxembourg Parliament Luxembourgish is now the most frequently spoken language, although the written texts are still in French. The theory and practice of the official languages can vary from one interlocutor to another, but social media is responsible for an increase in written and spoken Luxembourgish.

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