

Linguistic regionalism and the social construction of space in Belgium

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The three major language regions of Belgium, Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels, have become indelible features of the Belgian political, social, and cultural landscape. Their importance is not just administrative; they have assumed a high degree of functional significance as well. It is commonplace to consider major fiscal, economic, and demographic developments in terms of differences among and between Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels. Separate institutions have been established to deal with matters ranging from education to water use in each of the regions. And by most indicators, the language region is a significant basis for social and political identification.

Although the present language regions do not have deep historical roots as political or social units, they now provide the spatial backdrop for many of the questions that are asked about Belgium. Articles are written about the economy in Wallonia, language use in Brussels, and education in Flanders. One of the first questions that is posed about any new policy is whether it will benefit one or another language region disproportionately. Framing questions in these terms makes considerable sense, of course; with the constitutional revisions of the past 20 years, significant powers have devolved to the language regions. The regional councils of Flanders, Brussels, and Wallonia make independent decisions on issues ranging from environmental protection to foreign trade. At the same time, too frequently the questions that we ask about Belgium's language regions seem to take their existence for granted, almost as if they were natural and untransmutable spatial givens.

In this article I seek to shed some light on language and society in contemporary Belgium by looking at the social significance of Belgium's language regions. My analysis focuses on Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels. There is also a small German-language region in eastern Belgium, but its lack of prominence at the national level leads me to concentrate attention elsewhere. I argue that Western social science has largely failed to acknowledge regionalism as a force in industrialized