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What Languages Are Spoken in Belgium? 3 Official Tongues and Lots of Linguistic Diversity

The mountainous cathedrals and low, gray skies of [Jacques Brel's beloved plat pays](#) (flat country).

The lure of artisan [pralines belges](#) (Belgian chocolates).

The artistic treasures of René Magritte, Peter Paul Rubens and Ambrosius Bosschaert.

Those tantalizing, [twice-fried frites](#) (fried potatoes) in their crinkly paper cones.

The opportunity to learn real French in the wild, [outside its country of origin](#).

All these features and more make Belgium a wonderful place to visit.

But before you [pack your bag full of French travel phrases](#) and hop a plane, **take a moment to consider the other languages**

you might encounter.

Because the language situation *en Belgique*—in beautiful, fascinating Belgium—is more complicated than we thought.

What languages are spoken in Belgium? Where exactly are they spoken? And where can a French learner expect to hone their skills in the wild?

Read on to find out!

Belgium's Linguistic Diversity: A Product of History and Geography

Many areas of Belgium's linguistic map are associated with adjacent areas on the geopolitical map. Belgium is a relatively small country that happens to border France, Luxembourg, Germany and the Netherlands.

Belgium's diverse languages aren't a matter of simple geography, though.

The country's long and complex history intermixes with its crossroads geography, creating a special kind of linguistic alchemy.

Low Country heritage

Long before Belgium existed as a modern nation, it was **part of the Low Countries**.

The history of the Low Countries stretches back to the Roman empire. The seaside geography of the region made it conducive to commerce—and a lot of cultural co-mingling.

Port cities like Antwerp, Bruges and Ghent were important centers of trade throughout the Middle Ages, with a well-established mercantile infrastructure. Through their bustling sea trade, carrying everything from woolen items to diamonds, they established commercial ties with other countries. These Belgian port cities welcomed tradesmen, artists, bankers and merchants from many foreign lands—and, with them, their languages.

Redrawing the lines

It's easy to look at a modern map of Europe and think of it as a snapshot of countries and their cultures, with one language corresponding to each country, all neatly packaged inside their respective borders: French is spoken in France, German in Germany, Italian in Italy, Spanish in Spain, and so forth.

The reality isn't that cut-and-dried. The lines on today's maps represent only the latest revision of each country's borders... and, if you go back a few hundred years, many of those countries didn't even exist as we know them today.

Border lines are arbitrary—but history persists and they can't be wiped completely clean.

When Belgium became an independent country in 1830, its borders included regions where numerous languages—including Dutch and French, and variations of both—were being spoken. Many descendants of the people inhabiting these border regions still speak their ancestors' languages, albeit in more contemporary forms.

The “Battlefield of Europe”

From the Battle of Waterloo and the Battle of the Bulge, Belgium has experienced [centuries of incursions and immigrant settlements](#) from neighboring countries.

Belgium was often the battleground in the power struggles of early modern Europe. This tradition continued well into the 20th century.

Being so strategically placed between major military, economic and political powers like France, Germany and the Netherlands, Belgium's neutrality didn't spare it from the devastation and cultural changes imposed by warfare. It was invaded by Germany in World War I... and then again, 36 years later, in World War II.

Although these trying times were often disastrous for Belgium, they **helped shape the unique linguistic interplay** that characterizes the modern nation.

What Languages Are Spoken in Belgium? 3 Official Tongues and Lots of Linguistic Diversity

Triple Play: Dutch, French and German Are Belgium's Official Languages

Belgium's three official languages are **Dutch, French and German**.

If Belgium is so language-rich, why are there only three government-recognized languages?

Practicality plays a huge part in that decision. Governments must provide their citizens with versions of every legal and administrative document in each of the official languages.

Even the United Nations, a body with even more linguistic diversity than Belgium, has settled on [six official languages](#).

Official languages tend to be widely used, whether nationally or internationally. This is true of Belgium's three recognized languages.

Although Belgians speak many different languages, **these three major languages are the only ones with official government recognition**.

Interestingly enough, the Belgian constitution itself—available through the Belgian Senate in [Dutch](#), [French](#) and [German](#)—doesn't declare its official languages. But these languages match the language-based [regions established through government reforms](#) in the 1970s and 1980s.

[Articles 129-130 of the constitution](#) go into great detail about how each regional parliament is responsible for establishing official languages for their region... should they choose to do so.

Meanwhile, we have the Belgian constitution—and many other official documents—available in French, German and Dutch.

This isn't just practicality, of course. **It's also politics**.

Dutch is dominant up North

Over half the Belgian population speak Dutch as a first language; **Dutch and its variants dominate Flanders, the northern region of the country**.

When Belgium first became a nation, though, Dutch-language domination in Flanders wasn't guaranteed. After all, only 35

years prior to the dawn of Belgian independence, France had [annexed much of modern-day Belgium](#) under Napoleonic rule. Until 1815, the French government in Belgium had enforced the use of the French language in public life.

Even by the time of the Belgian revolution, there was still a preponderance of French speakers in national politics. And—as was the case in many parts of Europe at that time—French was the language of the court, and the common language of the well-educated elite.

Due to both centuries of history and contemporary politics, **it seemed at the time of its revolution that Belgium would be a primarily francophone country.**

Slowly but surely, though, **the 19th century saw the rise of the [Flemish Movement](#).** Some city-dwellers in the middle class began to promote the idea that the Flemish language and culture should be recognized and accepted by the new government.

Dutch as a language had some serious political stigma, as it was the language of King William I—the Protestant monarch from whom Catholic-majority Belgium had [recently gained its independence](#).

That said, the grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation of the Dutch spoken in Belgium—[often called Flemish](#)—had diverged somewhat from the Dutch spoken in the Netherlands. And it was spoken mostly by the Flemings, who were primarily Catholic and shared a religion with their francophone neighbors in Wallonia.

In this way, **Flemish Dutch was becoming more of a symbol of the culture of independent Belgium.**

However, it wasn't until nearly the 20th century that the official government use of Flemish Dutch was [discussed in the Belgian senate](#). The Law of Equality (also called the *Coremans-De Vriendt Law*) was passed in April 1898, almost 70 years after Belgian independence. This, and the [linguistic reforms that followed](#), began to turn the tide for the status of Dutch as an official Belgian language.

By the 1950s, the economic tide was turning as well. Flanders, once less prosperous than the industrial south of Wallonia, turned from its traditionally agrarian economy to embrace a booming manufacturing trade. Meanwhile, Wallonia—once dominant as a manufacturing center—was starting to lose its

socioeconomic superiority as obsolete infrastructure changed prosperity to recession.

Flanders' new economic success conferred a greater social importance to the Dutch language spoken in that region.

France is the *lingua franca* in the South

In the southern part of Belgium, also known as Wallonia, French and numerous related languages are natively spoken by most of the population.

This is unsurprising, given the political and military history of the region.

After all, the French royalty had once held sway in what's now southern Belgium during the 14th and 15th centuries under the House of Valois.

In 1713, the Treaty of Utrecht essentially established what's now the southern border of modern Belgium. Speakers of mainstream French and related regional languages remained on both sides of the new border.

Napoleonic rule in the 18th and 19th centuries further strengthened the prominence of the French language in Belgium.

Centuries after the first French expeditions into present-day Belgium, the French language—and several variations thereof—is still spoken in the southern half of Belgium, as well as a few other areas of the country. **About 36% of Belgians speak French as their first language**, and a little less than half the country claims it as a second language.

The French-speaking Community in Belgium was officially renamed *la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles* (Wallonia-Brussels Federation) in 2011. This may have reflected, to some degree, the aims of the minority *Rattachisme/Réunionisme* (Re-attachement/Reunionism) faction within the Walloon Movement, which works to protect the cultural identity of French speakers in Belgium.

Belgian French

The distinct flavor of French spoken in Belgium is considered one of the **major varieties of modern French**.

If you've learned *le français standard* (standard French), you'll need to make a few adaptations when you visit Wallonia.

For example, don't go on autopilot when [counting numbers 70 and above](#).

Belgium is one of those francophone countries that's rejected *soixante-dix* (70) in favor of ***septante***. ***Nonante*** replaces *quatre-vingt-dix* (90).

Oddly enough, the standard French construction *quatre-vingts* (80) is still used in Belgium, sandwiched between the special Belgian French counting words.

Beyond counting, there are [several differences in Belgian French vocabulary and pronunciation](#) that you should know about before you head off to Charleroi, Liège or Namur.

You can get a sense of the diversity of the French language, and how Belgian French sounds, through the [authentic videos on FluentU](#). FluentU takes real-world videos—like music videos, movie trailers, news and inspiring talks—and turns them into **personalized language learning lessons**.



[This music video about Belgium entering the World Cup](#), for instance, is a great introduction to the Belgian culture. Plus, every video on FluentU comes with interactive subtitles, multimedia flashcards, adaptive quizzes and more. Find more content like this for your French-learning journey with [a free FluentU trial](#).

Bilingual Brussels: Dutch and French

The Brussels-Capital Region and the City of Brussels are Dutch-French bilingual.

Happily for French speakers traveling to *Bruxelles* (Brussels), French is the predominant language in this very international city, with **about 80% of its citizens native francophones**.

Although there's still a strong Dutch influence in Brussels—as of 2009, it was considered [almost mandatory for employment there](#)—visitors can get by with a good command of French.

A little German on the side

Modern German is the third official language of Belgium. It's only **spoken natively by about a half a percent of the Belgian population**, with roughly 20% of Belgians speaking German as a second language.

Geographically, German speakers in Belgium are **centered in the East Cantons**, a sliver of land bordering Germany.

Nine communes in this part of Wallonia proclaim German to be their official language; two more offer accommodations for educational and administrative purposes.

The influence of German languages in Belgium traces all the way back to the Frankish tribes who dominated the northern area of the country, supplanting Roman rule around 300 AD/CE.

Part of this German-speaking region had been [controlled by France in the late 18th century](#).

After numerous foreign governments won and lost sovereignty in Belgium over the course of the next several centuries, the Germans took power in Belgium again near the start of the 20th century, bringing their language with them.

The [Battle of Liège](#), started on August 5, 1914, heralded the German occupation of Belgium in the early 20th century.

After WWI, the area now generally known as the East Cantons—also known as Eupen-Malmedy—was ceded to Belgium as part of the Treaty of Versailles.

With this annexation, **Belgium officially gained a small community of German speakers**. Since 1973, their descendants have been governed by the Parliament of the German-speaking Community, headquartered in Eupen (in Liège province).

According to the [Society for Threatened Peoples International \(STPI\)](#), “the German language plays a subordinate role compared to the predominant official French language.”

As a French speaker, you might want to learn a few German phrases for visiting eastern Belgium. But in a pinch, you can probably get by with French—especially if you stay near the towns of Lontzen, Eupen and Kelmis, where there are French-speaking minorities.

Variations on a Theme: Minority Languages from Majority Families

Here's where Belgium's linguistic tapestry becomes more intricate. Belgium is home to numerous regional or minority languages, which tend to be closely related to its major, official languages of French, Dutch and German.

A fine romance

Belgian minority languages related to French include **Walloon**, **Champenois**, **Lorrain** and **Picard**.

Spoken smack-dab in the middle of Belgium, Walloon is considered “definitely endangered” as a minority language.

Speakers of Lorrain are found in the far southeast corner of Belgium—primarily in a town called Gaume, where it's a recognized regional language referred to as Gaumais. As you can see from this collection of [Lorrain travel phrases](#), Lorrain looks somewhat like a cross between French and [Breton](#), a [Celtic language](#) from the west of France.

Champenois is spoken primarily in Vresse-sur-Semois, in Namur province. As the name indicates, it's also spoken in the province of Champagne in France. (It can be found in Île-de-France, as well.) Sadly, UNESCO rates Champenois as severely endangered.

As of 1990, Picard—like these other Romance languages—was recognized in Belgium's French community as a regional language. Unfortunately, like several of its sister languages—and numerous minor Romance languages in the region—Picard is classified as seriously endangered. Even in *la région Picardie* (the Picardy region), in France, there are relatively few speakers left.

The rest of the West Germanics

Regional language variants on the Germanic side in Belgium include **Moselle Franconian**, **Low Dietsch**, **Ripuarian**, **Southeast Limburgish** and **Yiddish**.

Moselle Franconian—named partly after the river shared by France, Germany and Belgium—is related to Luxembourgish, which is an official language in Luxembourg and a recognized minority language in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. It's also related to:

- The [Ripuarian dialects](#) (spoken in Liège)
- Low Dietsch (from the Duchy of Limburg)
- Southeast Limburgish (heard in the town of Eynatten, in the far northeast corner of Belgium)

The variety of Moselle Franconian that towers above the others spoken in Belgium is known as Eifelisch.

Yiddish

A medieval marriage of these [Franconian regional languages with Hebrew and Aramaic](#)—along with contributions from old French and Italian, as well as Slavic languages—produced Yiddish, which has been **spoken in Belgium for over 750 years**.

The Jewish community has [especially deep roots in Antwerp](#), Belgium's second-largest city. Beginning in the Middle Ages and continuing on through the travails of life under Spanish rule, Austrian rule, French rule and Dutch rule, the Yiddish speakers of Belgium continue to operate schools, synagogues, professional associations and political groups.

In the early-to-mid 20th century, the adjective “Yiddisher” was used to describe many of these expressions of Jewish culture in Belgium.

Today, Yiddish—which is written using the Hebrew alphabet—still plays a prominent role in Antwerp's Jewish community... although many members also speak Flemish Dutch, Hebrew and French.

A Smattering of International Flavor

As Belgium moves forward in the new millennium, its already-heterogeneous culture is becoming even more diversified. Today, there are more languages spoken in Belgium than ever.

New Belgians of the 21st Century

The new century has brought an even mix of **European and non-European immigrants**—and their languages—to Belgium.

Like many countries, Belgium has gone through phases of more liberal [immigration policies](#), followed by immigration restrictions.

During the 1960s, Belgium's work-permit policies attracted immigrants from Turkey and North Africa, as well as Southern Europe.

At the end of the Swinging Sixties, however, the Belgian government began closing the door to immigrant workers. By the mid-1970s, a combination of increased unemployment and economic recession forced Belgium to limit the number of immigrants it could accept.

Fast forward 10 years, and Belgium by the mid-1980s was once again more freely welcoming immigrants and naturalizing citizens.

In the decades since, Belgium has accepted more and more economic immigrants and asylum-seekers. As a result, the ethnic and linguistic mix of the country has changed dramatically in recent years.

The number of native-born Belgians [declined by 15% between the years 2000 and 2016](#). Within the same period, Belgium saw a 9% rise in naturalized citizens.

While 28% of immigrants in the year 2000 opted not to seek Belgian citizenship, that number rose to 35% in 2016.

Language plays a large part in national identity. As fewer immigrants decide to become Belgian citizens—which means [adopting at least one of the country's official languages](#)—the growth of non-Belgian languages within the country's borders may increase.

A kaleidoscope of languages

Modern immigrant languages spoken in Belgium now include:

- Portuguese
- Arabic
- Italian
- Polish
- Spanish
- English
- Greek
- Berber
- Turkish

To some degree, cosmopolitan Brussels can be seen as **a microcosm of the challenges faced in an increasingly polyglot Belgian society.**

Starting with the [immigration of guest workers](#) from Northwest Africa between 1964 and 1974, Arabic became a significant linguistic presence in Belgium.

As of 2011, [about 21% of the inhabitants](#) of French-Dutch bilingual Brussels speak Arabic. This number is even higher in the young adult population. (Dutch is still a close second, at 19.6%—with a 4% resurgence from 2006 to 2011. And French is at the top of the ladder with 63.2% of Brussels' population as native speakers in 2011—down 7.8% from 70% in 2001.)

Only about 2.5% of Brussels-dwellers speak English as their native language, which was on par for Italian during the same time period.

However, to tame Belgian this tower of Babel, Brussels minister Rudi Vervoort suggested in 2013 that [English should be made the Brussels-Capital region's official language](#). Although relatively few Brussels inhabitants speak English as their mother tongue, nearly 30% report that they are fluent in the language.

Taking a different approach, administrators of Brussels' *Plan Marnix* (Marnix Plan) propose that city-dwellers should make a concerted effort to learn each others' languages, bridging gaps of understanding by [becoming multi-lingual](#).

[The flat country that can become your own](#) holds astonishing treasures of history and culture. Belgium might have three official languages, but the full story of the languages spoken there's so much more complex. Its future is still unfolding, its tales—old and new—told in myriad tongues.

Michelle Baumgartner is a language nerd who has formally studied seven languages and informally dabbled in at least three others. In addition to geeking out over slender vowels, interrogative particles and phonemes, Michelle is a freelance content writer and education blogger. Find out more at stellawriting.com.