

At the intersection of French and Flemish: Implicational hierarchies in Brussels French loan (non-)adaptation as a window on French phonology and/or universal markedness

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Research problem

Although quite some literature deals with Flemish influence in Belgian or Brussels French phonology (e.g. Baetens Beardsmore 1971; Cassano 1993; Hambye 2005), the faithful pronunciation rather than nativisation of Flemish placenames, last names etc. in Brussels French is typically only briefly mentioned on the side, without further analysis¹. By doing so, the literature overlooks a crucial aspect of these Flemish loans: that the output is in fact *rarely* perfectly faithful *nor* fully nativised, contradicting the dichotomous view which has hitherto prevailed in the literature. Instead, hybrid outputs are widespread and reveal implicational hierarchies w.r.t. the preservation of the phonological elements which differ between the two languages (namely: Flemish word stress, [h], [x], [ŋ] and [r]; French [ɑ̃]/[ɛ̃]/[ɔ̃]). Adaptations “fall somewhere in between the two according to some community-based bilingual norm” (Baetens Beardsmore 1986: 50), where several variant pronunciations are considered acceptable to differing extents. Consider e.g. the name *Rembrandt* (cfr. Francard 2017: 194):

(1) <i>More Flemish</i> ←		→ <i>More French</i>				
[ˈrɛm.brant]	~	[ˈrɛm.brant]	~	[rɛm.ˈbrant]	~	[rɑ̃.ˈbrɑ̃(t)]
[r] [ˈ] [an]	~	[r̥] [ˈ] [an]	~	[r̥] [ˈ] [an]	~	[r̥] [ˈ] [añ]

On the scale in (1), [rɛm.ˈbrant] is the preferred pronunciation for native speakers of Brussels French; acceptability culminates there and diminishes towards both ends (e.g. native speakers see [ˈrɛm.brant] as ‘too Flemish’, and [rɑ̃.ˈbrɑ̃(t)] as ‘too French’). Crucially, note that there is *no* form [ˈrɑ̃.brɑ̃t] in (1): if gallicisation takes place by nasalising orthographical <em, an>, stress *must* be moved to the last syllable and the rhotic *must* surface as uvular. In other words, the absence of nasalisation is more resistant to gallicisation than Flemish stress and [r], exemplifying the implicational hierarchy ‘preserve non-nasalised Vn > preserve stress/[r]’. This preference for some hybrid forms to the exclusion of others is named *differential importation* in Kang (2011: 3ff.), who notes that it remains uncertain whether such preferences are to be ascribed to language-specific (here: French) or universal hierarchies.

This study is thus of special interest to phonology because “[t]he patterns that emerge in loanword adaptation often reveal aspects of native speakers’ knowledge that are not necessarily obvious in data of the native language and, as a result, loanword data can inform our analysis of the native phonology” (Kang 2011: 1). The implicational hierarchy of phonological phenomena which differ between the two languages can be deduced by comparing the acceptability of words containing two phenomena, one of which is preserved and one of which isn’t (e.g. [ˈrœi.tən] vs. [rœi.ˈtən] comparing stress and [r]). If participants rate the first example as most acceptable and the second less, one can deduce that preserving [r] implies preserving the original stress. Doing so will also allow to test the hypothesis that the promptness of a linguistic element to disappear correlates with its markedness (positively or negatively, i.e. as *reduction* or *preservation* of the marked; cfr. de Lacy 2006; Kang 2011).

1 E.g.: “Les Bruxellois prononcent souvent les mots d’origine flamande avec leur prononciation flamande” (DicBe); “Parmi les observations qui auront été laissées de côté (...) Laeken, Beethoven, etc., avec l’accent sur l’avant-dernière syllabe” (Pohl 1983: 35); “Foreignisms are often articulated in imitation of the so-called donor language” “which we need not treat of here” (Cassano 1993: 153f.); “généralement pas francisés en Belgique” (Hambye 2005: 93); “noms propres prononcés « à la flamande »” (Francard 2017: 193f.); o.e.

Data collection

The data are of a twofold nature: the acoustic examination of the recorded production of 17 French phrases containing Flemish placenames pronounced by 8 speakers of the target group described below, with the Flemish word appearing as the last word of each sentence; and a perceptual goodness rating task in which 11 participants of the target group rate the acceptability of hybrid forms which contain precisely one faithful and one nativised linguistic trait (e.g. half-faithful [ʀɛm.'brant] and half-faithful ['rã.brõt]), to confirm and complete the production data. Participants rate 60 hybrid forms in total, all embedded in French sentences (6 traits i.e. 30 possible ordered pairs, with two words for each ordered pair).

Participants of the target group are bilinguals residing in or around Brussels, who are fluent in Dutch and have Brussels French as a native language. Bilingualism is required since “[t]he percentage of non-adaptations is directly proportional to the number of bilinguals” (Paradis and LaCharité 1997: 390), i.e. monolinguals do not produce/hear enough hybrid forms.

Results

The resulting implicational hierarchy w.r.t. the *preservation* of Flemish elements is as follows:

$$(2) [r] <^* [h] <^{**} \text{word stress} <^{***} [x] \approx^{****} [\eta] <^* \text{non-nasalsed Vn}$$

So that if a certain feature on this scale is preserved, all features to the right are also. The hypothesis of a correlation with markedness is supported in the sense that the leftmost elements of the scale are more susceptible to be altered cross-linguistically, although it is hardly discernible from another explanation based on the stability of the elements in Flemish itself: the rightmost features are preserved in most Flemish varieties, whilst e.g. [r] → [ʀ] and [h] → ∅ occurs in the speech of Flemish speakers with whom the francophones are in contact. Further studies are thus needed to distinguish between both possibilities.

References

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*: p < 0.001; **: p = 0.017; ***: p = 0.042; ****: p = 0.467. Furthermore, all implications between non-neighbouring parts (e.g. [r] < [x], [h] < [η]) are also supported by the data.