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## ***Ein Mischmasch aus Deutsch und Französisch:***

### **Ideological tensions in young people's discursive constructions of Luxembourgish**

Dr John Bellamy  
University of Cambridge, UK  
jpb90@cam.ac.uk

Dr Kristine Horner  
The University of Sheffield, UK  
k.horner@sheffield.ac.uk

#### **Heading title:**

### **Ideological tensions in young people's discursive constructions of Luxembourgish**

#### **Abstract**

Luxembourg often has been classified as a 'triglossic' country in sociolinguistic literature, due to Luxembourgish being used predominantly for spoken functions and French and German for written functions. However, language use in late modern Luxembourg is characterized by increased levels of spoken French coupled with the growing presence of written Luxembourgish in the public sphere, thus altering certain long-standing patterns of language use. In this context, Luxembourgish is often framed as an important marker of authenticity and national identity in language ideological debates. At the same time, the ideological positioning of Luxembourgish as *the* national language stands in tension with varying levels of uncertainty regarding writing conventions in Luxembourgish, particularly in more formal contexts. Based on the analysis of metalinguistic comments from the focus group data, this article examines how the participants discursively construct Luxembourgish in their negotiation between positioning Luxembourgish as the national language whilst also describing it as not being a fully-fledged standardized language. On a broader scale, this paper contributes to language ideological research that explores the construction of national languages as well as the relationship between the standard language ideology and the one-nation one-language ideology.

#### **Keywords**

Luxembourg, language policy, metalinguistic comments, ideology, discourse

#### **1. Introduction**

Luxembourg is officially a trilingual state (French, German and Luxembourgish), where spoken communicative functions have traditionally been fulfilled by Luxembourgish and written functions by standard French and standard German. However, this established pattern which presents a tidy compartmentalisation of the languages in a complementary relationship is undermined by pervasive discourses which foreground speaking Luxembourgish as a defining quality of being an authentic Luxembourger. The idea that there is a symbolic hierarchy placing Luxembourgish above French and German was bolstered further in 1984 when Luxembourgish gained official recognition as *the* national language of Luxembourg (*Mémorial* 1984).

At the same time, the ideological positioning of Luxembourgish as the one national language stands in tension with varying degrees of uncertainty regarding writing Luxembourgish, particularly in more formal contexts (Horner and Weber 2010:185; Gilles 2015:129), which is unusual for official national languages of modern nation-states in Western Europe. This article will also show that this situation is compounded further by prevailing views in Luxembourg that the Luxembourgish language has not yet progressed to an equivalent stage of standardisation as other languages (especially English, French and German). Such tensions surrounding the positioning of Luxembourgish will be analysed in the discussion below by exploring the ways in which

Luxembourgish is discursively constructed in the metalinguistic comments from three focus groups consisting of young people in Luxembourg. The analysis will draw upon research on language ideologies (Schieffelin, Woolard and Kroskrity 1998) to orient and inform the discussion of the collected data, with particular attention given to ideological considerations about a standard language (Gal 2018) and nationalist discourses promoting the idea of “one-nation one-language” (Woolard 2016:188).

## 2. Overview of the language situation in Luxembourg

Consisting of 2,586 square kilometres, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg has a population of 590,700 (Statec 2017) and borders Belgium, France and Germany. It is one of the six founding members of the European Union (EU) and has many key EU institutions located in the state. The French and German languages have been recognised as legal, judicial and administrative languages since the 1984 language law which also grants Luxembourgish official recognition as the national language, although this is effectively legal ratification of the linguistic situation that already existed prior to the 1984 legislation (Weber and Horner 2012:4). The language situation in Luxembourg has traditionally been described as ‘triglossic’, in the sense that spoken functions are undertaken predominantly in Luxembourgish and written functions in standard French or standard German. The Luxembourgish government celebrates that “Alternating languages is an art in which Luxembourgers excel” (*Official Portal of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg*) and promotes this trilingual ideal, although it is worth noting that even the official online portal making this statement only provides versions in English, French and German, not in Luxembourgish.

Widespread views that efforts to elevate the status of the Luxembourgish language began during the World War II period are best understood in relation to popular accounts of resistance and emerging national narratives during the period of occupation by Nazi-Germany. However, research has shown that momentum to improve the status of Luxembourgish in fact gathered pace at a later stage (Horner and Weber 2008:72). The 1970s were an especially important period in this respect because of contemporary events taking place both in Europe and on a global scale, particularly the growing levels of migration and mobility (Wagner and Davies 2009:113). Luxembourg is home to the highest proportion of resident foreigners in the EU (i.e. 47.7% of the population do not have Luxembourgish citizenship) (Statec 2017) and consequently there is much linguistic diversity in the country. This leads to considerable discussion regarding the current status and function of the Luxembourgish language within the context of that diversity, especially with regard to contemporary debates surrounding languages in the education system (Weber 2009) and language requirements for citizenship (Horner and Kremer 2016). Furthermore, a substantial segment of the workforce in Luxembourg comprises around 183,000 *frontaliers* (border-crossing commuters) (Statec 2017), who are mainly French-speaking and commute from France and Belgium (approximately 75% of the total number of *frontaliers*). In addition, French is increasingly being used as a (supplemental) home language by a significant proportion of the resident population.

The education system teaches basic literacy skills through German and introduces French as a subject at the end of year two in primary school. Luxembourgish is not officially endorsed as a medium of instruction in primary and secondary education and it is supposed to be taught as a school subject for one hour each week during six years of primary school and one year of secondary school. So, officially, Luxembourgish only has a small part in the school curriculum and on the whole Luxembourgish is little used in the educational context for the functions which are usually carried out by standardised written languages. Yet, informally, Luxembourgish serves as the most frequent language of spoken interaction between teachers and students, and hence acts unofficially as a medium of instruction besides standard German and standard French. Thus, already at this stage, school pupils are presented with “a particular ideological model of the ideal Luxembourger (speaking Luxembourgish and learning standard German and French as additional languages, mostly for the purposes of writing)” (Weber 2009:136).

When compared to “some of the long lasting standardization histories of many of the other Germanic languages, the standardization of Luxembourgish has started only recently” (Gilles and Moulin 2003:310) and is still “on-going” (Belling and de Bres 2014:76). Moreover, many Luxembourgish-speakers feel that they lack sufficient orthographic skills for writing the language according to official spelling norms. In this context, the 2008 law on Luxembourgish nationality introduced a mandatory Luxembourgish language test for people applying for Luxembourgish citizenship, stipulating level B1 of the Common European Framework Reference for Languages (CEFR) for oral comprehension and level A2 for oral production (*Mémorial* 2008). Selecting exclusively the Luxembourgish language for testing as one of the requirements for obtaining Luxembourgish citizenship, despite the fact that Luxembourgish is only one of the three officially recognised languages of the Grand Duchy, serves to encourage the view that a Luxembourger is above all a speaker of Luxembourgish, irrespective of competence in either French or German (Horner 2015).

### **3. Constructing the language of the nation: discourse, language ideologies and the written form**

Research on metalinguistic comments has proven to be fruitful (for example, Unger 2013) in analysing the way in which language, or a particular language, is discursively constructed. It is through discourse that “social actors constitute objects of knowledge, situations and social roles” (Wodak, De Cillia, Reisigl, Liebhart, Hirsch, Mitten and Unger 2009:8), where the concepts of *national identity* and *national language* can be brought into being by means of discursive acts. These acts often involve the setting of boundaries, a process which Makoni and Pennycook (2007:1--2) describe using the term “inventing languages” to characterize the boundary marking and defining of languages according to the ideologically-driven developments of European nation-building and colonisation. By this process, named languages become legitimized largely through their codification and written form. The authority and power associated with the written form has been a key factor in establishing written “languages-of-power” and was often a catalyst for the crystallization of nations in the nineteenth century (Anderson 1991:37--46). The relationship between standard language, power and social status has been phrased in terminology from economics, whereby the prestige of the standard language has been recognised as a form of “cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1991:61--2) in the “linguistic market”. From this perspective, the official language of the state is defined as the “legitimate” language (Bourdieu 1991:45) and proficient competence in this linguistic variety can augment one’s position in the social hierarchy, much like with the accumulation of other types of capital.

The ideological underpinning of this conceptualization of what constitutes a language has cultural implications, whereby “[e]ach such named language ideally expresses the particular spirit of a people (nation)” (Gal 2018:226) and can intimate claims to territory and political autonomy on the basis of a shared linguistic heritage. The social, political and economic contexts surrounding discussions of language infuse debates with ideological positions which result in bestowing different values to different linguistic practices and ranking linguistic features in a hierarchical fashion. The ensuing analysis closely explores the way in which the Luxembourgish language is highly valorised in discourses about Luxembourgish identity, culture and nation but is framed in less favourable terms in other contexts, such as discussions about writing Luxembourgish according to officially sanctioned orthographic norms and comparing Luxembourgish with other major European languages.

Woolard (1998:7) draws attention to the power dynamics which frequently permeate language ideological discussions and this also surfaces in the way in which the Luxembourgish language is constructed in certain discourses as the gateway to Luxembourgish culture and as a quasi-requirement to becoming a ‘real’ Luxembourger. Singling out Luxembourgish in this way

serves to place greater symbolic importance on one language, rather than promoting the instrumental benefits of the trilingual model. The discourses which encourage the notion that speaking Luxembourgish goes a long way in legitimizing the speaker as a Luxembourger is a further key point which will be investigated in the discussion of the focus group data.

Although Luxembourgish has received official recognition as the national language, there remain certain tensions linked to the fact that the standardisation of Luxembourgish is still very much in progress, a point which is especially apparent in the prevailing uncertainty amongst Luxembourgish-speakers about writing Luxembourgish in a way that they deem to be 'proper'. The written form plays a vital role in elevating a specific variety to a recognized, authoritative and legitimate standard language:

standard languages are also discursive projects, and standardization processes are typically accompanied by the development of specific discourse practices. These discourses emphasize the desirability of uniformity and correctness in language use, *the primacy of writing* and the very idea of a national language as the only legitimate language of the speech community. (Deumert 2004:2, our emphasis)

This is highly salient to the situation and status of Luxembourgish, a language which has traditionally been considered an oral means of communication and for whose speakers written functions have conventionally been fulfilled by standard French and standard German. In everyday common conceptions of language, a standard language is highly emblematic in representing the essence of a nation and its speech community, therefore it will be interesting in the analysis of the young people's metalinguistic comments to explore how they grapple with the disparity between perceptions of Luxembourgish as an established language of national identity and the continuing, yet to be completed, process of the standardisation of Luxembourgish, especially when it comes to widely accepted norms for writing the language.

The points outlined in this section inform and structure the subsequent discussion of the focus group data and provide a useful way to categorise and analyse the way in which Luxembourgish is discursively constructed in the metalinguistic comments from the participants in the study. The following section describes the project, the focus groups and the process of data collection, before moving on to an analysis of key emergent discourses and themes.

#### **4. Project outline and focus groups set-up**

The data analysed below is from focus groups which took place in 2015-16 as part of the project on Multilingualism and the Voices of Young People (MULTILUX). By fostering discussion amongst the focus group participants about language-related matters in Luxembourg, the project explores young people's linguistic practices and examines more closely how these practices relate to language policy, to contemporary discourses on language in the Grand Duchy and to everyday experiences of living in the officially trilingual state. The procedure for the focus groups consisted of the moderator introducing one of the abovementioned topics and then giving all the participants every opportunity to discuss the issue at length amongst themselves. The remainder of this paper considers the metalinguistic comments on the Luxembourgish language made by the focus group participants, looking in particular at the way in which the language is discursively constructed and the subsequent implications for the positioning of Luxembourgish in its contemporary linguistic context. The analysis is based on data from three focus groups (out of fifteen focus groups in total) in which the discussion is particularly salient for the central topics of this paper. The details for each focus group are as follows (the age of each participant is provided in brackets):

Name: Focus group no. 9  
Location: Luxembourg City  
Participants: Eva (18), Félix (21), Luca (18), Robert (19)

Name: Focus group no. 11  
Location: Ettelbruck group  
Participants: Martin (26), Mike (27), Sofia (28)

Name: Focus group no. 15  
Location: Belval campus  
Participants: Christian (20), Simon (29), Vanessa (21), Yvette (22)

All participants were born in Luxembourg, grew up in the Grand Duchy and have Luxembourgish nationality, with the exception of Sofia who is from Sweden. They were all resident in the country at the time of the study. The real names of the participants have not been used. Each focus group lasted between approximately 60 to 90 minutes and took place in English, French, German and/or Luxembourgish. In each of the extracts from the focus groups in the following section, the original dialogue has been reproduced. Whereas the Ettelbruck focus group was mostly conducted in English, the Luxembourg City and the Belval campus focus groups were predominantly in German. The participants decided on the language(s) of the discussion jointly with the moderator and were free to switch between languages at any time. Whenever the dialogue is in a language other than English, an English translation is provided immediately below. The focus group discussions have been transcribed according to conventions based on those in Johnstone (2013:xviii--xx).

### **5. Discursive constructions of Luxembourgish in the focus groups.**

On analysing the metalinguistic comments of the participants in the focus groups, two major themes emerge with regard to the way in which Luxembourgish is constructed. They are:

- Theme 1: “Luxembourgers speak Luxembourgish, the national language of Luxembourg.”
- Theme 2: “Luxembourgish lacks essential characteristics of a standard language.”

A central issue emerging from the focus group data is the underlying tension between these two themes. How can Luxembourgish be established as the national language of Luxembourgers if there is still widespread uncertainty about how to write the language ‘properly’, especially in formal contexts? Moreover, as we shall see in the forthcoming examples, what drives the focus group participants to describe Luxembourgish in very positive terms in one situation but to criticise the language as “not beautiful”, “strange” or a “mishmash” at another stage of the same discussion? The following subsections will discuss the data arising from the focus groups, addressing each theme in turn, and ultimately attempt to address these underlying tensions.

#### **5.1. “Luxembourgers speak Luxembourgish, the national language of Luxembourg”**

On many occasions in the focus groups, the participants expressed a strong affiliation with Luxembourgish. Thus, for instance, in the Luxembourg City focus group, Eva explains how she usually makes a point of speaking Luxembourgish intentionally when she is in a shop with only French-speaking staff. She expresses this as a defiant act of resistance to, what she perceives as, increasing encroachment of the French language in Luxembourg:

Extract 1: Focus group no. 9, Luxembourg City  
(51:44-52:28)

Eva: Ich rede meistens aus Prinzip, wenn ich merke, da sind

nur Franzosen, rede ich nur Luxemburgisch.  
[...]

Eva: Ich denke mich einfach so, ja, du bist hier in meinem Land, du musst auch meine Sprache reden. Wenn ich zu dir nach Frankreich komme, strengere ich mich auch an, Französisch zu reden.

Eva: *On principle, I usually speak, if I notice there are only French people, I only speak Luxembourgish.*  
[...]

Eva: *I just think, well, you are here in my country, then you have to speak my language. When I come to your country France, then I make an effort to speak French.*

Eva defines Luxembourgish as “my” language which ought to be spoken in “my” country. Despite the long-standing history of trilingualism in the Grand Duchy, Eva rails against French and positions herself as a defender of ‘her’ language, Luxembourgish. French is not framed as a language of Luxembourg in this discourse. A brief moment later, another member of the Luxembourg City group, Luca, puts forward his own explanation of the issue, using an analogy:

Extract 2: Focus group no. 9, Luxembourg City  
(53:58-54:34)

Luca: Stellen Sie sich mal vor, wir kommen nach London und werden mit jedem, der da wohnt, Luxemburgisch reden.

Fieldw.: Mhm.

Eva: [Unclear.]

Luca: Die ganze Zeit. Irgendwann reicht das einem ...

Eva: ‘Reicht’!

Luca: Reicht! Der sagt also ‘nein, ich will Englisch. Ich bin Engländer. Du kommst hier herein. Also muss du dich mit mir unterhalten können, auf meiner Sprache. Ich nicht auf deiner Sprache’.

Fieldw.: Mhm.

Luca: Du willst was von mir. Nicht ich was von dir.

Eva: Ja.

Luca: *Imagine that we come to London and speak Luxembourgish to everyone who lives there.*

Fieldw.: Mmm.

Eva: [Unclear.]

Luca: *The whole time. At some point enough is enough ...*

Eva: ‘Enough’!

Luca: *Enough! The guy says then ‘no, I want English. I am English. You come over here. So you have to be able to speak to me in my language. Not me speaking in your language’.*

Fieldw.: Mmm.

Luca: *You want something from me. Not me from you.*

Eva: Yes.

Luca describes the act of communication as a transaction with an asymmetrical power dynamic, whereby the outsider should adjust to the language of the person in control, namely the person resident in 'their' country. Similar to Eva's example, only Luxembourgish is designated as the language of Luxembourgers in Luca's explanation. Both French and German are absent from the scenario which Luca puts together to illustrate his point. In their examples, both focus group participants position Luxembourgish as the language of the nation.

Furthermore, a recurrent trope in these extracts from the Luxembourg City focus group is the 'us'/'them' distinction. Both participants quoted here, Eva and Luca, refer to 'we'/'I' as opposed to 'them'/'you'. Each time, Luxembourgish is defined as our/my language, whereas other languages are labelled as their/your language, belonging to a postulated 'other'. This differentiation emphasizes the assumed inclusiveness of Luxembourgish, which is constructed as the language of an imagined national community of Luxembourgers. But while 'we' denotes inclusion, it conversely also implies exclusion (Wodak, De Cillia, Reisigl, Liebhart, Hirsch, Mitten and Unger 2009:45--6) and in extract 1 the focus is on the French language as the language of the imagined 'other'.

In the Ettelbruck focus group, a stereotype is foregrounded early on that all Luxembourgers grow up speaking Luxembourgish and that this is the typical situation for 'regular' Luxembourgers:

Extract 3: Focus group no. 11, Ettelbruck  
(08:35-09:08)

Martin: Err, well, I grew up in Luxembourgish as every kid over here and then basically even before you go to school you can speak German due to television, cartoons and everything. Erm, or even books my mum wrote, read for a good night story for example. It's all in German. And it's the closest to ... for me, like, for Luxembourgish people, they speak German as a second mother language, without accent or anything. That's for me the case.

With phrases such as "as every kid over here", Martin envisages himself as a prototypical Luxembourger and considers his linguistic development to be universally applicable to all Luxembourgish citizens. His language biography is narrated as if it is the case for all Luxembourgers without exception, meaning that Luxembourgish is the home language of every Luxembourger and that they speak German "as a second mother language" because Luxembourgish is, linguistically speaking, not very distant from German. However, this scenario does not equate with the experiences of many Romanophone Luxembourgers who frequently remain invisible in such discourses and consequently whose language needs are often inadequately catered for (Weber 2009:145). At a later stage in the focus group discussion, Mike categorises people living in Luxembourg according to linguistic and geographical criteria:

Extract 4: Focus group no. 11, Ettelbruck  
(13:22-14:00)

Mike: Like in Luxembourg you have a lot of ... especially in the south, you have a lot more Francophones, like French-speaking people. You have a lot more Portuguese. And then, like the, you know, the true, old-fashioned Luxembourg people, they are much closer to German in general.

Mike makes a clear distinction between "true, old-fashioned Luxembourg people" who "are much closer to German in general" than the Romanophone section of the population. The choice of the



word “true” underlines the assumption that an imagined ‘genuine’ Luxembourger has a linguistic repertoire which is more Germanic-oriented. Luxembourgish is indeed a West Germanic language and has many linguistic affinities with German. So, for Mike, it is not just the Luxembourgish language which indexes a genuine Luxembourger but also a Germanic connection, a nearness to the German language. A Germanophone-Romanophone divide is being constructed. At another stage of this focus group, Luxembourgish is again given prominence as an important marker of national identity:

Extract 5: Focus group no. 11, Ettelbruck  
(44:01-44:31)

- Martin: I think if you want to be part of Luxembourgish living culture and everything, you should definitely learn Luxembourgish. And then as a second language, err I see it as an advantage to speak German, French and English but English would be the first choice over the other two.
- Mike: I fully agree with that. I think it's really nice to have Luxembourgish, even though there's no real point for speaking Luxembourgish like that. Right now, speaking Luxembourgish is also more like a ... it's like a status symbol almost in a way.
- Sofia: Really?
- Mike: It's like a erm ... you know erm ... you don't ... yeah ... there's no need for it but it just kind of gives you a special position, or something like that.
- Martin: It makes you feel home.

Mike credits Luxembourgish with having special value in Luxembourg society, a form of “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1991:72) and Martin considers speaking Luxembourgish to be a prerequisite for engaging with Luxembourgish culture. Much like Bourdieu's description of the unequal distribution of linguistic practices in society (Bourdieu 1991:15), the Luxembourgish language is discursively constructed as a symbolic cornerstone of being Luxembourgish and therefore serves as a crucial factor both in legitimizing the speaker as a Luxembourger and for according the speaker social status within the speech community.

The focus of this section has been on the metalinguistic comments which frame Luxembourgish as the key language which defines Luxembourgers, a discourse which has affinities with a ‘one-nation one-language’ ideology. A pervasive theme is that there is a certain sequence of linguistic development (firstly Luxembourgish, then German, then French) which is typical for an imagined ‘true’ Luxembourger who grows up with learning languages in this specific order. Luxembourgish is presented as a prominent symbol of national identity and references to trilingualism do not feature in this discourse. There are entrenched beliefs amongst members of these focus groups that everyone grows up speaking Luxembourgish and has had lots of exposure to the German language through television and children's books (as in extract 3 for example). Children growing up with a different language background and who do not have access to this particular linguistic development are often erased from this discourse and become socially invisible.

In the extracts from the last focus group, Luxembourgish is couched in terms of being a valuable symbolic resource. Although Mike considers learning Luxembourgish to be of little worth in practical terms (low instrumental value), he conversely describes speaking Luxembourgish in Luxembourg as attributing social status to the speaker (high symbolic and affective value). This is illustrative of the type of complexity, sometimes seemingly contradictory, with regard to the situation surrounding Luxembourgish. The strong symbolic and emotional significance of being a

competent speaker of Luxembourgish is reinforced by Martin's observation at the end of this interaction that Luxembourgish nurtures feelings of home. The comments tie in with discourses of Luxembourgish as the language of integration, which suggest that gaining proficiency in Luxembourgish bestows the speaker with status in Luxembourg society and provides access to Luxembourgish culture and way of life. However, the subsequent section will demonstrate how depicting Luxembourgish as the language of the nation in this way is largely at odds with prevailing uncertainties about the language when it comes to writing Luxembourgish and also when discussing Luxembourgish in terms of standardisation and other (European) languages.

## 5.2 "Luxembourgish lacks essential characteristics of a standard language."

The theme of language standardisation emerged in the focus groups from two angles. Firstly, the status of Luxembourgish as an official standard language was undermined by a lack of confidence in being able to write Luxembourgish in accordance with officially recognised guidelines on orthography. Secondly, in describing Luxembourgish, frequent comparisons were made with other European languages, especially English, French and German, whereby Luxembourgish was presented as an emerging language which has not progressed to the same level of standardisation and hence in this respect was placed lower on an imagined hierarchy of languages.

Firstly, looking closely at comments on writing Luxembourgish, there was a sense of insecurity about one's own ability to produce 'proper' written Luxembourgish in all three focus groups. The participants were generally comfortable with writing Luxembourgish in an informal context, such as compiling text messages to friends and posting messages on various forms of social media. However, they expressed misgivings about being able to write Luxembourgish in a more formal situation, for example in an e-mail to someone with whom they are unacquainted. They added that this latter scenario, where they would use Luxembourgish in a formal setting, would be a relatively rare occurrence. The remarks by Eva, Félix and Luca in the next extract typify the anxieties that were expressed in the focus groups regarding this topic:

Extract 6: Focus group no. 9, Luxembourg City group  
(00:21:36-00:22:11)

Eva: Wegen auch der Schrift, es sind überall Punkte über den Buchstaben und es ist wirklich sehr schwierig auch zu schreiben und zu lesen. Das ähm ...

Fieldw.: Luxemburgisch?

Eva: Ja.

Félix: Man liest es nicht viel.

Eva: Nein.

Félix: Wenn dann, muss man ... ja eben nur, über das Hören ...

Eva: Ja.

Luca: Es gibt vielleicht ein Dutzend Bücher auf Luxemburgisch.

Eva: *Because of the writing too, there are dots everywhere over the letters and it is also really very difficult to write and to read. That erm ...*

Fieldw.: *Luxemburgish?*

Eva: *Yes.*

Félix: *We don't read it much.*

Eva: *No.*

Félix: *If we do, then we have to ... yes, well we only hear it ...*

Eva: *Yes.*

Luca: *There are maybe a dozen books in Luxembourgish.*

Gilles (2015:146) conducted a corpus-based study into spelling proficiency amongst Luxembourgers using chat-room data and news website comments. The study found that although there are signs that written Luxembourgish has on the whole been observed to be gradually conforming to officially approved orthographical norms, this is still not yet widespread. The dialogue in the previous extract shows a similar feeling amongst the participants in the Luxembourg City focus group, where they continue to view Luxembourgish as chiefly a spoken/aural language, rather than written/read. Moreover, the features Eva highlights as being particularly troublesome are the diacritics such as the letter <ë>, which in fact has been constructed as iconic of Luxembourgish and hence serves as one of the most conspicuous characters differentiating Luxembourgish from German. Similarly, in the Ettelbruck group, the thread of the conversation also touched upon difficulties faced when writing Luxembourgish:

Extract 7: Focus group no. 11, Ettelbruck

(00:11:42-00:12:48)

Mike: So I can only write two proper words in Luxembourgish. It's a really difficult language to write too. I don't have a clue.

Martin: Me neither.

Mike: I have a friend in political science. He has to write all four languages which you have to do if you want to work for the government.

Luxembourgers in this focus group are not necessarily conveying doubts about writing Luxembourgish per se, but rather about supposed 'correct' usage in more formal domains, what Mike describes as writing "proper words" in the language. In the Belval Campus group, they point out that the less formal the communication, the greater the tolerance for variation in orthography:

Extract 8: Focus group no. 15, Belval Campus group

(00:36:27-00:37:12)

Yvette: Ich schreibe eigentlich alle meine SMS oder so auf Luxemburgisch aber halt nicht in dann der richtigen Grammatik. Also man versteht, was ich sagen will. Man kann es lesen aber dann fehlt vielleicht auf einem 'E' einen Strich oder zwei Punkte aber ...

Fieldw.: Mhm.

Yvette: Man kann es schon lesen aber ... So schreiben fällt einem sehr einfach aber das richtige Schreiben ... brauche ich auch eine Stunde für einen Satz oder so! Also.

Christian: Aber jeder schreibt anders. Und ich, ich schreibe sogar selbst verschiedene Wörter anders heute wie morgen oder so. [*Laughs.*]

Fieldw.: Und ist das ziemlich egal? Also, das stört dich nicht?

Christian: Ja.

Fieldw.: Wenn du denkst ... ich weiß nicht ... wie ich das schreiben soll?

Christian: Ich verstehe auch, dass das komisch ist, denn ich hatte auch schon die Diskussion ... [*General laughter.*]

Christian: ... man versteht das nicht, wenn man seine eigene Sprache nicht schreiben kann.

Yvette: *I actually write all my text messages in Luxembourgish but not in the proper grammar. So everyone understands*

*what I want to say. They can read it but then perhaps there is a line or two dots missing above an 'e' but ...*

Fieldw.: *Mmm.*

Yvette: *People read it but ... writing like that is really easy but writing properly ... for that I need an hour for one sentence or something! Yeah.*

Christian: *But everyone writes differently. And even I, I write various words differently from one day to the next.*  
[Laughs.]

Fieldw.: *And is that more or less ok? Does that bother you?*

Christian: *Yeah.*

Fieldw.: *If you think ... I don't know ... how should I write that?*

Christian: *I also get that it's strange because I already had this discussion ...*  
[General laughter.]

Christian: *... people don't understand that we can't write our own language.*

Christian's final statement in this extract is a particularly informative and succinct encapsulation of the seemingly paradoxical situation with positioning Luxembourgish as the national language of Luxembourg and Luxembourgers. He points out the difficulty that people outside of Luxembourg have in understanding how Luxembourgers seem unable to write their own language. The language of a nation is commonly expected to be a standardised language with recognised norms, of which the written form is its most prestigious form. The ideological foundation for a standard language includes requirements for the standard variety to have little variability and to have reached standardisation most fully in writing (Milroy and Milroy 2012:18--9). This is in conflict somewhat with the feeling amongst many Luxembourgers that they cannot write 'their' national language properly. Although the current official orthography for Luxembourgish has been in place since 1975 (*Mémorial* 1975), followed by a spelling reform implemented by the *Conseil Permanent de la Langue Luxembourgeoise* in 1999, there is very little awareness of these official norms amongst Luxembourgers and these standards were never mentioned in any of the focus groups.

Since informal electronic communication (for example text messaging, posts on social media, e-mails between friends) largely resembles informal spoken communication, the use of written Luxembourgish in these domains does not usually pose a problem amongst the participants in the focus group, as explained by Yvette and Christian in the above extract. The focus group participants explained that, in scenarios when they need to write something in 'proper' Luxembourgish, they routinely run their written Luxembourgish through modern, technological tools that are readily available, such as *Spellchecker.lu*, which has on average 1,000 users per day (Gilles 2015:129). The overall impression from the focus groups is that the reliance of young people on digital spell checkers for their written Luxembourgish is fairly high. It is also quite telling that the members of this focus group, on receiving a Luxembourgish language version of the project *Information Sheet* explaining the aims of the study and the focus group procedure, claimed that this was the first time they had ever received a formal document written in Luxembourgish and found it somewhat amusing.

Besides misgivings about writing Luxembourgish, the participants in the focus groups also projected an image of Luxembourgish as a linguistic variety which has not yet reached the equivalent stage of development as other languages, particularly English, French and German, with which Luxembourgish is often directly compared. Doubts about Luxembourgish being a fully-fledged language can have a significant bearing on perceptions of its prestige (cf Fishman 1972: 17). As the very first extract in this paper has shown, Eva in particular is an advocate of promoting

greater use of Luxembourgish amongst people living in Luxembourg who currently do not speak it. Yet, at another stage in the same focus group, Eva demonstrates the complexity of the situation by also questioning its value:

Extract 9: Focus group no. 9, Luxembourg City group

(00:10:29-00:12:14)

Eva: Also, wirklich ist es keine schöne Sprache.

Fieldw.: Welche jetzt?

Eva: Luxemburgisch.

Fieldw.: Warum denkst du das?

Eva: Ich weiß nicht. Sie ist ähm ... ich finde sie ein bisschen komisch.

*[Some laughing in the group.]*

Eva: Wenn ich sie nicht selbst sprechen würde, würde ich sie komisch finden, wenn ich mich reden höre.

Luca: Also, für mich, ich finde Deutsch und Französisch wirklich die schönsten Sprachen. Auch English.

Eva: Ja, ich finde auch English die schönste.

Luca: Aber, so Luxemburgisch für mich ist es eher so ein Akzent, denn Luxemburgisch besteht ja im Hauptteil aus Französisch und aus Deutsch.

Eva: *Well, it really isn't a beautiful language.*

Fieldw.: *Which one now?*

Eva: *Luxembourgish.*

Fieldw.: *Why do you think that?*

Eva: *I don't that. It's erm ... I find it a bit strange.*

*[Some laughing in the group.]*

Eva: *If I didn't speak it myself, I would find it strange if I*

*heard myself talking.*

Luca: *Well, for me, I find that German and French really are the nicest languages. English as well.*

Eva: *Yes, I also find English the nicest.*

Luca: *But Luxembourgish seems to me to be more of an accent because Luxembourgish consists mainly of French and German.*

It is the English, French and German languages which are held up as the ideals with which Luxembourgish is compared. Whilst Luxembourgish is labelled “not beautiful” and “strange”, these other major European languages are singled out as “the nicest”. Luca refers to Luxembourgish as an accent, rather than a language, and goes on to describe Luxembourgish as mainly a hybrid of French and German. The trope of Luxembourgish not being a ‘real’ language on its own merits but only a derivative accent, as well as being merely a mix of French and German, was a common one in the focus groups. The idea echoes the ‘bridging’ characterization of Luxembourgers put forward by Ries ([1911] 1920), in Horner 2007), whereby Luxembourgers were portrayed as a point of connection (*Mischkultur*) between the French and German cultures. In a similar vein, in the Belval Campus group Yvette offers the following description of what ‘we’ in Luxembourg speak:

Extract 10: Focus group no. 15, Belval Campus group

(01:23:33-01:24:28)

Yvette: Die Meisten denken, dass wir Französisch sprechen. Nein, wir sprechen Luxemburgisch. Was ist Luxemburgisch dann?

Ein Mischmasch aus Deutsch und Französisch.

Yvette: *Most people think that we speak French. No, we speak Luxembourgish. So what's Luxembourgish? A hotchpotch of German and French.*

Here Yvette uses the hybrid metaphor to define Luxembourgish, referring to the language by the rather unflattering label “Mischmasch” (cf. also Davies 2012:56--7). However, this comment by Yvette succinctly captures the multi-layered nature of constructing Luxembourgish. Despite the description of Luxembourgish as a hotchpotch of other languages, which might be considered an unfavourable depiction of the language, there is no hesitation from Yvette in asserting that, contrary to speaking French, ‘we’ speak Luxembourgish. This not only again emphasizes the I/we vs you/they duality, but also positions Luxembourgish once more as a powerful symbol of national identity as Luxembourgers. Although standard French and standard German might serve as one of the benchmarks for comparing Luxembourgish, and might be perceived to overshadow Luxembourgish in terms of their long-established highly standardised forms, there is little doubt in this statement that Yvette still aligns herself strongly with the identification of Luxembourgers first and foremost as speakers of Luxembourgish.

Whilst there clearly is a discourse positioning Luxembourgish in a monolingual sense as the language of Luxembourgers (as seen in section 5.1), Luxembourgish is constructed at the same time as a language which still has some way to go before it reaches the level of standardisation of other languages with which it is often compared, usually English, French and German. The examples from the focus groups in this section demonstrate how Luxembourgish is constructed as a ‘lesser’ linguistic variety which is derivative of another ‘more established’ language, for example only an accent of German or merely a hybrid of French and German. By framing Luxembourgish in this way the focus group participants present the language as one which is subordinate to the highly standardised languages with which it co-exists. Luxembourgish is frequently described by the young people in this study as having a lower rank on a perceived hierarchy of languages, as well as lacking the level of progress achieved by other languages in terms of the attained stage of standardisation.

## **6. Conclusion**

The discussion of the data above reveals some of the underlying complexity surrounding language, identity and nationhood in contemporary Luxembourg. In their reflections on Luxembourgish, two prominent themes emerge amongst the participants in the focus groups. Luxembourgish is frequently characterised as the language of national identity and speaking Luxembourgish is constructed as a defining feature of being a ‘true’ Luxembourger. Yet, the Luxembourgish language is also described as “not beautiful”, “strange”, a “mishmash” of other languages and difficult to write ‘properly’. Having misgivings about writing the national language in relation to standardised norms is highly unusual for the national languages of modern nation-states in Western Europe.

This apparently conflicting set of descriptions of Luxembourgish and feelings the language evokes can be explained largely by examining Luxembourgish in respect of differences between symbolic and instrumental value. Despite the ideal image of the trilingual citizen which is largely projected by the state (there are many examples of this latter discourse on the aforementioned online *Official Portal of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg*), it is Luxembourgish above all which is repeatedly singled out in the focus groups as the language which has high symbolic value for Luxembourgers and their national identity. In these discourses which display tendencies of a ‘one-nation one-language’ ideology, Luxembourgish has positive associations of familiarity, authenticity, community and home. However, when the discursive frame shifts to the topics of correctness, formality, language standards, norms and practical utility, the envisaged hierarchy is inverted and

Luxembourgish is presented in less advantageous terms because it is not seen to have the benefits of widely influential world languages, such as English, French and German, with which it is then compared in the discussions. In this context, Luxembourgish is constructed as difficult to write correctly, “strange” and a derivative, linguistic hybrid.

These comments and views reflect wider contemporary discourses regarding languages and language policy in the Grand Duchy. Since many Luxembourgers harbour feelings of uneasiness when it comes to writing Luxembourgish ‘properly’, which is recognised as one of the main ideological tenets of a standard language, the legitimacy of the written form is undermined. This leads to views, such as those discussed in the previous section, that Luxembourgish has not reached the same levels of standardisation and maturity as many other well-established languages, especially English, French and German. When referring to other languages, the participants in the focus groups had a greater tendency to express an affinity with German than with French. German was more often couched in favourable terms of being a close linguistic relative to Luxembourgish, whereas French tended to be selected as a particularly potent threat to the vitality of the Luxembourgish language. This latter point illustrates how the young people’s different stances towards these languages index wider social issues and transnational developments such as contemporary patterns of migration into Luxembourg. There is clearly a nuanced and multi-faceted linguistic situation in Luxembourg which feeds into broader language debates in the country, ranging from discussions about the limited role of Luxembourgish in the education system to the function of Luxembourgish for integration and citizenship (Weber and Horner 2012; Horner and Kremer 2016).

## **About the authors**

### **John Bellamy**

Having undertaken quantitative and qualitative sociolinguistic research in Austria, Germany, Luxembourg and in the UK, John Bellamy is particularly interested in everyday perceptions of different linguistic varieties and their speakers, and how these perceptions are shaped by ideologies and wider discourses on language in society. He is currently working with Wendy Ayres-Bennett on the *Cambridge Handbook on Language Standardisation*.

### **Kristine Horner**

Kristine Horner is Reader in Luxembourg Studies and Multilingualism at the University of Sheffield, where she is also director of the Centre for Luxembourg Studies. She has published widely in the areas of language politics, language ideologies and multilingualism. Her most recent major publications are *Introducing Multilingualism: A Social Approach* (with J-J. Weber; 2017, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) and *The German-speaking World: A Practical Introduction to Sociolinguistic Issues* (with P. Stevenson, N. Langer and G. Reershemius; 2017, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.).

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