
Article:
Horner, K. (2025) The "natural history" of multilingual policy in Luxembourg: analysing strategic ambiguity and its implications for small language communities. Sociolinguistica, 39 (1). pp. 125-143. ISSN 0933-1883

https://doi.org/10.1515/soci-2025-0006

Kristine Horner*

The “natural history” of multilingual policy in Luxembourg: analysing strategic ambiguity and its implications for small language communities

https://doi.org/10.1515/soci-2025-0006

Abstract: Language officiality is best understood in relation to the specificities of the dynamic spatial-temporal context in which is it situated. While the analysis of present-day language policy can present challenges, historical sociolinguistic research is compounded by the paucity of records, obstacles in accessing key documents and, quite importantly, potential issues of researcher reflexivity. A further dimension of complexity exists given that language policy may be explicitly or implicitly formulated. Instances of ambiguity in policy documents may be potentially strategic, although difficulties exist in locating evidence as to whether such ambiguities may be considered as intentionally strategic by policy makers. With attention to the ideological and discursive dimensions of language policy, this paper investigates the ratification of the 1948 constitutional amendments in Luxembourg – following Nazi-German occupation during World War II – which involved the elimination of named languages from the constitution. This paper examines the ways that (strategic) ambiguity bears similarities to silence in that it may simultaneously constitute an absence and a presence. In historical sociolinguistic research, it is therefore imperative to be aware of the potential limitations of empirical data and to offer equal consideration to the analysis of what is and is not said.

Keywords: Language officiality, multilingual Luxembourg, small languages, strategic ambiguity

1 Introduction

Situated along the Romance-Germanic borderlands, the social, political, and economic dynamics of contemporary Luxembourg continue to be shaped by histori-

***Corresponding Author: Kristine Horner**, University of Sheffield, School of Languages, Arts and Societies, The University of Sheffield, Jessop West, 1 Upper Hanover Street, Sheffield S3 7RA, United Kingdom, k.horner@sheffield.ac.uk

cally entrenched multilingual policies, even if they have not remained immutable over time. It has been argued that language policy in Luxembourg is marked by forms of strategic ambiguity, i.e. where certain key policy elements are deliberately left open to interpretation, and that this device may be a notable feature of language policy pertaining to small language communities (Hawkey and Horner 2022). In a related vein to language ideological erasure (Irvine and Gal 2000), various methodological questions arise concerning the analysis of strategic ambiguity in action, including how to identify and examine aspects of policy that have been rendered nebulous, invisible or silenced, and to gauge the intentionality behind such policy decisions.

As a point of departure, this paper underlines the inherently ideological and discursive dimensions of language policy. Informed by research on language ideological debates (Blommaert 1999), linguistic authority (Gal and Woolard 2001a; Woolard 2008) as well as work on discursive approaches to language policy (Barakos and Unger 2016), the discussion focuses on the negotiation of language policy in Luxembourg in the immediate post-World War II era following the traumatic period of Nazi-German occupation. More specifically, this paper examines policy decisions concerning the 1948 constitutional amendment (Chapter II: Article 29) that eliminates the explicit mention of named languages and appears to be a key moment in the deployment of strategic ambiguity in Luxembourg's language policy. The analysis will lay bare the ways in which language policy is a matter of ongoing negotiation, with discourses and texts having their 'natural history' or "chronological and sociocultural anchoring" (Blommaert 1999: 6), in addition to weighing up the implications of this legislation for other forms of implicit and explicit language policy as well as acts of boundary construction in the socio-historical context of Luxembourg (Horner 2007).

The following questions will be explored in relation to the focus of this thematic issue: (1) From a historical perspective, how did social actors evaluate and act upon aspects of multilingual situations at difficult historical moments? and (2) As historical sociolinguists, what steps can we take in our research to better understand the 'natural history' of language policy as well as the ideologies that underpin historical language policy decisions and strategies that inform language policy legislation? The following section discusses key theoretical concepts, including language officiality, multilayered time, language authority and small languages. The third section offers insights into the socio-historical context of Luxembourg with a focus on the role of language in the processes of nation-building. The fourth section provides an analysis of the 1948 constitutional amendment in relation to the natural history of language policy in Luxembourg. The conclusion synthesises key points arising from the analysis, in addition to considering implications for present-day language policy in Luxembourg and current understandings of its historical trajectory. On

a broader scale, the overarching research questions are then revisited with an emphasis on highlighting insights for the field of historical sociolinguistics.

2 Language officiality, linguistic authority and the history of language policy

Language officiality is understood in terms of legal status which pertains to the statutory, working and symbolic roles of language at the level of the state (Stewart [1968] 2012; Cooper 1989). As tightly bound up with language policy, these roles can be difficult to separate in practice and are worthy of detailed examination in officially multilingual states. While the working language/s of the state is/are identifiable if official records are accessible, a clear indication of statutory and symbolic roles of language may or may not be transparent. It is important to consider what Hawkey and Horner (2022: 196) refer to as strategic ambiguity in relation to language officiality "wherein certain key policy elements are deliberately left open to interpretation" through a range of textual strategies. Thus, analyses should consider whether the statutory and symbolic roles of language are designated explicitly in texts, enacted implicitly in myriad practices or situated somewhere in between on this explicit-implicit continuum. According to Shohamy (2006: 50–63), language officiality together with related rules and regulations has the potential to act as a mechanism for turning *de jure* into *de facto* policy. Shohamy (2006) encourages us to explore the role of myriad language policy mechanisms in relation to the implementation of language policy as well as the ideologies that inform it. This approach resonates with much of the contemporary research on language policy, which Ricento (2000) describes as informed by the discursive turn and insights from critical theory (see also Barakos and Unger 2016). Ricento (2000) also stresses augmented engagement with the role of ideology, the agency of social actors and the socio-political field in which language policies are institutionalised.

In addition to foregrounding the discursive and ideological nature of language policy, the exploration of its implicit and explicit manifestations requires attention to social actors and their positioning in space-time. This importance of situatedness is consonant with Irvine's (1989: 255) definition of language ideology as "the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests". Taking this transformational research on language ideologies a step further, Blommaert (1999: 1) calls for the study of the historical production and reproduction of language ideologies by focusing analysis on debates in which "language is central as a topic, a motif, a target, and in which language ideologies are being articulated, formed, amended, enforced". Blommaert

offers a persuasive argument for the incorporation of Braudel's ([1958] 1969) notion of multilayered time into our toolkit as it is helpful in understanding the historiography of language and, by extension, language policy. Researchers in sociolinguistics often focus on the *courte durée* (*événements*) or the single moments that are perceptible to and experienced by individuals. By considering the *longue durée*, or the slowly unfolding time that lies beyond the scope of direct human reach, we gain insights into the longer trajectory of history in a way that bears affinities to those of a geologist albeit with the caveat that sociolinguistics is focused on social actors. As Blommaert (1999: 5–6) points out, "discourses, texts, talk all have their 'natural history' – a chronological and sociocultural anchoring which produces meaning and social effects in ways that cannot be reduced to text-characteristics alone". This approach can be brought into the ambit of historical sociolinguistic research in productive ways, for example when encountering ambiguities, pauses and silences in texts, in addition to avoiding the pitfall of treating texts as if they were stable over time, given that their meaning and effect cannot be stable across time-space. In this way, we are better equipped to question grand narratives on language history and to understand how languages and varieties as well as legislative texts shaping language officialisation are bound up with authority.

Research on language ideologies offers insights into how certain languages or language varieties are prioritised over others as well as how certain relationships between language and society are naturalised in relation to authoritative texts. Gal and Woolard (2001b: 2–5) discuss how certain representations of linguistic phenomena gain credibility and become influential, and also how language ideologies and practices are pivotal in the formation of linguistic authority. They explain that linguistic authority is established from two different perspectives: (1) emphasising the 'socially locatable' nature of language, rooted in primordialism and territorial belonging; and (2) emphasising the 'aperspectival objectivity' of language, based on universality and prescriptive norms. The former prong resonates with the 'one nation, one language ideology', and the latter with the standard language ideology. Gal and Woolard (2001b) stress that either perspective may be invoked to construct linguistic authority, and that the relationship between the two perspectives is often complex. They also underscore that the notion of "aperspectival objectivity", or the "view from nowhere", is pivotal in the process of constructing languages and publics alike (Gal and Woolard 2001b: 4). Woolard's (2008) extension to this work is quite relevant to the focus of this paper. She applies the two-pronged means of constructing authority directly to named languages – in this case, with reference to language politics in Catalonia – mapping the former 'socially locatable' aspect onto authenticity and the latter 'aperspectival objectivity' onto anonymity. Woolard (2008) shows how there has been a shift from the construction of Catalan as a national symbol (ideology of authenticity) to that of Catalan as everybody's

language and yet nobody's language in particular (ideology of anonymity), while also highlighting the tensions inherent to this process with regard to regional and/or small languages.

The term 'small language' has been employed by Pietikäinen et al. (2016) in their seminal work on sociolinguistics from the periphery, highlighting the shifting centre-periphery dynamics in what sometimes have been referred to as minority language communities. While the focus is on Corsican, Irish, Sami and Welsh, the heuristic use of the term 'small languages' encourages us to recall that majority-minority relationships are rooted in issues of power and inequality rather than size or numbers alone and also to challenge the idea that such relationships remain stable over time. While smallness does not equate with minoritisation, it appears that small languages share the feature of being situated in "cluttered fields of competing ideologies", as noted by Pietikäinen et al. (2016: 41). The "old circumstances" at the forefront of discussion in Pietikäinen et al. (2016: 9–22) pertain in large part to the centrality of the European nation-state model that took firm root during the long nineteenth century as well as the conditions that led to its dominance in social, political and economic life. It has been widely discussed how the one nation, one language ideology as well as the standard language ideology became widespread during this same period: these ideologies are closely bound up with one another and serve to legitimate the language of the state and enforce related language regimes (see Gal 2006: 15; Heller 1999: 7–9).

It is perhaps unsurprising that the notion of 'contested languages' has arisen in sociolinguistic research specifically in European contexts, including work on the 'quest for recognition'. Nic Craith (2006: 106) defines contested language as "forms of communication whose linguistic status is or has been disputed in the recent past". Building on this work, Wells (2019) offers insightful applications of the notion of contested language to the cases of Asturian and Sicilian and rightfully notes the parallels to Makoni and Pennycook's (2007) discussion of (dis)inventing languages, which highlights European underpinnings in the naturalisation of named languages. Such discussions underline the point that the most fundamental language ideology, which in turn has close links to European nationalisms, is the belief that named languages are timeless, natural and clearly bounded. As Irvine and Gal (2000: 35; see also Gal and Irvine 2019) cogently explain in their work on the semiotic processes of linguistic differentiation:

> A language is simply a dialect that has an army and a navy – so goes a well-known saying in linguistics. Although only semi-serious, this dictum recognizes an important truth: The significance of linguistic differentiation is embedded in the politics of a region and its observers. Just as having an army presupposes some outside force, some real or putative opposition to be faced, so does identifying a language presuppose a boundary or opposition to other languages with which it contrasts in some larger sociolinguistic field.

While languages such as Irish, Sami and Welsh no longer tend to be subjected to discourses of 'not really being a language' nowadays, Jaffe's (e.g. 1999, 2019) prolific discussion of the case of Corsican over time provides an interesting illustration of various strategic ideological positionings to underline its status as a language in tandem with vying for rights at multiple points in time. This work offers insights into how the sociolinguistic history of small languages is fractured and discontinuous. Additional studies have sought to explore how the legitimacy of certain languages – perceived by some to be dialects or patois – has been subject to related struggles for recognition, thus further entrenching a European-focused research preoccupation with this set of issues over the past decade (e.g. Havinga and Langer 2015; Harrison and Joubert 2019; Tamburelli and Tosco 2021; Litty and Langer 2025).

The study of language-related struggles and contestations harks back to previous discussion of language ideological debates in which case language is positioned, in theory at least, as the target of debate. Language policy and language officialisation are intertwined with other layers of the 'long language ideological debate' (Blommaert 1996), even if this state of affairs is not always visible in the broader public sphere. In operationally democratic states, where legislation is proposed, discussed, approved, formulated and implemented, there are many layers to understanding how and why things transpired as they did. Taking an approach that foregrounds the ideological and discursive nature of relevant texts is conducive to the view that texts are not tangible forms of empirical evidence but rather, traces of the debate situated in space-time which in turn open a window into the struggles and contestations in which languages, varieties and so on are invoked in that time-space. This paper takes its cue from such a critically reflexive approach. As noted previously, the formulation of language policy texts may be more explicit or implicit. In the latter case, it is important to consider whether strategic ambiguity is informing the texts, which may involve the use of hedges, backgrounding, omissions and polysemy, to name just a few discursive and rhetorical strategies.

The term strategic ambiguity has been used in a range of disciplines including rhetoric, communication and politics, especially in work that focuses on intersections between these fields. Bach, Schmitt, and McGregor (2025) state that the lion's share of research utilising this concept is focused on providing an analysis of the motivations, or strategic reasons, behind the use of ambiguity rather than the notion of ambiguity itself. Taking inspiration from the work of Chaffee (1991), they conceptualise strategic ambiguity as a rhetorical tactic that creates a message, aimed at a range of social actors, that facilitates various interpretations due to the formulation of the text. What is also crucial is that the communicator stands to benefit from this formulation and that strategic ambiguity is employed from many positions on the political spectrum informed by diverse motivations.

The employment of strategic ambiguity has been linked to a range of social contexts and discursive formulations. Here, we are concerned specifically with textual traces of ambiguity and the avoidance of a topic/issue/decision/group/policy, which are significant as silences are indicative of presences (see Jaworski 1992; Murray and Durrheim 2019). In this way, whatever forms of strategic ambiguity we may encounter bear no resemblance to the notion of 'bad data'. On the contrary, the main risk would be for the researcher to remain solely focused on certain textual formulations rather than others. As the following sections show, ambiguities and silences also may offer a path to avoiding contestation at moments when this strategy is deemed constructive even if the issues at hand remain unresolved. In language policy and related field of historical sociolinguistics, it is worth querying whether small languages are implicated significantly in such strategies. More specifically here, it is worth considering to what extent Luxembourgish, as a small language, is constructed as a 'non-contested' language by institutional actors and whether this stance dovetails with forms of strategic ambiguity that have been enacted by policy makers.

3 Contextualisation and the 'natural history' of language policy in Luxembourg

This section provides an overview of the ways that language officiality has been bound up with Luxembourgish nation-building from the nineteenth century until the present-day. This will help to provide an understanding of the longer trajectory of language policy and officiality in addition to the ways that these issues have been addressed in research. Contemporary sociolinguistic work on language policy in Luxembourg highlights the significance of the 1984 law on languages and sets its ratification in relation to significant socio-economic transformations between the late 1960s into the early 1980s (e.g. Fehlen 2002; Horner 2005; Garcia 2014). This law consists of four brief articles, the first of which designates Luxembourgish as the *langue nationale*, the second designates French as the *langue de la législation*, and the third stipulates that French, German and Luxembourgish constitute *langues administratives et judiciaires*. An additional fourth article guarantees flexibility in the choice of language when officials respond to a petition. While Berg (1993: 21–22) suggests that the 1984 law served to reinforce the linguistic status quo, he also notes that the term *langue officielle* is absent from the text and suggests that the chosen wording allows for flexible interpretations and applications of the law. We will consider this important point in the ensuing discussion but first will examine narratives pertaining to the role of language in relation to the longer historical trajectory of Luxembourgish nation-building and establishment of statehood.

Luxembourg is often portrayed as an anomaly in western Europe in connection with its smallness and tumultuous history. Historians have somewhat divergent views as to when Luxembourg became an independent state and it is best understood as a drawn-out process punctuated by a series of key moments in the first half of the nineteenth century (see Péporté et al. 2010). Following from decisions taken at the 1815 Congress of Vienna, King William I of the Netherlands was named as the Grand Duke of Luxembourg and ruling sovereign of the territory, while the Prussian garrison occupied the fortress of Luxembourg and at the same time Luxembourg became a member of the German Confederation (*Bund*). When the Belgium revolution broke out in 1830, Luxembourg city remained under the rule of King William II of the Netherlands. At that time, a Dutch language decree was issued stipulating that the use of German or French is optional. This form of language officialisation was not linked to Luxembourgish nation-building at the time; however, it set a process in motion that would shape bilingual policy in Luxembourg in the longer term.

The Belgian revolution of the 1830s was a pivotal moment as the western part of the former Grand Duchy was partitioned to the newly formed state of Belgium, with the eastern part forming what is the present-day Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. The territorial partitioning between what became the independent state of Luxembourg and the Province de Luxembourg in Belgium has led to the date of 1839 often being equated with the foundation of Luxembourg as an independent state (see Calmes and Bossaert 1996; Trausch 2002). As Péporté et al. (2010) note, the imagery of a partitioned Luxembourg has permeated the historical narrative in a way that has been intertwined with notions of smallness and vulnerability. From a sociolinguistic perspective, Berg (1993: 22–23) asserts that 1839 was a key date in the formation of a linguistically homogeneous nation:

> Das Attribut *langue nationale* hätte schon 1839 an die lëtzebuergesche Sprache vergeben werden können. In diesem Jahr verlor Luxemburg seine letzten frankophonen Gebiete, ab diesem Zeitpunkt ist die Muttersprache der Bevölkerung landesweit Lëtzebuergesch.
> [The term *langue nationale* could have been attributed to the Luxembourgish language already in 1839. In that year Luxembourg lost its last francophone areas, from that time onwards Luxembourgish has been the mother tongue of the population throughout the territory.]

While Berg's previous comments on the flexible formulation of language policy legislation are constructive, this passage raises two problematic issues pertaining to the relationship between language and nation: firstly, that people referred to the language that they spoke as *Lëtzebuergesch* at that time and secondly, that the 1839 partition formed a population who shared a common 'mother tongue' during the first half of the nineteenth century. Neither of these two presumptions has been clearly documented, yet they continue to inform nation-building narratives to this

day. Hence there is a need to debunk these myths of linguistic homogeneity: indeed, many people at that time referred to the language as 'Luxembourgish German' or 'our German', and a number of people also had other or additional mother tongues (in particular upper-class families often had French rather than Luxembourgish as their mother tongue).

In the context of revolutionary actions sweeping across Europe, an amended version of the constitution was ratified in 1848 which imparted certain members of society with greater rights. In terms of language officiality, Article 30 bears similarities to the earlier decree by stating that the usage of French and German is optional. This formulation was retained in the 1868 amendments to the constitution following the Second Treaty of London in 1867, although Article 30 became Article 29. The significant changes entailed the declared neutrality of Luxembourg together with its exit from *Bund* (German Confederation) while remaining a member of the *Zollverein* (German Customs Union). The 1868 constitution is sometimes regarded as the introduction of the first modern constitution, which is also considered as a 'living' or 'evolving' constitution which can be modified through set procedures.

In histories of Luxembourg, key foundational moments in the 19th century such as the ones referred to above are foregrounded, while the lion's share of the narrative usually focuses on the collective memory of the World War II period. This is not to say that there is complete erasure of the World War I period but rather that the emphasis is on other periods, which may partially be understood by the impact that World War II had on people's lived experiences as well as collective memory of a traumatic period of modern history. However, Spizzo (1995), in a compelling analysis, traces the trajectory of nation-building while pointing out that the 1910s constitute a key period in this process and that it must not be overlooked. Drawing on the work of Anderson ([1981] 1991), Spizzo (1995) discusses the oscillation between the opening and closing of the nation, which are elucidated as outward-facing and inward-facing constructions of Luxembourgish national identity. The outward-facing orientation draws on notions of Luxembourg as a bridge situated at the heart of the Germanic-Romance borderlands, which in turn dovetails with Nicolas Ries's ([1911] 1920: 267) designation of Luxembourgers as "*bons 'Mitteleuropäer'*" [good 'middle Europeans'], thus constructing Luxembourgish nationhood as refracting multiple cultural reference points rather than just one. Alternatively, the inward-facing orientation focuses on qualities perceived to be organic to the Grand Duchy, in addition to an emphasis on non-porous borders with the neighboring states of France and Germany, suggesting that Luxembourgish nationhood draws on a singular point of reference and a sense of national rootedness.

When discussing the same time period but with a focus on language, Horner (2007) considers the demarcating role of Luxembourgish as well as that of trilingualism in inward-facing and outward-facing nationalism/s. In this way, it is sug-

gested that the role of language in relation to nation-building constitutes a two-pronged rather than a straightforward 'one nation, one language' strategy. It is also worth flagging here that the standard language ideology has underpinned the use of German and French, in particular via language education mechanisms, dating back to the late nineteenth century with obligatory schooling implemented in 1881 (see Horner and Weber 2015). The same may not be said for Luxembourgish which was regarded in close relationship to German and used mainly for spoken functions. While Luxembourgish was predominantly a spoken medium of communication at the turn of the previous century, a small number of literary and other textual sources were in circulation at the time. Among these sources were newsletters of the Letzeburger National-Union who were active in promoting an inward-facing construction of Luxembourgish nationhood, stressing the importance of *ons Sprôch* [our language'] rather than drawing on a trilingual construction of nationhood (Jongletzebuerg 1911/12). Moreover, these newsletters offer albeit limited textual traces attesting to views on Luxembourgish as a language in the period prior to the World Wars.

Upon Nazi-German occupation in May 1940, language served a means of discursively justifying the incorporation of Luxembourg into the Third Reich. In October 1941, a census was administered, which included a number of questions about 'current citizenship', 'mother tongue' and 'ethnicity'. It was indicated that dialects were not permitted to be listed. In the early phase of the census, many people answered these questions with *Lëtzebuergesch*, thus symbolically resisting incorporation into the Third Reich. This act of rebellion is referred to as 'three times Luxembourgish'. In addition to forced conscription, mass deportations and physical acts of violence, the occupation also involved forms of symbolic violence, some of which specifically targeted forms of language use. Prior to the aforementioned census, a mass campaign of Germanicisation was already underway. Street signs and place names written in German replaced signs written in French. Personal names were also impacted by orthographic changes on surnames (e.g. Juncker became Junker) and German 'equivalents' replacing first names regarded as French (e.g. Jean became Johann). This process, in combination with other events and experiences, had a great impact on views and feelings about Luxembourgish: the World War II period was significant in fusing linkages of the language with notions of national groupness and resistance, thus bolstering the symbolic value of Luxembourgish. This was reinforced by speeches in Luxembourgish given by Grand-Duchess Charlotte, the ruling sovereign at the time, broadcast via the BBC while in exile in London.

Popular, official governmental and academic discourses alike highlight the role of World War II in augmenting the value of Luxembourgish. Scholars in multiple fields argue that the people's lived experience and the collective memory of

this period have served as an impetus for the augmented symbolic significance of Luxembourgish. Nevertheless, expanding on the use of written Luxembourgish in institutionalised settings was not a priority, and one of the most interesting shifts was the increased use of spoken Luxembourgish in parliament. This use of Luxembourgish in a highly formalised and symbolically elevated context is represented in the written minutes from parliamentary sessions, although the widespread use of written Luxembourgish remained relatively limited on a broader scale, thus this shift did not mark an abrupt change in linguistic practices.

Christophory's (1998) comments note that however powerful certain feelings may have been to abandon the use of German in a wider range of domains, particularly in the case of formal written functions, this change was considered to be impractical at that time:

> In 1945, after the shock of the Second World War, the prestige of the German language had suffered enormously in Luxembourg, and Luxembourgers tried to abandon it wherever they could. They expanded Luxembourgish as far as they could; decreed a new spelling reform [Margue-Feltes Lezebuurjer ortografi, 1946]; encouraged the teaching of Luxembourgish at high school level (1 hour, [septième]); introduced it into Parliament beside French and German; introduced it into Church for sermons mainly ... But in 1947 already, this proved to be an impossible endeavour and the German language was largely restored as the easiest instrument of communication for the large majority of people. (Christophory 1998: 128).

While it is unclear as to whether a turn towards a preference for the use of Luxembourgish as opposed to German in a wide range of (written and formal) domains was widespread at the time, the 1940s form part of the *longue durée* that offers interesting insights into how a gradual shift from German-French bilingualism moved further towards trilingualism that included Luxembourgish as part of the paradigm. In this light, the following section investigates what transpired in the mid-late 1940s and also how we can gain a better understanding of key texts as well as how they comprise the more gradual *longue durée*.

4 Strategic ambiguity and language officiality in the 1948 Constitution

Following the period of Nazi-German occupation there were naturally more urgent matters than those pertaining to language policy. Modern historians discuss the emphasis on ensuring that basic necessities were met and, perhaps all the more pressing, the mitigation of reported instances of Luxembourgish collaboration with the Nazi-German occupiers. Although language issues were not at the forefront of

immediate concerns, the discursive justifications that had been put forward by the occupying forces to fully incorporate Luxembourg into the Third Reich had explicitly flagged up language with particular attention to the (enforced hierarchical) relationship between German and Luxembourgish. In this context, there exist textual traces as well as witness testimonies attesting to views that language issues were in need of legal attention and actions in the aftermath of liberation. The extraordinary session of Parliament which took place on 14 September 1945 included the following agenda item:

> (1) La Constituante devra se prononcer sur le maintien de la langue allemande et sur l'introduction de la langue luxembourgeoise.
> [The Constituent Assembly will need to take a decision concerning the maintenance of the German language and the introduction of the Luxembourgish language.]

Perhaps for obvious reasons, there are few traces of public debate on the matter, at least not in textual format. However, a press release published a few days after the extraordinary session of Parliament constitutes a concentrated effort to avoid public debate on this issue, pertaining as it does to the traumatic events that transpired during the occupation. This extract is from the press release circulated in the dominant newspaper on the market at the time:

> (2) Es wird eine vorsichtige Lösung sein müssen, da der Schutz der sozialen Ordnung sich in der Hauptsache aus der Erziehung der öffentlichen Meinung, dem Ideenkampf und der gegenseitigen Kritik ergibt. Im Art. 29 wird die Constituante sich über die Beibehaltung der deutschen Sprache und die Einführung der luxemburgischen Sprache auszusprechen haben. (*Luxemburger Wort*, 17 September 1945)
> [It will have to be a prudent solution, since the protection of the social order results mainly from the positive influencing of public opinion, the war of ideas and mutual critique. The Constituent Assembly will need to take a decision in Art. 29 concerning the maintenance of the German language and the introduction of the Luxembourgish language.]

In the years that followed, reparations were underway while the government also was being reestablished, all of which served to ensure social, political and economic stability. During this period, work on a revised constitution commenced. Because language issues were bundled together with the revision to the Constitution of 1868, reports from the designated special commission are of interest. Again, language was not at the forefront of concerns in light of the range of major issues on the table, including the significant decision to abandon neutrality (breaking with the existing 1868 constitution following the Second Treaty of London in 1867), which in turn paved the way for Luxembourg to become a founding member of NATO as well as the Council of Europe, and one of the six founding members of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). While these internationally-facing

memberships sometimes led Luxembourgish policy makers to don the hat of the mediator between its larger neighbour states of France and the Federal Republic of Germany, the domestically-facing language situation called for more recognition of Luxembourgish with calculated distance from German insofar as possible.

On 13 April 1948, the Commission Spéciale (special commission) that was formed to work on revisions to the 1868 constitution put forth its proposal for revisions to Article 29. Below is an excerpt of the report that specifically pertains to the language question:

> (3) Le texte actuel de cette disposition s'explique par des raisons historiques. Ces raisons n'existent pourtant plus à l'heure actuelle. Aussi la commission spéciale, s'inspirant de l'exemple de la Belgique, voudrait-elle proclamer l'emploi facultatif des langues. Comme cependant cette faculté pourrait causer des difficultés en matière administrative, la commission spéciale propose d'abandonner à une loi le soin de régler l'emploi des langues en cette matière.
> Le texte aura donc la teneur suivante:
> La loi réglera l'emploi des langues en matière administrative.
> [The present wording of this article can be explained by reference to historical factors. However, these reasons no longer exist nowadays. Therefore, the Special Commission would like to proclaim the optional use of the languages, following the example of Belgium. But as this could cause problems at the administrative level, the Special Commission proposes the passing of a law to regulate the use of the languages in this domain.
> Thus the text will read as follows:
> The law will regulate the use of the languages in the administrative domain.]

Initially, it is noted that the current formulation of Article 29 is based on *raisons historiques* [historical reasons] and that these reasons no longer exist *à l'heure actuelle* [nowadays]. The textual foregrounding of time-space is noteworthy in that it alludes to a rupture between the period before and after the occupation, which in turn is viewed as grounds to rule out the current formulation on *l'emploi facultatif des langues* [the optional use of languages]. In spite of the reference to Belgium, whose Constitution served as a model in the 19th century, there is an absence of mention of named languages in the printed report. What can be inferred is that the *difficultés en matière administrative* [problems at the administrative level] would arise from an abrupt switch from German and French to Luxembourgish and French or, in the less likely scenario, from German and French to either Luxembourgish or French alone.

Following the work of the Commission Spéciale, legal texts are moved forward to the second chamber called the Conseil d'Etat (council of state), which offers expert recommendations on the formulation of texts that will enter into law. Unlike Parliament, session minutes do not exist for meetings of the Conseil d'Etat nor those of the Commission Spéciale. Thus, the excerpt below is from a Conseil d'Etat report that comprises part of the yearly proceedings which are held in the Bibliothèque Nationale (national library) of Luxembourg:

(4) Selon l'art. 29 actuel de la Constitution, l'usage des langues française et allemande, bien que facultatif, ne peut être limité par la loi.
Cette disposition, en tant qu'elle concerne la langue allemande, a justement retenu l'attention de la Chambre des députés. L'abus criminel que l'occupant a fait, pour des fins raciales, du principe que la langue allemande était une des langues officielles du pays, est trop vivace dans les souvenirs pour admettre que cette langue continue à être garantie par la Constitution.
[According to the present Art. 29 of the Constitution, the use of the French and German languages, though optional, cannot be restricted by law.
This article, in so far as it concerns the German language, has rightly drawn the attention of the Chamber of Deputies. The criminal abuse that the occupier has committed for racial reasons, of the principle that the German language was one of the official languages of the country, is too vivid in our memories to allow this language to continue being guaranteed by the Constitution.]

Here it is explicitly noted that, according to the 1868 constitution, the status of German as one of the languages of the state *ne peut être limité par la loi* [cannot be restricted by law] and hence it is problematic. Reference to lived experience during the occupation as *trop vivace* [too vivid] signals an awareness of a desire for change at the level of the broader public. Thus, German should no longer be legally guaranteed as a language of the state as enshrined in the binding text of the Constitution. The question that was likely discussed was how to remove German altogether, because the use of French would entail issues of access for a significant part of the population and the use of Luxembourgish would open the door to costly and practical complexities pertaining to corpus planning and standardisation processes. Indeed, the 1946 changes to the Luxembourgish orthography, rendering it more distant from German, proved largely unpopular and the new spelling system was considered a failure. It was modified again in 1975 to look more like the previous version implemented in 1912/1914. While it would be problematic to consider Luxembourgish a contested language, its implementation as an official language of the state was likely regarded as opening a pandora's box that would lead to myriad forms of contestation and debate.

In this light, the Conseil d'Etat notes that language should be regulated by a *loi ordinaire* [an ordinary law], although this did not happen until 1984 as discussed in the previous section. It is noted that the question of the official use of languages 'has not been resolved at this time', which is intertextual with Excerpts 1 and 2 above, although here it indexes a longer period of unfolding time that points to both the past and the future alike:

(5) La question de l'emploi des langues en matière officielle n'étant pas résolue à l'heure actuelle d'une façon définitive, le Conseil d'Etat est d'avis d'abandonner à la loi ordinaire le soin d'en régler l'usage, ce qui permettra en même temps de décider d'une manière adéquate, de l'emploi de la langue luxembourgeoise.

> Pour éviter que le terme «en matière administrative» soit interprété dans son sens technique propre, le Conseil propose d'adjoindre au texte de la Commission spéciale le terme «en matière judiciaire».
> [Since the issue of the use of the languages in the official domain has not yet been resolved at this time [in a definite manner], the Conseil d'Etat suggests that a normal law should regulate their use, which will allow, at the same time, an adequate decision concerning the use of the Luxembourgish language.
> To prevent the term 'in the administrative domain' from being interpreted in its proper technical sense, the Conseil d'Etat suggests adding the term 'in the judicial domain' to the text of the Special Commission.]

Careful attention is given to the stipulation of domains, which led to the inclusion of both the judicial and the administrative domains in the text. However, as regards the use of named languages, the wording adopted in the Constitution of 1948 serves to anchor an important element of strategic ambiguity in Luxembourg's language policy. The text does not mention any language by name and only refers to the official use of languages in the following way:

> (6) La loi réglera l'emploi des langues en matière administrative et judiciaire.
> [The law will regulate the use of the languages in the administrative and judicial domains.]

In this way, the door was left open to various forms of interpretation and implementation. This was seen as the only route as the alternative would have been positioning Luxembourgish as the language of the state when it was not being used widely in a range of written domains. The decision was taken to postpone the issue, thus also postponing questions of standardisation pertaining to corpus planning as well as implementation thereof.

5 Discussion and conclusion

This paper has offered insights into the 'natural history' of multilingual policy in Luxembourg, noting how language has played a role in nation-building in ways that bear similarities and differences to neighbouring states in western Europe. A key difference lies in the construction of nationhood along multilingual lines which often functions as a productive means of Luxembourgish boundary-drawing. However, this form of identification was disrupted during the period of Nazi-German occupation in World War II in tandem with manifestations of material and symbolic violence, sometimes mapped out onto language and other cultural practices. In this paper, it has been argued that the absence of named languages in the 1948 constitution constitutes a poignant example of strategic ambiguity as part and parcel of lan-

guage officialisation. Rooted in the particular moment, this *événement* may appear to be relatively inconsequential in the history of language policy in Luxembourg. However, upon considering how it is interwoven with the texture of slowly unfolding time, or the *longue durée*, it appears to be all the more relevant. While the 1948 constitution opened a path to the eventual ratification of the 1984 languages law, the latter also bears elements of strategic ambiguity in connection with the absence of the term *langue officielle* [official language] in that text (see also Hoffmann 1987). This further instance of strategic ambiguity bears a range of ongoing consequences for issues pertaining to issues of education, integration and citizenship. The use of written Luxembourgish in a wider range of domains has grown but it is not ubiquitous, thus presenting challenges for newcomers who are trying to learn the language.

More recently, the constitution was significantly reworked in 2023 and the new Article 4 stipulates that "the language of Luxembourg is Luxembourgish and that the law regulates the use of Luxembourgish, French and German". On a governmental website (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de l'Enfance et de la Jeunesse, not dated) it is asserted that "With its inclusion in the Constitution, the status of the Luxembourgish language has become unambiguous". A white paper setting out a forty-point plan to promote and develop the Luxembourgish language was circulated in 2017, followed by a law of 2018 to promote the Luxembourgish language, which in turn has led to some interesting initiatives including those led by the Zenter fir d'Lëtzebuerger Sprooch (Centre for Luxembourgish Language), which among other activities is responsible for the widely-consulted Luxembourgish Online Dictionary (LOD). However, there remains uncertainty concerning to what extent speakers want the language to be used in a wide range of formal written domains. In this light, the question of what to do with Luxembourgish remains the unresolved question that dates back to 1948. While the linguistic authority of Luxembourgish is well-established in terms of authenticity (socially locatable), the same still cannot be said in relation to anonymity (aperspectival objectivity).

On a broader scale, an analysis of the 1948 amendments to the constitution in tandem with present-day issues reminds us that an understanding of the 'natural history' of language policy cannot be reduced to text-characteristics alone. To be sure, there are challenges inherent to accessing textual sources that provide a window into the ways that social actors evaluate aspects of multilingual situations at difficult historical moments. A far greater challenge appears to lie in the widespread prioritisation of *événements* over the *longue durée* in historical sociolinguistic research, which may be linked to difficulties in uncovering and understanding forms of implicit policy or manifestations of strategic ambiguity. In this way, we need to aim at taking a more holistic and critically reflexive approach in order to avoid various kinds of 'blind spots'. We also need to gain insights into the ways that such texts are situated in a different time-space to us as researchers in order

to understand the ways that texts become authoritative and also how absences can constitute presences. Given that small languages exist in the crossfire of competing ideologies and have fractured and discontinuous histories, the study thereof constitutes a particularly fruitful way forward in historical sociolinguistics.

Acknowledgements: The author wishes to thank Andrew F. Bradley, James Hawkey, Sarah Muller and Jean-Jacques Weber for many interesting conversations about linguistic authority and strategic ambiguity, in addition to the two blind peer reviewers for their insightful and helpful comments.

References

Anderson, Benedict. [1983]1991. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.

Bach, Parker, Carolyn E. Schmitt & Shannon C McGregor. 2025. Let me be perfectly unclear: strategic ambiguity in political communication. *Communication Theory*. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtaf001

Barakos, Elisabeth & Johann W. Unger (eds.). 2016. *Discursive approaches to language policy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Berg, Guy. 1993. '*Mir wëlle bleiwe, wat mir sin': Soziolinguistische und sprachtypologische Betrachtungen zur luxemburgischen Mehrsprachigkeit* ['We want to remain what we are': Sociolinguistic and language-typological observations about the Luxembourgish multilingualism]. Tübingen: Niemeyer.

Blommaert, Jan (ed.). 1999. *Language ideological debates*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Blommaert, Jan. 2011. The long language ideological debate in Belgium. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 6(3). 241–256.

Braudel, Fernand. [1958]1969. Histoire et sciences sociales: la longue durée [History and social sciences: The longue durée]. *Ecrits sur l'histoire*, 41–83. Paris: Flammarion.

Calmes, Christian & Danielle Bossaert. 1996. *Geschichte des Großherzogtums Luxemburg: von 1815 bis heute* [History of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg: from 1815 to the present]. Luxemburg: Editions Saint-Paul.

Chaffee, Steven H. 1991. *Explication*. London: Sage Publications.

Christophory, Jules. 1998. Lëtzebuergesch and the overall situation in Luxembourg. *Terminologie et Traduction* 3. 116–134.

Cooper, Robert L. 1989. *Language planning and social change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fehlen, Fernand. 2002. Luxembourg, a multilingual society at the Romance/Germanic language border. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 23. 80–97.

Gal, Susan. 2006. Migration, minorities and multilingualism: Language ideologies in Europe. In Claire Mar-Molinero & Patrick Stevenson (eds.), *Language ideologies, policies and practices: Language and the future of Europe*, 13–27. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gal, Susan & Kathryn A. Woolard. 2001a. *Languages and publics: The making of authority*. London: Routledge.

Gal, Susan & Kathryn A. Woolard. 2001b. Constructing languages and publics: Authority and representation. In Susan Gal & Kathryn A. Woolard (eds.), *Languages and publics: The making of authority*, 1–12. Manchester: St Jerome Publishing.

Gal, Susan & Judith T. Irvine. 2019. *Signs of difference: Language and ideology in social life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Garcia, Nuria. 2014. The paradox of contemporary linguistic nationalism: The case of Luxembourg. *Nations and Nationalism* 20(1). 113–132.
Harrison, Michelle A. & Aurélie Joubert. 2019. *French language policies and the revitalisation of regional languages in the 21st century*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Havinga, Anna & Nils Langer. 2015. *Invisible languages in the nineteenth century*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
Hawkey, James & Kristine Horner. 2022. Officiality and strategic ambiguity in language policy: Exploring migrant experiences in Andorra and Luxembourg. *Language Policy* 21. 195–215.
Heller, Monica. 1999. *Linguistic minorities and modernity: A sociolinguistic ethnography*. London: Longman.
Hoffmann, Fernand. 1987. Lëtzebuergesch: Mundart und Nationalsprache: sprachenpolitische und sprachensoziologische Überlegungen zum luxemburgischen Triglossie-Problem und zum Sprachgesetz von 1984 [Luxembourgish: Dialect and national language: Language-political and sociolinguistic reflections about the Luxembourgish problem of triglossia and the language law of 1984]. In Wolfgang Brücher & Peter R. Franke (eds.), *Probleme von Grenzregionen: Das Beispiel SAAR-LOR-LUX-Raum* [Problems of border regions: The example of the SAAR-LOR-LUX space], 49–65. Saarbrücken: Saarbrücker Druckerei und Verlag.
Horner, Kristine. 2005. Reimagining the nation: Discourses of language purism in Luxembourg. In Nils Langer & Winifred V. Davies (eds.), *Linguistic purism in the Germanic languages*, 166–185. Berlin: de Gruyter.
Horner, Kristine. 2007. Language and Luxembourgish national identity: Ideologies of hybridity and purity in the past and present. In Stephan Elspaß, Nils Langer, Joachim Scharloth & Wim Vandenbussche (eds.), *Germanic language histories 'from below' (1700–2000)*, 363–378. Berlin: de Gruyter.
Horner, Kristine & Jean-Jacques Weber. 2015. Multilingual education and the politics of language in Luxembourg. In Catharina Peersman, Gijsbert Rutten & Rik Vosters (eds.), *Past, present and future of a language border: Germanic-Romance encounters in the low countries*, 233–253. Berlin: de Gruyter.
Irvine, Judith T. 1989. When talk isn't cheap: Language and political economy. *American Ethnologist* 16(2). 248–267.
Irvine, Judith T. & Susan Gal. 2000. Language ideology and linguistic differentiation. In Paul V. Kroskrity (ed.), *Regimes of language: Ideologies, polities and identities*, 35–84. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
Jaffe, Alexandra. 1999. *Ideologies in action: Language politics on Corsica*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
Jaffe, Alexandra. 2019. Standardization(s) and regimentation: Polynomic orthodoxies and potentials. *Language and Communication* 66. 6–19.
Jaworski, Adam. 1992. *The power of silence: Social and pragmatic perspectives*. London: Sage.
Litty, Samantha L. & Nils Langer. 2025. *Language ideology, policy, and practice: Focus on minoritized languages past and present*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
Makoni, Sinfree & Alastair Pennycook. 2007. *Disinventing and reconstituting languages*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
Murray, Amy Jo & Kevin Durrheim. 2019. Introduction: A turn to silence. In Kevin Durrheim & Amy Jo Murray (eds.), *Qualitative studies of silence: The unsaid as social action*, 1–20. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Nic Craith, Mairead. 2006. *Europe and the politics of language: Citizens, migrants and outsiders*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Péporté, Pit, Sonja Kmec, Benoit Majerus & Michel Margue. 2010. *Inventing Luxembourg: Representations of the past, space and language from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century*. Leiden: Brill.

Pietikäinen, Sari, Helen Kelly-Holmes, Alexandra Jaffe & Nikolas Coupland. 2016. *Sociolinguistics from the periphery: Small languages, new circumstances*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ricento, Thomas. 2000. Historical and theoretical perspectives in language policy and planning. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 4. 196–213.

Ries, Nicolas. [1911]1920. *Essai d'une psychologie du peuple luxembourgeoise* [Towards a psychology of the Luxembourgish people]. Diekirch: Imprimerie J. Schroell.

Shohamy, Elena. 2006. *Language policy: Hidden agendas and new approaches*. London/New York: Routledge.

Spizzo, Daniel. 1995. La nation luxembourgeoise: genèse et structure d'une identité [The Luxembourgish nation: Origin and structure of an identity]. Paris: L'Harmattan.

Stewart, William A. [1968]2012. A sociolinguistic typology for describing national multilingualism. In Joshua A. Fishman (ed.), *Readings in the sociology of language*, 531–545. The Hague, Paris and New York: Mouton.

Tamburelli, Marco & Mauro Tosco. 2021. *Contested languages: The hidden multilingualism of Europe*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Trausch, Gilbert. 2002. *Histoire du Luxembourg: Le destin européen d'un 'petit pays'* [History of Luxembourg: The European destiny of a 'small country']. Toulouse: Editions Privat.

Wells, Naomi. 2019. State recognition for 'contested languages': A comparative study of Sardinian and Asturian, 1992–2010. *Language Policy* 18. 243–267.

Woolard, Kathryn A. 2008. Language and identity choice in Catalonia: The interplay of contrasting ideologies of linguistic authority. In Kirsten Suselbeck, Ulrike Mühlschlegel & Peter Masson (eds.), *Lengua, nación e identidad. La regulación del plurilingüismo en España y América Latina* [Language, nation and identity: The regulation of plurilingualism in Spain and Latin America], 302–324. Berlin: Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut.