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# Cross-Border Regional Languages: Picard and West Flemish at the Franco-Belgian Border

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*This article investigates the role of the Franco-Belgian border in regional language activism in the Hauts-de-France region in northern France, as well as whether activists perceive it as a resource for or obstacle to the valorisation or revitalisation of regional languages. Hauts-de-France, which was recently formed after the merger of two former regions, now recognises two regional languages: Picard and West Flemish. Both are considered endangered by UNESCO and are cross-border, in that both languages have also been historically spoken in parts of Belgium. Based on a study of the institutional context and fieldwork carried out with activists who promote these languages, the aim of this contribution is to highlight how activists perceive the border. The Franco-Belgian border is sometimes seen as an obstacle, sometimes as a resource on the West Flemish side, and more often ignored on the Picard side. This article stands midway between cultural geography and political geography, because one of the challenges of studying representations of the border is to understand the role it can play in activists' strategies.*

## Introduction

The two languages studied in this contribution are Picard and West Flemish, both of which are cross-border languages spoken in Belgium and France. On 14th December 2021, a new circular from the French Ministry of Education was published. It legislated and authorised the teaching of Picard and West Flemish, the two languages currently recognised by the newly-formed institutional region “Hauts-de-France”. This development was a victory for language activists as the state had never before permitted the teaching of these languages in public institutions. Both languages are cross-border, in that they are also spoken in Belgium and they are treated differently in the Belgian regions.

West Flemish is not recognised as a language in Belgian Flanders and is only considered as a dialect of Standard Dutch, the official language of the Flemish Region of Belgium (Fauconnier 2018). Picard is understood as an ‘endogenous regional language’ in Wallonia but has limited financial backing. Initiated within the framework of the FRONTTEM doctoral seminar organised by the Jean Monnet Network in October 2021, this article examines the place and representations associated with the Franco-Belgian border in relation to Picard and West Flemish and how this border is perceived by activists who support the transmission of these regional languages. The first section of the article

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Figure 1. Map of Regional Languages of the Hauts-de-France. Image source: Région Hauts-de-France (2021).

examines the context in which the initiatives of regional language activists evolve. There are several discontinuities superimposed on different scales to consider. On the one hand, there is the Franco-Belgian border, which delimits two national territories with very different linguistic histories; the French state is often seen as a model of monolingualism, while the present-day Belgian state has several national languages that have played a role in crystallising social and political conflicts, especially between Walloons (French speakers) and Flemings (Dutch speakers) (Vandermotten 2020). On the other hand, the creation of the Hauts-de-France region is the result of a merger between two former administrative regions, Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Picardy, and the former regional demarcation still exists and influences activist practices today. Another element that requires attention is the linguistic 'border' between Picard and West Flemish. Historically, the two activist movements have not had much contact with each other, but institutional changes at the national and regional levels in recent years have had an impact on this situation. With the context established, the article then focuses on the activist practices and representations associated with the Franco-Belgian border. It discusses the perception of the border as an obstacle to the development of West Flemish. Indeed, this language is not recognised by the Belgian state and

its qualification as 'dialect' is opposed by activists. We also consider the Franco-Belgian border as a possible resource for activists, whether through different border effects or when, for example, it is mobilised in the framework of European programmes (Sohn 2022). Finally, the article interrogates the weak presence of this national border in the Picard activist movement, for which the former regional delimitations often seem to be more important.

This article is based particularly on fieldwork carried out as part of a thesis on activist movements that promote regional languages in the Hauts-de-France region. The research presented here draws principally from a series of semi-structured interviews conducted between the summer of 2020 and the summer of 2021 with activists, but it also considers activist public communication (or 'information') campaigns and field observations. Interviews have been translated from the French by the author.

The article is not about the speakers of the regional languages discussed, but rather the activist actions carried out by different actors to highlight and promote these languages. Some of these actors do not wish to be considered as 'activists', as the term is too closely associated with a political dimension. On the contrary,

most of the activists we met sought to present a ‘depoliticised’ image of their struggle by positioning the debate in the field of culture, which is understood as non-political. Nevertheless, we use ‘activist’ throughout this article given that the term ‘regional language activist’ refers to actors who, through their practices and actions, seek to have the disappearance of regional languages recognised as a ‘public problem’ while participating in their maintenance by a variety of means: writing, creating live shows, teaching, implementing bilingual signage, etc. (Neveu 2015). The fieldwork carried out is not exhaustive and does not aim to produce quantitative or statistical data on what activists think. Rather, the aim of the qualitative research project on which this article is based is to question different dimensions of their actions and to understand the internal dynamics of these activist environments. As a result, the comments presented in this contribution must be nuanced, because, of course, not all the activists we met would necessarily agree with all the extracts included. Finally, for the sake of simplicity, we speak here of the ‘Flemish activist movement’ and the ‘Picard activist movement’ without distinguishing the subtleties that exist within each of them. However, some activists operate in different environments, and to consider that there is only one network or ‘environment’ is an overly simplistic presentation of reality for which a more nuanced definition is required to be precise.

For confidentiality, the first names of the respondents have been changed. The people interviewed were either members of associations whose aim is to promote regional languages or employees of these associations. We have not included the statutes and names of the associations of the people interviewed as the different actors referred to in these are easily identifiable and their inclusion would, therefore, risk undermining the anonymity of our participants.

## 1. Picard and West Flemish: Multiple Borders on Different Scales

### 1.a. France and Belgium, two different linguistic histories

The definition of ‘regional languages’ is not always clear, as the representations and status given to the same idiom may vary according to different actors or periods. Indeed, these languages are sometimes described as ‘patois’, a term used to describe improper and incorrect variations of a standardised national language or languages (Boyer 2021). Regional language activists generally claim a linguistic status equivalent to that of ‘official languages’ and attempt to highlight the differences between the languages they promote and standard languages so that they are not considered dialects. We consider here that the statuses given to idioms are arbitrary, and that judging them as languages, dialects, or ‘patois’ is a political choice resulting from power relations (Bourdieu 2001).

The linguistic history of France is often seen as a model of centralising and unifying language policies that began with the French Revolution and was further reinforced through compulsory education and the Jules Ferry laws during the Third Republic. The French language was understood as a basis for national identity, and teaching it to the whole population was supposed to emancipate individuals by allowing them access to politics (Harrison & Joubert 2019). According to regional language activists, the institutional context today remains unfavourable to the promotion of regional languages, even if some progress has been made. The history of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is one example that illustrates this political and institutional context.

The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is a European treaty issued by the Council of Europe and adopted in 1992 (Jensdottir 2002). It was intended to be used as a tool to protect human rights, particularly in response to the broadening of the European project following the fall of the USSR. Nevertheless, several countries have not ratified the charter, including France and Belgium. In France, the two houses of parliament—the National Assembly and the Senate—have discussed the possibility of ratification on several occasions, the most recent of which dates back to 2015 (Rojas-Hutinel 2016). For opponents, the main point of contention relates to the charter’s constitutionality; they regard the ratification of the charter as incompatible with the principle of indivisibility of the French Republic as it would give rights to specific groups, i.e., Bretons, Corsicans, etc. (Rojas-Hutinel 2016). For political actors in favour of ratification, it is only a political debate over how to support the promotion of regional languages, and the refusal to ratify this charter is interpreted as hostility towards minority languages (Jensdottir 2002). In 1992, France adopted a constitutional entry in Article 2, “the language of the republic is French”, in preparation for the creation of the European Union in 1993 through the Maastricht Treaty; this was done in order to “protect” the French language against the “invasion” of English (Locatelli 2002, 168). This constitutional entry has since been evoked several times as an argument against the possibility of promoting regional languages and against the ratification of the charter in 1999 and again in 2015. The Ministry of National Education, Research and Technology and the Minister of Culture and Communication commissioned a public report on the languages of France with paths to ratification in 1999. Known as the “Cerquigliani Report”, it listed 75 minority languages in France, including Picard and West Flemish, but it did not provide exact figures on the number of speakers of these languages, as the authors found it difficult to estimate (Cerquigliani 1999). In the 2008 constitutional revision, an amendment was tabled to include regional languages in the constitution in Article 75-1, “*les langues régionales appartiennent au patrimoine de la France*” (“regional languages belong

to the heritage of France”), which can be seen as a form of compromise. This article was relatively well received by activists. Recognising the existence of regional languages created, on the one hand, a legal basis for the promotion of languages. Yet, recognising languages as “heritage” and therefore something belonging to the past raised questions about the scope of this article (Giordan 2008, 29; Malo 2011, 74). That the charter is yet to be ratified is evidence of tensions surrounding the recognition of regional languages in France.

In France, teaching regional languages is certainly the major point of tension between activists and successive governments. Activists consider efforts to teach these languages as incomplete, if not non-existent, due to a lack of resources and an appropriate legislative framework. Nevertheless, a bill relating to the protection of heritage of regional languages as well as their promotion was adopted in 2021. Although the content of the law is not revolutionary, its adoption still testifies to a change of perspective, as it is the Fifth Republic’s first law that is primarily concerned with regional languages (French Law 2021-641).

The linguistic context of Belgium is very different. The country obtained its independence from the Netherlands after the Belgian Revolution of 1830 and now suffers from a genuine linguistic cleavage between Flemings and Walloons. Initially a unitary state, Belgium federalised in 1970 and is now divided into three regions: the Flemish Region, the Walloon Region, and the Brussels-Capital Region (Vandermotten 2020). Furthermore, the linguistic division of the country does not correspond to institutional regional delimitations; rather, this partition relates to three linguistic subdivisions: the Flemish Community, the French Community of Belgium, and the German-speaking Community of Belgium. The major political tensions in Belgium concern the Flemish and French communities, and the origin of these is often attributed to the hegemony of the French language since the Belgian state was founded. For example, the Dutch language (the official language of the Flemish Community) was only recognised in penal law in 1873, then in the educational system in 1883, before finally obtaining official status in 1898 (Vandermotten 2020). However, French was associated with the dominant classes and was mandatory for Dutch speakers who wanted to become civil servants. Conversely, nothing obliged French speakers to learn Dutch and this element became a source of tension when Flanders became the economic motor of the country (Witte 2011, 39). As the Walloon movement refused bilingualism at a national level (which was already the situation in Flanders), this led the Belgian state to create a territorial linguistic policy (Witte 2011). This context is key to understanding the current situation and the status of regional languages in Belgium. The Belgian government has neither signed nor ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, but the Walloon

Region did create an endogenous regional languages service (*service des langues régionales endogènes*) in 1990. This service recognises Brabançon, Picard, Champenois, Lorrain, Luxembourgeois, and Walloon languages, but the situation is different in Flanders. The national political parties and the regional government have adopted Dutch in the education system and do not consider that there are specific languages, such as West Flemish, but only “dialects” or variations of Dutch (Fauconnier 2018). Consequently, they have been opposed to signing the charter, because they suspect it could serve as an argument against the unification of the Flemish Community’s official language, Dutch. In the French Community of Belgium, the creation of an endogenous regional languages service has formalised the recognition of regional languages, but it has limited means. This policy can be considered as essentially “heritage-making”. This means, as Jean-Marie Klinkenberg has argued, it contributes to the process of heritagisation, even if it does tend to increase recognition that regional languages are still spoken today (Klinkenberg 2016). This service has implemented two projects: the creation of a label *ma commune dit oui aux langues régionales* (“my municipality says yes to regional languages”) and the establishment of a *Fête aux langues de Wallonie* (“Celebration of Walloon Languages”). According to a survey respondent in Wallonia, most elected people do not have an aversion to regional languages, but they are often indifferent towards them:

*There are people in all parties who don't care but pretend to be benevolent because they realise that it's positive in terms of image, of communication, and so there's no one who's really against it, there are just a lot of people who don't care so they don't do anything.*

— Hervé, Picard activist, living in Belgium

The situation is, therefore, different in the two countries, but it is clear that the national contexts are not particularly favourable for the promotion and revitalisation of regional languages.

### *1.b. The language border, a militant border?*

West Flemish is spoken in a relatively small area in the north of the Hauts-de-France region, as well as across the border in Belgian Flanders. In France, some activists promote West Flemish as a fully fledged language, whereas by others it is viewed as a Dutch dialect, such as in Belgium. This difference in evaluation—language vs. dialect—can cause issues when valorising or revitalising the language. For example, in the case of actors who consider it a dialect, the establishment of a Dutch teaching programme is a target, while those who favour the fully fledged recognition of West Flemish would prefer that West Flemish be taught, instead of standard Dutch. The oft-cited figure for West

Flemish speakers in France is approximately 60,000 or 80,000 while there are more than a million in Belgium, according to the activists we met. However, there are no major surveys to our knowledge (Hamez 2004, 165). West Flemish is a language with rather Germanic and sometimes Anglo-Saxon influences.

Picard, on the other hand, is part of the Oil language family, of which French is also a member, and is, therefore, more closely related to other Latin languages. The Picard linguistic area includes most of the former administrative region of Picardy and about half of Nord-Pas-de-Calais, as well as part of the Hainaut Province in Belgium. Of course, these are very rough delimitations, as trying to map linguistic usage is often difficult.

Both West Flemish and Picard are considered endangered by UNESCO; West Flemish is labelled as “vulnerable” and Picard as “severely endangered”. *The Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger*, published online by UNESCO (2020), estimates that there are currently approximately 700,000 Picard speakers (500,000 in France and 200,000 in Belgium). However, Julie Auger, a linguist, “doesn’t really trust these numbers” and considers that, according to the INSEE (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies in France) Picard has fewer than 250,000 speakers (Julien 2017, author translation). The difference between these figures shows how difficult it is to collect data on regional languages, as well as the complexity inherent in defining the term “speaker”. For instance, what level is someone required to have before being considered a “speaker”? Or is it sufficient for someone to self-define as a speaker? One point, however, on which the different observers appear to agree is the fact that the number of speakers of both languages is decreasing. One of the elements needed to maintain a language is intergenerational transmission, especially through family circles. Currently, the lack of this form of transmission makes it difficult to maintain most regional languages in France, and activists often try to offset this with educational propositions (Harrison & Joubert 2019).

Currently, the activist network promoting West Flemish in France appears to be more active than the Picard network. The West Flemish network has many volunteers who teach the language, while the Picard network does not organise as many teaching sessions. In 2004, a number of associations that promote West Flemish banded together to form the Akademie voor Nuuze Vlaemsche Tael (ANVT). According to the federation’s website, it publishes works in Flemish and French about Flemish (ANVT, n.d.). Moreover, since 2015, the ANVT heads a service that assists municipalities who wish to change to bilingual signage in their communities. Municipalities who benefit from the ANVT’s signage support also sign a charter entitled “Yes to Flemish” (“*Ja om’t Vlamsch*” in Dutch or “*Oui au flamand*” in French), which, once signed, requires them

to make a certain number of commitments to promote the language (similar to the Walloon label in Wallonia). Similarly, the Picard movement, thanks to the work of the Regional Agency for the Picard language, has also been working on implementing a charter for bilingual signage and the promotion of the language and culture (“*Eme commeune ale o k er el picard*” in Picard and “*Ma commune aime le picard*” in French) since 2021.

In spite of the geographical proximity of where these two languages are spoken and where the two activist movements operate, there are not any historical links between the movements. Although some activists may know each other, there is no real cooperation according to our field observations. On a national scale, the two activist movements seem to have evolved in different networks. For example, the ANVT is a member of the Federation for Regional Languages in Public Education (FLAREP), but this is not a federation that is really known or active in Picardy. The ANVT is also active in a collective known as *Pour que vivent nos langues* (“To Keep Our Languages Alive”), a national movement supported by the French Member of Parliament Paul Molac, after whom the law on the protection of the heritage of regional languages is named (Loi 2021-641 or *loi Molac*). The Picard movement appears to be relatively more isolated on a national scale, despite its cooperative links with other movements for the promotion of Oil languages through the collective *D fense et Promotion des Langues d’Oil* (“Defence and Promotion of Oil Languages”). Nevertheless, recent changes in the legislative and institutional frameworks have had an impact on this situation.

### *1.c. The Hauts-de-France Region and the former Nord-Pas-de-Calais/Picardy delimitation*

Both Picard and West Flemish are now recognised by the Hauts-de-France Region and they benefit from some support from regional institutions. The Hauts-de-France Region is a territorial political institution that was established as the result of the merging of two former regional entities, Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Picardy, as part of a territorial reform in 2015. The two former regions did not have the same policy towards regional languages and this still has an impact on the structure of the activist movements.

In the Hauts-de-France region, the merging process has altered the recognition of regional languages, beginning in 2015 with the promulgation of France’s NOTRe Law. Picard had been recognised in Picardy and supported by the region since the 1990s. Conversely, the Regional Council of Nord-Pas-de-Calais had shown no support towards either West Flemish or Picard (Dawson 2018). Since the creation of the Hauts-de-France region and the election of Xavier Bertrand as region president from the right-wing party Les R publicains, the new Council has recognised the status of these languages and has organised initiatives for regional languages.

These actions are publicised in statements issued in support of the region's president, and West Flemish has also received financial backing, especially thanks to the intended creation of an office for the Flemish language. Picard has not received additional funds for its development, despite being the object of favourable political statements resulting from the regional merger. Nevertheless, regions in France do not have jurisdiction over the education system and, therefore, cannot develop an independent education policy. They can, however, subsidise associations and promote visibility through cultural actions, among other strategies.

Where the Picard movement is concerned, the former political-administrative delimitation of Picardy marks an important boundary in the social representations associated with this language group. Indeed, while Picard has long been recognised in the former Picardy region, it has not often been called by this official name in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais area, where the term 'Ch'ti' is more often used (Dawson 2012). The term 'Ch'ti' mostly refers to a particular linguistic variation as an accent or 'patois' that signifies "bad French" and is, therefore, not often accepted by the activists we met during our fieldwork. Activists try to maintain the status of Picard as a language and therefore sometimes see this term as a threat, although it is more popular, especially since the release of the film "Welcome to the Sticks" (*Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*). This film, which according to Picardy linguists conveys a distorted and pejorative view of Picard, sold more than 20 million tickets, making it one of the most successful commercial films in French cinema. In one of his surveys, Alain Dawson has argued that there is a "border effect" in the linguistic representations conveyed by some of his respondents (Dawson 2018). According to him, Ch'ti is associated with Nord-Pas-de-Calais; it is a popular, festive, and understandable dialect. Picard, on the other hand, is perceived as a rather learned, "serious" language, which is difficult to understand and should be learned in educational institutions. Indeed, this distinction is often perceived in the interviews we conducted and from our observations, even if it tends to be outdated:

*Some Picardian activists from the north fell inferior. It's as if the real Picard came from the Somme, and the North is more patois, deformed French. So, Picard has historically enjoyed prestige thanks to the elites in Amiens, which it hasn't enjoyed on the north side, which has remained a popular, working-class language.*

— Sylvain, Picard language activist, living in France (Somme), working in an association promoting Picard.

For some cultural actors in Nord-Pas-de-Calais, the term "Picard" is linked to the former Picardy region and does not correspond to their way of speaking, even if some actors sometimes use both terms:

*I prefer to say "Picard language" or even "the ch'ti" now, because, at the end of the day "ch'timi" is, it's Picard, but re-learned by others that is more specific to the mining basin, to the Nord-Pas-de-Calais Region. Why not? But it's still Picard.*

— Daniel, "Ch'ti" activist, living in France (Pas-de-Calais), president of an association promoting Picard.

Currently, the term "Ch'ti" often has commercial interest and is used in marketing, even sometimes by actors in the Picard movement (Dawson 2012).

Relations between activists and the media, especially with regional daily newspapers, also have an impact on different representations in both former administrative regions. The *Courrier picard* (distributed in Picardy) has a regular Picard column and provides a partial translation of the entire paper once a year, but, according to a survey respondent, the *La Voix du Nord* newspaper (initially distributed in Nord-Pas-de-Calais) does not want the same format, and refused a proposal to include a Picard column or translate one of its editions:

*We wrote to the Voix du Nord to see if they wanted to do the same thing. In Picard or in Ch'ti if they wanted to call it Ch'ti. They replied that they were not interested, without further explanation.*

— Sylvain, Picard language activist, living in France (Somme), working in an association promoting Picard.

However, this newspaper did publish a column entitled "Parlaches", which was written by Guy Dubois, a Nord-Pas-de-Calais activist, a few years ago.

The former demarcation between Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Picardy still has an impact on the activist milieu, particularly in the Picard movement, and the representations of the various actors. Since the beginning of the merging process, the "Regional Agency for Picard" was renamed the "Regional Agency for Picard language" to avoid possible confusion about its activities. It seems that the agency wanted to develop links with Nord-Pas-de-Calais actors but does not have enough financial or human resources (Engelaere 2018). During our field observations, we noted that there was a desire for cooperation among other activists in Nord-Pas-de-Calais, in Wallonia, or in French Flanders, but nothing tangible exists yet. When they call themselves "patoisants", Nord-Pas-de-Calais cultural actors do not seem opposed to cooperation. But the "Ch'ti" linguistic field, even if this label is questionable, appears to attract groups of individuals who are not part of the Picard linguistic field and who do not seem willing to join it, although this needs to be examined further in future research.<sup>1</sup>

The merger between Nord-Pas-de-Calais also altered the possible forms of cooperation between actors promoting Picard and those promoting West Flemish. For example, we observed a protest held in front of Lille’s education authority in May 2021, which demanded that both languages be taught; representatives of both movements were present and coordinated for this event. Thanks to the work of specific Picard and West Flemish activist initiatives, as well as their joint efforts, both languages may be included in a national ruling that allows for them to be taught in France in the same way as other languages are, such as Breton or Corsican. The regions in France have no jurisdiction over education policy (this remains the purview of the Ministry of Education), but the merger of the former regions has led to a rapprochement between the Lille and Amiens academies, which are now grouped together in the Hauts-de-France academic region, allowing the two activist movements to share the same intermediary.

Internationally, there are multiple discontinuities present in the region. On the one hand, there is the Franco–Belgian border, which demarcates two different national histories and institutional contexts. On the other hand, the linguistic delimitation between Picard and West Flemish has not led to historical cooperation between the activists promoting these languages; the Picard movement has a greater presence in the former Picardy region, while the West Flemish movement is present in the north of the former Nord-Pas-de-Calais region. Nevertheless, the recent merger between the two regions has modified militant initiatives within the movement promoting Picard, as well as between the two activist movements. These different elements allow us to contextualise these networks in the wider framework of the Franco–Belgian border itself, particularly in regard to the roles and representations associated with it by the activists we met.

## 2. Roles and Representations Associated with the Franco–Belgian Border

The Franco–Belgian border, beyond delimiting two institutional contexts, is perceived differently by the activists we met. It is considered an obstacle by West Flemish activists, but it may also be possible to mobilise it as a resource. As for Picard activists, the border does not seem to be as important for them: its existence does not hinder their activities, but it does not provide significant opportunities for them either.

### 2.a. The border as an obstacle to language development

The proximity of the Franco–Belgian border can sometimes be perceived as a constraint for activists in French Flanders. Indeed, the region of Belgian Flanders (which has comparatively more power than the French region) does not recognise the existence

of West Flemish as a language. It is perceived as a dialect of Dutch, and, as such, it is not considered in public policies in Belgian Flanders (Fauconnier 2018). However, this representation of West Flemish by Belgian authorities can influence policies in France. According to some activists, the teaching of Dutch is formally supported by representatives of the Belgian state, and this is accompanied by a discourse that generally denies the existence of West Flemish. Christian-Pierre Ghillbaert, an activist and academic who promotes West Flemish in France, believes that “*the notion of a Flemish regional language continues to be questioned, to the great displeasure of its French defenders and despite its recognition by the Ministry of Culture, by mainly foreign actors [...] the designation of Standard Dutch as a cross-border regional language corresponds to a recent political project, consubstantial with Belgian Flemish nationalism*” (Ghillbaert 2018, 105, author translation). He is therefore expressing that these political pressures have hindered the development of West Flemish language teaching.

It is not only Belgian authorities who classify West Flemish as a dialect; activists residing in France and engaged in the promotion of standard Dutch also make a similar claim. Actions promoting Dutch in France have sometimes been associated with independence or *rattachiste* movements: in other words, movements who aim to have their region (re-)attached to Belgian Flanders. As one Flemish activist told us:

*It is the transpiration of the Belgian cleavage that occurred in our territory [...], the transpiration of the Flemish nationalist movement in Belgium that dreams of one thing, that is separation from the other French-speaking territories in order to create a Flemish state.*

— Ludovic, West Flemish activist, living in France (North), president of an association promoting West Flemish.

For the Flemish independence or *rattachiste* movements, the presence and expansion of West Flemish has not always been tolerated. This division between West Flemish and Dutch activists has also been due to political disagreements that Dutch activists often associate with extreme right-wing movements:

*We agree, he [another activist] and I are on the same page about this: no fascists among us. And that is for two reasons, first because we are not an extreme-right wing movement, neither he nor I, and secondly because, historically, that is where the promotion of Dutch mistaken for Flemish comes from.*

— Adam, West Flemish activist, living in France (North), commission member in an association that promotes West Flemish.

This proximity to identity movements is also one of the effects of the Franco-Belgian border that West Flemish activists seek to combat. Indeed, the general confusion around the definition of ‘Flemish’ activists (both activists in favour of Standard Dutch in France and Belgium and activists in favour of West Flemish are all called ‘Flemish’) has contributed to confusion around the supposed political motivations of these ‘Flemish’ activists. For example, one activist told us about his encounter with the activist community:

*I found I had no information, but I was wary of potential sources of information because of the image of the Flemish milieu I had in general, this, this image was essentially marked by ‘Danger, danger, danger’ signals. Extreme-right.*

— Adam, West Flemish activist, living in France (North), commission member in an association promoting West Flemish.

West Flemish activists do not claim any political affiliation—most stay far away from extreme right-wing movements—as they try to remain in dialogue with all local elected officials. They therefore suffer from this association and have been obliged to work on the movement’s public image to remain politically acceptable. A symbolic element helps illustrate these differences: the two different versions of the Flanders flag (RTBF 2019). Both represent the lion of Flanders, but one of the lions has red claws and a red tongue, while the other one has black claws and a black tongue. The latter is emblematic of the Flemish nationalist movements in Belgium and France.

Finally, there is relatively little cooperation between West Flemish activists in Belgium and activists in France. Our interviewees sometimes mentioned knowing some people but had difficulty finding the names of the associations, thus indicating a certain distance, at least in their daily activist practices.

These different elements demonstrate that the French-Belgian border can be perceived as an obstacle to the development of West Flemish. This is due to the influence of language policy of the Belgian Flanders region and differing goals between activists; different groups mobilising Flemish culture exist, but they defend different languages. It is also important to note that, for the West Flemish activists we met, it was essential that they not be portrayed as ‘identitarian’ with separatist intentions.

## *2.b. The border as a resource*

Despite its many drawbacks, the Franco-Belgian border is also a resource for Flemish activists in many ways. The border can be seen as an “opportunity structure” for activist movements, in the words of Christophe Sohn (2022). Indeed, according to the activists, a significant

part of the population in Belgian Flanders still speaks West Flemish daily, in addition to standard Dutch. This proximity to a living linguistic environment supports some activists in learning and developing the language. During our fieldwork, several activists mentioned the social practice of enrolling their children in school in Belgium, for example, where they learn Dutch but speak Flemish in the playground:

*There are lots of French people who send their children to school in Belgium. So, the kid, he speaks French at home, he learns Dutch, even if it’s just across the border, they learn official Dutch. But, in the playground with the other kids, what do they speak? They talk like they do at home. And a good proportion of the people in the Belgian Westhoek speak the Western language.*

— Nicolas, living in France (North), West Flemish activist, working in an association promoting West Flemish.

According to this interviewee, proximity to the border can be considered an element that helps maintain West Flemish:

*We’re still a generation between 60 and 80 years old who understand a lot, and a part of these people, we can say, who can speak it quite easily, because they’ve come back to it, because a fraction continues to speak it amongst them, and also when we are near the border. There. When we move away from the border, it slightly crumbles.*

— Nicolas, living in France (North), West Flemish activist, working in an association in favour of West Flemish.

The activist movement for West Flemish also uses this linguistic proximity to address the issue of employment. The border can be considered as a development tool for West Flemish. For example, according to the ANVT’s website, its president Jean-Paul Couché participated in a 2016 meeting of the departmental council, which discussed the “Flemish regional language and cross-border employment” (ANVT, n.d.). According to the same website, the ANVT was represented at a cross-border employment forum in Steenvoorde in 2019 to provide training advice. This forum was organised by the *Communauté de communes de Flandre intérieure* (“Community of Municipalities of Interior Flanders”) under the framework of an Interreg project on employment without borders, which hoped to benefit from economic dynamism of West Flanders (ANVT, n.d.). In February 2019, an amendment proposed the *École de la confiance* (“School of Trust”) law, the aim of which was to give regional councils the power to determine which regional language could be taught



in each region. This amendment was rejected, but mobilised West Flemish as an example because it “allowed [West Flemish] local inhabitants to access many jobs offered in tourism sectors, cross-border trade, and in companies set up in Belgian Flanders” (Amendment 445 2019, author translation). It is therefore clear that the Franco–Belgian border can be, and has been, mobilised at a national scale to promote the economic aspects of maintaining and teaching regional languages.

On the Picard side, there is a history of cooperation between Picard activists in France and those in Picard Wallonia (Wallonie Picarde), particularly in the Tournai area. Picard Wallonia became an official territorial name in 2006 and it covers several communities of municipalities in the same area. This identity-based name is, on a regional scale, a way for this territory to assert its difference and mobilise an identity thanks to the proximity of the border. It also serves to turn the attention of these political communities towards France (Leloup 2017). However, this designation has not had a major impact on the development or maintenance of the Picard language as ‘Picard Wallonia’ does not have any real power, even though the political climate is favourable towards the promotion of the language.

The presence of the border has sometimes been mobilised as a resource by activists through cross-border Interreg projects. One of the projects carried out thanks to financial support from the Interreg Development program of a common cross-border culture was the Picard initiative ‘I speak Picard’, which was implemented by the Regional Agency for Picard (in Picardy, France), the Insanne Federation (in Nord-Pas-de-Calais, France), the Theatrical Caravan, *La Roulotte théâtrale* (Hainaut Province, Belgium), and El Môjo dès Walons (Hainaut Province, Belgium). This project brought together other initiatives, such as interregional choral meetings between schools in France and Belgium and the creation of a prize to reward Picard writing, although it already existed in other forms (Engelaere 2018). Currently, however, activists do not seem inclined to launch new projects like ‘I speak Picard’ as they can be very time consuming, even if greater cooperation is desired.

Indeed, the administrative dimension of European projects requires considerable investment for the activists, especially as Interreg projects only provide temporary financial support and are, therefore, not necessarily sustainable.

### 2.c. The invisible border

For West Flemish activists in French Flanders, the border has a real impact, as an obstacle as well as a resource, on their efforts to promote the language. Picard activists, on the other hand, are rather indifferent to the presence of this national border. They have mobilised the border

on occasion, but it has never been a central element in their activities. One of the interviewees who lives in Belgium, Hervé, indicated that “the border doesn’t exist” because of his family experience and his mobility:

*[The border] exists for commercial routes, for elections... for the health crisis it exists. But for the rest, the families are cross-border.*

— Hervé, Picard activist, living in Belgium.

He considered himself as Picard, and as close to France as to Belgium. Similarly, Picard classes (reading, writing, and conversation tables) that are organised in the Cultural House (*Maison de la Culture*) of Tournai attract inhabitants of nearby Lille, who happen to be volunteers in associations in France. However, even if the border does not represent a barrier, it is not considered as a resource by the activists either. Historical proximity between Picard and Belgian activists has not allowed for the creation of a territorial structure for Picard language. Indeed, interregional days were organized in 2006, 2007, and 2008 with many different actors—especially activists who belonged to different associations and Belgian and Picard elected officials—where the desire to found an Interregional Picard Agency was expressed, but “the projects remained in their draft states” (Engelaere 2018, 156). This was due to a lack of interest shown by the elected officials of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, who did not attend the meeting. Olivier Engelaere, director of the Regional Agency for Picard language, considered that political choices made by the former Regional Council of Nord-Pas-de-Calais complicated cross-border co-operation, with “the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region appearing as a kind of glacié” (Engelaere 2018, 148) between Picardy and Wallonia, both relatively geographically distant. Another element that became apparent to us was the fact that the two existing structures, the Regional Agency for Picard language and the Regional Endogenous Languages Service, are both very different.

The multiple discontinuities present in the Hauts-de-France, Flemish, and Walloon regions certainly explain this difference in the representations of the border and the roles attributed to it by the two activist movements. The most important element in this demarcation is the presence of two official languages in the West Flemish language area—standard Dutch and French—whereas the Picard language area may also be cross-border, but both areas it covers have the same official language.

## Conclusion

The present contribution has examined the different roles and representations attributed to the Franco–Belgian border by regional language activists who promote Picard or West Flemish. The findings presented here are based on fieldwork carried out as

part of a thesis on the practices and representations associated with regional languages in the Hauts-de-France region. The research was carried out through semi-directive interviews, observation, and reading activist public communications. The discourses and actions of the interviewees revealed that the presence of the Franco-Belgian border could be both an obstacle and a resource for the development of West Flemish, whereas its existence has almost been ignored in the Picard activist movement; it is, in fact, the former regional demarcation between Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Picardy that has had a far greater impact on the structure and activities of the pro-Picard movements. Of course, these observations must be qualified as they are the result of research that is still in progress and the situation appears to have evolved quite rapidly over the course of the past few years. The possibility that these French states will allow Picard and West Flemish to be taught in official settings may bring the movements closer together, but it could also have an impact on the other side of the Franco-Belgian border. Indeed, the teaching of a language through official channels, beyond the practical knowledge gained by the pupils, also symbolically valorises the language by showing that it is officially recognised.

## Note

1. We can observe, for example, an article written for a blog by Alain Dawson in 2006. He considered that a comic strip translator used "incorrect" Picard. The translator responded on his own website that his translation distinguished between Picard used by academics, and Ch'ti, which was, according to him, spoken by most people. Alain Dawson, on the website "Chtimi-picard: [100% chti, 0% picard, ou: Comment assassiner le picard plus vite que son ombre]". Published on 25 April 2006, consulted on 14 September 2020.

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