

12.4.2021

1 Introduction

Belgium is a country with 11.5 million inhabitants. Some organizational peculiarities are relevant to the country's linguistic landscape. It is organized into three linguistic communities: the Flemish community, for whom Dutch is the official language, consists of roughly 60% of the Belgian population; the Francophone (French-speaking) community, also known as the *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles* (FWB), has 40%, and the small German-speaking community, has less than 1% of the population.

These communities are responsible for all policies related to culture, which also cover linguistic policies. In addition to these communities, the country is also divided into three territorial regions: Flanders, Brussels, and Wallonia. Flanders is considered monolingually Dutch speaking, Brussels is officially bilingual French and Dutch speaking, and Wallonia is mainly monolingually French speaking, but also includes the small German-speaking community. According to Ginsburgh and Weber (2007), reporting on data from 2000, about 59% of people from Flanders also know French, and about 19% of people from Wallonia also know Dutch. In Brussels, 96% know French and 59% know Dutch. English is also well known in Flanders (52%) and Brussels (42%), but less so in Wallonia (17%). To make things even more complicated, the three regions and communities are regrouped under a federal state umbrella, which also has certain powers.

In our contribution, we mainly focus on the Plain and Easy Language initiatives in the Flemish and Francophone communities, as these communities each have their own initiatives, policies and organizations that deal with Plain and/or Easy Language. The main difference between these two concepts lies in their target audience. Plain Language is the standard for

communication between the government or public institutions and the general public, whereas Easy Language targets people with low literacy or impairments. We also look at the Plain Language efforts of some Belgian Federal entities, such as the Justice department. Over the different sections of this chapter, we treat Plain Language and Easy Language as parallel concepts. Although we have tried to give an extensive, detailed overview of the initiatives in Belgium, comprehensibility covering the many different aspects of language, we do not claim that it is exhaustive.

Until the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS 1996), in which Flanders participated, it was generally assumed that low literacy was a marginal problem in Belgium, and that only 1% of adults had to deal with it. Low literacy was equated with illiteracy. The 14% with low literacy found by the IALS study marked a revolution in the thinking about literacy. It became clear that even literate people may not be sufficiently functionally literate to perform their daily and professional activities without problems, especially in a society in which work activities were increasingly dependent on efficient language use (Boutet 2005). The results of the IALS study made it clear that low literacy was a bigger social problem than previously assumed, and could have consequences in various policy areas, such as social affairs, culture, employment, poverty, and equal opportunities (Schiepers et al. 2017a). Consequently, both linguistic communities have addressed this issue.

In the Flemish community, in 2012, about 15% of the people had low literacy (Onderwijs Vlaanderen 2012).¹ In terms of gender, this was 14% of men and 16% of women. At 26%, low literacy is a much larger problem among people aged over 55, but 9% of people aged between 16 and 24 also have low literacy. Among people with an immigrant background, the low literacy figures are 41% among first generation immigrants, and 18% among second generation immigrants, compared to 12% among people without an immigrant background. Among people for whom Dutch is not their native language, 35% suffer from low literacy in Dutch. If we look at literacy in terms of work, we see that low literacy affects 12% of people who work, 16% of people who are looking for work, and 23% of people who do not work and are not actively looking for work (Onderwijs Vlaanderen 2012).

¹ This infographic shows the most important figures concerning low literacy from the PIAAC 2012 research programme: Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies. The OECD have the full results of the study (2016).

For the French-speaking, we only have indicators, as neither Wallonia nor Brussels took part in, for example, the surveys of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2016) and the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (IALS 1996). The statistics are expected to be rather similar to those in Flanders, or in France. According to Moosen (2015), 10%–15% of the population is functionally illiterate. In other words, around 300 000 people in Wallonia could have low literacy. The *Lire et Écrire (Read and Write)* association is a prominent actor in adult literacy education. It informs public authorities of the persistence of illiteracy in Belgium. The statistics on the attendance of its courses every year that it compiles each year shed some light on the situation in Wallonia. In 2019, over 4000 participants started literacy classes (Lire et Écrire 2019). Among these, 61% were women and 33% were Belgian.² The number one foreign country represented was Morocco (18% of participants), where French is an official language. We should also mention that 20% of the participants had attended school in Belgium, but more than half of those with low literacy (55%) had not succeeded in obtaining a diploma. Thirty percent of them had never attended school at all. Regarding employment, most of those with low literacy did not have a job (20% were unemployed, 34% received state benefits).

Faced with this challenge, various Belgian actors, either institutions or non-profit organizations, launched different initiatives, support programmes and even research programmes to combat reading comprehension or language production difficulties.

2 Historical perspectives

Concerns about the accessibility of documents are not new. The concept of *readability*, i.e. the degree of ease with which a written text can be read and understood by a given reader, emerged at the beginning of the 20th century in the US. Research on the subject did not reach Western Europe until the second half of the same century, with the book *Lisibilité*

² All percentages are averages of Wallonia and Brussels. However, the number of foreigners in the two regions differs: 73% in Brussels, 60% in Wallonia.

(Readability) (Conquet 1956) and emerged in Belgium through the work of Gilbert de Landsheere (1963) and his PhD student, Georges Henry (1975). For more details on the history of the techniques for measuring text readability, see Section 7.

2.1 Plain Language

Belgian administrations have been increasingly aware of the impact of reading comprehension difficulties among citizens who have to carry out administrative or legal tasks. Therefore, several initiatives have been launched since the late 1980s to support Plain Language and facilitate the general public's access to information. People with special needs (illiterate people or people with disabilities) were, however, frequently overlooked by these policies and their needs were addressed by other organizations, through the paradigm of Easy Language.

The concern of administrations to communicate with their citizens in a more accessible language was addressed by the development of Plain English. The Plain English movement emerged in the US in the 1970s under Richard Nixon, who decreed that from then on, the average man in the street should be able to read the United States Federal Register.

In Belgium, the first efforts with respect to Plain Language can be traced to 1987, when a study on the readability of administrative texts was subsidized by the French Language Service. Unfortunately, this led to no subsequent action (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles 1994).

1992 saw the creation of the Readability Advisory Board of the Federal Ministry of the Civil Service (*Adviesbureau leesbaarheid van het Federaal Ministerie van Ambtenarenzaken / Bureau de conseil en lisibilité du ministère de la Fonction publique*), whose missions were to provide clear writing advice, not only to administrations, but also to legal actors.

Unfortunately, this board was rather quickly abolished as part of the Copernicus Reform to modernize the federal civil service.

In Flanders in 1992, the president of the Flemish Parliament put Plain Language, called *Klare Taal* (Clear Language), in legislation and government communication on the agenda of the

Flemish Parliament. The Parliament and the Government both created language services that give linguistic advice to all public services, and compulsorily revise all new legislation projects (bills and government decrees).

The Plain Language movement has strong roots in issues related to the clarity and accessibility of legal language. When it emerged in Belgium, the complicated nature of legal language had already been pointed out by researchers (Hendrickx and Deschamps 2016, Hendrickx et al. 2015) and members of Belgian administrations, such as the Council of State (Hendrickx 2003). The Belgian approach to Plain Legal Language differs from, for example, the French approach, in its multidisciplinary style, combining the linguistic tradition and the legal perspective (Cornu 2000). According to Fernbach (2003: 37), in France, this multidisciplinary aspect was missing until recently. The Belgian (federal) Senate had a reading committee that consisted of lawyers as well as linguists, which reviewed proposals and drafts. However, due to the reform of the Senate, this committee was abolished.

According to the *Justitiebarometer* (Justice barometer) (High Council of Justice 2014), 61% of citizens do not find legal language clear enough to understand. In another study (High Council of Justice 2018), this number was even higher: 86% of citizens found it unclear. Those who had already come into contact with the court ‘as a plaintiff, defendant or witness’ agreed significantly less with the statement that legal language is sufficiently clear. A striking finding was that 69% of lawyers also found legal language insufficiently clear. In fact, as much as 67% of magistrates considered it so. There were no significant differences between the French and Dutch speakers.

In 2014, the annual *Clarity International* conference was held in Antwerp and in the European Union in Brussels, providing a unique opportunity for delegates to learn about clear communication and Plain Language in a multilingual environment. *Clarity International* is a worldwide network of professionals who are committed to promoting plain legal language. In 2016, the University of Leuven held a conference on plain legal language, with speakers from many different legal branches, and a closing session by the Minister of Justice. In 2018, *Project flavour* was launched by the High Council of Justice to promote plain legal language in the judicial world (High Council of Justice 2018). This report contains an overview of the Plain Legal Language initiatives.

In 2019, a definition of Plain Language was presented in a report by the European Network of High Councils for Justice. That same year, the European Commission Structural Reform Support Service approved a project on Plain Legal Language, submitted by the High Council of Justice, which included a workshop and conference. Though many plain legal language initiatives have been launched, much remains to be done in view of the numerous complexities often found in legal language (e.g., archaic terminology and overly complex syntactic structures).

2.2 Easy Language

Easy Language in Belgium was born in Flanders in 1985, which corresponds to the first publication of the *Wablieft* (Excuse me, what did you say?) newspaper³ (Wablieft 2014), initially a single black and white paper leaflet that appeared every three weeks. In 1989 *Wablieft* became a *real* newspaper, printed in tabloid format. *Wablieft* clearly addressed a need, as it already had 2300 subscribers in 1990, and 5000 by 1995. Thus, it was made a weekly publication.

In 1997, the organization widened its scope and became well known for awarding the *Wablieft-Prijs* to a project, person or organization that uses Easy Language to make information accessible to everyone. This prize is announced on national (Flemish) radio and in tv journals. In 2006, *Wablieft* launched a service providing advice on texts and offering to rewrite texts in Easy Language versions. 2009 saw the first publication of easy-to-read books, and in 2011, *Wablieft* became digital with an online version, which currently has around 7000 subscribers.

In 2009, Belgium adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (the CRPD) (with a section on understanding documents), in which all levels of authority commit themselves to promoting integration-enhancing regulations and measures in all areas concerning people with disabilities. People with disabilities include those who have

³ Wablieft, <http://www.wablieft.be/nl>.

long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which cause various barriers that may hinder their full, effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. People with disabilities are no longer expected to adapt to their environment, now it is up to policymakers to address the barriers to their participation in economic, social and cultural life (United Nations 1996). This implies that Easy Language has had some sort of (indirect) legal status since 2009.

3 Current situation

The distinction between Plain Language and Easy Language seems somewhat artificial in the case of Belgium, as they seem to largely pursue the same goal. The guidelines we found for both look very similar at first sight, but Easy Language could be perceived as an *oversimplification* for a general audience. The main difference between Plain and Easy Language lies in their target audience.

3.1 Definitions

Plain Language is supposedly the standard for communication between the Government (both federal and regional) or public institutions and the general public. It is defined according to the definition of the International Plain Language Federation (2021):

‘A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.’

Easy Language targets two rather distinct groups: people with low literacy and people with impairments. The *Wablieft* website offers a description rather than a definition of Easy Language:

‘No difficult words, jargon or figurative speech, but articles that everyone can understand.’ (Wablieft 2021)⁴

In Belgium, no formal definitions of Easy Language seem to differ from definitions of Plain Language.

3.2 Societal and legal context

As we said, Plain Language has an official status in the Belgian law, whereas Easy Language currently does not. Easy Language only has an ‘indirect’ legal status, as it is mentioned in the UN’s CRPD (United Nations 2006), which Belgium adopted in 2009.

In Belgium, Plain Language appears in the federal Charter of the User of Public Services (*Handvest van de gebruiker van de openbare diensten*):

‘Letters, circulars and forms should be understandable and precise. Public services will endeavour to adapt their communications to their interlocutors and will avoid any technical jargon that is not essential for precision.’ (Handvest van de gebruiker van de openbare diensten 1993: chapter II § 2)⁵

This charter is implemented in both languages. An example of the use of Plain Language is the *legislative drafting manual* of the Council of State (Raad van State 2017). Another example is in the Code on Economic Law, which has been copied from a European consumer guideline.

⁴ Translated from Dutch by the authors.

⁵ Translated from Dutch by the authors.

‘If all or some of the terms of a contract between a business and a consumer are in writing, they must be drafted in a clear and understandable manner.’ (Federale Overheidsdienst Economie, KMO, Middenstand en Energie 2013: Art. VI.37.1 § 1)⁶

In Flanders, Plain Language (*Heldere Taal*) is mentioned in the Decree on Open Government:

‘Each [...] mentioned instance has the duty to inform the population or the involved target groups in a systematic, correct, balanced, timely, and comprehensible manner of its policy, government, services, and rights.’ (Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap 2004: 76)⁷

It is also mentioned in Chapter 2, Article 3 of the Decree on Flemish government communication:

‘The Flemish government communicates clearly in understandable language. The Flemish government communicates in the Dutch standard language. The communication of the Flemish government must be comprehensible to the recipient.’ (Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap 2016)⁸.

The federal manual on how to apply the UN’s CRPD appeared in 2013 (Federale Overheidsdienst Sociale Zekerheid 2013), and led to the launching of the Federal *Handstreaming* plan in 2016. This plan urges everyone to mobilize the resources necessary for the inclusion of people with disabilities, by removing the obstacles faced by this target group that prevent them from living on an equal footing with their fellow citizens in social, cultural and professional terms. This includes

‘[I]mproving the accessibility of the means of communication with the general public, which should be available in a form that is accessible to all through technologies adapted to different types of disability. This principle should also be applied to electronically disseminated information or the use of electronic forms. For example, websites can be screened for their accessibility (Anysurfer). Documents must also be made available in simple language. Recordings in sign language on websites can also

⁶ Translated from Dutch by the authors.

⁷ Translated from Dutch by the authors.

⁸ Translated by the authors.

provide information for people with hearing impairments.’ (Federale Overheidsdienst Sociale Zekerheid 2013: 8)⁹

3.3 Stakeholders

In order to help people understand legal texts, the *Droits Quotidiens* (Daily Rights) organization was founded in 1995 for French, and was later followed, although only in 2016, by its Flemish sister organization *Helder Recht* (Clear Law). The *Juristenkrant*, a current affairs magazine in Dutch that deals with the broad outlines of the development of law, has had a column that focuses on plain legal language since 2002. These were compiled into a book in 2008 (Hendrickx 2008). Many other initiatives have improved the comprehension of the law, such as changes in the style of verdicts, explanatory leaflets added to verdicts, paying attention to language usage in legal documents. The Francophone community, also known as the *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*, through its digital administration service (eWBS – *Wallonia Brussels Simplification*), offers awareness-raising activities. Writers can also ask to have a text, a group of documents or an entire process analysed and revised. This is done by the already mentioned organization *Droits Quotidiens*.

The **Inclusion Europe** organization, located in Brussels, plays an important role in defending the rights of people with intellectual disabilities. In 1998 it drew up a set of easy-to-read guidelines. In 2002, it created the Easy-to-Read Logo (Inclusion Europe 2002) which can be used by website developers to make accessible websites easily recognizable. In 2010, it developed an easy-to-read version of the new European Union Disability Strategy 2010–2020, a key document for the European Union’s work in the field of disability. Later, in 2014 and 2015, it received the Zero Project award for ‘promoting Europe-wide quality standards for accessible information for persons with intellectual disabilities’ and for its guidelines for accessible elections. The Zero Project is an Austrian-based initiative that focuses on the rights of people with disabilities globally. It provides a platform for sharing the most innovative and effective solutions to problems faced by people with disabilities.

⁹ Translated by the authors.

An important party in Flanders is **Wablief**. Apart from their newspaper, they offer a whole range of services related to Easy Language, such as screening texts, rewriting texts and assistance in setting up an Easy Language plan of action for organizations.¹⁰ Another Flemish player is WAI-NOT,¹¹ founded in 2001: a safe website and environment for people with cognitive disabilities and their teachers and parents. This initiative grew out of a practical need from a medical pedagogical centre. WAI-NOT actively works on social inclusion, specifically for people with intellectual disabilities, and targets children and young people as well as adults, their supervisors, parents and teachers. By teaching their target group skills related to computers, the internet and other media, WAI-NOT contributes to digital inclusion. WAI-NOT also includes news in very Easy Language. It is supported by the Flemish government.

On the Francophone side, the **Inter-Actions** organization worked on Easy Language in the digital sphere via the *Visa pour le net* (Visa for the web) project. They promoted a simple structure for websites, with information that was easy to find and understand. Unfortunately, in 2019, just as they had begun to build a good network after 12 years of efforts, they lost the funding for this project.

Since 2015, the **Asbl Inclusion**¹² organization has helped people with intellectual disabilities and their families. They are involved in, for example, the spread of FALC in Wallonia. FALC is an acronym that stands for *Facile à lire et à comprendre* (Easy to read and understand), which is the French equivalent of Easy Language. They have written a brochure in FALC (Inclusion asbl, n.d. a). On demand, they also do translations into FALC. These translations are proofread by people with intellectual disabilities trained in Easy Language. They have also announced a new service, www.falc.be, that will promote Easy Language. Their Flemish counterpart *Inclusie Vlaanderen* (Inclusion Flanders) was renamed in 2018 as *Stan – Treffpunt Verstandelijke Handicap* (Stan – Meeting point Mental Disability).

¹⁰ Wablief tekstadvies, <https://www.duidelijketaal.be/>

¹¹ WAI-NOT, <http://www.wai-not.be>.

¹² This year marks the merging of several associations that work with people with mental disabilities in Wallonia (Association Francophone d'Aide aux Handicapés Mentaux (AFrAHM) / APEM-T21 (parents of children with trisomy 21))

4 Target groups

The target group for Plain Language documents is the general public. Easy Language targets two rather distinct groups: people with low literacy and people with a mental disability.

People with low literacy are targeted by the *Laaggeletterdheid* (Low literacy) (Vlaamse overheid 2017) strategic plan of the Flemish government. Research has shown that the number of low literate people does not decrease even when the average level of literacy increases. This increase is accompanied by a significant decrease in the performance of the lowest achievers in secondary education groups or higher. There is a constant influx of new low-literate people, who are the focus of Easy Language, literacy training and other education measures. The share of adults with low socio-economic status and the share of first-generation immigrants in the group of the lowest performers has increased. The plan states:

‘[W]e strive for an inclusive society, in which everyone has access to the information necessary for participation. This is why it is important to keep emphasizing the importance of clear communication. By this, we mean both written information that must be readable to everyone, and digital information that must be accessible, understandable and manageable for everyone. In order to achieve this, we, as a society, must fulfil our responsibility towards people with literacy needs.’ (Vlaamse overheid 2017: 22)¹³

The second group likely to benefit from Easy Language are people with disabilities, who are the focus of the federal *Handistreaming* plan (Federale Overheidsdienst Sociale Zekerheid 2013). This plan includes a section on communications between the federal government and citizens with disabilities, in order to strengthen the accessibility of communications aimed at

¹³ Translated by the authors.

the general public. Websites are advised to adhere to the guidelines of the Anysurfer quality label,¹⁴ which shows that the website is accessible to anyone, i.e. that it follows the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (World Wide Web Consortium 2018).

In Flanders, the government has measures in place to enhance their communications with target groups that have cognitive, hearing or reading impairments.

The Francophone community follows the European Directive of 2016 (European Parliament and the Council of the European Union 2016), which provides a legal context for digital accessibility for Member States of the European Union. The objectives of many of the Walloon municipalities are to boost the municipal advisory councils and invest in the inclusion of people with disabilities and the elderly. Work on the accessibility of public utility websites meets this political and civic objective and creates a link between the people concerned.

5 Guidelines

Over the years, various stakeholders have published many guidelines to facilitate both Plain and Easy Language. We discuss these in closer detail below.

In 2000, the head of the Readability Advisory Board of the Federal Ministry of the Civil Service, Michel Leys, published the Plain Language writing guide in both Dutch and French: *Goed geschreven, goed begrepen* (Well written, well understood) (Leys and Theys 2000) and *Écrire pour être lu* (Write to be read) (Leys 2000). This guide has enjoyed great success, the distribution of its first edition being 10 000 copies. In addition, thanks to being freely available on the internet, it has gained popularity throughout the French-speaking world, and was chosen by the European authorities from ‘Fight the Fog’ at the Directorate-General for

¹⁴ Anysurfer, <https://www.anysurfer.be/en>.

Translation (Brussels) as the counterpart to the English plain language guide (Fernbach 2003: 37).

On the Flemish side, the Plain Language guides (Penninckx 1991, Pennickx et al. 1991) of the services created by the Flemish Parliament and the government enjoyed great success and were distributed widely for several years. For a detailed overview, see Hendrickx (2003). The Flemish government has published a brochure with 20 guidelines for Plain Language (Caluwé 2017). These guidelines are organized into four sections and can be summarized as: ‘Take your target group into account from the start’, ‘Pay close attention to the structure of your message’, ‘Formulate your message as clearly as possible’ and ‘Test your message carefully before you distribute or publish it’. Another, more elaborated set of guidelines for Dutch are those of *Taaltelefoon* (Language Telephone) (Caluwé et al. 2012), which is a language advice service established by the Flemish Government in 1998. *Taaltelefoon* and the related *Taaladvies.net*¹⁵ (Language Advice.net) are help desks that provide advice to users (writers of texts) on normative (spelling and syntax) as well as stylistic aspects of Dutch.

The *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles* (FWB) wrote its first Plain Language guidelines in 2000, the already mentioned *Écrire pour être lu* (Write to be read) (Leys 2000). This work inspired the French version of the European Union’s Plain Language guidelines (Fernbach 2003) and the other guides in FWB mentioned in Section 2. Even though it is the oldest guide in FWB, *Écrire pour être lu* remains the most widely used so far. The advice given in the guidelines is classified into five categories: ‘Hook your reader’ (the text should focus on the reader and their needs), ‘Choose your words carefully’ (pay attention to the selection of words, keep it simple), ‘Make simple sentences’ (e.g. short sentences, as few clauses as possible), ‘Highlight the text structure’ (e.g. add sections, give examples), and ‘Make reading easier by layout’ (e.g. use graphs or groupings, bold font). This was followed, in 2006, by the publication of Plain Language guidelines from the Walloon Region: *10 règles d’or pour des textes plus lisibles* (10 golden rules for more readable texts) (Easi-Wal 2006). In 2016, an initiative called *Ensemble simplifions* (Simplify together) was launched, which was linked to the user experience and simplification of online procedures, followed in 2017 by the publication of the Plain Language guidelines of eWBS (e-Wallonie-Bruxelles Simplification), mainly for digital communications: *Guide des bonnes pratiques pour des documents*

¹⁵ Taaladvies, <http://taaladvies.net>, is a service offered by the Dutch Language Union.

administratifs clairs (Good practice guide for clear administrative documents) (eWBS 2017), and in 2018 by a thematic year in Wallonia: *Si simple, si digital* (So simple, so digital) focusing on the user experience and readability of administrative documents. A Plain Legal Language guide, which combines linguistic and legal expertise is a two-volume book *Dire le droit et être compris: Comment rendre le langage judiciaire plus accessible?* (Speaking the law and being understood: How to make judicial language more accessible?) by the *Association Syndicale des Magistrats*. This guide, first published in 2003 and revised in 2010 (Vandermeersch et al. 2010) and 2017, has brought together linguists, criminologists, and magistrates. It suggests how to write legal documents that can be understood by their main addressee, the litigant. Wherever possible, the main lines are: favour everyday life language; help the reader orient him/herself in the judicial act; and maintain legal rigour.

Recent research by Nord (2018) has revealed that, although several Plain Language guides are available to assist writers of administrative texts in their work, the writers do not always follow the guidelines provided in these guides, mainly because they are too vague and too numerous. With the aim of relieving writers from the need to keep all these guidelines in mind, a web platform called AMesure¹⁶ has been developed for French (François et al. 2020) to automatically identify clear writing issues in administrative texts and provide simple writing advice that is contextually relevant. This tool mostly relies on the advice found in the FWB guidelines.

Wablieft provides a two-page leaflet with 20 tips for writing Easy Language: such as use clear layout, address the reader, put important information first, remove details, one topic per paragraph, subtitles in each paragraph, use short sentences (avg. 15 words), use everyday language, use the active voice and present tense and use short words (Wablieft n.d.).

In line with the *Handistreaming* plan, Brussels offers a small Easy Language guide in French, called *Handistreaming, comment adapter votre communication à tous?* (Handistreaming, how to adapt your communication to everyone?) (Equal.Brussels and CAWaB 2019) and in Dutch, *Handistreaming, communicatie die iedereen aanspreekt!* (Handistreaming, communication that appeals to everyone!). They offer advice on different disabilities (hearing, visual, physical, mental) and on easy language for different media. Beside these guidelines, Wallonia follows the recommendations for Easy Language by the European

¹⁶ AMesure, <https://cental.uclouvain.be/amesure/>.

Union and UNAPEI, the first French federation of organizations that represents and defends the interests of people with mental disabilities and their families.¹⁷ An example of the advice given is: use simple words, adapt the content to the target audience, prioritize essential ideas, simplify syntax, clarify layout, and use pictograms. For an illustration of the Dutch and French guidelines, see Appendix 1.

6 Practical outcomes

As mentioned in the previous section, different governmental levels have introduced various guidelines to facilitate and promote Plain and Easy Language. Besides this, other initiatives – especially Easy Language initiatives – have also emerged, which we discuss next.

6.1 Media and literature

For Dutch news in Easy Language, the *Wablieft* weekly **newspaper** is freely available on their website. An even easier newspaper is the *Wablieft Start*, which is targeted towards beginner readers of Dutch. A possibly even simpler version of this news is also presented on the already mentioned WAI-NOT website (see Section 3).

For French, various sources of Easy Language **books** are available, but these are generally published by French publishers (*Lire en français facile* (To Read in easy French) by Hachette and *Lecture en français facile* (Reading in Easy French) by Clé International). In Wallonia, at the instigation of the already mentioned organization *Lire et Écrire*, an original collection of books in simplified French, *La Traversée*,¹⁸ are now published by *Éditions Weirich*. The concept of this collection is that well-known Belgian writers write novels for everyone, with a special focus on adult beginner readers. To ensure the accessibility of these novels, they are

¹⁷ See the chapter on France for more information.

¹⁸ *La Traversée*, <http://www.collectionlatraverse.be/>.

submitted to and assessed by a reading committee composed of former illiterate people. Since 2012, 26 books have been published by 26 different authors. The books range from love stories to detective novels or realistic fiction, sometimes with a tragic background (such as war or disease). As adult beginner readers are often limited to reading children's books, the goal of this collection is to offer a variety of books with topics that might be more appealing to them.

6.2 Informative texts

During the recent COVID-19 crisis, the government has tried (not always successfully) to give information that is as clear as possible to everyone. The official website¹⁹ contains various posters and fact sheets in Easy Language in Dutch and French, but it is not easy to use. A link to *Wablieft* is also on the website to offer more information on the virus. For French, there is no such link, but *Asbl Inclusion* provides a great deal of valuable information in Easy Language (Inclusion asbl, n.d. b) and reaches more than 5000 families of people with mental disabilities.

6.3 Other projects

The *Week van de Geletterdheid* (Week of Literacy) is an annual campaign that draws the attention of the general media to low literacy issues, and tries to convince people with literacy issues to take part in adult education initiatives. The klaretaalrendeert.be²⁰ website (Plain language pays off) provides guidelines for easy language in adult education. Its successor, www.diversiteitspraktijk.be (Diversity Practice), has an entire section on *accessible*

¹⁹ Coronavirus COVID-19, <https://www.info-coronavirus.be/en/translation/>.

²⁰ Unfortunately, this website is no longer updated.

communication, including guidelines for COVID-19 communications for low literate people, and how to communicate with language learners. The www.nedbox.be website provides exercises at different levels of difficulty (starting from, e.g., Wablieft articles) and in different domains for language learners of Dutch (Schiepers 2016). These exercises are based on scientific research on second language learning and online teaching (Schiepers et al. 2017b).

The international literacy day, on 8th September, is also a perfect occasion for highlighting literacy problems among adults. The *Lire et Écrire* association, together with the *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*, carries out an awareness campaign every year on a different topic (digital illiteracy for 2020, the percentage of the Belgian population who is illiterate in 2019, etc.).

7 Education and research

Regarding education, in Section 5, we presented various guidelines that all comprise pedagogical material. In this section, we highlight some specific training initiatives for both Plain Language and Easy Language. The largest part of this section, however, is devoted to research related to several aspects of Plain and Easy Language, such as research on literacy and readability, Easy Language corpora, augmented communication, and automated text simplification.

7.1 Education

Since 1997, all newly appointed magistrates have received compulsory **Plain Legal Language training** for ‘editing verdicts’ with a focus on accessible language. The already mentioned Project Flavour (High Council of Justice 2018) gives an overview of plain legal

language initiatives, including two and a half days of training in *Editing of judgments: formal and substantive requirements*, of which one day is dedicated to Plain Language. This training is compulsory for candidate magistrates. The report also lists the initiatives of the different Belgian universities concerning *legal proficiency*, which often include sessions on comprehensibility.

The *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles* offers its own writers **Plain Administrative Language training** through its digital administration service eWBS – *Wallonie Bruxelles Simplification*. This training is in line with the eWBS guidelines for Plain Language, with a focus on digital communication.

Wablieft provides **Easy Language coaching** for writers and training sessions for organizations. *Asbl Inclusion* provides FALC (*Facile à lire et à comprendre*, Easy to read and to understand) classes for the parents of disabled children and for professionals (psychologists, administrations, etc.). Some of the courses are specially designed for people with intellectual disabilities, to teach them to say when a text is difficult.

7.2 Literacy research

Schiepers et al. (2017a) provides a review of the Flemish policy on literacy and a synthesis of the research on literacy in Flanders. Initially, the concept of *literacy* focused on being able to read and write, leading to a dichotomy between *alphabets* and *analphabets*. In the 1990s, the definition of literacy shifted towards a much broader and more positive, gradual concept of functional literacy.

Research on digital inclusion (Galvan 2019, Brotcorne and Mariën 2020) shows that internet use is heavily influenced by low literacy: email and social media, which both require writing, are much less used than applications such as WhatsApp or Skype, which allow sending oral messages and do not require writing. When they receive a textual message (sms, email), some users use text-to-speech software in order to avoid having to read, and turn it into an oral message.

7.3 Readability research

As we discussed earlier, the field of readability was first developed in the US, before being adopted by some researchers for both Dutch and French.²¹ Belgium was actually a pioneer in this field, as Gilbert de Landsheere (1963), Professor at ULiège, was the first to efficiently promote readability in the French-speaking world. He adapted the famous Flesch (1948) formula to French simply by adapting the way in which syllables are counted and sentences are defined. He was also one of the main advocates of the cloze test for assessing reading comprehension. Taylor (1953) created the cloze test as an easier tool for assessing reading comprehension. It consists of suppressing words in a text – for instance, one word in every five words – that the reader has to guess from the context.

However, the first dedicated readability formula for French was designed by de Landsheere's student: Georges Henry (1975). He administered cloze tests to 180 schoolchildren from the 5th to the 12th grade and developed a set of readability formulae which can measure more complex phenomena such as the proportion of dialogue pronouns and the proportion of concrete words, etc. He was one of the few readability researchers to consider that one formula does not fit all readers' levels nor all contexts, and thus proposed as many as nine formulae. Both researchers, however, mainly studied readability for educational purposes and not for illiterate people or people with disabilities.

For the Dutch language, the early work on readability was mainly done in the Netherlands. A number of Dutch formulae that were developed in the second half of the 20th century are still in use today: the *Flesch-Douma* (Douma 1960), *Flesch-Brouwer* (Brouwer 1963) and the CLIB and CILT formulae (Staphorsius 1994). A typical feature of all these formulae is that they assign a particular score to a text based on shallow text characteristics, such as the average word and sentence length, which are multiplied by a certain weight.

The CLIB and CILT formulae (Staphorsius 1994) were developed in the context of primary school education and have been used in both the Netherlands and Flanders to indicate reading levels of texts. These levels are applied to texts and to reading ability and are used to match

²¹For a synthesis encompassing all the work in this field, see Klare (1984), Chall and Dale (1995), François (2011), Benjamin (2012) or Collins-Thompson (2014).

beginner readers to appropriate-level texts. The CLIB formula was the first Dutch formula with a solid empirical basis. It is the result of extensive research that collected the cloze scores of 4320 children aged 7 to 12 into a corpus of 240 texts. The tests were distributed equally to children of different reading proficiency levels and each child took two different cloze tests. This resulted in 8640 cloze tests, the formula of which were calibrated and validated. The CLIB formula contains four predictors: average word length in letters, the percentage of highly frequent Dutch words, a type-token ratio, and the percentage of sentences per word.

Around the turn of the century, this simplistic approach to readability generated great criticism, mostly aimed at the lack of causal relevance of predictors such as word or sentence length for readability (Bruce et al. 1981, Kraf and Pander Maat 2009, Kleijn 2018), the disregard of the reader's prior knowledge or language skills (Redish and Selzer 1985), or the failure of readability formulae to take more complex linguistic phenomena into account (Zakaluk and Samuels 1988). Thanks to advances in the field of natural language processing (NLP) and computer science, recent readability research approaches have addressed the need to incorporate more complex text characteristics and machine learning techniques to more reliably predict readability.

For Dutch, this new paradigm has been investigated by several researchers (Pander Maat et al. 2014, De Clercq and Hoste 2016). In Flanders, the first machine learning-based readability prediction system for Dutch was developed at Ghent University (De Clercq and Hoste 2016). It scores an individual text (regression) or compares two or more texts (classification) and targets a wide variety of Dutch text material meant for adult readers. Various text characteristics have been implemented in the system, ranging from easy-to-compute superficial text characteristics to features requiring deep linguistic processing.

For French, readability studies had lost a great deal of popularity in the French-speaking world and were hardly investigated when François (2011) dedicated his PhD thesis to the development of the first readability formula for French as a foreign language in line with this new computational paradigm. François and Miltsakaki (2012) compared classic formulae with NLP-enabled formulae and concluded that both types of models captured slightly different information and that when combined, their performance improved. More recently, Tack et al. (2016) focused on predicting the readability of words for learners of a foreign language using a personalized model and demonstrated that this model could better predict

the words unknown by a given reader than a model based on a frequency list, as is common in second language education.

An entirely different, non-computational approach to the study of the readability and understandability of legal texts can be found in a number of master's theses, and in Hendrickx (2003), Nivelles (2008) and Deschamps (2009).

7.4 Easy to read corpora and linguistic properties

To study the properties of easy-to-read Dutch, Vandeghinste et al. (2019) collected and automatically annotated the archive of the *Wablieft* online newspaper and made the corpus available to researchers through the Dutch Language Institute.²² They are also working on making the WAI-NOT news corpus, i.e. the collection of all news items that have appeared on the WAI-NOT website, available for research. This corpus contains even shorter and easier to read sentences than the *Wablieft* corpus.

Vandeghinste and Bulté (2019) compared the linguistic properties of *Wablieft* Dutch with regular newspaper Dutch. Research on distinguishing easy language from language directed towards children is still ongoing, and to this end the linguistic properties of *Wablieft* Dutch and WAI-NOT Dutch are being compared with the properties of the language used in the Flemish youth journal *Karrewiet* (targeting children under 12) and in the Dutch (from the Netherlands) *Basilex* corpus (Tellings et al. 2014).

7.5 Augmented communication

²² Instituut voor de Nederlandse taal, <http://hdl.handle.net/10032/tm-a2-q6> .

Another way to alleviate low literacy is to use pictograms. Since 2012, the WAI-NOT email and chat services have contained a Text2Picto translation module,²³ which is based on research on computational linguistics (Vandeghinste et al. 2015) and enables augmenting (or translating) the senders' Dutch textual messages with pictograms. This means that the receiver of the message is not actually required to read. Users can also input messages through pictograms instead of text, which are then translated into words (Sevens et al. 2015a). The organization of the pictogram entry method is based on research by Sevens et al. (2017) and has improved through user feedback from people with intellectual disabilities (Sevens et al. 2018a). In the European Able to Include project,²⁴ the system was extended so that it can also translate English and Spanish messages (Sevens et al. 2015b).

Norré et al. (2020) have also investigated whether pictograms can be used as an efficient means of communication between doctors and patients through a survey with 67 respondents. The results of this experiment showed that pictogram-based messages were correctly understood in 75%–86% of cases.

Another approach is the work of Van Praet et al. (2020), which groups various communication support tools, such as translation into five foreign languages, pictograms, icons, video remote interpreting, and an audio version of text content in communication between caretakers of a preventive health organization situated in Flanders, Belgium and mothers with limited Dutch proficiency. In a more standard NLP vein, Norré and De Wilde (2018) have modified a word prediction system and had it evaluated by people with severe communicative disabilities. They found that such a system indeed makes the writing process quicker for this specific audience, but also creates a high cognitive load that should be taken into account in future developments. Pictogram prediction was also a part of the pictographic user interface of Sevens et al. (2017).

7.6 Automated text simplification (ATS)

²³ A demonstration of this system can be found online at <http://picto.ccl.kuleuven.be/> (Dutch/Spanish/English) [Last checked: 22.01.2021].

²⁴ Able to Include, <http://www.able-to-include.com>.

After automatically assessing the readability of a text, the next step is to be able to automatically rewrite the text in a form that is easier to decode and comprehend. A few studies have investigated the effect of text simplification on reading. Margarido et al. (2008) conducted several experiments on text simplification for poor readers, more specifically, functionally illiterate readers in Brazil. They showed that each simplification approach had different effects, depending on the level of literacy. However, they that all improved text understanding at some level. Rello et al. (2013) found that lexical simplification (i.e., replacing complex words with simpler synonyms) improved both reading speed and comprehension among dyslexic readers. More recently, Javourey-Drevet et al. (2021) conducted a large-scale experiment on 164 children in the 2nd grade and revealed that both reading fluency and comprehension of simplified texts were significantly better than that of normal texts. Justified by these encouraging results, automatic text simplification has undergone numerous developments since the early 2000s.²⁵

As regards work on automatic text simplification conducted in Belgium, the French side has been mostly studies at the Université Catholique de Louvain, in collaboration with French universities. In addition to the *AMesure* project described in Section 5, this team has also proposed one of the first syntactic simplification systems for French (Brouwers et al. 2012). This approach is based on the application of linguistic patterns to a syntactically parsed version of the text, followed by a step in which replacement rules are applied in order to create simpler syntactic structures. Several studies have also investigated the issue of lexical simplification, which mostly aims to rank words on the basis of their reading difficulty (Gala et al. 2014, François et al. 2016). This line of research has led to the development of a graded disambiguated resource of synonyms, ReSyF (Billami et al. 2018), which can be used to carry out lexical substitution within automatic text simplification (Hmida et al. 2018).

Similar to the French situation, automatic text simplification in Dutch is still in its infancy, focusing on knowledge-based methods for lexical simplification (Bulté et al. 2018) and rule-based syntactic simplification (Sevens et al. 2018b). Older approaches (Vandeghinste and Pan 2004, Tjong Kim Sang et al. 2004) have focused on simplification for subtitling, also known as *sentence compression*. Based on parallel datasets consisting of original transcripts and their *compressed/simplified* equivalents (Vandeghinste and Tjong Kim Sang 2004), the

²⁵ More details about the field of ATS can be found in the syntheses by Siddharthan (2014), Paetzold (2016), Saggión (2017), or, for French, by Gala et al. (2018).

systems were able to learn how to simplify, in a similar way to that in which machine translation systems learn from translated data.

8 Future perspectives

With respect to the future of plain and easy language in Belgium, there seems to be a difference between the perspectives of Plain language, aimed at the general public, and Easy Language, aimed at low literate people and people with disabilities.

Plain Language seems to be structurally funded through incorporating civil servants in the administrations of the different governments. These civil servants work on raising awareness, and organize training sessions with the overall objective of having government-issued documents in plain language that are understandable for the majority of the population.

While some politicians are starting to acknowledge the importance of Easy Language, for example for social workers,²⁶ the biggest challenges remaining are policy awareness and funding. Due to this lack of structural funding, it is hard to outline a long-term vision for Easy Language. Funding is often project based, and therefore by definition limited to a time window of a few years. Even when funding has been secured, budgets can still be cut, or projects can lose funding, which is what happened to the '*Visa pour le net*', an interesting initiative that fostered the simplification of websites.

With respect to the raised awareness of accessibility, only a limited budget is available to improve accessibility for people with disabilities. Clearly visible accessibility measures, such as the accessibility of buildings for wheelchairs, often have priority over less visible measures, such as providing government documents in an Easy Language variant.

²⁶ Information collected through a personal communication in 2020 with Laëtitia Jacoby of *Inter'Actions*.

Though politicians favour Plain Language, they often fail to understand that it is insufficient for certain audiences. It is hard to put yourself in the shoes of someone you do not know, or realise what their needs are. Easy Language should, however, be more widely disseminated at all levels of administration, and not only in services dedicated directly to people with disabilities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, government communication has had to be converted into Easy Language by organizations such as *Wablief*, which put a great strain on their normal activities.

With the digital shift of administrations, computer-mediated communication needs to be as easy as possible, as face-to-face conversations often disappear or are reduced to a minimum. This is where scientific research in Natural Language Processing and the resulting software applications can step in. Through the development of authoring interfaces that indicate when the author is using words and grammatical constructions that are not suitable for the targeted audience, authors may become aware of certain aspects of their writing style and adapt them accordingly. However, in order to do so properly, scientific research is needed to validate existing Plain Language and Easy Language guidelines, in particular by more clearly identifying the effect of each of the guidelines on specific user groups. Another interesting line of research is that of comparing the properties of Easy Language to those of language aimed at the general public or aimed at an *intellectual* audience.

As producing several versions of the same document to meet the specific needs of different audiences is very time-consuming, automated text simplification can also help in the conversion of documents aimed towards certain target groups. However, most techniques from state-of-the-art artificial intelligence require large data sets for training. For example, training for a text simplification system such as a machine translation engine would require large amounts of human-simplified text. While such resources might be available for English, they are not available for Dutch or French. Therefore, new techniques must be investigated that enable *unsupervised* text simplification (e.g., Surya et al. 2019). Currently, this research area is too premature for practical applications.

To end on a positive note: just as the recent COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an improved awareness of communication in sign language, it has also resulted in an improved awareness of the importance of communication that is understood by all sections of the population. We hope that this raised awareness will result in structural programmes, not only in Plain

Language governmental communication, but also in the adaptation of communication aimed towards specific groups of the population.

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Appendix 1. An illustration of guidelines for Easy Dutch and Easy French in Belgium. These example texts are not simplifications of regular texts; they have been written straight into their easy form.

Easy Dutch, Duidelijke Taal
Rode Kruis verkoopt weer stickers De verkoop van stickers voor het Rode Kruis is weer gestart. De traditie is al ouder dan 50 jaar. De verkoop duurt dit jaar nog tot 7 mei. In 2015 staat Wickie De Viking op de stickers. Wickie is geliefd bij vele kinderen. Het Rode Kruis hoopt daarom veel stickers te verkopen. Vrijwilligers van het Rode Kruis verkopen de stickers vaak op kruispunten. Vorig jaar ontstond even ophef. Is dat niet te gevaarlijk? Toch kan je opnieuw stickers kopen aan een kruispunt. Source: Wablieft, 30 april 2015 [Red Cross is selling stickers again The sale of stickers for the Red Cross has started again. The tradition dates back more than 50 years. This year, the sale will last until May 7. In 2015, Wickie The Viking is on the stickers. Many children love Wickie. The Red Cross hopes to sell many stickers. Volunteers from the Red Cross often sell the stickers at intersections. Last year there was some problems. Isn't that too dangerous? But now you can buy stickers again at an intersection.]
Easy French, FALC (Facile à Lire et à Comprendre)
Le vote est un droit Avant de voter, lisez et regardez des programmes électoraux. C'est important de bien comprendre les idées de chacun avant de faire votre choix. Votre choix peut changer les choses dans votre commune. Faites votre choix librement. Le vote est un devoir Tous les Belges qui ont plus de 18 ans doivent voter. Les personnes avec un handicap intellectuel doivent aussi voter. Vous êtes obligé de voter. Si vous n'allez pas voter vous risquez d'avoir une amende. Inclusion ASBL Source: This excerpt is taken from a brochure on municipal elections, written by <i>Inclusion asbl</i>. https://www.inclusion-asbl.be/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Livret-elections-communales-2018-Jai-le-droit-de-voter...-mais-comment-je-fais-min.pdf [Voting is a right

Before voting, read and watch party platforms. It's important to understand everyone's ideas before you make your choice. Your choice can make a difference in your municipality. Make your choice freely.

Voting is a duty

All Belgians who are over 18 years old must vote. People with an intellectual disability must also vote. You have to vote. If you don't vote you might get a fine.]