

# Linguistic landscapes in Chinese ethnic neighborhoods in multilingual Antwerp and Brussels

Rui Guo y Rik Vosters

This paper reports on an ongoing research project investigating the language use of Chinese immigrants as heritage language users in Antwerp and Brussels. Specifically, we study the linguistic landscape of three ethnic Chinese neighborhoods, comparing these areas in terms of the different languages and dialects used, and their visual presence in the public space. We map out the geographical spread of different languages in each locale and focus on language dominance, mutual translation in multilingual signs, and the use of different scripts and transliteration systems. By comparing the three ethnic Chinese neighborhoods and by thus relating their different linguistic landscapes to their distinct migration histories and demographic profiles, we attempt to show how a linguistic landscape study can be used as a way of gaining insight into the linguistic practices of relatively small minority groups, such as the Chinese community in Belgium, who often remain invisible in larger-scale sociolinguistic surveys.

**Keywords:** Chinese as a heritage language; linguistic landscape; multilingualism

*Paisajes lingüísticos en los barrios étnicos chinos en las ciudades multilingües de Amberes y Bruselas.* Este artículo informa del proyecto de investigación en curso en el que se estudia el uso de la lengua de los inmigrantes chinos como usuarios de su lengua heredada en Amberes y Bruselas. Específicamente, estudiamos el paisaje lingüístico de tres barrios étnicos chinos, comparando estas áreas en términos de los diferentes idiomas y dialectos utilizados, y su presencia visual en el espacio público. Mapeamos la propagación geográfica de los diferentes idiomas en cada localidad y nos centramos en el dominio del idioma, la traducción mutua en signos multilingües, y el uso de diferentes escrituras y sistemas de transliteración. Comparando los tres barrios y relacionando así sus diferentes paisajes lingüísticos con sus distintas historias de migración y perfiles demográficos, intentamos mostrar cómo un estudio del paisaje lingüístico puede ser

utilizado como una forma de conocer las prácticas lingüísticas de grupos minoritarios relativamente pequeños, como la comunidad china en Bélgica, que a menudo permanecen invisibles en encuestas sociolingüísticas a gran escala.

**Palabras claves:** Chino como lengua heredada; paisaje lingüístico; multilingüismo.

## 1. Introduction

It is a common observation among recent immigrants from China arriving in Europe that ethnic Chinese restaurants in the West offer different dishes and a very different taste experience from what their counterparts in China would offer. This is, of course, because such ethnic Chinese shops cater to a local audience, and adapt what they offer to a Western palate. Similarly, Chinese shops and other small businesses in the many Chinatown ethnic neighborhoods around Europe use the written word in their advertisements, signs, naming practices, and other textual communication to attract a wide range of customers, including locals and tourists alike, both from a Western or an Asian background. This study will examine such public displays of language in the ethnic Chinese neighborhoods of two highly multilingual cities in Belgium, Brussels and Antwerp, in order to uncover what languages are present, how Chinese languages interact with the multilingual environments in which they occur, and what the mechanisms and rationales are behind the specific linguistic landscapes in Brussels and Antwerp. By studying the display of various languages in three very different neighborhoods in these two cities, we will attempt to delve deeper into the multilingual practices that make up the public image of Brussels and Antwerp, and investigate how the presence of different languages reflects the different Chinese migration histories in each city.

The study of language use in present-day urban and multilingual contexts can be explored from a variety of different perspectives, and one possibility to chart out language use which has witnessed an upsurge of interest from sociolinguistic scholars over the past two decades is the study of linguistic landscapes (e.g. Backhaus 2007; Blackwood et al. 2016; Blommaert 2013; Gorter 2006; Landry and Bourhis 1997; Lou 2016; Shohamy et al. 2010). According to the classic definition by Landry and Bourhis (1997: 25), the linguistic landscape refers to the “language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration”.

Our theoretical focus takes cues from Cenoz and Gorter (2006), who highlight the correlation between the visual *de facto* language practices in the public sphere, and the sociolinguistic context. On the one hand, linguistic landscapes function as a way to visually reflect “the relative power and status of the different languages in a specific sociolinguistic context” (Cenoz and Gorter 2006: 67), and on the other hand, linguistic landscapes serve “as a mechanism to affect, manipulate and impose *de facto* language practices in hidden and covert ways” (Shohamy 2006: 111), thus further “contribut[ing] to the construction of the sociolinguistic context” (Cenoz and Gorter 2006: 67). Linguistic landscape studies therefore typically concentrate on unveiling the correlation between the linguistic landscape and the broader sociolinguistic setting, focusing on language practices in public space, for instance by looking at language choice, language visibilities, and languages’ relative salience with regard to other languages. In addition, scholars then often delve deeper into functions and social meanings of different linguistic practices, for instance interpreting the findings in terms of societal multilingualism, language identities, commodification of languages, or within a language planning and language policy framework.

With regard to the Belgian context, it is worthwhile to note that many studies focusing on the interaction of different languages, especially in the context of Brussels as the most multilingual and diverse city in the Low Countries, are very often limited to a strong focus on the dichotomy between Dutch and French as the two officially recognized majority languages. Studies investigating – especially smaller – immigrant heritage languages are more rare, and even larger-scale overview studies of language proficiency and use in various social domains, such as Janssens’ *Taalbarometer* surveys (2001, 2007, 2013, 2018) struggle with an underrepresentation of smaller linguistic communities (cf. Janssens 2013: 10). Hence, this study adopts a linguistic landscape methodology to highlight the linguistic practices of one such smaller immigrant language community, i.e. Chinese immigrants in the cities of Brussels and Antwerp.

We can, however, base our research on a small number of previous studies, some of which focused on the linguistic landscape of different Chinatown areas already. Most notable and exemplary is the study of Wang and Van de Velde (2015), who examined the linguistic landscape in the Chinatown neighborhoods of four Dutch cities (Amsterdam, Utrecht, The Hague, and Rotterdam) and two Belgian cities (Brussels and Antwerp). By quantifying language choice patterns in the public domain, they identified how different layers of identities are constructed by the use of different languages and different script types. However, while Wang and Van de Velde (2015) aim at a broad overview

of trends in the Chinatowns of these different cities, we will focus on Antwerp and Brussels exclusively, and attempt to zoom in more closely on linguistic practices of the Chinese communities in these cities, both within and beyond the traditional Chinatown areas. In addition to Wang and Van de Velde (2015), we also draw inspiration from the work by Vandenbroucke (2015), who analyzed part of the Chinatown area as part of her linguistic landscaping study of the larger, Brussels-based Dansaert neighborhood. Her qualitative research finds that Mandarin in this hip, touristy neighborhood is often commodified in an attempt to attract “tourists and urbanites as clientele by selling and flaunting ‘ethnic authenticity’” (Vandenbroucke 2015: 15; cf. also the earlier work by Pang 2012: 52–67). These pioneering scholarly explorations of the linguistic landscape in Chinese communities in the Low Countries, and especially in Brussels and Antwerp, serve as a foundation for our further exploration of public language display in these multilingual Chinese communities.

This paper will first embark on a comparative introduction of the migration and sociolinguistic profile of the different Chinese ethnic communities in Antwerp and Brussels (Section 2). After that, we will present our research questions and hypotheses (Section 3), and outline the methodology used in the study (Section 4). Next, we will move on to the analysis and interpretation of the linguistic landscapes in three Chinese neighborhoods in both cities, discussing the geographical distribution of Chinese signs, language use patterns and language visibilities, and some further aspects of script choice, mutual translation in multilingual signs, and sign function and medium, as explained below (Section 5). To conclude, we will summarize the main findings of our study and discuss some of the implications of our results (Section 6).

## 2. Chinese ethnic neighborhoods in Antwerp and Brussels

Antwerp and Brussels, the two largest cities in Belgium, are characterized by their highly multicultural and multilingual population, attracting tourists and immigrants from all over the globe. The three Chinese ethnic neighborhoods (or Chinatowns) in both cities have historically attracted Chinese immigrants, who began settling here from the 1920s onwards (Pang 2008: 88). These neighborhoods have grown into spaces of consumption for both Chinese and non-Chinese people (Pang 2012: 52–67), gathering residents and visitors of different backgrounds and

with a wide range of languages. In the two subsections below, after a brief introduction of the multilingual character of each city, we will introduce the main characteristics of Chinese migration to both Antwerp and Brussels.

## 2.1. Antwerp

Located in the North of Belgium, the city of Antwerp boasts one of the largest Chinese neighborhoods in the country. According to a recent survey, there are around 172 nationalities residing in the city, on a total population of just over half a million inhabitants (Stad Antwerpen Buurtmonitor 2014). In addition, “44% of the current population has a migration background. This percentage rises above 70% among the youngest age groups” (Dekeyser 2016; our translation). Linguistically, the majority of the local population in Antwerp speaks Dutch, although historically, French has also been an important language among the city’s elite, and English is also increasingly being used in different domains as an international lingua franca. The city is home to many linguistic minorities, from larger groups such as people of Moroccan or Turkish heritage, to smaller groups of more recent newcomers, such as Romanian or Polish immigrants.

The Chinatown area of the city of Antwerp is mainly centered around the Van Wesenbkestraat and the Van Arteveldestraat, not far away from the central train station. According to Pang (2012: 58), Chinese settlements in Antwerp display a relatively homogeneous pattern in terms of migration, as most of “those who arrived in the 1960s generally belonged to the same family and lineage networks”. Although Chinese migration to Antwerp began as early as the 1920s and 1930s, it was not until the late 1950s and 1960s that Chinese communities started to take shape with the arrival of a large number of Chinese immigrants, mostly originating from the New Territories and Hong Kong. At first, the early Chinese immigrants to Antwerp settled in a variety of different localities, and the situation did not change substantially until the mid-1970s, when “the area around Antwerp Central Station became a meeting place for a growing group of Chinese immigrants who did their business shopping in ‘the Criée’ indoor market” (Pang 2012: 55). This informal meeting area gave rise to Chinese ethnic restaurants and other ethnically oriented shops, including the well-known Chinese supermarket Sun Wah. From then onwards, the Antwerp Chinatown became a familiar ethnic neighborhood, and official city funding to rebrand and revalue the neighborhood allowed it to further develop its distinctive character, attracting a very heterogeneous customer base of Asian and

European consumers up until today. Considering the background of the Chinese immigrants in Antwerp, it is not surprising that Cantonese, a Yue dialect originating in the southern part of China and common in many diaspora communities, is the most commonly heard variety of Chinese, although it is reported that Mandarin is becoming increasingly more popular (Pang 2012: 58).

## 2.2. Brussels

Brussels is an even more international and multilingual city than Antwerp. The linguistic landscape in Brussels has changed drastically since the influx of mainly – but not exclusively – Mediterranean immigrants since the late 1950s, and the attraction of international organizations and institutions such as NATO and many EU headquarters ever since. As one third of Brussels' current population is made up of non-European immigrants (Van Parijs 2007: 4), the city of “Brussels is becoming less and less Belgian, with an increasingly diverse population that is at the same time more multilingual than the rest of the country”, making it into a linguistically, culturally and ethnically highly diverse city (Van Parijs 2007: 4). French and Dutch are both official languages as specified by law, and English is the third most widely used language, mainly in economic and cultural contexts (Janssens 2018). The most commonly spoken immigrant languages include Arabic, German, Spanish, Italian, Turkish, Berber, Portuguese, Greek, Russian, Polish and Lingala (Janssens 2001, 2007, 2013, 2018), and the wide variety of over 200 languages spoken on a daily basis has even led some scholars to term it a “new Babylon” (Verlot and Delrue 2004: 236).

Although Chinese establishments are scattered all throughout the Brussels capital region, with smaller concentrations around points of interest such as the Chinese embassy and the two main universities of the city, there is a clear concentration of Chinese restaurants and shops in the central Dansaert neighborhood, with some more businesses in the adjacent Bourse/Grand Place area (Vandecandelaere 2012: 321). According to Pang (2012: 56), however, the development of this Chinatown neighborhood in Brussels is “more recent, less homogeneous and indisputably more diverse” than its counterpart in Antwerp. The Chinese community in Brussels is heterogeneous in two ways. First of all, the area is far from exclusively Chinese, and many people of different ethnicities and nationalities are attracted to this very central neighborhood and tourist hotspot, including many Vietnamese and Thai restaurants in the direct vicinity. In addition, however, the area is also very diverse in terms of the different immigration backgrounds

within the Chinese community. The two most important Chinese sub-groups mainly hailed from Wenzhou and Qingtian, speaking Wu dialects from the Changjiang region in China, but there are also migrants who came from the north-eastern Dongbei area and the southeastern Fujian province, as well as ethnic Chinese from Indonesia and Vietnam (Pang 2008: 89). More recent immigrants to Brussels, however, tend to come from all parts of China, and compared to the earlier migrants, they are said to generally have a higher level of education, with a fair command of English and/or French (Pang 2012: 58).

Although this is rarely mentioned in the literature, our ethnographic work within different Chinese-heritage communities within the city allowed us to discover that, in addition to the more visible Dansaert Chinatown area, a second, more compact Chinese neighborhood with a relatively high concentration of ethnic businesses is located near the international Midi train station. The majority of Chinese establishments there are concentrated around the Rue Limnander, Rue Brogniez, and Rue Crickx Lambert, which all boast a variety of other shops run by immigrant entrepreneurs, for example of Congolese, Pakistani, Afghani and Moroccan origin. This neighborhood with a strong concentration of Chinese businesses is more compact and at the same time much more homogeneous than the one in the central Dansaert area. Most of the Chinese immigrants here are Wenzhounese from the rural areas of southeastern China, and left the motherland in the 1990s. As in the rest of the city, however, many of them made it into Belgium through transit migration and re-emigration (cf. Pang 2008: 87), and most first passed through other European countries such as France, Spain or Italy, before settling in the Midi neighborhood. As opposed to the large number of ethnic Chinese involved in the catering business in the Dansaert area, these migrants typically earn a living running small retailing businesses, importing and exporting various goods, working with a wide and varied global customer base.

### 3. Research objectives

As outlined in the Introduction, this paper aims to investigate the linguistic behavior of Chinese migrants to Antwerp and Brussels in relation to the wider context of urban multilingualism, by means of a study of linguistic landscapes. Our attention will be focused on the three ethnic Chinese neighborhoods described in the previous section, i.e. the Chinatown area in Antwerp, the Dansaert neighborhood in the center of Brussels, and the more hidden Chinese community in the Midi



neighborhood in the same city. By looking at signs of shops, restaurants and other small businesses, we attempt to find out how these three different Chinese communities differ in terms of the languages that are displayed in the public sphere, and how Chinese identities are constructed through public language use. More specifically, building on the previous work by Wang and Van de Velde (2015) and Vandenbroucke (2015), as discussed in Section 1, this study intends to first map the geographical spread of Chinese and other languages in the three neighborhoods, in order to get a broad panorama of the distribution of languages. This will be followed by an overview of language use, dominance and multilingual practices per establishment and per sign, with some additional discussion of script choice and a reflection on the impact of the medium and function of the signs in question. All throughout the analysis, we will compare the three areas under discussion, and aim at linking our observations to the larger sociolinguistic context of these three Chinese ethnic neighborhoods.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Research sites

The three neighborhoods where the field work was carried out were introduced in sections 2.1 and 2.2. for Antwerp, we will focus on the Chinatown neighborhood near the central train station, and for Brussels, we will focus both on the central Dansaert neighborhood as well as on the more peripheral Midi neighborhood. To circumscribe the specific area under investigation, in each case we started out from charting the presence of Chinese in these areas in a very broad sense, and defined our Chinatown areas by branching out from the most central streets with the most pervasive presence of both the Chinese language and references to China or Chinese culture. From these central streets, we expanded our focus outwards to include any adjacent street with at least one shop or establishment with any sort of visual link to China, Chinese culture, or the Chinese language. Also, we included all non-adjacent streets in the direct vicinity of these Chinese neighborhoods if they had at least three or more shops or establishments with a similar Chinese connection in them. We applied these sampling criteria to all three neighborhoods in a systematic way, so as to avoid a more subjective choice of which streets to include in the Chinatown area, and which not. Note that in these streets, we recorded all signs, also of shops or establishments without any link to China or Chinese, in order to map



out how Chinese languages appear in and interact with the larger multilingual context of the ethnic neighborhoods to which they belong.

## 4.2. Unit of analysis

During the data coding, we paid particular attention to the unit of analysis, which is a notoriously challenging aspect of linguistic landscape research. Some scholars adopt the view that the linguistic landscape should be analyzed at the level of a shop or establishment, contending that each sign as a linguistic text belongs to a larger and interconnected whole, and that these larger units should therefore be used as the integrated “unit of decision-making”, instead of focusing just on individual signs (Cenoz and Gorter 2006: 71; Vandebroucke 2015: 168). Other scholars prefer to use any piece of individual text “within a spatially definable frame” (i.e. a different sign, such as a flag, a shop door, a window pane) as unit of analysis, in order to acquire a comprehensive overview of the research data without imposing too many predefined categories (Fekede and Gemechu 2016: 4; Backhaus 2007: 66–67). We decided to combine both approaches, and designate both the individual sign and its co-occurrence with other signs per establishment as our main units of analysis. Therefore, we went out to photograph any visual presence of a language or of multiple languages on signs: anything ranging from slogans on big advertisement panels and shop windows, to words on small stickers or tiny handwritten scraps of paper carrying messages put up on the door. As a sign we considered any grouping of textual and/or visual information on a single material carrier and in a similar style. If multiple sign carriers were displayed in a symmetrical or connected way, or placed at the same physical level, made from the same material, and – most importantly– conveyed identical linguistic information, we considered them as instances of just one sign. Furthermore, given that some sign carriers bear more than one decision-making unit, we complemented our unit of analysis by coding for sign function and sign medium, as will be discussed in more detail below. As such, our unit of analysis is defined based on criteria of sign function and carrier, although we also group signs per shop or establishment, and look at the overall language use patterns per individual establishment in that sense.

## 4.3. Data collection and data processing

The fieldwork in these three Chinatown neighborhoods was carried out by the lead author from June to November 2018. To collect the data, we

used a camera device with built-in GPS to make pictures geocoded with the latitude and longitude coordinates of the samples. The linguistic signs on all of these photographs were organized and coded with information regarding the languages present in each sign, the degree of mutual translation in multilingual signs (Backhaus 2007, cf. below), and, in case of Chinese languages, the script choice (traditional characters, simplified characters, hanyu pinyin, a dialectal romanization system, or a localized orthographical transcription). In addition, we also recorded contextual information for each sign, such as the sign type (blessings, contact information, marketing and advertisement, opening information, payment information, product information, road signs, shop capacity, shop names and identification, warnings, and other types of signs), medium (digital, handwritten, printed, or mixed), shop or establishment, location within that shop or establishment (e.g. shop door, window, façade, etc.), shop or establishment type (e.g. art and decoration, clothing, restaurant, etc.), and the precise street, neighborhood and exact location of each sign. Finally, we also went into each shop to ask if the owner or the manager of the shop was a Chinese national or of Chinese heritage.

The languages present in each sign were coded disregarding proper names, brand names and abbreviations, and we also excluded instances where contextual information could not help us determine the language of individual and often isolated words (e.g. one-word signs, where the word exists both in French and in Dutch). Besides recording, counting and naming all languages present in a sign, we also coded for the dominant language per sign. To determine this, we based ourselves on the quantity of text (i.e. the language with more text is seen as more dominant), the text position (i.e. text on top or on the left is seen as more dominant), the font size (e.g. text in a larger font is seen as more dominant) and the color of the text (i.e. colored text is seen as more dominant). Where several of these criteria pointed in different directions, we applied them in descending order of importance, although a combination of two of the final three criteria was taken to overrule the first criterion.

After coding and data cleaning, we registered a total of 2,541 signs, with 1,127 signs in Antwerp, 1,034 signs in Dansaert neighborhood of Brussels, and 380 signs in Midi neighborhood of Brussels respectively. After cleaning up, coding and annotating the data in Microsoft Excel for Mac, we used the statistical package *R* (version 3.5.2) with the RStudio interface to aggregated, analyze, visualized and map our results, mainly using the *ggmap* and *tidyverse* packages (Kahle & Wickam 2013; Wickham et al. 2019).

## 5. Analysis and findings

We will first analyze the geographical distribution of languages in the neighborhoods. Next, we will move on to discuss the number of languages per establishment, before discussing patterns of language use, dominance and multilingualism per individual sign. In addition, we will also touch upon script choice and mutual translation in multilingual signs, and conclude by looking at the impact of sign function and medium, as explained below.

### 5.1. Geographical distribution of signs in neighborhoods

Figure 1 provides us with a panorama of the geographical spread of Chinese language signs (x-marks) versus non-Chinese language signs (green) in the three areas under discussion. Note that we use the term Chinese to refer to texts in any variety of Chinese, regardless of the writing or transliteration system. When we discuss Mandarin or other varieties (e.g. Cantonese) by name, we refer to those varieties specifically.



Figure 1. *Geographical spread of Chinese (x-marks) v. non-Chinese (triangles) language signs*

As we can see, the Antwerp Chinese neighborhood best resembles a more classic or traditional Chinatown area, with a very dense concentration of Chinese signs in especially the Van Wesenbekestraat, which – with its Chinese entrance gate – is the Chinese street *par excellence*. Chinese signs are still present in some of the adjacent streets, but to a much lesser extent. Compared to Antwerp, it is clear that the central Dansaert neighborhood in Brussels has a much less condensed and less uniform distribution of Chinese signs, which – together with its more multilingual character, discussed below – gives it the image of a more diversified Chinatown neighborhood. In the more peripheral Midi neighborhood, we see the lowest presence of Chinese in public signs, and the few available signs are

also fairly scattered across several streets. In fact, when we compare the relatively high number of shops with Chinese owners to the relatively low visible presence of the Chinese language in public space, it is clear that the Midi neighborhood can be categorized as a much more atypical, or even (near-)invisible Chinatown area. Given its location in a more peripheral and more run-down area of the city, Chinese does not have the symbolic ethnic capital it has in the more traditional and touristy Dansaert area.

## 5.2. Number of languages per establishment

Looking at the number of languages that are present in all of the signs of one individual shop or establishment, we can see that multilingualism is really the norm in all neighborhoods. However, we do see clear differences between the three different Chinese communities. The most multilingual of the three is clearly the Dansaert neighborhood in Brussels (with an average of 2.30 languages per establishment), as is shown in Figure 2: there are more shops bearing two or even three languages than there are shops with just one language. In Antwerp, despite the city's official monolingual character, there are slightly more bilingual than monolingual establishments, but the overall pattern is a bit less diversified than in the Dansaert area (average of 2.15 languages per establishment). Finally, the officially bilingual yet French-dominant neighborhood around the Brussels Midi station is the most monolingual in terms of public signs (average of 1.72 languages per establishment), although even here, there are more establishments with two or more languages displayed, than there are establishments with just one language.

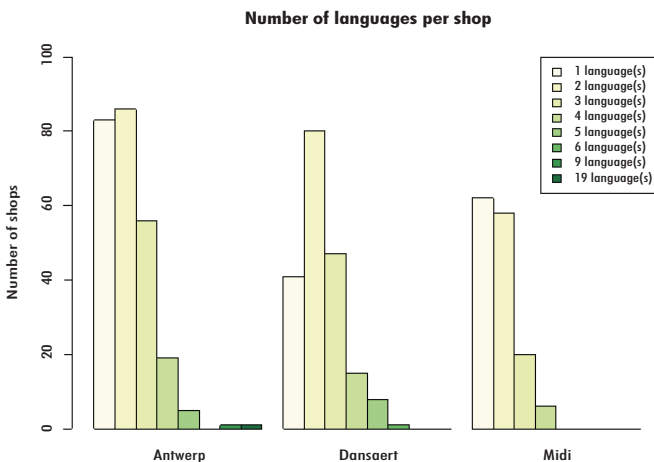


Figure 2. *Number of languages per shop or establishment*

If we only limit our attention to the establishments where the owner or manager was Chinese or of Chinese heritage, then the pattern becomes even more multilingual, and the average number of languages displayed by Chinese shop or restaurant owners is remarkably high. In fact, the mean value of languages per establishment rises to 3.32 for Dansaert (as opposed to 2.30 for all establishments), 3.16 for Antwerp (as opposed to 2.15 for all establishments), and 2.06 for Midi (as opposed to 1.72 for all establishments). Dansaert thus remains the most profoundly multilingual area, where businesses displaying two, three, four and even five different languages are all about equally common, as in the example in Figure 3. Here, we can see an advertisement for a Vietnamese noodle soup in five languages: Vietnamese, Chinese, French, Dutch, and English respectively. It reflects the common practice where Chinese restaurant owners will cater to a Western audience in an attempt to make their business flourish (cf. Pang 2002: 153–154), not only by adapting their dishes to local tastes and by offering take-away options, but also by reorienting themselves towards other, more popular ethnic Asian restaurants, in this case Vietnamese. This fairly successful business strategy makes for a very multilingual outlook on many of these restaurants, as they do still commonly keep some form of translation available in Chinese.



Figure 3. *Multilingual sign in the Dansaert neighborhood*

Slightly less multilingual, but still with many bi- and trilingual shops and establishments, is the Antwerp-based Chinatown, where we even find two or three extremely multilingual signs (with over 10 languages present). Such signs, with a public library even displaying 19 languages on one panel, are however clearly not representative of the neighborhood as a whole, and are probably the result of very deliberate top-down communication strategies meant to foreground an explicitly multilingual orientation. Finally, also the Chinese shops in the Brussels Midi neighborhood display a less wide range of languages, although even

here, there are still more establishments displaying multiple languages than there are monolingual ones.

### 5.3. Language choice, dominance and multilingualism per individual sign

We will now proceed to a more micro level of analysis of language use in individual signs in the three Chinese ethnic neighborhoods. Figure 4 shows the relative frequency of each language per sign (on the left) and the relative frequency of the dominant languages per sign (on the right). As the left graph shows, Antwerp has the most distinctly recognizable Chinatown neighborhood with the highest proportion of Chinese signs. Also remarkable is that we can distinguish a very limited visual presence of Chinese dialects, which are almost completely absent in the other neighborhoods. This fits in with the more uniform Cantonese-based migration history of the Antwerp Chinese community. Aside from Mandarin and the official language Dutch, this area also boasts a high number of signs in English, while the presence of French is almost negligible. In Brussels, English, French and Dutch (even if only to a lesser extent) are the main languages in the linguistic landscape, leaving a slightly lower visual presence for Chinese. However, here we also see that Chinese is more present in the more touristy Chinatown neighborhood of Dansaert, where displaying Chinese identity seems more common and more desirable than in the less recognizably Chinese Midi neighborhood, where Chinese is clearly just one of many other languages visually present in the public sphere. In addition, accompanying the recent influx of mainland Chinese residents and tourists to the Dansaert area, simplified Chinese characters are also being instrumentalized to attract these groups of more Mandarin-oriented newcomers.

The distribution of languages based on dominance stays relatively similar to that of the overall presence of languages per sign, and unlike what could be expected, the presence of Chinese stays fairly stable: this indicates that establishments who advertise or communicate in Chinese, mostly seem to use Chinese as the dominant language. A clear difference is seen with regard to the presence of Dutch in the two Brussels-based neighborhoods: whereas Dutch as a co-official language is clearly not absent from signs, it is usually not foregrounded as the dominant language on a sign. As the only official language in all three neighborhoods, Dutch is present in all areas, but even in officially monolingual Dutch-speaking Antwerp, its position has almost been surpassed by that of English. In Brussels, many *official* signs would be bilingual

French and Dutch, in line with the official bilingualism, but with French generally being listed first. Thus, whereas the graph of languages used in individual signs reflects to some extent the official policy, the graph on the right, that is, the dominant language per sign, still even more reflects the actual language practice, where French is far more dominant than Dutch in Brussels. Figure 5 shows a typical official bilingual sign in Brussel, with the French name *Petit-Château* presented in a slightly more dominant first position on the road sign, and the Dutch name *Klein Kasteeltje* in second position, displaying the same information as in French.

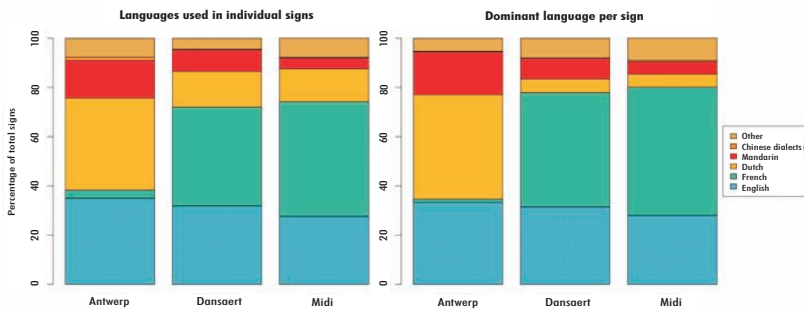


Figure 4. Relative frequency of languages and dominant language per sign



Figure 5. Official bilingual sign in Brussels

English, despite its lack of official status in Belgium, has proven to be omnipresent, being the second most frequently displayed language in all three sites, fulfilling different functions. All of these neighborhoods are quite internationally oriented, and English can be used to fulfill a



bridging function between different communities with different linguistic repertoires (cf. Backhaus 2007; Cenoz & Gorter 2006; Vandembroucke 2015). Around Brussels Midi, where French is dominant in the overall neighborhood, English clearly serves this role as an international lingua franca (cf. Edelman 2010), to facilitate the local entrepreneurs in their business importing and exporting goods worldwide. In addition, we also notice clear attempts to commodify English so as to give a shop or establishment an aura of internationalism and project images of transnational identities (Huebner 2006; Kelly-Holmes 2000; Piller 2003), especially in the touristy areas in Antwerp and the Dansaert neighborhood of Brussels. Finally and specifically in Brussels, English also serves as a mediating language between the two co-official languages French and Dutch, and is sometimes used to avoid a choice between those languages, or to avoid using both (cf. O'Donnell and Toebosch 2008: 154; Vandembroucke 2015: 174). Whereas Belgian language legislation requires all official public communication in Brussels to be in French and in Dutch, as in the official street sign in Figure 5, this is not always possible or desirable, for instance due to space restrictions. In such cases, the mediating function of English can provide a solution, as in Figure 6, where the local parking authorities use a common expression in English (“shop & go”) combined with abbreviations that work in several languages (“30 min”), to avoid displaying a homophonic bilingual sign.



Figure 6. *English serves as a mediating language*

#### 5.4. Script choice

Beyond language choice, owners displaying signs in Chinese also need to make a decision on which script or transliteration system to use. The two main writing systems used for Chinese are the logographic traditional and simplified characters. Traditional characters are still in use in Taiwan, Hongkong and Macau, and their use can “directly index the geopolitical entity” (Curtin 2009: 224). They were traditionally also used in mainland China, until they were replaced by simplified characters by the government of the People’s Republic of China in the 1950s. Simplified characters are now in use in the rest of China, as well as in Singapore and Malaysia. In addition to these logographic systems, many different romanization systems also exist to transliterate Chinese into a Western alphabetic system. The official romanization system in China, most widely used to teach Mandarin across the globe, is *hanyu pinyin*, although Wang and Van de Velde (2015: 124) note that other romanization systems are also commonly used among diasporic Chinese communities in the Netherlands and Belgium. Sometimes these transliterations can represent dialect speech, as in the case of the Cantonese pinyin, but we can also find transliterations based on local orthographical conventions. Although often hard to distinguish, such localized pinyin systems are newer inventions, which use local Dutch or French orthographical conventions to represent Chinese speech in a way that is more accessible for passers-by, as it allows them to intuitively read out what they see.

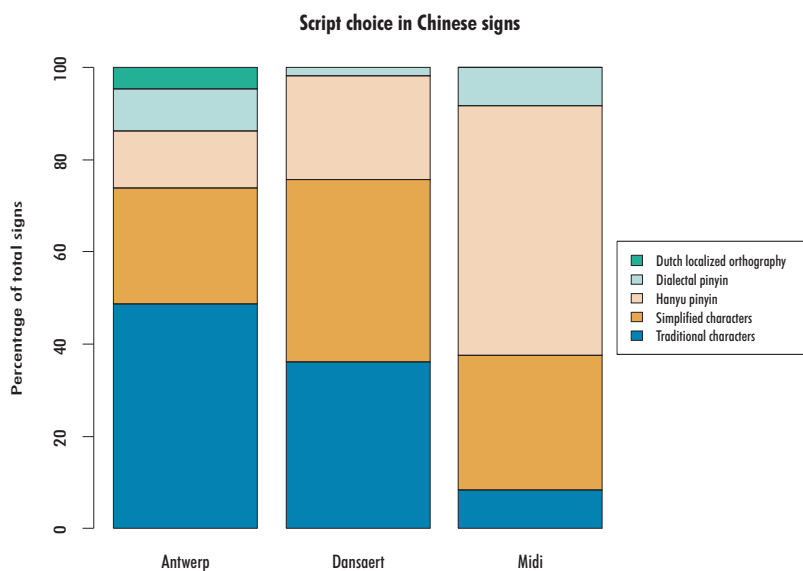


Figure 7. *Script choice in Chinese signs*

As shown in Figure 7, the Antwerp-based Chinese community most frequently uses traditional Chinese characters, which reflects the more homogeneous Cantonese demographic background of most immigrants in Antwerp. This is also confirmed by the presence of dialectal, mostly Cantonese pinyin systems, which are rarer in the other neighborhoods. Given this salient manifestation of traditional characters, as well as the comparatively high presence of dialectal transliterations, we can conclude that Chinese immigrants in Antwerp manifest a more regional, southern identity through the local linguistic landscape. Also, we can note a relatively high amount of text which has been transliterated based on Dutch orthographical principles – although often representing dialectal speech as well. One such example is the use of the Dutch digraph <oe> to represent the /u/ phoneme, as in the Foek Wing Supermarket sign in Figure 8. A more standardized pinyin transliteration would represent /u/ as <u>, but given the orthographical practice in Dutch to reserve <u> for /y/ and transcribe /u/ as <oe>, we can categorize this sign as an example of localized Dutch orthography.



Figure 8. *Localized Dutch orthography*

In contrast to Antwerp, the more heterogeneous Dansaert area in Brussels displays more simplified Chinese characters, although traditional characters are still displayed frequently as well. This reflects the more diversified and mixed make-up of the community there, hailing from different parts of the Chinese-speaking world. The notably low amount of dialectal pinyin romanizations can be seen in the same perspective, as it is less useful to display local dialects in a more mixed linguistic environment. However, traditional or simplified Chinese characters often co-occur with a pinyin transliteration. This serve a double function, on the one hand providing the Western audience with a con-

venient and readable transliteration of the displayed text, while at the same time also displaying Chinese characters, which can be perceived as ethnic commodities, giving the establishment a flavor of perceived authenticity (cf. Vandenbroucke 2015).

In the Midi neighborhood, then, the situation is different again, and the alphabet-based hanyu pinyin romanization system is most dominant here. We suspect that this could be due to the wholesale business orientation of this neighborhood. Displaying logographic Chinese characters and thus flagging Chinese identities saliently is of limited benefit to the shop owners in attracting an international customer base. In fact, associations of Chinese with a reputation of poor manufacturing quality (“made in China”) can even be seen as potentially driving away customers. In addition, this low visual presence of Chinese characters may also result from the lower level of education of most Chinese migrants in this area, who all more or less hail from a similar background in the rural parts of Wenzhou. Many of them are presumed not to be literate in Chinese characters, and therefore pragmatically adopt a romanization system, if they do display any signs in Chinese in the first place. Also dialectal romanizations are quite common here, representing strong local identities, while the absence of tourists eliminates the need to display Chinese characters as for-profit markers of ethnic authenticity (cf. Heller & Duchêne 2012).

## 5.5. Mutual translation in multilingual signs

Next, we also investigated the amount of mutual translation in the signs displaying more than one language. We draw on Backhaus’ (2007) typology, which in turn is inspired by Reh (2004). Backhaus (2007: 90) introduces a typology of multilingual signs for his study of the linguistic landscape in Tokyo, in order to arrive at “a better understanding of the problem of whether a given sign in the streets of Tokyo is multilingual [...] more with regard to people with non-Japanese backgrounds or more with regard to the Japanese host population”. He distinguishes between *monophonic* signs, which only display one language; *homophonic* signs, which can be considered balanced bilingual signs, displaying exactly the same information in each language, i.e. with complete mutual translation; *polyphonic* signs, which provide a different message in each language, and thus do not have any mutual translation; and *mixed* signs, where we can find some – but not complete – overlapping information in different languages, making mutual translation only partially available (Backhaus 2007: 91). Figure 9 shows examples of a homophonic, a polyphonic and a mixed sign. In the top sign, the

Chinese characters 欢迎光临 offer a direct translation of the juxtaposed *welcome* in English, whereas the example on the bottom left shows no such mutual information: the Chinese characters 兰州拉面 advertise the Lanzhou hand-pulled noodles for which the restaurant is famous, while the French *au bon bol* ‘at the delicious bowl’ signals the restaurant’s name. The bottom right example shows a mixed sign, where the English *Asia-Food* and the Dutch *supermarkt* ‘supermarket’ are only partially translated in the traditional Chinese characters 亞洲 meaning ‘Asia’.



Figure 9. Examples of homophonic, polyphonic and mixed signs

When we examine our results in terms of Backhaus’ typology, we can first of all note that monophonic signs are most common in all three neighborhoods, especially in Antwerp. However, if we concentrate on the signs with more than one language, we can see that homophonic signs are fairly uncommon. Although this is also especially the case in Antwerp, in each neighborhood we have more polyphonic and mixed signs than classic homophonic signs. This is counterintuitive, as the prototypical image of written multilingual communication would be homophonic, with the same information offered in each language – as is the case of most government communication in bilingual Brussels (cf. the example in Figure 5). However, most signs are either mixed or polyphonic, displaying different kinds of information in different languages. This relatively large proportion of signs with partial or no mutual translation indicates that shop or restaurant owners chose to display bi- or multilingual signs as a way to cater to different audiences, and to convey different types of information to different types of audiences. As such, it is not uncommon for restaurants to advertise regional Chinese specialties to a potential audience of Chinese tourists, while at the same time advertising more Western-style Asian dishes in Dutch, English and/or French. The observation by Vandecandelaere (2012: 307-308) that Chinese restaurants in Brussels can be compared to an onion, with a superficial outside layer characterized by exoticism aimed at European

customers, but with underlying less conventional layers, appealing to other, non-European audiences, for instance through the use of color symbolism, thus also seems to hold true at a linguistic level.

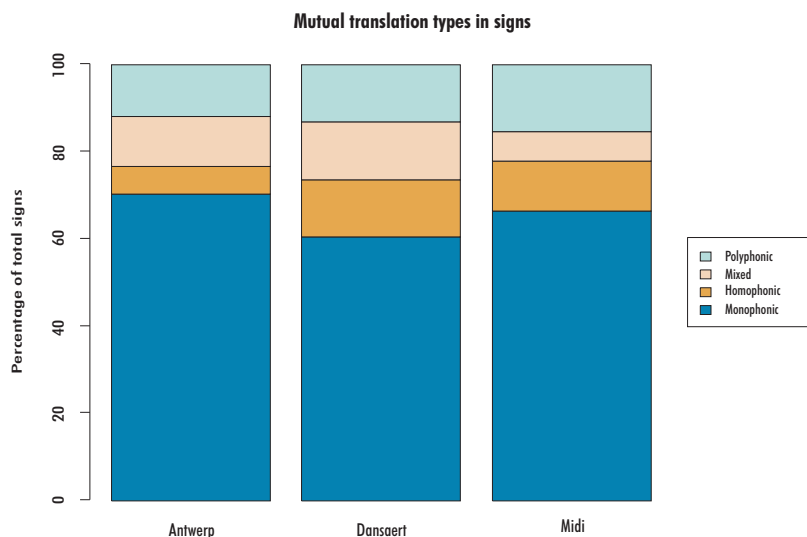


Figure 10. *Mutual translation*

### 5.6. Sign function and medium

Next, we will focus our attention on the use of signs in Chinese (or more specifically: Mandarin) versus signs in other languages, combined for all three neighborhoods, and divided to show the impact of the function of the sign in question. As explained in the methodology section, we coded for sign function, for which we look at the communicative purpose of the sign (e.g. to allow for identification of the shop, to provide a warning, to advertise, etc.). As such, we distinguish between 11 broad categories, with each category comprising a number of data points ranging from 15 (payment information) to 1046 (shop names and identification). We can see the influence of this variable on the use of Mandarin versus all other languages, clustered for clarity, in Figure 11. This graph shows that some types of signs appear more typically in Mandarin, while others rarely do. Signs containing product info, shop names, or marketing and advertising employ the Mandarin language relatively often, while more practical signs contained more standardized information, such as warnings, road signs, signs with payment info or signs expressing the maximal capacity of a shop, more often figure in other languages, such as the official languages French and Dutch.

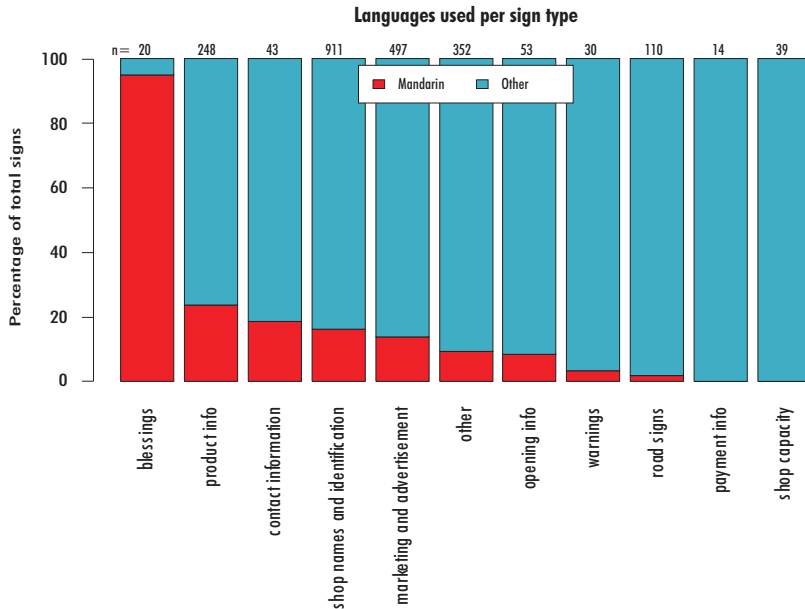


Figure 11. *Language use per sign type*

The only type of sign that is almost always written in Mandarin contains blessings. This is not surprising, as it is a very symbolic Chinese cultural custom to wish people good luck or a prosperous business, and as this is so closely related to Chinese cultural identity, the signs are usually drawn up in Chinese. This links up with the observation in some previous studies (cf. Shang and Guo 2017: 197), who conclude that Chinese shops in Singapore mostly make use of Chinese characters in their shop signs to express their emotional connection to traditional Chinese values. We can also remark that such Chinese good luck charms also seem to be used as a way of commodifying Chinese language and culture, exhibiting a flair of ethnic exoticism, especially in the more touristy Chinatown neighborhoods in Antwerp and central Brussels (cf. Leeman and Modan 2009: 332–62; Vandenbroucke 2015: 178).

We can also split up our data according to the medium of the sign, where we distinguished handwritten signs (67 observations), printed signs (2147 observations), digital signs (80) and a small number of mixed signs (23), usually combining handwritten notes with printed text. Figure 12 shows that Mandarin is almost never used in digital signs, and occurs much less in printed signs than it does in handwritten signs. It is most common in mixed media, where the typical sign would be an advertisement or printed menu in English, French and/or Dutch, with some additional information added in handwritten Chinese characters.



Similarly, handwritten signs in Mandarin are very frequently used in a more informal and complementary way, displayed in addition to other, more formal signs in other languages, and providing additional information to a Chinese target audience. This is also the case in Figure 13, where we can see a handwritten note advertising 越南牛粉 or Vietnamese beef noodles.

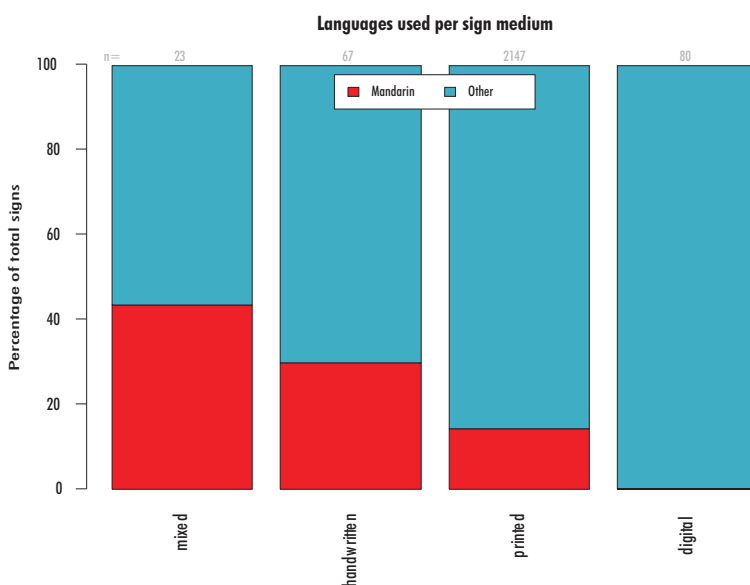


Figure 12. *Languages used per medium of the sign*

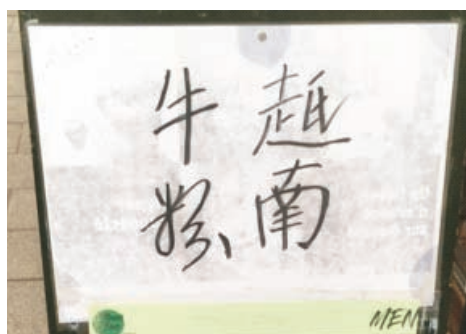


Figure 13. *Handwritten sign advertising Vietnamese beef noodles*

Combining the insights from our analysis based on sign function and on sign medium, as discussed above, we can conclude that Chinese appears more in bottom-up constructions of the multilingual linguistic landscape. In spite of its strong overall presence in the linguistic land-

scape of the Chinatown areas under investigation, Chinese is more frequently present in handwritten and less standardized types of signs, as well as in signs related to expressions of Chinese identity, whereas it is less present in more informative, standardized signs, as well as in printed and digital signs. As such, Chinese maintains a more bottom-up multilingual presence, underneath official and more dominant languages such as French, Dutch and English.

## 7. Conclusion

This study examined the linguistic landscapes of three different Chinese ethnic neighborhoods in the multilingual context Antwerp and Brussels. We started out from the migration and demographic profile of the Chinese community in each of the neighborhoods under investigation. Based on this information, we then systematically analyzed language use in all public signs, focusing particularly on how the different profile of each area influences linguistic choices, but also investigating the geographical distribution and number of languages, and exploring how patterns of language choice and language dominance are determined by a range of different variables. In doing so, we aimed to chart out the linguistic landscape in the traditional and more atypical Chinese ethnic neighborhoods in both cities. We did this on the one hand by connecting the macro level profile of each neighborhood to the meso level analysis of language display in shops, restaurants and other commercial establishments, but also by connecting this macro level information to the micro level analysis of language and script choice in individual signs.

As such, we were able to distinguish three very different profiles for each of the Chinese neighborhoods involved, although one commonality which connects all neighborhoods is the strong prevalence of English. The Chinese neighborhood in Antwerp was seen as the most traditional and prototypical Chinatown. Typical in this area is that Mandarin still holds a fairly strong base, but that Chinese dialects and dialectal transliterations are also present to a relatively high degree, as reflections of the older, more uniform Cantonese or generally Southern Chinese immigration to the area. The Dansaert neighborhood in Brussels gives us the image of a more diversified Chinatown area. Here, Chinese has to compete for space in the linguistic landscape with French, English, Dutch and a host of other different languages, and as a result, Chinese and Chinese characters are often commodified as a way to attract tourists for the many restaurants and catering businesses run by Chinese owners. Finally, the area around the Brussels Midi station is

the least prototypical ethnic Chinese neighborhood, as the presence of Chinese is much more invisible in this area. In this neighborhood, Chinese entrepreneurs, mostly hailing from rural south-eastern China and often with a more limited level of education, compete with small business owners from different cultural and linguistic heritage to negotiate their way through the import and export business.

By focusing not just on Mandarin and Chinese dialects, but by also looking at all other languages present in the linguistic landscape, we tried to show the interaction between the multilingual make up of the city and Chinese as a heritage language, as well as its maintenance in two linguistically and culturally highly diverse multilingual environments. Our overall results have shown that, beneath the superficial layer of official monolingualism in Antwerp and official bilingual in Brussels, the linguistic landscape in all three ethnic neighborhoods gives us a kaleidoscopic view of less official and more bottom-up language visibilities underneath the visual presence of more dominant languages. Where survey investigations of language use and language proficiency have highlighted the difficulties of capturing the linguistic practices of especially smaller and often undocumented minority groups such as the different Chinese communities, we believe to have shown that a study of the linguistic landscape can still give us an insight into the vibrant use and display of Chinese language and identities in a diasporic context.

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Rui Guo  
Vrije Universiteit Brussel -  
China Scholarship Council  
rui.guo@vub.be  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7941-9127>

Rik Vosters  
Vrije Universiteit Brussel  
Rik.Vosters@vub.ac.be  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5985-6933>

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