

Notes from the Field: Wisconsin Walloon Documentation and Orthography

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Wisconsin Walloon is a heritage dialect of a threatened language in the langue d’oil family that originated in southern Belgium and expanded to northeastern Wisconsin, USA in the mid-1850s. Walloon-speaking immigrants formed an isolated agricultural community, passing on and using the language for the next two generations until English became the dominant functional language. Although younger generations today have not learned the language, there remain enough Walloon speakers as well as Belgian descendants interested in their linguistic heritage to have generated community support for a Walloon documentation and conservation project. In this paper, we report on the results of over three years of collaboration between university researchers, students, and community members to document, study, and promote the language for the benefit of both scholars and community. We provide a description of the language, collaborative documentation efforts, and the development of community resources, including a phonetically-accessible Walloon orthography. We conclude with an outlook on future work with an eye toward increased community-led efforts.

1. Introduction¹ Walloon is a threatened language in the langue d’oil family spoken in southern Belgium. There are perhaps as few as 300,000 active speakers in Belgium, where the language is sometimes considered to be a French patois (Eberhard et al. 2020), although attitudes vary by region (cf. Hambye & Simon 2004). In Wisconsin’s southern Door Peninsula, a small, rural community of descendants of Belgian immigrants have spoken Walloon since the mid nineteenth century. There are fewer than 50 native speakers of this dialect today.

This article aims to provide an overview of the present state of the Walloon language in Wisconsin, identify phonological and morphological features that have been

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under-described in previous work, describe current documentation efforts, and outline an agenda for developing resources for the community. These resources include the collection of content for public archives, the development of a consistent and phonetically accessible orthography, and the development and publication of a primer for community reference.

1.1 Belgian immigration history Between 1846 and 1857, industrialization and economic hardship in Belgium were contributing factors in significant waves of immigration to the United States. Many southern Belgian immigrants were farmers and hoped to continue that livelihood abroad (Zaniewski & Rosen 1998; Tinkler 2013). This largely Catholic population, composed of bilingual speakers of French and several regional minority languages, eventually settled in various locations across the United States. Many French-speaking Belgians moved north, while Walloon-dominant communities settled in various regions across the country: Texas, Oregon, and Wisconsin (Zaniewski & Rosen 1998). A majority of Wisconsin Walloon settlers immigrated from Belgium's Namur region and hoped to re-establish their previous livelihoods as farmers. This commitment to living off of the land, along with the relative geographic isolation afforded by the peninsula where they settled, permitted the Belgian community to remain culturally isolated from the surrounding English-dominant culture.

No conventionalized writing system for Walloon was used in Belgium until after 1900, after the major mid-century waves of immigration had taken place. Many of the original settlers were illiterate, and those who were literate read and wrote in French. Walloon remained the preferred language in the home for several generations, while French proficiency declined within a generation. Therefore, the Wisconsin Walloon language currently lacks a conventionalized orthography, although community members have made efforts to create dictionaries and writing resources over the years (see §1.2). In Belgium, a cultural movement in favor of Walloon identity did not gain momentum until after this mid-century wave of immigration had occurred (Francard 2009), so the original Wisconsin community would likely have seen themselves as Belgian rather than Walloon. In Wisconsin today, the Walloon language is sometimes colloquially referred to as “Belgian”. For generations, the community remained a “close-knit, cohesive, nearly self-sufficient ethnic island, maintaining their religion, language, and customs” (Tinkler 2013).

1.2 The Belgian community today Today, land and farms that were owned by Belgian community members for several generations are passing out of family ownership and being purchased by large corporations. This loss of family ownership was one driving factor that had led so many farmers to immigrate from Belgium in the first place (Tinkler 2013). Many heritage speakers and their descendants have sought careers outside of farming, or have not maintained strong ties to family-owned land, so the cultural isolation that had originally permitted the language to flourish is less pervasive in the twenty-first century.

Belgian heritage remains an important aspect of local identity. With place names like *Namur*, *Brussels*, *Thiry Daems*, and *Rosière*, Belgian influence is apparent in

the toponymy of Wisconsin's southern Door, Kewaunee, and Brown counties. Cultural traditions are also upheld where possible. The countryside is still dotted with small roadside chapels, constructed by families but available for public use (Tinkler 2013). Each year, the community gathers for a Belgian Days celebration in June and celebrates a harvest festival in August known as the *Kermis* or *Grand Fiess*. These celebrations prominently feature traditional recipes such as Belgian pie and a chicken stew called *booyah*, which was proposed as the official state soup in 2015. Community members campaigned to preserve a historic church in Brussels, Wisconsin, and the building was converted into a Belgian Heritage Center. The space features displays outlining the influence of Belgian immigrants in the region, the history of local farms and businesses, and basic details about the language itself.

Many speakers, at least in our initial conversations, maintained that the language cannot be written. However, some common words are consistently written for advertising events like Belgian Days. Contemporary Belgian Walloon orthographies are largely based on French spelling conventions, with spelling and diacritic marks that distinguish it from French, but few Wisconsin Walloon speakers have studied these writing systems. Where Wisconsin Walloon is presented in writing, it often uses (or modifies) a writing system developed by Josephine Wautlet specifically for the Wisconsin community. Wautlet's *Phonetic Walloon for Belgian Americans* (1983) and *Petit Dictionnaire de Wallon* have heavy French influence, using diacritic marks and spelling conventions which many English-literate community members have admitted to finding unclear. Wautlet's resources are thorough but not comprehensive, and some spellings have evolved through usage. For instance, in Belgian Walloon, the aforementioned chicken stew is written as *bouyon*, but *booyah* has been used on menus in Wisconsin for years. A popular card game, *couillon* in Belgian Walloon, is advertised as *cooyah*. Neither the stew nor the card game is included in Wautlet's dictionary. Nasal vowels are contrastive for native speakers of the Wisconsin variety (see §2.2), but in practice, the distinction has not been marked in phonetic representations by and for English speakers. The community's history of efforts to create a more accessible orthography for English speakers suggests that the uniquely American features of the dialect are part of the multicultural identity valued by remaining speakers (cf., Schieffelin & Doucet 1994; Sebba 2009).

Languages spoken in immigrant communities in the United States tend to Anglicize over the course of three generations (cf. Alba et al. 2002; Fishman 1990; Veltman 1983). Walloon, however, maintained its status as a primary language in this community for nearly a century before the community began shifting to English. The last generation of native speakers of Wisconsin Walloon were born between approximately 1920 and 1945 mostly acquiring English when they began attending public school around the age of six. Predominantly, this generation did not acquire French in the home, even if one parent was bilingual in French and Walloon. Many recall being ridiculed and even punished for speaking Walloon at school, and English became the default home language for their children. This last generation of first-language Walloon speakers has continued to seek opportunities to converse in the language, but those opportunities are increasingly limited or inconvenient. A small group of com-

munity members meets regularly for a Walloon conversation club, and the language is preferred for informal gatherings like picnics or playing cards. Monthly Walloon language classes are also organized by the Belgian Heritage Center, in which native speakers provide informal instruction.

Most children born after 1945 grew up bilingual in Walloon and English but preferred English in most contexts and established monolingual households (cf. Alba et al. 2002). This generation has varying degrees of fluency in Walloon. Some members of this generation remain fluent bilinguals who can communicate with their relatives in Belgium. Some adult children of native speakers are fluent second-language speakers of Walloon. That is, they see themselves as English speakers who later learned or acquired Walloon as a second language, rather than as native bilinguals. Others are passive speakers, or adult learners who comprehend spoken Walloon but have limited spoken fluency themselves, and some are developing adult learners, who grew up only knowing basic vocabulary but have recently volunteered to learn the language in classes and conversation clubs with native speakers.

Among younger generations (e.g., those born after approximately 1990), comprehension of the language is limited, as are contexts in which the language is heard. These grandchildren and great-grandchildren do not generally participate as actively in conversation clubs and language lessons. Spanish is the only second language formally taught at rural local schools. Students interested in studying French, which has some degree of mutual intelligibility with Walloon, would have to pursue that study independently of their regular curriculum.

2. Previous research

2.1 Research on Belgian Walloon Although contemporary linguistic descriptions and analyses of Walloon are somewhat limited, the language has a rather long history of documentation, most notably in the form of diachronic and lexical studies, but also in phonetic/phonological, morphological, and to some extent syntactic studies (see Germain & Pierret 1981 for a comprehensive bibliography). Literature on the Walloon language concerns almost exclusively the Belgian varieties, and most resources are specific to one dialect of Walloon (often Liégeois), with few attempts to describe the language as a whole. One notable exception is a linguistic atlas, *L'Atlas Linguistique de la Wallonie*, published in ten volumes beginning with the first volume edited in 1953 by Louis Rémacle and continuing through 2011 under various other editors. Similar to other linguistic atlases in the European tradition, each volume examines the geographic variation of some aspect of the language (phonetics, morphology, syntax, or specific lexical fields in this case) by charting the pronunciation of certain words or phrases at over 200 different plot points across Wallonia in order to capture all the dialectal variation of Walloon as completely and accurately as possible. This information can then be used to create isoglosses and to observe areas of transition between different dialects. Such information can also be useful for studies such as ours, in which an immigrant language can be immediately compared to the speech of the original settlers' homeland (see §4.3).

Another major work to treat multiple varieties of Walloon is a comprehensive descriptive grammar by Lorint Hendschel (2012). The grammar provides a thorough account of the history, orthography, phonology, morphology, and syntax of Walloon in general terms, with each entry followed by notes on dialectal variations. Hendschel also describes important phonetic, lexical, and morphological characteristics of each of the four main dialects – East Walloon (the Liège region), Central Walloon (Namur), West Walloon, and South Walloon. These dialectal divisions and descriptions are also described in Baiwir (2008).

Although online resources are somewhat scarce, there are two major comprehensive dictionaries available. The first is the *Moti walon-francès*² (Walloon-French dictionary), edited by Lorint Hendschel and Pablo Saratxaga, which contains 30,000 entries. Though a wealth of information, it is intended to be searched in Walloon in order to return an entry in French, and not vice-versa, making it difficult to search for translations from French to Walloon. The second is a Wiktionary site³ that is a continuation of an online dictionary started by Lucien Mahin and Pablo Saratxaga. Again, the Wiktionary site is written for a Walloon-speaking audience, but its entries often include translations into French and other languages, making it somewhat searchable in French.

A wide range of other dictionaries and grammars exist, each treating one of the major dialects. An online list of over 500 dictionaries, lexicons, and thematic wordlists was created by Johan Viroux and Lorint Hendschel and is maintained by Lucien Mahin (2018). Major works include the *Dictionnaire liégeois* by Jean Haust (1933) and the *Lexique Namurois* by Lucien Léonard (1969). In many of these references, and in much of the remaining linguistic literature on Walloon, the language is described in contrast to French, which is unsurprising given the geographical and historical proximity between French and Walloon. Louis Remacle (1948), for example, examines the difficulty of reconstructing Old Walloon and differentiating it from Francien, given the similarity between the two varieties and the higher prestige of the latter. Older texts supposedly written in Walloon are often much closer to Francien or, eventually, French. More current analyses of Walloon have continued to examine the relationship between Walloon and French (e.g., Boutier 2009) or use Walloon as an example in comparative studies of Romance languages (e.g., Bernstein 1991). In this way, Hendschel's (2012) grammar and the linguistic atlases are unique in that they each provide a stand-alone description of the language.

2.2 Research on Wisconsin Walloon While Belgian Walloon has an expansive, albeit dated linguistic literature, Wisconsin Walloon has virtually none, although it is frequently acknowledged to exist in the Belgian literature. The history of Belgian settlement in Wisconsin is rather well documented, with numerous accounts of the early settlers and their voyage to Wisconsin, the difficulties they encountered upon arrival, the massive fire that decimated the early settlement, and the subsequent reconstruction (see, e.g. Lempereur & Istasse 2011). Major historical and anthropological

²<https://dtw.walon.org/>.

³https://wa.wiktionary.org/wiki/Wiccionaire:Mwaisse_p%C3%A5dje.

academic works from William Laatsch and Charles Calkins (1992) and Jacqueline Tinkler (2013; 2019), among others, have thoroughly documented various historical and modern aspects of the lives of the descendants of the Belgian immigrants.

Although much work has been done documenting the history of Walloon settlers in Wisconsin, we are aware of only one linguistic treatment of Wisconsin Walloon, which is Eric Colet's (1982) Bachelor's thesis (mémoire de licence), *Le Parler Wallon du Wisconsin*. Colet provides a synchronic analysis of the phonology, morphology, lexicon, and syntax of Wisconsin Walloon in comparison to Namurois Walloon. The comparative nature of the thesis allows Colet to discuss possible implications of contact between Walloon and English (or, more interestingly, the lack of contact with French, given that few modern Wisconsin Belgians have any familiarity with French), but it also results in much of the analysis being reduced to short summative statements affirming the similarity between the two varieties when no differences were observed by the researcher. Though these statements are likely useful to the intended Belgian audience, who may already be familiar with Namurois Walloon, this leaves other readers with an incomplete description of the language. There is no description, for example, of the future tense, or whether the subjunctive has persisted. The article, pronominal, and adjectival systems, while described in quite a bit of detail, have many gaps in the provided paradigms. This is also due to the limited amount of data collected – a total of just 135 minutes of spontaneous conversation from six speakers.

Nevertheless, the Colet (1982) thesis provides many interesting and useful insights into the structure of Wisconsin Walloon and is an invaluable resource. Concerning phonetics, Colet finds surprisingly few aspects that differ from Namurois Walloon: a variable simplification of the four-way contrast among short and long tense and lax high front vowels, an articulatory difference in the pronunciation of nasal vowels, and epenthesis of schwa before word-final [r] (but only for words lexicalized from English) as opposed to [e] or [œ] as would happen in Belgian Walloon.

Concerning the morphology of Wisconsin Walloon, Colet finds that it is “globally identical [...] to that which is practiced in Belgium,” which is to say that nearly all variants in the flexional system are attested in Namurois Walloon (1982: 85, translation ours). Concerning verbs, Colet discusses the infinitival and past participle forms of a few irregular verbs, the inflection of all verbs for the first, second, and third person plural in the present indicative, the inflection of verbs in the third person singular and plural in the imperfect indicative, and the gerund. He makes no mention of any other verb forms, which means that they are either unattested in the corpus or that they are produced in exactly the same way as they are in Belgium. The rest of his morphological analysis treats various articles, pronouns, and adjectives. These sections, and the remaining chapters on the lexicon and syntax of Wisconsin Walloon, follow a similar pattern in which examples are provided whenever Wisconsin Walloon diverges from Namurois Walloon or, as is more often the case, whenever there is some kind of variation within the Wisconsin Walloon community. Indeed, one of Colet's principal conclusions is that the Walloon spoken in Wisconsin is “assuredly Walloon” (130), and that the same kinds of dialectal variation found in Belgium can

be found in Wisconsin, meaning that “there is not one Wisconsin Walloon, but rather Wisconsin Walloons” (84).

Colet (1982) does not pretend to have provided a complete grammar and indeed acknowledges the gaps that need to be filled, but it remains the only Wisconsin Walloon grammar in existence. From the field work we describe in the next section, our hope is to lay the groundwork for the production of a complete grammar. Our present aim is simply to share our work and shed some light on this little-known language, so we will limit ourselves in §4 to select structural aspects of Wisconsin Walloon, building on some of the analysis provided by Colet in order to remark on developments in the language in the last thirty years.

3. Collaborative work on Wisconsin Walloon documentation and orthography

3.1 Collaboration Our research team first initiated contact with the Wisconsin Walloon-speaking community through a collaborative student-faculty project at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. After establishing contact with community members and leaders through an exploratory research trip to the southern Door Peninsula, we continued to learn about the local history and culture as we began a discussion of their needs and wants for the future of the language. As researchers cultivated an ongoing relationship with the community and visited various libraries and archives to assess available resources, we began to identify goals for documentation and preservation. Revitalization is not perceived to be feasible.

Community members frequently expressed surprise that we knew about them, as well as uncertainty that anything could be done with the language, especially in written form. Still, they were enthusiastic about exploring ways to preserve it. It became clear that they were interested in assistance from outside researchers and in cultivating more interest among the younger generations. One University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire student developed a middle school lesson plan on Walloon heritage and language for local Door County Schools. The community’s interest in both documentation and in youth education inspired the ongoing development of a primer, and community members have remained actively involved in decision making processes.

3.2 Consultants Prior to data-gathering sessions for this project, consultants were given an explanatory cover letter, a consent form, and a short survey about their background with and attitudes toward the language. All consultants declined anonymity and granted permission to disclose their identities.

We advertised the dates we would be in the area by contacting event organizers in the community and aligned some research trip dates to overlap with the annual Belgian Days festival in July. Some speakers who had previously provided recordings were contacted directly by our team, and others were contacted by their friends and relatives. The most extensive recording project was funded by a research grant, so consultants were offered small gift cards in exchange for their participation. We arranged recordings with 14 consultants.

All consultants were born between 1922 and 1941. 12 identified themselves as native speakers of Walloon, and 10 of those native Walloon speakers consider English to be their second language. Three consultants self-identified as native speakers of English (one as a first language, and two as English-Walloon bilinguals).

Most consultants recalled acquiring English at the time they began attending public school, around the age of five or six. Of the two native bilinguals, only one was raised in a household where English and Walloon were spoken with more or less equal frequency. Of the two speakers who identified themselves as non-native Walloon speakers, one began to acquire Walloon around the age of five under different home circumstances than his significantly older siblings (who acquired Walloon first, and English second). The other non-native participant was a fluent speaker who learned Walloon at the age of 20 because the language was spoken by most members of his wife's family (who were unavailable for recording sessions).

Seven consultants were men, and seven were women. Most consultants lived in southern Door County, Kewaunee County, and/or Brown County for their entire lives, in small, rural, unincorporated towns. The consultant who learned Walloon later in life has lived in the metropolitan Green Bay area for 47 years but was born and raised near Brussels, WI. One other consultant spent several years in Manitowoc, WI, but has since returned home to southern Door County. Most consultants had careers in farming, but other careers included classroom teacher, music teacher, seamstress, and restaurateur.

3.3 Survey A brief language attitudes survey was completed before each recorded session. Consultants mostly provided demographic information on this handout (see §3.2), but a few simple questions about fluency and attitudes were included to establish a baseline understanding of values before proceeding to establish goals with this group of consultants.

Table 1 provides a brief overview of survey responses, with both the mean (rounded to one decimal) and the median response ($N = 14$). Although the sample size is small, due to the limited speech community, there was strong consensus that Belgian heritage and the Walloon language was important to their sense of identity. Next steps will include assessing the attitudes and interests of the wider community with respect to the Walloon language and cultural background.

Table 1. Native speaker attitudes toward the Wisconsin Walloon language

Survey Question	Mean	Median
How well do you understand when Belgian (Walloon) is spoken around you? (scale: 1–3)	2.9	3
How well can you speak Belgian (Walloon)? (scale: 1–4)	3.8	4
My heritage is an important part of my identity (scale: 1–5)	4.6	5
I am proud of the Belgian (Walloon) language (scale: 1–5)	4.8	5
I like to hear Belgian (Walloon) being spoken (scale: 1–5)	4.9	5

3.4 Conversations In 2016, a series of videos were created for use at the Belgian Heritage Center in Brussels, Wisconsin. Speakers were filmed reading short prepared stories about traditions and cultural practices in English, and then translating these same passages in Wisconsin Walloon. Prior to our recordings, this short documentary project was the most extensive collection of high-quality recordings in the dialect. That resource is suited for its purpose as a multi-media display at a heritage center but does not include the kind of naturalistic pronunciations, representative of conversational speech, needed for linguistic analysis.

Speakers were paired together based on fluency and availability, and some consultants were recorded for multiple conversations with different partners. Only fluent speakers were used for these recordings. The two non-native Walloon speakers were paired with at least one partner who was a native speaker. In one case, a planned conversation partner was unable to attend their scheduled session, so a single native speaker was asked interview questions in English and she responded in Walloon. An additional conversation was recorded between a native speaker of Belgian Walloon (from Namur) and a native speaker of Wisconsin Walloon and will be used for comparison between the dialects but is not otherwise represented in this overview.

12.5 hours of recordings of conversations between native speakers were collected. Speakers were provided with a list of basic topic prompts (Appendix A), although these prompts were often not necessary to encourage or sustain conversation. Topics covered in these informal conversational recordings include festivals and cultural traditions, the consultants' previous occupations and careers, and memories of growing up bilingual in rural Wisconsin. Recordings will be archived for access to the local community as well as researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. A number of community members understand the language but are not comfortable speaking or being recorded in conversation, so some of these passive speakers (as well as native speakers) are assisting with transcriptions. The transcription and annotation of recordings is ongoing.

3.5 Recording Methods Recordings were collected over three separate visits in June and July of 2017. Speakers were given condenser headset microphones (either Shure SM35 or Nady HM-10) and recorded using a Zoom H4N portable digital recorder. In the interest of accommodating speakers' schedules, recordings were made on-site wherever consultants were able to meet. Several conversations were held in the Belgian Heritage Center, and others were held in consultants' homes around the small, unincorporated towns of Brussels, Champion, and Union. These homes were mostly in isolated, rural environments, so recordings include occasional interference from ambient road noise and background activities. In these cases, the comfort and convenience of the consultants took priority. Recordings are being used for ongoing structural analysis of the language. They are also being made available to community members at the Belgian Heritage Center, where permission was granted.

There were two types of recording sessions: lightly moderated conversations between two fluent speakers, or "observed communicative events", and intensive one-

on-one sessions with a single native speaker that included both “observed communicative events” and “elicitation” (Lüpke 2014).

3.6 Elicitations and Observed Communicative Events Two consultants dedicated additional time to intensive elicitation interviews to develop a more detailed grammatical description of the language. Between these two speakers, there are 14 hours of recorded elicitation sessions.

Elicitation consultants were Theresa Alexander and Arlene Jadin. The speakers were 81 and 86 years old, respectively, at the time of recording. Arlene’s grandparents spoke English and Walloon in the home, so she is a lifelong speaker of both languages. Theresa grew up speaking Walloon at home and acquired English when she started school around the age of five.

A combination of linguistic and non-linguistic stimuli was used to elicit a range of grammatical structures, pronunciations, and specific lexical items that were previously unattested in the literature. The linguistic stimuli included direct questions and requests for descriptions of specific circumstances. Non-linguistic stimuli included wordless videos, story books, images, and printed story cards). These materials were adapted from a range of online resources: Field Manuals and Stimulus Materials from the Language and Cognition Department at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, *Totem Field Storyboards*, and interactive story cards from Story Builder. Several narrative prompts were also used from existing stories: consultants described the sequence of events in a wordless video titled *The Pear Story*, and the wordless children’s story *Frog, Where Are You?* (<sound 11>) to elicit vocabulary and syntactic structures.

Both consultants noted that English borrowings were typically used to fill lexical gaps that did not exist in the language in 1850: e.g., the word *chameleon* was central to the narrative prompt *Chameleon Story* from Totem Field Storyboards, and *lizard* was used in the absence of a narrower label. Some Walloon words have cognates that are predictable from French, so interviewers were sometimes able to prompt a forgotten word (e.g., *circle*, [sɛʁkl] in French, prompted [sɛk] in Walloon, <sound 01>), but not consistently (e.g., *spider*, [aʃɛʁɛ] in French did not prompt the word in Walloon, which should be [arap] or [arɛɾ]).

3.7 Orthography Native speakers of Wisconsin Walloon have consistently expressed disagreement with aspects of Josephine Wautlet’s spelling choices and with the conventionalized writing system used by speakers of Belgian Walloon. Although adopting an existing orthography would certainly allow Wisconsin Walloon users to more easily access Belgian Walloon literature and resources and facilitate written communication between the two communities, our informants expressed a strong preference for developing an English-based orthography to best serve the immediate needs of the Wisconsin Walloon community. The practical concerns of orthography design are therefore balanced against the preferences and practices of the relevant community. “First, social factors, especially issues of identity, are often more important than linguistic factors when designing orthographies to meet the needs of multi-dialectal

communities” (Clifton 2013: 8). On the role of community involvement, Clifton writes:

This may well involve challenging some of our deeply felt convictions. On the one hand, we may find a push from the local communities to unify orthographies for speech varieties that will cause problems in reading for significant numbers of users. On the other hand, we may find that the wish of a community to distinguish itself from related communities may result in a body of literature that will have a smaller pool of potential readers. In the end, the most important issue is whether the communities involved will accept the orthography, not whether the orthography is linguistically correct or whether it will be usable by the greatest number of readers (2013: 8).

In August 2016, both native and second-language speakers of Wisconsin Walloon participated in an orthography workshop at the annual Kermis celebration. Participants used the Roman alphabet to write what they considered to be reasonable phonetic approximations of common words: e.g., days of the week, months, and colors. Based on responses to these questions, potentially contentious phones were identified, especially those not frequently represented in English orthography (e.g. /y/, word-initial /ʒ/, etc.). Nasal vowels presented the most persistent challenge and gave the widest range of possible solutions from consultants. In such cases, consultants in a later focus group were shown examples of words written in several possible forms and asked to comment on their acceptability. This process revealed concerns about unpronounced characters (e.g., in the French-based orthography, the word pronounced [tʁo] is spelled *trop*) and diacritic marks (e.g., the word ‘day’, pronounced [dʒu:] in Belgian Walloon, is written as *djoû* in the French-based orthography, the circumflex indicating the long vowel, whereas in Wisconsin Walloon it is pronounced with a short vowel) that had contributed to the lack of widespread adoption of previous attempts at writing systems. Proposals based on these responses were presented back to the focus group, revisions were made based on feedback, and a semi-final orthography was agreed on in June 2018. The development of an orthography that is more intuitive for the current generation of native speakers will assist in the creation of a primer about Wisconsin Walloon, which will also include examples from Belgian Walloon orthographies for comparison.

4. Structural observations

4.1 Phonology In this section we will briefly highlight some preliminary observations on some structural aspects of Wisconsin Walloon, especially in comparison to Belgian Walloon as described in Hendschel (2012) and the work done by Eric Colet in 1982.

Belgian Walloon, as an *oïl* language, is structurally very similar to French. Its phonemic inventory is nearly identical with the exceptions of the presence of affricates

/dʒ/ and /tʃ/, the absence of the semivowel /ɥ/, the addition of a high nasal vowel (/ĩ/ or /ẽ/ depending on the dialect), and contrastive vowel length in less restricted contexts.⁴ The phonemic inventory of Wisconsin Walloon is largely unchanged from that of the Namurois Walloon in Belgium (hereafter, references to “Belgian Walloon” are specifically in reference to this variety). There are, however, some notable differences that are of interest for future study. The first is that whereas in Belgian Walloon vowel length is contrastive, we do not find any evidence that it is so in Wisconsin Walloon. Instead, we find that long and short vowels in Belgian Walloon tend to correspond to tense and lax vowels respectively in Wisconsin Walloon, especially among high front vowels as in Table 2.

Table 2. Vowel length and tenseness in Belgian and Wisconsin Walloon

BE Walloon	WI Walloon	Audio	English
[dʒa li:]	[dʒa li]	<Sound02>	I read
[disy]	[disɪ]	<Sound03>	on top
[tɔtsy:t]	[tɔtsyt]	<Sound04>	right away
[y]	[ɪ]	<Sound05>	door

Note that the Belgian Walloon short /i/ and /y/ both correspond to /ɪ/ in Wisconsin Walloon. This simplification of the high vowel system is the next most noticeable feature of the Wisconsin Walloon phonemic inventory. Colet (1982) observes this reduction in his own data but concludes that the high front vowels are reduced to an inventory of /i:/, /y:/, and /ɪ/. He does not make explicit mention of vowel length or tenseness. Presumably, this is because he observed contrastive vowel length, as he only made mention of those things he found to differ from Belgian Walloon. Our hypothesis is that contrastive vowel length was gradually replaced by an emerging contrast between tense and lax high vowels. This is currently under investigation in a more detailed study.

It is interesting to note that the Wisconsin Walloon speakers (all of whom at present are bilingual with English) have maintained phonemic status of several sounds that are not phonemic in English, specifically /ɹ/, /y/, /œ/, and nasal vowels (/ẽ/, /ẽ̃/, /œ̃/, /ɔ̃/, /ã/). Furthermore, speakers have maintained phonetic differentiation of some shared phonemes in their English and Walloon phonologies. Most notably, the Walloon /r/ is consistently an alveolar trill (e.g., *ayer*, ‘yesterday’, <sound 06>), rarely surfacing as an approximant as in American English. Preliminary examination suggests that shared vowels are also pronounced differently. Upon analyzing several instances of the vowel /i/ of one of our consultants in both Walloon and English words, she appears to pronounce /i/ slightly higher in Walloon (average F1 of 260 Hz) than in English (average F1 of 330 Hz) with some consistency. Further research is needed to

⁴In Walloon, contrastive length is observed for nearly all vowels and is not restricted to particular phonological contexts, whereas in French, contrastive vowel length depends greatly on regional variety, and is limited to particular vowels and contexts as the result of historical compensatory lengthening (see, for example, Plénat 1987).

examine the extent to which this observation holds within and among speakers and for which sounds.

Some phonological processes that are observed in Wisconsin Walloon are attested in Belgian Walloon also. For instance, there is an alternation between voiced and voiceless word-final fricatives such that fricatives are typically only voiced when appearing before a vowel-initial word within the same intonation phrase, as in Table 3:

Table 3. Word-final devoicing in Wisconsin Walloon

WI Walloon	Audio	English
a. [nuf]	<Sound07>	‘nine’
b. [nu.vã]	<Sound08>	‘nine years (old)’

This alternation has already been analyzed as a devoicing process in Belgian Walloon (Hendschel 2012), and we suspect it to still be the case for Wisconsin Walloon. This is being studied further in conjunction with our study on high vowels, as there is a possible interaction between tenseness of vowels and voicing/devoicing of fricatives. For example, the word *live* (‘book’) is consistently pronounced [lif] (<Sound09>), but never [lɪf] (just as in Belgian Walloon, the long vowel is preserved – [li:f] and not [lif]). Elsewhere we have observed a laxing of high front vowels when they appear before a voiceless coda consonant, as in *visse* (‘screw’), pronounced [vis] (<sound10>). We take this to mean the pronunciation of [lif] is only possible if the underlying form is /liv/. Indeed, it is often written in Belgian Walloon as *live* (both spellings are present in Hendschel 2012), the circumflex indicating a long vowel (and thus a short high vowel in Wisconsin Walloon), but further evidence will need to be collected.

Although much of the phonological system is quite similar, there is anecdotal evidence of Namurois and Wisconsin Walloon diverging into distinct dialects (and not just limited to high vowels). Anecdotally, all Wisconsin Walloon speakers who have come into contact with Namurois Walloon speakers (which is most, if not all of them given that there are visits organized for Belgians in Wisconsin every other summer) attest that they can largely understand the Walloon they speak, but with occasional difficulty, and that there is a clear difference in pronunciation. One of our speakers says she was told by a Namurois speaker that he was reminded of the Walloon his grandparents spoke when listening to Wisconsin Walloon speakers, and that Namurois Walloon is now more similar to French. In future research, we will need to study Namurois Walloon (itself an understudied variety of Walloon) in robust detail in order to compare the two varieties and assess which differences are innovations in which variety, and which differences might have been influenced by the dominant language.

4.2 Morphology Whereas in Belgian Walloon there are two second person singular subject pronouns, one neutral (*vos*) and one very informal (*ti*), we currently find no evidence of the informal *ti* in our recordings. The form *ti* is, however, attested in

Colet (1982). The most obvious explanation for this discrepancy is that even in Belgium, the form *ti* is reserved for informal settings among speakers of the same sex (Hendschel 2012), and none of our recordings to date have been conducted under such circumstances (we do have several semi-informal conversations between speakers of the same sex, but we do not yet have any recordings in which no researchers are present during the conversation). During elicitation sessions, however, we were unable to elicit the *ti* form at all with either of our consultants, so it is reasonable to assume that this distinction has been lost at least in part of the community over the last few decades. Otherwise, the subject pronoun paradigm is unchanged.

While Colet (1982) does not thoroughly address all verb forms, he attests and describes in detail the imperfect indicative and the conditional present and later concludes that Wisconsin Walloon morphology is very close to the Belgian one, with little influence from English and French (83–4). We were able to elicit these forms as well as others described in Hendschel (2012), including the compound past, the periphrastic future, and occasionally the simple future and the subjunctive. The latter two almost never occurred in natural speech. The periphrastic future is the dominant future form used across speakers, and the subjunctive rarely occurs because there is an overall tendency to avoid subordinate clauses (Colet 1982). In future work we hope to quantify these tendencies and analyze any patterns of usage of these verb forms.

4.3 Lexical variation In our last comments concerning the structure of Wisconsin Walloon, we briefly address the lexical variation that has become apparent during our conversations with speakers. Speakers are well aware of lexical variation between and even among their individual communities. Some variation can actually be traced back to Belgium, as in the case of the word ‘bread,’ which for some Wisconsin Walloon speakers is pronounced [pāj] and for others [pwē]. An identical dialectal variation is found in the Linguistic Atlas of Wallonia, and these two variants appear within the region from which the Wisconsin Walloon ancestors emigrated. We have yet to determine whether the present variation in Wisconsin can be geographically delimited at all, but we suspect it is best seen as a familectal variation based on immigration history. When discussing such differences with each other, speakers typically say things like “that’s how we said it in my family” and not “my community.”

The emergence of familects is even more evident in the names of buildings and spaces. For example, there is some disagreement over the words for ‘barn’ [grɛɲ] and ‘stable’ [stof], where some speakers distinguish between the two and others apply the word [stof] for both. This seems to correlate to whether or not the speaker’s family actually had a separate barn for storing hay, in which case the distinction was made. Similarly, the extent to which a family was involved in the church seems to determine whether they made a distinction between ‘altar’ and ‘sacristy,’ where some apply the latter term more broadly. In future work, we aim to be able to describe these familectal differences in more detail and to determine to what extent this variation can be traced back to dialectal differences in Belgium (such as in the case of

bread discussed above). We also aim to determine to what extent, if any, synchronic geographic variation can be identified.

5. Conclusion and future work Our aim has been twofold: first, to introduce this little-known heritage variety of an understudied language to the world and second, to present our efforts to preserve and study Wisconsin Walloon for the benefit of both community and scholars. By way of the first goal, we present a story that is both familiar and extraordinary, one that has much to offer to ongoing conversations on heritage languages in decline, on contact linguistics, and on language conservation among others. We present an opportunity, especially but not exclusively for Romance linguists in particular, to join a growing collaborative effort to better understand Walloon and its trajectory in both Belgium and the United States.

In discussing our own efforts, we share just one possible model of what collaboration between scholars and a speech community can look like and what it can result in. We hope to illustrate the application of models and best practices in language conservation to a new context and thereby support the work that has been done in developing them. We see the success of this work in the enthusiasm of our community collaborators. In the earliest stages, our project was met with some skepticism, but the community has now largely bought into it. Native speakers and language learners are interested in using the new orthography for the development of materials for the Belgian American Heritage Center and for the development of consistent teaching resources. Leaders of the Walloon conversation club and language class have expressed interest in using such materials. An editorial board of native speakers and invested language learners has therefore been assembled to assist with the compilation of a Wisconsin Walloon primer with accessible instructions for pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar.

5.1 Future work Future scholarly work will initially focus on the phonology of Wisconsin Walloon with an eye toward examining the role of convergence in sound changes. We also seek to work toward synchronic and historical accounts of differences between the Wisconsin and Namurois varieties, not only in terms of their phonologies but also in their lexicons and morphosyntactic structures. Such information will be invaluable to our efforts to describe and analyze Wisconsin Walloon in the context of a heritage language in decline (cf. work on comparable heritage communities such as Bullock & Gerfen 2004 for French or Nützel & Salmons 2011 for one of many accounts of Germanic languages in the Midwestern United States).

Future community-oriented work will first focus on concluding the work that has begun on assembling a primer, after which we will aim to use the primer to promote the learning of and about Wisconsin Walloon in community groups and events, as well as in area schools. Future directions for community engagement will be discussed with our community partners but will involve developing strategies for continuing to shift the role of the researchers to one that is supporting community-led initiatives for language conservation.

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Appendices

A. Demographic and attitudes survey

Gender:

What year were you born?

Have you known Belgian (Walloon) for your whole life? Yes No

If you answered “no” above, approximately what age did you start to learn Belgian (Walloon)?

Have you known English for your whole life? Yes No

If you answered “no” above, approximately what age did you start to learn English?

Which Eastern Wisconsin town(s) have you lived in, and for how long (approximately)?

Have you always lived in Eastern Wisconsin? Yes No

If no, where else have you lived?

Do you know what town or region of Belgium your family immigrated from?
(If yes, please identify as specifically as possible)

What language(s) did your parents speak in your home?

What is your current professional occupation?

What were your parents’ primary occupations?

With whom, and how often, do you speak or hear Belgian being spoken?

If you had to guess, about how many people do you think speak Walloon in Wisconsin?

How well do you understand when Belgian (Walloon) language is spoken around you?

1. A few words and phrases
2. I can follow a conversation
3. I understand it as well as I understand English

How well can you speak Belgian (Walloon)?

1. A few words and phrases
2. I can follow a conversation, but not contribute much
3. I can carry a conversation with some effort
4. I am fully comfortable carrying a conversation

Rate the following statements.

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Don't know

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

My heritage is an important part of my identity.

1 2 3 4 5

I am proud of the Belgian (Walloon) language.

1 2 3 4 5

I like to hear Belgian (Walloon) being spoken.

1 2 3 4 5

Any other comments?

B. Conversation prompts

Below is a list of possible conversation topics. You may discuss as many or as few of these topics as you would like. Any and all conversation is useful to us, so you may talk about whatever you'd like.

Please try to keep as much of your conversation as possible in Walloon. If possible, we'd like conversations of about an hour in length, but you may talk for as long or as little as you'd like.

How would you describe Northeast Wisconsin to someone not from the area?

Do you remember a particularly hard winter?

What are some significant events you remember happening in this area in the past?

What kinds of festivals or traditions are unique to this area?

How are the town(s) you grew up in different now than when you were growing up?

How different do you think life was for your parents or your grandparents?

Do you think tourists have a big impact on Northeastern Wisconsin? Is this a positive impact or a negative impact?

Are you Packers' fans? What would Green Bay be like without the Packers?

Are there certain kinds of food that are special to this region? What are your favorites?

Do you remember any stories that your parents or grandparents told you about your family history?

What is the importance of Belgian heritage in the region? Are younger generations aware of this heritage?

What would you like to see happen in order to preserve Belgian heritage and culture in the region?

C. Orthography worksheet 1

Do your best to write out any words that you know in Belgian / Walloon so that someone who doesn't know the language could pronounce them fairly well.

DAYS OF THE WEEK

Monday _____
 Tuesday _____
 Wednesday _____
 Thursday _____
 Friday _____
 Saturday _____
 Sunday _____

MONTHS OF THE YEAR

January _____
 February _____
 March _____
 April _____
 May _____
 June _____
 July _____
 August _____
 September _____
 October _____
 November _____
 December _____

NUMBERS

One _____
 Two _____
 Three _____
 Four _____
 Five _____
 Ten _____
 One hundred _____

COLORS

Red _____
 Orange _____
 Yellow _____
 Green _____
 Blue _____
 Purple _____
 White _____
 Brown _____
 Black _____

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Mother _____
 Father _____
 Sister _____
 Brother _____
 Grandmother _____
 Grandfather _____
 Aunt _____
 Uncle _____
 Niece _____
 Nephew _____
 Wife _____
 Husband _____

SHORT SENTENCES

Note: The first four sentences were intended to elicit some minimal pairs involving nasal vowels.

They eat bread and peas. _____

They drink wine and beer. _____

I think so. _____

I pass. _____

What is the word for X? _____

My sister is here. _____

She is from Belgium. _____

His brother is nice. _____

How old are you? _____

What is your name? _____

Where is your house? _____

D. Orthography worksheet 2**SHORT SENTENCES**

These sentences are taken from Josephine Wautlet's "Phonetic Wallon for Belgian Americans" and re-written using a writing system based on information we have gathered so far. Read the examples on the left, sounding them out as you read, and see if you think they make sense as written. Underline any words that you think should be written differently, and if possible, write them out below in a way that makes more sense to you.

- | | |
|---|------------------------------|
| 1. Komaynh estaw? | (How are you?) |
| 2. Li kay tainh ess ki fay ojoordih? | (How is the weather today?) |
| 3. I fay bya eh friss. | (It is nice and cool) |
| 4. Il a fay cho ayeer. | (It was hot yesterday) |
| 5. I nufe doosemaynh. | (It is snowing lightly) |
| 6. Ewoo ess voss papa? | (Where is your father?) |
| 7. Il travahy. | (He is working) |
| 8. Kweh ess ki voss om fay? | (What does your husband do?) |
| 9. Il est on avoka. | (He is a lawyer) |
| 10. Ess ki voss mama est a voss mojhon? | (Is your mother at home?) |
| 11. No, el est evoy ashti dayz affair. | (No, she is out shopping) |

CHOICES

For each word in English on the left, choose the spelling on the right that closest matches the way you would pronounce it in Walloon. If you like two options equally, you may circle them both. If you don't prefer any of the options, write another option on the right.

1. Tuesday	more di	more dih	mord i	mord ih
2. Sunday	dimang	dimeng	dimegn	
3. Two	deu	deuh		
4. Three	twe	tweh		
5. Eight	ute	yute		
6. Twelve	doss	daws	dawss	
7. One hundred	sainht	senht	sanht	
8. Hello	bodjoo	bondjoo	bonhdjoo	boodjoo
9. Goodnight	boon nu	boon nue		
10. Girl	fay	fei	fey	
11. Coffee	cafe	kafe	cafeh	kafeh
12. Fry/fried	frikasi	frikassi	frikasee	frikassee
13. House	mojon	mojhon	mozhon	
14. Hat	chapia	chapyia	chopia	chopyia
15. Good	bonh	bohnh	bō	
16. White	blanh	blaunh	blā	
17. November	novamp	novaump		
18. Bread (dialect 1)	pienh	pauynh	pāuy	
19. Bread (dialect 2)	pwainh	pwanh	pwenh	pwē
20. Farm	senhse	sainhse	sanhse	sēss
21. Wine	vayng	vaynh	veinh	vāy

E. Orthography workshop 3The Coffee Song (Written by Charles Wérotte)

This song appears in the book *The Walloons in Wisconsin* by Françoise Lempereur and Xavier Istasse. Read the text aloud to yourself, sounding out the words, and making notes of any changes you think should be made in the margins.

S'ay l'kafeh, l'kafeh, l'kafeh
 Ki feh koketeh leh komayr
 Abeey li kokemwar o feh
 Po feh on boon tass deh kafeh !
 Chantay, l'joness,
 Chantay, leh bya, chantay, leh bell
 Veeno danhsay a l'granhd fyess di Brussell
 Po l'granhd fyess, j'a l'espayranhse
 Ki l'tainh freh bya sainh misayr.
 Ji voss ehgadji po l'preuhmehr danhsse
 S'ay mya ki to kweh ki dj' poo deer.
 Noss boshell aronh deh rubanh,
 Deh fleuhr pat'tavo leuh tyess,
 Deh byah fooro a falbala
 Po l'dimegn eh li joo dell granhd fyess.
 Purdo voss kamarad avoo
 Chessee baynh lonh leh misayr.
 Onh bwaireh tote li lonh dell joo.
 Rotay li bootair eh l'kaftyair !
 Nonh, s'ay voss ki jaim si baynh
 Ji m'espwair ki ji n'voo raynh pyedd
 Veeno m'karessessee on pitit momainh
 Eh m'rassuray on pitit myett.

[Note: Belgian Walloon version was not included in the workshop copy, but is reproduced here for comparison]

C'èst l' cafè, l' cafè, l' cafè
 Qui fèt coquetè lès comères.
 Abîye li coq'mwâr au fè
 Po fé one boune tasse dè cafè !
 Tchantéz, l'djon.nèsse,
 Tchantéz lès bias, tchantéz lès bèles,
 Vinoz dansér à l' grande fièsse di Brussèle.
 Po l' grande fièsse, dj'a l'èspérance

Qui l' timps f'rè bia sins misères.
Dji vos-ègadje po l' preumêre danse
C'èst mia qui tot qwè qui dj' pou dire.
Nos bauchèles âront dès rubans,
Dès fleurs pat't-avau leûs tièsses,
Dès bias foûraus à falbalas
Po l' dimègne èt li djoû dèl grande fièsse.
Purdoz vos camarâdes avou
Tchèssîz Bén lon lès misères.
On bwêrè tot' li lon dèl djoû
Rotéz li boutér è l' caf'tière !
Non, c'èst vos qui dj'in.me si Bén
Dji m'èspwêre qui dji n' vou rén piède
Vinoz m' carèssi one pitite momint
Et m' rassûrer one pitite miète.

It's coffee, coffee, coffee
That makes the women chatter.
Hurry, put the kettle on the stove
To make a nice cup of coffee!
Sing, youth!
Sing handsome boys! Sing pretty girls!
Come and dance at the Brussels kermis!
For the kermis I expect
The weather to be fine without flaw.
I'll ask you for the first dance
It's the very best thing I can say.
Our girls will wear ribbons,
And flowers all over their hair,
Fine flouncy dresses
For Sunday and for the kermis.
Take your friends along with you
Drive your worries far away!
We'll drink all day long
Go and put it in the coffee pot!
You are the one I love so much
I trust I will lose nothing.
Come and caress me a while
And reassure me a little bit.

F. Proposed orthography

This is a working version of the orthographic system resulting from our workshops. It will likely evolve as it is tested and put to use by the community.

Consonants			
Grapheme	Phoneme	Example in Walloon	English translation
		boojoo	'hello'
<ch>	/tʃ/	cheyn	'dog'
<i>Note: Written <tch> at the end of a word</i>			
<tch>	/tʃ/	rautch	'red'
<d>	/d/	deuh	'two'
<f>	/f/	fey	'girl'
<g>	/g/	gamaynh	'boy'
<gn>	/ɲ/	deemegn	'sunday'
<j>	/dʒ/	joo	'day'
<jh>	/ʒ/	mojhon	'house'
<k>	/k/	kut	'four'
<l>	/l/	lonhdih	'Monday'
<m>	/m/	mojhon	'house'
<n>	/n/	noof	'nine'
<ng>	/ŋ/	(only used for words borrowed from English)	
<p>	/p/	poy	'chicken'
<r>	/r/	rautch	'red'
<s>	/s/	sink	'five'
<i>Note: Written <ss> at the end of a word</i>			
<ss>	/s/	dauss	'twelve'
<sh>	/ʃ/	sheesh	'six'
<t>	/t/	tweh	'three'
<v>	/v/	avooy	'away'
<y>	/j/	oy	'yes'
<z>	/z/	kozee	'speak'
Vowels			
<a> or <ah>	/a/	kanada	'potato'
<au>	/ɔ/	dauss	'twelve'
<e> or <eh>	/ɛ/	on sakweh	'something'
<i>Note: when followed by <r> this sound is written <air> as in bwair ('to drink')</i>			
<air>	/ɛr/	bwair	'to drink'
<ee>	/i/	ayeer	'yesterday'
<euh>	/œ/	asteuhr	'now'
<ey>	/e/ (usually [eɪ])	fey	'girl'
<i> or <ih>	/i/	pitit	'small, little'

Continued on next page

Table 4. Continued from previous page

Grapheme	Phoneme	Example in Walloon	English translation
Vowels (continued)			
<o> or <oh>	/o/	cho	'hot'
<oo>	/u/	kootya	'knife'
<u>	/ʌ/	jut	'a traditional potato dish'
<uCe>	/y/	jhune	'june'
<i>Note: the C represents any consonant</i>			
Nasal vowels			
<anh>	/ɛ̃/	sanhss	'farm'
<aunh>	/ɑ̃/	blaunh	'white'
<eynh>	/ɛ̃/	sa va beynh	'it's going well'
<onh>	/ɔ̃/	lonh	'long'
<unh>	/œ̃/	brunh	'brown'
<i>Note: when a nasal vowel is followed by a nasal consonant, there is no need to write the <h>. Examples:</i>			
<an>	/ɛ̃n/	samwan	'week'
<on>	/ɔ̃n/	on sakweh	'something'