PhD scholarship (4 years)
"Regional prosodic variation and the influence on syntax and lexicon: Contrastive subjects in five regional varieties of French in Belgium, Switzerland and France"

Application deadline
1 July 2026 (11:59 p.m.)
Vacancy type
PhD scholarship, fixed-term.
Occupancy rate
100%
Universities
Institute for Language and Communication / Faculty of Philosophy, Arts and Letters at UCLouvain and Department of Linguistics at KU Leuven
Required degree
Master in Linguistics or in Languages and Literature, with a specialization in French

Description of the research team
The research project "Regional prosodic variation and the influence on syntax and lexicon: Contrastive subjects in five regional varieties of French in Belgium, Switzerland and France", jointly funded by the Global Partnership Fund of UCLouvain (Louvain-la-Neuve) and KU Leuven (Leuven) in Belgium, offers a PhD scholarship in French linguistics at these two universities. The project is a collaboration between the supervisors Anne Catherine Simon (UCLouvain) and Karen Lahousse (KU Leuven), and two co-supervisors: Jorina Brysbaert (UCLouvain) and Benedikt Szmrecsanyi (KU Leuven). It also involves international collaboration with the University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland) and Université Paris Cité (France).

The project in a nutshell
Contrast is a fundamental linguistic mechanism that structures communication and is typically expressed through prosodic, syntactic, and lexical cues. In the following example, the subjects *Marie* and *Paul* are contrasted:

(1) *Marie dévore les romans policiers, par contre Paul ne lit que des essais scientifiques.*
'Marie devours detective novels, by contrast Paul reads only scientific essays.' (lit.)

Although French has a rich inventory of such cues, little is known about how speakers select and combine them, or how these processes vary across regional varieties of French.
This project investigates how prosodic differences between five varieties of French spoken in Switzerland, Belgium and France influence the marking of contrastive subjects. We hypothesize that "prosodically richer" varieties, characterized by a wider pitch span and greater flexibility in the placement of prominence (e.g. in Neuchâtel and in Liège), rely more heavily on prosodic cues. By contrast, varieties that are prosodically more constrained, exhibiting a smaller pitch span and less flexible accentual patterns (e.g. in Paris), may compensate by making greater use of syntactic cues (such as left dislocation or cleft constructions) or lexical cues (such as *mais* 'but' or *par contre* 'on the other hand').
A controlled production experiment will examine how speakers from five cities (Paris, Brussels, Liège, Geneva and Neuchâtel) realize prosodic prominence on contrastive subjects across three syntactic configurations (preverbal, left-dislocated and clefted), with or without a lexical cue. A complementary corpus study will analyze the frequency and interaction of

syntactic and lexical cues in spontaneous speech, as well as the relationship between their distribution and discourse-pragmatic functions.
By combining experimental and corpus-based data, this project will provide the first comprehensive account of how regional prosodic systems influence the marking of contrast in French and, more broadly, their impact on syntax and the lexicon.

Job profile

YOUR TASKS
4 days per week:

- Collecting and analyzing linguistic data: conducting research using existing corpora, and setting up a production experiment (in Belgium, Switzerland and France).
- Writing a doctoral dissertation within the framework of the research project.
- Preparing joint publications in French and in English for international scientific journals.
- Presenting your research at national and international conferences.
- Participating in the research activities of the project team.

Up to 1 day per week:

- Activities related to teaching of French proficiency and French linguistics at UCLouvain (during the first two years) or KU Leuven (during the final two years).
- Organizational tasks: practical organization of the workshop to be organized within the project.
- Administrative tasks.

WHAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR

- Master's degree in Linguistics or in Languages and Literature with a specialization in French, obtained with excellent grades before the start of the PhD project. Students in the final year of their master's program can also apply, provided that the diploma will be obtained before the start of the contract (1 October 2026).
- A solid background in French linguistics, in at least one of the following subfields: syntax, prosody, information structure.
- Native or near-native proficiency in French (minimum C1 level).
- Very good proficiency in spoken and written English, including strong academic writing and communication skills (minimum B2 level).
- Excellent research skills, demonstrated for example through your Master's thesis or Bachelor's thesis/project.
- Knowledge of statistics and computational tools for corpus analysis (R), as well as software for phonetic analysis (PRAAT), or a willingness to acquire these skills.
- Excellent interpersonal and communication skills.
- You take initiative in developing new research ideas and critically evaluate your own work.
- You are able to receive and incorporate constructive feedback. The PhD project relies on the collaborative development of research ideas through exchanges with, and feedback from, the different supervisors and co-supervisors.
- You are highly motivated, reliable, hardworking, flexible, able to deal with complex issues, and you have strong problem-solving skills.

- You are able to take on responsibilities and to work both independently and as part of a team.

WHAT WE OFFER

- The opportunity to pursue a PhD starting from a well-defined research project, while gradually developing your own research agenda, with the support of an enthusiastic supervisory team. The team places great importance on providing detailed, constructive and critical feedback throughout all steps of the PhD process, fostering open and respectful communication, and maintaining a positive and intellectually stimulating working atmosphere. Dedicated training and guidance will be provided for all aspects of the project, with particular attention to building an international network and developing transferable skills relevant to both an academic and non-academic career.
- A fully funded, full-time doctoral position for four years (contract of one or two years renewable upon a positive evaluation), starting on 1 October 2026. The position will be held for two years at UCLouvain (from 1 October 2026 to 30 September 2028), followed by two years at KU Leuven (from 1 October 2028 to 30 September 2030).
- Two research stays are planned (between April and June 2027, in Paris and Neuchâtel) for data collection.
- Subject to satisfactory progress, the position will lead to the award of a PhD in Linguistics (joint degree awarded by UCLouvain and KU Leuven).
- A doctoral research position in a stimulating, dynamic, and international research environment.
- As a PhD researcher at UCLouvain and KU Leuven, you will benefit from a wide range of advantages, such as extensive training opportunities, flexible working hours, reimbursement of bicycle commuting expenses and public transport costs, etc. You will also be provided with office space, a laptop, and funding for research activities (participation in international conferences and the organization of workshops and conferences).

How to apply?

Please send your application by email to Anne Catherine Simon (anne-catherine.simon@uclouvain.be) and Karen Lahousse (karen.lahousse@kuleuven.be no later than 1 July 2026.

Your application should be submitted as a single PDF file and must include:

- a detailed curriculum vitae, including your academic background, language and methodological skills, research experience, relevant internships or professional experience, as well as any publications or conference presentations;
- a motivation letter (maximum two pages) explaining why you wish to pursue a PhD at UCLouvain and KU Leuven, and why you are interested in this particular research topic;
- a list of all courses completed at the Bachelor's and Master's levels, together with an official transcript of records;

- a personal piece of academic writing demonstrating your research abilities, such as a student research paper or publication (e.g. Bachelor's thesis/project, Master's thesis or journal article);
- the names and contact details of two referees, including your Master's thesis supervisor, who may be contacted by the selection committee;
- a copy of your Master's degree diploma (if already obtained; otherwise, it will be required before the start of the PhD).

The starting date for this position is 1 October 2026.
Selection interviews will take place on Thursday 20 August 2026 in Louvain-la-Neuve.

For further information, you can contact Prof. Dr. Karen Lahousse (karen.lahousse@kuleuven.be) or Prof. Dr. Anne Catherine Simon (anne-catherine.simon@uclouvain.be).

KU Leuven and UCLouvain are committed to fostering an environment where all talents can flourish, regardless of gender, age, cultural background, nationality, or impairments.