



Le multilinguisme à Bruxelles Meertaligheid in Brussel

**Débat entre têtes de liste/ Lijsttrekkersdebat
Brussels Information Point, 18/04/2024**

Brief report

Moderators

Nell FOSTER (ULB)

Alex HOUSEN (VUB)

Panelists

CD&V: Benjamin DALLE

DEFI: Bernard CLERFAYT

ECOLO: Gilles VANDEN BURRE

GROEN: Elke VAN DEN BRANDT

LES ENGAGES: Alain DENEEF

MR: Richard MILLER

N-VA: Cielte VAN ACHTER

Open VLD: Sven GATZ

PS: Martin CASIER

PTB-PVDA: Bruno BAUWENS

VOORUIT: Ans PERSOONS

Format

By way of introduction, the two moderators outlined the objectives of the Marnix Plan for a Multilingual Brussels, namely to promote language learning and multilingualism for all inhabitants of the Brussels Capital Region, in the conviction (based on scientific research) that individual multilingualism is the cement that keeps hyperdiverse communities such as Brussels together and which unlocks the multiple benefits (social, cognitive, cultural, economic) that multilingualism and linguistic diversity can bestow. Hence the importance of explicit language policies and measures to this end in the following legislature.

To this end, the Marnix Plan organised for the third time a debate among the list leaders of the eleven main political parties in Brussels to hear their opinions on these issues. (Some party list leaders were unable to attend, and were replaced by another party member competent in the matter). Each participant was invited to choose from a selection of fifteen proposals (based on the thirty-six recommendations proposed by in the Memorandum of the Brussels Council for Multilingualism) three proposals that (s)he thought deserved priority in

the next legislative term and one proposal (s)he thought as less important, ineffective or unfeasible.

All participants could express themselves in either French or Dutch. Several representatives of the French-speaking parties also spoke in Dutch, and several representative of the Dutch-speaking parties also spoke in French.

What follows is an expanded version of the concluding remarks that were made (in French and Dutch) at the end of the meeting by Philippe Van Parijs, chair of the Brussels Council for Multilingualism.

Predictable convergences

While the (fruitful) format of the meeting did not allow to determine with certainty which proposals were unanimously supported, a resolute choice by some of the panelists not contradicted by others suggests that there is a (fairly predictable) broad consensus on the following:

- the importance of promoting multilingualism in general, and in particular the knowledge of French, Dutch and English among job seekers,
- the decisive importance of the unhampered acquisition and positive appreciation of all native languages,
- the effectiveness of CLIL/immersion for the learning of languages from an early stage (which de facto also covers the attendance of NL and FR schools by the many pupils whose home language differs from the school language), including in technical/professional education,
- the desirability of twinning NL and FR Brussels schools with schools in the other language regime (possibly also located in Flanders and Wallonia),
- the usefulness of exchanges of teachers between NL and FR schools (currently greatly hampered by the desynchronization of the school calendars),
- the difficulty of recruiting and keeping teachers in Brussels schools, especially Dutch native speakers (even more since the desynchronization of school calendars),
- the difficulty of training enough primary school teachers of Dutch in FR schools (expected to be further increased as a result of the introduction of Dutch from grade 3 in Wallonia in 2027),
- the potential usefulness of an FR equivalent of the Onderwijscentrum Brussels.

Perhaps more surprising

Perhaps less predictably, there was also a broad consensus on the need to re-align the FR and NL school calendars, whether for the sake of reducing language loss (and loss of other academic content matter) over the summer vacation (Van Achter) or for the sake of facilitating collaboration between FR and NL institutions (including for leisure time activities in the holiday periods), and also for symbolic reasons (Van den Brandt).

There also seemed to be a broad consensus on extending the provision of public services in languages other than French and Dutch, not only English. This could possibly be signaled with stickers indicating which languages the official can speak (Persoons), with (Deneef) or without (Gatz) extension to all languages of the bilingualism bonus, and with the required revision of the federal legislation (Casier, Gatz).

Arguably most divisive was the ideal of truly “bilingual schools” (even if they do not imply the regionalization of education), with FR panelists mostly in favour (except Défi) and NL panelists mostly against (except Groen and PVDA).

New ideas

Beyond the recommendations by the Brussels Council for Multilingualism, a number of other ideas were proposed by panelists, including

- providing “français langue d’apprentissage” (FLA) in all FR schools, not only those benefiting from “positive discrimination” (i.e. those benefiting from extra resources because of the socio-economic characteristics of their pupils) (Deneef),
- introducing Community-level tests in all FR schools, as is being done in all NL schools, which would provide more reliable information than PISA-PIRLS surveys (Van Achter),
- require a commitment to the promotion of multilingualism in the management contracts of public media (Miller),
- organize ‘eloquence tournaments’ in pupils’ and students’ second or third language (Vanden Burre)
- link the Brulingua tests to a Brussels language passport to be used for job applications (Gatz).

A Brussels multilingualism week

Brulingua is an excellent instrument for language learning, but it is dramatically underused (Clerfayt, Gatz). All parents must be encouraged to adopt an efficient “family language policy”, but many do not know what this could entail and are unaware of what Brussels’ many libraries are offering to help them. Schools and nurseries must be encouraged to adopt an attitude that will benefit both the maintenance of the home languages and the learning of the school language, but they often lack guidance as to how to achieve this dual goal. Finally, many remarkable “role models” could be recruited to make the learning of Brussels’ two official languages at least as ‘cool’ as the learning of English.

In order to serve these various purposes, the Brussels Council for Multilingualism proposes the organization of an annual Brussels Multilingualism Week: a largely bottom-up initiative, that must cost very little and can start very modestly. The idea seemed to meet with consensus. But its coordination requires some institutional support.

The continuation of a ministerial portfolio for the promotion of multilingualism is deemed essential for this purpose according to some (Miller), while for others a commitment by the entire Brussels government is what matters (Bauwens). Another formula consists in creating a small specific administrative cell, which could also take care of other relevant initiatives such as a user-friendly platform for language-learning options in Brussels. However, several found such a cell excessive at this stage (Casier, Dalle, Vanden Burre). Other formulas are also possible. Whatever the case may be, some official coordination, no matter how light, is essential to ensure the lasting creation of the annual highlight that the Brussels Multilingualism Week would provide, and thus the efficient pursuit of the various objectives mentioned above.

A civilized debate thanks to reliable knowledge

It is striking to witness how civilized a political debate can be on what used to be one of Brussels’ most emotional political issues. This welcome development is to the credit of panelists who are willing to listen and learn. But it is also to a large extent due to the fact that such a debate can now be held against the background of objective knowledge about Brussels’ linguistic situation. Despite the unavoidable limits of using random samples and self-assessments, the contribution of the VUB’s Taalbarometers to this knowledge has been decisive. We look forward to the imminent publication of Taalbarometer 5.