Language Border

On my desk is a picture postcard. I turn it over and read the words: *Frontière linguistique à Riemst/Bassenge*. On the front is a colour photo. To the right is a mobile telephone mast. At least, I think that's what it is. Just to the left of centre is a fluttering Belgian tricolour. The flag is attached to a fence, one of those that you see by the thousand all over the world, made of chicken wire, with iron support posts and topped by a single strand of barbed wire. Between the fence and the mast runs a narrow road. The only other things in the picture are five trees and, in the background, woodland nestled up against a low hill. Take away the flag and you have a landscape that could be almost anywhere: France? Germany? England? Even Poland as far as I'm concerned. But the back of the postcard provides the answer: this is Belgium. And not only that, this is the very essence of Belgium: the language border. In the eyes of quite a number of foreigners, Belgium *is* the language border.

The photographer has not just picked a random spot along this language border that symbolises so much that is Belgium. Riemst is the municipality where the president of the Flemish Parliament lives: Jan Peumans, a convinced Flemish nationalist, even though he himself declares that, if there were such a thing as reincarnation, he would want to be reborn as a French-speaking Belgian, a Walloon. Bassenge was part of the (Flemish) province of Limburg until legislators fixed the language border in 1962 and placed the village in the (Walloon) province of Liège – quite rightly, because almost everyone in the village spoke French. The municipality of Bassenge produced one of the greatest Walloon writers ever, Conrad Detrez – born on a language boundary, later transcending and pushing back all boundaries; a priest in the Bishopric of Liège, revolutionary in Brazil, French citizen and diplomat, homosexual, AIDS victim.

But the photo does not simply depict Belgium. It tries to evoke European history. The mobile telephone mast suggests a watchtower; the fence is a hint at an iron curtain. I reject that reference. The French-language Belgian writer Patrick Roegiers, who lives in Paris, once described the language border as *une honte, un crime et un drame*.[1] He was making a reference to the Berlin Wall. I think that is unworthy of him. I have seen with my own eyes how deadly effective that Wall was. I have seen with my own eyes the boundless joy of the East Germans when they threw themselves into the first breaches. Anyone who

Language border at Riemst/Bassenge © Michel Castermans

compares the Belgian language border with the Berlin Wall or the Iron Curtain does not know what they are talking about. Throughout the entire Belgian language struggle, just two people have died, and both of them died a very long way from the language border. That border is not a scandal, not a crime and most definitely not a drama. It is not even typically Belgian.

Older than Belgium

The language border is much longer than the line that runs through Belgium. And it is older than Belgium.

My country gained its independence in 1830. But the language border was already there in the time of Charles the Great. That's around a thousand years. And we can go even further back. When Julius Caesar arrived here, he encountered a mix of Germanic people, Celts and heaven knows what else.

The northern part of Gaul did become more or less Romanised over time; it was, after all, a Roman province. But as the empire began to crumble and more and more Frankish tribes began advancing through our lands, a great deal of Gaul changed into a Romano-Germanic patchwork. It took centuries for the linguistic 'islands' to adapt to the foreign language areas surrounding them. The language border is thus the line where Germanisation and Romanisation held each other more or less in balance, not only in terms of the territory that is today called Belgium, but in an entire swath of Europe from Northern France to, say, Northern Italy.

There is another, fascinating hypothesis: the language border follows the line which marked the southern limits of a now extinct pre-Celtic language, a language which was still in use by a number of tribes when the Roman legions arrived. The region above that boundary was barely populated, and effectively presented an open door to the invading Germanic tribes. The language border could therefore be more than two thousand years old. The languages it separates are just different today. The boundary remains, the languages change.

The language border has cut across our territory since time immemorial then. Princes, citizens, farmers: everyone knew that people spoke differently on the other side. No one was troubled by this. If you travelled from Ghent to Tournai, you spoke French. Or, to be more accurate, you spoke Picard. And if you travelled from Liege to Leuven, you tried your hand (or rather your mouth) at Brabant dialect. Occasionally, a village or community switched from one language to the other. For example, the tiny Belgian village known as Sittert-Lummen in Dutch is today French-speaking and bears the appealing name of Zétrud-Lumay. Until the fourteenth century, it was known as Zetrud or Setrut, and in 1386 the name Zittert appeared. And where in 1576 the entire toponomy was in Dutch, in 1681 all official documents were written in French. In 1743 there was a minor dispute about the use of language in a court case; evidently the transition was not yet entirely complete. One or two other similar cases have also been recorded. For centuries, then, the language border has barely moved. For centuries it was recognised as simply a given, in the same way that a stream or a hill would be recognised.

We must not think that people considered language use to be of negligible importance. The above incident from 1743 testifies to the contrary. In the Duchy

of Brabant, for example, it was unthinkable that a resident would appear before a court that did not speak his language. This wise mediaeval arrangement only changed when France annexed our region at the end of the eighteenth century. Henceforth, the language of officialdom, and therefore also the compulsory language for the courts and lawyers, was French. The French occupier shattered the languid neighbourliness of Dutch and Walloon dialects by imposing one language on both – that of the ruling elite in Paris. We should not forget that during the French Revolution the majority of the *citoyens* spoke no French, and that it would take decades before that changed.[2]

Le flamand aux animaux et aux domestiques

In 1830, the homeland of the language border gained its independence. Immediately, the Belgian ruling class decided to ignore the language of the majority for serious administrative affairs and serious education. The only official language was French. It was not that the ruling class was made up of malign Walloons who were eager to suppress the poor Flemings. The elite of *the entire country* – in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels – spoke French. The fact that they accounted for less than 2 percent of the population was of no importance at all. They alone had the right to vote; they alone had political power.

They drew a different language boundary, one that was not geographical. Few foreigners are aware that there was also a non-territorial language boundary, a *social* language boundary. That boundary was situated exclusively *within* the Dutch-language area. It separated the upper and lower social echelons in

Flanders through language. It has lost much of its significance today, but it still exists, discreetly, in the background, and in my view has been more important in the whole language struggle than the boundary between Flemings and Walloons.

In the Flemish countryside, language separated those who owned the land from those who worked it. In the towns, the better-off middle classes quickly began speaking French, and the less well-off would have been only too pleased to do so. Paradoxically enough, those French-speakers still almost always called themselves Flemings; they were (and are) even proud of it. But they spoke French and considered it perfectly normal that they had the right to use French everywhere in public life. There is a sentence that I always use to illustrate the social language boundary. I heard it years ago from the mouth of a French-speaking inhabitant of Ghent: *On parlait le flamand aux animaux et aux domestiques*. One spoke Flemish to animals and servants. In that order. Almost all the language laws in Belgium were devised to take away the language rights of the upper class in Flanders. And all those laws were consistently approved by French-speakers and Dutch-speakers together, albeit in varying proportions.

In the nineteenth century, one could walk through a Flemish town and believe oneself to be in Northern France. Shops were called things like cordonnerie or bonneterie, the Bruges street Rozenhoedkaai had become the *Quai du Rosaire* and a street in Ghent called Ham was rather cunningly disguised as *rue du Jambon*. Until the 1960s, French was seen everywhere in the streets of Flanders. Those days are gone. Today, there is no doubting that the language of the Flemish region is Dutch. If anything, in the most recent years the biggest invasion has been from English, but on that point Flanders is no different from somewhere like the Netherlands, for example.

Language censuses

The 'Dutchification' of Flemish public life was only really consolidated thanks to the language boundary – not the geographical boundary, because that had existed for centuries, but the *statutory fixing* of that language boundary.

Belgium was the first country in the world to count its languages. The results of the first census (1846) are sometimes surprising. Today, for example, the Brussels Capital Region is officially bilingual, though few would contest the numerical predominance of French-speakers. In 1846, 18 of the 19 municipalities which now form the Region contained a Dutch-speaking majority; in 12 of those municipalities, that majority was between 90 and 100 percent. After 1846, therefore, something happened around Brussels which had not happened in all the centuries previously: the language boundary moved drastically.[3]

Brussels is the great exception. Even after independence in 1830, the language boundary remained amazingly stable. Outside Brussels, changes were a rarity. Sometimes the French-speakers had the advantage, elsewhere it was the Dutch-speakers. Three examples: in 1846, more than 70 percent of the inhabitants of the small town of Edingen (Enghien) were Dutch-speaking; in 1947 55 percent were bilingual and 4 percent spoke only Dutch. The town is now part of Wallonia. Also in 1846, three-quarters of the residents of the village of Rekkem, in the province of West-Vlaanderen, spoke French; in 1947 this had fallen to 10 percent and more than half reported that they were bilingual. Today,

Rekkem forms part of Flanders. The third example is Spiere. 90 percent of the residents of this village spoke French in 1846; in 1947 it was 27 percent, and a large group were bilingual. Spiere is now also part of Flanders, though with minority rights for the French-speakers.

Care was sometimes needed in the Belgian language censuses. Margins of error can never be avoided entirely, but the Belgian language censuses gradually became imbued with a political significance. Flemish politicians were quick to rage about what they described as falsification, manipulation and stealing of territory, especially – though not exclusively – in and around Brussels. They disputed the results (in 54 municipalities following the 1947 census), arguing that they had been used as a means of systematically moving the language boundary to the disadvantage of Dutch-speakers. Flemish public opinion demanded a fixed language boundary. The 1947 language census was the last.

The route laid out for the language border in the laws of 1962 and 1963 was the result of a careful study of the local situation on the one hand and on the other of fiercely divisive debates in Parliament. In 1948, on the initiative of the Walloon Christian Democrat Pierre Harmel, a Centre was founded whose tasks included studying the route of the language border. One Fleming and one Walloon, Jan Verroken and Jean van Crombrugge, acting *independently* of each other, studied the linguistic situation along the entire length of the language border, hamlet by hamlet, street by street, farm by farm. To their own amazement they discovered that the two routes, that of the Walloon and that of the Fleming, were identical but for a few minuscule exceptions. As a result Verroken withdrew his own map and co-signed that of his Walloon colleague. Everyone agreed that they had both done an excellent job, and the course of their border was approved by the Harmel Centre in 1952. But it was another ten years before the Belgian parliament, partly based on the decision by the Harmel Centre, finally – after the long-winded, never-ending debates – fixed the language border by law. From that point on, the language border coincided with the provincial borders wherever that was feasible.

For the first time, the country was divided into four language regions: Dutch-speaking, French-speaking, German-speaking (yes, Belgium also has a German-speaking minority) and the bilingual region comprising the 19 Brussels municipalities. French and Dutch were given equal status in Brussels, but the monolingual areas became genuinely monolingual, with a few exceptions along the language border.

Le droit du sol

Strikingly, French-speakers refused for a long time to accept the language border, even though the law had been approved by the Belgian parliament with a large majority. Many French-speakers voted against, but a substantial proportion also voted in favour.

There were some problems after 1962, starting with the villages in the Voeren region, which had been assigned to Flanders. But the Voeren question was resolved years ago. The language border did not move.

Until very recently, French-speaking politicians refused to accept the demarcation of Brussels. It is true that any number of (French-speaking)

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Bruxellois have moved into the Dutch-speaking environs of the city; city-dwellers moving out in search of green space – it happens all over Europe. But these city-dwellers spoke a different language from the villagers around them, and they refused to acknowledge the language of their new home. The result is that the Brussels periphery, although officially Dutch-speaking, houses tens of thousands of French-speakers. In six municipalities they have full language rights, the notorious *facilities*.

For Flemings, the spread of Brussels like an oil stain, swallowing up more and more Flemish communities, is a classic horror scenario. They will accordingly defend their monolingual status stubbornly. Being monolingual means only that a citizen speaks Dutch in his relationship with the government. At home, he can use whatever language he chooses, because the Belgian legislator has always kept out of private language use as a matter of principle.

Many French-speakers, however, consider it unacceptable that they cannot use French in every town hall. They defend what they call *le droit de la personne*, in other words, they want to be able to use their language anywhere. They accuse the Flemings of imposing a barbaric, almost Teutonic territorial law, *le droit du sol*. In doing so, they conveniently forget that there is one country in Europe which rigorously applies le droit du sol: France. Anyone who suggests that France is monolingual should free themselves of that illusion by reading the books referred to in note 2. Switzerland is another example of a country where territorial law is applied to maintain linguistic peace.

And what of Belgium?

As long as no one sought to impose their language on anyone else, there was no need for anyone to resist anything. And since 1962, no one *can* impose their language. So there is no focal point for resistance anymore. And it is precisely that which is the strength of our statutory language border. Even in the controversial Brussels periphery, we have succeeded in coming to an arrangement.

Friendly, democratic and decisive

The most recent problem in the environs of Brussels actually has less to do with French-speakers. A third of children in the Flemish territory surrounding Brussels do not speak Dutch at home, and this is a growing trend. Many of them, though by no means all, speak French with their parents – though there is also English, German, Berber, Turkish and a host of other languages.

For most immigrants, Belgian language legislation is impenetrable. They often do not even realise that our country is bilingual. They are irritated beyond measure when a simple civil servant behind the counter in a Dutch-speaking municipality simply applies Belgian law and speaks only Dutch. Rejoinders such as fanatic, narrow-minded and worse are not uncommon. That is unfair. Flemish house-to-house newspapers, folders published by the municipality, crèches and sports clubs are today all making heroic efforts to provide multilingual explanations.

The blissful indifference of centuries past will never return. It is our task to defend the language border, in a friendly, democratic but decisive way. Because in Belgium, the language border is the foundation of the peace that all of us want. ■

Translated by Julian Ross

NOTES

1. Roegiers, *P., Pauvre Belgique, pauvres c…!*, in: Frontières. Grenzen. Borders, Passa Porta Magazine # *0*, *2011*, p. *28*.

2 See e.g. the standard work by the American historian Eugene Weber, Peasants into Frenchmen: *The Modernization of rural France, 1870-1914*, Stanford, *1976* and also Braudel, *F., L'identité de la France*, Part I, Paris, *1986*, pp. *78-83*.

3 For all figures, see: Rillaerts; S., *La frontière linguistique*, *1878-1963*, Courrier hebdomadaire du Crisp, nr. *2069-2070*, Brussels, *2010*.