Brussels is already an institutionally bilingual city. But can we say today that it has become a multilingual city?

Philippe Van Parijs: “You have to make a distinction between linguistic diversity and multilingualism. Linguistic diversity in Brussels is increasing so much with each passing year that no one today knows exactly how many languages are spoken there. The Taalbarometer, produced by the VUB every five years, has just been published and it gives us a clue: in a sample of 2,500 Brussels residents taken ten years ago, there were 72 different mother tongues. Today, there are 104. This indicates a growing linguistic diversity. It means there are lots of languages spoken in Brussels, albeit sometimes by very small communities. Of course, French is still very widespread – it is today and will remain the ‘lingua franca’ of the city – but now it is the single native language for just one-third of the capital’s inhabitants (while being the native language of another third in combination with another language such as Dutch or Arabic). Five years earlier, that proportion was still over 50%.”

But the same Taalbarometer indicates a decline in linguistic competence.

“This linguistic competence relates to all the languages we know – and not just our mother tongues. It comes as no surprise that the three best known languages in Brussels are French, Dutch and English, although all three are in decline — so much so that, today, 8% of the people in Brussels know none of these three languages, compared to 2.5% five years earlier. This is a good illustration of the difference between multilingualism and linguistic diversity. A lack of multilingualism is a disaster: it means that people are locked inside their language ghetto. Learning languages, and especially ‘link languages’, is essential for social cohesion, as well as for neighbourhood relations and for talking to the authorities, the police, etc.”

And for finding a job?

“Indeed. The Brussels labour market is increasingly demanding in terms of languages. Here again, the data from the Taalbarometer make for interesting reading. Over ten years, the percentage of people surveyed stating that French is the only language spoken with their customers at work has fallen from three-quarters to one-third. French is no longer enough. At the same time, French/Dutch/English trilingualism has risen from 3 to 30%. This shows the extent of the challenge: on the one
hand, we see a decline in competence in these three languages, while on the other, language requirements are increasing.”

Aren’t schools fulfilling their role?
“Are schools fulfilling their role? A regards the learning of languages, schools must do far more in Brussels than in Flanders or Wallonia, because it’s in Brussels that the need for languages is the most acute. It’s a scandal that in the professional sections of Brussels’s francophone schools, more than 50% of the pupils do not have a single Dutch or English lesson for four years. At the same time, the learning of languages should be easier in Brussels because of the wealth of languages present locally. But this wealth needs to be mobilized in order to supplement and motivate the teaching of languages at school.”

What is to be done?
“Firstly, there is an obvious role for schools, even though we need to be aware that school cannot do everything. The media are a second important dimension. Thus, tvbrussel uses more subtitling than any other medium in Belgium, and subtitling is a highly effective aid for learning another language. There needs to be a form of synergy with the media in Brussels to enable children to see programmes on their neighbourhoods and other subjects that interest them. Subtitled programmes can be great teaching tools. Third dimension: everything that associations, large and small, can do to organise ‘conversation tables’. These include the Maison de la Francité, Bru-taal and many more modest initiatives. These are very important complements to language courses, enabling people to put the languages they learn into practice. In Brussels, there are plenty of people with language skills, for example young retirees or the spouses of European officials, prepared to share their linguistic competence. What they lack are the channels, the framework, for this contribution. Fourthly, parents are the most important of all and we want to help spread among them the knowledge they need in order to make the right choices in the way they use languages with their children.”

What should guide these choices?
“The three best known languages in Brussels are French, Dutch and English, although all three are in decline — so much so that, today, 8% of the people in Brussels know none of these three languages.”

“Do we need more immersion language classes?
“We certainly do. In Wallonia, an average of 5% pupils do immersion classes; in Walloon Brabant it’s 11.4%, while in Brussels it’s just 1.2%! An excuse sometimes given is that in Brussels, many French-speaking pupils go to Dutch-language schools. Yet there is a large unsatisfied demand. On the Dutch-speaking side, immersion learning has long been impossible for fear that exposure to

PHILIPPE VAN PARIJS: A “PHILOSOPHE ENGAGÉ”
Philosopher and economist, professor at UCL, KUL and Oxford, Philippe Van Parijs is also a citizen committed to many causes. An advocate of a universal basic income and the right to vote for all foreign residents at local and regional elections, he was also one of the founders of the Pavia group, which promotes the creation of a country-wide electoral constituency for part of the seats in Belgium’s federal parliament. The general public knows him best as the initiator of “Picnic the Streets”, a civil disobedience movement that invites the people of Brussels to organize urban picnics in order to accelerate the rehabilitation of Brussels’ public spaces. An apostle of multilingualism, Philippe Van Parijs is himself a polyglot and speaks no fewer than six languages, like his namesake, Philippe de Marnix.
Dutch in the classroom may prove insufficient to secure proficiency by the end of primary school. However, a decree was adopted in July 2013 that will allow immersion teaching in both Flanders and Brussels from September 2014.”

Is there a lack of a good cooperative agreement between the two Communities for the exchange of teachers?
“There has been progress there. At the inaugural event of the Marnix Plan, both education ministers confirmed that such an agreement is about to be finalized. However, one must be aware that any initiative in this direction – immersion courses, teacher exchanges, etc. – immediately comes up against the major problem of a lack of Dutch-speaking teachers in Brussels. It’s already a major issue for Brussels’s Dutch-language schools. Doubtless part of the solution lies in making it easier to get into the profession in the first place.”

Some children seem to learn with greater ease than others. Are languages within everyone’s reach?
“There are of course differences from one child to another, but it’s not necessarily just a question of aptitude. It can also be, for example, about the child’s position in the family, whether he’s the oldest or the youngest. The socio-linguistic factor – i.e. the presence of the various languages in the environment, the parents’ attitude towards them, etc. – has a far greater impact than innate differences, knowing that no two situations are ever identical. That’s why we insist that all recommendations must be ‘context-sensitive’.”

The Marnix Plan also stresses the importance of early learning.
“Evolution has given children the wonderful ability to learn several languages simultaneously – which for me is a constant source of amazement, given that our ancestors were small groups of hunter-gatherers who were linguistically isolated. The latest research indicates that early-age bilingualism not only has benefits for learning other languages later in life, but also has cognitive benefits in other areas. It confirms that it is best to start as early as possible at home and in the community as well as at school. On the other hand, it’s never too late to start learning, either, if both the motivation to learn and the opportunity to practice are there.”

In Belgium, language is often perceived as an element that divides us. How can we transform it into something that unites us?
“That’s the idea underlying the Marnix Plan as a whole: becoming proficient in a language other than your mother tongue does not mean that you are betraying your community, but that your are equipping yourself for a better life in Brussels and in the world. It’s also a mark of respect for the people whose language you learn and a real pleasure because it opens up another world to you. That’s why we need to develop a positive attitude towards learning languages. The ‘trilingualism plus’ we advocate — French, Dutch and English for all and the valuation and transmission of all other native languages — will be a central part of the identity of tomorrow’s Brusselers.”

Brussels Metropolitan wants English to be allowed in relations with the authorities and public services, alongside the two official languages. Is that a vision you share?
“The Marnix Plan is not an institutional programme, but personally, because of the rise of English as Europe’s lingua franca I have long defended the idea of a form of recognition for English as a third official language in the capital of the EU. Of course, this notion of an official language is ambiguous. I wouldn’t want to see a third name appearing on every street sign, but public communication and relations with government would have to be in the three languages. However, this promotion of English into official status is only legitimate and realistic if its learning is fostered in all layers of Brussels’ population.”

Is adopting a single language, like Esperanto, a pipedream?
“Yes it is. The two usual arguments put forward for Esperanto – neutrality and simplicity – are far weaker than they seem. Esperanto is not a neutral language but a European language made up of Latin, Germanic and Slav components. As for simplicity, it is true that Esperanto has an advantage if learning a language is seen as memorizing grammar rules and lists of vocabulary, then yes. But this is not the way most language learning operates. It relies on the motivation and opportunities guaranteed by large numbers of native speakers, films, music, newspapers, literature, etc. Despite Esperanto’s theoretical advantages, English is far ahead in this respect. It’s the mother tongue of over 400 million people and a second language for another billion. People realize that learning it will never be a wasted investment and therefore keep doing so. Hence it is vital for English to become more widely known in Brussels, Europe and the world – so that it is no longer the monopoly of a minority.”

Emmanuel Robert