

The Marnix Plan for a multilingual Brussels

Founding document 26 November 2012

PREAMBLE

The Marnix Plan for a multilingual Brussels aims to be a bold concerted effort by parents, schools and a wide variety of other actors to develop among all layers of the Brussels population — not just a privileged minority — the coherent learning of several languages, combining a priority for French, Dutch and English with the encouragement of the transmission of all native languages.

Its objectives, tools and prospective resources are presented below. Its content and form grew out of an inaugural brain-storming meeting held on 20 June 2012. Appendix 1 summarizes the conclusions of this meeting. Appendix 2 supplies the list of participants. Appendix 3 explains the choice of the name of the project.

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I. OBJECTIVES

(a) Brussels' languages: urgent needs and wasted potential

In 2001, a group of European intellectuals was mandated by European Commission President Romano Prodi and European Council president Guy Verhofstadt to think about how Brussels could “best express the needs and functions of a European capital”. In its final report, the group suggested the creation of an “institute for multilingualism”: *“Brussels is the city with the highest concentration of people speaking different languages, the highest quality and expertise in translation and interpretation services and a population that has learned to respect, learn and diffuse bilingualism as a common practice. The proposal is to make out of this comparative advantage an opportunity for development that would benefit both Belgium and the European institutions. The institute would be expected to pool together the knowledge concerning multilingualism, including speaking, reading, translating and interpreting second and third languages, teaching them and communicating such plurality in more attractive and user-friendly ways.”* (Brussels, *Capital of Europe*, European Commission, October 2001, p. 33).

We share the basic premises behind this proposal. On the one hand, the learning of languages —and in particular the acquisition of an adequate knowledge of French, Dutch and English — is exceptionally important for those who grow up in Brussels, not least for those who speak yet another language at home. It is exceptionally important for each of them individually, to help them find a job in Brussels or its hinterland but also to give them the option of settling comfortably either in Flanders or in Wallonia, as Brussels fills up and accommodation becomes more and more expensive. It is also exceptionally important for the city's economic dynamism and its good functioning as capital of the European Union: the main collective asset of the home-grown population must be its ability to serve as an efficient link between the increasingly English-speaking international activity in Brussels-Capital and the two neighbouring regions, one Dutch-speaking and one French-speaking, on which this activity depends in all sorts of ways.

In Brussels, at the same time and for closely related reasons, the learning of languages should be less difficult than elsewhere, providing one manages to mobilize intelligently the linguistic wealth and good will available in Brussels itself and in its hinterland. This requires early learning and innovative teaching of more than one language in all Brussels schools, but also drawing on an effective collaboration between schools, the media, the social partners, voluntary associations and — above all — families.

(b) Bottom up: concerted action and advocacy

More than a new institution, therefore, what Brussels needs is a “Marnix Plan”. Philippe de Marnix de Sainte Aldegonde (1540-1598) was born and grew up in Brussels. In one of his posthumous writings, he formulated what may well be the first plea for the simultaneous learning of several languages through immersion at a young age (see appendix 3). In the spirit of this plea, what is needed in Brussels is a vigorously positive attitude towards language learning, especially at an early stage in life, and a bold concerted effort by parents, schools and a wide variety of other actors to develop among all layers of the Brussels population — not just a privileged minority — the coherent learning of several languages, combining a priority for French, Dutch and English with the encouragement of the transmission of all native languages.

To make this happen will require some bold acts and significant policy changes on the part of the various public authorities involved. For example, it will require a major strengthening of the presence of Dutch and English in Brussels’ Francophone schools, not least in professional sections, where they are completely absent; the facilitation of teacher exchange schemes between the CFWB and the VG and the loosening of rigid “equivalence” regulations that hinder the supply of competent teachers; the systematic substitution of subtitling for dubbing for films, documentaries or interviews; or the setting up of type II European primary schools with early immersion. Along these dimensions and many others, the Marnix Plan must trigger and strengthen advocacy and lobbying by all those convinced that current policies fall far short of what is both possible and needed, given the specificities of the Brussels context.

But the Marnix Plan is not primarily about deploring the current situation and demanding top-down action from public authorities. It is in the first place a multifarious bottom-up effort by a great variety of Brussels citizens who want themselves to contribute to making all components of the Brussels population far more and far better multilingual than is currently the case. It is about building hundreds of bridges across the many cleavages that partition the Brussels population. It is about replacing mutual ignorance, rivalry and distrust by mutual appreciation, emulation and support. It is about identifying the many valuable existing initiatives and weaving them into an exciting common project. It is about realizing on the ground that what works for some people in some contexts does not work for all people in all contexts and about concluding from this, not that multilingualism is out of reach for many, but it needs to be pursued in an intelligent, context-sensitive way. It is about convincing all inhabitants of the capital of Europe that learning languages and helping other learn languages should be a normal daily activity, economically valuable for each of them, absolutely crucial for the lasting dynamism of Brussels as a whole, and moreover enriching and gratifying in all sorts of ways.

II. TOOLS

The core of the Marnix Plan will consist in a website, a newsletter and a regular public event.

1. Website.

A user-friendly, carefully updated website must provide information about

(a) **what to do:** guidelines and FAQs, formulated in a very accessible language, about what to do and not do when bringing up or teaching multilingual children (in particular regarding the language dimension of school choice and extra-curricular activities, of TV watching and internet use, and of interaction in the home context), with links to trustworthy textbooks and websites in various languages for those who want to know more and, if possible, with an online interactive “help desk” where people can get competent responses to their questions, hesitations and worries by language experts (researchers, teachers, interpreters, translators,) and by people with a similar experience;

(b) **what there is:** information about relevant Brussels-based initiatives, associations, courses, conversation tables, libraries, book-sharing schemes, medias, experiments and events, across the various cleavages (some very rudimentary and incomplete list

<http://brussels.irisnet.be/brussels-for-free/learning-a-language> is provided by the Brussels Region, but a far more comprehensive and informative list, with the possibility of evaluation by users etc. would be a great improvement);

(c) **what we know:** information about the achievements and limits of innovative language learning methods, about the way languages are learned in places broadly similar to Brussels, about linguistic competence in Brussels and elsewhere and its determinants, about other recent scientific findings of particular relevance to multilingualism in the Brussels context. The basic information will be in three languages (FR/NL/EN), and the rest in whatever language is appropriate.

2. Newsletter

A simple e-mail newsletter would supplement the website by providing news (about relevant events, publications, new or newly discovered initiatives, etc.) with links to the Marnix Plan website or to other websites, as appropriate. Anyone will be able subscribe to the newsletter by registering on the website.

3. Public event.

Once or twice a year, a public event will provide an opportunity for people involved or interested in the promotion of multilingualism in Brussels to meet, share information and think together. It will also offer a “time hook” for the press to publicize the language-learning effort. It could also provide an occasion for the awarding of an annual prize honouring a particularly valuable contribution to the multilingualism of the Brussels population. Room should be made for debates on controversial issues, for presentations and discussions of new initiatives, for the presentation and discussion of new language teaching experiments by teachers or for guest speakers from other places, for small-scale parallel meetings where teachers or parents share their experiences and their worries.

4. Leaflet.

At least at the beginning of the project, and in order to reach beyond internet users, a leaflet could be produced which would succinctly express the objective of the Marnix Plan and provide information about what to do and not do as regards language learning by children. It could be spread in the form of a simple “guide for perplexed parents” made available in several languages through the O.N.E./ Kind en Gezin and/or in crèches and kindergartens.

III. PROSPECTIVE RESOURCES

The Marnix Plan is not a Marshall plan. It does not require massive resources, but only enough to fund modest yet effective tools for channelling reliable information, prompting goodwill, triggering collaboration, encouraging innovation and breeding enthusiasm. Funding is needed (1) to pay someone on a part-time basis to set up and maintain the website, edit the newsletter and deal with the logistic aspects of the regular public event; and (2) to pay for the other costs associated with the website, the newsletter, the event and the leaflet.

Given the direct relevance of the Marnix Plan to at least two programmes of the King Baudouin Foundation (“Brussels as Capital of Europe” and “Integration”), a grant from the Foundation (up to 50.000 euros) to cover operations for the initial period is an obvious option. In the longer-term, the European programme “Erasmus for All”, expected to be launched in 2014, is another promising possibility.

In addition, the Marnix Plan should be able to count on free access to meeting space and other facilities, as well as sponsoring for its regular public event and annual prize from various institutions and organizations who share its objectives. Its main resource, however, will be the competence and enthusiasm of the many Brusselers who are convinced of the importance of promoting multilingualism in Brussels and willing to contribute to it some of their time, imagination and energy.

APPENDIX 1. BACKGROUND : LANGUAGE LEARNING IN BRUSSELS

(Some conclusions emerging from the inaugural brain storming meeting of 20 June 2012.)

I. Labour market

- While in Wallonia being monolingual often counts only as a minor shortcoming, it is frequently a decisive handicap in Brussels, sometimes because bi- or multilingual competence is strictly required for the job, but also often because it is important for a smooth relation with co-workers, or provides a convenient proxy for less observable qualities, or serves as a cover for sheer discrimination.
- For a significant portion of Brussels' potential workforce, the best bet is at the moment to find a job in Flanders, especially in the “rand”, where some degree of competence Dutch is very often a must.
- Hence, in the Brussels area, one could say that “the choice of learning Dutch and English versus remaining monolingual amounts to the choice between resigning oneself to living in a flat versus hoping to be able to afford a house”.

II. Schools

(a) General

There is a consensus on the following ideas:

- Language teaching should be primarily focused on communication, rather than, say, on the history of literature or grammatical subtleties.
- It should be based on implicit learning by practice followed by reflection, rather than on the abstract study of grammar rules and lists of vocabulary.
- It should rely on the teaching of non-language subjects in a second or third language, possibly repeating the same stuff in the first language (Content and Language Integrated Learning or CLIL).
- It should incorporate the use of radio, TV, videos, newspapers and real-life meetings.
- It should pay attention to attitudes and to the sociolinguist context, which differs greatly depending on the language regime of the school and its recruitment.
- It should present language learning as a life-long never-ending process and ignore the paralyzing demand of perfection, which drives many into — grammatically correct — silence.

(b) Communauté française (about 80% of Brussels' pupils).

1. Curriculum

- Dutch is compulsory from year 3 in Brussels primary schools, but the Dutch exams do not count for the “certificat d'études primaires”, which is the same as in Wallonia.
- The secondary school curriculum for Dutch in the “enseignement général” takes no account of years of Dutch at primary school (the expectations are the same as in Wallonia)
- There is no compulsory language course at all (neither Dutch nor English) in the “enseignement professionnel”, with dramatic consequences after graduation in terms of access to internships, higher education (e.g. tourism) and employment in Brussels and around.

- One reason why language learning is evidently not a political priority for the Communauté française is the widespread belief that both the level of competence in French and the strength of Francophone identity would be weakened by multilingualism.

2. Immersion schools

- There is a large demand for but a tiny supply of immersion schools in Brussels (there are only nine schools offering immersion classes in Brussels, compared to over 200 in Wallonia)
- Currently, immersion schools are allowed by the CFWB only in the “enseignement général”, but from 2013 onwards, it should also be possible in principle in “enseignement qualifiant” (“technique” and “professionnel”).

3. Teachers

- The recruitment of Dutch native teachers should be less of a problem in Brussels than in Wallonia because of its proximity to Flanders. Yet, there is a serious problem, due to the shortage that also prevails in Flemish Brussels schools (see infra), combined with the fact that teachers are better paid in Flemish than in Francophone schools.
- At the initiative of Minister Pascal Smet, the Flemish government has agreed to allow for the detachment of Flemish teachers in Francophone schools with maintenance of wage and seniority on condition of reciprocity, which has still not been approved by the government of the Communauté française). There should be no principled opposition by teacher unions if there is reciprocity, but the integration of teachers from the other Community, made more delicate by the wage gap, should be managed with care to avoid a backlash.
- The shortage of teachers is worsened by the obstacles to the recognition of relevant qualifications, and in particular by the rigid practice of the “commission d’équivalence” as regards foreign degrees and by the current impossibility of doing a “supplément d’agrégation” for people with a good knowledge of another language and a qualification in a non-language subject. (This is a more general problem: there are about 35000 job seekers in Brussels educated abroad with no recognized secondary school degree.)

(c) Vlaamse Gemeenschap (about 16% of Brussels’ pupils)

- About 85% of the pupils in Brussels Flemish schools do not have any Dutch at home. For this reason, it has been argued that “immersion schooling” (with some subjects taught in French) makes no sense in Brussels Flemish schools: they are already de facto immersion schools for most pupils. Adding French as a medium of education may be detrimental to an adequate learning of Dutch owing to insufficient exposure.
- The problem of insufficient exposure to Dutch arises in particular when many of the pupils have French as their mother tongue. The prohibition of French in the playground is then hard to enforce and frequently denounced as oppressive (even though it is also practised in some Francophone Brussels schools with a large number of allophones).
- The 55% threshold for the priority to Dutch mother tongue pupils leads to segregation: concentration of the Dutch native speakers in a few “good” schools, leaving some others with 100% of non-Dutch native speakers.
- There is a serious problem of recruitment and high turnover of teachers : most of them come from Flanders and many take a job in Flanders when given an opportunity in order to avoid high Brussels housing costs or long commutes.

(d) European schools (about 4% of Brussels' pupils)

- The Brussels European Schools currently host about 3.000 Belgian children, both Dutch-speaking and French-speaking, often attending classes together in a third language.
- European School pupils become multilingual, thanks to CLIL teaching in the second working language at secondary school (English, French or German) and foreign language lessons attended jointly by pupils with a variety of mother tongues.
- Even after the opening of the fourth large school in Laeken (September 2012), access will de facto be restricted to children of EU civil servants (“catégorie I”).
- All existing European schools in Brussels are “type I” schools, i.e. schools whose running is funded by EU members states and the European Commission (only the site and building are funded by the host country). “Type II” schools, jointly funded by “Europe” and the “local” authorities exist elsewhere in the EU but not in Belgium so far.

(e) Private schools

In addition to the European schools, some private schools in or close to Brussels offer bilingual education (English/French). This is the case, for example, for the International School of Brussels (Boistfort), for the Brussels International Catholic School (Etterbeek), for the Bogaerts International School (Waterloo) and, since September 2011, the British School (Tervuren). A new trilingual school (French-Dutch-English) started in September 2012 in Kraainem (<http://arboretumcollege.be>).

III. Adult education

- As part of its “plan langues”, Bruxelles-Formation (“l'organisme public chargé de la formation professionnelle des demandeurs d'emploi et des travailleurs bruxellois francophones de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale”) offers a test that has been taken by 15000 people and a language course that is being followed by about 5000 (roughly 80% for Dutch). Those who followed the course have a significantly higher rate of job access, but how much is due to self-selection (i.e. to prior characteristics) rather than to the language training itself is hard to assess.
- The language courses are taken in private schools and paid for by Region-financed “cheques-langues”. This is a juicy business for private language schools, but it is not self-evidently cost-effective for the Region, especially as it has the side effect of worsening the shortage of language teachers in Brussels secondary schools (where the pay is lower than in private schools).
- The “Huis van het Nederlands” also provides valuable Dutch language courses, especially at the more basic levels. There is no coordination with what is provided by Bruxelles-Formation.

IV. Associations

In addition and as a complement to formal courses, there are a number of initiatives providing “conversation tables”. The most developed one is Bru-taal, which operates in the Gemeenschapscentra of the Vlaamse Gemeenschap, relies on volunteers as table leaders, attracts about 1400 participants per year (some once, some every week) and also aims to provide opportunities for social contact. There are many other more limited initiatives, such

as the Cercle royal polyglotte de Bruxelles hosted by the Maison de la francité (www.maisondelafrancite.be), but no coordination or cooperation between them.

V. Medias

(a) The virtues of subtitling

- Watching subtitled films and other broadcasts in a foreign language is a cheap and powerful way of learning languages from an early age. The fact that dubbing is used instead of subtitling in the larger language areas goes a long way towards explaining the difference between Flanders (or Finland or Greece) and Wallonia (or Germany or Spain) as regards competence in English. There is, however, a risk that the power of this easy learning method will be weakened as a result of linear TV watching being replaced by DVDs and internet viewing, just as the learning of the local language by immigrants was slowed down by the availability of satellite dishes and cable TV giving them access to channels in their native languages.
- The systematic use of subtitling rather than dubbing would not only be beneficial for the learning of English. As dubbing is very expensive, it is reserved for productions that can count on a large market and hence are practically all American. Subtitling being much cheaper, it allows for the profitable distribution of more modest productions in less widely spread languages, and thereby gives access to a wide variety of cultures and languages. Thus the VRT and the KRO are now broadcasting Scandinavian series which have no access to the dubbing-dominated markets.

(b) tvbrussel

- The Belgian medium that uses subtitling most systematically is tvbrussel. It started doing so for both English and French in 1996, and its website is now completely trilingual. The main motivation was to broaden its audience beyond the (shrinking) proportion of native Dutch speakers in the Brussels population and to provide this broader audience a Flemish perspective on Brussels life. It is plausible to conjecture that today the majority of tvbrussel viewers are not native speakers of Dutch.
- The daily news (between 20 and 27 minutes per day) is spoken in Dutch and subtitled in both French and English. Interviews can be conducted in French or English and then subtitled in Dutch and either English or French.
- Subtitling is an art with strong constraints: viewers need 6 seconds to read two lines of 32 characters. Spoken sentences often need to be summarized. It can take up to one hour of work by a competent translator to provide subtitling for a 5 minutes film. Finding translators from oral Dutch into English is extremely difficult, not least because of the variety of accents. tvbrussel currently used a cascade formula: the English subtitles are based on the French ones.
- For a while, Arabophones and Turcophones living in Brussels also had a programme in their own language on tvbrussel ("Arabesk" et "TrBrüksel"), with subtitles in Dutch and French. However, these programmes have been discontinued for budgetary reasons.

(c) Francophone channels

- Owing to the cost involved and the fact that there would be no analogous gain in audience, there is no sign or chance of Télé-Bruxelles introducing subtitles in Dutch or English.
- The RTBf made some timid move towards broadcasting more films in the original version with subtitles, but the fear of competition with RTL, TF1 and other French channels is bound

to inhibit any more significant move towards broadcasting in the sole original version. However, the DigiText or Teletext technology makes it possible to watch a film either in a subtitled or in a dubbed version, providing the télédistributeurs allow it (Telenet and Belgacom do). This possibility is already used by ARTE for some of its programmes. The cost of the double version would of course be higher and the impact weaker in terms of language learning, but it would avoid the audience loss and may be politically more acceptable as it leaves the choice to the viewers (or their parents).

VI. Families

- One problem is that families often do the wrong thing with the best intentions. It is important that parents should learn the language of the school, so as to be able to communicate with the teachers and the school staff and to monitor their children's work and reports. However, it is also important that they should speak consistently *their own native language* to their children, especially in the early years before language competence is well established, rather than try to speak (often very incorrectly) the school language or mixing the two.
- Cable and satellite TV and the ever wider range of options offered by the internet make it increasingly possible for other languages to enter the home and be learned at home, but also make it increasingly easy to miss these opportunities by going for the least effort. The parents's guidance and discipline (including self-discipline) thereby gains unprecedented importance.

APPENDIX 2. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

in the inaugural brain storming meeting of Wednesday 20 June 2012.

Nicole Bya, in charge of the sector "modern languages" at the Secrétariat de l'enseignement catholique (SEGEC)

Gregor Chapelle, director of the Brussels Employment Office Actiris

Pinuccia Contino, European Commission, DG Education, Unit Multilingualism

Régine Florent, professor of English at the Haute Ecole en Communication IHECS (Brussels), active campaigner for subtitling in the media

Myriam Gérard, regional secretary of the ACV-CSC Trade Union

Serge Goriely, professor of theatre studies at the Université catholique de Louvain

Alex Housen, professor of Dutch at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Kari Kivinen, secretary general of the Conseil supérieur des écoles européennes, formerly director of the European School of Brussels 1

Johan Leman, professor of social anthropology at the KU Leuven, former director of the Centre pour l'égalité des chances, founder of the vzw Foyer (Molenbeek), that has been practising OETC ("Onderwijs in eigen taal en cultuur") for 30 years

Françoise Pissart, director at the King Baudouin Foundation

Anna Sole Mena, European Commission, DG Enterprise, author of *Multilingües desde la cuna. Educar a los hijos en varios idiomas*

Luca Tomasi, European Commission, DG Education, Unit Multilingualism

Piet van de Craen, professor of linguistics and dean of the Faculty of Letters, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, initiator of the STIMOB programme ("Stimulerend Meertalig Onderwijs in Brussels")

Marianne van de Graaff, director of Bru-Taal, an associations which organizes conversation tables in Dutch in the Flemish Gemeenschapscentra of Brussels communes

Marie Ange Veyckemans, teacher of French to newcomers in a technical school, co-initiator of the project "Ecole Babel", working on a doctoral thesis on the teaching of French as a second language

Georges Wathlet, translator in charge of subtitling for TV Brussel

Olivier Willocx, CEO of the employers association of the Brussels Region BECI (Brussels Enterprises, Commerce and Industry)

Sue Black and Philippe Van Parijs, hosts

Unexpectedly prevented from attending:

Philippe Hiligsmann, professor of Dutch and linguistics and dean of the Faculty of Letters, Université catholique de Louvain

Anne Maquet, director of the Institut Saint Louis

APPENDIX 3. WHY MARNIX ?

Philippe de Marnix de Sainte Aldegonde (1540-1598) was born and grew up in Brussels. His father came from Savoie, his mother from near Mons. He studied in Louvain and Genève, became the chief adviser of Brussels' leading aristocrat Wilhelm von Nassau, concocted on his behalf the first official document recognizing some form of freedom of religion (the Pacification of Ghent, 1576), negotiated with Alessandro Farnese the surrender of Antwerp (1585), wrote the Dutch national anthem and translated part of the Bible from Greek and Hebrew into Dutch. One of his opponents, the Florentine Paolo Rinaldi, described him as "*un gentilhomme noble, sage, accort, sagace, éloquent, expérimenté, ... fort instruit en grec, hébreu, latin; il comprend et écrit aisément les langues espagnole, italienne, allemande, française, flamande, anglaise, et bien d'autres, mieux qu'aucun autre homme de ces pays*" (cited by Rudolf De Smet, "Taal, context en conventie in Marnix' correspondentie", in: H. Duits & T. Van Strien eds., *Een intellectuele activist. Studies over leven en werk van Philips van Marnix van Sint Aldegonde*, Hilversum, 2001, pp. 37-50).

In a booklet on education published after his death, he formulates what may be the first recorded plea for immersion schooling and early multilingual education: "*Il faut approuver la pratique de ceux qui s'efforcent d'inculquer à leurs enfants la connaissance de deux langues différentes entre elles par la prononciation et le vocabulaire. En agissant ainsi, on habituera leur langue encore souple à deux méthodes différentes de prononciation et on la rendra plus habile à exprimer plus tard les dialectes de n'importe quel langage étranger... Les parents n'oublieront pas non plus, si c'est possible, d'apprendre à leurs enfants à parler dès leur jeune âge deux langues différentes pour éviter que leurs organes, une fois habitués à un accent, ne s'en tiennent qu'à celui-là. C'est pourquoi, je voudrais que, tout jeunes, les Allemands apprennent, en même temps que la langue allemande, un dialecte français, italien ou latin, pour éviter que plus tard, habitués au seul allemand, ils n'introduisent des germanismes dans une autre langue; je voudrais que les Français apprennent, avec le français, le belge, l'allemand, l'anglais ou enfin l'italien: mais lorsqu'ils auront atteint six ou sept ans, ils s'habitueront à prononcer convenablement le latin, qui leur sera enseigné non par un Français, mais par quelqu'un qui n'est pas sujet aux gallicismes. Quand ils sont plus âgés, je désire qu'ils aillent à l'étranger et qu'ils apprennent autant que possible la langue des autres peuples et particulièrement de ceux qui entretiennent avec leurs concitoyens des rapports suivis.* » (*Ratio Instituendae Juventutis*, written in 1583, first published in 1615, Latin edition (J. Catrysse ed.), Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1959, pp. 29 and 109; French translation: *Traité d'éducation de la jeunesse*, Bruxelles : Editions ARSCIA, 1959, pp. 35 and 91).