

Ten questions newcomers ask about language use in the Vlaamse Rand

# LIVING IN TRANSLATION LIVING IN TRANSLATION

vzw 'de Rand'



## 10 QUESTIONS

1. Which language is spoken in Belgium?
2. In which language can I contact the authorities?
3. Which language is used at school?
4. What language is spoken in companies and hospitals?
5. How can I keep abreast of current events in Belgium?
6. Why is Belgium not just bilingual?
7. Why do the Flemish people hold so strongly to the monolingualism in the Vlaamse Rand?
8. Why do the municipalities in the Vlaamse Rand around Brussels continue to be Flemish, even when they are inhabited by a majority of foreign speakers?
9. Why is Brussels bilingual when only a minority of Dutch speakers live there?
10. Why does Flanders refuse to ratify the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities?

# INTRODUCTION

Belgium's complexity is obviously one of the country's many charms but it obviously raises a barrage of questions from newcomers. Our country's structure, operating principles and its organisation are not as fragile and arbitrary as they may appear at first sight. The way the Belgian state is organised is the outcome of long and often challenging developments and negotiations that have produced subtly balanced structures and powers, particularly in recent decades. Belgium was created as a unified state in 1831 but has now become a fully-fledged federal state. Belgium's 11 million inhabitants live in four different language regions. The country has nine parliaments each of which enjoys its own powers. The Belgian structures are the result of democratic processes and changes that have developed over a long period of time. The myriad rules and regulations can lead to some confusion in practice. For example, the language laws have given rise to different linguistic provisions in the Flemish Region (the Dutch-speaking area) and the Brussels-Capital Region.

This booklet is designed to help answer some of the questions newcomers often ask. The rules discussed in the context of Flanders are generally reflected in the other language regions as well.

This publication by 'de Rand' is an updated version of an earlier text written by Michaël Van Droogenbroeck and published in March 2011.



# WHICH LANGUAGE IS SPOKEN IN BELGIUM?

In Belgium you can speak any language you want. For contacts with the authorities three official languages can be used: Dutch, French and German. These languages are not spoken everywhere, because Belgium is subdivided into federated states. Each federated state has its own official language. Only the Brussels-Capital Region is bilingual. However, more and more residents in our country are multilingual and speak the two most important national languages.

## WHICH LANGUAGES MAY BE SPOKEN HERE?

In Belgium, people can speak any language they want. This language freedom is embedded in the Constitution. It implies that you can decide yourself which language you use in your household, among friends, in the media, and in the cultural, economic, commercial and religious fields.

Like any other country, Belgium also has official languages. These are Dutch, French and German. These three languages are spoken in areas that are more or less delineated. In the middle of the last century, language areas were delineated on the basis of language use. The prevailing language spoken in a specific area also became the language of administration for that area. Belgium is composed of four language areas: the Dutch language area, the French language area, the German language area (nine municipalities in the east of Belgium) and the bilingual Brussels-Capital area.

This subdivision into language areas and official languages by no means detracts from the language freedom. The use of one (or several) of these official languages is compulsory in a limited number of situations, especially in contacts with the authorities. Sometimes this obligation only applies to the official body, at other times to the citizens as well.

■ ■ ■ The Germanic-Latin language border probably came into being during the fourth century. During this period the Roman Empire disintegrated into chaos, and large numbers of German Franks settled in our region. At that time, it was inhabited by the Gauls and Celts, both of whom had assimilated Roman culture. The north was mainly inhabited by the German Franks, who in the south were in the minority. The establishment of a border between the Germans in the north and the Romans in the south was a fact ■ ■ ■

■ the Dutch language area



■ the bilingual Brussels-Capital area



■ the French language area



■ the German language area



## HOW MANY PEOPLE SPEAK WHICH LANGUAGE?

Belgium has 11.250.585 inhabitants: 6.47 million in the Flemish Region (Dutch language area), 3.6 million in the Walloon Region (French language area + German language area) and 1.18 million in the Brussels-Capital Region (bilingual area). (01/01/2016)

It is difficult to verify the number of Dutch speakers and French speakers in Belgium. The Walloon Region, for instance, is also home to Dutch speakers, and the Flemish Region to French speakers. The Brussels-Capital Region has French speakers, Dutch speakers and foreign speakers among its inhabitants. The number of speakers of each language is not registered. The German-speaking Community (which is a part of the Walloon Region) has about 76,591 inhabitants.

## WHICH LANGUAGES DO THE INHABITANTS OF BELGIUM SPEAK?

An increasing number of Flemish people and French speakers in Belgium speak at least a second and even a third language. These days, there is little chance that you will meet anyone here who does not speak English. Many Flemish people are familiar with and speak French and an ever-increasing number of French speakers know and speak Dutch. The knowledge of German is less widespread.

Most people start to learn an additional language in school. In Dutch-language education French lessons start at the age of 10. At the age of 12 or 14, pupils are also taught English. German and Spanish can also be taught. Flemish people frequently come into contact with the English language through the media. Foreign films and TV series, for instance, are not dubbed, but subtitled.

As a result, you can often also speak English in informal situations throughout Belgium. However, this does not change anything about the use of the official languages of administration in each language area. It is therefore recommended that you also learn the language of that area.



# IN WHICH LANGUAGE CAN I CONTACT THE AUTHORITIES?

In principle, any contacts with the authorities take place in the language of the area where they are located. In Flanders, this is Dutch; in Wallonia, French or German; and in Brussels, Dutch or French. This rule usually only applies to the authorities themselves. You are therefore not always obliged to use the official language when addressing the authorities. In most cases, civil servants will only answer and documents will only be drawn up in the official language.

Due to its state structure, Belgium has many different levels of government. These include the federal (central) authorities, the Communities and Regions, which partially overlap, the provinces and the municipalities. You will probably come into contact with some authorities more often than others.

In principle, the language of each authority is that of the language area where it is located. In other words: the language of that area is the language of administration. This rule always applies to the authorities. Therefore, you cannot just assume that civil servants will understand your language. In fact, in most cases the authorities are only allowed to reply in the official language. In addition, the documents of the authorities are only drawn up in the official language.



## THE MUNICIPAL LEVEL

The municipality is the level of government that is closest to the people. This is where you collect your identity card, receive information about domestic waste collection, submit a change of address, register a birth, marriage, etc. Each municipality belongs to a specific language area and communicates in the language of that language area. A municipality in the Dutch language area only communicates in Dutch and a municipality in the French language area only in French. In Brussels, municipal civil servants must be able to help residents both in Dutch and in French.

The same language regulation applies to the *openbare centra voor maatschappelijk welzijn* or *OCMWs* (public centres for social welfare) which are associated with the municipality. OCMWs are responsible, among other things, for providing affordable housing and sufficient means to people with financial difficulties.

## LANGUAGE FACILITIES: THE EXCEPTION

A special regulation applies in the municipalities with facilities. These municipalities are situated in a monolingual language area, but offer 'facilities' to foreign-speaking inhabitants. Around Brussels there are six municipalities with facilities in the Dutch language area where facilities are provided to French-speaking residents. In Drogenbos, Kraainem, Linkebeek, Sint-Genesius-Rode, Wemmel and Wezembeek-Oppem residents may ask to receive a specific document in French. These municipalities are not bilingual like the municipalities in the Brussels-Capital Region. Here, official messages and communications must be both in Dutch and French, whereas individual communication normally takes place in Dutch. However, exceptionally this is also allowed in French.

From the very start there has been disagreement about the idea behind the facilities. French-speaking politicians consider them to be permanent language rights. To Flemish politicians, these facilities are a temporary privilege for newcomers from another language area who have not yet mastered the language. The legislation itself continues to be vague about the objectives. As a result, opposing interpretations continue to exist. This regulation is partially responsible for attracting a large number of French speakers (and foreign speakers) who want to come and live in the green Vlaamse Rand, close to Brussels. Because of this, the balance between the languages in these municipalities has shifted. The majority of the people living there are French speakers or foreign speakers who have not adapted to the Dutch-language character of the region. This leads to political discussions about the language status of these six municipalities.

## FRUSTRATION

Some people show displeasure or incomprehension about the language rules used by municipal civil servants in the Vlaamse Rand. Why do these civil servants not simply speak French or English? Is it not so that most Flemish civil servants master these languages? Yet, the principle of the 'language of that area being the language of administration' is accepted almost everywhere in the world. No French or English is spoken in Spanish town halls either. In the Swiss city of Geneva you will only be addressed in French, although, like Brussels, the city houses a lot of international organisations (UN, WHO, UNAIDS, WTO). No Dutch is spoken in the French language area in Belgium either.

As they live close to Brussels, expats are inclined to think people manning the municipal service desk will help them in French. When officials stick to the official language (Dutch) rather than agreeing to speak another one (French or English), people tend to interpret this attitude as a form of harassment.

Meanwhile, many Flemish people regard the use of French as further language concessions and a lack of respect for the official administrative language and the structure of the Belgian state.

In the light of the fast-paced Frenchification of Brussels, the Flemish are concerned that the same situation is developing in the Vlaamse Rand around Brussels. That is why the Flemish authorities have adopted a policy seeking to protect the region's Flemish character and encourage people to speak Dutch.

Finally, a lot of Flemish people are annoyed about the one-sided character of this debate. Dutch speakers who move to the French language area of Belgium often do not have any problems learning French and using it in their contacts with the local authorities. The massive migration of Flemish people to the rich industrial Wallonia of the 19th and early 20th centuries did not lead to any Dutchification or Flemishification there.

AUTHORITIES	LANGUAGE	RULE
FEDERAL AUTHORITIES	DUTCH, FRENCH OR GERMAN	IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE CITIZEN'S PLACE OF RESIDENCE
PROVINCE	DUTCH, FRENCH OR GERMAN	IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE LANGUAGE AREA WHERE THE PROVINCE IS LOCATED
COMMUNITIES		
FLEMISH COMMUNITY	DUTCH	
FRENCH COMMUNITY	FRENCH	
GERMAN-SPEAKING COMMUNITY	GERMAN	
REGIONS		
FLEMISH REGION	DUTCH	COMMUNICATION IN DUTCH
WALLOON REGION	FRENCH OR GERMAN	DEPENDING ON THE CITIZEN'S PLACE OF RESIDENCE
BRUSSELS-CAPITAL REGION	FRENCH AND/OR DUTCH	INDIVIDUAL COMMUNICATION IN FRENCH AND DUTCH, DEPENDING ON THE LANGUAGE USED BY THE CITIZEN CONCERNED  PUBLIC COMMUNICATION IS BILINGUAL THERE.

# WHICH LANGUAGE IS USED AT SCHOOL?

The teaching language is the official language of the area where the school is located. Except for the language subjects, all other subjects must be taught in that language. In Brussels, you can choose between Dutch- and French-language education. There are a few exceptions in the municipalities with facilities. In higher education, a growing number of subjects are taught in English.

## EDUCATION IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE AREA

The principle is simple. It is laid down by law in which language the general subjects are to be taught in nursery (2,5-6 years), primary (6-12 years) and secondary education (12-18 years). The language coincides with the different language areas. In practical terms this means that Dutch is the teaching language in Flanders. French lessons may be given in French, English lessons in English, but general subjects like mathematics, biology or geography must be taught in Dutch. In Wallonia, the official teaching language is French whereas in Brussels this is either Dutch or French, depending on the school.

This rule of teaching in the language of the area applies to all the schools of the official network (which are organised by the authorities themselves) and to the schools of the privately run network (schools that are recognised or subsidised by the authorities). Private schools do not have to comply with this language rule and can teach in the language of their choice.

There are a number of exceptions to the language rules for education.

- For a number of years a pilot project has been running in nine secondary schools in Flanders, allowing general subjects to also be taught in another language.
- Wallonia has immersion schools. At these schools, some general subjects are taught in Dutch. The idea is to improve the pupils' knowledge of the other national language.
- In a few big cities, including Brussels, quite a large number of children of foreign origin attend Dutch-language education. At home they sometimes only speak their mother tongue, as a result of which they know too little Dutch to be able to follow the lessons to a sufficient extent. In order to facilitate their integration, some schools organise language support initiatives in close cooperation with the Flemish authorities.
- The international schools are not bound by the language rules for education.



## BRUSSELS


There is no bilingual education in Brussels. Schools teach either in Dutch or in French. People living in Brussels can choose. Even people who do not speak Dutch at home can attend Dutch-language schools. Many Dutch-language schools in Brussels attract children from families where one or both parents do not speak Dutch. In order to make sure that everyone can follow the lessons in Dutch, additional assistance is often provided to foreign speaking pupils.

## MUNICIPALITIES WITH FACILITIES IN FLANDERS

In the six municipalities with facilities around Brussels (and in Ronse) schools must in principle teach in the Dutch language. However, in keeping with specified conditions these municipalities organise French-language nursery and primary schools for French-speaking children from the municipality. Dutch-speaking children from the municipality are not allowed to attend these French-speaking schools. Neither are French-speaking children from other municipalities without facilities. These schools are subsidised by the Flemish authorities, who ensure that intensive Dutch courses are taught at these schools. This exception does not apply to secondary schools. In the municipalities with facilities secondary education can only take place in Dutch. Pupils who do not want to attend secondary education in the language of the area usually go to a French-language school in the Brussels-Capital Region or in the Walloon Region.

## HIGHER EDUCATION

This rule has become less strict in higher education in Flanders. The use of Dutch in higher education is compulsory for bachelor's and initial master's programmes. Yet even in the bachelor's and master's programmes a growing number of subjects are taught in another language (mostly English). However, students are entitled to take their exams in Dutch for the subjects that are taught in a foreign language. Naturally, these restrictions do not apply to language subjects.



At [www.studyinlanders.be](http://www.studyinlanders.be) you can find an overview of all courses in higher education in Flanders that are taught entirely in English.

An overview of the international schools is available at [www.xpats.com](http://www.xpats.com).

More information on Flemish education can be found at [www.ond.vlaanderen.be/English](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/English).

# WHAT LANGUAGE IS SPOKEN IN COMPANIES AND HOSPITALS?

Companies are allowed to use whichever language they want in their external contacts. Only language use within the company and in official documents is regulated by law. These contacts must take place in the language of the area, although translations are always permitted and in some cases even obligatory. Hospitals too can use the language of their choice. In Brussels, however, public hospitals must be able to address their patients both in Dutch and in French. The emergency services in all Brussels hospitals must be bilingual.

## COMPANIES IN FLANDERS

In businesses in Flanders, there is freedom of language use. In principle, both companies and their employees can use whatever language they want, even in their external communication. Rules are only laid down for official documents and for language use within the company. Non-commercial companies also come under this regulation. For companies in Flanders this implies that written and oral communications by the company to the employees, as well as manuals and warning signs in the company, must be drawn up in Dutch. This also goes for official documents, such as invoices, pay slips and employment contracts. Although these documents may be translated, the Dutch version remains the only official version.

Any other communication by a company is not regulated. This communication, both oral and written, may take place in other languages. A company is thus perfectly allowed to send letters in German or receive customers in Portuguese. A company can even oblige employees to use another language. Even conversations between employees need not necessarily be in Dutch, as long as no hierarchical relationship exists between them. Strictly speaking, a boss must address his or her subordinates in Dutch, but not vice versa.

■■■ Companies are allowed to use any language they want for advertising purposes, as long as the advertising is related to private businesses. Advertising brochures and posters may be produced in other languages. However, the inhabitants of the Flemish Region and the Flemish authorities appreciate it when only the Dutch language is used for advertising, because this is a token of respect for the region. It is a matter of linguistic courtesy.

The situation is different for advertising produced by the official bodies. Public announcements, brochures, radio and television spots in Flanders must be in Dutch. ■■■

## COMPANIES IN BRUSSELS AND THE MUNICIPALITIES WITH FACILITIES

Different rules apply in Brussels and in the municipalities with facilities. These can be briefly summarised as follows:

- Only commercial companies come under the language regulation, whereas non-profit organisations do not.
- For official documents, companies in Brussels can choose between Dutch and French. These documents can also be drawn up in both languages. In the municipalities with facilities, companies use the Dutch language.
- In written communication with staff, Brussels-based companies must use Dutch or French, depending on the language of the employee. Bilingual pay slips are not allowed. In the municipalities with facilities, companies use the Dutch language. Translations are allowed, however.
- No rules exist for oral communication with staff.

## JOB ADVERTS AND JOB INTERVIEWS

No language rules are in force for job adverts. Job adverts in French or English are perfectly possible. A job advert is not regarded as an employer-employee relationship. Consequently, no restrictions can be imposed.

This is different for job interviews. In this case, it concerns a social relationship. Strictly speaking, job interviews in Flanders must be held in Dutch, although an employer may always 'test' whether a job applicant speaks other languages as well.

The legislation on the language of administration applies to companies or public institutions that work on behalf of the authorities. They use the language(s) of the commissioning authority. However, local branches of a public company can only use the language of that area. These include, amongst others, the Public Transport Company *De Lijn* (Dutch), the *NMBS/SNCB* (Dutch-French-German), the *MIVB/STIB* (Dutch-French), *BPost* (Dutch-French-German), *Kind & Gezin* (Dutch) and *Belgacom* (Dutch-French-German). The central service provision of these companies is in keeping with the language regulation of the authority they depend on. The postal office in Overijse, for instance, is only allowed to use the Dutch language, but the Flemish Public Transport Company *De Lijn* must also use French in Brussels.



## HOSPITALS

Hospitals and rest homes are not legally obliged to address patients in their own language. This obligation does not apply in Brussels either, at least not for private hospitals and university hospitals. This is different for public hospitals (OCMW hospitals). All public hospitals in Brussels must be able to help patients both in Dutch and French and must be able to provide any documentation and correspondence in both languages. This also applies to rest homes. Private rest homes in Brussels are not legally obliged to use the Dutch language, unlike public rest homes.

This rule is stricter for emergency services. All emergency services in Brussels, including those of private hospitals, must guarantee a bilingual service. Therefore, each Brussels emergency service must be able to help you both in Dutch and in French.

# HOW CAN I KEEP ABREAST OF CURRENT EVENTS IN BELGIUM?

The media in Belgium are also subdivided into three language groups. The Dutch-language media carry news broadcasts in Dutch on radio and TV, in newspapers and magazines. The French-language media do the same in French. Even the German-speaking Community has its own media. There are practically no bilingual media. A number of English-language initiatives exist for expats and foreigners.

## MOST IMPORTANT DUTCH-LANGUAGE MEDIA

### TV

- **VRT: Eén** and **canvas**, **Radio 1**: The two channels of the public broadcaster VRT (Flemish Radio and Television) with news programmes Het Journaal and an online news platform **www.deredactie.be**. Radio 1 is the radio station that provides news and comment about current events.
- **VTM**: Het Nieuws: The largest commercial broadcaster in Flanders. News broadcasts in Het Nieuws. **www.vtm.be**
- **kanaalZ**. **www.kanaalz.be**: Economic and financial news
- Regional TV broadcasters. In Brussels there is **tvbrussel (www.tvbrussel.be)**, in the Vlaamse Rand **RINGtv (www.ringtv.be)**, but in Tervuren **ROB-tv (www.robnet.be)**. Some programmes by these broadcasters are subtitled for foreign speakers.

## DAILY NEWSPAPERS AND THEIR WEBSITES

- De Standaard – [www.standaard.be](http://www.standaard.be)
- De Morgen – [www.demorgen.be](http://www.demorgen.be)
- De Tijd – [www.tijd.be](http://www.tijd.be)
- Het Laatste Nieuws – [www.hln.be](http://www.hln.be)
- Het Nieuwsblad – [www.nieuwsblad.be](http://www.nieuwsblad.be)
- Gazet van Antwerpen – [www.gva.be](http://www.gva.be)
- Het Belang van Limburg – [www.hbvl.be](http://www.hbvl.be)

## SOME ENGLISH-LANGUAGE MEDIA WHICH PROVIDE A LOOK AT FLANDERS:

- Flandersnews: The news website of the Flemish public radio and television service (VRT), Flandersnews carries information in English about all the major Belgian and international issues. The Dutch, French, English and German versions of the website can be found at: [www.redactie.be](http://www.redactie.be) (Dutch) / [www.flandreinfo.be](http://www.flandreinfo.be) (French) / [www.flanderninfo.be](http://www.flanderninfo.be) (German) / [www.flandersnews.be](http://www.flandersnews.be) (English).
- Fans of Flanders: A programme created by the Flemish public television service (VRT), *Fans of Flanders* broadcasts information in English about life and news in Flanders with a touch of humour. Fans of Flanders also has an extensive website ([www.fansofflanders.be](http://www.fansofflanders.be)) carrying light-hearted video clips and a weekly newsletter.
- Xpats.com: Created by Belgium's largest media group, Xpats.com is targeted on the international community in Belgium, featuring various subjects, such as Belgian news, European affairs, politics, the economy, lifestyle topics, advice about shopping, the home, cinema, restaurants and an extensive events calendar for Brussels.
- The Bulletin: [www.thebulletin.be](http://www.thebulletin.be): allows you to subscribe to a daily newsletter carrying topical items about the day's events.
- Flanders Today: A free English-language newspaper that is published every week, Flanders Today keeps track of events in Flanders, featuring articles about the economy, science, sports, art and culture in Flanders. Flanders Today has an English-language website and a weekly newsletter.

# THE LANGUAGE BORDER: A RICH HISTORY

Belgium is, and has always been, a complex country. On a map this is illustrated by the language border which really cuts Belgium in two. The language border delineates two language areas: the Dutch and the French. Throughout the years the language border has been officially defined and it has become a federated state border within Belgium. However, the language border existed long before that and it is much older than Belgium itself.

The exact age of the language border is unknown. It is generally accepted that the language border arose around the fourth century. For centuries, this border hardly had any significance at all. In the Middle Ages, Latin was the prevailing language. Afterwards, more and more people started to use French. Around the 18th century, French was the language spoken by the social and political elite almost everywhere in Europe. When Belgium was annexed by the French Republic in 1795, the administration, courts, army, media and education were called on to Frenchify Flanders. This Frenchification continued even when Belgium was annexed to the Verenigd Koninkrijk der Nederlanden (United Kingdom of the Netherlands) in 1815. The Dutch authorities tried to turn the tide, but their efforts failed when Belgium seceded in 1830 and became independent.

The young state of Belgium guaranteed language freedom and also entered this principle in the Constitution. However, the reality turned out differently. The then rulers chose French as the language of administration. French became the language of the political, social and economic elite. The Dutch language was hardly taught, had little cultural prestige and was not a standard language. As a result, the centuries-old language border turned more and more into a social border as well: the French-speaking upper class versus a mainly Dutch-speaking lower class.

The opposition in Flanders to this distorted situation only gradually got into its stride. Consequently, the fight for emancipation and the linguistic conflict lasted a long time. Overall, it would take more than a century before the demographic prevalence in Flanders could also be translated into political influence. A first important step was the Equality Act in 1898, which recognised Dutch as an official language and placed it on the same footing as French. Still, the practical consequences remained limited. Wallonia continued to be monolingually French, while Flanders remained bilingual. Moreover, French continued



to be the language of the social elite in Flanders and Brussels. University studies could not be attended in Dutch anywhere in Flanders. In the first decades of the 20th century the Flemish battle concentrated on the Dutchification of the state university in Ghent. This battle was won in 1930, but it was 1968 before the age-old Flemish university of Leuven became monolingually Dutch.

In 1921, Belgium was subdivided into two monolingual areas (Flanders and Wallonia) and the bilingual area of Brussels. From then on, the language of the area also had to be the language of administration. Although the country's political elite recognised that Flanders had a fully-fledged language and culture, the French-speaking bourgeoisie retained a lot of safeguards in Flanders too.

In 1932 the principle of territoriality was introduced. From then onwards, the rule of the 'language of the area being the language of administration' also applied in Flanders. Nevertheless, transitional measures were still in place for French speakers. In addition, the language border had still not been fixed. Every ten years it could be adjusted on the basis of the results of the language censuses. These adjustments were practically always made to the disadvantage of Dutch speakers.

Finally, the language border in Belgium was laid down by law on 8 November 1962. This was done with a democratic majority of Dutch and French speakers. One year later, the language legislation for administrative affairs was thoroughly reformed. The language border was now linked to the concept of language area. At that time Belgium was also subdivided into the four language areas: the Dutch language area, the French language area, the German language area and the bilingual Brussels-Capital area. Each Belgian municipality is unmistakably part of one – and only one – of these four language areas.

In 1970 the language areas were also embedded in the Constitution. Again, this was done with a majority of Dutch and French speakers. At the same time it was agreed to what extent these language borders and language areas could still be changed in the future. The idea was mainly to prevent the language border from being adjusted every other day, which would make it impossible for the different language communities to coexist in Belgium. Another objective was to avoid one single language community having the power to redraw the language border all by itself.



# WHY IS BELGIUM NOT JUST BILINGUAL?

Although Belgium has three official languages, only the Brussels-Capital Region is officially bilingual. The other federated states are officially monolingual. This is the result of a political evolution that started with the establishment of Belgium in 1831.

Belgium is neither bilingual nor trilingual. In fact, this would mean that both French and Dutch are spoken everywhere in the country, by the population as well as by the authorities. Belgium is subdivided into three monolingual language areas and the bilingual Brussels-Capital Region. Many foreigners ask themselves why Belgium is not just entirely bilingual. This probably seems logical and would make the current complex structure superfluous. However, history has decided otherwise.

Upon the establishment of Belgium, French was introduced as the standard language by an administrative elite who invoked language freedom so that they would not have to learn the language of the majority of the common people. Gradually, this elite faced mounting opposition in Flanders where many Dutch speakers wanted laws to protect their language. Such laws would result in equal treatment of Dutch and French in all sectors of society. As soon as the language laws were introduced the problem arose as to how they were to be enforced. Those who did not want to learn the language with a lower status - Dutch - started to sabotage matters. This revealed the limited nature of the language laws. Later on, the Vlaamse Beweging (Flemish Movement) would therefore argue in favour of delineated language areas.

Belgium was finally subdivided into language areas when the language border was fixed in 1962. It is a strict but clear subdivision: in Brussels both Dutch and French are official languages; in Flanders only Dutch and in Wallonia only French.

Mom!  
I don't  
understand  
this soup!



# WHY DO THE FLEMISH PEOPLE HOLD SO STRONGLY TO THE MONOLINGUALISM IN THE VLAAMSE RAND?

The Vlaamse Rand around Brussels is experiencing fast-paced changes. The growing urban pressure in Brussels has prompted large numbers of people to leave the city. Many of the new arrivals are people who have no knowledge of Dutch. As a result, the local inhabitants and authorities are seeing the rural and Flemish character of their municipalities being eroded. The peripheral municipalities are trying to deal with this situation by encouraging non-Dutch speakers to learn the local language and helping young Dutch-speaking inhabitants to find affordable homes.

## THE VLAAMSE RAND



Nineteen Flemish municipalities around Brussels belong to the Vlaamse Rand. These include all municipalities bordering the Brussels-Capital Region or one of the municipalities with facilities. The six municipalities with facilities belong to this group of 19.

## FRENCHIFICATION / COSMOPOLITISM

The region around Brussels was literally a Flemish periphery for a very long time. Conducted in 1846, the first census shows that 98% of the population was Dutch-speaking. One hundred years later, only 6% of the inhabitants claimed to know only French but the number of people who said that they spoke French the most or exclusively had risen to 14% in terms of averages.

However, the fast-growing trend towards suburbanisation in the Western World also arrived here in the 1960s. The middle class flight from the city of Brussels resulted in the gradual Frenchification of the Rand. In the wake of Brussels' designation as the capital of Europe, expats followed the same path: well-off European civil servants and people working for multinationals, who generally stay in the region on a temporary basis. More recently, there has been a surge in the number of 'ordinary' migrants. The Rand has therefore become an incredibly diverse region, made up of over 100 different nationalities: one in three inhabitants is of non-Belgian origin while the figure is as high as four in ten in the north-eastern part of the Rand. This influx has also led to a huge language shift.

A recent survey (BRIO language barometer) reports about 80 languages. Dutch is apparently not the common language as it is in other parts of Flanders. It is still the language most frequently used in the home environment but a higher number of people know French. 78% of the people interviewed said that their knowledge of French was good to excellent, while 68% of the individuals asked claimed that their familiarity with Dutch was good to excellent. 47% of the interviewees reported a good to excellent knowledge of English. This shows the extent to which Dutch is coming under pressure owing to the ever-growing number of people who can use internationally important languages and to the Rand's geographical location (bordering on Brussels and on Wallonia in the south, regions with different language provisions).

In spite of their language skills, Dutch-speakers would obviously rather not see their own language's status as the most frequently used common language being eroded. Dutch-speaking people are proud of their culture and language, which is the only official language in Flanders (and, consequently, in the Vlaamse Rand). They are keen to experience and share their culture with newcomers, in the language of that culture. This is a perfectly natural attitude, one that is seen elsewhere in the world, where a language is being oppressed in an environment where the domination of the 'major' languages undermines the respect for and use of the indigenous language. Hence it is perfectly understandable that Flemish people should continue to defend unilingualism in Flanders and the Vlaamse Rand. Obviously, while fully respecting the constitutional freedoms.



## FLEMISH POLICY

The policy adopted by the municipalities and Flemish authorities is therefore intended to focus more on the social fabric and community building. Promoting a common language, obviously Dutch, forms an integral part of this policy. That is why measures are being taken to protect the Dutch-speaking character of the region. A lot of local politicians in the Vlaamse Rand are anxious to strengthen the Dutch-speaking character of their municipalities, for instance by encouraging the use of Dutch (and often also discouraging the use of other languages in the public forum). The use of Dutch is compulsory in municipal administrations, except for municipalities with language facilities. Similarly, retailers are often urged to speak in the language of the region, encouraging non-Dutch speakers to learn the language. However, there are exceptions for when Flemish municipalities may use other languages, such as in recognised tourist centres.

# WHY DO THE MUNICIPALITIES IN THE VLAAMSE RAND AROUND BRUSSELS CONTINUE TO BE FLEMISH, EVEN WHEN THEY ARE INHABITED BY A MAJORITY OF FOREIGN SPEAKERS?

The municipalities in the Rand around Brussels belong to the Dutch language area. Due to the fact that a lot of French speakers have recently moved to these municipalities in the Rand, more and more inhabitants speak French there. In the municipalities with facilities the French-speaking inhabitants are even in the majority. However, officially, these municipalities in the Rand continue to be exclusively Dutch-speaking. The reason for this is that, like in some other federal countries, the principle of territoriality applies in Belgium. geldt immers het territorialiteitsbeginsel, zoals in wel meer federale landen.

## INTERNATIONALISATION IN THE VLAAMSE RAND

A significant number of 420,000 inhabitants in the 19 municipalities in the Vlaamse Rand around Brussels are foreign speakers. Their exact number is unknown. In recent decades, the six municipalities with facilities experienced a great deal of Frenchification and internationalisation as well. Yet these municipalities continue to belong to the Dutch language area, and, apart from their exception status, Dutch is still the official language there. To many foreigners this situation is hard to comprehend. However, it is the result of a balanced set of agreements between the language communities in Belgium.

## PRINCIPLE OF TERRITORIALITY

With the subdivision of our country into language areas, the principle of territoriality was also introduced. This means that the language of the area is also the language of administration, education and courts. In practice, the Dutch language must be used in these fields everywhere in Flanders, even when in some municipalities the majority of the inhabitants speak another language. In fact, this same rule applies to the French and German language areas. Over the years, French and Dutch speakers have shaped the principle of territoriality together. Moreover, it is laid down in the Constitution and can therefore not easily be modified. Besides, there is no political majority for this.

## THE RESULT OF AN HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

The language border cannot be adjusted just like that. This requires a *special majority* in the federal parliament. This means that the proposal for amendment must be backed up with a two-thirds majority in the House of Representatives and the Senate and that in each language group a majority of MPs must back the law. Consequently, the language border can only be changed if a majority can be found for this, both among the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking MPs. Dutch speakers and French speakers can never modify the language border unilaterally. The fact that some Flemish municipalities are home to a lot of French and foreign speakers does not change anything. Since the Flemish politicians in particular are unwilling to discuss any modifications to the language border, there is little chance that this situation will change in the near future.

## NOT JUST IN BELGIUM

Belgium is not the only country whose federal model is built around the principle of territoriality. It is also applied in other multilingual countries, such as Switzerland. The underlying rationale there is the same as in Belgium. A living language is inextricably linked to a territory and to the people living in that territory.

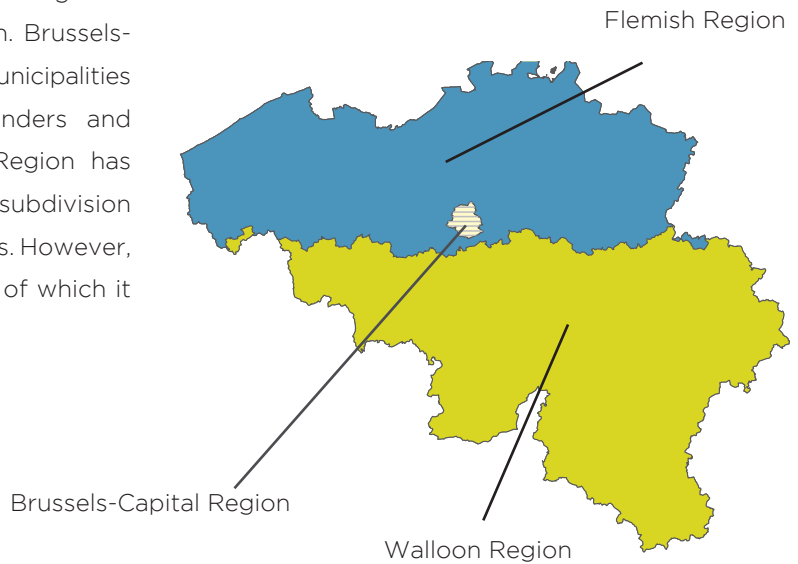
# WHY IS BRUSSELS BILINGUAL WHEN ONLY A MINORITY OF DUTCH SPEAKERS LIVE THERE?

Why is English not an official language in an international city such as Brussels?

Brussels is bilingual: French and Dutch are the official languages there. Yet Brussels is home to only a minority of Flemish people. This may sound strange, but the reason is simple. For centuries, Brussels was a Dutch-speaking city and today it is still the capital of Flanders.

## BRUSSELS-CAPITAL REGION

The nineteen Brussels municipalities together form the Brussels-Capital Region. Brussels-Capital is one of these nineteen municipalities as well as the capital of Flanders and Belgium. The Brussels-Capital Region has been officially bilingual since the subdivision of our country into language areas. However, Brussels is enclosed in Flanders, of which it is also the capital.



By making Brussels the capital of Flanders and establishing the Flemish Government, the Flemish Parliament and the administration there, Flanders has opted to emphasise the close relationship between Flanders and Brussels. However, Brussels is also the capital of Belgium and Europe and has consequently grown into a multicultural metropolis. Thirty per cent of the more than 1 million residents are foreigners. Although Brussels is officially bilingual, in reality it has been multilingual for a long time. It goes without saying that the Flemish minority (including the hundreds of thousands of commuters travelling from Flanders to Brussels each day) have the right to be helped in its own language here. The many foreigners living in Brussels on the other hand cannot expect this, or even the right to use English, which sometimes causes resentment. This can be explained partly through history, partly through politics.

## FROM A DUTCH-SPEAKING TO A MULTILINGUAL CITY

Historically speaking, Brussels is a Dutch-speaking city. From its creation in the tenth century until the eighteenth century Brussels was almost exclusively Dutch-speaking. In the nineteenth century, following the independence of Belgium, the language relations changed. Because Belgium chose French as its official language, the French language started to dominate public life and it became the language of the courts, administration, army, culture and media. As the language of the political and economic elite, the French language developed into a status symbol.

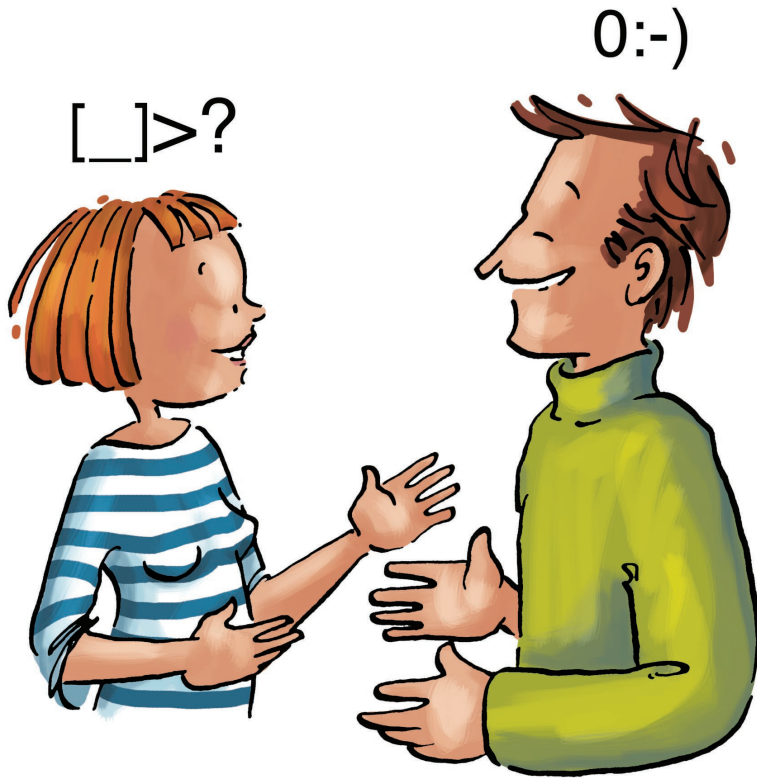
As the new capital, Brussels experienced a population explosion. In 1830 Brussels had 50,000 inhabitants. In 1875 this grew to 250,000 and in 1914 to 750,000. As the political, financial and economic centre Brussels had a French-speaking upper and middle class. Because primary and secondary education was only provided in French, the French language gradually also permeated the lower social classes. The many immigrants, most of whom originated from Flanders, were forced to speak French if they wanted to climb the social ladder. This caused the Frenchification of Brussels to continue at a rapid pace.

## OFFICIALLY BILINGUAL

When Belgium was subdivided into four language areas in 1962, Brussels became officially bilingual. The bilingual area continued to be limited to the nineteen municipalities that formed the Brussels metropolitan area. In 1989, the borders of Brussels and its bilingual status were re-confirmed. This was done with a special parliamentary majority. In both chambers of the federal parliament two thirds of the MPs adopted the law with a majority in both the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking language groups. Since the Flemish are in the minority in Brussels, so is their political representation in the capital. Today, the Flemish have a guaranteed representation in the Brussels parliament. When a Brussels municipality appoints a Flemish alderman/alderwoman, it receives additional funds.

## ENGLISH AS A FOURTH NATIONAL LANGUAGE?

Because of the large number of foreign speakers, some suggest the idea of introducing English as the fourth national language. This would allow the many international residents in Brussels to be addressed in English. Although this may seem advisable for the international community, it seems unfeasible both practically and politically. In fact, Brussels and its public services are already struggling with the current bilingual status.



# WHY DOES FLANDERS REFUSE TO RATIFY THE FRAMEWORK CONVENTION FOR THE PROTECTION OF NATIONAL MINORITIES?

Belgium has not yet ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. The reason for this is that the Flemish Parliament has not yet adopted the Convention. Flanders does not have any problems with the spirit of the Convention. However, it fears that French speakers living in Flanders will invoke this Convention to enforce additional rights, whereas they cannot be considered a minority according to the Flemish Parliament.

## THE FRAMEWORK CONVENTION FOR THE PROTECTION OF NATIONAL MINORITIES

The Minorities Convention was drawn up on the initiative of the Council of Europe, some years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Because a number of states were falling apart and citizens acquired a different nationality from one day to the next as a result of that, national tensions in Central and Eastern Europe threatened to flare up. The Council of Europe wanted to prevent this by obliging the Member States to give additional protection to national minorities. The Convention stipulates among other things that the Member States must ensure that recognised minorities have access to the media, are able to follow education in their own language and can use their own language in contacts with the authorities, in order to preserve their own culture and identity.



## THE MINORITIES CONVENTION IN BELGIUM

On 31 July 2001, the Belgian federal government signed the Convention within the framework of a broader agreement (the Lambermont Agreement) between the Communities. However, a number of nuances were made. These imply that the Convention must not detract from the constitutional provisions and the language laws. In order for the Minorities Convention to be ratified by Belgium, it must also be adopted by the federated state parliaments. Flanders refuses this, as a result of which the Minorities Convention has not yet been ratified by Belgium. The discussion concentrates on the question of whether the French speakers living in Flanders can be regarded as a minority as specified in the Minorities Convention.

In 1997 the Flemish Government declared it was unwilling to sign the Convention unless neither Dutch speakers nor French speakers could be regarded as a minority in our country. According to the Flemish Government, both Communities are dominant in their own language area and minorities in the other Region, but they are on an equal footing within the federal structures and within the bilingual Brussels-Capital Region.

However, in an additional Resolution, the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly decided in 2002 that the concept of “national minority” would also refer to regional minorities. In other words, Dutch speakers in Wallonia and French speakers in Flanders. The 2014 Flemish coalition agreement explicitly states that the majority parties will not ratify the Convention. This has nothing to do with the spirit of the Convention, but everything to do with the impact it may have on relations between the Communities in our country. The current institutional organisation and language legislation are the result of an historical compromise. The Belgian state structure already contains several mechanisms to protect minorities, including the special majorities, the “alarm bell” procedure, the conflicts of interest, the parity-based composition of the supreme courts (Court of Cassation, Council of State and Constitutional Court) and the parity in the federal and Brussels governments.

## THE MINORITIES CONVENTION IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Apart from Belgium, Luxemburg, Iceland and Greece have not ratified the Convention either. Andorra, France, Monaco and Turkey have up till now neither signed nor ratified the Convention.



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Text (2011)

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Revision (2015)

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Bernadette Vriamont

Lay-out

Sylvie Van de Waeter, Agentschap voor Binnenlands Bestuur (editie 2011)

Heartwork (editie 2015)

Illustrations

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At first sight, Belgium is a complex country, with its four language areas, three Communities and three Regions. Outsiders who come to live here for a shorter or longer period of time cannot always make sense of this Belgian structure. This booklet is to help them gain a better understanding of it. It contains ten practical questions with cut-and-dried answers. It is written for expats, but can be used by anyone who wants to acquire a greater understanding of Belgium in a practical manner.



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More information about the regions around Brussels: [docu.vlaamserand.be](http://docu.vlaamserand.be)