

The linguistic territoriality principle: a historian's perspective

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There are three levels of discussion.

1. The normative framework

I would like to congratulate Philippe Van Parijs for spelling out this framework by highlighting the generality of some basic mechanisms, with as an interesting starting point how to secure "linguistic justice" and "equality of dignity" (or "parity of esteem"). Therefore chapter 5 of his book (Van Parijs 2011) opens with the "American in Waterloo" anecdote, as an illustration of a "colonial" linguistic attitude, the mentality of many French-speakers in Flanders, especially in the past.

Basically, there is no contradiction with the frame of reference in our book (2011): a sociolinguistic one (the interference between a language with a superior status and a language with an inferior status) and the relationship between nation building and language policies. This also corresponds with the theory of the Czech author Miroslav Hroch (1995), based on an international comparative study regarding the evolution of non-dominant ethnic groups. They could develop three important demands for the right to self-determination: first, the development or improvement of a national culture, based on a local language which had to be used in education, administration and economic life; secondly, the creation of a complete social structure, including their "own" educated elites and entrepreneurial classes; thirdly, the achievement of equal civil rights and of some degree of political self-administration. The latter was negotiable. So, I agree with the evolution sketched by Van Parijs: a territorial regime requires administrative borders, it does not require these borders to be political ones, nor the borders of sovereign states as a consequence of secession. It all depends on the political and socio-economic context.

In this sense, Belgium is a rather unique laboratory, because it has passed through virtually all stages in its internal development: unitary state; protective language legislation; principle of coercive territoriality; functional cultural autonomy, broadcasting and education; phased development of a federal state based on communities and regions with their own institutions, competences and finances; evolution towards a form of "confederalism", starting with the splitting up of the national parties. The acquisition of partial autonomy based on a structure governed by public law can then be the criterion for nationalism, namely Flemish and Walloon nationalism.

Quite interesting was the implementation of the top-down mechanism and even more the bottom-up mechanism, called "Laponce's law": "the kinder the people, the unkind the languages". Other important points of attention on which I will not elaborate here, are:

- Linguistic territoriality, a "coercive linguistic regime" is consistent with respect for fundamental liberties. How coercive a regime is, depends on how extensive its constraints are, how ambitious it is, how general it is, how severe the sanctions are.
- Linguistic territoriality is not the same as linguistic homogeneity.
- Linguistic territoriality must not be confused with the ancestral "right of the soil".
- The problem of "linguistic facilities": the difference made between long time residents, newcomers and newborns, short time residents. The need for cheap and effective language learning facilities.
- The need for a fixed linguistic border to solve never-ending disputes, as was the case between Flanders and Wallonia.
- The application of the European Convention for the protection of minorities, and the difficulty to find a clear definition of "minority", certainly when there is conflict of interest and there are hidden agendas.

2. The choice of historical illustrations

It is very tempting to stress the similarities rather than the differences in each case. Regarding references to Belgium, especially mentioned in Chapter 5 of Van Parijs's (2011) book, I will comment on some basic linguistic elements:

Firstly. A coercive linguistic territoriality regime was an option originally taken by the Walloon movement. It rejected each form of bilingualism in Wallonia, even in the interaction between highly educated children of the Walloon bourgeoisie and an underclass of Flemish immigrants. It considered monolingual French in Belgium as a dam in terms of territory and in terms of career possibilities. It was the main reason, together with the alliance of the Walloon socialists with the French-speaking bourgeoisie in Flanders, why the Flemish question became a free question in the socialist party just before the first World War. However, it is noteworthy that in contrast with the Walloon socialist Jules Destrée quoted by Van Parijs (2011, chapter 5, fn 61), Célestin Demblon, who belonged to the same party as a representative for Liège, had already pointed out in 1909: "Either we give the Flemish workers in Wallonia the same [linguistic] rights as the Walloon workers in Flanders [...] or the outcome will be administrative separation". Yet, even a superior language may prefer to hide behind a linguistic barrier, depending on specific political and socio-economic circumstances. A linguistic territoriality regime was willingly adopted by the Flemish movement. According to the principle of reciprocity both movements agreed in the 1930s to give no linguistic rights to their minorities. In Wallonia, unlike in Flanders, no exceptions were allowed. After having chosen in principle for two unilingual territories, the following step was a fixed border and the strengthening of the Flemish principle of territoriality, which made the transition towards federalization easier.

Secondly, there is the effect on national organizations, for example on the central administration in Brussels. At the request of the Walloons, a bilingualism of the services was introduced, combined with monolingualism of the civil servants. These were divided according to language roles, between which there should be a fair balance, later converted into equality. The knowledge of the second national language was limited to a minimal number of positions. This exposed the key issue: the linguistic problem as a social problem regarding linguistic criteria for recruitment, appointment and promotion. French speakers dominated the administration. Bilingualism was seen as a competitive advantage for Flemings. As a result the Walloons chose to give up a considerable part of the labour market in order

to secure as many monolingual French speaking jobs as possible. The administrative elite tried to limit the danger through bureaucratic infighting based on an authoritarian corporate culture. So, only slow progress was made to this fair balance, with large scale evasions in some departments, which gave rise to dissatisfaction on the Flemish side. In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs "equality" was only reached around 1970. Another consequence was a growing Flemish demand for splitting linguistically some administrations, starting with the Ministry of Education. Yet, the political choice for the principle of territoriality influenced the linguistic organization of the central administration and further weakened a Belgian identity.

Finally, there is the role of the capital. Here again, political choices have been made. For almost one and a half century Brussels did not play the role of a bilingual capital between Flanders and Wallonia. That was the result of an "accommodating" linguistic regime, strongly defended by the francophone elite, disregarding the language laws where possible, in order to turn the agglomeration into a merely francophone city. The principle of bilinguality was not accepted and later on only slowly put into practice. Indeed, the process of Frenchification only stopped in the 1970s. One of the reasons was that Flanders got control of its own separate cultural and educational network. Besides, the language laws of 1963 guaranteed bilingualism and the recruitment of Dutch-speaking civil servants. These laws were also applied in a minimalist way in a number of municipalities and avoided whenever possible. Afterwards, in 1980, the Brussels Capital Region also opted for bilingualism of the services, based on monolingualism of the civil servants. Today francophone politicians demand the same mechanism for the Brussels communes and a change in the language law. At the same time, from 1966 on, Flanders had become the strongest economic region and economic power generated linguistic power, with effects on the labour market and a growing demand for bilingual personnel. In short, in one generation Dutch was recognized as a standard language with a high status.

3. The current situation

It cannot be denied that for a very long time Flanders kept Belgium linguistically together. French was the obligatory second language in education, while in Wallonia the pupils had the choice between Dutch, English and German and in the French-speaking schools in Brussels Dutch was neglected.

The recent evolution in Wallonia's language policies is most interesting as they emphasize multilingualism in education (the French Community advocating immersion schools), in tourism and museum sectors. It is also part of the "Marshall-plan" (2005) in order to revitalize the Walloon economy. Moreover, individual language facilities on the internet are already implemented in some Walloon communes. Changes can also be seen in the attitude of French-speaking politicians. Meanwhile, in Flanders there is an accelerating spreading of English in the academic world, recognized as the worldwide lingua franca, vital for appointments and promotions, and with an increasing effect on the curricula.

There are two main points of discussion: the linguistic border between the Brussels Capital Region and Flanders, and the future status of the Brussels Capital Region. In my opinion, an intentional weakening of the Flemish position in Brussels and the end of the balances in the design of the Brussels model (the implementation of Plan B on the French-speaking side; the development of a Brussels nationalism) will damage the future existence of Belgium more than the separatist thinking of Flemish-nationalist parties.

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