

# Flemings and Walloons: Encounter in Equivalency

by Pat Patfoort

## The situation in Belgium, and a little bit of history of Belgium

Belgium is subdivided into municipalities (or cities), several municipalities together make up a district (in Dutch and French: arrondissement), several districts together make up a province, and then in Belgium there are **three regions** :

- 1) **The Flemish region or Flanders**, the **Flemish-speaking region** in the North, which corresponds with the Flemish- or Dutch-speaking community, with the Flemish government and parliament;
- 2) **The Walloon region or Wallonia**, with two linguistic communities : the French-speaking and the quite small German-speaking communities (with a government for the French-speaking community and a government for the German-speaking community), but with one regional government for both communities, the government of the Walloon region;
- 3) **The region of Brussels**, with two recognized linguistic communities : the Flemish- or Dutch-speaking community (about 10%) and the French-speaking community, but in addition there are about 50% people speaking other languages. In Brussels there are also many mixed families, many real bilingual people. Brussels is a kind of island in Flanders, but very close to the linguistic frontier with Wallonia. It contains 19 municipalities.

In the Flemish rim around Brussels there are 6 so-called ‘municipalities with (language) facilities’. These are municipalities with special law provisions to protect rights of their (historic) linguistic minorities. Basically, this means that in these municipalities it is possible to relate to the local and federal administration, in one official language other than that of the language area within which the municipality lies (for instance obtain administrative documents). These municipalities with facilities were created after establishing the language frontier between Flanders and Wallonia. In those municipalities there were French as well as Flemish-speakers (with at least 30% of the French-speaking minority), and so this status was a way to make it easier for this minority to live with the new situation. Afterwards quite a few French-speaking people –often coming from Brussels- came to live in those municipalities, but didn’t feel like learning Flemish; so now in most of those municipalities in the rim of Brussels French-speakers people are the majority.

Belgium was created in 1830, after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, almost 200 years ago. Before, Belgium was part of The Netherlands, The Low Countries, and the rich factory owners were French-speaking; the factories were in Wallonia because of the coal mines there. French has also long been a language of power, the ‘cultural’ language in Europe : all the royal courts and the aristocracy in Europe were linked in some way to the royal court of France, and in all of them French was spoken. French was the language of the governors. In fact everything that was not French, was considered dialect. Only French was officially a language, used for writing.

From 1830 till 1932 Belgium was officially monolingual French. With the language law of 1932 Dutch and French were considered as two official languages.

The first Flemish-speaking secondary schools in Flanders were created in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the first Flemish-speaking University started in 1916. For a long time the Flemings felt oppressed by people speaking French, and they struggled to get institutions and education in their own language.

Brussels is originally a Flemish city. The Frenchifying of the population of Brussels started in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, and continued with the establishment of the (French-speaking) government in Brussels<sup>1</sup>. Many people wanted to speak French as it was a power language, considered as 'better' than, 'superior' to Flemish. It was more interesting to be a French-speaker. People speaking Flemish were considered as not-educated; they were the peasants. And in fact many Flemish-speaking people in and around Brussels still consider French as superior; moreover, many French-speaking people living around Brussels are wealthy.

### **The issue of 'BHV' or 'Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde'**

Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde is a (legal and electoral) district. Since the time of Napoleon elections were always organised on the basis of districts. In that time of course there were no subdivisions in language communities and regions as yet (the Flemish, the Walloon and the one of Brussels). But since the division of Belgium into three regions, the federalisation (in 1970), there has been a technical problem with BHV, because there are two regions together in one district: the region of Brussels and the region of Flanders. This is normally not possible. And this issue was not solved at the time of the federalisation.

In 1999, there was a big governmental change: The Christian-Democrats became the opposition after having been in power for a very long time, and the Liberals (with prime minister Verhofstadt), together with the Socialists, formed the government. They decided to replace as the basis for the federal elections the districts by the provinces. This made things easier in some ways, but it was also an advantage for the big political parties. This happened throughout the country, in Flanders and Wallonia also. But Brussels was a problem, because on the one hand Brussels is inside of the Flemish Brabant province, and on the other hand it's also a region, so it is not part of that province. And Brussels, together with Halle and Vilvoorde, constitutes a district.

A district is also a legal unit. This means for BHV that, for instance, if someone commits an offence in a municipality in Halle or Vilvoorde, this has to be handled in Brussels. And as Brussels is a big city, there are very long waiting lists in the court of Brussels, similarly for people in Halle and Vilvoorde.

So how to solve this? Split up Brussels on one hand and Halle and Vilvoorde on the other hand, so that Halle and Vilvoorde would be inside of the electoral unit of the province of Flemish Brabant, and Brussels would be separate? Scrap the region of Brussels? What other solution? The Flemings want this splitting up; the Walloons don't. From the beginning the Walloons said that if BHV were split, then they wanted to talk about the territory of Brussels, i.e. add some part of the rim municipalities with facilities of Brussels to the region of Brussels. And then the Flemings responded : "No, you won't touch our territory" (those municipalities with facilities are part of Flanders).

As Brussels is bilingual and most of the rim municipalities with facilities have a majority of French-speakers now, the extension of Brussels would be advantageous for the French-speaking residents of Brussels. But this extension would also be advantageous for Brussels as Brussels is very poor and in the rim are many affluent people, so it would be helpful for Brussels to levy taxes in the rim. There is also the fact that now to go from Wallonia to Brussels, one needs to go through a little piece of Flanders, as Brussels is an island inside of Flanders. If there were the extension of Brussels with some part of the rim of Brussels, then it

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<sup>1</sup> All governing bodies in Flanders were also in French.

would not be necessary to do that anymore; there would be the so-called 'corridor', this passage from Wallonia to Brussels. This corridor is psychologically very important for the Walloons.

### **The competitive, aggressive and destructive mentality that has been used until now: against one another**

Until now the mentality in which the debate about BHV has been held, was very competitive and destructive: in the so-called **Major-minor or M-m way**<sup>2</sup>. In this mentality **arguments** are used as instruments. Arguments are everything one can find to put the other one down, and oneself above the other one; to put the other one under pressure, to say oneself is right and the other one wrong, to say oneself is good and the other one bad. The most used arguments are (from softer to harder):

- 1) positive arguments: saying positive things about one's own point of view
- 2) glorifying arguments: saying positive things about oneself
- 3) negative arguments: saying negative things about the point of view of the other
- 4) destructive arguments : saying negative things about the other person.

During more than a year that this crisis has lasted (since June 2007), we had lots of those in all directions. Sometimes directly against one another, most of the time about one another (gossiping) and also through the media. See examples below:

#### **From the Flemings:**

- "What we want is just to put the constitution in practice."
- "The decree of the Constitutional Court has to be respected."
- "Agreements must be realized."
- "The reformation of the state is necessary to improve the government of the communities and regions."
- "What we ask/want is for their benefit (of the Walloons)."
- "The Flemish presence in Brussels has to be defended."
- "It only takes 5 minutes political courage to split BHV." (famous statement of the prime minister Leterme during his electoral campaign before June 2007)
- "The Walloons want to restrict the territory of Flanders to get more votes."
- "They want to have a larger French electoral district in Flanders, so that top French political people can also get votes in Flanders." (for instance in the area of Vilvoorde)
- "They apply double standards implementing the old electoral legislation."
- "They take away Flemish territory."
- "A Flemish patient cannot be helped in Flemish in hospitals in Brussels. This problem happens mostly with doctors and specialists. This is awful!"
- "They take away our money!"
- "They say they don't have money, but the government of the French community can find money for the French schools in the rim of Brussels, or to subsidize a French paper in Flanders!"
- "Many Walloons deny their Flemish roots."
- "Look back at the history of Belgium : The French speaking people have always presented Belgium as unilingual, French!" (the ambassadors for instance were from the French speaking bourgeoisie). "They didn't care how we felt at that time."

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<sup>2</sup> See more about the Major-minor model on [www.patpatfoort.be](http://www.patpatfoort.be)

- "Everything was originally written in French, starting with the constitution in 1830. The official Flemish emancipation in Flanders started only from 1961/1962! The Francophones didn't respect us, they didn't listen to us, they didn't worry about us."
- "They never apologized for all that they did to us!"
- "We are paying for the Francophones!"
- "You Francophones don't want to do anything to reform the state!"
- "Walloon are a real burden!"
- "They are hypocrite, dishonest!"
- "Walloon are lazy. So they should not complain about not having enough money."
- "Since 1830 you have exploited us, because of our language, and it still happens in Brussels!"
- "The Francophones are blocking everything!"
- "The Francophones always say 'no', you can't talk with them, they only want to get and never to give anything."

**From the Francophones:**

- "We are many Francophones in BHV, not only in Brussels but also in the rim municipalities with facilities."
- "Following the Convention for the Minorities of the Council of Europe we should be protected as a minority."
- "It all worked well when there was only one province of Brabant for the elections<sup>3</sup>."
- "This is a next step...the 'conclusive step'...to the falling apart of Belgium."
- "They always want more."
- "They want to get this for free...without giving anything in exchange."
- "They want to restrict Brussels to nothing...smother it to conquer it afterwards."
- "For years you wanted the Prime Minister to be a Fleming, you don't accept a Walloon Prime minister<sup>4</sup>."
- "By always carrying out more divisions we are going to get to have lapses like in Leuven in those days!"
- "Many Flemings deny their Walloon roots."
- "Flemings harbour feelings of hate against the Walloons!"
- "You are selfish when you forget what we have done for you on the socio-economic level!"
- "All Flemings are extremists, separatists, anti-royalists, members of the Vlaams Belang extreme right party!"
- "Flemings are closed and racist."
- "We have to defend ourselves against those arrogant Flemings who think they can buy anything they desire."
- "They are too stupid."
- "You only break off and never build up!"

**Similar arguments used by both sides :**

- "It's their fault if..."
- "We are right."
- "They don't do anything so that..."
- "They are hard of hearing, they are stubborn."
- "The problem is with them."
- "They are too rigid."
- "They have to give in."

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<sup>3</sup> Now there are two: Flemish Brabant and Walloon Brabant.

<sup>4</sup> The last French speaking Prime Minister was in 1973.

- “We want to convince them of...”
  - “They have to...”
  - “They are not open to accept our requirements.”
- and all kinds of judgments, provocations, threats.

It is clear after more than one year that this approach is not only failing to bring a solution, but also is making everybody feel bad. The work of the federal government has been blocked for one year –with negative consequences for the country and the Belgian population-, and many people are afraid of the future.

**The cooperative and constructive mentality that could be used from now on: together with one another**

Another approach to use and communicate with is the model of the **Equivalency- or E-model**<sup>5</sup>. This is a cooperative and constructive way, in which the focus is on the process and not on the solution, even if the result of the process is itself a solution. Going from the Major-minor model towards the Equivalent model is called transformation of conflicts.

In the system of the Equivalency, arguments are not used, but they are replaced by **foundations**. These are the instruments of the Equivalency. They are the needs, the feelings, the fears, the values, the habits, the objectives, the interests of both parties: this means every statement that answers the question ‘why?’ each has his or her point of view. And they are formulated following very precise guidelines. **A very important point about foundations is that there are no good or bad foundations, no right or wrong ones.** So when you read foundations: if you judge them, criticise them or pull them to pieces, if you refute them or laugh at them –even just with a little smile or inside of yourself-, be aware that you are not reading foundations anymore, you are going back from the constructive Equivalency system to the destructive Major-minor system, you are going backwards transforming foundations back into arguments.

A mixed group of Flemings and Francophones came together in October 2007<sup>6</sup>, during two whole days, to work on putting their relationship into the system of the Equivalency. They made an analysis of what could be the foundations of Flemings and Francophones in relation to their contradictory points of view of splitting BHV or not.

Here below, you find the foundations for both points of view:

**(Important notice:** Be aware, that, if you really want to read foundations and thus think and work in a constructive and Equivalent way, you can’t judge or criticise any of them. If you do, it’s not a foundation anymore, but you transform it back into an argument)

<b><u>Flemings:</u> We want to split BHV.</b>	<b><u>Francophones:</u> We don’t want to split BHV</b>
1. I have the feeling the Francophones want to dominate. 2. I am afraid that the legal sentence won’t be respected. 3. I would feel bad then. 4. I don’t feel at home in my own municipality.	1. We are afraid it would be one step closer to the end of Belgium. 2. We are afraid that this makes Brussels poorer. 3. As French speaking people in Brussels, we need to continue to be connected with the two regions.

<sup>5</sup> See also [www.patpatfoort.be](http://www.patpatfoort.be)

<sup>6</sup> See the articles about this session, in Flemish and French, on [www.patpatfoort.be](http://www.patpatfoort.be)

<p>5. I think that the French speaking people can speak their own language here on Flemish territory, but that this can't happen in the other direction</p> <p>6. I feel discriminated against by that.</p> <p>7. I have the feeling I always have to take Francophones into account.</p> <p>8. I'm tired of that.</p> <p>9. I have the feeling there are always problems.</p> <p>10. I'm tired of that.</p> <p>11. I'm afraid we shall be again put at a disadvantage as happened in the old days in Brabant.</p> <p>12. I have the feeling it will be easier without Francophones.</p> <p>13. I have the feeling the Francophones want more.</p> <p>14. We feel cheated.</p> <p>15. We felt humiliated and have the feeling it's happening again.</p> <p>16. We are afraid to fall back into the minor-position, which we felt for so long.</p> <p>17. We need to feel appreciated for what we have achieved.</p> <p>18. We need to make feel we can defend ourselves.</p> <p>19. We feel humiliated that even the Royal Family raises its children in French.</p> <p>20. I am afraid for the inequality in the implementation of the law.</p> <p>21. I experienced a case where I think it happened.</p> <p>22. I feel this is a question of violation of the principle of equality (that here the province should not be the electoral unit as in the rest of the country).</p> <p>23. I am sure this will be electorally advantageous for us.</p>	<p>4. We have the feeling that otherwise we would feel isolated.</p> <p>5. I am afraid to lose the richness of the mixed cultural offer in Brussels.</p> <p>6. I don't feel like a Walloon, I feel my identity is 'Belgian Francophone', I am afraid of everything that threatens the existence of Belgium.</p> <p>7. As 'Belgian Francophone' I am afraid to lose my identity.</p> <p>8. I am afraid of the negative image this would give to the rest of the world.</p> <p>9. I feel 'pushed against the wall' always having to give up more under the law of the strongest.</p> <p>10. I am afraid that this conflict will degenerate into a physical confrontation (as in Leuven, Voeren,...)</p> <p>11. I feel humiliated and not respected, by being considered as a millstone.</p> <p>12. I need more openness than closeness.</p> <p>13. I have the feeling we don't build up enough together, but destroy, on both sides.</p> <p>14. We are afraid to look ridiculous in the frame of the EU process of expansion.</p> <p>15. We feel put in a minor-position for some years.</p> <p>16. We feel hurt when we have the feeling that our capacities and our intelligence are contested.</p> <p>17. We feel excluded and sad when we have the impression that Flemings first feel Fleming before Belgian.</p> <p>18. We are afraid this will be electorally disadvantageous for us.</p>
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In fact, both are afraid to be dominated, the Flemings because of the past, the Walloons because of the situation now. Flanders has been very poor in the past, but is now much richer than Wallonia. Wallonia has been very rich in the past century, but now their industry is out-of-date.

We could redo the same exercise for the two following contradictory points of view:

<b><u>Flemings:</u> We don't want to expand Brussels.</b>	<b><u>Francophones:</u> We want to expand Brussels.</b>
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and we probably would find many similar foundations to those listed above.

Having done this exercise or reading about it is of course completely different. Therefore I like to add comments given by participants of this group of Flemings and Francophones at the evaluation of this exercise:

- Nominating foundations is quite confrontational.
- I became aware how little I know from the other side.
- I have the feeling I am considered as enemy, and I don't feel I deserve that.
- I have a feeling of weakness and humiliation.
- I have a feeling of powerlessness that hate and the law of the strongest will triumph.
- I have the feeling that the other is locked up in a similar prison as mine.
- I feel shame for what some of my people do.
- Everyone wants to have an opinion about the issue, but this often leads to simplification in the arguments.
- The groups whip one another on.
- I think very often I am quickly hurt and then also very quickly want to defend myself, and so attack the other one.
- I see how many prejudices I have, and how often they disturb my communication with others.
- It's difficult for me to get rid of many prejudices, condemnations and taboos.
- We have to become more conscious of our own foundations, particularly those usually considered as 'unacceptable'.
- At both sides we have to work on foundations which could be considered as 'violent'.
- I like very much the postulate to accept the foundations of the other one, whatever they are, without judgment. This is his/her truth.
- In Belgium, surely in the media, people almost never talk on this level. And this perpetuates the Major-minor process.
- This is qualitative communication.
- Arguments (the instruments of the Major-minor system) are generalizations, are superficial.
- We often see few positive things in the other side, because of the polarization caused by the arguments.
- We don't see the advantage anymore in the fact of having the other, we don't see what we should miss if he wouldn't be there anymore, and this is because we are blinded by the arguments.
- Everyone feels in a minor-position, and from there the arguments grow to put oneself in the Major-position.
- In the hardest arguments one says devastating things, but with the foundations one expresses the same things without reproaching the other one or condemning him or her.
- Finally I thought foundations (of the Equivalent system) were easier to find than arguments (of the Major-minor system): we met two different human natures, but it's the same human 'dough'.

## **Conclusion**

Just two days ago the Prime minister tendered his resignation to the King, and so the country is once more in crisis because the discussions between the Flemish and the Walloon communities became so difficult, with the central issue of splitting BHV. It becomes more and more clear to everyone that it can't continue in the same way, in the Major-minor way. Since June 2007, the arguments among and against both have become more and more severe and sharp. And what is the result of such an escalation? People feel bad, hopeless, paralysed, angry. And no solution has emerged.

On the other hand, in the mentality and with the method of Equivalency, a real dialogue can develop. Therefore we need to develop better listening, an open and respectful listening towards the other for who he or she is, with the feelings, needs and fears he or she might have. Listening and accepting the other one, as he or she is, is not a weakness, is not losing face, is not losing. Not 'winning' doesn't necessarily mean 'losing'; it also can mean 'winning together'. We also have to learn to express our feelings and needs in a non-aggressive way, so as to make it easier for the other side to listen to us. We need to be able to communicate while we let go of what the solution could be; otherwise we won't be able to really communicate in an Equivalent way. If we can do all this, we won't be little and weak, but on the contrary very strong and big. And out of this process a satisfying and realistic solution may finally arise.

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