

Do we still understand each other ?

A cross-cultural analysis of discourse
practices in French and Dutch television
debates

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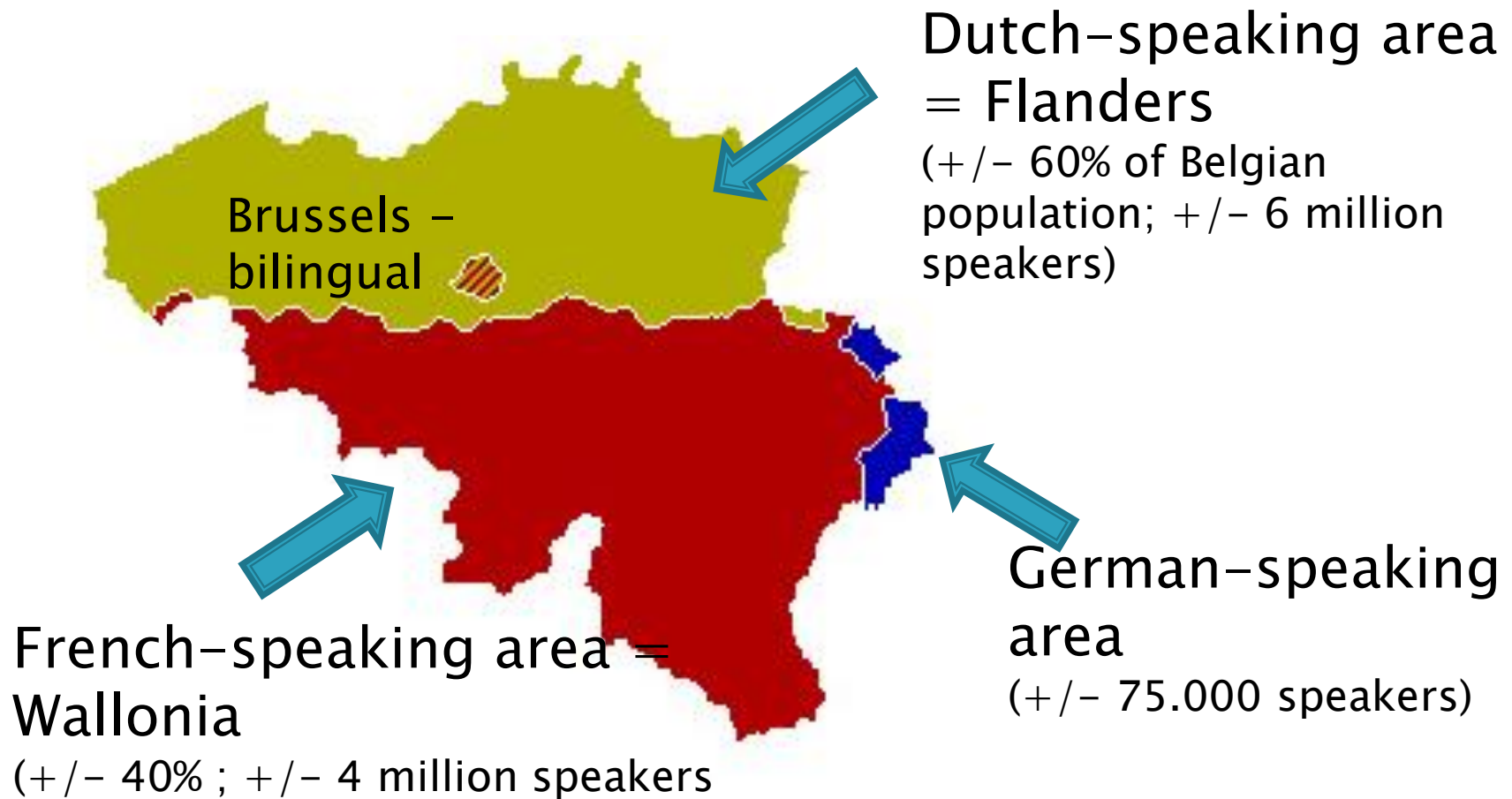
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Intro: "Belgium for dummies"...

Linguistic & political situation

Language communities in Belgium



Political crises...
State Reforms...
Growing autonomy...
Growing distance...

Two democracies, two distinct public spheres (e.g. Sinardet 2009).

Illustrations

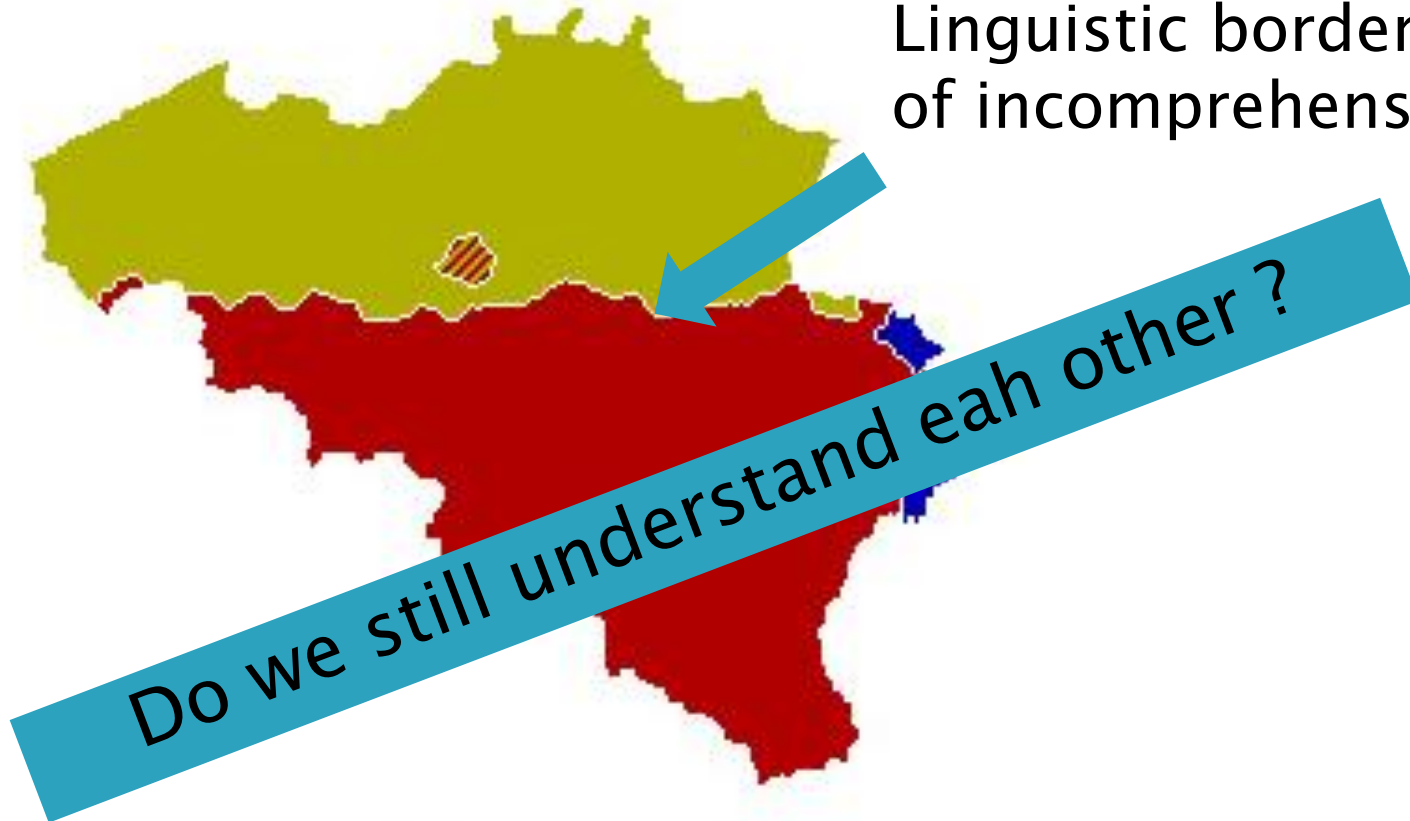
- Politicians : are hardly known by the other part of the country
- No common television and radio broadcasting companies





World record 2011:
541 days without government...

Linguistic border = wall
of incomprehension



Purpose of today's talk

Do we still understand each other ?



Divergences reflected in **discursive practices** of speakers of both language communities ?



Focus of the talk: **conversational routines** of Dutch speakers and French speakers in Belgium

(Underlying question: do conversational styles of Dutch and French speakers differ in such way that these might lead to some frictions and hence reinforce the general feeling of "incomprehension", which in turn might complicate political negotiations ?)

Pilot study: quantitative corpus analysis of television debates

- VRT: Flemish public broadcasting corporation
- RTBF: (Belgian) French public broadcasting corporation

Research focus – pilot study

- ▶ **Turn-taking system:** turn-openers, backchannels, gaps between turns, overlaps
- ▶ Ideally: **rules** (respect of other speaker's turn, pauses not too long or too short)
- ▶ **But:**
 - Variation
 - **Culture** may play a role in it

Research focus – pilot study

- ▶ Béal (2010): differences between turn taking system of (hexagonal) French and Australians (in Australian company)
- ▶ Research questions
 - Similarities between turn-taking system of the French-speaking Belgians and the French (France) ?
 - Differences between turn-taking system of Dutch-speakers and French-speakers in Belgium (+ possible similarities with the English-speakers of Australia) ?

The corpus

- ▶ Debates – similar programs on Sunday morning (VRT: 'De zevende dag'; RTBF: 'Mise au point')
- ▶ Political, socio-economic events (+ sports, culture) of past week
- ▶ Interviews, debates (politicians and other personalities)
- ▶ Differences:
 - RTBF: debates longer (+/- 50 min; VRT: +/- 20 min)
 - RTBF: number of participants is higher

The corpus

RTBF

- Length: 50 min
- Subject: Public service
- Participants: 6 politicians + 2 researchers + president of Federal Public Service Personnel & Organisation
- Moderated by 2 journalists

VRT

- Length: 20 min
- Subject: new law concerning plea agreement
- Participants: 2 politicians + 1 lawyer + president of Association of Belgian magistrates
- Moderated by 1 journalist

1. Turn-openers
= discourse markers introducing
turns: *well, euhm, so...*



Turn-openers

Corpus Béal (2010): French vs Australians

French turn openers

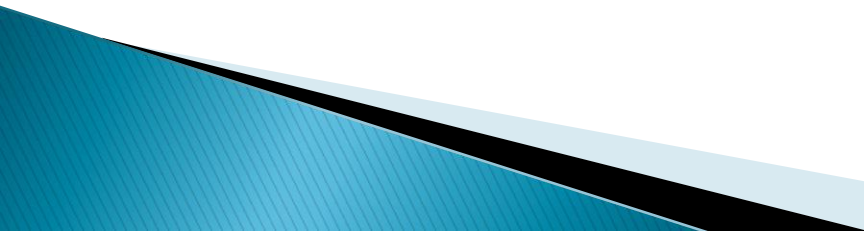
- **Emphatic: firm & clear position**
 - 'Oui/non' reinforced ('ah oui', 'ah non')
 - Repetition of 'oui/non': 'ah non non non'
 - Combination of turn openers: 'ah non mais non absolument pas'

Australian turn openers

- **Avoid risk of conflict:**
 - Consensual markers: 'yeah', 'ok', 'all right', 'sure'
 - False starts: stuttering
 - *Well* = preferred opener = moment of hesitation

Turn-openers: the Belgian corpus

(1) categories of turns not taken into account:

- 'One-word' turns: backchannels, extremely brief answers (one word or couple of words)
 - Turns by journalists
 - In the RTBF-debate (French): turns by Flemish participants (expressing themselves in French)
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Turn-openers: the Belgian corpus

(2) general figures

- Total number of turns
 - RTBF (French): 151
 - VRT (Dutch): 65
- Presence of turn openers:
 - RTBF: 74 / 151 turns = 49%
 - VRT: 31 / 65 turns = 47,7%

Turn-openers: the Belgian corpus

(2) categories of turns not taken into account:

- 'One-word' turns: backchannels, extremely brief answers (one word or couple of words)
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Turn-openers: the Belgian corpus – results

(1) Similarities corpus Béal

- 'Wel' vs 'ben' (cf. 'well')
 - VRT: 16% of turns ('wel')
 - RTBF: 5.4% of turns ('ben')
 - Frequent use by Flemish participants in RTBF–debate (26.7%)
 - Meaning differences RTBF – VRT: intensifier <-> no intensifier
- Hesitations, false starts: 'euhm'
 - VRT: 22.6% of turns
 - RTBF: 8.1% of turns
(chi-square: 4.218, p= 0,04)

Turn-openers: the Belgian corpus – results

(1) Similarities corpus Béal

- Emphatic markers (e.g. repetition of openers)
 - RTBF: 12%
 - VRT: 6.5% of turns
- Dutch speakers (cf. Australians) take the floor in a less emphatic and somehow more hesitating way than French speakers => Dutch speakers avoid risks of conflicts

Turn-openers: the Belgian corpus – results

(2) Other observation

- RTBF–corpus: act of speaking (and listening) (12.2%)

Ex. *donc ce que je veux dire* quoi *ce que je veux dire* (...) c'est que
c'est très facile d'avoir des idées générales [...]

(so what I want to say what I want to say (...) is that is very easy
to have general ideas [...])

- VRT: verbs of thinking (12.9%)

=> French speakers: more firm, explicit way of speaking

<-> Dutch speakers: point of view = result of thinking,
personal reflection => higher degree of consensus
between participants (?)

Turn-openers: the Belgian corpus – results

(3) Differences corpus Béal (2010)

- 'mais' vs 'maar' (= 'but')
 - Frequency almost the same: RTBF: 39.2% ; VRT: 35.5% (<-> Australians use very little 'but')
 - 'mais' / 'maar': share same meanings (different from 'but', which is much stronger)
 - Combination of openers
 - Similar frequency in RTBF (14.9%) and VRT (12.9%)
- => more research needed, but differences between Dutch and French speakers in Belgium maybe smaller than differences between French and Australians (?)

2. Backchannels

- ▶ = verbal (or non verbal) markers
 - the hearer is listening to the current speaker,
 - he acknowledges the fact that the other speaker has the floor
 - he wants the interaction to continue in this vein (cf. Heinz 2003).
- ▶ Hypothesis:
frequent use of backchannels = indication that speakers do not search any conflict but tend to reach consensus in speaking

Backchannels – the Belgian corpus

Participants to the debate				
	VRT (Dutch)		RTBF (French)	
Backchannels	18	20%	7	4%
Other turns	71	80%	167	96%
	89	100%	174	100%

(chi square : 17.968 ; $p = 0.00002247$; $df = 2$)

=> Flemish listeners more frequently signal their attention to the speaker than francophone listeners

3. Transitions between turns

3.1. Inter-turn pauses

3.2. Overlaps

3.1. Inter-turn pauses

- ▶ Impact of culture on length of pauses
 - Northern (European) cultures: (very) long (cf. Lehtonen–Sajavaara 1985, in Stivers *et al.* 2009)
 - Americans: longer pauses than French speakers (cf. Kerbrat–Orecchioni 1990)

Inter-turn pauses – the Belgian corpus

- ▶ Analysis: answer of participant to question or intervention of moderator (journalist)
 - ▶ Results: mean length of pauses between turns:
 - VRT: 16.5 hundredths of a second
 - RTBF: 2.9 hundredths of a second(man-withney $p= 0.002$)
- => Flemish participants take some more time to formulate their intervention than francophone participants.

3.2. Overlaps

- ▶ Literature (e.g. Béal 2010, Guillot 2005)
 - French conversation: lots of overlaps and interruptions => constant battle to have the floor

<->

- English speakers (Americans, British, Australian):
much more moderate

Overlaps– the Belgian corpus

(1) Mean length of overlaps, in syllables (participants)

- RTBF: 5.7 syllables
- VRT: 3.9 syllables

(man-withney $p = 0.051$)

Overlaps– the Belgian corpus

(2) More in detail

Participants to the debate				
	VRT (Dutch)		RTBF (French)	
no overlap	17	27%	29	20%
moderate overlap (1 – 9 syllables)	42	67%	85	59%
severe overlap (≤ 10 syllables)	4	6%	30	21%
	63	100%	144	100%

(chi square = 6.939; p= 0.03113259; df = 2)

Overlaps– the Belgian corpus

(3) Form of the interventions/incursions in ongoing turn

Participants to the debate				
Intervention Speaker 'n'	VRT (Dutch)		RTBF (French)	
Hesitating intervention	7	15%	9	7%
Immediately cut off intervention	17	32%	17	14%
Insistent intervention	8	17%	40	33%
Unmarked intervention	17	36%	56	46%
	47	100%	122	100%

Overlaps– the Belgian corpus

(4) Impact of the intervention of Speaker 'n' (S_n) on the turn of Speaker 'n-1' (S_{n-1})

- Importance:

Problematic overlap = when the current speaker uses some repair strategy (cf. e.g. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974)

Overlaps– the Belgian corpus

Hitches and perturbations (Schegloff 2000)

1. No repair strategy at all:

- 1.a. S_{n-1} finishes sentence before giving the floor to S_n
- 1.b. S_{n-1} keeps turn without any reaction to intervention of S_n

2. The turn of S_{n-1} presents some repair strategy:

- 2.a. Turn of S_{n-1} is cut off (S_n interrupts S_{n-1} in the middle of his/her sentence)
- 2.b. S_{n-1} keeps turn but shows some signal of perturbation (pause, stuttering, repeating elements):
- 2.c. S_{n-1} keeps turn, but gives explicit discursive reaction:
 - Content level: S_{n-1} incorporates part of the turn of S_n or reacts with respect to the content of S_n
 - Metadiscursive reaction: S_{n-1} protests against the intervention of S_n

Overlaps– the Belgian corpus

- (4) Impact of the intervention of Speaker 'n' (Sn) on the turn of Speaker 'n-1' (Sn-1)

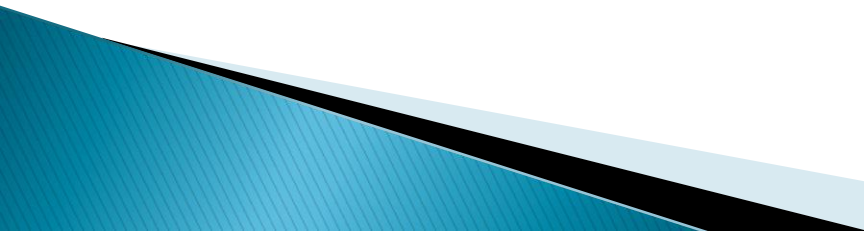
Participants to the debate				
Turn Sn-1	VRT (Dutch)		RTB (French)	
absence of repair strategy	37	79%	72	60%
presence of repair strategy	10	21%	49	40%
	47	100%	121	100%

(chi carré = 5.488 ; p = 0.01914743; df = 1)

=> Overlaps appear to be more frequently problematic in the RTBF–corpus than in the VRT–corpus

Conclusion

Generally speaking:

- ▶ Belgian francophone style: quite some similarities with the conversation style of the French (cf. e.g. Béal 2010)
 - ▶ Conversation style of Flemish speakers: up to a certain point similar to the style of Anglophone speakers
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Conclusion – more in detail

Dutch speaking participants (VRT)

More consensual and moderate way of speaking:

- lower tempo: longer pauses between turns
- shorter overlaps (cf. speakers interrupt themselves very quickly + interventions do not often disturb the current speaker)
- speakers intervene in a more hesitating and thoughtful way (openers 'well', 'euhm', 'I think', pauses)
- higher use of backchannels

French speaking participants (RTBF)

More confrontational, emphatic, restless way of speaking:

- higher tempo: shorter pauses between turns
- longer, more insistent overlaps (cf. give rise to more repair strategies)
- emphatic openers: 'non non non non' 'absolument pas', explicit reference to act of speaking ('moi, je voudrais dire...')
- lower use of backchannels