

Urban Culture and Diversity:

(Digital) Language and Communication Practice in Superdiverse Societies:

The Bussels' Case Study

In superdiverse, multilingual urban societies like Brussels, public service provision - public administration, courts of law, health care, education, emergency and social services – is under pressure, for service quality depends largely on the service provider's and her or his client's ability to communicate. In want of clear communication, service quality crumbles and the public domain becomes less accessible to a growing number of residents who do not or insufficiently master the official languages.

Pascal Rillof, BCUS Civil Society Fellowship 2016: *(Digital) Language and Communication Practice in Superdiverse Societies: The Brussels' Case Study.*

The BCUS Civil Society Fellowship programme connects research and practice through hands-on collaboration between civil society actors and academic researchers.

One of the major challenges of today's public services is to make sure that all residents have access to public services, regardless of the languages they master. And, particularly for newly arrived immigrants, certainly in the initial phase of their residence in a new community, there is a language barrier between the service providers they encounter and themselves.

Brussels is an example of a plurilingual, superdiverse urban society due to the large number of minority communities residing there. As a 'small world city', Brussels shows the traces of a globalised society. Both the active recruitment of immigrant workers, the colonial past, the EU with its free movement of persons policy as well as the economic and political situation in the world have shaped the diverse makeup of Brussels' population, a diversity spurred on by the 2015 Refugee Crisis. Today, over a hundred home languages are spoken in Brussels. Over the years, Brussels has become a city in which the originally dominant official languages French and Dutch are losing ground. The number of languages in Brussels is still growing and the way they interrelate with one another is shifting. Almost 10% of Brussels' residents do not speak any of the official languages and the proportion of speakers of Arabic is growing, followed by Spanish, German, Italian, Turkish and Polish. Furthermore, in the slipstream of the 2015 Refugee Crisis, Brussels has known an influx of speakers of – again – Arabic, but also Dari, Pashto, Somali, Urdu and Tigrinya.

The language diversity in Brussels is bound to have a significant impact on the work of public service providers, who find themselves at the service of this great diversity in backgrounds and languages. Since client-focused, clear and effective communication lies at the heart of quality service provision, methods to support service provider-client communication are and remain a necessity. Thus, public service interpreting and translation organisations in Brussels,

like *Sociaal Vertaalbureau Brussel Onthaal*, are now witnessing a growing demand for interpreters and translators. More than ever before, this rise in demand and the increased diversification in the languages that service providers need communication support for, have shaped the ingredients of the BCUS Civil Service Fellowship collaboration between the Civil Service Fellow – the public service interpreting and translation service *Sociaal Vertaalbureau Brussel Onthaal* – and both Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) based departments *Brussels Information, Documentation and Research Centre* and the *Department of Linguistics and Literary Studies*.

Their cooperation in the course of 2016 has led to four core results or products that we will briefly discuss. First, however, it seems appropriate to name a fifth and far-reaching result of the BCUS project: *Sociaal Vertaalbureau Brussel Onthaal* and VUB have continued to work together, beyond the BCUS Civil Society Fellowship project's duration. In this vein, *Sociaal Vertaalbureau Brussel Onthaal* and VUB are in the course of setting up a research and training project for interpreters in reception centres for asylum seekers. Thus, the BCUS Civil Service Fellowship programme was the springboard for sustainable cooperation between the partners. *Sociaal Vertaalbureau Brussel Onthaal* also receives VUB-interpretation trainees.

The BCUS Civil Service Fellowship programme has not only resulted in highly relevant products for practice, but has also revealed itself as the springboard to sustainable cooperation between the partners from the field and academia.

The first product of the project is a **research report** as a result of interviews with service providers in Brussels. To gain insight into the communication practices and the use of bridging functions or 'tools' like interpreters, mediators, the use of pictograms and technology in multilingual service encounters in Brussels, interviews were conducted with service providers in the asylum and (mental) health sectors. The service providers were (route) counsellors, social workers, nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists and legal assistants on the one hand and administrative and leading staff (clerks, coordinators or managers) on the other hand.

In most cases, so it is stated in the conclusions of the research report, bridging functions are determined in advance, before the actual service encounter is in effect, during a registration procedure or when an organisation refers a client to another service provider for further assistance. The language of the client or care seeker, a contact language or the use of a professional interpreter appear to be the bridging functions that service providers prefer to use, for they allow people in search of assistance to

express themselves fully, more or less free from all the linguistic limitations and comprehension flaws that tend to accompany plurilingual contacts. Professional interpreters are the most commonly used bridging function. Interactions between service providers and their clients are often complex and may take a while. The presence of a professional and consequently impartial interpreter who is able to accurately translate complex and sensitive issues into both of the languages used, is considered as crucial to successful communication and, as a result, to effective and quality service provision. Still, public service providers believe that there is much room for improvement, for example through better guidance and follow-up of these interpreters.

The use of visual materials, videos, written communication and terminology lists and the likes are limited in use. Non-professional 'ad-hoc' interpreters are sometimes called on for the more (self)evident strands of communication like making an appointment. The use of these ad-hoc interpreters seems to be largely avoided when communication is expected to be or become complex, especially in health care contexts.

A second key result of the project is **the 13 October 2016 seminar for and networking event** between service providers in both the health care and asylum sectors, policy makers, researchers and communication experts. During the seminar good and new practices in terms of bridging functions were disclosed in six workshops, preceded by keynote presentations. The workshops were:

- (1) *ZANZU – a plurilingual website on sexual health*, in twelve languages, developed by Sensoa, the Flemish Expertise Centre for Sexual Health; presented by Kaat Van Bosstraeten (Sensoa);
- (2) *Miscommunication in multilingual consultations at hospital emergency departments*, by Toon Cox (VUB);
- (3) *Using terminology and translation tools in social services*, by Koen Kerremans (VUB);
- (4) *Audio-visual storytelling as a communication tool in public service provision*, by Johan Ruysseveldt (Caveman Productions);
- (5) *Using apps to help communicate in multilingual service encounters*, by July De Wilde (UGent);
- (6) *Bridging the communication gap: Learning from real service encounter cases to develop communicative strategies*, by Pascal Rillof (Independent expert);

The keynote interventions were: *Language diversity in Brussels: a framework for analysis*, by Rudi Janssens (VUB) and a presentation of the Brussels' case study research report by Laurent-Philippe De Ryck (*Sociaal Vertaalbureau Brussel Onthaal*) referred to earlier.

As a third product of the BCUS Civil Society Fellowship, a **webpage and Dropbox folder** was set up to be shared between the project partners and with all seminar participants.

Finally, the fourth product is the joint **article 'Bridging the Communication Gap in Multilingual Service Encounters: the Brussels Case Study'** for *The European Legacy* journal.

To round up this account, we conclude - while drawing from the aforementioned article - that client-oriented, clear and purposeful communication in multilingual service settings cannot be haphazard. At least the following conditions should apply for the effective usage of bridging functions to be enhanced.

- (1) Bridging functions should not be approached as single or isolated functions but rather as a coherent range of functions or solutions to solve miscommunication.
- (2) Service providers must have access to this range of functions – mentally by knowing and by understanding them, for which training is necessary, and tangibly in or through 'one-stop-shops' or 'bridging function hubs'. And
- (3) service providing organisations need to develop a clear policy on the place they attribute to the bridging functions in the services they provide.

Biography

Marianne Scheppers, **Sociaal Vertaalbureau Brussel Onthaal**, Brussels, Belgium

bio: Marianne Scheppers graduated as a social worker and started her professional career at Brussel Onthaal – Open Deur vzw in 1985, an organisation providing reception, information provision and referral services to migrants in Brussels. A few years later, the organisation started offering community interpreting and translation services, which led to the creation of the independent centre called the 'Sociaal Vertaalbureau' in 1997, of which Marianne Scheppers is the coordinator.

Vanessa De Tobel, **Sociaal Vertaalbureau Brussel Onthaal**, Brussels, Belgium

bio: Since 2007, Vanessa De Tobel is assistant-coordinator and quality assurance officer at the Sociaal Vertaalbureau of Brussel Onthaal vzw, a non-profit organisation offering community interpreting and translation services in Brussels. She holds a master's degree in interpreting (Spanish-English-Dutch) from the Erasmus University College Brussels and obtained community interpreting and translation certificates for French, English, Spanish and Dutch. Occasionally, she still provides interpreting services.

Laurent-Philippe De Ryck, **Sociaal Vertaalbureau Brussel Onthaal**, Brussels, Belgium

bio: Laurent-Philippe De Ryck holds a master's degree in Comparative and International Politics from the University of Leuven. At the Sociaal Vertaalbureau of Brussel Onthaal vzw, a non-profit organisation offering community interpreting and translation services in Brussels, he was responsible for the collection of research data in the project 'Bridging The Communication Gap in Multilingual Service Encounters – The Brussels Case Study'. He was also member of the project's Steering Committee.

Rudi Janssens, **Vrije Universiteit Brussel**, Brussels Informatie-, Documentatie- en Onderzoekscentrum, Brussels, Belgium

bio: Rudi Janssens is a senior researcher at BRIO-POLI VUB. He is responsible for the Language Barometer Research Project in Brussels and is a member of the MIME consortium on Mobility and Inclusion in a Multilingual Europe where he is focussing on the bottom-up effects of migration and mobility on the local society.

Koen Kerremans, **Vrije Universiteit Brussel**, Department of Linguistics and Literary Studies, Brussels, Belgium

bio: Koen Kerremans currently holds a position as doctor-assistant at the department of Linguistics and Literary Studies of Vrije Universiteit Brussel. He holds a master's degree in Germanic Philology, a postgraduate degree in Language Studies and a PhD degree in applied linguistics. He teaches courses on terminology, technical translation and translation technologies in the master programmes of translation and interpreting. His research interests pertain to terminology, specialised communication and translation technologies.

Pascal Rillof, Independent expert

bio: Pascal Rillof coordinated the Civil Society Fellowship project 'Bridging The Communication Gap in Multilingual Service Encounters – The Brussels Case Study'.

He is the president of the European Network for Public Service Interpreting and Translation and is also in charge of the Public Service Interpreter and Translator Training and Certification Centre of the Flemish Integration Agency. Finally, he is involved in research on communication and policy in multilingual service settings.