

CODART TIEN study trip: Lecture by Luc Devoldere

“Vous êtes en Flandre” About French Flanders, frontiers and languages

Luc Devoldere, chief editor Ons Erfdeel vzw (www.onserfdeel.be / www.onserfdeel.nl)

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“Le roi s’amuse à prendre la Flandre” (“The King’s taking Flanders for his diversion.”

Madame de Sévigné

If you take the motorway from Dunkirk to Lille, or, to give it its name in Dutch, Rijsel (a place that doesn’t exist on English atlases and road maps) you see the familiar brown sign appear on the side with the confusing message: “Vous êtes en Flandre” (You are in Flanders). You’re just as much in France, in the Département du Nord, and, yes, you’re also in French Flanders.

An interesting example to illustrate the confusion over language and identity is *La Flandre française*, Frans-Vlaanderen (French-Flanders), also called the French Netherlands (de Franse Nederlanden in Dutch). The terms alone merit some historical explanation.

For Dante in 1300 Flanders was situated between Bruges and Wissant (*Guizzante*), between Cap Griz Nez and Cap Blanc Nez, because in the *Inferno* (XV, 4-6) he compares the dikes of the Flegetonte, in Hell, to those of the Flemish dike builders:

*Quali Fiamminghi tra Guizzante e Bruggia,
temendo ‘l fiotto che ‘nver’ lor s’avventa,
fanno lo schermo perché ‘l mar si fuggia;*

With the Peace of Cambrai (1529) the county of Flanders, which also comprised a French-speaking area (*Flandre gallicante* or *wallonne*), was removed by Emperor Charles V (King Charles 1 of Spain) from French sovereignty. The county stretched over most of the present-day Belgian provinces, West Flanders and a good deal of East Flanders (it wasn’t until around 1050 that the area east of the Schelde, up to the Dender, was added to the county) and over a good deal of present-day Holland (Zeeland) and northern France (the Nord and Pas de Calais *départements*). There was absolutely no question in those days of the modern equation “Flanders = Dutch-speaking Belgium”. And as far as the term “French Netherlands” goes: in the seventeenth century Guicciardini called the whole area between Artois and Friesland “Paesi Bassi”: the Low Countries, the Netherlands. And in that century a *Fiammingo* could come from Namur, Amsterdam, Bapaume, Cologne or Maastricht. The whole was named after the politically, and culturally, most important, most prosperous part.

The confusion regarding the language spoken in these “Low Countries” has remained to our time. In the county of Flanders people called the language “Flemish”. On a larger scale people called the vernacular *Theotisca lingua*: “language of the people”, as opposed to the Latin. This *Theotisca lingua* became “Diets”, related to “Duits” (the Dutch word for “German”). The confusion was retained in the English name for the language: “Dutch”.

To this very day the confusion continues: it's often said of Flemings that they speak "Flemish", whereas they really speak Dutch, but as it is spoken by Belgians. Might we compare it to Austrians who still speak German, even though it's a bit different? In the past, out of ignorance, laziness or stupidity an awful lot of French-speaking people in Belgium and France used to refer to "flamand" (Flemish), and they still do. At the beginning of the twentieth century Cardinal Mercier, the Belgian Primate, could dismiss "flamand" as a language unfit for university education and research. But, back to history.

It was in Steenvoorde, in the most southerly reaches of Dutch-speaking Flanders (*Flandre flamingante*) that the iconoclast started in 1566. This was to throw the whole of the Low Countries into disarray. The revolt against Spain and the division of the Low Countries was to follow. After the Peace of Westphalia (1648) the Republic of the North regarded the Southern Netherlands as a buffer against France. The war between France and Spain was a continuing problem. Following the battle on the plain of the Peene near Cassel, in Northern France, in 1677, when *Monsieur*, the brother of Louis XIV, beat the combined Spanish-Dutch forces under the command of the young Prince of Orange (later to become William III, King of England), the French Netherlands were annexed to France. In 1713, with the Treaty of Utrecht, Louis XIV regretfully relinquished Ypres, Furnès, Menin and Tournai, but permanently retained the rest. The frontier that was established at that time has scarcely changed since. The vernacular continued to be used in this part of Flanders. It wasn't until 1794 that a decree was issued making French the language of education throughout the Republic. Vernaculars were associated with feudalism. The new "Republic" was to be "one and indivisible", and to know only one national language. The Frenchifying of the upper classes and broader spectra of the population in the cities was definitely helped by this. But in the villages the pastors and school masters kept Flemish going for a long time.

The language frontier between French and Dutch in the North-West corner of France, along the Channel and the North Sea coast, has shifted a hundred kilometers in the last thousand years from Etaples further to the North. It was only the French-Belgian national boundary and the guerilla of a regional language that kept the advance of French at bay. Today between Duinkerke (Dunkerque, English Dunkirk) and Belle (Bailleul) a few thousand, mostly older and country people, still speak a Flemish dialect in addition to French. I suspect that in a few years it'll have died out. Today Dutch is taught as a foreign language in a great many schools. Nearby Belgium with its flourishing economy is naturally no stranger. Moreover in Northern France the quality labels *flamand* and *Flandre* are used without any hint of a complex – in French that is. Lille station is called *Lille Flandres*. In the Westhoek region Flemish inscriptions are being restored here and there with pride. You can see a lot of flags with lions flapping in the wind. The strange thing for Flemings lies in that very lack of complex: in Flanders frequent use of the label "Vlaams" (Flemish) is soon regarded with suspicion. Of course this rhetoric contributes to the revival of regionalism: the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region, and especially Lille, want to put themselves over well in competition with Paris. The French people in the North describe themselves as "Nous, les Flamands de France – We, the French Flemings": French as to language, "Flemish" as to mentality. Lille, *capital of Flandres*, has become particularly ambitious in the last twenty years. The driving force behind transforming the city into a metropolis was the former first minister and mayor, Pierre Mauroy. He managed to get the Eurostar-junction to Lille, which made the city the turntable between London (an hour and a half), Paris (one hour) and Brussels (38 minutes!). His successor, Martine Aubry, is living up to him. They didn't get the Olympic Games but they did get the title of Cultural Capital of Europe 2004. And there are even greater ambitions. Lille must become the heart of a Transfrontier Metropolis, a metropolis that cuts across frontiers, and more still - a Eurodistrict stretching from Lens and Arras in the South up to Courtrai and Tournai and Edingen in Flemish Brabant in the North. There are maps to prove it.

So this metropolis is stretching its hand out towards Flanders, and especially towards the attractive southern area of West-Flanders. *Timeo Gallos et dona ferentes?* Should we be afraid of the French and their gifts?

Between the expansion pole that is Lille and the Channel ports of Dunkirk and Calais with the Channel Tunnel lies *Flandre Maritime*, the rural French Westhoek area, still somewhat overlooked and sleepy. Let's keep it like that. There you can find a landscape that Belgian Flemings have lost: a landscape from before the pretty little restorations of old farms and the ribbon development you can find in Belgium: strange and at the same time familiar. Then travel on to the highest situated town in Flanders: Cassel.

From Cap Griz Nez to Lummen in Limburg you can follow on the map the line of ancient sand banks that hemmed the shoreline in the Miocene period (25 to 7 million years ago). When the sea retreated north the sand banks, which had become hardened, were pushed up. With its 176 meters Mount Cassel is the highest hump in the whole line. From the belvedere on this Flemish "Mountain" (from which Marshal Foch looked towards the front in Flanders, in the First World War) you can see the Roman highway from Boulogne cutting straight as a die through the plain. In late Antiquity this axis of transport that connected Boulogne with Tongres (Tongeren) via Courtrai (Kortrijk) and Velzeke had become a line of defence against the marauding Germanic peoples. It didn't do any good. For centuries, as far as the eye can see in all directions, this entire area has been caught up in the great tension between Germanic and Romance, Northern and Southern Europe. Gauls had already entrenched themselves here. The Romans would build their army camp here and leave behind the name for it (*castellum*).

Go on then to Boeschepe where, on the 6th of March 1906, the twenty-nineyearold Géry Ghysel was killed *par une balle homicide* (by a homicidal bullet). His grave in the churchyard sets the martyr in an elevated but somewhat false context: *chassant comme le divin maître les voleurs du temple* (chasing the robbers from the temple like the Divine Master). On that day devout Catholic villagers were defending the church with three-tined forks and pitch forks against the *gendarmes* who were riding into the church on horseback, on the orders of the French authorities, to make an inventory of church property. It was in the time of the harsh laws of the anti-clerical Combes government that was pushing through the separation of church and state, the backbone of "secularism".

And to think that the first field-sermon in the history of the Netherlands and the Reformation took place on this very spot, on the 12th of July 1562! Two women in the church told me the story, and showed me the place where Ghysel fell. We looked in vain for bullet holes in the wooden panelling. On leaving I asked them if they also spoke Dutch. "Nateurlik dat wylder vlams klappen. (Of course, we talk Flemish)". I was extremely moved and still savour a few sentences of their language, so close to my mother tongue, a language that's turned in on itself in this isolated environment, and will disappear with them.

And go then to the Black Mountain on the French-Belgian frontier – *vaut le détour* (it's worth the detour), at least the French side is; and take a copy of Marguerite Yourcenar's *Archives du Nord* (*Archives of the North*) with you. It's the best book about *la Flandre française* (*French Flanders*). Indeed you can't ride through this region without thinking of Yourcenar. On her father's side she came from the Frenchified Flemish nobleman (Cleenewerck de Crayencour) from *la Flandre flamingante* (*French Flanders*). Her grandfather still spoke Flemish with his tenant farmers. Her father no longer. Yourcenar was born in Brussels. Her mother, who was of the Walloon nobility, died soon after her birth. Marguerite spent the first nine summers of her life on the castle estate on

the Black Mountain. She heard Flemish from the house staff, but was to retain only the French national language as a vehicle for communication. The nineteenth-century castle and the dark spruces that gave the name to the hill were shot to pieces in the First World War. The country house that stands there now was built in the 20s in neo-Norman style.

You can walk through the park on the Black Mountain today, among other trees, not ninety years old. You see the expanse of the Flemish plain shimmering in the distance. The castle has been replaced by a country house where writers from all over Europe can receive bed and board to work undisturbed on their projects. A few months before her death in 1987 Marguerite Yourcenar learned that the old family domain, sold by her father Michel de Crayencour in 1912, was being listed. She was never to know that the estate of 40 hectares would become a writers' house in 1997. On warm summer days, when the park's full, I've heard poets reading their works in many languages. That adds to the beauty of this place. But maybe Yourcenar herself would have seen more in the clowns and musicians who held children spellbound on those Sundays. But I'm going to return with you to this town: *Lille Métropole transfrontalière - Lille, Transfrontier Metropolis*. Don't forget the adjective. It's crucial to the French.

In other words, does the vocation of Lille Metropolis lie in the North? And so in Belgium? And if that is the case, can this metropolis, which for the time being is still only a virtual reality, hold its own with Paris, London, the Dutch western conurbations, the Ruhr area in Germany, not to forget Brussels?

Notwithstanding all the ambitions there's no escaping the fact that a frontier does run through the Transfrontier Metropolis of Lille, two, even three frontiers; a national frontier, a language frontier, a frontier with two areas/regions: Flanders and Wallonia.

People can only cross frontiers if they accept that they exist.

I'm not one of those ramblers who make a "silent pilgrimage" every year in the Peene plain to mourn the loss of the area at the battle of Cassel in 1677 that I mentioned earlier. History isn't there to be mourned, but to be recognized. The Fleming in me, the Dutch-speaking Belgian, loves this city and French Flanders. And loves it because it's foreign – the closest foreign country. Strange yet familiar. A foreign country where a lot of toponyms, or place-names, only exist in my mothertongue: Godewaersvelde; Sint-Winoksbergen; Hondskoote; Hazebrouck; Boeschepe.

Translated by Sheila M. Dale