Do we still understand each other?

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

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Intro: "Belgium for dummies"

Linguistic & political situation
Language communities in Belgium

Dutch-speaking area = Flanders
(+/- 60% of Belgian population; +/- 6 million speakers)

French-speaking area = Wallonia
(+/- 40%; +/- 4 million speakers)

German-speaking area
(+/- 75,000 speakers)

Brussels – bilingual

(http://reflexions.ulg.ac.be)
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

Do we still understand eah other?

(http://reflexions.ulg.ac.be)
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RTBF</th>
<th>VRT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Length: 50 min  
• Subject: Public service  
• Participants: 6 politicians +2 researchers + president of Federal Public Service Personnel & Organisation  
• Moderated by 2 journalists | • 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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French turn openers</th>
<th>Australian turn openers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Emphatic: firm &amp; clear position</td>
<td>• Avoid risk of conflict:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ‘Oui/non’ reinforced ('ah oui', 'ah non')</td>
<td>• Consensual markers: ‘yeah’, ‘ok’, ‘all right’, ‘sure’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Repetition of 'oui/non': 'ah non non non non'</td>
<td>• False starts: stuttering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Combination of turn openers: 'ah non mais non absolument pas'</td>
<td>• <em>Well</em> = preferred opener = moment of hesitation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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)
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%
(2) 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)
**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)
(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 (?)
(3) Differences corpus Béal (2010)

- 'mais' vs 'maar' (= 'but')
  - Frequency almost the same: RTBF: 39.2%; VRT: 35.5% (Australian 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants to the debate</th>
<th>VRT (Dutch)</th>
<th>RTBF (French)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Backchannels</strong></td>
<td>18  (20%)</td>
<td>7  (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other turns</strong></td>
<td>71 (80%)</td>
<td>167 (96%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>89 (100%)</td>
<td>174 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(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)
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

(mann–withney p= 0.051)
(2) More in detail

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants to the debate</th>
<th>VRT (Dutch)</th>
<th>RTBF (French)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>no overlap</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moderate overlap (1 – 9 syllables)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>severe overlap (≤ 10 syllables)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>63</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(chi square = 6.939; p = 0.03113259; df = 2)
(3) Form of the interventions/incursions in ongoing turn

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention Speaker 'n'</th>
<th>VRT (Dutch)</th>
<th>RTBF (French)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hesitating intervention</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediately cut off</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intervention</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insistent intervention</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarked intervention</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>47</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(4) Impact of the intervention of Speaker ‘n’ (Sn) on the turn of Speaker ‘n–1’ (Sn–1)

- Importance:
  Problematic overlap = when the current speaker uses some repair strategy (cf. e.g. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974)
Hitches and perturbations (Schegloff 2000)

1. No repair strategy at all:
   1.a. Sn–1 finishes sentence before giving the floor to Sn
   1.b. Sn–1 keeps turn without any reaction to intervention of Sn

2. The turn of Sn–1 presents some repair strategy:
   2.a. Turn of Sn–1 is cut off (Sn interrupts Sn–1 in the middle of his/her sentence)
   2.b. Sn–1 keeps turn but shows some signal of perturbation (pause, stuttering, repeating elements):
   2.c. Sn–1 keeps turn, but gives explicit discursive reaction:
      – Content level: Sn–1 incorporates part of the turn of Sn or reacts with respect to the content of Sn
      – Metadiscursive reaction: Sn–1 protests against the intervention of Sn
Overlaps— the Belgian corpus

(4) Impact of the intervention of Speaker ‘n’ (Sn) on the turn of Speaker ‘n–1’ (Sn–1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants to the debate</th>
<th>VRT (Dutch)</th>
<th>RTB (French)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turn Sn–1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>absence of repair strategy</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>presence of repair strategy</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>47</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(\chi^2 = 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
## Conclusion – more in detail

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dutch speaking participants (VRT)</th>
<th>French speaking participants (RTBF)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>More consensual and moderate way of speaking:</strong></td>
<td><strong>More confrontational, emphatic, restless way of speaking:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- lower tempo: longer pauses between turns</td>
<td>- higher tempo: shorter pauses between turns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- shorter overlaps (cf. speakers interrupt themselves very quickly + interventions do not often disturb the current speaker)</td>
<td>- longer, more insistent overlaps (cf. give rise to more repair strategies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- speakers intervene in a more hesitating and thoughtful way (openers 'well', 'euhm', 'I think', pauses)</td>
<td>- emphatic openers: 'non non non non' 'absolument pas', explicit reference to act of speaking ('moi, je voudrais dire…')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- higher use of backchannels</td>
<td>- lower use of backchannels</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>