



Dutch-speakers and French-speakers: how can we exchange our thoughts with one another? A forum of stories

1. Introduction

The introduction is where we will explain how the P&V section of the European project on intercultural dialogue will operate. This European project has set itself three goals:

- To develop a platform for reflecting about cultural dialogue, the significance and meaning of the concept and its relationship to European citizenship;
- To compare perceptions and practices within civil society in the various member states;
- To initiate an intercultural dialogue in the various working groups.

In terms of Belgian participation, attention is focused mainly on the theme of language diversity. Our aim is to establish a forum of stories – or testimonies – featuring approximately forty to fifty voluntary citizens.

We will begin by explaining the issue in brief, after which we will move on to how we view this topic and how we intend to approach it. After that, we will set out our methodology. We will conclude by describing the practical organisation of the way our working groups will meet.

2. “This is how the story goes” or language diversity in Belgium

Belgium became a federal state in 1993 with the Kingdom divided into three Regions (Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia) and 3 language communities (Flemish [Dutch], French and German). In terms of figures, Belgium is divided up as follows:

The Belgian population (2008)	
Brussels Capital Region: <i>bilingual, with a French-speaking majority</i>	1,048,491
Flanders: <i>mainly Dutch-speaking</i>	6,161,600
Wallonia: <i>mainly French-speaking, with a small German-speaking population (74,565)</i>	3,456,775
Total	10,666,866

Belgium’s history is characterised by a dispute over language. What is known as the community fault-line is just one of three fault-lines that divide the country (in addition to the conflict between Catholics and free-thinkers, and between left and right). Over the course of Belgium’s history, these differences have generated regular conflicts and political strife.

In recent times, community conflict has become more pronounced and acute again. It is described in general, especially by the media, as discord between the two main language groups: French-speaking and Dutch-speaking. This usually takes place in a way that suggests these two language communities are *de facto* historical enemies that have to adopt a diametrically opposed position to one another.

What is striking in the current version of this community conflict is the lack of dialogue between the language communities. It is highly probable that the ability to speak both



languages, certainly in Flanders, has lost ground. The language communities also have no shared education, no shared media, no shared policy on culture and no shared political parties. In fact, the communities can be seen to be growing away from one another.

It is to accommodate this situation that as part of the European project for intercultural dialogue, the P&V foundation has opted to create dialogue between language groups. Because we are losing dialogue and contact with one another, anyone who speaks another language becomes a 'foreigner' as it were and out of sheer necessity we lapse into clichés, stereotypes and preconceived ideas that end up with any intercultural life between the various groups of the population becoming bogged down.

Perhaps this is all a good reason to bring the so-say conflicting parties together before we even start out on the project. That way we can get to know and understand one another's story and point of view. This is also precisely the intention of our working groups. Our aim is to encourage matters intercultural by bringing a group of citizens directly into contact with one another. Not just to discuss things together, but to listen to each other's stories and in so doing to restart dialogue.

3. "You know the story" or why have a story?

Because anyone who does not speak the same language is sometimes virtually a 'foreigner', a direct conversation is often difficult and so tends to be carried out in terms of clichés and preconceived ideas. For that reason, we have opted to take this reality into account and actually intend to place these 'prejudices' in the spotlight at our meetings. So our starting point is to hear stories or testimonies about the language diversity in Belgium, and not to have a political discussion about the current community conflict. There are two reasons for doing this: the first is at the level of society itself, in the sense that we want to focus on how a society is organised. The second reason is at the level of the working groups and relates to the dynamics involved in a dialogue. I agree with these two reasons for our choice of methodology in opting for a forum of stories or testimonies.

3.1 "The moral of the story" or the perspective for the way of thinking

To form an identity, people as well as whole societies use stories to get their point across. Stories are often used to explain a person's own position, as well as to justify our problems and misfortunes. In which case some people also say that humans are actually *animals that tell stories*.

However, as a society we also need a way of organising ourselves and above all to justify our social order. Throughout our history, stories have been used as an accessible means of doing just that. From the Greek myths right through to Hollywood stories have been used to explain our emotions, values and habits to one another.

When these stories are used to give shape to social values and standards, they are also called *ways of thinking*. Ways of thinking can be understood as general stories that try to give unity to a group of people. Which means that we use a story as a tool to explain the past and present of a society to ourselves and to others.

These ways of thinking are then taken on by a certain group in society and understood by virtually everyone. Their importance comes in particular when problems exist between a particular group and the rest of society. In that sense, ways of thinking in the form of stories have a therapeutic function. They help us to express our problems and feelings in



a very familiar form. A story helps us to designate and interpret our environment and what happens in it.

The fact that stories play a role in defining, explaining and using social values is well illustrated in the research of Bonilla-Silva, Lewis and Embrick. They demonstrated how white Americans attempted to justify their attitude to their black fellow citizens using a series of recurring stories (2004). David Boje also showed how people use story structures in everyday life. He monitored the staff of an office accessories company and discovered that they explained the company and their own role in by way of a story (1991). He noted that there were lots of mutual stories about work poured into a fixed story structure. As if the complex organisation of a company was easier to understand for employees like this. Barbara Czarniawska gives a similar example when she went to listen to the stories being told by mechanics and concluded: "*The technicians' stories are not 'organisational stories'; they are 'stories that organise'*" (p.40, 2004). The fact that social values and problems can be placed easily in narrative structures was shown in an unusual way by Sabine Chalvon-Demersay. Using an analysis of 817 television scripts submitted for a competition, she showed how the same social ways of thinking kept recurring. Despite the wide variation in themes and subjects, she kept discovering how people are able to get along without any social bond. All of which also explains the major impact that the media has on social development and the formation of values. The media is constantly serving up stories about the world we live in and the problems that surround us. That way the media can act as a sort of psychoanalyst who transforms our worries, doubts and feelings of malaise into true and understandable stories.

And when it comes to language diversity, we each have our own story ready. This in the first place is because the 'other parties' are not always directly in contact with one another. So if we want to understand the issues between Flemish-speakers and French-speakers, we need to start by looking at the stories that they tell about one another. At how the discrepancy between these two communities is converted into a story structure. What stereotypes, clichés and prejudices are used? So an initial reason for having a forum of stories is that we can assume from it that stories represent an important mechanism in a society and that we find stories the easiest way of putting our social discords and ideas into words to get them across. For that reason, we hope that the working groups can tell us their stories about 'foreigners' who speak other languages as a way of exposing the underlying social way of thinking.

3.2 "Tell me your story" or public dialogue

There is however a second reason why we have very deliberately opted to establish a story forum and this has to do with the group dynamic itself. The problem that people often experience in discussions within a group is that things can quickly lead into a heated discussion. Indeed, the big disadvantage of a discussion is that it sometimes requires a great effort on the part of the participants. Not everyone is as good at saying what they think. But then not everyone is sure of their opinion either. When this happens, the big drawback is that a silent majority is created or there is a group of people who cannot or dare not say anything more. Yet we want to hear what these people are thinking and what they have experienced in their lives. We shouldn't always go looking for who is right, but should also try and learn from one another.

So this is also the reason why we are looking to shift our intercultural dialogue from a discussion or debate structure and replace it with a forum of stories. In particular we believe that we cannot expect everyone to be able to begin a dialogue in an unprejudiced way. Which is precisely why we want to give them a way of expressing these prejudices,



clichés and stereotypes without being interrupted by their fellow participants. A story forum is the ideal way to achieve this aim.

Basing ourselves on this idea, a story forum should be able to deliver two practical advantages: on the one hand it may enable us to help the participants in the group to build up an *identity*, and on the other hand the other participants will better understand the *perspective* of that identity.

The fact that telling a story can help us to build up an identity has to do in the first place with how it allows us to put our own experiences into words and then link the two. A story enables us to reconstruct what we know, hear or have seen. We are able to make recognisable 'characters' of ourselves and/or other people as part of our social story.

Which brings us to the second advantage of a story forum: namely the opportunity to understand another person's point of view or perspective. That way we are able to understand stories as a way of making it clear to other people how we see things. For example, we can explain more easily when and how something happened. And by doing this, the other person gets to know the story behind you and your opinions. In a group dialogue, this enables us to identify ourselves better with the people we are talking to.

In these two ways, a story forum can form a bridge between the participants so that a public dialogue becomes possible with as few silent participants as possible. It is a bridge that is necessary if we are to get a discussion up and running within two language communities.

4. "Let's get the story straight" or searching for a better story

The aim of our working groups is to create an intercultural *dialogue* rather than an intercultural *discussion*. A dialogue that ultimately leads to a solution or to 'a better story'. This can be achieved by getting a group of people together to about five meetings and having them confront one another with their stories or testimonies. Our meetings have three aims: telling stories, reflecting together about these stories, and searching for a 'better' story.

What we have to do is start by extracting testimonies, experiences and prejudices from the participants and enabling them to share them with each other in an undisturbed way. By doing this, our aim is to make it easier for them to express their position as a French-speaker or Flemish-speaker. And the best way of doing that is to give them the opportunity to tell everything in the form of a story or testimony.

But isn't the aim that we should communicate with one another? Yes, but only in the second phase. Once we have heard the stories about each other, we will then be able to understand the other participants a little bit better and know what their points of view are.

To make subsequent reflection possible about the stories, a scientific analysis will be carried out about the stories told aimed at bringing the most popular stories to the fore. Which clichés, stereotypes and prejudices keep on cropping up? What are the problems that people see most often in a country where there are two languages? So we will go looking for a few recurring stories and then present them again. That way we hope to have a more subtle dialogue, rather than a discussion.



Finally, this dialogue has to lead us somewhere – preferably to a communal story. Our ultimate aim is to come up with a story that is identifiable for both French-speakers and Flemish-speakers. And to do that we not only want to compare their stories, but also look for both positive and negative stories that the two language groups have about one another. By doing that, we hope to create an overall picture that results in a story that transcends language.

In practical terms, this means that we will divide the five meetings approximately as follows:

What is a story forum? (26th November 2008)

Our aim at this first meeting is mainly to motivate the participants and explain what a story forum is. So in particular we need to make it clear why we want to hear their stories and how these stories can ultimately lead to a dialogue. And to do that, after providing clarification about the origin and structure of the research, we will also be giving a few examples of stories.

At the end of this first meeting, the participants will leave with a practical assignment to come up with a negative story. Which means they will have to use their experiences from other people or the media to present a testimony that for them illustrates one of the problems posed by Belgium's language diversity.

First story forum (13th December 2008)

The aim of the second meeting is to give the participants the opportunity each to tell their story. This will be done in the first instance in small groups, after which there will be a more general dialogue. French-speakers and Dutch-speakers can then each point out in their own language what the problems are and how they see their own or other people's position.

At the end of the first story forum, the participants can start helping the researchers in their search for their way of thinking. They will be able to reflect for the first time about what these stories actually contain and why they are being told. Among other things, they will also be asked to distinguish between what they feel are the 'true' facts and what is prompted by their 'feelings'.

Feedback to the participants (4th February 2009)

Based on the stories provided, the third meeting should produce a dialogue. By now, the researchers have had the time to analyse the negative stories and to see how general they are. The intention is for us to give feedback to some stories and put a number of questions to the participants:

- Is this way of thinking recognisable?
- Is this way of thinking understandable?
- According to them, where does this way of thinking come from (the media, politicians, history, etc.)?
- Do they agree with the way of thinking?

In the end, what it boils down to is that we want to test the content of truth and content of recognisability with the group.



At the end of this public dialogue, we will again give participants the task of coming up with a story, only this time we want them to think about the advantages or how we benefit from having a bilingual country such as Belgium. What positive experiences have the participants had with the other language community? Or what have they ever heard about the 'others' that pleasantly surprised them?

Second story forum (7th March 2009)

From here we want to follow more or less the same methodology as for the previous two meetings. We will again give the participants the opportunity to relate stories and will ask them to think carefully about the reasons behind these stories. But this time, the emphasis will be on the benefits of language diversity. So our aim here is to create a forum in which positive stories take centre stage. Once again the participants will be divided into groups, after which there will be a plenary discussion about the stories told.

A general story (6th May 2009)

The final meeting needs to provide a summary of all the previous meetings. At this meeting, our aim is to see with the whole group what all these stories have taught us. And how perhaps in the future it can be a different story. It is our objective, and to be hoped, that some of the negative stories can be made less negative by placing them next to the positive ones. So we want the participants themselves to use the positive stories to go looking for answers to the negative ones. In the end, we should then be able to come up with a sort of general story with which both language communities are able to identify.

5. Bibliography

Boje, David M., (1991). 'The storytelling Organization: A study of Story Performance in Office-Supply Firm'. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 36, pp. 106-126.

Bonilla-Silva, E., Lewis, A. & Embrick D. G. (2004) 'I Did Not Get That Job Because of a Black Man...': The Story Lines and Testimonies of Color-Blind Racism' *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 19, 4, pp. 555-581.

Chalvon-Demersay, Sabine (1994) Mille scénarios : Une enquête sur l'imagination en temps de crise. Paris, Éditions Métailié, p. 193.