

Friendly train attendants - but in the right language, please!

The language dispute has actually accompanied Belgium since its foundation almost 200 years ago. A hundred years ago, legislation gradually developed on where and when people were allowed to speak which language, starting in the education and judicial systems. The division of the kingdom in the 1960s by the language border into a Dutch-speaking and a French-speaking area then also led to rules on which language had to be spoken or used in certain areas ([language laws of 18 July 1966](#)). This was perfected by a corresponding bureaucracy in the form of the "[Permanent Commission for Language Control \(SKSK\)](#)", which is entrusted with the general supervision of the application of language laws in administrative matters in Belgium. Its [annual reports](#) give an impression of the major and minor problems that can arise in daily life in a multilingual country.

The language dispute is also at the centre of the negotiations on a new regional government in Brussels, which are currently almost completely deadlocked and which Belgiuminfo has reported on several times ([most recently here](#)). While this problem threatens to take on dramatic proportions, another case that has been reported in the media these days - even across the borders as far as Aachen - seems rather bizarre. The language laws not only apply to the administrations in the respective regions, but also to "mobile" administrations, so to speak - such as trains of the Belgian state railway SNCB/NMBS, which inevitably and often cross language borders several times on their journey. And this is where things get complicated.

Train conductor Ilyass Alba, who is also [an active blogger](#), greeted passengers with "Goeiedag, bonjour" when checking tickets at Vilvoorde station on a train travelling from Antwerp to Brussels. A passenger complained about this to the railway because Vilvoorde is in Flemish Brabant and the use of French is therefore prohibited.

Formally, he was probably right. This is because railway stations are considered local services under the language laws, while trains are considered regional services (of a central organisation such as the railway). The rules of the language area in which the station is located or the train is currently travelling therefore apply. So the train conductor was indeed only allowed to greet the passengers in Dutch and ask for their tickets. Less than five minutes later - after crossing the border between Flemish Brabant and Brussels-Capital - the greeting would have been fine, but only if his native language was Dutch.

The language regime that SNCB/NMBS has applied internally for many years attempts to take this linguistic jungle into account. In the (purely) French and Dutch language areas, only the respective language is used at the stations and on the trains. In the bilingual Brussels-Capital Region, announcements on the train are made in both languages, starting with the native language of the train crew member. In the "municipalities with language facilities", i.e. mainly in the Flemish region around Brussels, the announcement must always be made in Dutch first. The - now standard - electronic displays on the train "jump" between the two languages. The same applies to the displays in the stations and on the platforms.

An almost Solomonic solution applies to the announcements in the three large Brussels stations: in Brussels South station, the announcement is first made in French, in Brussels North in Dutch; in Brussels Central, the order changes every year. Has anyone noticed this? In fact, someone has complained that French always comes first in Brussels South. In 2020, the SKSK Language Commission then [asked the railway to change the order regularly](#), as in Brussels Central (as well as in Brussels North, but this has not yet happened).

In any case, it is noticeable that the SKSK handles the possible exceptions to the respective regional language regime under the language laws very restrictively. Multilingual announcements at railway

stations should only be possible for international trains or those to the national airport Zaventem - but not on the trains. And even if the trains to the coast are used by many tourists, announcements on the train that you have to change trains or carriages in Bruges due to a technical problem, for example, may only be made in Dutch.

Because of this barely comprehensible confusion, the railways and the current federal transport minister Georges Gilkinet of the Francophone Greens (Ecolo) pleaded for greater flexibility after the incident in Vilvoorde. The reactions to this show that this is not about a scurrility, but about big politics. In a heated debate in the chamber, the federal parliament, Gilkinet and the leader of the Flemish Christian Democrats, Sammy Mahdi, clashed. For Mahdi, watering down the current language laws is out of the question. Such demands showed a lack of respect for the Dutch language. For Gilkinet and the railway spokesman, on the other hand, the most important thing is that staff treat passengers in a friendly manner.

In any case, the railway has decided not to take any disciplinary action against the train attendant despite the formal complaint. Is this the end of the matter? A statement from the SKSK is still pending, and it remains to be seen what it will look like.

Incidentally, if the Belgian state held less than 50 per cent of its railway company (as is now the case with Postbank, for example), the language laws would no longer apply. The language would then be dealt with in the same way as private players in trade and tourism have always done, whether in the north or south of the country: pragmatically and customer-orientated...

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