

The Remarkable Resilience of Frisian: five projects

Many small languages in contemporary Europe can boast a history that stretches back to the Middle Ages. This also applies to Frisian. In the Early Middle Ages, Frisian emerged from West-Germanic, after which, during the High Middle Ages it was used along the entire Northern Dutch and North-German North Sea coast, as a written language (for administration and jurisdiction). As a result of 15th and 16th c. centralisation and state formation processes, Frisian was replaced by other, more dominant languages like Dutch and Lower Saxon, with the exception of the present Dutch province Fryslân. In the cities, Frisian was replaced by Dutch-Frisian contact varieties, but Frisian survived the early modern era as a spoken language in the countryside, only to be used again, as a result of a strong romantic-nationalistic revival, as a written literary language in the nineteenth century. Strongly intertwined with printing capitalism, a process of vigorous cultivation, institutionalisation and standardisation of the language came about. One thing with the other ultimately led to Frisian being recognized as the second state language in the Netherlands (1980) and as one of the protected minority languages in Europe (1996).

Despite far-reaching social changes after WWII and equally radical later globalisation and digitisation processes within Dutch society, the number of users of Frisian is barely declining, be it that nowadays more and more people are multilingual. Research shows that the percentage of new speakers is a noteworthy 28%. What gives, from an intra- and extra linguistic point of view, Frisian this remarkable resilience?

The PhD umbrella programme "The remarkable resilience of Frisian" focusses on both diachronic and synchronic aspects of Frisian. An important aspect of the suggested projects is that they have a strong descriptive component, in order to answer the question 'how'? This is inherent to the field of Frisian studies, that has few players and is therefore in need of fundamental descriptions of the language (situation). Another important aspect is to train young linguists, transmitting specialized knowledge of established researchers to a new generation (*Nachwuchs*).

Below we formulate the first five research projects of this umbrella programme. All these projects have a diachronic component, taking a retrospective view from an early or more recent past to the present. This will enable the identification of stable and unstable features in language (use), which contributes to the understanding of the mechanisms of change and hence the *constraints on language variation*, the motto of the [ACLCLC](#). All of these projects will be conducted using advanced technical tools in language processing and analysis, building on current theoretical approaches. The insights gained from the studies can feed back into the formation and adaptation of linguistic theory.

1. Old Frisian: An analysis of the diachronic philological and linguistic layering of the oldest Frisian attestations;
2. Sound change: a study of variation and change in Frisian, using a diachronic corpus that allows the study of stable and unstable phonetic features in a bilingual context over multiple generations;

3. Historical (socio)linguistics: this project tries to capture the spatial dynamics of language change over a period of three centuries, from the early-modern period until our times;
4. Language contact and language variation: An analysis of code-switching between two closely related languages;
5. Linguistics and literature; the reciprocity of standardised and literary language in Frisian: This project researches the nature and the level of mutual influences between resp. the written standardised, the literary and the spoken versions of Frisian.

Projects in detail:

1. The structure of the Old Frisian manuscripts.

There is a long-standing debate about the age and origin of both the content and the linguistic features of the language in the Old Frisian manuscripts. In particular the so-called ‘classical’ manuscripts (E₁, H_{1/2}, R₁, R₂, B_{1/2}, parts of U – and to a lesser extent E₂, E₃ and F) are of great importance for our knowledge of the earliest history of Frisian as well as the wider context of Old Germanic and even Indo-European studies.

Over the last couple of decades, the awareness has grown that even these ‘classical’ manuscripts are not monolithic, neither in content, nor in linguistic shape, but the result of a process of law codification in which new articles, based on later verdicts, could be added. These new fragments have mostly been added to the end of the text, creating an organically grown text, reflecting its diachronic growth. However, sometimes additions have been made to an existing article, inserting a more modern section of even a few lines into an older fragment.

Whereas the age of the oldest physical manuscripts does not exceed the late 13th century, the contents of some texts have been claimed to be much older (at least 11th century) on the basis of references to historical configurations, such as Viking attacks or older coinage systems. Some articles or formulations in the law texts are even similar to regulations in the *Lex Frisionum* (ca. 800). Acknowledging the organic growth of the law texts, such early dates cannot necessarily be applied to the entire text, not to mention the entire manuscript, but only to the actual text fragment. Most texts lack an absolute date, but some parts have an explicit date, being a *datum post quem* for that particular piece, while the date of the manuscript provides a *datum ante quem* for all its linguistic content.

Analysis of textual (grammatical, phonological, spelling) differences within manuscripts has shown that some text fragments are very resilient in their transmission and must have been fairly faithfully copied from older pieces, preserving archaic traits that were at least rare, if not obsolete at the time of copying.

A combination of historical and philological insights, knowledge about diachronic changes in phonology and grammar and using quantitative text analysis tools will enable the identification of a relative chronology of every text section (at least on the level of texts, most likely law articles and sometimes even subsections of them). The establishment of such a relative chronology of text (fragments) is the ultimate goal of this project. This relative chronology can be linked to the absolute date and location, known for a couple of texts including some of the earliest charters. This chronology will not only help us to develop a

more detailed picture of linguistic changes in the earliest stages of Frisian, but also to understand better when these texts have been written down for the first time in which order and where.

Profile of the candidate:

- Background in historical linguistics and philology, preferably concerning Germanic;
- (Proven) affinity with quantitative and computational text-analysis tools – a focused training in computational methods can be part of the first year;
- Functional (passive) knowledge of Dutch and German (language of most of the scholarly literature on the topic); willingness to acquire at least functional language skills in Frisian;
- Co-promotor: dr. Han Nijdam (Fryske Akademy)

Key-publications:

Bremmer Jr, Rolf H. *Hir is eskriven: lezen en schrijven in de Friese landen rond 1300*. Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2004.

Bremmer Jr, Rolf H. 'Language and Contents of the Old Frisian Manuscripts from Rüstringen (c. 1300): A "Veritable Mixtum Compositum"'. *Advances in Old Frisian Philology* / Ed. by Rolf H. Bremmer Jr., Stephen Laker, Oebele Vries 64 (2007): 29–64.

Munske, Horst Haider. *Der germanische Rechtswortschatz im Bereich der Missetaten; philologische und sprachgeographische Untersuchungen*. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1973.

Versloot, Arjen Pieter. *Mechanisms of Language Change: Vowel Reduction in 15th Century West Frisian*. Utrecht: LOT, 2008: pp. 15-75.

<http://www.lotpublications.nl/mechanisms-of-language-change-mechanisms-of-language-change-vowel-reduction-in-15th-century-west-frisian>.

Versloot, Arjen Pieter. 'Die –ar-Plurale im Altwestfriesischen mit einem Exkurs über die sächlichen Plurale im Westfriesischen'. *Us Wurk* 63 (2014): 93–114.

Versloot, Arjen Pieter. '[The Riustring Old Frisian -ar Plurals](#): Borrowed or Inherited?' Eds. Michiel de Vaan & Stephen Laker. *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Älteren Germanistik: Festschrift Rolf Bremmer* 77 (2017): 442–56.

2. Sound change in real and apparent time in Modern West Frisian

The phonology of Modern West Frisian (MWF) has been described on various occasions since the early 20th century. Since then, the Frisian speech community has gone through substantial changes including a substantial growth of the level of bilingualism of its speakers. Until the beginning of the 20th century, many speakers of Frisian had knowledge of Dutch but were rarely in contact with speakers of Dutch, other than speakers who were also embedded in the Frisian context and must have been strongly adjusted to Frisian phonetics and prosody. Only since the introduction of radio and television, speakers of Frisian have regular access to

other Dutch pronunciations and over the past decades native speakers of Frisian have become active users of both Frisian and Dutch from a very young age. This will have put its mark on the phonetics and phonology of MWF, in addition to the long-standing contact with the dominant language Dutch. Still, Frisian phonetic features seem fairly resilient, both in Frisian, as well as in the way native speakers of Frisian pronounce Dutch.

The [Boarnsterhim](#)-corpus offers a unique source to investigate the pronunciation of Frisian and Dutch by L1-speakers of Frisian in a partly real-time, partly apparent-time study, covering a full century. The data have been annotated and made available over the last couple of years. Some analyses have been made, but a more systematic capturing of both details of Frisian phonetics and their dynamics against a background of increasing levels of bilingualism is still a desideratum of Frisian studies.

The main research questions (or a selection of them) for this project are:

- To provide an adequate description of the phonetic characteristics of Frisian;
- To trace the features that people transfer to their L2;
- Capture the changes in the phonetics of Frisian in the real-time and apparent-time study: which features are stable, which ones change?
- Why are some pronunciation characteristics more resilient or persistent than others?
- What is the role of bilingualism in these developments?
- Refine the models of language variation change in individuals and the community.

Profile of the candidate:

- Background in linguistics, preferably phonology/phonetics and language variation and change;
- Full (native) command of Frisian;
- Affinity with digital phonetic tools and experience with statistical analyses;
- co-promotor (FA/UU): Hans Van de Velde;
- cooperation with Paul Boersma (UvA).

Key-publications:

Evans Wagner, S. & I. Buchstaller (eds), *Panel Studies of Variation and Change*. Routledge (2018).

Graaf, Tseard de. 'Phonetic Aspects of the Frisian Vowel System'. In *Friserstudier IV/V: Foredrag Holdt Ved Den 3. Og 4. Friserdag i Odense 6. Oktober 1983 Og 5. November 1985*, onder redactie van Niels Danielsen, Erik Hansen, Hans Frede Nielsen, en Hans Bekker-Nielsen, 3–20. Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1986.

Visser, Willem W. 'The Syllable in Frisian'. Holland Academic Graphics, 1997.

Sloos, Marjoleine, Eduard Drenth, en Wilbert Heeringa. 'The Boarnsterhim Corpus: A Bilingual Frisian-Dutch Panel and Trend Study'. *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC 2018)*, 2018. <https://aclanthology.org/L18-1232.pdf>.

Hay, Jennifer B., Janet B. Pierrehumbert, Abby J. Walker, en Patrick LaShell. [‘Tracking word frequency effects through 130years of sound change’](#). *Cognition* 139 (2015): 83–91.

3. Language variation in Friesland between 1720 and 2020: *panta rhei*.

At the heart of the study lies the rich dialect material of Frisian that provides the opportunity to trace changes in the language over several centuries. The project covers the period from 1720-2020, from the onset of a denser dialectal attestation of Modern Frisian, throughout the industrialization period, until the current times.

This period is characterized by various tendencies:

- Resilience of Frisian as a spoken vernacular;
- A highly dynamic dialect landscape with wide-spread dialectal levelling as a result of and at the same time as a prerequisite for the preservation of the speech community as one social unity (contrary to what for example happened in North Friesland).

Fryslân has been a bilingual Frisian-Dutch region since the 15th century, although complete individual active bilingualism throughout the population was not attained before the second half of the 20th century. Over all these centuries, Frisian witnessed internally driven changes as well as contact-induced changes, without losing its profile as a language in its own right. This perception of being a language – and not a dialect of Dutch – was further enhanced by the language movement in the 19th and 20th centuries. The worldwide fairly unique source material of Frisian offers an excellent opportunity to study the geographical dynamics of the region over 300 years, going through a transformation from a pre-industrial to a post-industrial society.

The aims of the project are multiple (focus depending on final project formulation):

- to obtain a clearer picture of linguistic changes of Frisian over that period, which overlaps with the period of the establishment of the Modern Frisian Standard Language;
- to identify the sources and velocity of change in terms of geographical locus and directions of radiation;
- link the patterns of language change to available extra-linguistic information about traffic networks and demographic mobility;
- to refine theories about the relation between language change and changes in the society.

Profile of the candidate:

- Background in (socio-)linguistics/dialectology/language variation or social-geography;
- Affinity with or willingness to acquire working skills in geographical analysis tools (GIS), preferably in cooperation with similar initiatives at the HUC (KNAW);
- Good knowledge of Frisian;
- Second promotor Hans Van de Velde (UU/Fryske Akademy).

Key-publications:

Versloot, Arjen Pieter. 'Historical Dialectology: [West Frisian in Seven Centuries](#)'. In *Handbook of the Changing World Language Map*, onder redactie van Brunn Stanley en Roland Kehrein, 405–42. Springer, 2020.

Blaxter, Tam T.: [Contact, change and diffusion in medieval Norway](#). University of Cambridge, 2017.

4. Frisian-Dutch Code-switching: structural and functional aspects

Codeswitching between Frisian and Dutch, is part of the daily language practice of most speakers of Frisian, whom are all Frisian-Dutch bilinguals. Almost in every Frisian conversation code-switching and/or borrowings from Dutch show up.

The switching between languages by bilingual speakers has been studied from both structural and functional perspectives, but these perspectives are seldomly combined in the same study. Furthermore, the existing insights in the linguistic constraints on code-switching, are mainly based on typologically quite distinct languages. The long and intensive contact between Frisian and Dutch has resulted in numerous contact-induced changes in Frisian and in Frisian-Dutch. In this project, we will study code-switching from both perspectives in Frisian and Dutch, two closely related West-Germanic languages.

In the project the PhD will make use of a bilingual Frisian-Dutch speech recognition system and computational tools. In the first stage, existing corpora will be used, such as the Frisian council meetings corpus, the [Frisian broadcast archive](#) and the [Boarnsterhim](#) corpus. Depending on the results of these analyses, additional spontaneous speech data and experimental data will be collected and analysed to get more insight in the structural and functional principles underlying Frisian-Dutch code-switching and their relation to individual and societal multilingualism, patterns of language choice and language variation and change in Fryslân.

Profile of the candidate:

- Background in linguistics;
- Fluent in both Dutch and Frisian (native);
- Second promotor Hans Van de Velde (UU/Fryske Akademy)

Key-publications:

Backus, Ad. A usage-based approach to code-switching: The need for reconciling structure and function. In: Stell, Gerald and Yakpo, Kofi. *Code-switching Between Structural and Sociolinguistic Perspectives*, Berlin, München, Boston: De Gruyter, 2015: 19-38.

Sjölin, Bo. '*Min Frysk*': een onderzoek naar het ontstaan van transfer en "code-switching in gesproken Fries. Grins: Frysk Ynstitut oan de Ryksuniversiteit, 1976.

Sloos, Marjoleine, Eduard Drenth, en Wilbert Heeringa. 'The Boarnsterhim Corpus: A Bilingual Frisian-Dutch Panel and Trend Study'. *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC 2018)*, 2018. <https://aclanthology.org/L18-1232.pdf>.

5. The reciprocity of standardised and literary language in Frisian

As is the case with many minority languages which are not in use as a language of instruction in a state-organised educational system, Frisian as a written language does not come naturally to its mother tongue speakers. Frisian as a spoken language is an L1 to them, yet as a written language it is mostly the last language to be learned. In other words, most speakers who learn to write Frisian at a higher communicational level do so only at a later age, for instance when they find a job in the Frisian spoken and written cultural and educational infrastructure or when they decide to become a Frisian writer.

For this reason, the relation between written and spoken Frisian differs highly from that in a majority language situation. As a spoken language, Frisian is strongly influenceable. The combination of a recent media-driven increase of language contact and the lack of knowledge of the written language and of a fixed word image makes that contemporary Frisian is developing rapidly in the direction of Dutch (and English).

However, also the relationship between standard Frisian and written literary Frisian (in the sense of the language used in creative works of fiction) differs strongly from that in larger, non-minority language areas. Traditionally the standardization of Frisian took place in Frisian literature and presumably - no exhaustive research has been carried out to date - this is still partly the case. In literary Frisian, a number of strategies - like for example: distancing, archaizing, neologisms, purism, exotization etc. - may ultimately lead to changes in the written standard language which in its turn - inadvertently and paradoxically - might further widen the gap between spoken and written Frisian.

On the basis of contextualisation and computational analysis of a corpus of Frisian literary texts as compared to a corpus taken from purely informative standard language and a corpus of spoken Frisian, the proposed research will analyse the nature and the level of mutual influencing between resp. the written standardised, the literary and the spoken versions of Frisian.

Profile of the candidate:

- Background in (socio)linguistics
- Knowledge of Frisian literature;
- Fluent in both Dutch and Frisian;
- Second promotor Goffe Jensma (RUG).

Key-publications:

Feitsma, A, *De Friese beweging als gangmaker van Friese literatuur in de 19e eeuw* (Gent: Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde 1986).

Hoekstra, Eric, 'Frisian', in: Ana Deumert en Wim Vandenbussche ed., *Germanic standardizations: past to present. Impact, studies in language and society* v. 18 (Amsterdam ; Philadelphia: J. Benjamins 2003) 193–210.

Hoekstra, Jarich, 'Standard West Frisian', in: Nils Århammar e.a. ed., *Handbuch des Friesischen / Handbook of Frisian Studies* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2001) 83–98
<<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110946925>>

Poortinga, Ype, 'De opbou fan de Fryske literatuertael oan it begjin fan de 19de ieu', in: M. K. Scholten en Klaes Dykstra ed., *Fryske stúdzjes oanbean oan Prof. Dr. J. H. Brouwer*. Fryske Akademy 180 (Assen: Van Gorcum 1960) 27–40.

Veen, K.F. van der, 'De frekwinsjeferhâlding fan inkele dialektyske farianten', *It Beaken*. Meidielingen fan de Fryske Akademy 43 (1981) 30–53.

Woude, G. van der., 'Standaardtaal en dialekt in Friesland.', *Taal en tongval : tijdschrift voor de studie van de Nederlandse volks- en streektalen* (1960).