

Sociolinguistic perspectives on Wangerooge Frisian

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A grammar of Wangerooge Frisian (2022–2024)

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Outline

- 1 What is Wangerooge Frisian?
- 2 Sociolinguistic perspectives
 - Social history
 - Effects of language contact
 - Language obsolescence
- 3 Conclusions and future plans

Section 1

What is Wangerooge Frisian?

Frisian

- Germanic language family, closely related to English (Anglo-Frisian)
- Spoken along the North Sea coast in the Middle Ages; today three separate areas:
 - West Frisian (Fryslân in The Netherlands)
 - East Frisian (Saterland in Niedersachsen)
 - North Frisian (Nordfriesland in Schleswig-Holstein)
- Much dialectal variation, partly due to contact with different neighbouring languages (Dutch, Low/High German, Danish)
- For more information see e.g. Hoekstra & Tiersma (1994), Winter (2022), or *Handbuch des Friesischen* (Munske 2001)



The Frisian languages (from Nielsen & Larsen 2009)

Wangerooge Frisian

- East Frisian dialect (or language) on the Wadden Sea island Wangerooge; never more than a few hundred speakers
- *Neujahrsflut* 1854/1855, resulting in evacuation of the speakers to the mainland → “broken transmission”
- The last two speakers are said to have died in 1950, but these may have been semi-speakers (cf. Versloot 1996a: liv)

Documentation of Wangerooge Frisian

- Good documentation, mainly thanks to Heinrich Georg Ehrentraut (1798–1866) and his primary consultant Anna Metta Claßen (1774–1846)
- Also some shorter texts (e.g. Littmann 1922, Siebs 1923), *Wenkersätze* (Bosse 2021: 510–513), and a few sound recordings
- Corpus of some 100,000 words in total, “eine reichhaltige Grundlage für das Studium der Syntax” (Versloot 2001: 424)

Table 1: Main sources of Wangerooge Frisian

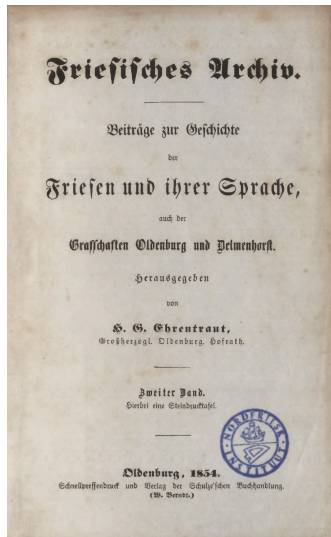
Source	Main type of material	Date	Words
Ehrentraut MS.	Fairy tales, sentences, etc.	c. 1840	c. 66,000
FA1 (Ehrentraut 1849)	Sentences	c. 1840	c. 12,500
FA2 (Ehrentraut 1854)	Autob., fairy tales	c. 1840	c. 18,000
Firmenich (1854)	Translations, anecdotes	c. 1850	c. 1,700
Winkler (1874)	Translation	1871	c. 950
<i>Wenkersätze</i>	Sentences	c. 1884	c. 450
Littmann (1922)	Autob.	1897	c. 2,000
Siebs (1923)	Autob., sentences	c. 1899	c. 3,000
In total			c. 104,600

H. G. Ehrentraut (1798–1866)

- Lawyer and exceptionally talented “hobby linguist”
- Fieldwork on Wangerooge 1837–1841
- Developed a transcription system and collected texts, paradigms, and material for a dictionary
- Some of the material appeared in *Friesisches Archiv* (1849–1854), the rest edited and published by Versloot (1996c)



H. G. Ehrentraut (1798–1866)



Friesisches Archiv, vol. 2 (Ehrentraut 1854)

Example of Wangerooge Frisian

- (1) yaa schríiv-et de Wangeróog-er too_el up, deer
they write-PL DEF W.-DER language up there
kum-t doch siinléthiig nicks fon herdúut ...
come-3SG surely ever nothing of out
'They are writing down the Wangerooge language, but surely
nothing will ever come of that...'

Example of Wangerooge Frisian, continued

- (2) dait kan-t yaa doch nich farsta'un, af yaa mútt-ert
that can-PL they surely not understand.INF1 or they must-PL
álłtiid 'n Wangeróog-er bii yam hab, deer yam dait
always INDF W.-DER by them have.INF1 REL them that
farthiúutsk-et
Germanize-3SG
'... surely people cannot understand that, unless they always
have a person from Wangerooge with them who can translate
it into German for them' (Versloot 1996c: 446.34)

Stand der Forschung

- Word lists and paradigms in Ehrentraut (1849)
- A few works on historical phonology in the early 20th century (e.g. Siebs 1901, Löfstedt 1932)
- Some more recent work on phonology and morphology
 - e.g. Versloot (1996b, 2002), Hoekstra (1998, 2008), Stiles (2008), and Bosse (2012)
- My plan: synchronic grammatical description
 - Special attention to syntax and information structure
 - Intended audience: general linguists as well as students and scholars of Frisian

Some challenges

- The majority of the corpus is due to one linguist and one consultant
- Little to no metadata about most texts
- Some texts are close translations with a strong literary “feel” – likely not representative of spoken Wangerooge Frisian syntax
 - cf. Ebert (1994: 22–23) on attempts to write Fering (North Frisian)

Section 2

Sociolinguistic perspectives

Subsection 1

Social history

Central questions

- How did outsiders perceive Wangerooge Frisian and its speakers?
- How did Wangerooge Frisian speakers perceive themselves and their language, and how did this influence its use?

Sources on social history

- Descriptions of the island and its inhabitants beginning with Winckelmann (1671)
- Comments on the language (mainly by outsiders) collected by Ehrentraut
- Later information on the decline of the language, e.g. in Kollmann (1891) and Siebs (1923)

Winckelmann (1671) on the islanders

Die Einwohner dieses Eylandes gebrauchen sich zwar ins gemein der Westphälischen Sprach / jedoch haben sie unter sich noch eine besondere / die ein fremder / gar nicht verstehen kan [...] Auch sind die Einwohner / wie fast andere Wasserleut / etwas roh- und wilder Art / sollen sich jedoch / innerhalb kurzer Zeit / sehr gebessert haben

Winckelmann (1671: 11)

Heinemeyer (1804) on the islanders

Einr kaum glaubliche Trägheit für jede Arbeit ist das Erbtheil der meisten Bewohner von Wangeroo [...] Gleich dem Fault-hiere, bewegt sich der Insulaner nur aus Noth von seinem Platze.

Heinemeyer (1804: 133)

Lorenz Oken on the islanders, Feb 1807

Dieses Volk ist eine einzige Familie von 200 Menschen, die bloß unter sich heiraten. Sie sind altfriesischen Stammes und haben ihre Sprache bis jetzt behalten.

Braüning-Oktavio (1958: 21–22)

Ehrentraut's description

Die Wangeroger sind oft wegen ihrer Sprache geneckt worden, und scheuen sich deshalb in der Regel, in derselben zu reden, wenn ein Fremder gegenwärtig ist. Sie ist dadurch den Bewohnern des nahe liegenden Landes fast ganz unbekannt geblieben und von ihnen verachtet.

Ehrentraut (1849: 13–14)

Some perceptions collected by Ehrentraut

Ein frommer Mann konnte es nicht begreifen, wie es möglich wäre, daß dieses Heidenvolk [...] eine Sprache hätte, die einen vernünftigen Menschen interessiren könnte. [...] Ein anderer, welcher die Insulaner gern schwarz machen möchte, meinte, es wäre eine Diebessprache, welche die Insulaner erfunden hätten, um nicht verstanden zu werden.

Versloot (1996c: 446.36)

Sociolinguistic position until early 19th c.

- Relative isolation and linguistic endogamy ensured the survival of Wangerooe Frisian into the modern period
- Wangerooe Frisian and its speakers clearly recognized as distinct, both by outsiders and by the speakers themselves
- Low prestige, no official functions, and no written tradition
- Low German on the mainland, High German used by church and administration → the islanders needed at least some knowledge of these languages

Subsection 2

Effects of language contact

Central question

- How did contact with other languages – most importantly Low German – influence Wangerooge Frisian?

Wangerooge Frisian bilingualism

- Stable bi- or multilingualism at least from 17th (Winckelmann 1671) to early 19th century (Chemnitz 1833)
- Opening of a health resort in 1804 → likely increased influence of (High) German
- At least from 1854/1855 replacive bilingualism and gradual language obsolescence

Chemnitz (1833) on Wangerooze Frisian

Ungeachtet sie die plattdeutsche Sprache reden, und die hochdeutsche verstehen, so bedienen sie sich doch unter einander einer ganz besondern [...] Sie nennen es Quiddern.

Chemnitz (1833: 24)

Examples of Low German influence

- Many lexical items, cf. next slide
- Borrowed morphology e.g. PL -s: *fóoget*, *fóoges* ‘bailiff(s)’; *éerem(s)* ‘arm(s)’
- Almost certainly syntactic convergence, but harder to pinpoint
- Probably loan phonemes /œ/ and /œ:/ (Versloot 2001: 425)
- In other words both MATTER and PATTERN replication (Matras & Sakel 2007)

Table 2: Examples of Low German loanwords

Loanword	Meaning	Comments
<i>dártiig</i> to <i>nä'ägentiig</i>	'30' to '90'	
<i>döör</i>	'through'	also as verbal prefix
<i>dorp</i>	'village'	
<i>gelúckelk</i>	'lucky'	also as adverb 'luckily'
<i>gewás</i>	'growth'	
<i>léevent</i>	'life'	
<i>obschóon(s)</i>	'although'	
<i>pöözel</i>	'toil'	
<i>sick</i>	REFL	rare, mainly in proverbs

Table 3: Examples of High German loanwords

Loanword	Meaning	Comments
<i>geschickt</i>	‘deft, smart’	
<i>gevä’nknis</i>	‘prison’	
<i>óoberst</i>	‘colonel’	
<i>óoder</i>	‘or’	<i>af</i> more common
<i>prinséssin</i>	‘princess’	
<i>slos</i>	‘castle, palace’	beside <i>slot</i>
<i>swerg</i>	‘dwarf’	

Subsection 3

Language obsolescence

Central questions

- How and why did Wangerooge Frisian stop being spoken?
- Did the gradual obsolescence of the language have any linguistic effects? (And can these be distinguished from “normal” contact-induced change?)

Decline of Wangerooge Frisian

Table 4: Number of Wangerooge Frisian speakers

Year	Speakers (approx.)	Source
1738	171	Ehrentraut 1849
1790	174	Crome 1793
1890	32	Kollmann 1891
c. 1900	30	Siebs 1923
1927	7	Siebs 1931

“Decay” in late Wangerooge Frisian?

- Texts from c. 1900 differ linguistically from Ehrentraut corpus
- Controversy: language “decay” a process *sui generis* (e.g. Sasse 1992a,b), or reducible to contact effects (e.g. Johanson 2002)?
 - Compromise: “The difference [...] very often lies not in the sorts of change [but] in the quantity of change and in the speed with which the obsolescent language changes” (Aikhenvald 2012: 77)

Some changes in “late” Wangerooge Frisian

- 1 Instability in vowel qualities acc. to Siebs (1923: 237)
- 2 /e:/ → /ø:/ (sporadically), e.g. *nijjeer* → *nijjöör* ‘New Year’
- 3 /θ, ð/ → /t, d/ acc. to Siebs (1923: 237), but in fact already noted by Oken in 1807 (Braüning-Oktavio 1958: 22)
- 4 Analogical levelling, e.g. *sain* – *sainst* – *saint* ‘send (1/2/3sg)’ for earlier *sain* – *sanst* – *sant* (Siebs 1923: 251)
- 5 Relativizer *wut* for earlier *deer*
- 6 Instability in infinitive rule: INF1 for INF2

INF1 for INF2

- INF1 (-Ø) historically used after auxiliaries, INF2 (-en) elsewhere; but in Littmann (1922) the INF2 suffix is sometimes missing

- (3) då haid-en wi nix to doo[n] as íirdapel
 then have.PST-PL we nothing to do than potato
 úp-ghriwe[n]
 up-dig
 ‘then we had nothing else to do than dig up potatoes’
 (Littmann 1922: 22)
- (4) hu dait am besten to maki[in] weer
 how that PTCL best to do COP.PST.3SG
 ‘... how that could best be done’ (Littmann 1922: 18)

“Decay” of infinitive rule

- Instability in infinitive rule might be a good candidate for language “decay”
 - The rule is otherwise remarkably stable across Frisian languages
- However, the pattern in the Littmann texts could also be explained as negative borrowing from Low German
 - No INF1/INF2 distinction in Low German (cf. Matras & Reershemius 2003: 59) → lack of distinction copied into late Wangerooge Frisian

Section 3

Conclusions and future plans

Conclusions

- Wangerooge Frisian a remnant of a larger Frisian area – survival due to relative isolation and linguistic endogamy
- Low prestige and no official functions (and documentation only thanks to a few enthusiasts)
- Contact with Low German for several centuries with lexical, grammatical, and phonological effects
- Accelerated change in late Wangerooge Frisian (language “decay”?)

Plans for the future

- Continue work on grammatical description
- More systematic comparison of Ehrentraut corpus (c. 1840), later texts (c. 1900), and sound recordings (1927)
- More work on loanwords and other contact effects

A syntactic sketch of Wangerooge Frisian

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Thank you for your attention!



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Comments and questions are always welcome:
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