

A “lost” language of Northern Germany

A crash course in Wangerooge Frisian

Sune Gregersen

ISFAS, Kiel University

StuTS 73, Frankfurt 28 May 2023

Plans for today

1 What is Wangerooge Frisian?

2 Definite articles

3 Some other linguistic features

4 Reading Wangerooge Frisian

5 Rounding off

What is Wangerooge Frisian?
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Definite articles
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Some other linguistic features
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Reading Wangerooge Frisian
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Rounding off
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Referenc

Slides and exercises

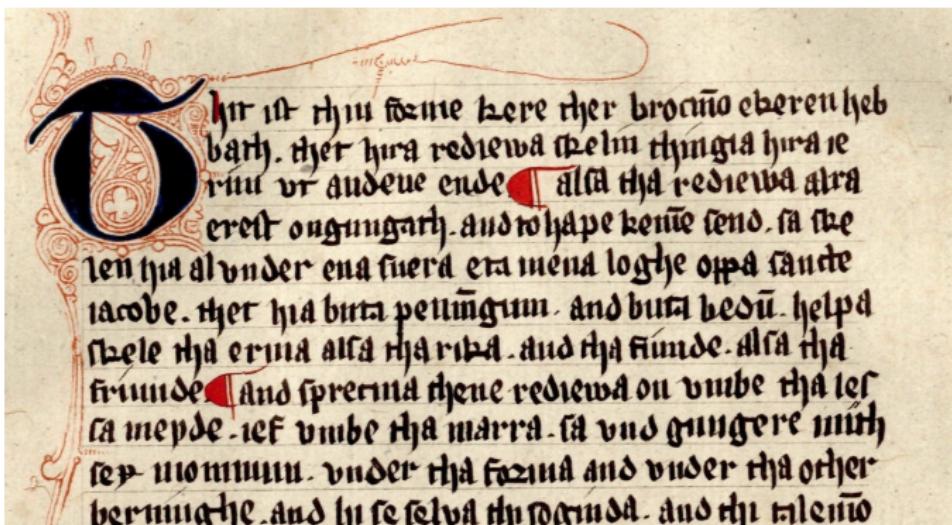
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Section 1

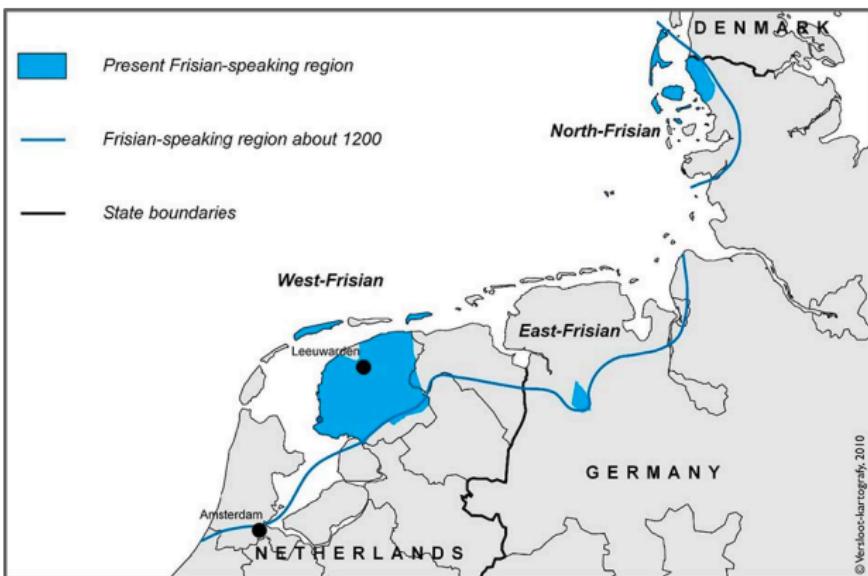
What is Wangerooge Frisian?

What is Frisian?

- Subbranch of the Germanic language family, most closely related to English (“Anglo-Frisian”)
 - Old Frisian spoken along the North Sea coast in the Middle Ages – manuscripts from c. 1300–1500 CE
 - After Middle Ages gradual language shift, resulting in much smaller Frisian-speaking area:
 - West Frisian (Fryslân in The Netherlands)
 - East (Sater) Frisian (Saterland in Niedersachsen)
 - North Frisian (Nordfriesland in Schleswig-Holstein)



Old Frisian manuscript (Brokmerbrief, c. 1300)



(Old) Frisian-speaking area

(© Versloot-kartografy 2010; reproduced from Winter 2022)

Frisian today

- West Frisian: c. 400,000 speakers, vulnerable
- Sater Frisian: c. 1,000 speakers, severely endangered
- North Frisian: c. 4,000 speakers (all dialects), severely endangered (cf. Winter 2022)



Modern Frisian languages (from Nielsen & Larsen 2009)

Wangerooge Frisian

- East Frisian language/dialect on the Wadden Sea island Wangerooge; never more than a few hundred speakers
 - First mentioned 1671
 - Earliest documentation (word lists) c. 1800
 - Main corpus collected c. 1840
- *Neujahrsflut* 1854/1855 → evacuation of speakers to the mainland followed by gradual language loss
- The last two speakers are said to have died in 1950, but these may have been semi-speakers (cf. Versloot 1996a: liv)



Wangerooge (© Martina Nolte, CC BY-SA 3.0 DE)



View of Alt-Wangerooge, c. 1840 (Zuiderzeemuseum Enkhuizen, CC BY-SA 4.0)

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 mütt-ert
that can-PL they surely not understand.INF1 or they must-PL
álltiid 'n Wangeróog-er bii yam hab, deer yam dait
always INDF W.-DER by them have.INF1 REL them that
farthiúutsk-et

Germanize-3sc

'... 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)

Winckelmann (1671) on the islanders

Though the inhabitants of this island do commonly use the Westphalian [Low German] language, yet amongst themselves they have another, which an outsider cannot understand at all ... Also, like other sea-dwelling people, the inhabitants have a rather coarse and wild manner, though they are said to have improved much recently.

[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)

Lorenz Oken on the islanders, Feb 1807

This people is one big family of 200 who only marry amongst themselves. They are from Old Frisian lineage and have maintained their language until the present day.

[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.]

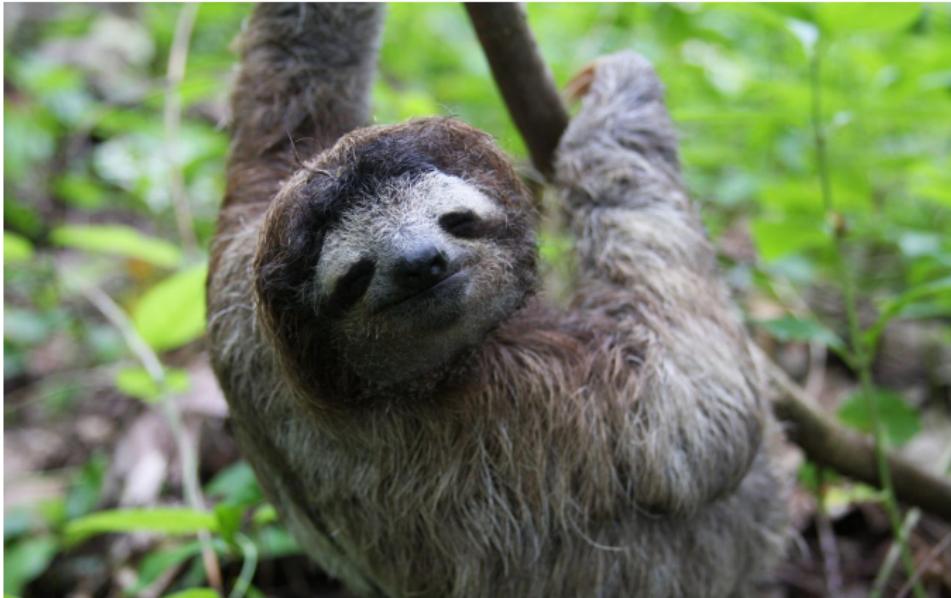
Braüning-Oktavio (1958: 21–22)

Heinemeyer (1804) on the islanders

An almost unbelievable laziness with respect to all work is the natural disposition of most of the inhabitants of Wangerooge ... Just like the sloth, the islander only moves from his place out of sheer necessity.

[Eine kaum glaubliche Trägheit für jede Arbeit ist das Erbtheil der meisten Bewohner von Wangeroog [...] Gleich dem Faulthiere, bewegt sich der Insulaner nur aus Noth von seinem Platze.]

Heinemeyer (1804: 133)



Three-toed sloth (© Nathan Dappen, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Ehrentraut (1849) on the islanders

The people of Wangerooge have often been ridiculed because of their language, and generally shy away from speaking it when an outsider is present. For this reason it is virtually unknown and despised by the neighbours on the mainland.

[Die Wangerooger 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

One pious man was unable to understand how these pagans ... could possibly have a language which was of interest to any sensible person. ... Another, who wanted to smear the name of the islanders, thought that it was a thieves' language which the islanders had made up in order not to be understood.

[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 situation

- Relative isolation and linguistic endogamy ensured the survival of Wangerooge Frisian into the modern period
- Wangerooge 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
- After 1854/1855 speakers quickly assimilated to (Low) German majority

Decline of Wangerooge Frisian

Table 1: 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

Documentation of Wangerooge Frisian

- Excellent 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
- Total corpus of more than 100,000 words

Table 2: 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)

What is Wangerooge Frisian?

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Definite articles

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Some other linguistic features

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Reading Wangerooge Frisian

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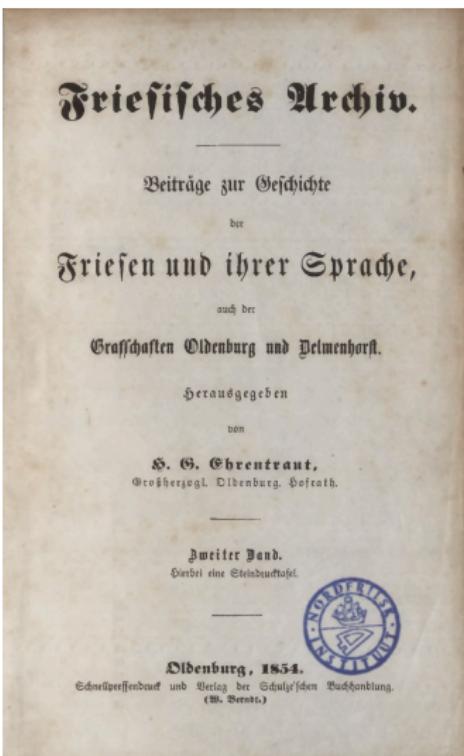
Rounding off

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H. G. Ehrentraut (1798–1866)



Friesisches Archiv, vol. 2 (Ehrentraut 1854)

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 project: synchronic grammatical description
 - Special attention to syntax and information structure
 - Intended audience: general linguists as well as students and scholars of Frisian

Section 2

Definite articles

Slides and exercises

<https://talks.stuts.de/stuts73/public/events/1021>

Definite article paradigm

Table 3: Wangerooge Frisian definite determiners

	N	F	M	PL	Eng.
“WEAK”	<i>'t</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>de</i>	‘the’
“STRONG”	<i>dait</i>	<i>djuu</i>	<i>dan</i>	<i>daa</i>	‘the’

“Split” definiteness

- “Split” definiteness in other languages tied to shared knowledge (common ground) of interlocutors
 - Identification due to linguistic co-text → strong
 - Identification due to extralinguistic context → weak
- Systems with two definite articles have been described for a number of languages (cf. Schwarz 2013), including:
 - Various varieties of German (e.g. Heinrichs 1954, Hartmann 1982, Haberland 1985, Harweg 1989, Schwarz 2009)
 - Fering (North Frisian; Ebert 1971)
 - Lakhota (Siouan; Schwarz 2013: 546–548)
 - Hausa (Chadic < Afroasiatic; Jaggar 2001: 316–323)

Generic and ‘global’ contexts: typically weak

- (3) in 't **djúnkens** muuzt **de kat** am best.
in DEF darkness catch_mice.3SG DEF cat PTCL best
‘The cat catches mice best in the dark’ (proverb)
- (4) **de sun** gungt únner
DEF sun go.3SG under
‘The sun is setting’

Anaphoric context: typically strong

- (5) nu kumt 'er 'n løøv un fint daa twoo béener
now comes EXPL INDF lion and find.3SG the.PL two children
deer, nuu nimt **djuu løøv** ain fon daa béener
there now take.3SG the.F lion one of the.PL children
thwäärs in 'er tuut
sideward in DEF mouth
- 'Then a lion comes and finds the two children; then the lion takes one of the children in its mouth'

Variation in weak and strong articles

- (6) daa sjucht hii **dan grooet riiz** al fon fiirens.
then see.3sg he the.M big ogre already from far_away
daa ropt **de grooet riiz:** wut wult duu kleiner
then shout.3sg the big ogre: what want.2sg you small
Erdwurm?
earthworm
‘Then he sees the big ogre from a distance; then the big ogre
shouts: “What do you want, you puny earthworm?”’

Section 3

Some other linguistic features

Brief typological overview

- Analytic language with few inflectional categories
- Nouns inflect for number (SG/PL)
- Verbs inflect for person, number, mood (IND/IMP), and tense (PST/NONPST)
- Adjectives inflect for gender/definiteness (M.SG.INDF vs. the rest) and degree (POS/CMPR/SUPR)
- V2 in main clauses, V-late/V2 in subordinate clauses (cf. StuTS 72 and Gregersen 2023b)
- Significant (Low) German influence on syntax and vocabulary

Some (more or less) interesting features

- Phonological “r-insertion” /TəT/ → /TərT/ (Hoekstra 1998)
 - e.g. *mut-* ‘must’ + *-et* ‘PL’ → *múttert* ‘must.PL’
- Geminated consonants (Versloot 1996b) – unusual for the area
- No productive diminutive formation (but many lexicalized forms; cf. Versloot 2002)
- Inflection of premodifying adverbs
- “Weak” and “strong” definite articles
- Two infinitives (like other Frisian languages): INF1 after auxiliaries, INF2 elsewhere
- Evidentiality contrast between past and perfect (?)

/r/-insertion

- Between alveolar plosives, i.e. /d/ and /t/, /θ/ is prohibited or at least dispreferred
- The sequence /TəT/ typically becomes /TərT/, also across word boundaries
- Result between words: appearance of a meaningless /r/, interpreted as a particle by Ehrentraut

Examples of /r/-insertion

- “Weak” definite article /də/ → /dər/ before /t-/ or /d-/

- (7) daa béen-er wéeren naa **der** dúunen wíziin
DEF.PL child-PL were to DEF dunes been
‘The children had been to the dunes’

Examples of /r/-insertion

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‘The children had been to the dunes’

- Sequence /-t ət-/ → /-t ər t-/

(8) deer licht 'er 't
there lies ?? it
‘There it lies’

Inflected adverbs

- Attributive adjectives and premodifying adverbs are usually uninflected:

- (9) 'n gans äärm faun
INDEF very poor girl(F)
'a very poor girl'

Inflected adverbs

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INDF very poor girl(F)
'a very poor girl'

- But M.SG.INDF adjectival suffix *-en* is copied to premodifying adverbs:

- (10) den wart hii 'n gáns-**en** ríik-**en** kö'öniing
then become.3SG he INDF very-M.INDF rich-M.INDF king(M)
'... then he becomes a very rich king'

Inflected adverbs



Een hele goede morgen

Wangerooge Frisian bilingualism

- Low German spoken on the mainland, High German used in religious and official contexts
- 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

Chemnitz (1833) on Wangerooge Frisian

Although they can speak the Low German language and understand High German, among themselves they use a very peculiar language ... They call it Quiddern.

[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 4: 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 5: 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 LG <i>slot</i> 'lock'
<i>swerg</i>	'dwarf'	

Section 4

Reading Wangerooge Frisian

Section 5

Rounding off

Take-home messages

- Wangerooge Frisian is an exciting language to work on!
 - Little-known and under-investigated in spite of the rich documentation
- Germany is home to many languages and dialects → original empirical linguistics can also be done close to home

Take-home messages

- Wangerooge Frisian is an exciting language to work on!
 - Little-known and under-investigated in spite of the rich documentation
- Germany is home to many languages and dialects → original empirical linguistics can also be done close to home
 - Also good for practice before taking on a language further afield

My plans for the future

- Continue work on grammatical description
- Transcription of sound recordings from the 1920s (to the extent possible)
- Online publication of the entire Wangerooge Frisian corpus

An invitation

- As far as I know, no one else is working on Wangerooge Frisian at the moment – but anyone interested is welcome!
- Corpus can be made available upon request
- If you want to know more, a preliminary grammar sketch is available at DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7775494

An invitation

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- If you want to know more, a preliminary grammar sketch is available at DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7775494
 - Feedback on any aspect of this will result in eternal gratitude!

A syntactic sketch of Wangerooge Frisian

Sune Gregersen¹
Kiel University

Version 1.0, 16 March 2023

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7775494

Thank you for your attention!



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Comments and questions are always welcome:
s.gregersen@ifsfas.uni-kiel.de

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