

An invitation to Wangerooge Frisian

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A grammar of Wangerooge Frisian (2022–2024)

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Outline

- 1 What is Wangerooge Frisian?
- 2 A bit of grammar
- 3 Conclusions and perspectives

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

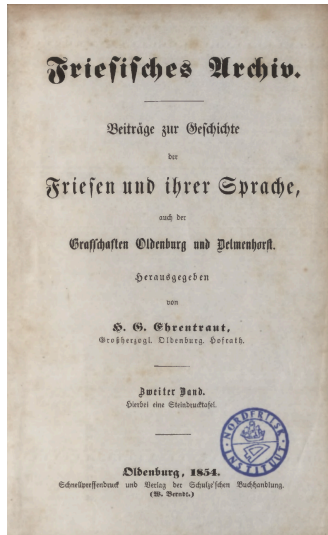
Source	Main type of material	Date	Words
Ehrentraut MS.	Fairy tales, sentences, etc.	c. 1840	c. 66,000
FA1 (Ehrentraut 1849)	Sentences	c. 1840	c. 12,500
FA2 (Ehrentraut 1854)	Autob., fairy tales	c. 1840	c. 18,000
Firmenich (1854)	Translations, anecdotes	c. 1850	c. 1,700
Winkler (1874)	Translation	1871	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)

H. G. Ehrentaut (1798–1866)

- Lawyer and exceptionally talented “hobby linguist”
- Fieldwork on Wangerooze 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)



Friesisches Archiv, vol. 2 (Ehrentraut 1854)

8. Volksgeleuven.

Geruven.

bî ôlen tiden, won de wûfer stinen tō fjennen, un haïden dait fjennen in de fjen farfınd *) — dait kan gans licht farfınd wêr mit tō heit watter ôder tō kôl — den kreïgen yâ nain bûter. ôder mōnnich mōl kreïgen yâ 'n lets ful, dait wêr jûst as mēlktippel, dait hīten ya fon hēxenbûter. won der den 'n wûfminsk ûrtō kaum dait wêr 'n hex. fâ wêr der aīnmōl 'n wûf bî 't fjennen, yû kan nain bûter krīg, dâ kumt 'er 'n ôl wûf 'erdīn un fīdert hīrī an, wut yû nain wōn hâ? dâ bit **)

Example of a text (Ehrentraut 1854: 13)

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

Section 2

A bit of grammar

Brief typological overview

- Analytic, few inflectional categories (but many classes)
- Nouns inflect for number (SG/PL)
- Verbs inflect for person (1/2/3), number (SG/PL), mood (IND/IMP), and tense (PST/NONPST)
- Adjectives inflect for gender/definiteness (M.SG.INDF vs. the rest) and degree (POS/CMPR/SUPR)
- Nonfinite verb forms: INF1, INF2 (“gerund”), PTCP
- V2 in main clauses, V-late/V2 in subclauses (Gregersen 2023b)
- Significant Low German influence on syntax and vocabulary

Some (more or less) unusual 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
- Two definite articles (“strong” vs. “weak”)
- “Free” polar complement clauses

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- **“Free” polar complement clauses**

Inflected adverbs

- Attributive adjectives and premodifying adverbs are usually uninflected:

(1) 'n gans äärm faun
INDF very poor girl(F)
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- But adjectival suffix *-en* in M.SG.INDF contexts – this is copied to premodifying adverbs:

(2) 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



“Strong” vs. “weak” definite articles

- Two definite articles, one “strong” and one “weak”

- (3) nu gungst hi na **de** prinsessin to
now go.3SG he to DEF.F.WK princess(F) to
‘Now he goes to the princess’
- (4) deer sit **djuu** prinséssin oon
there sit.3SG DEF.F.STR princess(F) in
‘In there the princess is sitting’

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- Comparable – but not identical – phenomena in North Frisian (e.g. Ebert 1971) and German (e.g. Nübling 2005)

“Strong” vs. “weak” definite articles

Table 2: Wangerooge Frisian definite articles

	“Weak”	“Strong”
M.SG	de	dan
F.SG	de	djuu
N.SG	't	dait
PL	de	daa

Free *wut* clauses

- Polar complements formed with *wut* ‘if, whether’, as in (5)–(6):

(5) iik wul him fraig, **wut** hii mit gung wul
I want.1SG him ask.INF1 if he with go.INF1 want.3SG
‘I’ll ask him if he wants to come along’

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(6) hii wet nich, **wut** hii up ’t haud gungt, af up
he know.3SG not if he on DEF.N.WK head(N) go.3SG or on
’e foot.
DEF.PL.WK foot[PL]
‘He doesn’t know if he’s walking on his head or on his feet’

Free *wut* clauses

- However, *wut* clauses may appear without a complement-taking predicate
- The function is more like a purpose than a complement clause

(7) doot dait fínster ínсен ípiin, **wut** djuu
do.IMP.PL DEF.N.STR window(N) once open if DEF.F.STR
duuv hiir wail herdíin kumt
dove(F) here really inside come.3SG
‘Please open the window [to find out] if the dove is going to
come inside’

Free *wut* clauses

- (8) yaa wult weg un wult naa hírii kantóor too, **wut**
they want.PL away and want.PL to her office to if
yaa daa breíver nich fiin kant
they DEF.PL.STR letter.PL not find.INF1 can.PL
'They want to go to her office [to see] if they might be able to
find the letters'

Free *wut* clauses

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they want.PL away and want.PL to her office to if
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‘They want to go to her office [to see] if they might be able to
find the letters’

- Question: Are you aware of similar phenomena in other languages? References welcome!

Section 3

Conclusions and perspectives

Take-home messages

- Wangerooze Frisian is an exciting language to work on!
- 19th-century documentation of exceptionally good quality
- Typologically similar to neighbouring Germanic languages
 - ... but also phenomena in need of further investigation

Plans for the future

- Continue work on grammatical description
- Transcription of sound recordings from the 1920s (to the extent possible)
- Online publication of the corpus
 - But where, and in what format?

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 about Wangerooge Frisian, an initial syntactic sketch is available
 - Feedback on any aspect of this sketch is highly appreciated
 - Can be found at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7775494>

A syntactic sketch of Wangerooge Frisian

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Thank you for your attention!



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