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Frisian as an Endangered Language: An Overview

Abstract

The main goal of the paper is to answer the questions whether Frisian can be referred to as an endangered language and if it managed to survive the constant influence of the surrounding larger cultures and languages. The first point to be analyzed is the geographic distribution of Frisian. The second issue to be considered is the historical and present cultural and social status of the Frisian language. The third matter to be analysed is the lexical variety of Frisian language and its complexity, which made its survival possible. The article takes the diachronic perspective and expounds upon all the mentioned factors and their role in the preservation of Frisian until today. The paper presents an analysis of Frisian along Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), its extended and modified version offered by Lewis and Simons (EGIDS) and the UNESCO's 'Language Vitality and Endangerment framework' (LVE) guidelines (2003).

Keywords*:* Frisian, language contact, endangered languages, Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale

Introduction

Language contact occurs when speakers of different languages interact, and their languages influence each other on different levels. As it is stated by Winford (2005, 2008) language contact always induces change. Still, the influence of one language on another varies and depends on the nature of the contact. Obviously, a language's influence widens as its speakers grow in power. One culture is influenced by a more dominant, formidable culture, and begins to lose its character and language. When we look at the history of European languages, and especially older Germanic languages, we can see that many of them, for example Gothic, Burgundian or Vandalic disappeared. Many other languages are endangered. According to Crystal (2010: 19) "there is a language dying off somewhere in the world every two weeks or so." Reasons for language loss or language shift towards a stronger language, are numerous. Besides natural disasters we should mention colonization, migration, and invasion, often resulting in cultural assimilation.The focus of this paper, however, is not on language death, but rather on language survival.

Throughout the years Frisian territories bordered first on the Roman Empire, later on the Carolingian Empire, whose languages and culture were dominant in Europe. Yet, the language of the Frisians managed to survive and grow independently.

Language endangerment

Language endangerment has long been a matter of great interest in wide range of linguistic fields. In broad terms, language endangerment can be defined as a situation in which a particular language is at risk of losing its active users and becoming extinct (Harrison 2007: 14). Nettle and Romaine (2000: 90) point out that languages become obsolete in the face of population loss or language shift. The issue formed the central focus of a study by Austin and Sallabank (2015) in which the authors additionally mention further causes of language endangerments such as "overt repression, often in the name of 'national unity' or assimilation (including forcible resettlement) (...) [and] cultural/political/economic dominance" Austin and Sallabank (2015: 5). There is a consensus among scientists that language shift can be either non-voluntary or voluntary. Voluntary shift takes place when a language speakers assume that they could benefit more from speaking the dominant language than their own. Very often a minority language speakers are believed to be "relatively powerless politically, (...) less educated, less wealthy (even living in poverty in many cases), with less access to modern conveniences and technologies" (Grenoble 2015: 34). Such situations lead to the abandonment of both the minority language and culture and adoption of the dominant, more prestigious ones (Lüpke 2019: 468-471).

Yet another important feature of language shift is highlighted by Austin and Sallabank (2015: 1), who stress that

> [l]anguage shift can take place rapidly, over a generation or two, or it can take place gradually, but continuously, over several generations. Language shift often takes place through a period of unstable bilingualism or multilingualism, that is, speakers use two or more languages but one (or more) of them is more dominant and used increasingly widely until finally it (or they) take over the roles previously carried by the endangered language(s).

All this may lead to the situation in which almost 50% of the languages spoken around the world will be abandoned by their users (Harrison 2007: 3).

2. Language revitalisation and maintenance

Language loss is a growing concern among scholars. Linguists are becoming increasingly disquieted at the speed at which languages and cultures disappear. Mufwene (2004: 211) highlights the need to consider both language maintenance and revitalization from the broader perspective of a relationship that binds language, culture and ecosystem together. He continues, pointing out that "[l]ike cultures, languages are dynamic, complex adaptive systems that cannot be considered independent of the adaptive needs of their speakers" (Mufwene 2004: 219).

On of the researchers that discusses possible actions that need to be undertaken to stop or, at least, impede the process is David Crystal (2000) who proposes six factors that might help sustain the stability

of a language. He claims that the threatened language will not only progress, but also quite possibly recover, if its speakers (1) increase their prestige within the dominant community; (2) increase their wealth; (3) increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community; (4) have a strong presence in the educational system; (5) can write down their language; (6) can make use of electronic technology (Crystal 2000: 133–144). Ladefoged (1992: 810), on the other hand, reminds that linguists, encouraging the revitalization processes, should be cautious of their actions and consider the situation of individual linguistic groups with great care and sensitivity: "we should not assume that we know what is best for them."

2.1. The degree of language vitality—assessment tools

Language revitalization programs need to adopt specific, most accurate in the particular environment actions. In order to do that, a language's state should be understood and carefully evaluated. Obiero (2010: 203) postulates that a precise assessment of "the degree of language vitality is the basic indicator used in determining the appropriate type of language revitalization program." Dwyer (2011: 1) elaborates on the idea and suggests that

> (...) [a]ssessing the degree to which shift occurs invariably entails determining and applying a range of largely quantifiable sociolinguistic variables, such as the number and age of speakers, or whether there is a writing system, educational materials, or media in the language (...).

Similar approach is adopted by Grenoble and Whaley (2006: 3) who claim that "(...) a language spoken by several thousand people on a daily basis presents a much different set of options for revitalization than a language that has a dozen native speakers who rarely use it."

There are numerous methods and techniques used for language's vitality assessment, yet, the most commonly used are the following scales:

1) *Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS)* developed by Fishman (1991)
2) *Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS)* developed by Lewis and Simons (2010) and further adopted by *Ethnologue* database (https://www.ethnologue.com/)
3) *UNESCO's 'Language Vitality and Endangerment framework' (LVE) guidelines* (2003)

Fishman (1991) proposes a sequence of 8 stages that serve as a tool in the assessment of language disruption, and which may be helpful in the establishment of a plan of actions leading to the endangered language's revitalization. 8th stage suggests a near total extinction, whereas stage 1 indicates the smallest disruption.

The Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) developed by Lewis and Simons (2010) is more detailed than Fishman's GIDS and consists of 13 levels. Here, however, the higher the number on the scale the greater level of disruption to the intergenerational transmission of the language. Additionally, it is worth highlighting that the levels 6a and 6b correspond to Level 6 of Fishman's GIDS, and levels 8a and 8b correspond to GIDS's Level 8. There are also 3 new levels 0, 9, and 10. Table 1 below summarizes the stages the language might find itself in:

Table 1. *Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) vs. Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS)*

	Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) (Fishman 1991)	**Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (Lewis and Simons 2010)**
0.		*International* The language is widely used between nations in trade, knowledge exchange, and international policy.
1.	The language is used in education, work, mass media, government at the nationwide level	*National* The language is used in education, work, mass media, and government at the national level.
2.	The language is used for local and regional mass media and governmental services	*Provincial* The language is used in education, work, mass media, and government within major administrative subdivisions of a nation
3.	The language is used for local and regional work by both insiders and outsiders	*Wider Communication* The language is used in work and mass media without official status to transcend language differences across a region.
4.	Literacy in the language is transmitted through education	*Educational* The language is in vigorous use, with standardization and literature being sustained through a widespread system of institutionally supported education.
5.	The language is used orally by all generations and is effectively used in written form throughout the community	*Developing* The language is in vigorous use, with literature in a standardized form being used by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable.
6.	The language is used orally by all generations and is being learned by children as their first language	
6a.		*Vigorous* The language is used for face-to-face communication by all generations and the situation is sustainable.
6b.		*Threatened* The language is used for face-to-face communication within all generations, but it is losing users.
7.	The child-bearing generation knows the language well enough to use it with their elders but is not transmitting it to their children	*Shifting* The child-bearing generation can use the language among themselves, but it is not being transmitted to children.
8.	The only remaining speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation	
8a.		*Moribund* The only remaining active users of the language are members of the grandparent generation and older.

	Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) (Fishman 1991)	**Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (Lewis and Simons 2010)**
8b.		*Nearly Extinct* The only remaining users of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language.
9.		*Dormant* The language serves as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community, but no one has more than symbolic proficiency.
10.		*Extinct* The language is no longer used and no one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language.

In his research Baker (2001: 79) additionally stresses that:

> [f]or Fishman (1991), *Stages 8* to *5* constitute the minimum basis of reversing language shift. The activities at these stages rely solely on the efforts of the language community itself. Such stages reflect a diglossic situation where the minority language has separate functions from the majority language.

UNESCO's 'Language Vitality and Endangerment framework' attempts to evaluate the level of language knowledge and use. The document presenting the framework indicates in its closing lines the fact that:

> (...) linguists, language activists, and policy makers have a long-term task to compile and disseminate the most effective and viable mechanisms for sustaining and revitalizing the world's endangered languages. Most importantly, they have the responsibility of working collaboratively with endangered language communities that enjoy an equal partnership in the projects. (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group 2003: 18)

The framework includes six degrees of endangerment based on nine factors. The framework's authors stress, however, that "[l]anguages cannot be assessed simply by adding the numbers." Below are the 9 factors and a sample gradation of the degree of language's endangerment (Table 2).

Factor 1. Intergenerational Language Transmission (scale)
Factor 2. Absolute Number of Speakers (real numbers)
Factor 3. Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population (scale)
Factor 4. Trends in Existing Language Domains (scale)
Factor 5. Response to New Domains and Media (scale)
Factor 6. Materials for Language Education and Literacy (scale)
Factor 7. Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies, Including Official Status and Use: (scale)
Factor 8. Community Members' Attitudes toward Their Own Language (scale)
Factor 9. Amount and Quality of Documentation (scale)

Table 2. UNESCO's 'Language Vitality and Endangerment framework' (LVE) guidelines (2003) *Factor 1: Intergenerational Transmission*

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Speaker Population
safe	5	The language is used by all ages, from children up
unsafe	4	The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains
definitively endangered	3	The language is used mostly by the parental generation and up
severely endangered	2	The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and up
critically endangered	1	The language is used mostly by very few speakers, of great-grandparental generation
extinct	0	There exists no speaker

3. Frisian language—the history

As it is commonly known the Frisians and their language were first mentioned in Pliny's *Belgica* and later on in *Germania* written by Tacitus. From these sources we find out that the Frisians inhabited the area between the Rhine in the west and the Ems in the east (Bremmar 2009: 1). Throughout the years Frisian territories bordered first on the Roman Empire, later on the Carolingian Empire, whose languages and culture were dominant in Europe. Yet, the language of the Frisians managed to survive and grow independently.

The first reason why Frisian survived is its geographic distribution. Now, Frisian is a language spoken mostly in the province of Friesland (*Fryslân*) in the north of the Netherlands (Gorter 2001: 103). In the past, during the middle ages, the speakers of the language inhabited the northern European coastlines of the Northern Sea that used to be called Mare Frisicum IJssennagger (2017). The area of Frisian speaking community was most of the time inaccessible due to the surrounding mud and marshes. Thus, it has rarely been invaded or totally conquered. Due to geographical reason migrations in this area were also rare, which gave Frisian the dominant position as far as communication is concerned. Frisians colonized often flooded salt marshes, therefore they built the farms on top of an artificial mound or a *terp*. As the population grew, *terps* were enlarged or a cluster of smaller *house terps* merged into a larger *village terp* (Bremmer 2009). Such geographical surrounding gave Frisians relative protection and made the land not attractive for invaders, first, from Roman Empire and, later, Charlemange.

Around the 1st century BC, Frisians inhabited the areas of present Netherlands and constituted a third largest tribal community (Munske 2001). The areas they settled were bordering with, occupied by the Romans, Gaul. Despite intensive contacts and trade between the Frisians and the Romans, Frisian remained culturally and linguistically independent, Frisians, being excellent warriors and traders, did not focus on expansion and always came back to their homeland. This had a huge impact on the culture's and language's survival. There were much more numerous Germanic tribes such as Goths or Saxons prioritised conquering other lands. Such approach led to a less fortunate outcomes, as the tribes, due to the contacts with other peoples, assimilated and lost their unique identity. Frisians did not share their fate, however.

When we look at the later history, we can see that "[i]n the late seventh century, the Franks began to extend their territory towards the north and first conquered the coastal area between the Scheldt and

the Rhine" (Bremmer 2009: 2). Various Frankish kingdoms and finally the Holy Roman Empire tried to control Frisian areas. Still Frisian natural habitat was to their advantage, as the extensive marshes and peat-moors secluded Frisian from the inland. Such geographic distribution of Frisian language ensured the relative stability of the language and enabled the passing of the language from one generation to another.

The second issue to be considered is the cultural status of the Frisian language. Undoubtedly, language survives through its use in cultural and religious ceremonies as well as in writings. The earliest attestations of Frisian language originate from the inscriptions that are found mainly on coins and swords. Later on, despite the general dominance of Latin in Europe, there appear legal texts written in Frisian, which, undoubtedly, has an impact on establishing a standard written language of that time. Codification of the law with the usage of Frisian language must have had an impact on the usage of the language and its future existence and growth. Thanks to the well-established legal language, the members of the Frisian society could feel certain bond and unity. The fact that people could use Frisian language underpinned the independence and freedom of the Frisians.

The 16th and 17th centuries were the time during which Frisian language lost its popularity and importance. Frisian was perceived as a language of lower social classes (Bremmer 2009: 3-6). The official institutions used Dutch as a written language, and Frisian became the spoken language of the common people. Languages evolve and interact with one another. Frisian language also experienced some changes due to the contact with other languages, yet, it has never been absorbed or dominated. It established and, for long, sustained its own linguistic features as far as the lexicon, morphology and phonology are concerned.

4. Frisian language—now

The revival of Frisian writing and, therefore, its standardization begins already in the eighteen century. Hoekstra (2003: 199) mentions the immense role of people such as Everwinus Wassenbergh (1742–1826) or Ecco Epkema (1759–1832), Joost Halbertsma (1789–1869) or Eeltsje Halbertsma (1797–1858) who led to the establishment of a linguistic Frisian standard.

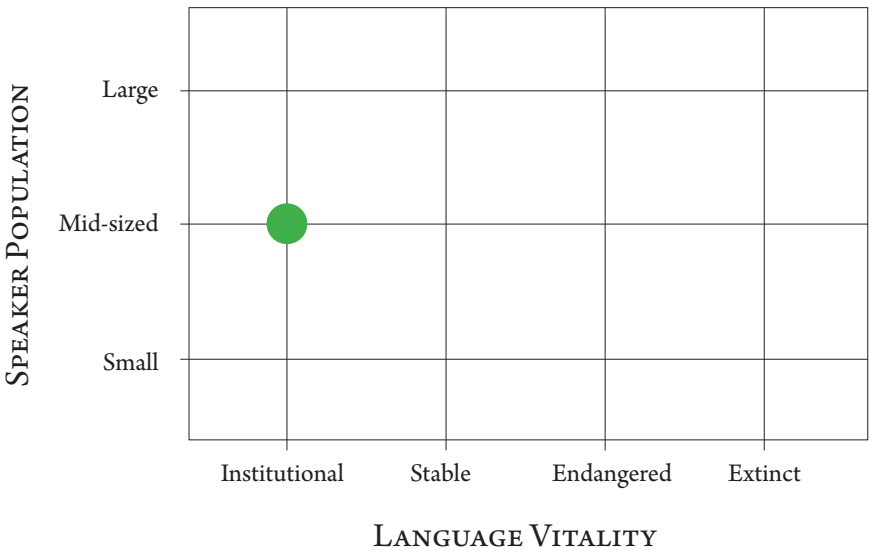
Now, we may say that Frisian language is characteristic for the region and can be put somewhere between a vernacular and a standard language (Feitsma 1978; 1981). What is more, Frisian has recently been recognized as an official language alongside with Dutch (Cenoz & Jessner 2000).

When we look at the language from the perspective of the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale adopted by Ethnologue and the Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale Frisian language has already passed the 8th and 7th stage. Not only adults, but also young speakers and children use Frisian on a daily basis. Frisian is the native language of around 350,000 people in Friesland. It may be said that 74% of the inhabitants of Friesland can speak the language (Gorter 2001: 104). According to Edelman (2010: 46) "Frisian has a relatively strong position in the domain of family, work and community, whereas Dutch dominates in the domains of education, media, public administration and law." This fulfills the requirements of Stage 6 which say that all three generations speak the language within the family. The criteria of Stage 5 are focused on the existence of literacy at home, school and community networks. At Stage 4 of the GIDS, the language is present at the primary level of education. Here, the research conducted by Edelman leads to the conclusion that "Frisian has a marginal position

as a language for teaching at all levels of education. It is an obligatory subject for all primary schools in Friesland, but only a small percentage of schools use Frisian as a medium of instruction" (Edelman 2010: 46). Gorter (2008: 510) mentions that only 73% of parents, when asked if it is important that their children learn Frisian at school, answered 'yes'. When the same question was asked with reference to Dutch, 100% of parents agreed. Frisian is present at primary level education in Friesland, but it is not that popular outside the territory of the language community and therefore does not fulfill the criterion of Stage 3. Gorter (2008) concludes here that:

> Frisian may be appreciated for its historical value or as the language of intimate contacts, but it is regarded as of low value for economic progress. Moreover, Frisian is not perceived as being endangered in the short run. Parents and teachers are not convinced that Frisian needs much more than a limited role in education. Today most people may be convinced of the 'harmless' character of teaching some Frisian, because it is not detrimental to Dutch (Gorter 2008: 517)

The revival activities receive support from the central government, which is important in connection with Stage 2. It needs to be pinpointed here that the 18th edition of the Ethnologue places the Frisian language at the **second stage**, which means that Frisian has a stable, unthreatened position among the world's languages. Frisian is characterized here as Institutional (EGIDS 0-4) which means that the language has been developed to the point that it is used and sustained by institutions beyond the home and community.



Graph 1. Frisian Language Vitality according to *Ethnologue*.

It is also worth mentioning that Frisian is the only official language in the Netherlands recognised under Part III of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages which aims to protect and promote historical *regional* and *minority languages* in *Europe*. The European Charter of Regional and

Minority Languages was ratified in the Netherlands in 1996. It made the Dutch government responsible for the adoption of certain measures to strengthen Frisian.

Conclusions

Looking at the LVE, GIDS or EGIDS scales of endangerment, we may conclude that Frisian belongs to the minority languages that managed to strengthen their position.

Throughout centuries, Frisian was surrounded by much more powerful languages: English, French, Latin and finally Dutch. Still, because of the fact that it was so deeply rooted in the common life and traditions of the Frisian people, it managed to survive. Frisian has a rich vocabulary that differs considerably from Dutch and from other Germanic languages. It has its own rules for word formation, phonological processes which developed through various historical changes (Jorvert Breaking and the characteristic for Frisian rising of diphthongs), which would also be interesting to elaborate on. Finally, Frisian has a standardized spelling and grammar, is spoken and written, used at home, in cultural expression and in public life. From the time Frisian is mentioned by Pliny on, the language faced various historical challenges. Yet, it survived and managed to establish its position despite the fact that it is and has been spoken on a relatively small area. All this makes it interesting for scholars and introduces questions why certain languages continue to exist, and other die.

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