Frisian language use and ethnic identity

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Introduction

In regard to sociolinguistics and language geography, the Frisian language area occupies a marked place in the Netherlands in a number of ways. Traditionally, the linguistic groups are sharply divided along lines of *social class*. In regard to linguistic geography, we also find a traditionally sharp division between *city* and *countryside*. Third, Frisian is the only regional language in the Netherlands that has developed a *standard variety* which is generally accepted and which is used to a marginal but progressing level in education and public administration.

We assume that it is precisely these *contrasts* that have been the determinants upon which the survival and revival of Frisian in the past century and a half have been based. In part, this explains the relative vitality of Frisian in comparison with the disappearance of regional languages. As a result, we feel that it is very important, when making prognoses about the future of Frisian, to study geolinguistic and sociolinguistic developments in the light of these contrasts. Until 1950, Friesland exhibited a sociolinguistic situation that had probably undergone little numerical change during a long period: that is, overwhelmingly Frisian-speaking rural areas versus towns with a predominantly Dutch-speaking population; a social upper class that spoke Dutch and viewed it as a mark of their place in society (Van der Plank 1979). (The term 'Dutch' includes regional and local varieties which are still spoken, along with the – increasing – use of standard Dutch.)

Changes in geolinguistic conditions 1950–1980

Until the 1950s, Friesland was one of the Netherlands' least industrialized provinces, a fact that is partially due to the province's peripheral location. As a result of its agrarian character and limited employment opportunities, Friesland is estimated to have lost half of its natural population growth due

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to *emigration* between 1880 and 1950. In 1950, approximately a third of those of Frisian ancestry were living outside the province (Bouma 1949: 4–5). The rural population in particular was affected by this process. The massive emigration was also a qualitative loss for the rural areas. In contrast, the towns experienced a slow growth during this period. In the 1950s, barely a fourth of the total population lived there. Since that time, the national government has taken steps to increase employment opportunities by means of *industrialization*. This policy was successful, and its results became evident in a migration of *rural inhabitants* to the towns and especially to new urban centers.

By about 1980 the percentage of urban population had doubled in the short span of 30 years: by that time almost half of the population was living in towns (de Jager 1977).

The increasing prosperity of the 1960s and 1970s had ramifications for the extent of the *services sector*. Employment opportunities in public administration, education, health care, and service-oriented professions increased greatly in that period: by one third individually, to more than a third of total employment. Since for many of these functions too few qualified persons were available in Friesland, the job market was opened to an *inrush of allochthons*. Between 1967 and 1980, this group nearly doubled, from 12% to 23% of the total population. Friesland, traditionally the most autochthonous province in the Netherlands, currently has a population in which one out of four inhabitants was born outside of the province. Due to their numbers, and especially as a result of their high social status, members of this group have partly taken the place of the traditional elite.

The process of dynamic change in Frisian society described above has had a major impact on linguistic relationships. A portion of the rural, Frisian-speaking population has been moving to the towns since the 1950s. Since approximately 1965, the process of urbanization has also manifested itself in the form of newly created bedroom communities in the vicinity of the villages near the towns. The commuters form a group of urbanites and allochthons of higher social status. In this way, the overwhelmingly Frisian-speaking countryside has acquired a considerable non-Frisian-speaking minority.

The influx of people from the countryside into the towns has not led to a 'Frisianization' of the colloquial language, as some had hoped, and as others had feared. The language of the towns has remained non-Frisian as before, even though Frisian has taken on a more important role in second place.

On the other hand, Dutch has gained a far more extended function in the countryside, due to the presence of a considerable number of Dutch unilinguals and the increasing impact of (Dutch) education and (Dutch) mass media.

To conclude this section, we show the changed linguistic relationships in Friesland in Table 1. In doing so we make use of a 1955 survey of the language

Table 1. *Frisian as a home language in urban and rural areas (%)*

	1955	1967	1980	N
Inhabitants of urban areas	32	49	38	392
Inhabitants of Frisian-speaking rural areas	94	81	75	577
Inhabitants of non-Frisian-speaking rural areas[1]	19	?	22	137
Total for Friesland	65	±65	55	1106

of all elementary-school children (Boelens and Van der Veen 1956), of the first (1967) sociolinguistic study made in Friesland (Pietersen 1969), and of the 1980 study by Gorter et al. (1984).

The percentages represent the number of inhabitants who use Frisian daily as the language of the home. They hardly diverge from those indicating the number of inhabitants speaking Frisian as their first language.

In this article, we will use the description 'Frisian-speaking' only for those persons who learned Frisian as their first language. Further on we will give information concerning those who learned Frisian as a second language.

It is worthy of note that in the total figure for the province, a considerable decrease occurred between 1967 and 1980 for Frisian speakers. This is not a matter of an absolute decrease, but rather the consequence of an increase in population that consisted largely of allochthons. In regard to the geolinguistic situation, we find that a constant, slow de-Frisianization of the countryside is in progress, while the Frisian-speaking element in the towns has increased sharply. However, this latter element does not appear to have become deeply rooted. In all likelihood, the numbers of Frisian speakers in the towns are being sustained by continuous migration from rural Friesland, while urban Frisian speakers are gradually being Dutchified.

Changing sociolinguistic conditions 1965–1980

No statistics are available to us in which the relationship between language background and social status can be shown for the period prior to the 1960s. Pietersen was the first to make numerical data available through his sociolinguistic study (1969). That material relates to 1967 and perhaps we may view it as the final description of conditions as they were before the expansion of the allochthonous group. It shows that among the social elite, of those professionals in leadership positions, just under 30% used Frisian as the daily colloquial language of the home. This percentage rose, however, to more than 75% for blue-collar workers, and to more than 95% for farmers. The highest

income groups matched this distribution, with less than half being Frisian speakers, as did the lowest, with more than 80% being Frisian-speaking. Therefore, there has been *no leveling* of the traditional social differences between Frisian and non-Frisian in the period 1967–1980. Barely more than 20% of those in the highest occupational categories were Frisian speaking in 1980, while a large majority of those in the lowest occupational categories were Frisian speakers.

If we examine the relationship between autochthonous Frisian speakers and non-Frisian speakers, however, it appears that there have been changes. Namely, more than 60% of the *autochthons* who belong to the upper class are Frisian speaking. As a result, they are at only a slight disadvantage in comparison to their non-Frisian-speaking countrymen, because at 76% they still form a larger proportion of the lower class in autochthonous society. Apparently, it is the *influx of allochthons* from higher social categories that is maintaining the traditional proportional relationship. These allochthons occupy more than 50% of the positions in the highest occupational categories, and almost half of those in the highest income categories. Their arrival on the scene has, as a result, again statistically reinforced the traditional social inequality between Frisian and non-Frisian, or rather between the Frisian and Dutch languages.

Figure 1 is a bar graph in which the numerical proportions between the

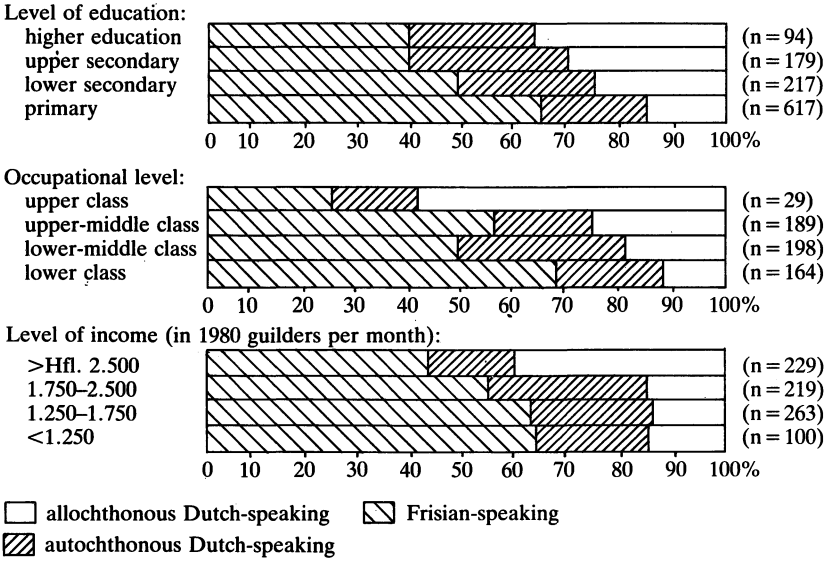

Figure 1. *Frisian and non-Frisian speakers, autochthons and allochthons, grouped according to education, occupational level, and income level*

different groups are given on the basis of the variables education, occupation, and income (the latter two variables are of course only applied to breadwinners and the gainfully employed).

In Figure 1, 'higher education' includes college, university, and higher professional education; 'upper secondary' includes senior high school and professional training institutions; 'lower secondary' includes junior high school and trade schools; 'primary' includes primary school and extended primary education.

'Upper class' includes upper management positions in industry and public administration, service-sector occupations, and self-employment at a comparable level; 'upper-middle class' includes middle management and positions requiring a secondary-level professional education (farmers are also included in this category); 'lower-middle' class includes remaining white-collar employees; 'lower class' includes blue-collar workers, both trained and untrained.

When a distinction is made in the rest of this article between only two levels – high and low – we have combined upper and upper middle on the one hand, and lower and lower middle on the other (Jelsma et al. 1983).[2]

The differences between the allochthonous and autochthonous groups are so great that we can speak of a geographically split labor market. At higher levels, it is primarily those from outside of Friesland who apply for jobs and who compete successfully with Frisians. Jobs at lower levels are left to the autochthons. This is a result of the fact that high-level positions are offered on the Dutch national labor market, while lower-level positions are only offered on the Frisian regional labor market. The employment policy has highlighted the creation of an ethnic division of labor in Friesland. In regionalist circles in Friesland, protests against the appointment policies of the national government can be heard, when it appears that preference has 'again' been given to a non-Frisian. This preference can indeed be assumed to exist for managerial personnel in civil service agencies controlled by the national government as well as in other institutions controlled by allochthons. In general, opportunities for allochthons are greatest in the third and fourth sectors: higher education, civil service, social services, and health care. These are providing a rapidly growing segment of the labor market.

In regard to level of education, the population of Friesland is below the average level in the Netherlands, so the allochthonous element has been able to manifest itself as a new elite. In that regard, the position of the autochthons is much stronger in the more traditional sectors: agriculture, trades, and industry. It can be assumed on the basis of these differences that the third and fourth sectors will serve an important function in the *integration* of Friesland into the Dutch national framework. On the other hand, they may also be a source of tension in the relationship between Frisians and non-Frisians, particularly in language contrasts. These manifest themselves not so

much in contrasts between groups, but rather in the differences in frame of reference and cultural and political orientation. Even though an important part of the allochthonous population has adjusted more or less to the bilingual circumstances in Friesland (one-third of them have aquired an active command of the Frisian language), the group is still per se an element of the population that distinguishes itself, wants to be distinguished, and probably, in part due to its secure social status, can continue to distinguish itself.

The frequency of listening to regional radio programing and of reading regional newspapers is much lower among allochthons than autochthons, and among the autochthonous population it is highest among Frisian speakers. The allochthons are more strongly oriented toward the Dutch national media. Politically, they have a proportionally strong preference for liberal parties, even more so than for Christian Democratic or Social Democratic parties, which in Friesland are traditionally first and second in size on the political scene. As a rule, the liberal representatives reflect their voters in being least in favor of the pro-Frisian language policy of the provincial and municipal governments. It is also striking that the degree of agreement with the treatment of Friesland in national government policies is high for allochthons. The rather negative opinions about the national government among the autochthons strongly contrast with this allochthon satisfaction.

Competence and use of Frisian

So far, we have counted subjects as Frisian-speaking only in those cases where Frisian was the first language they learned. However, Frisian has become a secondary language for one-tenth in that category. In their daily communication they are primarily Dutch-speaking. On the other hand, half of those who learned Dutch first have acquired an active command of Frisian. In their daily communication, more than one-fifth among them have taken to using Frisian as their primary means of communication. In Table 2, this shift among the original language groups is made clear.

A summary of language competence for the population of Friesland is as follows: 60% speak Frisian as easily as or more easily than Dutch (monolingual Frisian speakers are a rare exception); 13% can speak Frisian, too, but Dutch is easier for them; 27% speak only Dutch. More than three quarters of the latter are able to understand Frisian.

On the whole, 73% have to be considered as active bilinguals, 21% are passive bilinguals, and finally, 6% are unable to understand Frisian. A majority of those who do not speak Frisian are of the opinion that it is 'not necessary' for them to learn this language.

If we limit ourselves to the autochthonous population, 86% are active

Table 2. *Competence in and use of Frisian according to linguistic background (%)*

According to first language	Able to speak Frisian	Frisian as language of the home	N
Frisian-speaking	98	90	618
Dutch-speaking autochthons	(52)	(17)	(256)
Dutch-speaking allochthons	(33)	(9)	(238)
Dutch-speaking	43	13	494
Inhabitants of Friesland	73%	55%	1112

bilinguals and 12% are passive bilinguals (only active in Dutch), while 2% of them are unable to understand Frisian. Among the allochthons 43% are active bilinguals, 44% are passive, and 13% are unable to understand Frisian. In terms of language use, we see that the informal domains are a solid basis for Frisian. A very large majority of Frisian speakers still speak the language at home (90%), use the language with friends and acquaintances (91%), with neighbors (87%), and at work (87%), and participate in Frisian-language club and association life (77%). The heaviest concentration of use of Frisian for those who learned Frisian as a second language is also found in these informal domains. Of them, 23% speak Frisian at home, 42% with friends and acquaintances, and 46% with their neighbors.

In order to measure *language use in public life*, in 1980 we asked which language was used in a number of commonly occurring contacts with public servants, service agencies, and authorities. We asked which language had been selected for use during the previous year in such contacts. On the average, the reports of language use in incidental situations give a picture of the position of Frisian in the domains of public life. In Figure 2, these contact situations are numbered vertically as follows:
language use (1) with a bank employee; (2) with a shopkeeper; (3) with sports fans; (4) with a bus driver; (5) at the post office counter; (6) with a civil servant; (7) with a policeman; (8) with a salesperson; (9) with a librarian; (10) with a salesman at the open-air market; (11) with a teacher; (12) with a nurse; (13) with a waiter; (14) with the mayor; (15) answering the door to a stranger; (16) with a doctor; (17) with a stranger (when asking the way); (18) with the minister; (19) with a judge; (20) at the local Chinese restaurant; (21) with a tourist.

In Figure 2, the percentages of those actually using the Frisian language in the situations named are given for Frisian speakers (that is, those who learned Frisian as their first language) and for those who have learned Frisian as a

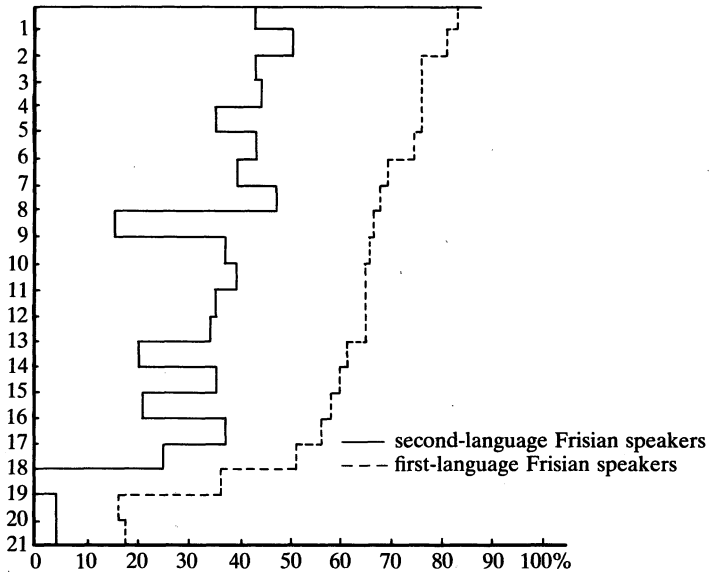

Figure 2. *The use of Frisian in 21 public-life contact situations by first- and second-language Frisian speakers*

second language separately. The percentages relate only to those who have had contact in the aforementioned contact situations. They rate a contact as Frisian if Frisian was chosen at least once, so these statistics give a maximum of the use of that language in public life.

It is clear from our data that a considerable minority of Frisian speakers never, or only rarely, make use of their language in public life. They switch to Dutch especially when speaking to officials who are in a position of authority in relation to them. On the average, the percentage of Frisian speakers who no longer use their language in public life runs from 20% in contacts with public servants to 40% in comparable contacts with those in authority. Strangers in Friesland will hardly hear any Frisian addressed to them.

Frisian is made use of by a minority of those who learned Frisian as a second language. For this group, 60% do not speak it to public servants, and this number increases to 70% when speaking to those in authority.

On the basis of these results, Frisian seems to be a language that is used *primarily* in relationships that are *intimate or familiar*. It fulfills a *secondary* role in anonymous *public communication*. Frisian speakers appear to anticipate by opting for Dutch 'to be ready in advance' and on the basis of the rules of etiquette that specify that it is not polite to use Frisian to those who cannot speak or will not use the language themselves.

We find great disparities between Frisian speakers who live in the countryside and those in the towns. It is apparent in the urban mixed multilingual situation that as 'the risk' of coming into contact with non-Frisian speakers increases, only half of the Frisian speakers use their language (50% of the urban Frisian-speakers speak it in contacts with public servants and one-third when speaking to those in authority).

Ethnicity: identification as a Frisian

Although the Frisian Movement is actively supported only by a minority, its influence is certainly much greater, and its goals are accepted by broad segments of the population. A considerable portion of Frisian speakers support the claim that Frisian is a standard language that ought to have equal rights with Dutch and, in addition, that it ought to play an appropriate role in education and in public administration. In contrast, the support for these claims among Dutch speakers is low, allochthons as well as autochthons. It is against this background that we formulate the question: to what degree can one speak of *ethnic identification* and how is such identification related to the Frisian language? In this section we shall attempt to determine the ethnic identity of the population according to the definitions applied by the different groups themselves: Frisian and Dutch speakers, autochthons and allochthons.

In the Netherlands, Frisian 'identity' is generally considered to be non-ethnic, a solely geographic category. According to this view, each inhabitant of the province of Friesland is considered to be 'Frisian'. In contrast, in Friesland we can distinguish a *genealogical* and an *ethnolinguistic definition*; a solely geographic definition does not play any role (Van der Plank 1985).

Among Frisian speakers we find a definition of identity in which the language is at least an important codeterminant. The importance of the language criterion indeed increases proportionally as the Frisian speakers place more importance on the goals of the Frisian Movement. Although that of course could not be established in the 1980 study, we may assume that this ethnolinguistic criterion first gained such a large, and for many a primary, importance in recent times. As such, this criterion is a distinguishing feature whose choice can freely be made by each individual. One may disavow or claim it, in contrast to the genealogical definition that reflects assigned quality. Most likely what is being expressed here is the tendency that typifies modern regionalism, and in that regard, regional languages also: the acceptance of an ethnic identity as a conscious choice and no longer solely as a hereditary determination, a choice expressed in the use of the regional language. The Dutch-speaking autochthons in particular define someone

(and themselves) as being Frisian on the basis of family background. A command and use of the Frisian language is not a determinant of Frisian identity for them.

It is noteworthy that the allochthons in Friesland concur with the ethnolinguistic definition of the Frisian speakers. Perhaps this is a sign that it is (becoming) a dominant feature of Frisian identity.

The consequences of applying these definitions are expressed in the way the inhabitants of Friesland *identify themselves*. Do they consider themselves 'Frisian', and if they do, do they feel that this Frisian identity is more important than their formal Dutch identity (citizenship)? Or, do they think that they are first and foremost Dutch and only Frisian within that framework (for example, as a regional variant)? We asked the 1980 sample to define themselves as primarily Frisian, or as Dutch first and only second as Frisian, or as not Frisian at all. The answers are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. *Self-identity of Frisian speakers and Dutch-speaking autochthons and allochthons (%)*

	Primarily Frisian	First Dutch, second Frisian	Non-Frisian	N
Frisian-speakers	57	40	3	539
Dutch-speaking autochthons	30	45	25	235
Dutch-speaking allochthons	7	18	75	230
Total population	39	36	25	1004

A detailed comparison of these self-definitions with those of the Frisian identity as such makes it apparent that the 'primarily' Frisians base their identity on an ethnolinguistic definition, and that the 'secondarily' Frisians use a definition in genealogical terms.

The consequences of the expression of identity in different ways also become visible in the differences between the social classes in the population. Yet, the number of allochthons is increasing rapidly, and with it the number of 'non-Frisians'. Additionally, we also found a weaker ethnolinguistic consciousness among the upper class, and even among the Frisian upper class, as can be seen in Table 4.

Identification as being Frisian also has to do with the position one occupies on the social ladder. We may assume, on the basis of the results of our 1980 study, that both the ethnolinguistic definitions of identity and support for the emancipation of Frisian are based in the social *lower class*. The Frisian-

Table 4. *Self-identity of Frisian and Dutch speakers according to social class (%)*

	Primarily Frisian	First Dutch, second Frisian	Non-Frisian	N
Frisian-speaking				
upper class	41	54	5	97
lower class	56	41	3	183
Dutch-speaking				
upper class	5	29	66	103
lower class	26	36	38	152
Total				
upper class	21	42	37	200
lower class	42	27	21	335

speaking upper class is less 'Frisian-minded' in respect to identification and toward the language movement, probably because it is more heavily oriented toward Dutch culture and more integrated into the allochthonous group.

Some concluding remarks

In Friesland one may speak of social contrasts that find their expression in language. These contrasts are confirmed explicitly by the manner in which identity is experienced. In this situation, one would expect conflicts to occur between language groups. This is not the case in Friesland. Language conflicts do take place on a regular basis but not, however, as group conflicts. They are interpreted as incidental and of a personal nature. Therefore, we may assume that the informal domains of social life offer enough room for a satisfying use of Frisian and for experiencing the Frisian identity. In the countryside, public life is Frisian. There, one cannot speak of a linguistic border between the informal and the more formal domains of social life, as is the case in the towns. Yet, in public life, Frisian speakers are generally inclined to accommodate their use of language in accordance with their Dutch-speaking coinhabitants and even anticipate their presence by choosing for Dutch in anonymous situations.

Whether or not this basis of the use of the Frisian language can be maintained, and whether or not it can continue as a sufficient basis for Frisian to function in the future, are questions that the results of our study are unable to answer. The conscious attempts to foster the position of Frisian in formal domains like public administration and education, however, will be a new challenge to the Frisian speakers, to widen their linguistic domains, and to the Dutch speakers, to try their tolerance.

Notes

1. The linguistic borders of Frisian are not entirely identical to the provincial borders of Friesland. A small part of the Frisian-speaking region is in the province of Groningen. Particularly along the southern border of Friesland, one finds a non-Frisian-speaking strip in which approximately one-tenth of the inhabitants of the province live.
2. Jelsma et al. (1983) gives a tentative picture of the relationship between social stratification and language group. In doing so a different definition of stratification categories was used, with the result that the figures in that article differ from the definitive figures given here. The tendencies themselves, however, are the same that we proposed here.

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