Frisian as a European Minority Language

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1. Introduction

Since about the 1960s there has been a renaissance of minority languages in Europe. Throughout Europe an active interest has grown for minority languages and their respective linguistic communities, resulting especially in the 1980s and 1990s in a number of legal measures, provisions and to a certain degree the development of infrastructures at regional, national and European level.

These developments have affected the three Frisian areas (referred to hereafter with the collective term "Frisia") of North (NF) and West Frisia (WF) as well as the Saterland (Sat.) and it was considered appropriate to treat this as a separate issue in its own right.

Following a short historical survey of Frisian as a European minority language including some aspects of the situation today, we shall discuss the reception of European developments in Frisia as exemplified by Frisian participation in various activities, both in a more passive role reacting to events in Europe such as legislation, and in a more active role where the Frisians themselves have seized the initiative.

2. A historical perspective

In the history of the Frisian movement in NF developments have sometimes been influenced by their possible significance at a national and quasi European level. As an example, the Prussian Minister of Education forbade Frisian tuition in Westerland (Sylt) in 1909 because he feared that this might be a precedence for the Danish and Polish minorities in Germany, and it also contradicted his centralistic doctrine of national and linguistic unity.

The most important feature in the history of NF in this context is the Dano-German conflict dating back to the beginning of the 19th century. The divided loyalties in Schleswig also split the Frisians as witnessed by the existence of the two Frisian associations, the *Nordfriesischer Verein* (originally *Nordfriesischer Verein für Heimatkunde und Heimatliebe*, founded in 1902), which considers the Frisians part of the German people, and the *Foriining for nationale Friiske* (originally *Friesisch-schleswigscher Verein*, founded in 1923), which considers the Frisians to be a national minority. The dispute as to the status of the North Frisians led to a serious conflict within the Nationalities Congresses of 1925-27 in Geneva. The problem was, however, perhaps not so much the Frisian question as such, but rather a number of fundamental principles concerning European minority issues which the Frisian case highlighted.

Whereas the North Frisian case was of some interest to other European minorities and state authorities, the majority of the Frisians took little interest in

minority issues as they rejected this concept for themselves. The exception was the *Friesisch-schleswigscher Verein* whose chairman co-founded the *Verband der nationalen Minderheiten in Deutschland* in 1924, introducing a period of close cooperation between the national minorities in Germany. The attempt by the *Friesisch-schleswigscher Verein* to have the North Frisians represented in Geneva was also exceptional as minorities without a state were hardly present, and indeed discouraged (Steensen 1986).

The history of the WF movement has not been so directly caught up with international affairs. A longstanding discussion concerns an inward view upon Frisian language and culture itself, versus an open perspective to the outside. The slogan "Fryslân and the world" was already the leading theme of the Young Frisians in the 1920s. It expresses the ideology of wanting to be part of, and be taken seriously by larger entities, such as European culture. In some parts of the movement there have been some relations with other national movements, but mainly on an individual basis. In the early 1950s the "Feriening foar in Federaal Jerope" (Association for a federal Europe) was an active member in the FUEN, later on the activities decreased in intensity. Several people in WF have always felt strong bonds with Scandinavia.

Based on common linguistic interest and the concept of "Frisian brotherhood" contacts had been made to the West Frisians as early as the first half of the 19th century and with varying degrees of intensity with the East Frisians as from 1909. These eventually led to the founding of the "Frisian Council" (*Friesenrat/Fryske Rie*) in 1930 (cf. Steensen article).

The perhaps slightly limited tradition of interest in European minority issues in Frisia has now grown with the Europe-wide renaissance. In the 1950s and 1960s there was still only a small number of individuals participating in European activities, but this increased substantially in the 1980s and 1990s. It is, however, still difficult to judge how these European activities affect each linguistic community as a whole.

3. Relevant developments in the regions

The Dano-German border area is considered by politicians in Germany as being a model for Europe as here three minorities (the German minority in Denmark as well as the Danish minority and the North Frisians in Germany) peacefully co-exist with their respective majorities. Great efforts have indeed been made to settle a border area which has in the past been a source of considerable conflict. There is, however, a certain discrepancy between the amount of aid afforded the Danish and German minorities as "national minorities" in contrast to the North Frisians as an "ethnic group" (*Volksgruppe*). In 1995 the Danish and German minorities with some 50,000 and 15,000 members respectively received approx. DM 132 million and DM 35 million each in subsidies (Präsidentin des S.-H. Landtages 1996). The subsidies for the promotion of North Frisian with some 8-10,000 speakers amounted to just over DM 1 million in 1995.

The Dutch government also likes to think of itself as a "shining example" in the field of minority languages regarding its treatment of WF, even if its efforts can - comparatively speaking - at best be characterized as modest. The financial support for WF with some 400,000 speakers amounts perhaps to Dfl 15 million in 1997

(Hemminga 1998).

Because of the model character of the Dano-German border area the Schleswig-Holstein government in conjunction with the Danish and German governments initiated the idea of a "European Centre for Minority Issues" (ECMI) which was officially opened in Flensburg on December 4th, 1996. The basic concept of this institution is primarily to research ethnic conflict in Europe.

A group in NF founded in 1995 an association *Verein Europäisches Zentrum für Minderheitenfragen e.V.*, firstly with the aim of having ECMI based in NF and Tondern (Denmark), and then to represent the interests of the local region and minorities in it. It is as yet unclear what form of cooperation will in fact be possible.

Part of the old Duchy of Schleswig including NF is at present being developed into a Euroregion. In the north of NF, for example, there is close cooperation between the *Amt Wiedingharde* and the adjoining communes in Denmark which has led to various projects partly funded by the European Union. On the other hand the concept of the Euroregion has led to protest and resistance in Denmark. Since the suggested name for the area has been changed from *Euroregion Schleswig/Slesvig* to *Region Schleswig/Sønderjylland*, the situation seems to have become quieter. It would though seem to indicate that the Dano-German border area is not as trouble free as is often maintained. Such developments as the introduction of a Euroregion which might be seen as questioning the significance of national borders as such seem to be of greater importance to the Danish and German minorities than the Frisians.

An Euroregion in that sense is of less relevance to WF, although even here some people have toyed with the idea of a large region (or even state) along the southern border of the North Sea, reaching from WF into Germany.

4. The reception of European developments in Frisia

4.1. General remarks

The minorities renaissance has been received in different ways in NF and WF. As in NF the concept of a minority is for the most part traditionally related to the Danish minority, it took some time for many North Frisians to appreciate the importance of Europe for minority languages, whereas it was immediately grasped in WF, e.g. the initiatives in the directly elected European Parliament in 1981 (Radersma 1981). Generally speaking there is an openness for new developments in both communities. Certain sections are pleased to see that they are not alone with their problems and are curious to see how other linguistic minorities are tackling similar problems. There is a desire to learn from each other and to set up networks. Similarly programmes offered at European level have been examined and partly made use of, e.g. to finance projects. On the other hand there are also sections less interested in European developments which retain a certain scepticism.

Ideas circulating in Europe with respect to ways of promoting linguistic minorities such as concerning economic facets such as cultural tourism or new methods in bilingual education have been discussed in NF but have so far only to a limited degree been adopted. A new concept for tourism in NF is, however, being developed and it is hoped that in 1998 new methods of in-service training for Frisian teachers may be introduced benefitting from European experience with bilingual

education elsewhere. In WF the concept of “cultural tourism” as an alternative to traditional forms of mass-tourism has obtained quite some support, e.g. in the form of “city-guesthouses” in some of the eleven cities of WF. Also for bilingual education in WF the orientation upon other situations has increased enormously over the last 20 years. Comparative studies are one of the core activities of Mercator Education, located in the Fryske Akademy (see below).

4.2. European legislation and its reception in Frisia

Since the beginning of the 1980s various European institutions have been taking an interest in the question of linguistic minorities. These are the European Union, in particular the European Parliament and the European Commission as well as the Council of Europe, in particular the Standing Conference on Regional and Local Authorities (European Bureau 1994). The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE - formerly “Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe”) also discussed such questions as “less widely-spoken languages” as early as its conference in Helsinki in 1975. The OSCE has developed the subject since, but this has gone largely unnoticed both in NF and WF.

The European Parliament has passed a series of reports and resolutions supporting linguistic minorities: Arfé (1981 and 1983), Kuijpers (1987), Killilea (1994). These have led to a greater interest for the subject at a European level and have helped generate a more positive atmosphere in Frisia.

One very important result of the above mentioned reports and resolutions was the introduction of a small budget line in 1982. The first year it had a volume of 100,000 ECUs. In 1998 it will have a volume of 4 million ECUs. The budget line is designed to enable the European Commission to support projects to preserve and promote European minority languages (Jacoby 1991). The West Frisians were among the first to seize upon the new opportunities offered here and, for example, organized the first international conference to be supported by the budget line in Ljouwert in 1985 on the question of pre-school education. Later on many more projects were carried out in WF with European support. After a slow start the North Frisians have had various projects partly funded by this budget line, e.g. an archive on the island of Amrum for all printed and hand-written literature in the local Frisian dialect.

The Council of Europe has been prominent in developing the concept of basic rights for national and linguistic minorities. After about 10 years' preparatory work the European Charter for Minority and Regional Languages was opened for signature by the member states of the Council of Europe in 1992. The Federal Republic of Germany immediately signed the charter, naming Danish and Sorbian as the two languages to be included. Following protests by the North and Sater Frisians and with the support of the Schleswig-Holstein parliament Frisian should be included in part III of the charter when it is ratified, probably in 1998. Also the Netherlands were among the first signatories in 1992, at the time West Frisian was the only minority language mentioned.

The discussion concerning the charter has had a high profile in Germany as both the German Sinti and Roma as well as members of the Low German linguistic community wish their respective languages to be included. It is, however, unclear

whether the real significance of the charter and its actual possibilities and limitations have been fully understood by all the linguistic communities concerned.

In 1995 the Netherlands completed the process of ratification of the Charter and was the fourth state to do so, after Norway, Finland and Hungary. As Croatia and Liechtenstein have also added their signatures, the Charter came into effect as of March 1st, 1998. During the parliamentary debate in the Netherlands the lobby wishing to include Low Saxon as a minority language was successful, although this "language" will only be recognized under part II (excluding any specific measures under part III). Following this, further minority languages have been included in the Charter, to wit Limburgian, Yiddish and the Roma and Sinti languages. Still under consideration are sign language and the regional dialect of the province of Sealand.

For West Frisian, paragraphs that have been included in part III of the Charter do not imply any new developments in language policy as they only refer to already existing provisions. Therefore the Charter has primarily a symbolic function. However, the obligatory periodic report which has been drafted in the meantime under the auspices of the Fryske Akademy in Ljouwert/Leeuwarden has already made clear that in certain areas further measures are needed. Research is also recommended to investigate the current situation of Frisian in certain areas e.g. in pre-school education and health-care institutions.

A second initiative taken by the Council of Europe is the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. This was signed by the German Federal Government on May 11th, 1995 and ratified on September 10th, 1997. The groups named by the Federal Government are the Danish Minority and the Sorbian people as "national minorities" and the (North) Frisians and the German Sinti and Roma as "ethnic groups" (*Volksgruppen*). Although a terminological distinction is made between the four groups, the Federal Government emphasises that this has no bearing on the relevance of the convention for the groups concerned.

The Dutch government has not signed the Framework Convention, and as far as is known has no intention of doing so because it considers the Framework Convention to be weaker than the Charter and also because it has difficulties in applying the concept "national minority" to the West Frisians.

So far the convention has had little impact on the North and Sater Frisians but it does help to cement the official status of the various groups named.

4.3. Participation in European activities

4.3.1. Organisations

The Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) was founded in 1949. One of its founding fathers was F. Paulsen from Föhr. The *Foriining for nationale Frashe* became a full member in 1950. The *Nordfriesische Verein für Heimatkunde und Heimatliebe* became an associate member in 1955 and a full member in 1973. The West Frisians were represented by the *Feriening foar in Federaal Jeropa* as from the early 1950s. There were periods when participation from WF was quite active, but also other periods when no delegates were sent to meetings and activities were minimal.

The Easter seminars organized by the Youth of European Nationalities (YEN),

originally FUEN's youth organisation, are regularly attended by young North and West Frisians. One was held in NF in 1989 and in WF in 1990. Stimulated by the possibility of international contacts in the 1980s the *Jongereinferiening Frysk Ynternasjonale Kontakt (FYK)* became one of the most active youth organisations in WF. A North Frisian was president of the YEN from 1982-1986 and a West Frisian from 1996-1998. There will be a conference during the summer of 1998 called *Simmerbarren 500*, where young people from abroad and from *Fryslân* will discuss such topics as employment, identity, culture and language.

The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages (EBLUL) was founded in 1982, after the adoption of the Arfé-resolution in the European Parliament. One of its founding fathers was a West Frisian. The Dutch Member State Committee (MSC) was convened for the first time in 1983, when a broad representation of Frisian organisations was established. From the very beginning the West Frisians have been active in the General Council of EBLUL and after the reorganisation in 1990, also in the Board of Directors. The first manager of EBLUL's Brussels Information Centre, established in 1992, came from WF.

The German MSC, with representatives from the Danish Minority, the North and Sater Frisians, the German Sinti and Roma as well as the Sorbian people, was founded in 1986. The North Frisians have been active from the very beginning and so far two North Frisians have been chairmen of the German MSC (Walker 1995).

Partly as a result of the initiatives taken by the German MSC leading members from each minority have formed an unofficial "minorities council" which meets at irregular intervals to pursue common aims, e.g. the convening of a minorities council attached to the Federal Parliament in Bonn.

4.3.2. Conferences

Frisians and Frisian scholars have often participated at European, national and regional level in political and (semi-) scientific conferences concerning linguistic minorities in an attempt to keep abreast of developments and to introduce more people from the respective language communities to them. Two problems arising here, especially in the North and Sater Frisian context due to the smallness of the linguistic communities concerned, are the dearth of qualified people able to participate in such conferences and the subsequent dissemination of information gained therein. The structures in NF are not yet sufficiently developed in order to maximise the benefit attainable from the knowledge and experience gained at such conferences.

Large conferences, with some international input, have played a major role in the development of education in WF (Vledder 1987). In 1982 an important international conference was organized on "Bilingual education in Friesland" (Zondag 1982). There was a follow-up conference in 1993 (Zondag 1993).

Conferences at a European level have included such themes as pre-primary education (Ljouwert 1985) (O'Murchu 1985) and primary education (Riis, WF 1988) (Riemersma and Walker 1988).

A series of International Conferences on Minority Languages (ICML) started in Glasgow in 1980 with delegations from WF and NF. Other ICMLs, every three years, were always attended by Frisians. In 1989 the fourth conference in the series was held

in Ljouwert/Leeuwarden, WF, under the auspices of the Fryske Akademy (Gorter et al 1990). Other international conferences in WF include one on code-switching in 1994 (within the framework of the European Science Foundation) and on economic development and minority languages in 1995 (organised by the FORUM-network).

Of a more political nature were conferences organized by the Schleswig-Holstein Parliament such as *Minderheiten in Europa* (1991) and *Das neue Grundgesetz - kein Platz für Minderheiten und Volksgruppen?* (1992) concerning the possible inclusion of a minorities clause in the German constitution. The German MSC of EBLUL organized a conference in Bonn in 1992 on the same theme and in Flensburg in 1994 on matters of common interest to the linguistic minorities in Germany (the German constitution, the European Charter for Minority or Regional Languages, and the possible establishment of a secretariat for linguistic minorities in Bonn/Berlin). Following the re-unification of Germany it also organized in 1992 a scientific conference on bilingual education in Bautzen aimed at introducing the Sorbs to developments in Western Europe concerning minority languages in education.

4.3.3. Comparative studies and reports

Due to the rise of interest in Europe for minority matters a good number of comparative projects have developed, e.g. on education, theatre, music etc. as well as the large sociolinguistic survey of linguistic minorities commissioned by the European Commission called "Euromosaic". Usually reports on West, North and Sater Frisian are included.

Of special importance is the already mentioned Mercator project which started in 1987 on the initiative of the European Commission. In WF the Fryske Akademy took upon itself the responsibility for "Mercator-Education". This project has published many comparative studies on different aspects of education over the years (a.o. Sikma and Gorter 1991, Tjeerdsma and Sikma 1994, Dekkers 1995, Van der Goot et al 1994, Tjeerdsma and Stuijt 1996). A basic tool for the stimulation of contacts among the minorities was the Mercator Guide to Organizations (MGO), originally published in 1990, with updates in 1992, 1994 and 1998. Another current project is the publication of a series of so-called "Regional Dossiers" which give a basic overview of the situation of a specific minority language in education. The dossier on West Frisian appeared in 1996, the one on North Frisian in 1997. Internet is becoming increasingly important in order to serve the widest audience possible. Mercator Education has developed a web-site with a large number of links giving information about minorities (www.fa.knaw.nl/mercator).

4.3.4. European support structures

Various support structures have been instigated in Europe for the benefit of the indigenous linguistic minorities. Two more successful ventures are:

A programme of study visits was initiated in 1983 allowing members of the various linguistic minorities each year to participate in joint visits to a number of selected linguistic minorities. These visits last a week and either concentrate on a theme, e.g. education or the economics of linguistic minorities, or they describe the manifold activities a particular linguistic group has developed to promote its language.

Through an exchange of experience and views it is hoped that the participants as multipliers will be able to use their acquired knowledge to the benefit of their own community. Most years West and North Frisians have participated in this scheme. A study group visited NF together with the Sat. in 1994. Groups have visited WF every two or three years since 1987.

Euroschool was first introduced in 1988 in Brest. A group of about 400 school children aged between 10 and 14, culled from a large number of linguistic minorities throughout the European Union, are guests of a particular linguistic community for a week. The aim is to introduce speakers of minority languages to the linguistic diversity found in Europe at an early age in order to enhance a positive attitude and to encourage the development of networks. These meetings take place every two years. West Frisians have been participating from the very beginning and North Frisians since 1991. *Euroskoalle* took place in WF in 1993 (Zondag 1993).

5. Cooperation with other minorities

There is a tradition of close cooperation between the North, East and Sater Frisians as well as the West Frisians as exemplified by their joint membership in the Frisian Council. There are also annual joint meetings of Frisian farmers, local councillors etc. A Frisian congress, a congress on Frisian philology, and the *Sternfahrt* to Heligoland where Frisians gather one weekend from all points of the compass, take place in successive years every three years (cf. chapter by Steensen).

Even before the fall of the iron curtain the North Frisians had established contact with the Sorbs in Lusatia. These contacts were strengthened by a conference in 1991 *Friesen und Sorben. Zwei Minderheiten in Deutschland* (Holander and Steensen 1991). Since then regular visits have taken place between the two groups.

Examples of institutionalised cooperation are the bi-annual meetings of North Frisian teachers. These are often in conjunction with the East, Sater and West Frisians as well as the Sorbs. Sometimes the groups take it in turn to visit each other. In the project *Erwerb friesischer Sprachkompetenz innerhalb und ausserhalb der Schule* colleagues from each of these groups were members of the advisory council. Ideas and experience were exchanged here and the introduction of Sater Frisian into kindergarten was probably due to this cooperation.

In WF manifold contacts have developed over the years with many minorities in (Western) Europe. A special case in this respect is Wales which has been an example for WF in many ways. Boelens (1974) has already emphasized the importance of the Welsh case. Since the 1970s several study-visits have taken place to Wales and Welsh delegations have visited WF in 1984 and 1995.

Due to the greater cooperation between linguistic minorities at a national and European level, the once strained relationship between the Danish minority and a good part of the North Frisian community seems to be improving.

6. Self-presentation at European level

For a long time the North Frisians were considered "one of the best kept secrets in Germany". In recent times, however, considerable effort has been taken to make them known nationally and internationally. Thus West and North Frisian have been

included in sundry books on (socio-)linguistic matters e.g. Extra and Verhoeven (1993), Goebel et al (1997), Hinderling and Eichinger (1996), König and van der Auwera (1994), Russ (1990) and on Germany and/or Schleswig-Holstein, e.g. Johannsen und Opitz (1996). EBLUL has also produced a booklet on North and Sater Frisian designed for a wider European audience (European Bureau 1996).

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