How majority languages influence minority languages: the linguistic mechanisms and some consequences for language maintenance through education

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Abstract

Language systems of bilinguals interact in devious ways. As we will see, this interaction is to the advantage of vocabulary items from the minority language which have high phonological similarity to their semantic equivalents in the majority language. Such items oust rival items in the minority language which are less similar. The pressure exerted by vocabulary items of the majority language is a function of their frequency. Thus, Frisian vocabulary items similar to Dutch ones are linked to their Dutch counterparts and 'profit by collaboration' from the frequency of the Dutch items. These frequency effects discourage Frisian items or constructions which differ strongly from Dutch. The result is language change by impoverishment. We will analyze several changes in Frisian as a reflection of the process sketched above: *Word-final –e in nouns and compounds; word order among verbs; vocabulary change; and choice of nominalising suffix.* Minority language education often tends to focus, counter-productively, on specialized or old-fashioned grammar and vocabulary. It is argued here that language education, instead, should focus on vocabulary items and grammatical phenomena which can be used frequently in everyday speech.

1. Introduction

As is well-known, majority languages influence the grammar and vocabulary of minority languages (Van Coetsem, 1988). Less well known are the precise mechanisms of language change responsible for such influences, which are studied in the grammatical literature on language contact (Van Bree, 1997; Hoekstra, 2002 and others). Knowledge of those mechanisms, apart from being scientifically interesting in itself, may also help educators in providing more effective tools of instruction for minority languages. It is our claim that minority language education should not aim at preserving the whole language unchanged. Instead, strategic choices must be made, so as to be more successful in areas of the language where there is a chance of success, and not to waste time and energy in trying to preserve those areas of the language where change is inevitable. Knowledge of the linguistic mechanisms involved in minority language change helps us to make informed strategic decisions when it comes to minority language planning and education.

Our primary concern is to present four case studies dealing with linguistic phenomena exemplifying how the majority language (Dutch) influences the minority language (Frisian), often in devious and intricate ways. On the basis of our insight into this process, we go on – which is our second concern - to formulate an informed advice on whether or not language teaching should pay attention to the phenomena dealt with, and, if so, how it should be done. Our informed advice can be construed as a standard of evaluation for existing language courses. The question then arises – our third concern - to what extent existing courses in Frisian meet the standards we have set up. When focusing on the actual practice of language teaching, we will restrict our attention to the beginner's course for adults taught by the General Frisian Education Committee (*Algemiene Fryske Ûnderrjocht Kommisje*, abbreviated as AFÛK). The course material reviewed includes Stienstra, De Vries & De Vries (1982) and Eisma (1989). Ideally, all courses of Frisian should be evaluated against the standards which we set up, but, for reasons of time and space, we will have to restrict ourselves to the beginner's course of the AFÛK.

2. Four case studies

Linguists sometimes have an idealized view of language systems of bilinguals, pretending these can be studied, as well as learned, separately and in isolation from one another (for example, Chomsky, 1981, a very influential work). However, such an idealisation is far removed from reality, as is well-known to those studying code switching (Poplack, 2004), dialectal variation (Barbiers, Bennis, De Vogelaar, Devos & Van der Ham, 2005) or language change (Labov 1994, 2001). In fact, we will present four case studies indicating that the language systems of bilinguals interact in devious ways, especially when the vocabulary items of minority and majority language resemble each other closely. Each of our case studies involves a specific aspect of the language. Sections 2.1 and 2.2, dealing with compounds and nominalisation suffixes respectively, involve morphology. Section 2.3, dealing with verb clusters, involves syntax; and section 2.4 deals with vocabulary change. Our analysis provides insight into the phenomenon of change in these areas of the language, and it provides a positive or negative answer to the question of whether language education should take action to counter the influence from the majority language on the minority language.

2.1. Case study # 1: compounds

2.1.1. The subtle influence of Dutch uncovered
Two words or stems can be combined to form a new word, which is then referred to as a compound. The first word of a compound sometimes

undergoes a slight change, when compared to its occurrence as a word in isolation. One such change is the appearance or disappearance of a medial –E in compounds (pronounced as a mid central vowel called *schwa*). To illustrate, consider the following data from Frisian:

Appearance of schwa in compounds:
boek + e + kast   =>   *boekekast*
book + E + case   "book case"

Retention of schwa:
brêge + man   =>   *brêgeman*
bridge + man   "bridge man"

Deletion of schwa:
side + kant   =>   *sydkant*
side + surface   "side"

The same phenomena occur in Dutch, but in different words. Frisian morphology is a rather complicated matter (as is Dutch morphology), so we won't go into all the details. Schwas may be "added" as well as "deleted" in compound forms (as compared to the citation form) in Frisian and Dutch; in addition, the compound form is in many cases homophonous with the citation form. We will not be concerned with the appearance of schwa, but we will focus on retention and deletion of the schwa in compounding.

A relatively large number of nouns in Frisian end in a schwa, which is in some cases optional. Some examples of these (so-called) schwa nouns are: *brêge* "bridge", *bean(e)* "bean", *skoalle* "school" *stim(me)* "voice", *wike* "week", *wille* "pleasure". When these words show up as a first member of a compound, they may (or may not) lose their final schwa.

Loss of schwa in compounds:
stim-bân "vocal chord" from *stim(me)*
skoal-plein "school yard" from *skoalle*
wyk-blêd "weekly paper" from *wike*

Retention of schwa in compounds:
skoalle-plein "school yard" from *skoalle*
brêge-man "bridge man" from *brêge*
wille-wurk "pleasurable task" from *wille*

The crucial fact is that nouns ending in schwa may or may not lose it in compounds.

Slofstra, Versloot & Hoekstra (2008) investigated the behavior of these schwa nouns on a statistical basis. One of their conclusions is relevant in the context of this article. It supports a view of the way in which a majority language influences a minority language.

It turns out that schwa-nouns tend to keep their final schwa when they:
(a) have a non-optional final schwa
and/or
(b) do not resemble their Dutch (schwa-less) counterpart.

The examples below illustrate that a nominal schwa in Frisian may get lost in compounds due to the absence of schwa in Dutch in those cases where the Frisian words are phonologically similar to their Dutch semantic equivalents:

stim(me) "voice",   Dutch *stem*
stim-bân, Dutch *stemband*, "vocal chord"

wike "week", Dutch *week*
wyk-blêd, Dutch *weekblad*

The following examples involve cases where a schwa does not get lost and where the Frisian word is not similar at all to Dutch:

wille "pleasure", Dutch *plezier*
wille-wurk, "pleasurable work"
pake "granddad", Dutch *opa*
pake-stoel "grandpa chair"

Conclusion (a) could be expected from a language-internal point of view. If a schwa noun has a a schwa-less counterpart (e.g. *stimme / stim* "voice"), this counterpart could influence the choice of the compound form, that is to say: the existence of the word *stim* (alongside *stimme*) could influence the choice of the compound form in favor of the short variant *stim-*.

However, conclusion (b) makes clear that Dutch influences the way in which compounds are formed in Frisian, in that Frisian is sensitive to

the form of the individual lexical item in Dutch when used as the first element of a compound.

The following diagram provides the percentage of compounds which retain a schwa:
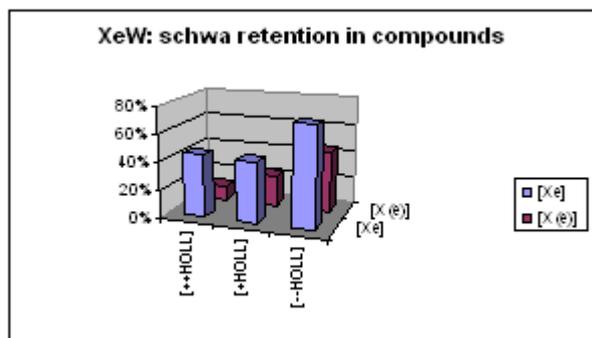
The figure above shows six columns of 'schwa nouns' acting as input of the first member of a nominal compound. The three columns in the foreground represent groups of schwa nouns that have a non-optional schwa (e.g. *brêge* "bridge"), as contrasted to the three columns in the background which have an optional schwa (e.g. *stimme/stim* "voice").

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As can be seen from the figure above, two factors (having a non-optional schwa and being 'non-Dutch') favor the retention of the schwa in compounds.

To sum up, similarity to Dutch is a factor relevant to the presence or absence of schwa in Frisian nominal compounds. If similarity to Dutch had not been a relevant factor, the three columns would have roughly the same height. Our findings indicate that the vocabularies of Dutch and Frisian are not kept separate in the heads of bilingual speakers. Dutch words exert influence on their Frisian counterparts, if they are phonologically similar to them.

2.1.2 Consequences for language education

Now that some insight has been gained into the devious ways in which Dutch compounding influences Frisian compounding, the question arises whether action should be taken concerning the way in which this phenomenon is taught in beginner's courses. Our advice is that no special action needs to be taken as far as beginner's courses are concerned. The phenomenon is much too complicated to try and explain how it works. In other cases, explanation of the way in which interference works, may be pedagogically useful, and the coursebook of Stienstra, De Vries & De Vries (1982) regularly makes effective use of that.

There is another reason for not paying too much attention to the Dutch influence here. Loss of schwa in words such as *stim(me)*, and consequently in compounds based on it, has been an ongoing change in Frisian itself from the 17th century onward. Although Dutch speeds up this change and affects the type of words to which it applies, it is not a phenomenon wholly alien to Frisian. Given that the time and energy which language students have at their disposal is limited, we would advise not to pay special attention to schwa in compounds, beyond, of course, teaching the correct form of compounds which are frequent.

2.2. Case-study #2: nominalization suffixes

2.2.1. Dutch –*heid* favours Frisian –*heid* over Frisian -*ens*
Frisian features two suffixes which build nouns (N) from adjectives, -*heid* and –*ens*:

wiis + heid	=>	*wiisheid*
wise + N		"wisdom"
tûk + ens	=>	*tûkens*
smart + N		"smartness"

Dutch, however, only has the suffix –*heid*, for example in the word *wijsheid* "wisdom". Dutch *wijsheid* is very similar to Frisian *wiisheid*: the consonantal skeletons are identical, and many Frisian words containing /i/ have a Dutch translation equivalent in /ei/ (spelled *ij* or *ei*).

Most nominalizations may be found with either suffix in written Frisian and in formal Frisian, as became clear from an investigation in the Frisian Language Database, (Hoekstra & Hut, 2003). The Frisian Language Database, incidentally, contains about 25 million words, from 1550 until the present.

Nevertheless, Hoekstra & Hut (2003) observed some clear tendencies. It appeared from the investigation that the suffix –*ens* is more often used with Frisian words (stems) without a Dutch translation equivalent than with Frisian words having such an equivalent. To illustrate, consider the examples below; the numbers represent the number of occurrences in the Frisian Language Database:

Absence of similarity to Dutch favors –*ens*:
tûkens - tûkheid   30 – 0 "intelligence"
kjellens - kjelheid   48 – 0 "fright"
batskens - batskheid   10 – 0 "rudeness"

Here we see that –*ens* figures prominently in case it is attached to words which have no phonologically similar translation equivalent in Dutch. Next, consider the figures for words which do have a phonologically similar translation equivalent in Dutch:

Similarity to Dutch favors –*heid*:
frijheid - frijens   1257 – 38
Dutch *vrijheid*, "freedom"
wiisheid - wizens   245 – 34
Dutch *wijsheid* "wisdom"
dwaasheid - dwazens   166 – 5
Dutch *dwaasheid* "foolishness"

The suffix –*heid* rules supreme in these words, which are phonologically and semantically very similar to Dutch, as is clear from the Dutch translation equivalent indicated below each example.

Again, our findings indicate that the Dutch and Frisian vocabularies are not kept distinct. The frequency of the Dutch items in –*heid* favors translation equivalents which are similar in Frisian; this is to the disadvantage of formations in –*ens*.

2.2.2. Consequences for language education
The suffix –*ens* owes its success in part to the increase in popularity of written Frisian in modern times. Middle Frisian (1550-1800), when less Frisian was written, hardly features any nouns in –*ens*. The suffix –*ens* is relatively popular in writing nowadays because it provides an easy, if not always correct, way of making one's writing appear more Frisian: it is an easy rule of thumb to just replace –*heid* with –*ens*. Thus the relative popularity of –*ens* is in part due to hypercorrectness and distancing. This is nor surprising since people who write Frisian anyhow have a positive motivation for Frisian, whereas people who talk Frisian need not be positively (nor negatively) motivated. Thus –*ens* is more popular in written than in spoken language.

Our advice would be for teaching to ride the crest of the relatively high popularity of –*ens* in writing. After all, it does provide an easy way of distancing Frisian from Dutch.

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The textbook instruction should not be to always use –*ens* where Dutch has –*heid*. That would lead to extremely rare and unnatural forms like *wizens* foar *wiisheid* 'wisdom'. However, the textbook could very well advise students to use –*ens* when in doubt. The textbook could also point out that –*ens* is more popular in writing than in speaking, and that learned words (hence of Latinate origin) can easily be connected with –*ens*, such as *konkreet – konkretens* 'concreteness'.

2.3 Case study #3: verb order in the verbal cluster

2.3.1 The grammar of Frisian is influenced by Dutch
Dutch and Frisian both share the property that auxiliary verbs and the main verb are aligned in one group, the so-called verbal cluster. Interestingly, the word order in Dutch is the opposite of the word order in Frisian, if we set aside *to*-infinitives. To illustrate, consider the following examples:

Dutch order: *tensed verb – 2 – 3 - main verb*
Omdat hij zou hebben kunnen bellen
because he would have could phone
"Because he could have phoned."

Frisian order: *main verb – 3 – 2 – tensed verb*
Omdat er skilje kinnen ha soe.
because he phone could have would
"Because he could have phoned."

Nowadays, spoken Frisian is changing. Young people mix up verb clusters in such a way that any possible word order may be found in the new sort of Frisian, which is sometimes referred to as Interference Frisian. Given three verbs, all logically possible orders (6) may be produced or accepted by some speakers, according to Koeneman & Postma (2006), though there are strong differences in the frequency with which these orders are attested:

Tensed verb – infinitive - main verb ('Dutch order')

Tensed verb – main verb - infinitive
Infinitive – tensed verb - main verb
Infinitive – main verb - tensed verb
Main verb - tensed verb - infinitive
Main verb - infinitive - tensed verb ('Frisian order')

These facts can only be explained if every Frisian verb may freely adopt the ordering requirement of Frisian ('leftward orientation') or the ordering requirement of Dutch ('rightward'). This in turn implies that the grammar of Frisian is being accessed by the grammar of Dutch, which exerts its influence on Frisian vocabulary items, in a way that is similar to what we encountered earlier.

2.3.2 On how to teach this phenomenon
In clusters of two verbs, the situation is more complicated, since Dutch allows both orders in that specific case: main verb – tensed verb, tensed verb – main verb. Standard Frisian only allows the order: main verb – tensed verb. We restrict ourselves to subordinate sentences, since that is where the difference shows up, in case the sentence contains a main verb and a tensed verb.

Linguistic knowledge is required in order to write the course book that teaches this complex phenomenon in the most efficient way. Two simple rules are sufficient in order to deal with verb order *inside* a verb cluster:

- The main verb must come first in the verb cluster.
- The tensed verb must come last in the verb cluster.

These two rules just involve the concepts 'main verb' and 'tensed verb', which should be introduced earlier in course books relying on them. It is thus worthwhile to devote some attention to this in those books. Once the syntactic pattern has been taught, the learner can correctly order every imaginable combination of auxiliary verb and main verb. A conservative estimate would have it that there are about 10 auxiliaries and 1000 main verbs, yielding 10,000 phrases which can now all receive the correct word order.

In the course book of the AFÛK dealing with verbs (Eisma 1989:18-22), the phenomenon of word order in the verb cluster is discussed correctly, but in the style of a reference grammar, without pedagogical techniques to make it easier for the students. Eisma's main discussion (page 19) centers around sentences involving 4 verbs. In actual practice, such sentences are very rare. In addition, the book does not warn against having the wrong order in 2-verb sentences, which are very frequent with the younger generations of speakers. However, it must be mentioned that Eisma does arrive at the two simple rules which we presented above, though he does not foreground them enough to give them pedagogical prominence. Another course book (De Vries 1993) compounds the explanation about word order in verb clusters by introducing two verbs which happen to take the infinitival marker *te* 'to' in Frisian.

On the one hand, existing course books sometimes focus on highly specialized cases, as if these were essentially different, such as a distinction between clusters with three verbs and clusters with four verbs. On the other hand, course books hastily try to deal with both word order and morphological adaptations all at once, which is linguistically and pedagogically confusing. Nevertheless, Eisma's treatment is strictly speaking correct, although it is not optimal from a pedagogical point of view.

2.4 Case study # 4: vocabulary change

2.4.1 How vocabulary change works
The previous cases can be taken as illustrations of the claim that morphology and grammar of Dutch affect Frisian. More specifically, Frisian items are being associated with morphological and syntactical specifications belonging to their Dutch translation equivalents. In the same way, Frisian vocabulary items are being ousted if they are not similar to Dutch (Breuker, 2001; Sjölin, 1976, and others).

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Consider the frequency of the idiomatic phrase "*fertuten dwaan*", which means "have good results". Dutch has a different idiom "*resultaat hebben*". The phrase "*fertuten dwaan*" decreased in frequency through the decades of the last century. Instead, a phrase more similar to Dutch is gaining in frequency, namely "*resultaat ha*". Similarly, the Frisian preposition "*lâns*" is being ousted in spoken language by the form "*langs*" (compare Dutch "*langs*"). Numerous examples of this process are presented in the literature cited above.

2.4.2. Some consequences for teaching
Language courses sometimes devote space to vocabulary items which are almost useless from a communicative point of view and which are extremely infrequent. Thus a beginner's course in Frisian features lists of extremely specialized vocabulary dealing with birds, insects and meteorological terms. To exemplify, it does not just teach the word for rain, but also words for various sorts of drizzle. It teaches names of birds which are hardly known even in the dominant language, let alone in the minority language. Teaching those extremely infrequent words in a beginner's course is a waste of valuable time and energy. Given the limited amount of time and energy which beginners have at their disposal, it follows that it is impossible to teach them *all* the words of the target language. Strategic choices must be made, however painful they may be.

Consider, for example, the preservation of vocabulary items. Superficially, it would seem that language preservation entails vocabulary preservation, as if the vocabulary of a language is a monolithic and unchanging entity. Nothing is further from the truth. When confronted with

vocabulary change taking the form of language loss, the question is how the course books, which bear out a prescriptive standard of language use, should react to that. The linguist must answer the question: should we accept this change or should we attempt to resist it? Consider the following cases of vocabulary going out of use:

- Words denoting agrarian tools which farmers have replaced with more modern tools.
- Words denoting different shades of wind relevant to an age in which sailing ships were important.

These words have very low usage frequencies in the Linguistic Database of Modern Frisian. Nevertheless, old-fashioned language planners have taught them not so long ago in their beginner's courses of Frisian (Stienstra, De Vries & De Vries, 1982; their word lists are based on Kalma, 1948). Furthermore, such words go out of use not only in minority languages, but in majority languages as well. Thus trying to preserve such words is a waste of time, money and energy, which could be put to a more profitable use elsewhere.

Compare this to the following cases of vocabulary extension:

- Words denoting the computer and its constituent parts, mainly derived from English and occasionally (in Frisian) from Dutch
- Words denoting the television and its constituent parts, mainly derived from English.

Sometimes, these changes have been fought by language planners and would-be planners. Thus, a lover of the Frisian language tried to get a made-up word for "file" (*trime*) generally accepted, whereas the dictionary makers of the FA adopted the word '*bestân*', which is similar to Dutch *bestand* and which is competing with the English loanword 'file'.

This raises the question of what sort of words should be taught in a beginner's course in a minority language. In our view, such words and expressions must meet two requirements:

- They are useful for communicative purposes, put differently, they are frequent
- They differ substantially from the corresponding word or expression in the dominant language.

Communicative usefulness should be a prime factor in determining the choice of vocabulary items which beginner's courses teach. Frequency in spoken and written language corpora provide a formal criterion by means of which communicative usefulness can be adequately measured. Given that not all words and phrases can be taught, the most sensible and most effective strategy is to teach those words and phrases which are most useful, hence most frequent, in everyday speech. Once those have been adequately mastered, more specialized vocabulary can be taught in advanced courses.

3. Study of linguistic change of minority languages

The Council of Europe has proclaimed on several occasions that it considers linguistic diversity to be a valuable ingredient of the European Union (see Lotti, 2007; De Jager & Van der Meer, 2007, and the references cited there). It is thus legitimate and even desirable that an attempt is made to preserve minority languages. A lot has been said about social measures aimed at providing minority languages with a future. The establishment of trilingual schools can be seen as one such measure (Beetsma, 2002). However, measures based on linguistic analysis have either been neglected or dealt with at a non-professional level.

In our view, it is useless to try and maintain into living usage words which belong to an outdated technology or sphere of living. Similarly, it is no use to prevent English words for new technology from coming into use, seeing that even well-established majority languages such as French and Dutch are mostly unsuccessful in this. If even majority languages are unsuccessful, what are the chances of a minority language being successful?

However, it often happens that Frisian speakers resort to Dutch for using commonplace, technology-neutral, society-neutral concepts, for example, for saying that something is useful: *resultaat ha*. Here it would be useful, as was mentioned above, to teach the less common, more Frisian expression: *fertuten dwaan*. Thus, a list of every day concepts should be drawn up, which can be done on the basis of frequency lists of idiomatic expressions. Dutchisms in such a list can be linked to more Frisian expressions, and these should be taught in school. Thus, frequency would offer an important key as to which part of a minority language should be the primary focus of attempts at language preservation.

Similarly, syntactic constructions are to a larger or smaller extent independent of specific words. Hence, if you learn the correct word order in the verbal cluster, you can put in any modal you want and derive a rich range of possible sentences. Thus it is very fruitful to teach syntactic patterns, since they can be used to express a wide range of semantic expressions. Needless to say, it is less useful to focus on those properties of a minority language which it has in common with a dominant language, in our case Dutch. Those properties will tend to come for free.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, those words, idiomatic expressions and constructions should be the target of language preservation which fulfill three conditions:

- They are frequent.
- They have a wide range of semantic-situational applications.
- They differ from the dominant language that is threatening the minority language.

Regarding the last point, it is clear that there is nothing wrong with the strategy of distancing in prescriptive language planning. But distancing will only be successful in case it involves lexical and grammatical phenomena with a high communicative value in everyday life. If the focus is on agrarian tools or rare birds, you waste time and effort, and you will anyhow fail to preserve those words.

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Thus we argue in favor of a strategic approach to language preservation: put the time and energy to use where the chance of success is best. Otherwise, a lot of energy is wasted in fighting battles which even a standard language will lose. Strategic choices come first in language preservation.

As we have seen, vocabulary items from the minority language which have high similarity to the dominant language seem to profit from the language contact. They oust rival vocabulary items which are less similar. Knowledge of these linguistic mechanism is relevant in the attempt to preserve a minority language by means of language education. Strategic choices must be made after determining which parts of a minority language should be preserved. Once it is known which parts of a minority language will inevitably be subject to change, then it can be concluded that it is a waste of time and energy to try and preserve them. Making the right choices helps to prevent the erosion of minority languages and to preserve the rich culturally varied heritage, which is one of Europe's strong points. After all, monocultures are vulnerable to radical change, as we know from monocultures in ecological systems.

Acknowledgements

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