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From inflected material adjectives to the history of Schwa apocope in West Frisian: diverging influences on a sound change

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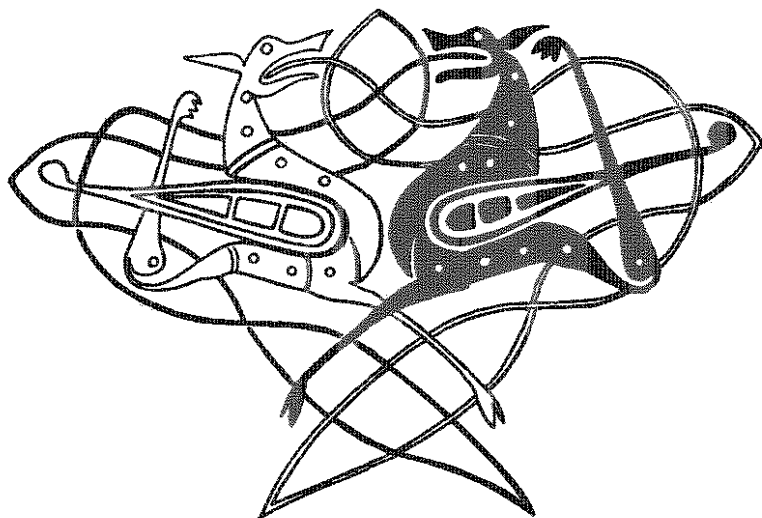
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A FRISIAN AND GERMANIC MISCELLANY

Published in Honour of
Nils Århammar

on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday, 7 August 1996

*"From inflected material adjectives to the history of
Schwa apocope in West Frisian: diversity influences
on a sound change". (pp. 55 + 67)*



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FROM INFLECTED MATERIAL ADJECTIVES TO THE
HISTORY OF SCHWA APOCOPE IN WEST FRISIAN:
DIVERGING INFLUENCES ON A SOUND CHANGE

An earlier Festschrift within the field of Frisian philology, viz. the one for Miedema (Århammar *et al.* 1984), includes an article by Anne Dykstra on the flexion of adjectives indicating names of materials in Modern West Frisian (henceforth 'Frisian'). At the time, his article could not make me quite enthusiastic. In a review (Dyk, Hoekstra & Visser 1985:24) I promised to return to the issue, and this is an appropriate opportunity to redeem my debt. In doing so, it will appear that the issue involves a problem that exceeds the inflection of material adjectives in that the instability of the adjectival inflectional *-e*, as I will show, can also be observed in other categories ending in *-e*. I will argue that both its loss and preservation can be explained by taking into account the functional load of the suffix.*

The material adjectives involved are all formed by adding the suffix *-en* ([ən]) to the noun designating the material. For example, from *hout*, 'wood', one can derive the adjective *houten*, 'wooden'. Frisian's neighbour Dutch has the same suffix, but a striking difference between the two languages is that the Dutch adjectives cannot be inflected, whereas the Frisian ones can. So, by adding the flexion suffix *-e* ([ə]), the Frisian result is *houtene*, and although both languages use the same word for 'wood', this form would be completely ungrammatical in Dutch. Dykstra traced this subject in the available grammatical handbooks of Dutch and Frisian, and confronted these opinions with data from Frisian texts from 1800 onward. His main conclusion was that flexion seems to decrease in these adjectives.

Dykstra has surely given a good description of the facts, but what makes his article somewhat disappointing is that he does not exploit these facts to gain a deeper insight into what is actually going on here. In the present paper, I hope to make clear that the behaviour of material adjectives should be extended to other cases, which implies

that Dykstra has missed a generalization. More seriously, he has not even made a beginning of what could be characterized as an explanation of the facts. To achieve this is another goal of my paper.

It is not impossible that these omissions in Dykstra's article can be ascribed to a wrong perspective on the question in that he looks at Frisian through Dutch eyes. Otherwise, his statement that Frisian threatens to lose a characteristic morphological property cannot well be interpreted. I would state, in contrast, that it is not Frisian that is peculiar here, but Dutch. We can see this when we take as a starting point that adjectives, both in Dutch and Frisian, are inflected in certain positions. Considering this, it is very strange that only adjectives designating names of materials refrain from being inflected. Therefore, not the fact that the Frisian adjectives show inflection, but rather the fact that their Dutch counterparts lack it, needs to be accounted for.

This immediately raises the question why material adjectives in Dutch lack inflection. To detect this, it is obvious to look for the cause in common features of the category. As a first option, one might think of a semantic reason, but we can immediately put this aside, as adjectival flexion seems to be totally independent of meaning. A second option could be to look into the morphology of these adjectives. Perhaps a feature in the *-en*-suffix itself prohibits an inflectional suffix to be added. Although such a constraint between a derivative and an inflectional affix would be very peculiar, I nevertheless think this comes closer to the truth. Still, the constraint cannot be ascribed to morphological features. A major indication is that the same behaviour can be observed in adjectives ending in *-en* where this ending can by no means be characterized as a suffix. For example, Frisian *iepen* ('open') can or cannot have inflection (1), whereas its Dutch equivalent shows only the latter possibility (2):

(1) De iepen(e) doar
The open door

(2) De open(*e) deur

I would like to claim here that the reason for the non-inflection of material adjectives must be phonological, as the various steps of morphological derivation will show.

By adding the derivational suffix *-en* to the stem, an adjective is formed which ends in a non-stressed syllable, since the phonological representation of the suffix is [ən]. When inflected, another syllable containing a Schwa is added, resulting in two adjacent syllables containing Schwa. This clearly contradicts a general phonological tendency which demands a regular alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables in the preferred case. As a syllable with nuclear Schwa can never be stressed, phonological pressure will seek to restore the sequence. This can hardly be done by bringing one of the unstressed segments back to a full vowel, since underlyingly the suffixes just contain a Schwa. The only reasonable solution left is deletion. Deleting the first Schwa is difficult, since this would result in a sequence with bad syllable contact. An example would be **houtne*, where the cluster **tn* is a marked one in Frisian.¹ On the other hand, deletion of the second unstressed syllable never runs into phonotactic troubles.

The phonological cause of non-inflection is further evidenced by those rare adjectives which end in two unstressed syllables even without inflection. Examples are derivatives of *izer* ('iron') and *koper* ('brass'). In his corpus Dykstra (1984:186) could not find any inflected instance of such adjectives, which confirmed a remark by Sipma (1913:61), who stated that an adjective is not inflected 'when it ends in two unaccented syllables'. If such adjectives had been inflected, the result would have been a cluster of even three unstressed syllables (**izerene*, **koperene*), which would clearly cause too serious difficulties for a smooth pronunciation.

The tendency to avoid too many unstressed syllables may even have had its effect on the choice of a derivational suffix. Jarich Hoekstra has pointed out to me that material adjectives ending in *-ən*, *-əl* and *-jə* never take the suffix *-en*, but rather *-s*. Examples are *linnens* (< *linnen*, 'linen'), *duffels* (< *duffel*, 'duffel') and *flenjes* (< *flenje*, 'flannel'). When inflected, these words count two adjacent unstressed syllables, which does not seem to meet phonological objections in this case. This leads me to the observation that of the adjectives with a Schwa in the final syllable only those ending in *-ən* suffer from the possibility of not being inflected. Those ending in *-əl* (e.g. *krigel*, 'diligent') or *-əm* (e.g. *stikem*, 'underhand') regularly take an inflectional Schwa when necessary. I must admit that I have no explanation of this divergent behaviour of

adjectives ending in various unstressed syllables. This should surely be a topic for future research.

Returning to our adjectives ending in *-en*, we end up, then, in a situation where two competing forces struggle for dominance. One is morphological in that words belonging to a certain category should be inflected according to the rules for that category. The other is phonological and prefers a regular alternation of accented and unaccented or less accented syllables. This picture easily explains why the inflection of these adjectives in Frisian is a variable process: the forces appear to be more or less equally strong, although it can be observed from Dykstra's data that the morphological one is weaker and is still losing ground. If nothing changes, and honestly I cannot see why it should, the end of the development is illustrated by the situation in Dutch, where phonology clearly gained the victory (cf. Raidt 1968). This picture likewise assumes that in the course of history the morphological force loses its strength. This conclusion is corroborated by data from Dykstra (1984:191) which show that in Middle Dutch the material adjectives were still inflected, and it is also in line with the general tendency of deflection in so many other Germanic languages.

The same line of reasoning can be applied when we extend the scope to other categories than just adjectives. I will restrict myself to the phonological environment [ənə], since this sequence has the interesting property to show up in many different contexts. Sometimes, the cluster has undergone apocope in the history of Frisian. Here is an overview:

- A. The gerundial ending *-ene* simplified to *-en*. This must have been accomplished by the end of the Old Frisian period (ca. 1500). So, the gerundial form *to helpene*, of the verb *helpe* ('help'), changed into *to helpen*.
- B. The plural preterite ending *-ene* in the paradigm of irregular verbs simplified to *-en*. Regrettably, this ending has not received any serious attention within the Frisian grammatical tradition. As far as I can see, it occurred especially with irregular verbs. According to the grammars, it seems to be absent in Old Frisian, but in Middle Frisian it was far from uncommon, and at least in the early Modern Frisian period, around 1800, it was still quite

frequently used, to fade out rapidly about 1850. It is rarely found in texts of authors who begin to write at that time, such as Waling Dykstra and Tsjibbe Gearts van der Meulen, whereas members of an earlier generation, such as the Halbertsma brothers, R. Posthumus, W. de Jong, Eman and A. Telting, exhibit the phenomenon fairly commonly. For an example, take the verb *meitsje* ('make'). Nowadays, the preterite plural is *makken*, but in the earlier half of the nineteenth century also *makkene* was usual. Other examples are *rekkene* from the verb *reitsje* ('hit'), *wistene* from *witte* ('know'), *namene* from *nimme* ('take') and *kriigene* from *krije* ('get').

- C. The adjectival flexion dealt with above.
 D. In plural genitives of weak nouns, typically restricted to literary style:

- (3) Friezene frijheid ('Frisians-GEN freedom')
 (4) Minskene hâlden en dragen ('people-GEN behaviour')
 (5) Fammene pronkjen ('girls-GEN strutting')

It is not possible to drop final Schwa in these cases, e.g.:

- (6) * Friezen frijheid

- E. In the first and third person preterite and in the past participle of weak *je*-verbs (class II), which have a stem ending in /ən/. An example is the verb *tekenje*, 'draw', with its stem *teken*:

- (7) a. Ik tekene ('I drew')
 b. Hy tekene ('he drew')
 c. Ik haw tekene ('I have drawn')

With these verbs, final Schwa is obligatory:

- (8) a. * Ik teken
 b. * Hy teken
 c. * Ik haw teken

The first, (8a), might be heard occasionally, something which must be ascribed to interference from Dutch. However, in that case the form

does not designate the preterite, but rather the present. Forms (8b) and (8c) are impossible on any occasion.

F. Inflected adjectives with an empty nominal head (cf. Hietbrink 1993). The articles *de* and *it* can both be used here, where *de* normally denotes a person:

- (9) Hy hie twa soannen. Lolle wie de iepene, Gurbe de
slettene
He had two sons. Lolle was the open, Gurbe the closed
'He had two sons. Lolle was the one with an open mind,
Gurbe was uncommunicative'
- (10) It iepene fan it Fryske lân
The open of the Frisian countryside
'The openness of the Frisian countryside'

These uses cannot undergo apocope:

- (11) a. * De iepen
b. * De sletten
c. * It iepen

It could be suggested that there is another environment where apocope can be observed, viz. in the case of adverbs when they modify an adjective, especially those which serve an intensifying function. In Frisian texts, I have found just one possible example, *ûnwiten*, in e.g. *ûnwitene lûd*, 'extremely loud'. This adverb may undergo apocope: *ûnwiten lûd*. However, this need not be a case of Schwa-apocope after *-en*, since the intensifying Schwa seems to be optional in any case: *bar(e) nijsgjirrich* 'very curious' or *seldsum(e) ferfelend* 'extremely boring'. For the clarity of argument, I will ignore this instance of 'Schwa apocope'.

In sum, we now have six environments which are phonetically identical. If the Neo-Grammarians were right in their statement that sound change is exceptionless, then these environments would be expected to behave in the same manner with respect to Schwa-apocope. Yet, this has not been the case: they show a variegated behaviour towards *e*-apocope: two lost final Schwa, in one it is optional, and in

three it is absolutely forbidden to drop Schwa. The question to be posed is, of course, what cause is underlying this state of affairs.

To answer this, I would like to have recourse to an important article by Kiparsky (1982). He formulated three important principles, all functional in character, which play an important role in many sound changes. It can be argued that all three are involved in the case of Schwa-apocope in Frisian, two of which we have already become familiar with. The first is the phonetic impetus of a change, which can be considered as a *conspiracy* to simplify the basis of pronunciation. Such conspiracies tend to be formulated negatively. 'Phonotactic conspiracies function to avoid certain complex syllable types or complex prosodic configurations' (Kiparsky 1982:109). And a few sentences later: 'In prosody, a common type is the elimination of adjacent stresses in favor of an alternating stress pattern'. All this matches perfectly with the situation I described earlier with respect to final Schwa deletion in inflected material adjectives.

Another important principle could be said to have a morphological background. It is dubbed *paradigmatic coherence*, meaning that 'allomorphy within a paradigm tends to be minimized' (p. 101). The alleged counter-force described above, which assumed that all adjectives, including those ending in *-en*, tend to be involved in one and the same flectional system, could be subsumed under this heading.

There is a third principle not yet alluded to, called the *distinctness condition*, which implies that 'there is a tendency for semantically relevant information to be retained in surface structure' (p. 87). In the literature one can also find this influence under headings such as 'grammatical conditioning' (e.g. Anttila 1989) or 'grammatical prerequisites' (Roberge 1985), the latter providing a fine overview of the research history in this field. One of Kiparsky's examples is the loss in American English of word-final *-t*. When this *-t* is the past tense ending, it is dropped only in those verbs where the present and past tense have different stem vowels, as in *keep - kep'*, *creep - crep'*, *sweep - swep'*, etc. When the *-t* is the only indicator of the past tense, it is retained, as in *steep - steeped*, *heap - heaped* or *step - stepped*. Kiparsky suggests not to weigh the semantic categories equally. He makes a division between weak and strong categories, in which a concept such as case is weak, while number, tense and gender are strong.

Verbal agreement can be both weak and strong, depending on its ability to trigger what would nowadays be called *pro*-drop. Within this division, it is to be expected that a morpheme designating a weak category is lost earlier than a morpheme designating a strong category.

How does Frisian Schwa apocope fare within this system? Note that chronologically we can distinguish four stages of apocope, roughly around 1500 (the gerund), around 1800 (the past tense of the irregular verbs), today (the adjectival flexion), and not (yet?) executed (weak genitives, preterites and past participles of *je*-verbs, and nominalizations of adjectives). Also note that of Kiparsky's three principles I assumed one to be constant, viz. the phonetic conspiracy. The question therefore remains what effects the other principles can be held responsible for.

Let us start with the gerund (or: inflected infinitive). The final Schwa in the sequence *-ene* can be considered to be an expression of case, to wit the dative, governed by the preposition *to* (Steller 1928: 58; Nielsen 1981:170). Kiparsky assigns case to the weak category. Semantically, nothing is lost by dropping the final Schwa of *-ene*. Without doubt, the loss will have been accelerated by the break-down of the morphological case system, which occurred at the same time. Hence, it comes as no surprise that the final Schwa of the gerundial ending dropped at an early stage.

The next occurrence of Schwa apocope was in the case of the plural preterite of irregular verbs, as in *laitsje - laken(e)* and *nimme - namen(e)*. It is hard to tell what the final Schwa in these forms represents. Tense, in itself a strong category, is not self-evident, since that is already marked by the stem-vowel change in these irregular verbs. It could therefore be Number, also a strong category, since this Schwa is typically observed in the case of plural past tenses. But then the Schwa is not necessary to distinguish the plural from the singular, for the preceding *n* could minimally do the job: plural *laken* vs. singular *lake*, or plural *namen* vs. singular *naam*. Having no essential function, neither in terms of paradigmatic coherency, the final Schwa could easily drop. As such, this is an illustration of a more general hypothesis formulated by Labov (1982:53-54), which states that a segment can be dropped more readily once there is an adjacent segment left which can take over the function of the original one. That

this *-ene*-sequence could come into existence and be maintained in a period after the restructuring of the gerundial ending could be ascribed to its occurrence in a small set of forms which were irregular anyway. Maybe, the factor that the full forms referred to the strong categories of tense and number slowed down this process.

I have shown in the beginning of this paper that the third instance of Schwa apocope, item (C), the one in the adjectival agreement, has not been fully completed as yet. Adjectival agreement is not mentioned by Kiparsky, but no doubt it can be set on a par with verbal agreement, in its weak variety to be precise, since the agreement is not used to recover a covert constituent. As a weak category, it could be expected to have disappeared already. In all likelihood the functional principle of paradigmatic coherence has protracted its life: the adjectives tend to go along with the regular adjectival agreement system. A comparable external support is lacking in the case of the plural preterites of the irregular verbs discussed above. Therefore, loss of final Schwa has been completed earlier in these verbs than apocope of the final Schwa in material adjectives.

I will now deal with the cases where final Schwa, at least up to this point in history, resists apocope. The genitives mentioned under (D) above actually form a peculiar category, since the construction is stylistically marked. Within Kiparsky's theory case is a weak category, so the prediction is that final Schwa could easily drop. Nevertheless, this is contrary to the facts. What might be a factor here is that the case concerned is the genitive, which in itself is not structural, but inherent (cf. Chomsky 1986). Particularly, the genitive expresses a relatively special meaning, roughly to be indicated as 'possession'. Significantly, when a language loses its case system, the genitive usually is the last case to be given up. This can be illustrated from Frisian itself, where the genitive suffix *-s* is still attached to proper names, e.g. *Dykstra's hûs*, 'Dykstra-GEN house'. A further factor in the retention of final Schwa in (D) could be that it is supported by a genitival Schwa used with relationship terms (cf. Tiersma 1985: 55), as in *heite pipe*, 'father-GEN pipe'. There seems some influence of *paradigmatic coherence* here, but as the final Schwa as a genitival suffix has a marginal position in all its manifestations, I will not weigh this factor too seriously.

A much clearer stance can be taken in the case of the preterites and past participles of *je*-verbs. Here final Schwa marks Tense, which is a strong category in Kiparsky's system of distinctness conditions. Hence, final Schwa is retained in the paradigm of this class of weak verbs, the more so since there is also support of paradigmatic coherence from the general paradigm of this class of weak verbs.

The last instance of retention of final Schwa concerns cases of inflected adjectives with an empty nominal head, dealt with under (F) above. These are part of a general pattern in which the suffix *-e* is added to the stem of the adjective. As such it could be claimed that (F) is supported by paradigmatic coherence. But assuming that the *-e*-suffix is the same agreement suffix as in the case of the adjectives of (C), then exactly the same coherence must be assumed to work, and nevertheless there the final Schwa is under severe pressure, as we have seen. So what makes the difference? I think it must be in the strength of the agreement. In the case under discussion the agreement suffix functions as a means to recover the covert head. Hence, it should be considered as a *strong* category, whereas the agreement in (C), with its overt head, should be considered weak. In other words, a distinctness condition is responsible for the retention of final Schwa in these cases. It could be opposed that for the covert head to be visible the addition of a determiner, and maybe also the syntactic position in sentence structure, should be sufficient clues. A comparison with a language like English, however, shows that the determiner cannot do the job on its own there, either, witness the obligatory addition of, for instance, the dummy pronoun *one* or a suffix like *-ness*:

- (12) the wide *(one)
 (13) the wideness / *wide of the Frisian countryside

Hence, it looks as if the suffix *-e* plays an essential role in this particular adjectival construction.

Summarizing the influences of the conditions of paradigmatic coherence and distinctness, I arrive at the following picture:

	paradigmatic coherence	distinctness
gerundives	-	-
preterites	-	-
adjectives	+	-
genitives	±	±
<i>je</i> -verbs	+	+
nominalizations	+	+

It appears from this picture that the distribution of the values reflects the chronology of Schwa apocope rather well. Two plusses indicate that the apocope has not been effected yet, and maybe never will. Two minuses mean that the Schwa did not receive enough support to be preserved. The combination of a plus and a minus indicates that the process must be at a transitional stage, and this is in accordance with the facts. The two irregular or marginal processes of the preterites and the genitives remain problematic. For some considerations I refer to my discussion at the relevant places above.

I hope to have demonstrated in this paper that the study of material adjectives in Frisian is far more interesting than it may have looked at first sight. They appear to be in the midst of a constellation of final Schwa deletion which is governed by functional conditions: phonological conspiracy on the one hand and distinctness and paradigmatic coherency on the other. The accidentally high amount of various distinct processes within one and the same phonetic environment makes it an ideal field for investigations. As such, the interest of the case lies well beyond the borders of Frisian linguistics proper.²

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Notes

- * This paper benefitted greatly from comments on an earlier draft made by Jarich Hoekstra and Willem Visser.
1. 'Marked' does not mean impossible. For metrical reasons, one can sometimes encounter forms like *houtne* in poetry.
 2. The literature on grammatical conditioning usually parades the relatively simple example of the Greek future and aorist and the Estonian loss of final *-n* in first person singular and imperative (e.g. Campbell & Ringen 1981). Curiously and regrettably enough, an earlier study (Lindgren 1953), with even far more details than the present Frisian case, has been overlooked by many researchers. The same applies to the even older article by Moore (1927), with a somewhat different methodology, but with results the essence of which again points in the same direction.

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