

The Frisian Language Database as a source of information on language variation

Arjen P. Versloot (*Fryske Akademy*)

Language variation is found in three dimensions: through time (diachronic), through space (dialectal) and through society (socio-linguistic). While synchronic theories build on the axiom of synchronic individual linguistic knowledge, corpus based research shows the overall presence of variation and change, even among individual speakers. Apparently, linguistic knowledge implies linguistic variation and linguistic change.

The Frisian language is small and has a limited historical attestation compared to many other Germanic languages. But the Frisian language corpus shows some features that make it extraordinary suitable to trace language variation and change on the dimensions time and space over 700 years, from 1300 up til now:

- the limited attestation enables full coverage of all pre-1800 sources;
- the limited geographical extension provides a relatively dense geographical distribution;
- the lack of a cultural-linguistic centre and any standardisation tendencies until the middle of the 19 century offer a detailed th look into the actually spoken language over the period 1300-1850.
- To fully appreciate the last aspect, we have to give up our prejudices about written sources and leave our expectations based on modern dialects and historical reconstructions by side.

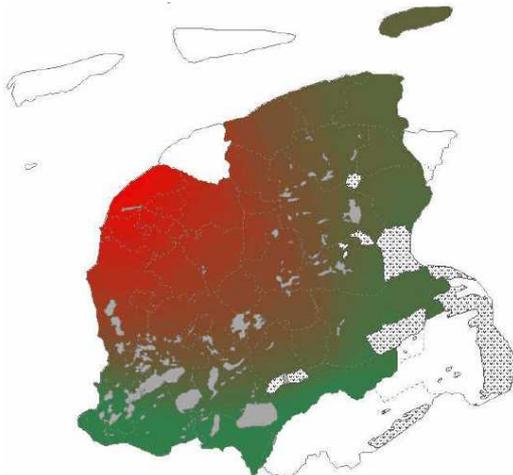


Figure 1: The geographical configuration of r-deletion, from red (early) to green (late).

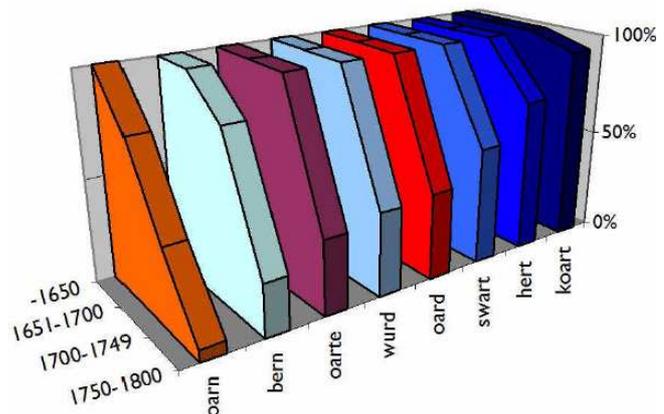


Figure 2: The gradual disappearance of /r/ before /d,t,s,n,l/ in different phonological contexts between 1650 and 1800, based on attested spelling forms.

The result is an amazingly detailed picture of high diachronic and dialectal dynamics, changing the picture of gradual, slow language change into a sometimes complex, sometimes non-linear development, that resembles the shifted perception of biological evolution from a gradual, linear descent model into the bush-model. Examples of both rapidly altering dialectal configurations and relatively stable phenomena will be given to illustrate the benefit for the study of language variation and change.

Language database at: www.fryske-akademy.nl/tdb