

Corpus of Wangerooge Frisian (CWF): An Open Resource for East Frisian Studies

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Abstract. *The paper describes the Corpus of Wangerooge Frisian (CWF), an online resource gathering the extant documentation of the East Frisian variety formerly spoken on the island of Wangerooge. In addition to the textual material, the corpus includes recently made transcriptions of about half an hour of audio recordings from the 1920s. The paper outlines the aims and structure of the corpus and describes the preparation of the texts. It ends with a brief discussion of some past and future applications.*

1. Introduction

Wangerooge Frisian is well-known among Frisian specialists for its historical interest and extensive documentation (see e.g. Kramer 1999; Versloot 2001; Hoekstra 2023). In spite of this, however, there have been relatively few linguistic studies of this variety. The work presented here attempts to mitigate this by making the extant documentation openly accessible in online place, namely the online Corpus of Wangerooge Frisian (CWF). The corpus contains almost all of the known documentation, some of which has only recently become available. While it was collected for a specific linguistic research project, which I will briefly describe below, it is hoped that the corpus will be of use for other investigations in the future, linguistic as well as ethnographic and historical.

This paper introduces the corpus and explains some of the decisions made during the compilation of it. I will first briefly discuss the motivations behind the corpus (Section 2) before providing an overview of its structure and content (Section 3). The preparation of the corpus texts, including the retranscription of some sources, is then described in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 discusses a few past and potential future use cases.

2. Aims of the project

The Corpus of Wangerooge Frisian was developed as part of my postdoctoral project at Kiel University in 2022–24. The primary aim of this project was to provide the first comprehensive grammatical description of the East Frisian

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dialect of Wangerooge, intended for a broad audience of general linguists, specialists of Frisian and Low German – the main contact language of Wangerooge Frisian – and anyone with an interest in these languages.

Because Wangerooge Frisian ceased to be spoken in the middle of the 20th century, grammatical work by necessity has to be based on the extant linguistic record. Documentation survives from the period c. 1800–1935, the majority of it collected by H.G. Ehrentraut during several field trips in 1837–41. Some other texts and fragments of the language are found in other publications, and two sets of audio recordings were made by Otto Bremer and Theodor Siebs in the 1920s. While the documentation is abundant, not all of it is equally accessible to contemporary linguists and students. Some of it is found in relatively obscure 19th- and early 20th-century publications, the sources use divergent orthographies, and transcriptions of the audio recordings have not been published so far.

For the grammatical description, I decided to gather all available texts in a searchable corpus and publish this online. Some of the texts were already available in a digital format, whereas others had to be (re)transcribed for the purposes of the corpus, as discussed below. While my own project was of a linguistic nature, the material is also interesting for other reasons. Among other things, it includes fairy tales and folkloristic texts, accounts of historical events, and descriptions of everyday life in a small coastal community in the middle of the 19th century. By gathering this material in one place, I hope that anyone else with an interest in Wangerooge Frisian will be able to benefit from it in the future.

3. *Overview of the corpus*

In its present form, the Corpus of Wangerooge Frisian contains 161 individual text files of varying length. Some corpus files only consist of a few sentences, whereas the longest ones contain almost 10,000 words. In total, the corpus contains about 109,000 words. The word count only includes the running Wangerooge Frisian text in each file; isolated word forms and explanatory text in other languages (mainly German) were not counted.

The corpus is divided into 13 subcorpora (folders), each containing the texts from an individual source or linguist. The folder names are used as prefixes in the names of the texts. For instance, the subcorpus [li] contains the three texts published by Littmann (1922), which have the file names [li-christians], [li-seals], and [li-village] in the corpus. The smallest subcorpora consist of just a single text, while the largest one contains 68 text files. An

overview of the subcorpora is given in Table 1. The corpus can be downloaded from <<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15131042>> (Gegersen 2025a).

Folder	Content	Source	Text files	Words
eh	Ehrentraut's <i>Nachlass</i>	Versloot 1996	68	66,261
fa1	Texts from <i>Friesisches Archiv</i> 1	Ehrentraut 1849	15	12,585
fa2	Texts from <i>Friesisches Archiv</i> 2	Ehrentraut 1854	33	18,029
fi	Texts from <i>Germaniens Völkerstimmen</i>	Firmenich 1854	7	1,777
gr	The Lord's Prayer	Gröne 1881	1	67
li	Three narrative texts	Litmann 1922	3	2,085
lu	Two short texts	Luths 1934, 1935; Gegersen 2024a	2	174
ok	Material from Oken 1807	Bräuning-Oktavio 1958	1	60
rec-br	Audio recordings by Otto Bremer	Bremer 1924-25	6	1,122
rec-si	Audio recordings by Th. Siebs	Siebs 1927	7	2,373
si	Texts from the work of Th. Siebs	Siebs 1889, 1893, 1901, 1923	16	3,318
we	Wenker questionnaire from 1884	Wenkerbogen 48241; Bosse 2021	1	458
wi	The Parable of the Prodigal Son	Winkler 1874	1	963

Table 1. Contents of the Corpus of Wangerooge Frisian, v. 1.0.0

Most of the texts in the corpus are in the public domain, and many can already be found online; links to these works can be found in the references. The edition of Ehrentraut's *Nachlass* was supplied to me by Arjen Versloot. The transcriptions of the recordings were made by myself. The texts of two of the subcorpora are not yet in the public domain as the copyright holders died within 70 years of the publication of the corpus; in both cases, the inclusion is in accordance with the right-to-quote exception of the German copyright law.¹

The corpus has aimed to gather all textual documentation of Wangerooge Frisian, but it is not a database of all lexical material. This means that sources with running text are generally included, whereas sources only listing individual word forms are not. Examples of material not included are the lexical items collected by Lübber (1847), the bird names recorded by Wiepken (1877), and

¹ The subcorpora in question are [li] and [lu]. Enno Littmann died in 1958, Otto Luths in 1973. In both cases, the included texts are only part of a larger work and are quoted for scientific purposes only, as provided by the *Gesetz über Urheberrecht und verwandte Schutzrechte*, § 51.

the various animal and plant names listed by B.E. Siebs (1928, 1974). Similarly, while I have made some use of the notes in Otto Bremer's *Nachlass* (Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesbibliothek, Cb 122) for the phonological description of Wangerooge Frisian, these have not been edited for the corpus as they only consist of individual words. I have also not included the material collected by U.J. Seetzen around 1800. While Seetzen's glossary does include a few sentences and short text fragments (see Versloot 1995: 101–103), it contains so many uncertainties and obvious transcription errors that it can only be used with caution. For this reason, I decided against including this source in the corpus and instead refer to the critical edition by Versloot (1995).

In addition to the texts themselves, the current release of the corpus contains a list of all texts, a text file with a short explanation of the corpus, and a scan of Siebs (1923); this source was retranscribed for the corpus, but because the corpus version differs significantly from Siebs' phonetic transcript, the original publication is included for reference. The texts in the current version of the corpus are provided in raw text format (TXT with UTF-8 encoding). These can be downloaded and read with any modern text editor or concordancer. They may also be used to create other corpus resources, such as a syntactically annotated or part-of-speech tagged version, provided these are also made openly accessible.² They could also be included in a larger corpus of the Frisian languages or in multilingual corpora focussing on specific linguistic phenomena, such as Multi-CAST (Haig & Schnell 2018).

4. *Preparation of texts*

The texts in the corpus were recorded in different orthographies and for different purposes. In a number of cases, I have retranscribed texts out of necessity or because of practical considerations, and it should thus be kept in mind that some parts of the corpus represent reinterpretations of the primary sources. For this reason, the preparation and retranscription of the different subcorpora will be explained in this section.

The largest subcorpus [eh], which contains the Ehrentraut material published by Versloot (1996), was already available to me as a machine-readable file. For the purpose of the corpus, this was converted to individual files, each

² The corpus is distributed under the CC BY-SA 4.0 license. See <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>> for the terms of use. An attempt to make a lemmatized version of the corpus was made during a research stay at the Fryske Akademy in 2023, but I was unable to finish this because of time constraints. The lemmatized files are stored at the Fryske Akademy.

representing a unique text or textual fragment; an overview of these with page references to Versloot (1996) can be found in the corpus metadata file. In the corpus files, footnotes were omitted, and the Sater Frisian and Low German cognates given by Ehrentraut in [eh-fr-dictionary] were left out. Words and phrases which are underlined in the edition are indicated with surrounding asterisks in the corpus, e.g. <*dan* pizel> for <dan pizel> ‘that room’. In his editorial introduction, Versloot (1996: xli–xlv) gives an overview of the three orthographic systems used by Ehrentraut and the way these were retranscribed for the edition. Most importantly, Versloot’s edition uses digraphs instead of diacritics to represent long vowels, e.g. <aa> for Ehrentraut’s <a²> or <â> and <ââ> for Ehrentraut’s <o³>. The corpus files reproduce the text as it appears in Versloot (1996) with a few minor exceptions. The lowered <e> used by Ehrentraut and Versloot appears as <e>, so the corpus has <ooe> for the <oo_e> found in the edition. The combination <ng>, which represents the velar nasal /ŋ/, appears as <ng>. Accents above diacritics were changed to a following apostrophe for technical reasons, hence <ââ> becomes <ä'ä> in the corpus. Finally, the small capitals <G> and <TH> are represented as <G> and <TH> in the corpus.

The texts in *Friesisches Archiv* (Ehrentraut 1849, 1854) were originally printed in the third version of Ehrentraut’s orthography. For the subcorpora [fa1] and [fa2], these texts were retranscribed using the same orthography as in [eh]. For instance, <ô> becomes <oo>, <o³> becomes <ââ>, <ö³> becomes <öö>, and <ô> becomes <øø>. Some texts in *Friesisches Archiv* contain a large number of misprints and typos, e.g. acute for circumflex or vice versa. Obvious ones are indicated with ‘[sic]’ in the corpus. Figure 1 shows an excerpt of a text on seal hunting from Ehrentraut (1854: 35) and the transcription found in the corpus file [fa2-xvii-seals].

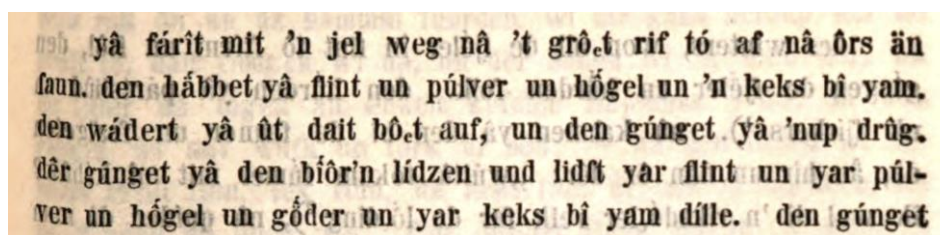


Figure 1. Excerpt of ‘Die Seehundsjagd’ (Ehrentraut 1854: 35; [fa2-xvii-seals])

yaa fâriit mit 'n jel weg naa 't grooet rif tó [sic] af naa oors än saun.
den hâ'bbet yaa flint un pûlver un hóogel un 'n keks bii yam. den
wâdert yaa uut dait booet auf, un den gúnget yaa 'nup druug. deer

gúnget yaa den bíoor'n lídzen und [sic] lidst yar flint un yar púlver un
hóogel un gø'øder un yar keks bii yam dílle. den gúnget [...]

The texts published by Siebs (1923) are written in a phonetic orthography similar to the one Siebs used in his works on other Frisian varieties (e.g. Siebs 1901, 1931). This is clearly of great value for our understanding of Wangerooge Frisian phonology, but the texts are difficult to work with for a variety of reasons. While Ehrentraut's orthography is (implicitly) phonemic, Siebs' transcription is phonetic and represents a number of allophones which are written in the same way by Ehrentraut. Some characters are difficult to distinguish in the font used in Siebs (1923), in particular <æ> and <œ>, and were occasionally confused by the typesetter. Most importantly, however, many of the characters are not available in UTF-8 encoding, which made a retranscription of the texts inevitable. For the purposes of the corpus, I decided to use the Ehrentraut-Versloot orthography because this is used in most of the other texts. The subcorpus [si] thus uses the same spelling as the subcorpora [eh], [fa1], and [fa2] discussed above, though stress is less frequently indicated in the Siebs texts than in the Ehrentraut material. It must be kept in mind that the subcorpus [si] represents an interpretation of Siebs' texts, the main purpose of which is to facilitate searching and comparison with the rest of the corpus. Any analysis using this subcorpus should check the text against the transcripts in Siebs (1923), which also contains valuable linguistic commentary. Figure 2 shows an excerpt of Siebs' original text along with the corresponding retranscription in the corpus. For the sake of convenience I have included a scan of the article in the corpus repository.³ Further Wangerooge Frisian material can be found in other work by Siebs, but this is almost exclusively isolated word forms; the Wenker sentences in Siebs (1931) are adapted from Siebs (1923). I have included a few phrases and sentences from Siebs (1889, 1893, 1901) in separate files, but I have not systematically checked all of Siebs' publications for fragments of Wangerooge Frisian. If further material is found, it may be included in a later version of the corpus.

³ The article is in the public domain and is in fact already available in at least two versions online: <<https://archive.org/details/zeitschriftfurdeutsch1923/page/236/>> and <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40498287>>. Neither of these scans is of very high quality, however, making Siebs' phonetic orthography even more difficult to read.

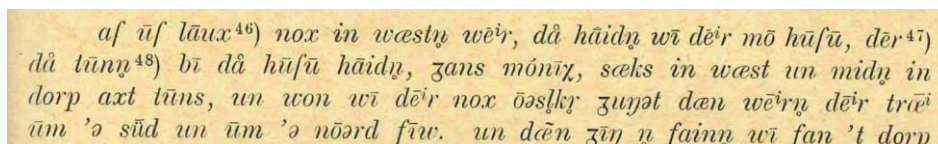


Figure 2. Excerpt of ‘dait ooel lauch un dait salin’ (Siebs 1923: 243; [si-village])

as uuz lauch noch in westen weer, daa haiden wii deer moo huuzuu,
 deer daa tuunnen bii daa huuzuu haiden, gans mónniich, sex in west
 un midden in dorp acht tuunns, un won wii deer noch ooeselker
 gunget den weeren deer three uum ’e süüd un uum ’e noord fiiv. un
 den giing ’n feinen wii fan ’t dorp [...]

The texts in the subcorpora [fi], [gr], [lu], and [ok] appear as in the sources. In Littmann (1922) [li], a long <ſ> is used to represent the phoneme /z/, and the cluster /sx/ is written <ßch>. These were retranscribed as <z> and <sch> in the corpus files. In the transcript of the Wenker questionnaire [we], the long <ſ> was represented as <s>. In the text from Winkler (1894) [wi], a circumflex is used for a long vowels, e.g. <â>, and a lowered <e> is used in the digraph <ôe>. These were represented as in the Ehrentraut material, i.e. <aa> and <ooe>. In addition, Winkler occasionally inserts a lowered <r> where an /r/ is expected historically but had disappeared in 19th-century Wangerooge Frisian. This etymological <r> was removed.

Two collections of audio recordings of Wangerooge Frisian are available from the 1920s, [rec-br] and [rec-si]. The former was collected by Otto Bremer in 1924–25 (see Gerhardt 1938), the latter by Th. Siebs in 1927 (see Miedema 1961: 239–240). Most of these were transcribed for the corpus, though some of the Bremer recordings were of too poor quality for transcription. There are also a number of gaps and uncertainties, indicated with double brackets in the transcripts. The transcripts were made with the software ELAN (The Language Archive 2024) and use the Ehrentraut-Versloot orthography. These files, which also include an English translation of the texts, can be downloaded from <<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15106067>> (Gregersen 2025b). The versions of the transcripts in the corpus only include the Wangerooge Frisian text. For further information on the recordings and transcripts I refer to the online repository.

5. Using the corpus

The first official release of the Corpus of Wangerooge Frisian was published on Zenodo on 7 April 2025, but earlier versions have already been used for a

number of investigations. I will briefly discuss two syntactic studies that made use of the corpus and then point to some possible future applications.

In Gregersen (2023a), the word order of complement clauses with *dat* ‘that’ was investigated. As in many other Germanic languages, complement clauses in Wangerooge Frisian may have the finite verb in second position (V2) or later in the clause (V-late). Although the latter option is more common, *dat*-clauses with V2, like (1), are also very frequently found:

- (1) *as yu iven iin is, da kricht yu órdër, dat yu sil bi de groev kumme*

As soon as she arrives home, she receives the instruction that she has to go to the count’ [eh-rings]

The investigation focussed on the Ehentraut material, i.e. the subcorpora [eh], [fa1], and [fa2]. All *dat*-clauses were extracted with the concordancer AntConc (Anthony 2022) and manually analysed for word order, syntactic position, and type of complement-taking predicate. Inspired by earlier investigations of other Germanic languages, it was argued that V2 could be used in *dat*-clauses with so-called constative potential, i.e. which can be interpreted as making a claim about the world. In other types of *dat*-clauses, e.g. factive and counterfactual complements such as (2), V-late was the only option:

- (2) *ik mend, dat du al längst dooed werst*

I thought that you were already long dead [eh-hans]

Scheffner (2024) investigates the various functions of the subordinator *wut* ‘if, whether’, also using the material in [eh], [fa1], and [fa2]. All *wut*-clauses were excerpted with AntConc and then classified according to their function. In addition to polar complement clauses like (3), Wangerooge Frisian *wut* may also introduce so-called in subordinate clauses, as in (4), and adjunct clauses, as in (5):

- (3) *nu freiget de kööniing him, wut hi uk noch fermílii hää*

Then the king asks him **if** he also has any relatives [eh-hans]

- (4) *man hírii állers sint laang al dooed wízziin. ‘wut yuu den nain moo swester af bróoriing hää?’*

... but her parents have been dead for a long time. ‘Does she not have any other siblings?’ [eh-aalew]

- (5) *yaa wult weg un wult naa hírii kantóor too, wut yaa daa breíver nich fiin kant*

They want to go to her office **to see if** they might be able to find the letters [eh-daagoo]

According to Scheffner, clauses like (4) are prototypical instances of insubordination, whereas examples like (5) may represent an intermediate stage between fully integrated subordinate clauses and insubordination. Scheffner also discusses parallel uses of *ob* in colloquial German, showing how the study of Wangerooge Frisian may also shed light on the grammar of other Germanic languages.

At the moment, the corpus is being used for the preparation of a descriptive grammar of Wangerooge Frisian. A working paper presenting a first overview of its syntax is available in Gregersen (2023b). The corpus has made it possible to quickly look up specific lexical items and see how they are used, e.g. pronouns and prepositions, and to check whether grammatical forms mentioned by Ehrentraut (1849) are also attested in the texts. The syntactic sketch mentions a number of phenomena which will be investigated with the corpus, such as the distribution of the indefinite pronouns *ään* and *woo* ‘someone’, the order of prenominal adjectives, and the structure of the clausal middle field (Gregersen 2023b: 10, 31, 51). Other topics which require further study include auxiliary selection in passive and perfect constructions, the use of (near-)synonymous adverbs like *iin/’niin/henîin* ‘inside, home’, and the distribution of the so-called strong and weak definite articles (Gregersen 2024b only looked at a small selection of texts).

As mentioned above, the corpus is openly available and may be used to develop other resources, such as a grammatically annotated version or a parallel corpus allowing for the comparison of phenomena across languages. Individual texts and transcripts may of course also be downloaded and used for teaching or research purposes. In case other Wangerooge Frisian sources surface in the future – or in case additional recordings from Bremer’s 1924–25 fieldtrips are transcribed – these may easily be added to the corpus.

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