

An evidential perfect in Wangerooge Frisian (Germanic, Northern Germany)

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‘Narrative perfect’ in Wangerooge Frisian?

- (1) Aínmool is dër 'n groev wizzin, dan
once be.PRS.3SG EXCL INDF count be.PTCP DEM.M
hä 'n groet slos haivt. dan hä
have.PRS.3SG INDF big castle have.PTCP DEM.M have.PRS.3SG
ain faun un ään fent haivt.
one.F girl and one.M boy have.PTCP

Literally: ‘Once upon a time there has been a count; he has had a big castle. He has had a daughter and a son.’ [eh-hans]

Outline

- 1 Language and sources
- 2 Tense in Wangerooge Frisian
- 3 Talking about the past
- 4 Parallels in other languages
- 5 Conclusions

Section 1

Language and sources

What is Wangerooge Frisian?

- East Frisian dialect (or language) on the Wadden Sea island Wangerooge
- Documentation from c. 1800 to 1930s
- Long history of contact with (Low) German
- Probably never more than 200 speakers; 7 remained in 1927 (Siebs 1931: 70); extinct by 1950



The Frisian languages (from Nielsen & Larsen 2009)

Documentation of Wangerooge Frisian

- Excellent documentation thanks to H. G. Ehrentraut (1798–1866) and his consultant Anna Metta Claßen (1774–1846)
- Corpus of c. 100,000 words collected 1837–1841
 - Genres include fairy tales, ethnographic texts, anecdotes and ghost stories, and proverbs
 - Some material appeared in *Friesisches Archiv* (Ehrentraut 1849, 1854), the rest published by Versloot (1996)
- Additional corpus of slightly later texts, c. 6,000 words (Winkler 1874, Littmann 1922, Siebs 1923)

A grammar of Wangerooge Frisian (2022–2024)

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Text	Reference	Text type(s)	Words	Main tense(s)
The thumbling	EhV 449.178–179	Anecdote	172	[PF +] PRS [+ PF]
Dau and his bride	EhV 449.180	Anecdote	76	PF + PRS
Crazy Triinnk	EhV 449.182	Anecdote	92	PF + PRS
Fairies	FA2.7–9	Anecdotes + ethnographic	430	PST + PRS + PF
Superstitions	FA2.13–20	Anecdotes + ethnographic	2,560	PST + PRS + PF
Children's games	FA2.4–7	Ethnographic	795	PST + PRS
Seal hunting	FA2.35	Ethnographic	300	PRS
Remarriage	FA2.51	Ethnographic	65	PST
Pastimes	FA2.53–54	Ethnographic	145	PST
How we hunt seals	Littmann 16–19	Ethnographic + real-life events	512	PRS + PST
Death of T. J. Tannen and H. J. Hanken	EhV 446.326–338	Real-life events	2,000	PST + PRS (+ PF)
The old village	Littmann 10–15	Real-life events	606	PST
Life of Christian Christians	Littmann 20–27	Real-life events	967	PST (+ PF)
Shooting seals	Siebs 240	Real-life events	458	PST (+ PRS)
Catching seals	Siebs 241	Real-life events	221	PST
The wine soup	Siebs 242	Real-life events	345	PST
The old village	Siebs 243	Real-life events	281	PST
Åskenbridel Saunsidel	FA2.80–81	Fairy tale	455	PRS
Müüsken and Metwurst	FA2.81–82	Fairy tale	275	[PF +] PRS
The three witches	EhV 449.9–12	Fairy tale	540	[PF +] PRS
King Hans and his children	EhV 449.37–101	Fairy tale	9,290	[PF +] PRS [+ PF]
King Daagoobertus	EhV 449.102–130	Fairy tale	4,680	[PF +] PRS
The deceived witch	EhV 449.183–185	Fairy tale	425	PRS
The clever farmgirl	EhV 449.210–214	Fairy tale	736	[PF +] PRS [+ PF]
The three brothers	EhV 449.221–228	Fairy tale	1,290	PRS (+ PF)
Parable of the Prodigal Son	Winkler 171–173	Bible story	963	[PF +] PST
Parable of the Prodigal Son	Siebs 247–248	Bible story	541	PST

Figure 1: Analyzed texts (from Gregersen 2024)

Section 2

Tense in Wangerooge Frisian

Overview of tense system

- Four-way tense system: inflectional **present** and **past**, analytic **perfect** (present anterior) and **pluperfect** (past anterior)
 - All of these can be used to talk about situations in the past
- Future time reference (prediction) with simple present or modal verbs

Example of a tense paradigm

	PRS	PST	PF	PLUPF
1SG	kriig	kreig	hüb kriigiin	haid kriigiin
2SG	kriichst	kreichst	hüst kriigiin	haidst kriigiin
3SG	kriicht	kreig	hää kriigiin	haid kriigiin
1PL	kriig(et)	kreigen	hüb(t) kriigiin	haiden kriigiin
2PL	kriig(et)	kreigen	hüb(t) kriigiin	haiden kriigiin
3PL	kriiget	kreigen	hübt kriigiin	haiden kriigiin

Table 1: Paradigm of *kriig* ‘get’

Simple present

- (2) lauk naa d' krog, wut hii **sjuth**
 look.IMP after DEF pot whether 3M boil.PRS.3SG
 'Check the pot to see if it is boiling' [eh-fr-dict]

Simple past

- (3) dait heer **stiin** mii too barg as iik dait
 DEF.N hair stand.PST.3SG 1SG.OBL to hill when 1SG DEM.N
bla'uket
 see.PST.1SG
 'My hair stood on end when I saw that' [eh-phrases]

Perfect (present anterior)

- (4) iik **hāb** miin iirdappel uut de kuul **kriigiin**
1SG have.PRS.1SG 1SG.POSS potato[PL] out DEF pit get.PTCP
'I have got (taken) my potatoes out of the pit' [eh-phrases]

Pluperfect (past anterior)

- (5) hii wail dait âbër nich witë, dat hii
 3SG.M will.PST.3SG DEM.N however not know.INF COMP 3SG.M
sliipiin haid.
 sleep.PTCP have.PST.3SG
 ‘But he would [PST] not admit [lit. ‘know’] that he had been
 sleeping [PLUPF]’ [si-shooting]

Section 3

Talking about the past

Tense use in narratives

- Stories from real life usually told in the simple past tense
 - Individual episodes may be narrated in the present tense

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- Stories from real life usually told in the simple past tense
 - Individual episodes may be narrated in the present tense
- Fictional stories (fairy tales, ghost stories) and anecdotes show two patterns:
 - Present tense used throughout entire story
 - Combination of perfect and present: perfect used to ‘frame’ the narrative and provide speaker commentary

Own past experiences: past tense

- (6) aimooel **weeren** wii mit twoo schüüpuu un **wailen**
 once be.PST.PL 1PL with two ships and will.PST.PL
 wäg too siiliichfangen. nuu **laigen** wii mit de
 away to seal.catch.GER now lie.PST.PL 1PL with DEF
 schüüpuu in 'e grooet balg; dåå **giingen** wii mit
 ships in DEF big tidal.creak then go.PST.PL 1PL with
 de jäl nåå 't grooet rif
 DEF dinghy after DEF.N big shoal
 'Once we were with two ships [PST] and wanted to go and
 catch seals [PST]. Now we were lying with the ships in the
 main tidal creek [PST]; then we went to the big shoal in the
 dinghy [PST].' [si-shooting]

Own past experiences: past tense

- (7) éntelk toolést **giing** half Wangeróog der 'n_dille, un
 finally at.last go.PST.3SG half W. there down and
 uk Hank un Thiárk yar wü'üfer. daa **kúunen** wii 't
 also H. and T. 3PL.POSS wives then can.PST.PL 1PL it
 wail sjoo, wii **fra'igeten**, weer Hank un Thiark wéeren,
 well see.INF 1PL ask.PST.PL where H. and T. be.PST.PL
kréigen áaber nain óntwooert.
 get.PST.PL however no answer
 'Then at last half of Wangerooge went down there [PST], also
 Hank and Thiark's wives. Then we could see it for ourselves
 [PST], we asked where Hank and Tjark were [PST], but got no
 answer [PST].' [eh-tannen]

‘Fairy-tale present’

- (8) der **wúnnet** a'inmool 'n gánsen ríiken éddelmon mit
 EXCL live.3SG once INDF very.M rich.M nobleman with
 siin wüüf un thríiu fa'uner. nuu **kumt** der
 3M.POSS wife and three girls now come.PRS.3SG EXCL
 'n gans aisk krónkheit in dait laun
 INDF very ugly disease in DEF.N country
 ‘Once upon a time a very rich nobleman is living with his wife
 and three daughters [PRS]. Now a terrible disease comes to
 the country [PRS] ...’ [eh-aschenbroedel]

Perfect/present in supernatural tale (I)

- (9) a'inmool **is** deer 'n buur **wíziin**, un dan
 once be.PRS.3SG EXCL INDF farmer be.PTCP and DEM.M
hää 'n kuu **haivt**, un djuu kuu **re'iket**
 have.PRS.3SG INDF COW have.PTCP and DEF.F COW give.PRS.PL
 yaa drínken, un djuu kuu **drínket** dait uk up.
 3PL drink.GER and DEF.F COW drink.PRS.3SG DEM.N also up
 'Once there has been a farmer [PF], and he has had a cow
 [PF], and they give [PRS] the cow something to drink and the
 cow drinks [PRS] that too.'

Perfect/present in supernatural tale (II)

- (10) nuu **mut** deer áaber wit lebéndiigs oon
 now must.PRS.3SG EXCL however something alive.PART in
 wíziin hab, dait **is** daa bii djuu kuu
 be.PTCP have.INF DEM.N be.PRS.3SG then by DEF.F cow
gróoiid. up lest **fangt** et an too snácken, won
 grow.PTCP at last begin.PRS.3SG 3N PREV to talk.GER when
 djuu móoget **mélket**.
 DEF.F maid milk.PRS.3SG

‘Now there must have been something alive in it [PRS], which then has grown inside the cow [PF]. At last it starts talking [PRS] when the maid is milking [PRS].’

Perfect/present in supernatural tale (III)

- (11) ... man wut 'er 't far 'n deert **wíziin hää**,
 but what R 3N for INDF creature be.PTCP have.PRS.3SG
 dait **weit** iik nich moo. 'n dü'ümelken
 DEM.N know.PRS.1SG 1SG not more INDF thumbling
hää 't **wíziin**.
 have.PRS.3SG 3N be.PTCP
 '... but what kind of creature that has been [PF], that I don't
 know anymore [PRS]. A thumbling is what it has been [PF].'
 [eh-thumbling]

Perfect/present in anecdote

- (12) Dēr **hää** 'n breidgummël un 'n breid **wizzin**,
 EXCL have.PRS.3SG INDF groom and INDF bride be.PTCP
 un diu breid diu **hää** bi de breidgummel
 and DEF.F bride DEM.F have.PRS.3SG by DEF groom
 kumme **sul**. daa **hä** yu weg to 'm
 come.INF have_to.PTCP then have.PRS.3SG 3F away to 3M.OBL
 bjooed **latt**, dat yu **wul** kumme, won yu
 inform.INF let.PTCP COMP 3F will.PRS come.INF when 3F
 hiri fiur **torickin hää**
 3F.POSS fire prepare.PTCP have.PRS.3SG
 'There has been a groom and a bride [PF], and the bride has
 been supposed to visit the groom [PF]. Then she has sent him
 the message [PF] that she is going to come [PRS] as soon as
 she has made the fire [PF].' [eh-dau]

Perfect and other evidential strategies

- (13) den **hää** hii in siin fiin blau klóoeder longs
 then have.PRS.3SG 3M in 3M.POSS fine blue clothes along
 yar píizel **líipiin**. dait **hää** saa thríiuu
 3PL.POSS living.room walk.PTCP that have.PRS.3SG so three
 jeer döör **duurd**. yaa **que'iden**, pastóor **sul**
 year through last.PTCP 3PL say.PST.PL vicar shall.PST.3SG
 him toolést fardríiviin hab.
 3M.OBL at.last exorcise.PTCP have.INF
 ‘Then he [a ghost] has walked around outside their living
 room in his fine blue clothes [PF]. That has gone on for about
 three years [PF]. People said [PST] that supposedly the vicar
 exorcised him in the end [PST with reportative *sil*].’
 [fa2-xvii-superst]

Präteritumschwund?

- General replacement of simple past by (original) perfect in some European languages (e.g. Lindstedt 2000, Fischer 2018) – perhaps also in Wangerooge Frisian?

Präteritumschwund?

- General replacement of simple past by (original) perfect in some European languages (e.g. Lindstedt 2000, Fischer 2018) – perhaps also in Wangerooge Frisian?
- Not likely: Wangerooge Frisian past and perfect were not interchangeable – autobiographical texts never in the perfect

Past in late autobiographical recordings

- (14) ain huus nâa de oor **giing** ferlâ'riin / de
 one house after DEF other go.PST.3SG lose.PTCP DEF
 Wangeróogers â'âber dâ **ha'idén** drok too dóoen /
 islanders however DEM.PL have.PST.PL busy to do.GER
 yâ **líipen** wut yâ man loopen **kúunen** / um too
 3PL run.PST.PL what 3PL only run.GER can.PST.PL in.order to
 rä'äden wut noch to rä'äden **weer**.
 save.GER what still to save.GER be.PST.3SG

[Recollection of the storm of 1854:] 'One house after the other was lost [PST]. But the inhabitants of Wangerooge had enough to do [PST]. They ran [PST] all they could [PST] in order to save whatever could still be saved [PST].'
 [rec-si-storm]

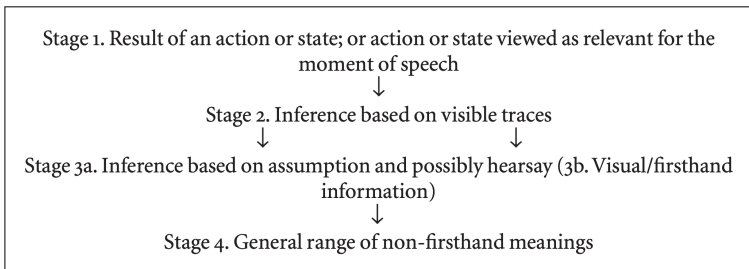
Section 4

Parallels in other languages

Evidential perfects around the world

- Perfects with evidential functions in many languages, especially in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (e.g. Aikhenvald 2004: 112–116; Plungian 2010; Wiemer 2010)
- However, in Western Europe perfects “hardly ever show signs of evidential extensions” (Wiemer 2010: 66)

From perfect to evidential



From perfect to evidential according to Aikhenvald (2004: 116)

An evidential perfect in Low German?

- Bernhardt (1903: 18) on Glückstadt Low German: “You report an event in the past tense when you were there yourself, the perfect indicates that you heard it from someone else” (my tr.)

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- Mussaeus (1829: 73) on Mecklenburg Low German: perfect “sometimes has the connotation that one knows it from hearsay [vom Hörensagen]” (my tr.)

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- Mussaeus (1829: 73) on Mecklenburg Low German: perfect “sometimes has the connotation that one knows it from hearsay [vom Hörensagen]” (my tr.)
- Briefly discussed by Fischer (2018), but apparently no studies of the phenomenon

An evidential perfect in Low German?

(16) Glückstadt Low German

hüt morgen **keem** eener an hâben op
 today morning come.PST.3SG one.M at harbour on
 schreckliche wis' to schâden
 terrible way to harm

‘This morning someone had a terrible accident on the
 harbour’ (the speaker was there) (Bernhardt 1903: 18)

An evidential perfect in Low German?

(17) Glückstadt Low German

hüt morgen **is** eener an hâben op schreckliche
today morning be.PRS.3SG one.M at harbour on terrible
wis' to schâden **kâmen**
way to harm come.PTCP

‘This morning someone had a terrible accident on the
harbour’ (the speaker was told) (Bernhardt 1903: 18)

Section 5

Conclusions

Take-home messages

- Both past and perfect used in Wangerooge Frisian narratives; past usual in accounts of the speaker's own past experiences, perfect/present in fairy tales, ghost stories, etc.
- Proposal: perfect used to indicate second-hand (“renarrative”) nature of information
- Possibly developed through an inferential evidential use, but this is very rare in the corpus

Two questions for future work

- Past vs. perfect use in Low German poorly understood – but might some dialects have had an evidentiality distinction?
- Evidential perfects thought to be rare in Western Europe, but what about other vernacular/non-standard varieties?

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An evidential perfect in Wangerooze Frisian

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Thank you for your attention!



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