

A “lost” language of Northern Germany

An introduction to Wangerooge Frisian

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A grammar of Wangerooge Frisian (2022–2024)

CARLSBERGFONDET

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Outline

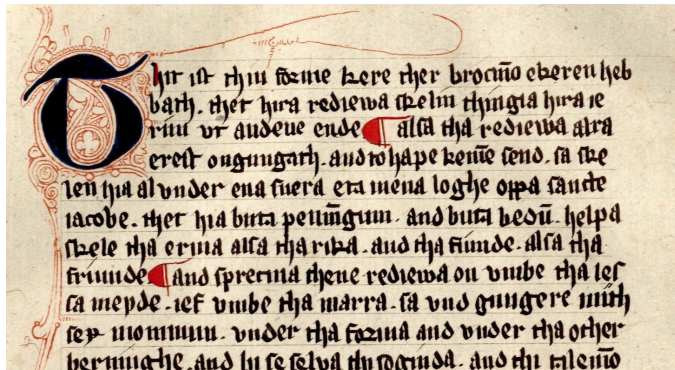
- 1 What is Wangerooge Frisian?
- 2 Three grammatical highlights
- 3 Conclusions and perspectives

Section 1

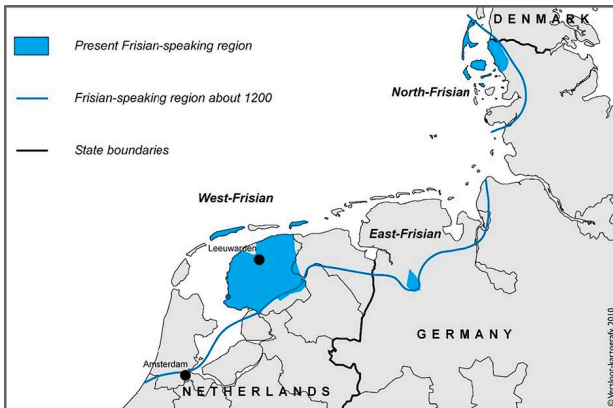
What is Wangerooge Frisian?

What is Frisian?

- Subbranch of the Germanic language family, most closely related to English (“Anglo-Frisian”)
- Old Frisian spoken along the North Sea coast in the Middle Ages – manuscripts from c. 1300–1500 CE
- After Middle Ages gradual language shift, resulting in much smaller Frisian-speaking area:
 - West Frisian (Fryslân in The Netherlands)
 - East (Sater) Frisian (Saterland in Niedersachsen)
 - North Frisian (Nordfriesland in Schleswig-Holstein)



Old Frisian manuscript (Brokmerbrief, c. 1300)



(Old) Frisian-speaking area

(© Versloot-kartografie 2010; reproduced from Winter 2022)

Frisian today

- West Frisian: c. 400,000 speakers, vulnerable
- Sater Frisian: c. 1,000 speakers, severely endangered
- North Frisian: c. 4,000 speakers (all dialects), severely endangered (cf. Winter 2022)



Modern Frisian languages (from Nielsen & Larsen 2009)

Wangerooge Frisian

- East Frisian language/dialect on the Wadden Sea island Wangerooge; never more than a few hundred speakers
 - First mentioned 1671
 - Earliest documentation (word lists) c. 1800
 - Main corpus collected c. 1840
- *Neujahrsflut* 1854/1855 → evacuation of speakers to the mainland followed by gradual language loss
- The last two speakers are said to have died in 1950, but these may have been semi-speakers (cf. Versloot 1996a: liv)



Wangerooge (© Martina Nolte, CC BY-SA 3.0 DE)



View of Alt-Wangerooge, c. 1840 (Zuiderzeemuseum Enkhuizen, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Winckelmann (1671) on the islanders

Though the inhabitants of this island do commonly use the Westphalian [Low German] language, yet amongst themselves they have another, which an outsider cannot understand at all ... Also, like other sea-dwelling people, the inhabitants have a rather coarse and wild manner, though they are said to have improved much recently.

[Die Einwohner dieses Eylandes gebrauchen sich zwar ins gemein der Westphälischen Sprach / jedoch haben sie unter sich noch eine besondere / die ein fremder / gar nicht verstehen kan [...] Auch sind die Einwohner / wie fast andere Wasserleut / etwas roh- und wilder Art / sollen sich jedoch / innerhalb kurzer Zeit / sehr gebessert haben]

Winckelmann (1671: 11)

Documentation of Wangerooge Frisian

- Good documentation, mainly thanks to Heinrich Georg Ehrentraut (1798–1866) and his primary consultant Anna Metta Claßen (1774–1846)
- Also some shorter texts (e.g. Littmann 1922, Siebs 1923), *Wenkersätze* (Bosse 2021: 510–513), and a few sound recordings
- Total corpus of more than 100,000 words

Table 1: Main sources of Wangerooge Frisian

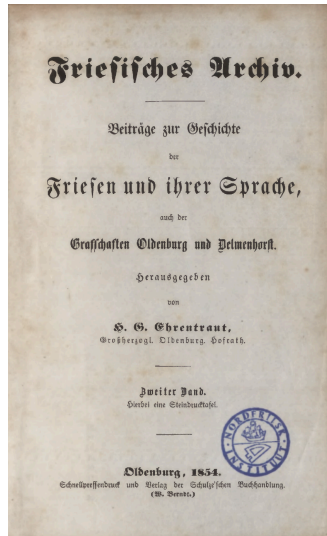
Source	Main type of material	Date	Words
Ehrentraut MS.	Fairy tales, sentences, etc.	c. 1840	c. 66,000
FA1 (Ehrentraut 1849)	Sentences	c. 1840	c. 12,500
FA2 (Ehrentraut 1854)	Autob., fairy tales	c. 1840	c. 18,000
Firmenich (1854)	Translations, anecdotes	c. 1850	c. 1,700
Winkler (1874)	Translation	1871	c. 950
<i>Wenkersätze</i>	Sentences	c. 1884	c. 450
Littmann (1922)	Autob.	1897	c. 2,000
Siebs (1923)	Autob., sentences	c. 1899	c. 3,000
In total			c. 104,600



H. G. Ehrentraut (1798–1866)

H. G. Ehrentraut (1798–1866)

- Lawyer and exceptionally talented “hobby linguist”
- Fieldwork on Wangerooge 1837–1841
- Developed a transcription system and collected texts, paradigms, and material for a dictionary
- Some of the material appeared in *Friesisches Archiv* (1849, 1854), the rest edited and published by Versloot (1996c)



Friesisches Archiv, vol. 2 (Ehrentraut 1854)

8. Volksglauben.

Heren.

bî ólen tíden, won de wúfer stínen tó fjénmen, un haíden dait fjénnen in de fjen farfínd *) — dait kan gans licht farfínd wêr mit tó heit wátter óder tó kôl — den kreígen yâ nain búter. óder mónnich môl kreígen yâ 'n lets ful, dait wêr júst as mélkstíppel, dait híten ya fon héxenbúter. won der den 'n wúfminsk úrtó kaum dait wêr 'n hex. fâ wêr der aínmól 'n wúf bî 't fjénnen, yû kan nain búter kríg, dà kumt 'er 'n ôl wúf 'erdín un fídert híri an, wut yû nain wôn hâ? dà bit **)

Example of a text (Ehrentraut 1854: 13)

Ehrentraut (1849) on the islanders

The people of Wangerooge have often been ridiculed because of their language, and generally shy away from speaking it when an outsider is present. For this reason it is virtually unknown and despised by the neighbours on the mainland.

[Die Wangeroger sind oft wegen ihrer Sprache geneckt worden, und scheuen sich deshalb in der Regel, in derselben zu reden, wenn ein Fremder gegenwärtig ist. Sie ist dadurch den Bewohnern des nahe liegenden Landes fast ganz unbekannt geblieben und von ihnen verachtet.]

Ehrentraut (1849: 13–14)

Some perceptions collected by Ehrentraut

One pious man was unable to understand how these pagans ... could possibly have a language which was of interest to any sensible person. ... Another, who wanted to smear the name of the islanders, thought that it was a thieves' language which the islanders had made up in order not to be understood.

[Ein frommer Mann konnte es nicht begreifen, wie es möglich wäre, daß dieses Heidenvolk [...] eine Sprache hätte, die einen vernünftigen Menschen interessiren könnte. [...] Ein anderer, welcher die Insulaner gern schwarz machen möchte, meinte, es wäre eine Diebessprache, welche die Insulaner erfunden hätten, um nicht verstanden zu werden.]

Versloot (1996c: 446.36)

Example of Wangerooge Frisian

- (1) yaa schriiv-et de Wangeróog-er too_el up, deer
 they write-PL DEF W.-DER language up there
 kum-t doch siinléthiig nicks fon herdúut ...
 come-3SG surely ever nothing of out
 ‘They are writing down the Wangerooge language, but surely
 nothing will ever come of that...’

Example of Wangerooge Frisian, continued

- (2) dait kan-t yaa doch nich farsta'un, af yaa mútt-ert
 that can-PL they surely not understand.INF1 or they must-PL
 álltiid 'n Wangeróog-er bii yam hab, deer yam dait
 always INDF W.-DER by them have.INF1 REL them that
 farthiúutsk-et
 Germanize-3SG
 '... surely people cannot understand that, unless they always
 have a person from Wangerooge with them who can translate
 it into German for them' (Versloot 1996c: 446.34)

Sociolinguistic situation

- Relative isolation and linguistic endogamy ensured the survival of Wangerooge Frisian into the modern period
- Wangerooge Frisian and its speakers clearly recognized as distinct, both by outsiders and by the speakers themselves
- Low prestige, no official functions, and no written tradition
- After 1854/1855 speakers quickly assimilated to (Low) German majority

Decline of Wangerooge Frisian

Table 2: Number of Wangerooge Frisian speakers

Year	Speakers (approx.)	Source
1738	171	Ehrentraut 1849
1790	174	Crome 1793
1890	32	Kollmann 1891
c. 1900	30	Siebs 1923
1927	7	Siebs 1931

Stand der Forschung

- Word lists and paradigms in Ehrentraut (1849)
- A few works on historical phonology in the early 20th century (e.g. Siebs 1901, Löfstedt 1932)
- Some more recent work on phonology and morphology
 - e.g. Versloot (1996b, 2002), Hoekstra (1998, 2008), Stiles (2008), and Bosse (2012)
- My plan: synchronic grammatical description
 - Special attention to syntax and information structure
 - Intended audience: general linguists as well as students and scholars of Frisian

Section 2

Three grammatical highlights

Brief typological overview

- Analytic language with few inflectional categories (but many inflectional classes)
- Nouns inflect for number (SG/PL)
- Finite verbs inflect for person (1/2/3), number (SG/PL), mood (IND/IMP), and tense (PST/NONPST)
- Nonfinite verb forms: INF1, INF2 (“gerund”), PTCP
- Adjectives inflect for gender/definiteness (M.SG.INDF vs. the rest) and degree (POS/CMPR/SUPR)
- V2 in main clauses, V-late/V2 in subclauses (Gregersen 2023b)
- Significant Low German influence on syntax and vocabulary

Some (more or less) unusual features

- Phonological “r-insertion” /TəT/ → /TərT/ (Hoekstra 1998)
 - e.g. *mut-* ‘must’ + *-et* ‘PL’ → *múttert* ‘must.PL’
- Geminated consonants (Versloot 1996b) – unusual for the area
- No productive diminutive formation (but many lexicalized forms; cf. Versloot 2002)
- Inflection of premodifying adverbs
- Two definite articles (“strong” vs. “weak”)
- “Free” polar complement clauses

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Inflected adverbs

- Attributive adjectives and premodifying adverbs are usually uninflected:

(3) 'n gans äärm faun
 INDF very poor girl(F)
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- But adjectival suffix *-en* in M.SG.INDF contexts – this is copied to premodifying adverbs:

(4) den wart hii 'n gáns-**en** ríik-**en** kö'öniing
 then become.3SG he INDF very-M.INDF rich-M.INDF king(M)
 '... then he becomes a very rich king'

Inflected adverbs



“Strong” vs. “weak” definite articles

- Two definite articles, one “strong” and one “weak”

(5) nu gungt hi na **de** prinsessin to
 now go.3SG he to DEF.F.WK princess(F) to
 ‘Now he goes to the princess’

(6) deer sit **djuu** prinséssin oon
 there sit.3SG DEF.F.STR princess(F) in
 ‘In there the princess is sitting’

“Strong” vs. “weak” definite articles

Table 3: Wangerooge Frisian definite articles

	“Weak”	“Strong”
M.SG	de	dan
F.SG	de	djuu
N.SG	't	dait
PL	de	daa

“Split” definiteness

- “Split” definiteness in other languages tied to shared knowledge (common ground) of interlocutors
 - Identification due to linguistic co-text → strong
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“Split” definiteness

- “Split” definiteness in other languages tied to shared knowledge (common ground) of interlocutors
 - Identification due to linguistic co-text → strong
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- Systems with two definite articles have been described for a number of languages (cf. Schwarz 2013), including:
 - Various varieties of German (e.g. Heinrichs 1954, Hartmann 1982, Haberland 1985, Harweg 1989, Schwarz 2009)
 - Fering (North Frisian; Ebert 1971)
 - Lakhota (Siouan; Schwarz 2013: 546–548)
 - Hausa (Chadic < Afroasiatic; Jaggar 2001: 316–323)
 - Bohairic Coptic (Egyptian < Afroasiatic; Müller 2011: 19–23)

Generic and “global” contexts: typically weak

- (7) in 't **djúnkens** muuzt **de** **kat** am
 in DEF.N.WK darkness(N) catch_mice.3SG DEF.M.WK cat(M) PTCL
 best.
 best
 ‘The cat catches mice best in the dark’ (proverb)
- (8) **de** **sun** gungt únner
 DEF.F.WK sun(F) go.3SG under
 ‘The sun is setting’

Anaphoric context: typically strong

- (9) nu kumt 'er 'n løøv un fint daa twoo
 now comes EXPL INDF lion(F) and find.3SG DEF.PL.STR two
 béener deer, nuu nimt **djuu** **løøv** ain fon
 children there now take.3SG DEF.F.STR lion(F) one of
 daa béener thwäärs in 'er tuut
 DEF.PL.STR children sideward in DEF.M.WK mouth(M)
 'Then a lion comes and finds the two children; then the lion
 takes one of the children in its mouth'

Variation in weak and strong articles

- (10) daa sjucht hii **dan** **grooet riiz** al fon
 then see.3SG he DEF.M.STR big ogre(M) already from
 fiirens. daa ropt **de** **grooet riiz:** wut
 far_away then shout.3SG DEF.M.WK big ogre(M) what
 wult duu kleiner Erdwurm?
 want.2SG you small earthworm
 ‘Then he sees the big ogre from a distance; then the big ogre
 shouts: “What do you want, you puny earthworm?”’

Free *wut* clauses

- Polar complements formed with *wut* ‘if, whether’, as in (11)–(12):

(11) iik wul him fraig, **wut** hii mit gung wul
 I want.1SG him ask.INF1 if he with go.INF1 want.3SG
 ‘I’ll ask him if he wants to come along’

Free *wut* clauses

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(12) hii wet nich, **wut** hii up ’t haud gungt, af up
he know.3SG not if he on DEF.N.WK head(N) go.3SG or on
’e foot.
DEF.PL.WK foot[PL]
‘He doesn’t know if he’s walking on his head or on his feet’

Free *wut* clauses

- However, *wut* clauses may appear without a complement-taking predicate
- The function is more like a purpose than a complement clause

(13) doot dait fínster ínсен ípiin, **wut** djuu
 do.IMP.PL DEF.N.STR window(N) once open if DEF.F.STR
 duuv hiir wail herdíin kumt
 dove(F) here really inside come.3SG
 ‘Please open the window [to find out] if the dove is going to
 come inside’

Free *wut* clauses

- (14) yaa wult weg un wult naa hírii kantóor too, **wut**
 they want.PL away and want.PL to her office to if
 yaa daa breíver nich fiin kant
 they DEF.PL.STR letter.PL not find.INF1 can.PL
 ‘They want to go to her office [to see] if they might be able to
 find the letters’

Free *wut* clauses

- (14) yaa wult weg un wult naa hírii kantóor too, **wut**
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they DEF.PL.STR letter.PL not find.INF1 can.PL
‘They want to go to her office [to see] if they might be able to
find the letters’

- Question: Are you aware of similar phenomena in other languages? References welcome!

Section 3

Conclusions and perspectives

Take-home messages

- Wangerooe Frisian is an exciting language to work on!
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 - Under-investigated and little known outside of Frisian studies
- 19th-century documentation of exceptionally good quality
 - Also of interest for the history of linguistics
- Typologically similar to neighbouring Germanic languages
 - ... but also less common phenomena in need of further research

Plans for the future

- Continue work on grammatical description
- Transcription of sound recordings from the 1920s (to the extent possible)
- Online publication of the entire Wangeroope Frisian corpus

An invitation

- As far as I know, no one else is working on Wangerooge Frisian at the moment – but anyone interested is welcome!
- Corpus can be made available upon request
- If you want to know more, a preliminary grammar sketch is available at DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.7775494](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7775494)

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 - Feedback on any aspect of this will result in eternal gratitude!

A syntactic sketch of Wangerooge Frisian

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Version 1.0, 16 March 2023

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7775494

Thank you for your attention!



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Comments and questions are always welcome:
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