THE NORTH FRISIANS
IN THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

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The North Frisians comprise a special cultural subgroup in the northwestern corner of Germany. Although they number almost 10,000 people, there exists neither a federal law nor a state law in Germany concerning their rights. They inhabit approximately 400-square miles of the North Sea coast extending in a 33-mile-long ellipse less than 10 miles wide at its widest point, from the Danish border to north of the city of Husum. Frisians also live on the islands of Föhr, Amrum, Sylt, Helgoland and the Halligen. Their language is mutually unintelligible not only with the Frisian spoken by the 1000 or so East Frisians in the Saterland, about 18 miles west of Oldenburg, but also with the dialect of some 300,000 West Frisian speakers in the northern part of the Netherlands.

To complicate matters, North Frisian is fractured by strong dialectal differences. It has two chief divisions. The mainland group (which includes the Halligen) has seven subdialects (some of which can be even further subdivided) and the island group comprises three subdialects which differ even more markedly from one another.\(^1\) For example, the difference between the island dialect of Sylt as opposed to that of the islands Föhr and Amrum is roughly the same as that between the languages of Scandinavia, while these dialects, in turn, are often mutually unintelligible with those of the mainland. The North Frisians' linguistic similarities to and differences from the High and Low German speakers around
them evidence a puzzling dichotomy of adaptiveness and conservatism which can perhaps best be understood from a historical perspective.

There is general agreement that the North Frisians originally came from the south, perhaps near or just east of the present Dutch-German border, and it is probable that they moved into their present location at two different times. The first wave arrived at the islands of Föhr, Amrum, and Sylt around the eighth century (but possibly as early as the sixth), and the second wave settled the Halligen and the nearby coastal regions around the latter half of the eleventh century.2

This dual migration would account for the deep dialectal split found in North Frisian. It also offers an explanation for the strange fact that the word for "Frisian" is used by the islanders to refer to the mainlanders and by the mainlanders to describe themselves, but speakers of island dialects have no common word for themselves, using instead the name of their own island in this way as well as for their language.

Original contacts by the incoming North Frisians with the indigenous population, with Scandinavians of the ninth and tenth centuries, and with neighboring Danes in the late Middle Ages probably resulted in the assimilation of these latter groups. The last of these, however, did add some features to the mainland dialects, which then spread to the Halligen, Föhr and Amrum, but very rarely to Sylt and to Helgoland. From the fourteenth century, Low German, aided by the influence of the Hanseatic League on the Baltic and North Sea regions, heavily influenced the Frisian language because of its function as a trade language, and also as the accepted vehicle of the church, of the government, and as a medium of culture. During the seventeenth century Dutch contributed commercial terms to the islands, but the new threat to Frisian hegemony was High German, which became the language of government and culture by the seventeenth century and of the church by the beginning of the eighteenth. Up until the twentieth century, however, Low German continued as the lingua franca in the region, and the cities of the area had long been Low German speaking.3 Because Denmark ruled Amrum and the western part of Föhr between 1400 and 1864, Danish continued to influence the dialect of these islands and probably retarded encroachment by Low German.

The twentieth century has brought a tremendous wave of High German influence. Resettlement of Germans from vastly different dialect regions due to the Second World War, the bombardment by High German in the mass media, and the invasion of the islands by tourists have thrown both Frisian and Low German on the defensive. From its one-time area of greatest expansion, North Frisian has since lost the small region in the southwest corner of Denmark, the islands of Pellworm and Nordstrand, and the peninsula of Eiderstedt.4

As a result, the North Frisians occupy a position in Europe which makes them unique among all of that continent's minorities. First of all, they are as a group at least trilingual. In fact, until the plebiscite of 1920 in Schleswig-Holstein, a large percentage of North Frisians was quadrilingual, adding Danish as well. Secondly, and of importance from a sociolinguistic point of view, all of the Frisians' three vehicles of communication belong to the same language family. This fact makes their having withstood assimilation all the more remarkable. Thirdly, the North Frisian practice of using a different language, Low German, to communicate with other North Frisians from different regions is a rare
linguistic phenomenon in Europe, especially in such a limited geographic area.

The current linguistic situation in North Frisia is not a simple one. Frisian is usually spoken in the home and among relatives, and, depending on the region, with people from the same dialect area. Low German is employed with speakers of Low German and often with North Frisians from different dialect regions. High German is the language used in the schools, churches and governmental offices as well as when speaking to the numerous tourists and High German speakers who have moved to the area.\(^9\)

Statistics from both Föhr and Amrum indicate that Low German reached its peak of influence in the 1920's. In most of the North Frisian region both Frisian and Low German have since lost ground to High German, although it appears that Low German is now retreating at a much faster rate than is Frisian. Especially on the islands of Amrum, Sylt and Helgoland, direct transition from Frisian to High German is more prevalent than to Low German.\(^6\)

There is no doubt that the last 100 years have seen a sharp reduction in the total number of North Frisian speakers. In 1855 they numbered over 27,000; less than three quarters of a century later there were just over 15,000, a drop of almost 45 percent; and the following fifty years saw a further decline of one third their number.\(^7\) World War II brought a staggering influx of High German speakers. In the area around Risum-Lindholm, for example, the population grew between 1939 and 1946 by 56 percent due to migration from the cities and from Eastern Europe.\(^8\) Those areas where Frisian is experiencing the greatest difficulty are on the mainland between Husum and Bredsted and on the Halligen. Less critical but still serious is the situation on the islands of Sylt, Helgoland and the eastern part of Föhr.\(^9\)

Illustrative of the difficulties faced is the situation on Föhr. As of 1970 there were 7,750 full-time inhabitants. All of these people are able to speak High German, but only slightly more than 2,000 can speak Frisian. Of this number about three quarters are concentrated in one part, the western half of the island. In 1965, a total of 678,000 overnight guests was recorded and the number has risen sharply, especially in the last decade.\(^10\) The wave of tourists also engulfs Amrum, where Frisian is spoken by almost one quarter of the local population (450 out of 2000 inhabitants).\(^11\)

Even more impressive has been the ability of the Helgolanders to maintain their Frisian. On an island less than one square kilometer in area, some 3200 inhabitants (as of 1967) were inundated between 1966 and 1967 by a flood of tourists, piling up 363,000 overnight stays in addition to the waves of daily excursion guests who came from Büsum, Cuxhaven and Hamburg. In 1972/73 the overnight guests numbered 347,000 and the day guests totaled around 796,000. Furthermore, the entire population was evacuated twice to the German mainland, once in 1914 for several years and again in 1945 for around seven.\(^12\)

It can be said that a variety of factors have contributed to the decline of North Frisian over the centuries. One is the lack of political power which is traceable back to the ravages of the Franks in the eighth century. From the twelfth to the twentieth centuries the area inhabited by North Frisians has been a bone of contention between Germany and Denmark.

Another reason is the (not unrelated) lack of economic power, which was difficult to establish on the harsh terrain which the North Frisians have called home for so long.
Periodically in history, the ocean has swept over farms and villages, forcing the people to begin again. In some instances (e.g., 1362, 1634) some of their land permanently disappeared, as did numerous inhabitants. It is estimated that seven to eight thousand people drowned in a single night during the flood of 1634.

A third factor (related also to the above) is the limited geographic space which the North Frisians settled. Unable to expand, many Frisians were forced to become more mobile. Either they took to the sea for their livelihood, which exposed them to other languages and customs, or they emigrated, primarily to the United States, but also to industrial centers in Germany. The emigration to America evidently began as early as the first part of the seventeenth century. A Frisian association has been in existence in New York for almost a century and currently numbers about 690 members, while a newsletter in English, The Frisian Roundtable, edited by Roy Ketelsen in the Bronx, is sent around the United States. The second largest North Frisian enclave in this country is apparently in Petaluma, California, located about 40 miles north of San Francisco.

A fourth reason for the present plight of North Frisian has been the lack of a widespread written standard. Although a literature consisting chiefly of lighter material and translations is known from the seventeenth century, it was not until the nineteenth century that works of more literary merit appeared. The twentieth century has brought forth an even greater qualitative and quantitative increase, but until recently, the situation was not unlike that which still prevails for dialect literature in Germany and Austria. There the reading of a dialect text proceeds so slowly for most readers that, although almost all the words are eventually understood, the enjoyment of the text as literature is virtually destroyed.

A fifth factor is the structural closeness of the language to those which are threatening it, for Frisian speakers can very easily learn the encroaching Low and High German. Since these latter speakers have not traditionally learned Frisian, intermarriage usually means that the language of the family will not be Frisian.

Sixthly, North Frisian speakers have traditionally been illiterate in their native language, simply because there has traditionally been so little to read. Not just literature, but all the information conveyed by newspapers, books and magazines must employ a foreign language. This situation has led to certain areas such as world affairs and cultural innovations where High German influence has had no competition from Frisian. Consequently, the number of borrowings, not only lexical, but also syntactic, increases enormously, bringing the two languages very close together for certain topics. This aspect of Frisian multilingualism still remains to be investigated further, but quite applicable is the converse of the anecdote about the Dutch and German farmers on each side of their common border. They are able to converse about matters of local interest in the same Low German dialect, but as soon as the topic shifts to world affairs, the amount of hand movement rises, as does the amount of head scratching, there is a two-sided groping for words, and one farmer begins to speak Dutch and the other drifts into German. With Frisian and German speakers, the same conversation would lead rather to a sharp reduction in communicative difficulties; both would shift to High German.

Related to the lack of literacy in Frisian is the plight of Frisian studies in the schools. The low point at which no Frisian was taught
at all was reached during World War II. Even the structure of the modern German school system has placed Frisian at a disadvantage. Village schools have been replaced by regional schools in the cities, thereby diluting the percentage of Frisian speakers and making it more difficult to add Frisian studies.

Since the religion of the Frisians is not usually different from that of their neighbors, it is language which is the chief element of the culture which the Frisians are so anxious to preserve. It does not seem that the majority of Frisians are advocating political hegemony for themselves. Not only were the Frisians in the north never politically unified, but many were under Danish rule for such a long time that they have felt themselves drawn more closely to the Germans than to the Danes. Another reason for this point of view was probably socio-economic, since the Danes most Frisians had contact with were the poor laborers from Jutland. This less than friendly relationship to the Danes is preserved in one of the Frisian folktales, which tells how Frisian women used porridge pots to defeat an attacking band of Danes.

The complacency of the German government toward the Frisians stems in part from a petition circulated in 1926 and referred to as the Bohmstedter Richtlinien, the guidelines of Bohmstedt. At that time over 13,000 North Frisians signed, with most indicating that they did not wish to be regarded as a national minority. Even the North Frisian Union (Nordfriesischer Verein für Heimatkunde und Heimatliebe), currently numbering 5,000 members, wishes to be regarded as a cultural body and not as a political one. On the other hand, the Union for Frisian Nationalism (Foriining for nationale Friske), founded in 1923 (the current name dating from 1948) and numbering about 800, does have as one of its goals the independence of the North Frisian people. A purely cultural organization is the North Frisian Institute (Nordfriisk Institut), founded in 1949 and having a membership of 620. It serves as a publishing house for Frisian material and encourages scholarly and pedagogical work on Frisian.

In recent years the government of Schleswig-Holstein has lent some financial support to several programs, including the North Frisian Union and the North Frisian Institute, as well as a Frisian dictionary project. In addition, it has set up a chair in Frisian Philology at the University of Kiel and it is hoped that this will increase the number of teachers able to introduce a course in Frisian in local grade schools and high schools. At the present time the language is taught in four elementary schools on Sylt, one elementary school and in high school in the town of Rism on the mainland, in one elementary school in the western part of Föhr, as well as in high school in Wyk on Föhr and in a high school on Sylt.

There are several other factors at work which are helping to preserve the Frisian way of life. One of them lies in the occupation of a great number of speakers, namely farming. It is an occupation which restricts contact with non Frisians and reduces outside influence. It is also possible that the economic aid given the region by the state of Schleswig-Holstein may be of some benefit culturally. In a society where large numbers of the population traditionally leave in order to find work, an increased number of jobs would tend to keep more Frisians together.

Another aid to the preservation of Frisian has been the establishment of a written standard, although there are details which still need to be worked out. There can be no doubt that North Frisian has become a literary
vehicle, and several publications have sprung up to fill a long-standing need: Nordfriesland, published quarterly in Bredstedt by the North Frisian Institute and founded in 1965, is broadly cultural in orientation, Uûsen äine wàl ("Our Own Way"), published less than twenty kilometers away in Risum, is more political in nature, and the Fering-Oømøn verifies Breipot, with its home in Wyk on Föhr, is a literary journal. The potpourri of articles about North Frisian flora, fauna, geography, culture and language found in the 20-year-old annual, Zwischen Eider und Wiedau, Heimatkalender für Nordfriesland has been made even more useful by the publication of an index volume for the years 1958-1977.25

Finally, the more rapid disappearance of Low German could mean that this threat to North Frisian will be reduced and that future Frisian speakers will be bilingual. This already seems to be the case on the western and southern portions of Föhr, where the number of Frisian speakers has risen in recent decades. Inferior social status does not seem currently to be a problem for North Frisians. The butt of the wave of recent German ethnic jokes are the inhabitants of Ostfriesland, the vast majority of whom speak no Frisian at all. Before the present century Frisians were generally regarded as being lower on the social scale, although this does not seem to have been the case on the islands.26 Nowadays there is no inferiority attached to being Frisian; in fact, increasing numbers of native German speakers seem willing to build Frisian-style houses in the area and to adopt Frisian names.

Although the future of North Frisian language and culture has been described as bleak by a number of scholars over the decades, there is now hope that the decline in the absolute number of Frisian speakers can be stopped. The chance of success is nowhere greater than in the Bükingharder area on the mainland (around Niebüll, Dagebüll and Risum) and on the western half of the island of Föhr, where the existence of entire Frisian-speaking communities can provide a natural environment for the normal functioning of a truly Frisian society.27
NOTES


6 Sjölin, p. 44.


9 Sjölin, p. 44.


13 Judging by their names, many of the early settlers of New York were Frisians, although their nationality would be listed as Dutch, German, or Danish. It is believed that at one time there were as many or more Frisian speakers from the island of Föhr living in New York City than there were remaining on the home island itself. Be that as it may, a more recent, very rough estimate in Arhammar, "Die Sprachen der Insel Föhr," p. 31, puts the total number of Frisian speakers from Föhr and Amrum now living elsewhere at ca. 1500 or 40 percent.

14 The oldest texts employing North Frisian are translations of Luther's catechism and are probably not older than ca. 1600.
Two dialects are represented, that of Nordstrand, which is no longer spoken, and that of the island of Föhr. Dietrich Hofmann, "Die Entwicklung des Nordfriesischen," Friesisch heute, p. 24.

15 The commonly held belief that Frisian is historically most closely related to English and that there existed at one time an Anglo-Frisian language has now been abandoned, and the two languages are regarded along with an older stage of Low German (Old Saxon) as having formed a subgroup among the West Germanic languages, Krogmann, "Friesische Sprache," col. 1917.


17 Petersen, p. 75.


23 "Nordfriesische Sprachpflege," p. 4.


26 Walker, p. 57.

27 Note the difference between Rodenäs, a town just below the Danish border, and non-urban Föhr. In the former, 37 percent of the people born before 1915 had Frisian as their native language. For children born after 1945, the figure falls to 6.3 percent. On non-urban Föhr, 74.5 percent of all households spoke Frisian in 1909 and in 1969 this figure was still 54 percent. Walker, p. 54.