

The Position of Frisian in the Germanic Language Area

Frisian and the Germanic languages

The Germanic branch of the Indo-European languages has a large number of speakers, approximately 450 million native speakers, partly due to the colonization of many parts of the world. However, the number of different languages within the Germanic group is rather limited. Depending on the definition of what counts as a language there are about 12 different languages. Traditionally, they are divided into three subgroups: East Germanic (Gothic, which is no longer a living language), North Germanic (Icelandic, Faeroese, Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish), and West Germanic (English, German, Dutch, Afrikaans, Yiddish, and Frisian). Some of these languages are so similar that they are only considered independent languages because of their position as standardized languages spoken within the limits of a state. This goes for the languages of the Scandinavian countries, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian, which are mutually intelligible. Other languages consist of dialects which are in fact so different that they are no longer mutually intelligible but are still considered one language because of standardization. Northern and southern German dialects are an example of this situation.

It is commonly assumed that the Germanic languages originate from the southern Scandinavian and the northern German region. After the migration of the Goths to the Balkans towards the end of the pre-Christian era, North-West Germanic remained uniform till the 5th century AD, after which a split between North and West Germanic occurred owing to dialectal variation and the departure of the Anglo-Saxons from the Continent and the colonization of Jutland.

During the Viking Age, speakers of North Germanic settled in a large geographic area, which eventually led to the five modern languages (see above). Of these languages, Icelandic (and to a lesser degree Faeroese), which is based on the language of southwestern Norway where the settlers came from, can be considered the most conservative language (Sandøy, 1994). Of the three mainland Scandinavian languages, Danish has moved farthest away from the common Scandinavian roots due to influences from the south.

The parentage of the West Germanic languages is less clear. Different tribal groups representing different dialect groups spread across the area, which eventually resulted in the modern language situation. Historically Frisian and English both belong to the Ingwaeonic branch of the West Germanic language group. Originally the Frisian speech community extended from the present Danish-German border along the coast to the French-Belgian border in the south. However, expansion from Saxons and Franconians from the east and the south throughout the medieval period resulted in a loss of large Frisian areas and a division into three mutually intelligible varieties: West Frisian (spoken in the northern Dutch province of Friesland by more than 350,000 people), East Frisian or Saterlandic (spoken by a thousand speakers in three villages west of Bremen) and North Frisian (spoken by less than ten thousand people on the islands on the north-western coast of Germany).

The English language came into being as a result of immigrations of tribal Anglo-Saxon groups from the North Sea coast during the fifth and sixth centuries. Whereas other insular Germanic varieties are in general rather conservative, the English insularity lacked this conservatism. English is considered most closely related to Frisian on every linguistic level due to their common ancestorship and to continued language contact over the North Sea.

The German language is spoken in many European countries in a large number of dialects and varieties, which can be divided into Low German and High German. Yiddish, too, can be regarded as a German variety. Dutch is mainly based on the western varieties of the low Franconian area but low Saxon and Frisian elements are also found in this standard language. Scholars disagree about the precise position of Dutch and Low German in the language tree. They can be traced back to a common root often referred to as the Ingwaeonic language group, but are often grouped together with High German as a separate West Germanic group. This grouping with High German

might be the best representation of the modern language situation given that the individual dialects spoken in the area in fact form a dialect continuum. Afrikaans, finally, is a contemporary West Germanic language, developed from seventeenth century Dutch as a result of colonization, but with influences from African languages.

This short outline of the relationships among the Germanic languages shows that English is the language which is genetically closest to Frisian, and still today English is considered to be most similar to Frisian. For example The Columbia Encyclopedia (2001) says: "Of all foreign languages, [Frisian] is most like English". Pei (1966, p. 34) summarizes the situation as follows: "Frisian, a variant of Dutch spoken along the Dutch and German North Sea coast, is the foreign speech that comes closest to modern English, as shown by the rhyme: 'Good butter and good cheese is good English and good Fries'". This rhyme refers to the fact that the words for butter and cheese are almost the same in the two languages. However, in the course of history, contact with other Germanic languages has caused Frisian to converge to these languages. The Frisians have a long history of trade and in early medieval times they were one of the leading trading nations in Europe due to their strategic geographic position close to major trade routes along the rivers and the North Sea. Also, the Vikings and the English were frequent visitors of the Frisian language area. This intensive contact with both English and the North Germanic languages, especially Danish, resulted in linguistic exchanges (see Feitsma, 1963; Miedema, 1966; Wadstein, 1933). Later in history, the Frisian language was especially influenced by the Dutch language (which itself contains many Frisian elements). For a long period, Frisian was stigmatized as a peasant language and due to the weak social position of the Frisian language in the Dutch community it was often suppressed, resulting in a strong Dutch impact on the Frisian language. Nowadays, Dutch as the language of the administration still has a large influence on the media and there has been substantial immigration of Dutch speaking people to Friesland. However, the provincial government has decided to promote Frisian at all levels in the society.

When investigating the position of the Frisian language within the Germanic language group, there are clearly two forces which should be taken into account. On the one hand, Frisian and English are genetically closely related and share sound changes which do not occur in the other Germanic languages. This yields the expectation that the linguistic distance between these two languages is relatively small. On the other hand, the close contact with Dutch makes it plausible that the Dutch and the Frisian languages have converged. Also the distance to Danish might be smaller than expected from the traditional division of Germanic into a North Germanic and a West Germanic branch at an early stage because of the intensive contacts in the past.