
Avoiding Frisian

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Minority Languages are thus called because they underwent or are still undergoing a process of minoritisation: the loss of domains of where a language is spoken due to overt or covert discrimination or ridicule suffered by its speakers. For many languages this has a centuries-old track record, e.g. the case of North Frisian which was never used as general written language by its speaker and thus remained invisible in historical records, school textbooks or inscriptions on gravestones, in churches or on public signage. In consequence, North Frisian obtained and retains low status throughout much of its history. During the twentieth century, a range of language revitalization processes were installed top-down to raise the language's prestige, most notably through the introduction of school lessons in the first half of the century and the establishment of academic institutions to the study of the language in the second half of the century. In addition, the language is protected under the European Charter, there is some public signage and some, though very little, use in the public media. All these language policy measures are aimed at raising the language's prestige so that speakers are encouraged to use the language and pass it on to the next generation. Due to the fairly universal bilingualism of the remaining 5000-7000 native speakers, the language is no longer considered an obstacle for good education and hence has lost its stigma as being backward.

In this paper I will contrast these prestige-raising efforts with minoritizing processes within the language community, which may have the effect of discouraging the use of the language. Prominent gatekeepers of the language equate the good or authentic use of the language with a particular set of features which are not shared by all. Due to their bilingualism, many speakers resort to drawing on their linguistic repertoire without sharply separating their own languages: scholars refer to these practices as code-mixing or translanguaging, the speakers themselves see this as simply speaking Frisian, the gatekeepers are concerned that these practices will corrupt or dilute the language and ultimately lead to its death. I will present various parts of the metalinguistic discussion on the notion of correct Frisian to explore what voices and views can make people avoid their own language. I will argue that purism within a minority language can be just as damaging to the intergenerational transmission as the whole-scale stigmatization of the language as a "peasant dialect", witnessed until the late twentieth century.

References: • Admiraal, F. et al. (2024). Which Frisian Should Be Maintained? Exploring Language Attitudes and Agency of Speakers and Non-Speakers. In M. Linn & A. Dayan-Fernandez (eds.), *Agency in the Peripheries of Language Revitalisation*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 115–137.