

Etymological and perceptual distinctiveness of Frisian: Borrowings and the perception of ‘good’ Frisian

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Frisian is a so-called ‘minority language’ even when a majority of inhabitants of its traditional language area has Frisian as a mother tongue. Every speaker of (West-)Frisian is bilingual Frisian-Dutch. As Dutch is the dominant language in formal and especially written domains, most speakers of Frisian acquire their secondary vocabulary, e.g. concerning modern technics, abstract concept and the like, from or by Dutch (internationalisms). This is not surprising.

There is a growing concern among language promoters about the intrusion of the primary vocabulary of Frisian with Dutch loanwords among the younger generation, such as: *erch* < Du. *erg*, Fr. *slim* ‘bad’ or *neus* < Du. *neus*, Fr. *noas* ‘nose’. Studying the variation and changes in Frisian over the last 700 years shows that the idea of only recent intensive borrowing is based on a misconception of the past.

Frisian shows borrowings from (earlier) versions of Dutch since the late Middle-Ages, also in fields such as the primary vocabulary (words such as: ‘and, she, yet, never, what, thing, case’), morphology (e.g. plural formation) and idiom. All that time, Frisian survived as a distinct linguistic identity. The contrast between spoken language (Dutch influence) and modern language norm (‘pure’ Frisian) is not only the result of recent borrowings in the spoken language, but also of purification and intentional selection of archaic word(forms) in the written standard. This sometimes leads to hyper-correction.

Many forms that are propagated in the written norm are just as well Dutch loanwords or loan formations. Due to gradual changes in Dutch, some old loans are no longer detectable from a contemporary point of view and felt and propagated as ‘pure’ Frisian.

The different instances of borrowing and their contemporary interpretation will be illustrated with examples from older and younger sources.