

The Aim and the Contributions of the Frisian Language Desk

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0. Summary

Since 1980, the Frisian Language Desk is a small department of the Frisian Academy. However, it is not the only institute which offers Frisian language services. In this contribution the specific role of the Academy's desk will be considered. Since the nineties of the twentieth century, the aims of the language desk formally have not changed. However, in practice, since the publication of the Concise Frisian Dictionary at the end of 2008, the only aim of the desk is to answer questions about Frisian or the use of Frisian. Examples of these questions are: how to write and spell the text of birth and death announcement cards and epitaphs correct, and how to interpret older Frisian texts. So, the desk is at this moment not pro-active and is no longer working on long-term projects. The main results of the earlier long-term projects of the desk will be listed and described.

Because of the lack of research time, the Desk is not pro-active anymore. For the future of the Frisian terminology, a better co-operation, or even an amalgamation between the several Frisian language services might be better. Only a vital service desk, i.e. a desk with structurally research time, has the real opportunity to build Frisian in a complete language, this is a language which can be used in all domains.

As well as a description of the Academy's Language Desk, in this contribution a brief description of the Frisian Academy and its history, and the situation of Frisian in the Netherlands and specifically in the Dutch province of Friesland will be given.

1. Introduction

On the site of the Frisian Academy in Leeuwarden you can read the following text, "Anyone who has questions about Frisian or how to use it can get help from the Language Desk. The Desk answers questions about spelling, phrasing or terminology and can give advice concerning the composition of Frisian texts. The Language Desk is specialized in translating texts containing technical terms into Frisian (e.g. notarial acts, official and technical documents)."

However, the Frisian Academy's neighbour, the Afûk, an education organization which focuses upon Frisian outside schools, publishing educational materials and children's books, and running a Frisian bookshop, gives also language advice. On its site you can read, "Do you have a question about the Frisian language? Or do you want us to translate a text into the Frisian language? Then you can contact us."

In Bolsward, another Frisian town, the Gysbert Japicx House offers Frisian language service with its text shop.

So, the language desk of the Frisian Academy is not the only institute which offers language services. In this contribution the specific role of the Academy's desk will be considered. First of all, follows a short description of the Frisian Academy and its history. Furthermore, the situation of Frisian in the Netherlands and specifically in the Dutch province of Friesland will be described.

2. *The Frisian Academy and the Frisian Language desk*

Origins of the Fryske Akademy - founded in 1938 - is the scientific centre for research and education concerning Friesland and its people, language and culture, this in the broadest sense of those words. The work of the Fryske Akademy, however, is often of great social interest. Take, for example, the Academy's contribution to the status of Frisian as equivalent to that of Dutch, the impressive *Wurdboek fan de Fryske taal / Dictionary of the Frisian Language*. The research is focussed on the Frisian language, Frisian history and the Frisian community. Over the years, the Akademy has published over 1,000 scientific books, thousands of articles and a large number of reports on these subjects.

As stated before, the Frisian language is one of the most important areas where the Academy conducts research. Fortunately, use of the Frisian language has been on the increase in recent years, also in the language traffic of the government. Furthermore, in a number of municipality Frisian is the official language for place names. Things were not always this way. In education, for example, Frisian was a neglected stepchild for a long time.

Due to this increasing use of Frisian, and the lack of good education of Frisian in the primary and secondary Frisian schools, the number of questions about the right use of Frisian also increased, and still is. As a consequence of this, the provincial policy pleaded in the seventies of the last century for a Frisian language desk. In 1980, the Frisian Academy got the assignment and the subsidy from the provincial government for starting the language desk with one full-time researcher. At the moment, three Academy researchers are connected with the desk. However, their available time for the desk is very limited and their task has, compared with the task of the first desk researcher, minimized.

3. *The aims of the centre*

In 1984, according to the policy report concerning the new Frisian language desk¹, the main target of the desk should be to develop Frisian as the most important means of communication of the Frisian cultural society. In practice, the desk had to elaborate Frisian most of all on the lexical level in a scientific way. The decreased development of the language was one of the results of the changed political situation in Friesland at the end of the Middle Ages: in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, it lost its independency. The cause of the loss is that at the end of the fifteenth century, Albrecht van Saksen, duke of Saksen-Meisen, became governor of Friesland. However, he was not able to dominate the Frisians, but seventeen years later, in 1515, the Frisians came under Burgundian rule. To govern them with more success than Van Saksen did, Burgundian Charles the Fifth sent his own Dutch civil servants to the Frisian government centres. In consequence, the language of the Frisian government was no longer Frisian, and Dutch became the most important language in Friesland. Until the twentieth century, Frisian has only marginally been used as a written language, mainly for the little Frisian literature. As a result of the Frisian Movement, in the last century the use of Frisian in several domains increased. So it is understandable that the Frisian lexicon is immature.

In the same report the language desk had to elaborate Frisian on the next domains: media; statecraft and justice; church; welfare work; education; leisure; service and provision of services; trade and industry; medical care; arable and dairy farming; housekeeping; science; art.

¹ Beliedsrapport. Ynstânsje foar taalûntjouwing en taalkundige bystân. Ljouwert, desimber 1984., p.11.

Since 2004, the year when the language desk researcher has retired, the aims of the language desk formally have not changed. However, in practice, since the publication of the Concise Frisian Dictionary at the end of 2008, the only aim of the desk is to answer questions about Frisian or the use of Frisian. So, the desk is at this moment not pro-active and is no longer working on long-term projects.

4. The kind of services

Most of the questions about Frisian are linguistic ones and asked by individuals. Examples of these questions are: how to write and spell the text of birth and death announcement cards and epitaphs correct; how to interpret an older Frisian text; what is the correct Frisian word form of exonyms; and what is the best translation of a specific word or a whole text. Furthermore, the desk answers questions about the use of Frisian. An example of this is the question whether it is permitted or not to use Frisian in court or the local council outside the provincial borders of Friesland.

Not only individuals, but also institutes like municipality councils know how to find the language desk of the Frisian Academy. This may be illustrated by the following development concerning the Frisian local names. In the last decenniums, an increasing number of local authorities has made the decision to Frisify the official place and street names. To choose correct-written Frisian toponyms local government officials often consult our language desk. In addition, local authorities also often consult us if they want to Frisify the names of their departments.

In practice, the language desk of the Frisian Academy is not the only Frisian language desk which gives language advice. The Afûk, the education organization specialized upon Frisian adult education, has also a language desk, but this desk does not have the intention to develop the Frisian language. The aim of the centre is to offer language services like translations. The language desk of the Frisian Academy is only willing to translate texts if these are specific texts. An example of such a text is the European constitution, which was translated under orders of the Provincial Council of Friesland. The Gysbert Japicxhouse, named after the seventeenth-century Frisian Renaissance poet Gysbert Japicx, offers Frisian language service with its text shop. This text shop is specialized on creating and correcting Frisian occasional texts, like birth announcements.

So, people who want to write in Frisian but need advice, can get sufficient support on several places.

5. The kind of methods, tools and data of the Academy's language desk

As the result of the fact that the language desk no longer works upon the elaborating of Frisian, but only answers questions of individuals and institutes, the researchers don't handle with scientific methods. To answer the questions they consult the Frisian dictionaries, especially the data base of the comprehensive *Dictionary of the Frisian Language* or the language corpora of the Frisian Academy. The Academy has the disposal of four corpora: the corpus New Frisian; the corpus Nineteenth-century Frisian; the corpus Middle Frisian; the corpus Old Frisian. Most of the questions are about the correct spelling or the meaning of New Frisian, therefore the corpus New Frisian is of course the most used corpus. The corpus New Frisian contains a representative sample of twentieth century Frisian, containing various sorts of texts such as newspaper articles, novels, poetry, technical literature. The corpus contains some 25 million words.

Besides those lexicographical tools, the researchers of the desk consult if necessary also Frisian grammars and other relevant sources.

6. Results of the language desk

From the early beginning of de Academy's Language Desk a huge number of questions reached the desk researcher. However, like mentioned above, his main task was to elaborate the Frisian lexicon. For example, in behalf of the educational domain, the desk published a list of terms used by subjects of instructions, that is history, geography and biology. In behalf of the formal, administrative domain, a list containing formal words was published. The legal domain got a fully-fledged legal dictionary Dutch-Frisian ten years ago. For general purposes, the desk compiled a concise monolingual Frisian dictionary. This dictionary is the first and up till now the only Frisian dictionary which describes the language in Frisian. It is clear that the editors of the dictionary had to develop Frisian terms: they could not fall back on a tradition. The second example of a publication for general purposes is a comprehensive writing guide for students, writers, editors and publishers.

7. Specific problems

Frisian has mainly an oral tradition. However, since the nineteenth century written use of the language increased and it still is. The Frisian dictionary tradition started about hundred years ago. Nevertheless, Frisian has not yet a fixed standard. In the above mentioned concise dictionary several, mainly dialectical, varieties are attested. Up until now, the language desk has been rather tolerant towards the Frisian dialectical variety. According to my opinion, it might be better that the desk developed a fixed written standard. Such a standard gives more opportunities to use the language with more success, especially in education.

In addition, the minority position of the language causes the absence of social or economic pressure to use Frisian more and in more domains. In theory, the Frisian language desk can develop or elaborate for all domains suitable terms, but if there is no pressure or the necessity to use them, all efforts are useless. For instance, my above mentioned Frisian legal dictionary has up until now got too less attention in the domain.

If the Dutch and the local governments are really interested in the welfare of the second official language of the Netherlands, I think it is inevitable that all Frisian language desk activities take place at one strong, vital desk. This desk must have a expert and good equipped staff. The members of the staff have to develop the language, but they also have to work on the introduction of these new language elements and the strengthening of the social position of Frisian. The vital language desk needs the policy to make it in Friesland necessary to use the language. Nowadays, the policy thinks Frisian has to be fun. Of course, it has. All languages have to be fun. But to have fun, you need good tools and you have to need these tools. I think, we need in Friesland more and more necessity to use Frisian and we have to give the language more prestige. A language desk which is only facilitating a domain or the whole language, will not have any success in the long term. A vital language desk might be the right partner of the politicians to increase the use of Frisian.