
WFT: The comprehensive Frisian Dictionary
(Wurdboek fan de Fryske taal / Woordenboek der Friese taal)

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The Wurdboek fan de Fryske Taal (WFT) is a dictionary of a regional minority language. Yet it may be compared to the big scholarly dictionaries of national languages like Dutch, German and English, not because of its size but with respect to its principles. The WFT is, as a description of a minority language, in this sense unique. Its more modest size is partly due to the dictionary's design, but a more important reason is that the lexicographical description of Frisian is hampered by the absence of a large variety of written sources, because Frisian, characteristically as a minority language, especially functions as a spoken language.

In my paper I clarify how the position of a minority language - and in addition the scholarly infrastructure - are decisive for the lexicography of Frisian and the compilation and contents of the WFT in particular.

*Before discussing some aspects of the WFT itself I will deal with three items. 1. The unfinished dictionary *Lexicon Frisicum (A-Feer)* (1872) by J. H. Halbertsma (1789-1869), the founding father of the lexicography of modern Frisian; 2. The continuation of Halbertsma's lexicographical work, resulting in the *Friesch Woordenboek* (1900-1911). 3. The preamble to the WFT.*

I discuss the following aspects:

- the choice of the non-Frisian metalanguage in the dictionaries above
- the choice of only post-1800 Frisian in the WFT.
- the choice of regional variants in *Friesch Woordenboek* and WFT
- the choice of including the first attestation of each entry into the WFT
- the microstructure of the WFT
- etymology in the WFT

I finally mention the future of the WFT: with the completion of the paper dictionary, the WFT is now ready to enter the exiting world of online electronic dictionaries.

1. Introduction

The *Wurdboek fan de Fryske taal* (WFT) is a dictionary of a regional minority language. Yet it may be compared to the big scholarly dictionaries of national languages like Dutch, German and English, not because of its size but with respect to its principles. The WFT is, as a description of a minority language, in this sense unique. Its more modest size is partly due to the dictionary's design, but a more important reason is that the lexicographical description of Frisian is hampered by the absence of a large variety of written sources, because Frisian, characteristically as a minority language, especially functions as a spoken language.

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2. History¹

Present-day Frisian lexicography began in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Rev Joast Hiddes Halbertsma, who was a linguist as well as a writer, amassed a huge collection of linguistic material. He described the Frisian words in Dutch and, occasionally, in Latin. With this material he started his Frisian–Latin dictionary, which remained unfinished. In 1872 (after his death in 1869) his son Tsjalling published the part that had been completed, entitled *Lexicon Frisicum (A – Feer)*. Among international scholars Halbertsma had distinguished himself as a specialist on Frisian, and his dictionary was meant to facilitate the study of

¹ This section is mainly based on Dykstra (1999).

Frisian for an international public. The Englishman Joseph Bosworth, who was in contact with him, also stimulated him to write the dictionary (De Jong 2009: 268-269).

Halbertsma bequeathed his library and his manuscripts to the province of Friesland, requesting them to continue his lexicographical work. This work was in fact continued, but the *Lexicon Frisicum* was not. After the *Lexicon Frisicum* had been published it became clear from the reactions that the Frisians needed a dictionary for themselves. In 1879 it was decided to compile a completely new dictionary, with Dutch as its metalanguage. Why not Frisian? The reason was the social status of Frisian, which was in that respect more a dialect than a proper language. A Frisian dictionary with Frisian as its metalanguage, and hence semantic definitions in Frisian, was not to be published until the year 2008.

In 1879 work on the new dictionary was immediately started and in 1891 a new manuscript was ready. This manuscript was to be revised further. The first editor, Godert Colmjon, had followed Halbertsma's working method, but he died in 1884 (by then he had completed the letters A through J). He was succeeded by Waling Dykstra, who adopted a more relaxed and less formal approach, and who moreover inserted a lot of material (spoken language and dialectal variants) that was absent in Halbertsma's writings. Consequently, a discrepancy with the part revised by Colmjon arose, which therefore had to be supplemented. Therefore, it was decided to continue the work and, what is more, in 1892 the linguist Foeke Buitenrust Hetteema was contracted in order to improve the quality of the project and to deal with the Latin translations and descriptions also to be used in the dictionary. Eventually, Hetteema's suggestion was followed to give up the impractical Latin part. It was decided not only to fill the gaps in the manuscript but also to enrich it with non-standard forms and more regional varieties. It was also suggested to add pronunciation keys, but in the end the compilers restricted themselves to indicating the correct pronunciation in cases where a diphthong is 'broken' (e.g. *beam* [bi.əm], plural: *beammen* [bjɛməŋ]) and even this was not carried out consistently. Another point of criticism was the fact that quotations were presented in non-original orthographies or in paraphrased form. But it was too late to correct these flaws. A dispute arose about the number of quotations to be included and moreover it was discussed whether the dictionary should only include 'good' Frisian vocabulary or include everyday written and spoken expressions as well. The proponents of the latter option lost the argument.

The publication process of the dictionary, entitled *Friesch Woordenboek* ('Frisian Dictionary'), started in 1896. It was to be published in a number of volumes, the first of which appeared in 1900. The second volume appeared in 1903 and the third, completing the series, appeared in 1911. This dictionary was succeeded by the Comprehensive Frisian Dictionary (WFT; in Frisian: *Wurdboek fan de Fryske Taal*; in Dutch: *Woordenboek der Friese Taal*), which is the main topic of this contribution. As will become clear in a minute, the compilation of this dictionary is the direct result of the founding of the Frisian Academy (whose Frisian name actually is *Fryske Akademy*.)

3. A new scholarly dictionary²

Immediately after the publication of the third and final volume of the *Friesch Woordenboek* the need for a new Frisian dictionary was felt. Almost simultaneously plans were mooted for founding a Frisian Academy (an idea already suggested by S. Huisman in 1914). In 1919 G.R. Veendorp stressed the need to collect linguistic material that had been disregarded in the

² This section is mainly based on van der Veen (1988).

Friesch Woordenboek, so as to set up a more elaborate dictionary, but actually he wanted more:

‘If possible I would like to see a dictionary compiled in a *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* (WNT) style [i.e. the famous comprehensive Dutch dictionary project from 1864 to 1998]; it should not become as comprehensive as this WNT, but still the entries should be described in more detail than has been done now.’ (Veendorp 1919)

In his opening speech on the occasion of the foundation of the Frisian Academy in 1938, entitled ‘The Frisian Academy, its work and essence’ Piter Sipma, the first Academy president, said: ‘With respect to the work to be done by the Frisian Academy, I should once more refer to our statute’s article that obliges us to dedicate ourselves to ‘the study of Friesland and the Frisian people in all their manifestations and in the broadest sense’. This comprises a huge program that embraces, we might well say, all branches of scholarship: humanities, physics and mathematical sciences as well as social and applied sciences. As a matter of fact, we are wise enough to realise that it would be impossible to attempt all of these at once, and we will not try to have too many irons in the fire. We must consider what could serve as an appropriate and feasible start’ (Sipma 1938a).

Then Sipma proposes the following: ‘In my opinion we could first create a linguistics department, because this is needed most and in this field we have the requisite staff at our disposal. We could in particular start with the faculties of lexicography, onomasiology, dialectology and syntax.’ And lexicography it was going to be. The Frisian Academy’s first and at the time only employee was given the task of creating a card index system of Frisian words.

It was logical and to be expected that the Frisian Academy should consider language in general and lexicography in particular its first priority. The plans for a Frisian Academy were first developed in circles of the Frisian movement, whose aim was the preservation of the Frisian language.

First and foremost such a thing as a Frisian Academy was of interest to Frisian movement members, philologists and linguists.

The desirability of a Frisian Academy of Sciences had first been put forward in 1936 by the biology student S. Bloembergen, when he ended his essay in the Frisian Students’ Almanack as follows: ‘In my view it is highly important that the Frisian Academy should eventually create an appropriate scientific and scholarly nomenclature for all disciplines that will be really useful’ (Bloembergen 1936).

And it was in 1936, the year in which Bloembergen published his essay, that Sipma, the aforementioned first Frisian Academy president, put forward a proposal for a new Frisian dictionary during the fourth Pan-Frisian Congress [attended by Frisians from the Netherlands and Germany].

Immediately after the Frisian Academy was founded the same Piter Sipma published the design that he had in mind for the lexicographical work in the Academy periodical *It Beaken* (‘the beacon’):

‘One of the first and most necessary projects that we could work on is the lexicographical plan. Our aim is to create a dictionary data base in the form of a large card index system that will be stored in the *Coulon House* [the Academy’s seat in the city of Leeuwarden], to be consulted by each and everyone. In that collection we

will store and exhibit all lexical material of the Frisian language and its dialects, from the present and the past, as completely as possible.’

And he adds:

‘It is not our concern now what kind of dictionary will eventually be extracted from this material, and it will not be explained either; what matters now is that we take a first step.’

He defines seven points of action with respect to establishing the card index system.

- (1) Incorporating the existing dictionaries into the card index system.
- (2) Incorporating words discussed earlier in studies, collections, lists and scattered annotations, wherever they are to be found, either published or in manuscript.
- (3) Incorporating oral and written attestations of words, sayings and proverbs not in the Waling Dykstra dictionary (note: people are invited to submit such attestations.)
- (4) Collecting technical terminology, names of work-related activities, names of tools and component parts.
- (5) (Quoting literally): ‘Writing down groups of words such as bird names, plant names etcetera; words about weather and wind, land and water, wood and field, air and soil, humans and animals etcetera. here also, everything is welcome, even the tiniest contribution.’
- (6) (Quoting literally again): ‘The dialect words, that is to say, the occasional deviations, the rich array of words and word forms (for instance: verb forms) including their meanings, whenever they deviate from the standard forms.’
- (7) (the last point): Excerpting books and magazines.

Commenting on the last point he says this mainly concerns the most important words. And then Sipma proposes to begin with Frisian from 1800 onwards (Sipma 1938b). The source list of the WFT shows that Sipma’s program was carried out by a large number of volunteers.

The fact Sipma proposed confining the excerpting of books and magazines to the period from 1800 onwards (traditionally called the ‘New Frisian’ period) was not without its consequences. Although Sipma in his design mentioned ‘all lexical material of the Frisian language and its dialects, from the past and the present, as completely [collected] as possible’, the consequence of the ‘from 1800 onward’ restriction was that the Frisian Academy did not create a card index system of the Frisian language throughout the ages: something else happened.

Around 1950 the Frisian Academy and the so-called *Frisian Institute* of the University of Groningen agreed to divide the linguistic periods among themselves. The Frisian Academy became responsible for the so-called ‘New Frisian’ period (from 1800 to the present); ‘Groningen’ was supposed to deal with the so-called ‘Middle Frisian’ (1550-1800) and ‘Old Frisian’ (1300-1550) periods. At that time ‘Groningen’ had started creating card index systems of these pre-1800 periods. When, in 1950, the dictionary staff were of the opinion ‘that so much material had been collected that it seemed feasible to start arranging a dictionary successfully’ (Brochure 1960), the then advisory board was asked by someone whether ‘Middle Frisian’ (Frisian from 1550-1800, which actually is plain and ordinary ‘New Frisian’) should not be included in the dictionary as well. But this was not to happen. The *Wurdboek fan de Fryske Taal* (the comprehensive Frisian dictionary) was to become a dictionary of post-1800 Frisian.

Obviously one of the points of discussion preceding the compilation of the dictionary was the kind of dictionary to be created. At first people had in mind a prescriptive concise dictionary

like the popular Dutch *Van Dale* dictionary. But in 1956, at the instigation of by the new director, J.H. Brouwer, it was decided to design a scholarly and descriptive dictionary. Then, however, it turned out that the card index system created up to that time was not equal to that task. The card index system contained mainly content words and material about function words and some verbs was lacking or inadequate. Within two years another large group of *volunteers* was formed again, charged with the task of copying words and expressions in context from a cross section of the sources used (books and magazine articles) into a new card index system.

Now a new hurdle had to be passed, or you might as well say: there was a new battle to be fought - i.e. the choice of the metalanguage: Frisian or Dutch. The position of Frisian as a minority language, its social dialect status as well as scholarly, language-political and cultural arguments played a role here, along with considerations of what was feasible and practical. In the end Dutch was favoured as the metalanguage and in 1960 the compilation process could be started. The Metalanguage Struggle, for that matter, inflicted deep wounds caused by both the decision itself and the way it was taken. And what is more: in 1982 the then director of the Frisian Academy decided to put the issue on the agenda again. The Frisian Academy board now decided to opt for Frisian, but the Dutch education minister eventually refused to give his consent.

Obviously, because a scholarly dictionary was at issue, people had in mind something comparable to the Dutch scholarly *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* (WNT), just as Veendorp imagined in 1919. So, when, in 1960, the dictionary project proper was due to be started, two dictionary staff members visited the Dutch Institute of Lexicology (INL) at Leiden University for a while for information.

The first dictionary volume did not appear until 1984. In hindsight this was to be regarded as a lucky coincidence, because around 1980, when publishing plans became serious, the Leiden INL recommended applying an electronic printing procedure, so the text had to be stored digitally first. This recommendation was followed, and as a consequence the dictionary entered the digital era from the first volume onwards.

We owe the fact that the dictionary has now been completed to a number of factors. In the first place money was made available to contract more lexicographers during these years; moreover, the Academy board has always given priority to the dictionary in general. Another very prominent factor is the fact that people have not again deviated from the 1960 design and that the card index systems have been supplemented only marginally. In fact, only one change has been made. In the late seventies the new Frisian orthography (due in 1980) was preferred for the entries, but this was a small and easy operation.

4. Aspects of the dictionary

After having said that the *Wurdboek fan de Fryske Taal* (WFT) can be judged to be qualitatively excellent, offering a wealth of information, I want to touch critically on some salient aspects of the dictionary.

First I will discuss three issues relevant to the construction of the card index systems.

One of the decisions taken was to include the first attestation of each lexical entry, which of course boiled down to the first attestation in the card index system (not in Frisian writings as a

whole), because only a limited sample from the sources had been collected. From most sources only those quotations were excerpted that were judged appropriate and some sources were much more intensively excerpted than others. And what does such an oldest attestation tell us anyway? Only in a restricted number of cases does it indicate that the word at issue came into existence in that very period. Sipma preferred creating a card index system with ‘all of Frisian’, but that ideal was unrealistic. His method of excerpting did not even guarantee that all words occurring in the sources used are in the dictionary. And, moreover, Frisian is more a spoken than a written language. The latter problem was tackled only in part by the use of oral reports and a lot of technical terminology. Technical terminology was not collected exhaustively. Instead one had to rely on the words and idioms in particular word fields that were collected by a number of interested people. This has of course led to a certain imbalance, but fortunately major specific parts of the Frisian vocabulary, such as the language of farmers, fishermen and skippers, have in fact found their way into the dictionary as completely as possible. And then there is another important thing.

To make things worse, some entry words are accompanied by such a small number of citations that not all meanings of the word are covered. When the Frisian Academy started constructing digital data bases of Frisian the temptation became very strong to consult these databases as well when revising the dictionary articles, but because of planning restrictions this was done only in exceptional cases.

In Waling Dykstra’s *Friesch Woordenboek* (FW) attention had already been paid to the dialectal variation in Frisian, but not exhaustively so. This holds for the *Wurdboek fan de Fryske Taal* (WFT) as well. Initially, it concentrated on the central and western variety of Frisian, which functions as a standard variety; in addition, attention was paid to some specific dialectal varieties from a region in the eastern part, named *De Wâlden* (‘the woods’). Opinions about correct and incorrect Frisian played a role here. For example, some phonological phenomena in south-western Frisian were neglected in the dictionary because of their supposedly dutchified character and the absence of characteristically Frisian developments, like the so-called breaking of diphthongs [again: [bl.ə̃m] vs. [bj̥ɛ̃mən], ‘tree(s)’]. Recently, I heard a Frisian spoken commercial showing a shop owner and a customer who both used the south-western word *gud* ([gʏt], ‘ware, goods’) intentionally in order to generate attention by using deviating idiom. The standard expression *guod* ([gwot]) does occur in the *Wurdboek fan de Fryske Taal* (WFT), but the dialectal variant *gud* does not. By the way, in general one can speak of some development in doing justice to the regional varieties of Frisian, especially with respect to pronunciation. The first editors (who planned to make a prescriptive dictionary) never really deviated from that prescriptive course, but their successors have done so, in the long run. As a result, attempts have been made to give some attention to local variety in the dictionary. For that purpose written dialect inquiries were organised from 1978 to 1996 and in 2001 a book was published based on dialect notes by Jan Jelles Hof, who had published his standard work *Friesche Dialectgeografie* (Frisian Dialect Geography) as early as 1933.

In addition to the issue of dialectal variation there is also the difference between spoken and written Frisian. There is a gap between the two. Authors have always striven to write an (in their view) correct Frisian and consequently, from this written tradition, a kind of standard Frisian has evolved and become accepted. But due to the minority position of Frisian vis à vis Dutch this standard has been unable to acquire a strong position in the spoken language. Because the

Wurdboek fan de Fryske taal is mainly based on written sources it may correctly be called a scholarly description of Frisian as a written language, but it is much less deserving of this name as a description of the spoken language.

People expect a scholarly dictionary to pay attention to etymology. In the WFT, however, etymological information is presented in general terms only. Generally (apart from some incidental cases) the dictionary refers to equivalent cognates in related West-Germanic languages (especially Dutch, English and German) and, whenever necessary, to other languages like Latin. The decision to do so was essentially practical: one had to reckon with man-power and time for editing. For the same reason (as well as for lack of sufficient material) a simpler strategy was preferred for teasing apart the (sub-)meanings of each lexical entry.

With respect to the internal arrangement of the lexical entries (their microstructure) there is certainly one major flaw. Sayings and proverbs (occurring within a lexical entry) were not given alphabetically ordered separate sections; instead, they were lumped together into a single section in chronological order (the oldest attestation first). Occasionally such a section fills pages. All this has to do with the fact that in 1960, when the project was due to start, the idea was that the dictionary eventually would not comprise more than a couple of volumes, so the available space had to be used economically. This micro-structural aspect not only hinders the reader in looking up information, it also necessitates an adjustment in the digital files in order to optimise findability.

5. The digital future of the dictionary

Now that the dictionary has been completed we have to look at its future. Twenty-four volumes have already appeared (a final one will follow soon), running to a total number of more than 20,000 pages. The volumes have appeared in print runs of approximately 500 copies each. This is all very nice, but it is only half of the story; as a matter of fact, it is all history. What is important now is the digital version of the dictionary, the electronic browsing facilities, accessibility through the internet, and the unprecedented possibilities for adding data and linking information. Now that the volumes are there, in a way things are really about to happen.

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