



Children's and Young Adults' Literature and Linguistic Minorities

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Introduction

One of the autochthonous languages of Europe, Frisian, is the mother tongue of about 400.000 inhabitants of Fryslân located in the north of The Netherlands. Fryslân is a bilingual province where all children grow up bilingually and where they can encounter literature in two languages, Dutch and Frisian.

Today, I want to present three projects of many which are meant to stimulate the development and enjoyment of Frisian children's literature. I hope that these projects can provide an example to be used for the same purpose and in the interest of other lesser used languages. The first project targets young children, the second aims at engaging adolescents.

But first – very quickly – a few points about multilingualism as background for this literature.

One. There are people who believe that multilingualism is an exceptional condition. I maintain, on the contrary, that today to be educated with only *one* language is what can be considered the exceptional case. In Europe alone, over 50 million people use two or more languages every day. Modern linguistics says that humanity is largely multilingual.

Two. There are people who think that multilingualism leads to linguistic confusion for children and that it can even delay language development. These claims have never been proven. In fact, research shows that every child is capable of learning more than one language without a negative impact on their development linguistically or otherwise.

What are the benefits of multilingualism? Some include that, multilingual children:

- display more linguistic feeling

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- are more flexible with language and are capable of moving easily from one language to another
- understand very early that everyone has his own language
- in general, learn an additional language more easily
- in general, learn to read more quickly.

Finally, according to experts, problems with mastering language are not caused by multilingualism.

Now, let me turn to the projects that I wish to highlight today. First, the Frisian *Tomke*-project.

This is the most important project for reading and language promotion in Frisian. It is directed at the youngest group of children in playgroups and in junior grades of the primary schools. It is organized as a cooperation amongst several institutions, a publisher, a library, television and so on, and is coordinated by the publisher Afûk and the Library Service of Fryslân.

The project is extensive and brings together a number of children's books, television programs and themes and activities for playgroups. Every year a new theme is chosen and with this in mind, a new story about a small boy, Tomke, is published. The publication is accompanied by a new poster and library activities.

This year, traffic is the theme. A new book that includes several stories and selected poetry and many illustrations has been published as an Action Book. The book will be promoted and the activities around the book will be highlighted in September or what is now called Children's Book Time (Berneboeketiid). This new story is designed for children from 2 to 6 years old.

The project also gives a great deal of professional support for leaders of playgroups: every year November is the special time for this support and counselling. At this time, the Tomke working group organizes the Tomke-symposium during which participants receive useful information and can participate in different workshops about the designated theme of the year. The participants are always very pleased with these conferences because they go home with many practical ideas and suggestions to work with. As well, a newsletter is published and distributed three times a year to inform the leaders about activities and new materials that are part the project.



News about the project has spread as far as the Caribbean! In 2006 a Frisian delegation departed to the Dutch Caribbean islands of Antilles to present the first Tomke-book in Papiamentu, the language spoken in this territory. It was a fine presentation and was welcomed with a great deal of pleasure and enthusiasm. All children who participated received a copy of the book and a specially designed T-shirt. It was wonderful to see the children in their colourful shirts, each with the book in their happy hands. At this moment, these contacts are being extended to include another of the islands. This time, it will be in Bonaire.

To give such a project a more scholarly foundation, a research program about language used in allochthonous families and their social context, especially in Antillean families, has been undertaken by Mercator. This institute is a European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning. The program was started in the Frisian capital, Leeuwarden and in the Dutch city of Rotterdam. The Papiamentu translation of one of the Tomke-books is a useful tool within this research program.

Who is Tomke or Little Thumb?

The small boy, Tomke was 'born' in 1997 and since then he has made quite a few successful tours throughout Fryslân. Tomke has enjoyed many adventures together with his small and mischievous dog, Romke, with Kornelia the Kangaroo, a kind of mother person and with his friend Yana Yu, the Chinese girl next door. The stories about Tomke tell about the daily life of small children. Children recognize themselves in the adventures and react at what they are seeing and hearing.

The first time the project was presented in 1997, it actually drew attention to the importance of reading to children. Six television broadcasts showed different people - a grandfather, a mother, a teacher – reading to a child. That first time, Tomke made his debut with a distribution of 16.000 booklets. If you remember that a normal edition of Frisian children books consists of no more than 1000 copies, you will understand how important this was. But, this huge edition of the Tomke book was necessary, as toddlers in playgroups all got a free copy.

Since then, the number of books published has grown every year and last year 23.500 copies were produced. A further 1500 copies in a dialect spoken in south-east Fryslân were distributed as well. These booklets include four Tomke-stories, songs and



poems to be recited, and games, all of which are centred around the annual theme. The books are sent to playgroups, day nurseries, infant welfare centres and libraries.

A new phenomenon is the so-called 'Fertelkoffer' – a narrative suitcase (on behalf of telling). In this suitcase, a wonderful hand-puppet, a manual with suggestions, and of course the books themselves are made available to those who use them with children. Leaders and educators are very happy to receive this support and use the suitcase with much pleasure.

It is clear that language, especially the Frisian language, has a central place in this reading promotion project. Every year the theme is connected to language in some way. Over the years, nursery rhymes have received special attention, as has language that is connected with playing, music, art, colours and forms, travelling, and so on.

Television has its place within this project as well. It is, of course, important for promoting the event but also for supporting the initiative. For example, every year in June, Omrop Fryslân – the regional television company – broadcasts eighteen new television-adventures about Tomke.

Internet also plays an important role. The provincial government has provided financial support to set up a special Tomke website at www.tomke.nl. This website consists of two sections: one interactive part for children and one part for educators. Although it is in Frisian of course, I recommend a visit to this website if you wish to get a deeper understanding of the project. Now as the global financial crisis is beginning to have an influence on this project, those who have developed it are very anxious about the future. Like them, we hope for the best, especially since Tomke celebrates his 15th anniversary next year.

During the planned anniversary celebrations, there will be theatre productions and a special foundation is organizing stage plays for children with Tomke and his dog Romke as leading actors. The plays are full of songs and will add to the gaiety of the festivities!

Fifteen years after the initial launch of the project, it has become immensely popular not only amongst the young but also amongst parents, grandparents and professionals working with children. As well, it has played a major part in the development of Frisian literature for children and of the Frisian language itself. Book, television and the Tomke-site on internet have been a very useful alliance to strengthen



recognition of the value of the project and its acceptance in an ever-growing community.

The second project I wish to introduce is the *Festival to tell and read*.

This is another annual activity and has strong ties with the Tomke-project. It is essentially a festival that takes place all over the province to do exactly what it says it will do - tell and read. *Fertel-en foarlêsfestival*, takes place in the first two weeks of the month June. Within this festival, there is a special Frisian reading week, organized by the organization *Selskip foar Fryske Tael en Skriftekennisse*, which supports Frisian language and culture. In cooperation with the Tomke working group, this organization encourages reading among young children. During this special week, the yearly Tomke-booklet is distributed freely and grandparents can get it in libraries to read to their own grandchildren. Volunteers of all ages, young and old, read this Tomke-booklet. In 2009 to more than 9.500 toddlers in about 600 groups of children were involved in this experience. The children receive the booklet and may take it home. In 2009, 15.000 Tomke booklets were distributed in this way. So, Tomke is an important figure, and not only youngsters know him very well, but also people of the age of their grand-parents, even perhaps their great-grand-parents. Together, the different generations enjoy the small, daily adventures of Tomke, all of which are very recognizable for children.

The Festival itself is a reading festivity for everyone in Fryslân, aimed at the active use of the Frisian language. There is a reading competition for schoolchildren and a Telling bus travels throughout the province and visits schools.

Merchandising

And of course, not only books appear in such a constellation; we must note that a lot of merchandising or supporting materials are also presented. Some of them are meant to be used in libraries or playing groups, for example the Tomke-telling suitcase, the poster, CD. and DVD about the small boy. But the scope of Tomke is going further.

There was a party in a village near Ljouwert a few weeks ago. Such a party usually starts with a parade. In this particular parade, this year, Tomke and his friends were also present. My own son represented the kangaroo figure and my small grandson was Tomke himself. Everyone recognized them as the figures from the story; they even won the first prize! It is a good illustration of the popularity of these stories.



It should be clear that the purpose of the Tomke-project is not only encouraging reading, or book promotion; it is also designed to promote language acquisition. The hope is that children and their educators will recognize how wonderful language is, in this specific case the Frisian language.

Ferstival

There is another project I will very briefly tell you something about. This project is the reciting project Ferstival.

It is very popular in Fryslân and aims at the older 10+ age group. Although this age group is not the best reading group, they like this activity well enough. Perhaps it has to do with the commitment of their schools to the success of the project. Enthusiastic teachers, as we all know, inspire their pupils.

The phenomenon of reciting is a time-honoured practice in Fryslân and was practised already in the 19th century when adults recited for adults. From and through education, the reciting tradition aroused the interest of children and their educators, and in 1941 a committee was set up to organise competitions in reciting for students of secondary schools. This 'Ferstival', as the event has been called since 1968, has an influence on Frisian children's and youth literature because it awakens an interest in the sort of literature it encourages not only amongst those who recite but those around them, and in fact in a much wider circle, even for the children's literature itself.

In addition to the oral activities, a collection of poetry for children, *Fersefariaasje*, (Versified Variations) is published from which the readers can select texts to read. This book is made up in part of earlier poets' collections, but each year the organisation invites poets to write new poetry for the young as well. After a number of years this sometimes leads to new collections by individual poets and over time has contributed to enriching Frisian children's literature.

Conclusion

I presented some projects which are meant to stimulate the development and enjoyment of Frisian children's literature. The first project targets young children and is very popular among Frisian speaking kids and Dutch speaking kids as well. The other projects aim at engaging adolescents and are also very popular. The success has to do



with transmitters who are able to inspire the youngsters and show them how wonderful language is, how wonderful their own mother tongue is and how wonderful the language of other people is. I hope once again, that these projects can provide an example to be used for the same purpose and in the interest of other lesser used languages.

IBBY could be an instrument for that because of the experience from several related situations.

