



Minorities: the challenge of language; the promise of reading

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Abstract: The autochthonous, lesser-used language Frisian is the mother tongue of about 400.000 inhabitants of Fryslân, in the north of The Netherlands. Children grow up bilingually, in Dutch and in Frisian. I will address the actual language situation there and the current situation of children's literature. The appearance of Diet Huber's debut collection *Tutte with the Ribbons*, 1955, was a landmark in Frisian children's literature. A small minority literature cannot exist without 'coproduction'. I will discuss infrastructures like publishing, reading place, promotion and awards, such as the Simke Kloostermanpriis and the IBBY-Honour-diploma. IBBY should institute a theme group which would study children's literature in these languages and promote their production and reception.

Key words: Frisian, co-production, publishing, reading place, promotion, awards.

Introduction

In this lecture I will present the example of a literature written in a lesser-used language. One of the autochthonous languages of Europe, Frisian, is the mother tongue of about 400.000 inhabitants of Fryslân, in the north of The Netherlands. The Frisian language is centuries old and differs considerably from the first official language of The Netherlands, Dutch. Nevertheless, it is related to other languages, especially to Dutch and English.

Fryslân is a bilingual province where all children grow up bilingually and can encounter literature in two languages, Dutch and Frisian. Therefore, these children enjoy a privileged position. This is not only true for the children who speak Frisian. Many children in Friesland do not speak Frisian but in spite of this, they are acquainted with Frisian children's literature in schools, libraries and via television.

First, I will address the actual language situation in Fryslân and then the current situation of its literature. The developments in the status and recognition of the Frisian language, and the impact of this on education, are stimulating the growth and emancipation of children's literature in this language as well.

Actual situation of Frisian as a lesser used language

Frisian is the second language of the Netherlands, spoken by the majority of the population of the province of Fryslân. Fryslân is one of twelve provinces of the Netherlands. Since 1970, Frisian has been recognized as the official second language in the Netherlands. Of the more than 600,000 people who live there, 74% actively speak Frisian and 94% can



understand the language. In the second half of the 20th century, specifically in 1969, 1980 and 1995, three surveys on language competence, language behavior and language attitudes were undertaken. In 2007 a quick rate was made. The surveys of 1995 and of 2007 indicated that the language attitude in respect to the education of children is, in principle, positive; a majority supports teaching of all four skills.

In order for a language to be preserved and to develop, education in that language is indispensable. For a long time education in Frisian was of a private nature without support from the government. Only since 1907, with a subsidy from the provincial government, have Frisian lessons after school hours been provided. After 1937, and particularly in 1955, 1980 and 1993, formal steps were made towards providing education in the Frisian language, recorded in the Education Law. Nowadays teachers are formally obligated to teach Frisian as a subject and they may use the language as a medium of instruction in all grades. Media, including radio and television, present successful programs for schools, including those with a literature focus.

The measures for the emancipation of the Frisian language and literature have been successful at least in this respect: that Frisian reading is becoming more and more common for all children and is becoming a part of children's lives.

Skills in reading and writing are the basis of all literature. The first problem facing readers in minority languages is developing skill in the reading process. First, there is the target group of Frisian children's literature: the young readers. A special feature of education, regarding reading in Frisian, is that students at the end of primary school have good results in reading comprehension.

However, it is not only the younger readers of children's literature who have problems with reading Frisian. The reading skills, or rather lack of them, of adults, educators and transmitters of children's literature, bring their own problems. In all cultures it is important to transmit one's own culture, one's own literature to future generations by reading to children. But often it's the lack of technical skill, that causes Frisian parents to use books in their second language, not in their own.

Teachers are another important group of transmitters. Not every teacher in Fryslân has had an education in Frisian and many do not know enough about Frisian books and literature. By consequence, some do not read to their pupils because they lack the relevant knowledge.



Fortunately however, many teachers in Fryslân are convinced of the value of Frisian language, literature and culture.

The good news is that the reading skills of children and transmitters are gradually improving. Together with improving reading skills, the quality of writing is also rising, both amongst children and adults. Over time, authors without any previous education in Frisian have attended courses or taught themselves to write in their own language, and as a result of all these efforts, a modern Frisian literature, fiction as well as non-fiction, has come to life.

Current situation of Frisian children's literature

The roots of Frisian children's literature lie in the 19th century when interest in the Frisian language as a written language, a literary language, a language of books was rekindled. Literature was seen as part of a cultural heritage. As of the twentieth century, developments in education have often been connected with the growth of this literature.

The first person to write a Frisian book for children was the teacher, Harmen Sytstra. In 1846 he published a Grimm fairy tale in translation. He gave the story a Dutch title, *Gelukkig Hansje* (Lucky Hans) to help his young readers who were not accustomed to reading Frisian.

Since the 1950s, much original work, prose as well as poetry, has been published. The appearance of Diet Huber's debut collection, *Tutte mei de linten* (Tutte with the Ribbons, 1955) was a landmark in Frisian children's literature. After the Second World War, authors initially continued to follow old patterns exploring traditional genres and creating a 'land of childhood' with traditional norms and values. The poetry of Diet Huber and many colleagues changed this. Their work focused on the experience and emotions of the children and moved the emphasis from a pedagogic-didactical and/or language political one to a more literary one.

Today, the existing infrastructure and conditions that include excellent printing possibilities, wider markets, government subsidies supporting the publication of books and a well-established library system are comparatively favorable and result in as many as twenty to twenty-five children's books published out of a total number of a hundred books in Frisian, originals and translations, published every year.

I now wish to focus on four items: publishing, the place of reading, promotion and awards.



Publishing

Publishers in minority languages such as the Frisian language have their own particular problems. There are authors with recognized qualities, but can they produce enough books for Frisian children in all age groups? Twenty to twenty-five Frisian books a year means books in all genres: picture books for the youngest children, books for first readers, but also youth novels, historical novels, etc. Very soon a publisher has to admit that he cannot do without translations if he wants to offer enough reading material. The next question is raised. What kind of books are to be translated? Books from the dominant language? But children can read that language as fluently as their own language, often better. Bestsellers from other foreign languages? But often those books have been translated into the dominant language already. Besides, translating is expensive.

That the classics of world literature are also available in Frisian is an important fact. It plays a role in strengthening the status of the language. Numerous older and modern classics can be read in Frisian: there are the classics from the English Golden Age of children's literature, including *Alice in Wonderland*¹, *Winnie-the-Pooh* and the tales of Beatrix Potter, from Germany, the mischievous lads of Wilhelm Busch, *Max und Moritz*, from France A. de Saint Exupéry's, *Le petit prince*. As well, modern classics such as the books of the Swedish author Astrid Lindgren and the English Charlie-books by Roald Dahl have been published in Frisian. In fact, six books by the Swedish author, translated into Frisian, have been presented to the Junibacken museum in Stockholm.

One of the solutions for the translation problem is *co-production*, especially with regard to picture books. Co-production is possible between a publishing house in a dominant language and one in a lesser used language, or between various publishers in the lesser used languages themselves. It's clear that a small minority language like Frisian cannot do without the phenomenon of coproduction. The translation from other languages has delivered a good stock of picture books for Frisian children. Their popularity can be measured from the number of reprints. For example, the adventures of the little dog Spot – his Frisian name is Stip – by Eric Hill, and of Little Bear by Martin Waddell are very popular in Frisian too. The books were even reprinted, a phenomenon that is rare in a lesser used language such as Frisian.

¹ *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll was translated by Tiny Mulder in 1964, with a second edition in 1994. There will be a big manifestation in New York next year accompanied by a book about translations around the world of this classic, the Frisian one.



According to the publisher's website, there are now fourteen titles about the little dog available.

Reading place

When one has the good fortune of having a rich children's literature, it does not seem right not to create enough opportunities to read this literature. How about a reading place to inspire young readers? Children first encounter literature within the family, then in playgroups and schools, and subsequently through the work of important institutions for reading and book promotion. In most modern homes, television and computer technologies are very serious competitors of reading. Beyond this, the reading habits of parents are very important models for the reading behavior of children. In families where parents read a lot, also to their children, these children read more books². Their socialization in literacy is optimal. But what about those who do not have such a home situation? Other institutions outside the family sphere can have a role to play there.

The first institution outside the family for the young child from two to four years old is the playgroup. For the last ten years, beside a lot of Dutch speaking groups, there have been a number of playgroups where the leaders always speak Frisian with the children, even with children from Dutch-speaking backgrounds. Dutch-speaking parents probably like these groups because they provide early immersion and so they send their children to these groups with pleasure. A basic assumption of the groups is that there is a frequent use of Frisian picture books which leaders are taught to use well. In this way, the playgroups provide a good continuation of Frisian literacy socialization in family life. The success of the groups is reflected in the popularity of picture books.

Education, especially primary school education, continues this process of literacy socialization. For literacy education, the interaction between school and family is important: when reading is a significant part of school education, it can inspire parents to promote the children's reading. Most schools have their own library; when there are enthusiastic teachers and librarians working in and with them, the children they serve read more and literacy amongst this population improves. When these teachers and librarians take a lively interest in Frisian literature, young people also develop an enjoyment of these books.

² Van Lierop-Debrauwer, Helma van, 1990.



Bibliotheekservice Fryslân is worth noting here: it is a service organization for libraries which supports regional programs to promote reading in the Frisian language and provides information and materials to libraries.

Promotion

Book promotion is very important and has two aspects. Incorporated into reading promotion there is the aspect of sales promotion. Without a substantial amount of readers, books will not be sold.

The educational publishing house *Afûk*, which publishes mainly in Frisian, is at the same time the publisher of most of today's Frisian children's books. It is a key player in the promotion of literature for children in the Frisian language. Reading promotion is also the aim of organizations such as the Foundation of the Frisian Book and the Foundation of the Frisian Children's Book, the latter more especially directed toward reading and studying Frisian children's literature.

Reading promotion begins with the important question: how can you reach the intended group of readers? Activities in book promotion aim at the groups of pre-school. Playgroup leaders who are often Dutch-speakers are encouraged to use the mother tongue of the greater part of the children. Picture books are appropriate for this. For some years now, the month of November has been targeted as the month in which this group gets special attention. In cooperation with the regional broadcaster, reading and other activities around the little boy *Tomke* are organized. As a consequence, this original Frisian boy has grown very popular even beyond the borders of Fryslân. I will speak more about this very successful *Tomke*-project in a Round Table discussion.

To involve the young reader more completely, a children's jury has been working since 1992, in cooperation with schools and local libraries. Every year a certain age group can choose their favorite book from a list of books published in the prior three years. These books can be either original works or translated. Children work enthusiastically at this task. Figures about the number of participants illustrate this. There was a regression, as the results of 2006-2008 show. In 2009, there was no jury because of reorganization but in 2010 the number of participants was at high level again. This has to do with the age group of that year.

However, not only reading promotion is important. Sales promotion as a supplementary activity, which not only takes place in the regular book trade of shops, is



important too. This promotion had its climax in what was called the *Sutelaksje* (= Hawking Action), a very successful selling activity all over Fryslân that was led with the help of many volunteers. It is remarkable that children's books always had a high score. As of this year, this sales promotion will be re-organized to include six weeks of activities highlighting reading and sales promotion and highlighting children's books.

During the *Sutelaksje* a special book, *Action Book for Children* is presented and can be purchased for a small price when people buy children's books. Well-known authors are asked to write such an Action Book. Quality is the first criterion, with humor and excitement coming up close behind! Sales figures of the Action Books are high - between 3000 and 3500 copies sold. The Frisian children's books edition sells around 800 to 1000 copies. So the sales of the Action Books indicate the popularity of these books. The age groups for these Action Books are variable, but it is remarkable that the books for the younger age groups sell better than those for older children.

Awards

It is a well-known fact that awards stimulate the quality of children's literature. This holds true for all literature, regardless of the number of readers. Although Frisian children's literature is not a major force in the world of children's books, it has, nevertheless, been blessed – besides the Award of the Children's Book Jury – with the tri-annual *Simke Kloosterman* Prize and with the IBBY-Honour-diploma that provide recognition on an international stage. Rich imagination and attention to literary structure and language can be found in prize-winning books.

Prizes not only stimulate quality, but are also an indication of quality: books awarded the *Simke Kloosterman Award* could easily receive other awards and prizes as well. Some of the prizewinners have also been awarded a place on the IBBY-Honour list. The first Frisian book to appear on an IBBY-Honour list was *Bartele Bûse*, awarded in 1992, also a winner of the *Simke Kloosterman Award*, as was the book of Mindert Wynstra, *The House full of Stories*. That a place on the IBBY-Honour list is important can be concluded by translations of some of the Honour-winners. The Wynstra book, for example, was translated into Japanese and Korean,.

Recommendation

As literatures in minority languages often encounter problems similar to those



discussed in relation to Frisian literature for children, I recommend that IBBY institutes a theme group which would study children's literature in these languages and promote their production and reception. This could have a place within the *IBBY Documentation Centre of Children Books from Linguistic and Cultural Minorities*.

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