J.H. Halbertsma als lexicograaf: studies over het Lexicon Frisicum (1872)

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5 J. H. Halbertsma: Sexual Language and the Lexicon Frisicum

5.1 Introduction
In many societies, sexual language is taboo and treated in a special way. To a lexicographer this means that the ideas of a particular society should be taken into account when it comes to incorporating sexual language into a dictionary (Radtke 1990:1194). Béjoint (2000:133) implies that lexicographers actually do so, when he says that ‘all dictionaries reflect the dominant values and ideas of the societies that produce them.’ According to Béjoint (2000:136), that is exactly what dictionary users want: ‘they want their dictionary to transmit what is generally thought to be good or bad in the society in which they live. They want their dictionaries to mirror the likes and dislikes of the society as a whole.’ For merchandising reasons, publishers often object to including sexual language in their dictionaries (Radtke 1990:1194). We may conclude from Radtke and Béjoint, that the contents of a dictionary are, for the most part, determined by the intended audience. Related arguments are made by Radtke (1990:1194), who refers to Dornseiff’s thematic dictionary (1933) that, following Boissiere (1862), has a supplementary volume that contains sexual language and is meant to be used by scholars. Schweickard (1997:305) mentions an Italian dictionary by Ballesio (1898), which has an appendix that, for the sake of decency, lists sexual language that was not deemed fit to be included in the regular text. Radtke (1990:1195) states that up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, sexual language was included in general dictionaries, usually without any labels whatsoever. Systematic labeling of vulgar language came into use towards the end of the eighteenth century, and then into wider use in the nineteenth century. Radtke believes that this represents a development towards an increasing standardization of language. In France, Lebsanft (1997:117) recognizes a phase in the development of taboo in which, since the Renaissance, an ever more rigid standard of civilized language came into being, which reached its absolute peak in the middle of the nineteenth century. Schweickard (1997:304) shows that some nineteenth century Italian dictionaries were reluctant to include embarrassing words. Yet, Schweickard argues, it is too simple to conclude that by definition nineteenth century

Italian dictionaries are less liberal than modern ones. Schweickard’s case in point is the *Dizionario Della lingua italiana* (Tommaseo/Bellini 1865-1879), which to a considerable extent manages to reconcile the ever prominent nineteenth century puristic-educational elements and the philological urge to provide a listing of the lexicon that is as complete as possible. As a result the Dizionario includes a remarkably complete collection of delicate language material. So it is not so much the contemporary moral ideas as it is the basic attitudes of the lexicographer in question (and that of his publisher) that determine the contents of a dictionary (Schweickard 1997:304-305).

This point may be illustrated by a letter that the German linguist and lexicographer Jacob Grimm wrote to Matthias De Vries in 1852 (Soeteman 1982:38). De Vries was editor-in-chief of the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*, and Grimm wrote him to ask some questions about taboo words. Grimm’s basic attitude toward sexual language and the dictionary becomes apparent from the way he introduced his questions: ‘Der lexicograph und grammatiker müssen alle wörter gleich wichtig und heilig sein, folglich auch, die an sich unschuldigen obscoenen.’ There appeared to be a difference of opinion between Grimm and De Vries. The latter wanted to use the Dutch dictionary to improve and to purify the Dutch language, by excluding, among other things, indecent and uncivilized language. Halbertsma did not like this at all and complained to Grimm concerning Matthias de Vries’ plans. This was in 1858, six years after Grimm had told De Vries how a lexicographer should view obscene words. Halbertsma wrote to Grimm to say how pleased he was to see that Grimm *did* include obscene words in his dictionary, because obscene words usually are among the oldest in a language (Sijmons 1885:28-29). When volume I of the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* was published, it appeared that De Vries had changed his mind. In his preface (1882:XLV- XLVI) he acknowledged that Grimm was right when he said that words in themselves are pure and innocent.

Mathijsen (2002:21-94) describes sexuality as a social problem in nineteenth century Holland. She shows that there was a double moral standard where sexuality was concerned. Extramarital relations were tolerated, for men that is, and sometimes even considered necessary. Prostitution was state controlled, but female sexuality was under a taboo. Mathijsen found that there were hardly any allusions to sexuality in personal letters written by women, whereas men used to write each other rather frank letters. Higher literature showed the official moral standard by not entering into sexual detail. Everything that crossed the line had to be kept hidden. There existed pornography in those days, but when, in the eighteen sixties, the first novels that ignored the sexual taboo were published, they met with a wave of criticism in the moralist press. Halbertsma’s conviction that a dictionary should openly deal with sexual language was obviously not in accordance with the prevailing ideas about sexuality. He did not really have to worry about that, which he probably would
not have done anyway, because the Lexicon Frisicum was not meant for the Dutch general public. He knew that the Latin metalanguage of his dictionary would not be beneficial to the sales in Friesland, or in the Netherlands. Right from the beginning, the Lexicon Frisicum aimed at a European expert audience of (comparative) linguists of Germanic languages.

5.2 The Lexicon Frisicum

Halbertsma’s dictionary and the manuscripts upon which it is based contain, as might be expected, many words and expressions in the field of sexuality. Buma (1969a:107) noted that there were so many words and expressions for sleeping with a woman included in the Lexicon that one was inclined to think that Halbertsma took personal pleasure in amply discussing and including precisely this kind of language in his dictionary. Every now and then, his choice of examples would indeed seem to support the idea that Halbertsma simply enjoyed referring to sexual matters in his dictionary.

In the entry BAAS, ‘boss’, for instance, the first example is a proverb: *Dy to lang fär feint thjinje hauwe dien as hja baes wirde, qui adolescentes nimis diu venerem vagam coluerunt mariti sunt effutiti* (‘young men who sleep around too much will have fucked themselves exhausted by the time they become husbands’). The entry BLED (‘page, leaf of a book’) has four examples, the first of which is: *It boekje mei twa bledden, pudendum muliebre* (‘female genitals’). This is preceded by *tropice*, which may be translated as figurative or metaphorical. The second example, *Hy studjerret to folle yn it boekje mei twa bledden*, means ‘he studies too much in the book with two leaves,’ i.e., he is having too much sex (*nimium dat veneri vagæ*).

Halbertsma often worked by way of association; very many articles contain example sentences and references that are only remotely related to the entry word, and often these seem totally out of place. The entry *busjild*, modern spelling *bûsjild*, is a fine example of Halbertsma’s way of working:


*Bûsjild* is *pocket money* in British English (roughly *pocket change* in American English), and the Dutch equivalent is *zakgeld*. Perhaps prompted by Dutch *zak*, which is also short for *klootzak*, ‘scrotum’, Halbertsma gives as a figurative sense of *busjild*: vis procreatrix genitalium viri (‘the male organ’s ability to reproduce’), illustrated by the example *Di âlde stakker trouwt my dær ien flink jung frommis ind by hat nin busjild*. This may be translated ‘that poor old bastard is marrying a strapping young woman and he has no pocket money.’ The figurative meaning,
Halbertsma explains, is (hidden) in the scrotum (*figura latet in scroto*), which the Frisians call *di sek, sacculum*, ‘little bag’. *Sek*, by the way, can also be short for *kloatsek*, ‘scrotum.’ Halbertsma then refers the reader to Anglo-Saxon *puse, marsupium*, i.e. ‘pouch’ or ‘purse’, and Old High German *phoso*, which has the same meaning, as has Icelandic *pus*, which has an extra meaning, namely *volva equarum*, ‘vulva of a mare’, which probably brought Frisian *pus* (modern spelling *poes*), *cunnus* (‘vagina’), to Halbertsma’s mind. So he goes from *pocket money* to *vagina* in just ten lines! Though the etymology of *pus, cunnus* is probably correct, Halbertsma need not have mentioned it here. If at all, he should have mentioned it s.v. BUSE, ‘pocket’, which he did not; s.v. *bûse* he refers instead to Old English *hose*, ‘a hollow.’

Buma (1969a) is not the only one who thought that Halbertsma had a great personal fancy for sexual language. Kalma (1969b:45-46) concludes from Halbertsma’s published and unpublished scholarly and literary material, and that of his brothers Eeltje and Tjalling for that matter, that the three were all very interested in sexual matters. It is true, Kalma says, that Halbertsma does not use explicit language when dealing with sexuality, but it is equally true that he very often refers to things concerning sexuality — so much so, observes Kalma, that one cannot but conclude that Halbertsma had a more than average interest in sexual matters.

### Halbertsma and the Frisians

Kalma’s (1969b:45-46) observations were prompted by a Romantic and rather chauvinist paragraph in Halbertsma (1841:25) in which he claims that slavery would inevitably introduce disgusting and rude vileness into the language of any people. The Frisians had never been slaves, and the freedom of the Frisians had done great service to the Frisian language. They freely and naively called everything by its name. The only exceptions were dirty objects, diseases, and matters concerning procreation, for which the Frisians always used euphemisms. Halbertsma held this point of view all his life. In 1827 he had remarked that the delicacy of

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56 ‘Pussy as a slang term for the female pudenda is thought to derive ultimately from Low German *puse* ‘vulva’ or Old Norse *puss* ‘pocket, pouch.’ It does not occur in English with a sexual meaning until the 19th century; prior to that it had been used to refer to women in general (16th century)’ ([http://www.takeourword.com/pt.html](http://www.takeourword.com/pt.html)).

57 A few lines further on, Halbertsma expresses his conviction that the pure mind of the Frisians may be traced to chastity, protected by the forefathers as the primary virtue by means of hideous punishments. In all histories, he says, the Frisians are praised for their chastity and considered superior to any other people. This contrasts sharply with Mathijsen (2002:66), who claims that the Frisians were well known for their frivolity, and she refers to the diary of a nineteenth century Dutch writer who observed that the Frisian women, reserved and chaste as they might look, went around in hordes to offer themselves to anyone looking for lust.

58 This is a literal translation of *vuile voorwerpen*. Halbertsma is probably here referring to products of excretion.
expression of the seventeenth century Frisian poet Gysbert Japiks (1603-1666), whom he greatly admired, was a virtue of the Frisian national character rather than of Japiks himself. This was evident from the fact that the Frisian language had many euphemistic terms for the sexual organs and our lower, bestial needs. Every Frisian not wishing to be deliberately rude would always make use of these euphemisms. Halbertsma admits that the Frisian national character is neither polite nor considerate. Still, people who cursed and swore or used filthy language were exceptions to the Frisian national character (Halbertsma 1827b:308). Some years prior to his death he wrote of how the language of a Frisian people neither capable nor desirous of disguise called everything by its name but for things that might offend a chaste audience. For no single aspect of sexual reproduction existed for which the language did not have a euphemism (Halbertsma 1865b:8).

Frisian was barely a written language in Halbertsma’s day, so he had to collect his language material directly from the people; this, of course, fitted in nicely with his ideas about language and linguistics. Thus, where Modern Frisian is concerned, the *Lexicon* is based largely upon spoken language. Halbertsma interviewed people and jotted down interesting, strange, and dialectal linguistic usage in his notebook. He preferred to interview illiterate people. A farmer with a fine head, who never read, and chatty old women who could not tell A from B were his best informants (Halbertsma 1862a:259-260). So was all the sexual language cited in his dictionary fished from such uneducated farmers and talkative old women? Some, perhaps, but surely not all. In his hunt for words, Halbertsma met with much distrust, especially when people did not know him. He was aware that people warned each other of him, as an interrogative, mysterious stranger. It would seem unlikely, then, that Halbertsma’s farmers and old women felt free to discuss sexual matters with him. The twenty-three notebooks that have come down to us contain, indeed, hardly any notes on sexual matters. It would seem safe to assume that Halbertsma could draw on a large stock of sexual language of his own, which would do justice to his reputation. Kalma (1969b:46) suggests that Halbertsma’s preoccupation with sexuality was so strong that his mind was constantly looking for new words and expressions for sexual matters.

5.4 Degree of Offensiveness

Sexual language is not by definition obscene, offensive or taboo. The *Lexicon* does not itself always tell us which words were offensive and/or taboo in Halbertsma’s day. In a number of entries, words and expressions are referred to as being obscene, euphemistic, or trivial. But the dictionary is not very strict with its labels. S.v. BITHJINJE (modern spelling *betsjinje*), ‘serve,’ the phrase *inire fæminam*, ‘enter a woman,’ is labeled figurative or metaphorical, whereas *concubitus*, ‘sleeping with someone,’ is a euphemism s.v. the corresponding noun *bithjinning*, ‘servitude’ (modern spelling *betsjinning*).
Adams (1982:2) gives a rule of thumb, one might say, for obscene language: ‘A language will generally have a set of words which can be classified as the most direct and obscene terms for sexual parts of the body and for various sexual and excretory acts. As a rule, basic obscenities have no other, primary, sense to soften their impact. They are unusable in polite conversation, most genres of literature, and even in some genres which might be thought obscene in subject matter.’ There was not much contemporary or older literature in Halbertsma’s day, and contemporary literary citations in the Lexicon Frisicum are scarce. The dictionary does contain citations from (mostly legal) Old Frisian sources and from the work of the seventeenth century poet Gysbert Japiks, but on the whole the dictionary is based on oral language. We have seen that Halbertsma preferred to interview uneducated, illiterate people. Adams’ notion of polite conversation may be defined as conversation that is marked by consideration for others, tact, and observance of accepted social usage (cf. the American Heritage Dictionary 2000). What is considered accepted social usage may differ according to the social class that the interlocutors belong to. Yet it seems reasonable to assume that polite conversation is free from coarseness or vulgarity in all social classes, even if ‘in the spoken language public taboos are not so influential’ (Adams 1982:225). Still, if we assume that the lower classes may be more tolerant towards sexual language, we cannot simply take it for granted that the (spoken) language of the lower classes is obscene or coarse (cf. Adams 1982:215).

When we apply Adams’ rule to single out basic obscenities in the Lexicon Frisicum, we find very few indeed, and then only in the microstructure. Examples are skite (‘to shit’), kloatsek (‘scrotum’), and pisje (‘to piss’). Only kloatsek may be classified as sexual language. Moreover, pisje does not really belong to this list. Forty years ago pisje was still considered a completely inoffensive word, while nowadays most Frisians will not use it; it has become offensive to their ears, which shows that we have to be very careful not to judge nineteenth century Frisian by today’s standards.

It is hard to determine the degree of offensiveness of words and expressions dealing with sexuality in the first half of the nineteenth century. Moreover, what is offensive to the higher classes may not be so among the lower classes.

The nineteenth century Frisian readers of the Lexicon would have belonged to the higher social classes, and many would probably have indeed been offended by its frankness. In a lecture delivered to the rather elitist Frisian Society in the winter of 1857-1858, a speaker observed that the higher classes did not speak Frisian and consequently neither did they read Frisian. As a result, the people who wrote in Frisian were aiming their words at the lower classes and therefore strove to use so-called naive, often all but decent, expressions.

59 Adams remarks in a footnote that ‘they may of course in origin have been metaphorical, but metaphors often fade.’
The speaker thought that such behavior was bound to denigrate the Frisian language rather than to elevate it (cf. Breuker 1981a:75). He may have here had in mind Halbertsma, who, with two of his brothers, wrote popular stories in Frisian to promote and preserve the Frisian language. What we would like to have is contemporary evidence as to the degree of offensiveness of certain words and phrases lacking a usage label in the *Lexicon*. Such evidence is scarce. At the request of the French prince Louis Bonaparte, Halbertsma translated the Gospel according to St. Matthew into Frisian (Halbertsma 1858). Halbertsma (1865b:13) made clear that he used the language of his fine-headed farmers in this translation. At the same time, he said that he had tried to avoid language that might offend delicate ears. So we may assume that the language of his Matthew translation falls within the broad scope of generally acceptable euphemistic terms that Frisian is supposed to have in the field of sexuality (Brouwer 1997:73). Brouwer (1997:74) showed that Halbertsma in his manuscript replaced the verb brûke, ‘to use’, in Matthew chapter 1, verse 25 with the verb besliepe, ‘to sleep with.’ This was probably because he did not consider it fit to say that Joseph used Maria; but he did not see any problem in including the phrase ‘to use a woman’ in the *Lexicon Frisicum*, without any classification as to its acceptability.

55 Latin

Adams (1982:9) says that ‘the basic obscenity for the male organ was mentula.’ It was so obscene a word that ‘Cicero was not prepared to use mentula openly in his discussion of obscenity.’ Adams goes on: ‘By the time of Cicero, penis [‘tail’] had lost its literal sense; it is likely that some speakers did not interpret the sexual meaning as metaphorical.’ Interestingly, in the *Lexicon*, penis is used to refer to names for the male sexual organ of animals, and the obscenity mentula to that of human beings, even in the case of a neutral word like ding ‘thing.’ Does this mean that Halbertsma was more sensitive to sexual language than one would consider appropriate on the basis of his reputation and his scholarly point of view? To be able to decide this, we would need to know whether or not he was aware of the difference between penis and mentula, which we do not. Yet Halbertsma does not always seem to be entirely comfortable when he notes down sexual words in his own manuscripts. The metalanguage in the manuscripts is Dutch, but Halbertsma often switches to Latin when it comes to words that denote sexual activity or refer to sexual organs.60

60 Cf. Jacob Grimm, who in the preface to his dictionary remarks that the Latin language is useful in explaining lewd words. Through Latin, one can be less explicit and as it were disguise the meaning of such words: ‘Nicht zu verachten ist auch, daz durch den gebrauch der fremden sprache,’ i.e., Latin, ‘die erklärung der unzüchtigen wörter löblich verdeckt und dem algemeinen verständnis gewissermasen entzogen wird’ (1854, column XLI).
There is one notable omission in the *Lexicon Frisicum*. In his letter to Grimm, Halbertsma referred to the *crimen nefandum*, the unspeakable crime, or homosexuality, which according to Halbertsma was regarded as the ultimate abomination. Mathijsen (2002:16) and Hekma (2004:39) confirm that homosexuality was indeed not spoken of in nineteenth century Holland, though there was the occasional scandal. Hekma (2004:39) points out that homosexuality was a crime in the Netherlands until 1811, when the sodomy law was abolished. Maybe this explains why Halbertsma did not include words referring to homosexuality in his dictionary, but, according to his lexicographic principles, should have. Apparently homosexuality fell under so strict a taboo that even Latin was not distant and formal enough to deal with it.

5.6 Conclusion
As linguist and lexicographer, Halbertsma considered obscene words as good as any. Consequently, one would expect him to include sexual language in his dictionary, which he did. Indeed, there are so many sexual words and expressions in the *Lexicon Frisicum* that Buma (1969a) thought that Halbertsma had a strong fancy for sexual language. Kalma (1969b), on the basis of his published and unpublished works, concluded that Halbertsma had a more than average interest in sexuality. As a Romanticist and Frisian chauvinist, Halbertsma considered the Frisians a very noble and decent people who would never use downright offensive language, but would always prefer euphemisms. To Halbertsma, much of the sexual language he cites in the *Lexicon Frisicum* is probably acceptable euphemism, though the dictionary itself does not provide much information as to the degree of offensiveness of words and expressions referring to sexual matters. Halbertsma’s image of the Frisian people somehow seems to clash with his own image as someone who eagerly refers to sexuality in so many of his works. The latter image is so strong that I am inclined to think that the *Lexicon Frisicum* reflects Halbertsma’s keen interest in sexuality at least as much as his lexicographic and linguistic principles. Yet he also shows a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards sexual language. While he amply includes sexual language in his personal lexicographic manuscripts, he uses Latin rather than Dutch to translate and/or explain it. So even given that obscene words are as good as any, Halbertsma (instinctively?) treated them differently. Maybe the *Lexicon Frisicum* would not even have contained so many sexual words and expressions had its metalanguage not been Latin. Whatever his reasons for including so much sexual language in his dictionary, Halbertsma did include in it a rich collection of words and phrases referring to sexuality.