Growing up with Frisian and Dutch: The role of language input in the early development of Frisian and Dutch among preschool children in Friesland

Dijkstra, J.E.

Citation for published version (APA):
Dijkstra, J. E. (2013). Growing up with Frisian and Dutch: The role of language input in the early development of Frisian and Dutch among preschool children in Friesland.
1 Introduction

1.1 The role of bilingual language input in language minority contexts

Over the past decades, the influence of language input on the bilingual language development of children has been studied extensively (a.o. Hoff, Core, Place, Rumiche, Señor & Parra, 2012; Unsworth, 2012; Dixon, 2011; Thordardottir, 2011; Bohman, Bedore, Peña, Gillam & Pérez, 2010; Paradis, 2011, 2010; Quiroz, Snow & Zhao, 2010; Scheele, 2010; Scheele, Leseman & Mayo, 2010; Gathercole & Thomas, 2009; Cornips & Hulk, 2008; Duursma, Romero-Contreras, Szuber, Proctor, Snow, August & Calderón, 2007; Yip & Matthews, 2006; Driessen, van der Slik & de Bot, 2002; Oller & Eilers, 2002; Nicoladis, 1998; Hickey, 1997; Pearson, Fernández, Lewedeg & Oller, 1997). These studies demonstrate that the proficiency of bilinguals in their languages largely depends on the amount of input they receive in each language. More specifically, bilinguals who have considerably more exposure to one language will generally show a higher proficiency in that language compared to the other. The amount of input in each language differs in most bilingual contexts. This is especially true in bilingual contexts where one language is dominant over the other, for example in minority-majority language contexts. In such a context, the majority language is generally omnipresent and the minority language has a more modest place in society. From the perspective of children this means that, although most interactional language input may be in the minority language, e.g. from parents and other family members, neighbours or friends, there is almost always exposure to the majority language, due to its stronger presence in society. This is different for the children growing up with the majority language at home. These children will generally have little exposure to the minority language due to its modest place in society. In Wales, the national language, English, exists alongside the regional minority language, Welsh. Gathercole and Thomas (2009) investigated the proficiency of children and adults in both Welsh and English. They showed that in early acquisition of English, young children growing up with Welsh only or both Welsh and English at home lagged behind in English proficiency, compared to their L1-English peers. However, their study further revealed that the slower progression in English of these two groups of participants had decreased by
the end of primary education. Regardless of home language, school-aged children and adults had an equivalent command of English compared to their peers. In other words, even the L1-Welsh participants who had received less English input compared to their L1-English peers, had caught up in English proficiency by the end of primary school. This is a surprising result, since one would expect they would still lag behind in English. In contrast, the participants who were exposed to English only or to both English and Welsh at home lagged behind in Welsh compared to the L1-Welsh participants and this delay persisted over time. It seemed that the proficiency in Welsh was directly linked to the amount of Welsh input whereas English proficiency was not. Gathercole and Thomas’ study shows that limited input to the majority language led to an adequate proficiency in English, while continued exposure to the minority language was needed to establish sufficient command of Welsh.

In the context of Gathercole and Thomas’ study (2009), the question arises whether their findings will also hold for other minority contexts. The Frisian-Dutch language context is a case in point. Frisian is a minority language spoken in the province of Friesland, in the north of the Netherlands. Like Wales, Friesland is an interesting case for studying bilingualism, since here two closely related languages, i.e. Dutch and Frisian, are used alongside one other. Taking the perspective of the Netherlands, Dutch is referred to as the majority language in this dissertation, since it is the national language. This does not necessarily mean that the inhabitants of Friesland speak Dutch more than Frisian. In fact, Frisian has quite a strong position in the rural parts of Friesland, sometimes even stronger than Dutch (Gorter & Jonkman, 1995). Nevertheless, Frisian is referred to as minority language in this dissertation, since it is a minority language in the Netherlands.

The current project monitored the Frisian and Dutch language development of young children in Friesland. In relation to language input, children in Friesland are exposed to both Dutch and Frisian from an early age onwards, although the amount of input in the two languages might be highly unbalanced. The role of language input, whether it is the input at home or outside the home and family, has received scarcely any attention in research in the Frisian-Dutch language context. Moreover, most educational studies in Friesland have concentrated primarily on school-aged bilinguals. A study of Ytsma (1995) among pupils in primary education (age 8-9 years and 11-12 years) showed that the home language played a substantial role in the acquisition of Frisian vocabulary. While the L1-Frisian children obtained a mean score close to the maximum score of the self-developed Frisian productive vocabulary test, the mean
score of their L1-Dutch peers on that vocabulary test was substantially lower. Furthermore, the L1-Dutch children showed a considerable variance in their scores on this Frisian vocabulary test, and it appeared that their lexical knowledge of Frisian was related to the amount of Frisian exposure they received outside the home and family (see § 2.2). On the other hand, de Jager, Klunder & Ytsma (2002a, b, c) and van Ruijven (2006) found that pupils in the fourth year of primary education (age 7-8 years) in Friesland performed similarly in Dutch compared to their peers in the rest of the Netherlands (see § 2.2). These findings suggest that in primary education children in Friesland catch up in Dutch. Together these studies confirm Gathercole and Thomas’ results (2009) in the Welsh-English context. However, it is unclear if the findings of Ytsma (1995), de Jager et al. (2002a, b, c) and van Ruijven (2006) also apply to preschool children. This is supported by findings from the Gathercole and Thomas’ study (2009). Although the differences between the home language groups in English proficiency had decreased by the age of seven, there was an effect of home language among the four-year-olds. Moreover, it is important to gain as much knowledge as possible about the typical (bilingual) language acquisition of preschoolers. After all, without proper knowledge about the typical language acquisition, whether monolingual or bilingual, it is impossible to indicate if children have language deficits or not. It is well known that language deficits that occur at a young age will, in the long run, also affect other skills such as literacy and further academic performance (Dickinson & McCabe, 2001; Scarborough, 2001), so it is important to identify language problems as soon as possible.

Gathercole and Thomas’ paper (2009) discusses six cross-sectional studies among children aged between 3-11.5 years (study 1-4) and adults (study 5-6). These studies concern Welsh only (study 1-3), or both Welsh and English (study 4-6) (see also § 2.3 and § 2.4). The current project will partly replicate the Gathercole and Thomas’ study (2009). The central theme will be the role of language input in the development of a bilingual vocabulary and morphosyntax in Frisian and Dutch. It is not an exact replication of Gathercole and Thomas (2009), since the focus in the current project lies on preschool children (aged between 2.5-4 years) only. Another difference between both studies is that the design of the current project is longitudinal.

Although the main focus within our project will lie on language input, the relation between morphosyntax and vocabulary will also be examined. Several studies confirm the existence of a strong relation between morphosyntax and lexicon (see § 2.5 for an overview of prior research on this topic).
Since this aspect has never been investigated before in Frisian-Dutch bilinguals, the relationship between the two language components will be studied both within and across Frisian and Dutch.

The next section (§ 1.2) will give some sociolinguistic characteristics of Friesland and the Frisian language, followed by a section (§ 1.3) with general information on preschoolers in Friesland.

1.2 Friesland: a region with two languages

Friesland (Frisian: Fryslân) is a bilingual region located in the north of the Netherlands. More specifically, Friesland is one of the twelve provinces of the Netherlands, as indicated by the dark area in Figure 1.1. The province of Friesland has 647,282 inhabitants (1 January 2011, source CBS), which is 4% of the 16.7 million people living in the Netherlands. In addition to the national language of Dutch, the autochthonous minority language Frisian (Dutch: Fries; Frisian: Frysk) is spoken in Friesland. Outside the Netherlands, the language is also known as West Frisian, to avoid confusion with the other Frisian languages, which are spoken in Germany (i.e. Saaterland Frisian and North Frisian). Therefore it should be noted that whenever the term Frisian is used in this dissertation, it refers to the West Frisian language.

Like Dutch and English, Frisian is a West Germanic language. In the Middle Ages the Old Frisian language was closely related to Old English. It developed independently of Dutch, but nowadays, due to language contact, the modern Frisian language contains quite a few Dutch loan words and morphosyntactical structures (Popkema, 2006; Breuker, 2001). It should be noted, however, that most of these morphosyntactic structures are not used in Frisian child language, since they mainly concern mature language structures used in adult language, e.g. the verb order in an infinite verb cluster in subordinate clauses.

Frisian has four main dialects as indicated in Figure 1.2, i.e. Klaaifrysk, the variety spoken in the western half of Friesland, Wâldfrysk, spoken in the eastern part of the province and Südwesthoëksk, spoken in the southern part of Friesland. The fourth dialect is called Noardeasthoëksk, which is spoken in the northeastern part of Friesland. Although these dialects differ on the phonological and lexical levels, they are mutually understandable (it is beyond the scope of this project to describe the differences between the dialects in detail; see Popkema (2006) and Tiersma (1999) for an overview). Frisian is strongest
in the rural areas of the province of Friesland, compared to the more urban areas, such as Leeuwarden (Frisian: Ljouwert), the capital of Friesland (Gorter & Jonkman, 1995). Furthermore, in some cities/towns Stedsfrysk, a mixture of Frisian and Dutch, is spoken, i.e. in Leeuwarden (Frisian: Ljouwert), Dokkum (Dokkum), Franeker (Frjentsjer), Harlingen (Harns), Bolsward (Boalsert), Sneek (Snits), and Heerenveen (It Hearrenfêan). Whenever the term Frisian is used in this dissertation, it refers to the four main dialects mentioned above. However, it does not include the Stedsfrysk dialect nor the quite distinct Frisian dialects spoken in Hindeloopen (Hylpen) and Stavoren (Starum), and on the islands of Schiermonnikoog (Skiermûntseach) and Terschelling (Skylge).
In the 1970s, Frisian was officially recognized by the Dutch government as the second language in the Netherlands after Dutch. Furthermore, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages was signed by the Dutch government in 1992 and ratified in 1996 with respect to Frisian (Council of Europe, 2012). A regional radio and television station broadcasts in Frisian several hours per day. Frisian is mostly used orally and in informal domains, such as within the family, among colleagues, etc. It has a modest place in formal areas such as the church, education, or written media (Breuker, 2001).

Several sociolinguistic studies in the twentieth century have revealed a slow decline in the percentage of speakers of Frisian (cf. Gorter & Jonkman, 1995; Gorter, Jelsma, van der Plank & de Vos, 1984; Pietersen, 1969). The latest
large-scale sociolinguistic study (Gorter & Jonkman, 1995) showed that 94% of the population in Friesland understand Frisian, while 74% of the inhabitants claim to be able to speak Frisian, 65% can read Frisian, and only 17% can write in Frisian. More than half of the inhabitants (55%) declare that they are native speakers of Frisian. It is commonly assumed that every adult inhabitant of Friesland has a thorough command of Dutch, since it is the main language used in education. In other words, nearly all Frisian-speaking adults are (orally) bilingual in Frisian and Dutch, whereas adults who have Dutch as their mother tongue are not necessarily able to speak Frisian. A recent study conducted by the provincial government showed that on average 48% of the inhabitants speak Frisian to their children (Provinsje Fryslân, 2011). Approximately half of the population of young children in Friesland would then seem to acquire Frisian as (one of) their mother tongue(s). Statistically Friesland has 35,724 children aged 0-5 years (1 January 2011, source CBS), so in 2011 about 17,000 children grew up as young bilinguals, living in families with one or both parents providing Frisian input.

1.3 Preschoolers in Friesland

In the Netherlands, children generally start attending preschool by the age of two years and a half, sometimes a few months earlier. They continue going to preschool till the age of four, when they enter primary education. Preschool education is not mandatory in the Netherlands. Most children go to preschool for one to four sessions per week. A preschool session lasts 1.5-2.5 hours and takes place in the morning or in the afternoon. Therefore, a preschool session is also called a ‘morning’ or ‘afternoon’ in colloquial language. In some cases, when children first start attending preschool, they only go there for one session per week and this is gradually increased to two, three, or sometimes four sessions (Beekhoven, Jepma & Kooiman, 2011).

Some preschools in Friesland have an explicit language policy, others do not. For example, there are Frisian-medium preschools where the teachers speak Frisian only while communicating with the children, or bilingual preschools where one teacher consistently speaks Frisian, while the other uses Dutch only. There are 76 Frisian-medium or bilingual (Frisian/Dutch) preschools in Friesland (2013, Sintrum Frysttalige Berne-opfang). It must be noted, however, that this number includes preschools that are officially certified as Frisian-medium or bilingual preschools as well as preschools that are
still in the process of certification. Dutch is the main medium of instruction at preschools in Friesland that lack an explicit language policy, although it is a general observation that Frisian is also used, for example in individual contact with the children.

By the age of four, children enter primary education where, in general, the main language of instruction is Dutch and Frisian is only taught as a subject. There are also 23 officially certified primary schools in Friesland that operate within a language policy of three languages that are used as medium of instruction, i.e. Frisian, Dutch and English (July 2012, source: CEDIN/Taal-sintrum Frysk). English is introduced in the higher grades at these schools.

Young children are exposed to language in all situations: at home, at daycare, at preschool, etc. However, it is a general observation that until they enter preschool, most children in Friesland have mainly been exposed to their own home language(s). Especially when there is only one language spoken at home, the exposure to another language than the one spoken at home is often still limited. The exposure to that other language may, for example, come from relatives or friends who use it or it is the main language used at preschool or daycare. Other ways of exposure to the other language than the one spoken at home is through television, radio, book reading, etc. Since Dutch is omnipresent and Frisian has a much more modest place in society, children with Frisian as their home language have more exposure to Dutch compared to the Frisian exposure that children with Dutch as their home language receive. Furthermore, in terms of Frisian and Dutch language proficiency, it is a general observation that preschoolers with Frisian as their home language speak their L2, Dutch. When they are less proficient in the L2, they often mix both languages. Conversely, children with Dutch as their home language hardly use their L2, Frisian. If they use Frisian, this will in most cases be restricted to a few Frisian words.

With Frisian being the minority language and Dutch the majority language in Friesland, preschoolers with Frisian as their home language can therefore be described as minority L1-speakers/majority L2-learners, since they grow up with Frisian but are exposed to Dutch to a lesser extent. Conversely, preschoolers with Dutch as their home language can be described as majority L1-speakers/minority L2-learners, since their exposure to Frisian is, in most cases, minimal.
1.4 The background of the current project

In 2006 the provincial government, the Provinsje Fryslân, launched a new policy focusing on the improvement of the language position of Frisian in preschool, primary and secondary education (Provinsje Fryslân, 2006), setting up an integral language policy for all education levels. Translated to preschool level, this means providing all the conditions necessary for optimal development in both Frisian and Dutch for all young children in Friesland. Since the late 1990s, money and effort had already been put into developing a Frisian language programme for preschoolers and in establishing bilingual and Frisian-medium preschool and daycare facilities. However, little was known about the Frisian and Dutch language development of young bilinguals. As stated in § 1.1, findings from van Ruijven (2006), de Jager et al. (2002a, b, c) and Ytsma (1995) with primary school children in the Frisian-Dutch context may not hold for preschool-aged children. Therefore, in 2008, the current longitudinal project was initiated in order to gain more insight on the early acquisition of Frisian and Dutch. The focus was the preschool period, i.e. when children are aged between 2;6 (i.e. two years and six months) and 4;0 years old. The project consists of different types of studies: test adaptation and evaluation, and test data and spontaneous speech samples collected longitudinally.

1.5 Thesis outline

Chapter 2 provides the theoretical framework for this project starting with an overview of previous studies of the early acquisition of Frisian and Dutch. Next, the chapter summarizes and discusses previous literature concerning the influence of language input on early bilingual language development, focusing on vocabulary and morphosyntax. The research questions and hypotheses are formulated and the two conceptual models presented at the end of Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 discusses the research design and the participants, as well as the procedure, the instruments and statistical analyses used in the project.

Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 address the empirical work conducted in the project. Since there were no Frisian vocabulary tests available, a Dutch receptive and a Dutch productive vocabulary test were adapted for Frisian. Chapter 4 describes the adaptation process and the pilot that was conducted with preliminary versions of these Frisian adaptations, including a discussion on
the reliability of the final versions of the adaptations. During the adaptation process the use of cognate items in the vocabulary tests was challenging for the validity of the vocabulary tests. Since Frisian and Dutch are closely related, there is a partial overlap in vocabulary, resulting in cognate items, i.e. words that are similar in pronunciation as well as meaning in both languages, in the Frisian and Dutch vocabulary tests. Chapter 5 describes how this issue was resolved.

Chapter 6 examines the influence of language input on the early development of Frisian and Dutch vocabulary. Language input inside and outside the home function as independent variables, and they are tested for their relationship with lexical proficiency in both languages.

Chapter 7 concerns the role of language input in the early development of Frisian and Dutch morphosyntax. Again, language input inside and outside the home function as independent variables. Next, the relationship between morphosyntax and lexicon is examined.

The final chapter, Chapter 8, discusses the findings from the vocabulary and morphosyntactic studies with respect to the research questions. It further addresses limitations of the studies. The chapter ends by drawing general conclusions and by providing recommendations for future research.

The current project will contribute to a growing body of research exploring the influence of language input in bilingual language proficiency, more specifically within a minority-majority language context. It further will explore the relation between morphosyntax and vocabulary within and across two languages. Practically, the findings will provide parents as well as language professionals such as speech and language therapists and educational specialists working in Friesland with useful knowledge on the acquisition of Frisian and Dutch by young children.