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## METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE EMERGENCE OF OLD FRISIAN

The question addressed in this article is whether it is possible to identify the time of the emergence of Frisian from the rest of West Germanic. Some of the criteria used in determining the chronology of Frisian language history are evaluated in terms of their temporal and spatial aspects. Phonological features that appear to differentiate languages from a present-day perspective disappear in a haze of synchronic and diatopic allophonic alternations. Reconstructions of the order of phonological developments often turn out to be best-fit interpretations of changes whose precise character, age and location are hard to determine. Besides, reconstructions of regional distribution are obscured by subsequent migrations and dialect shifts. Consequently, the splits in a language family tree are not bifurcations, but bushes of variation, where only hindsight allows an identification of the chronology and the decisive factors involved.

### *1. Introduction: the problem of West-Germanic language grouping*

Modern West-Germanic is commonly considered to consist of five languages: English, Frisian, Dutch, Low German and High German. The delineation of English hardly poses any problem. Frisian can relatively easily be separated from the directly neighbouring language varieties (e.g. Heeringa 2004), but its internal coherence as a synchronic group is questionable as is evidenced by the nearly complete lack of mutual intelligibility of its varieties.

The Dutch, Low and High German varieties constitute a dialectal continuum. The emergence of two standard languages from this continuum, however, triggers a division between the Dutch and German dialects, leaving the identity of Low German somewhat vague.

Given the ambiguity of this synchronic language grouping from a purely linguistic point of view, it becomes even more difficult to decide how languages should be identified in earlier times: when and how did the West Germanic languages arise as distinguishable units characterized by linguistic features shared by specific speech-communities, leading to more shared development (cf. Århammar 1990 for the emergence of the Old Frisian – Old Saxon language border)?

The Frisian situation is clearly different from the Dutch-German continuum. In a historical reconstruction all post-mediaeval Frisian varieties can be deduced from a language form that comes close to the language attested in the Frisian legal texts

from between about 1250 and 1400. This implies that Frisian must in the course of time have emerged as an identifiable entity among the West Germanic dialects. Gysseling concludes that most of the distinctive phonological features of Frisian had already developed between the years 700 and 800 (Gysseling 1962: 9, 17). Viewed from a synchronic perspective, at the time when North Sea Germanic was expanding and its characteristic features were only about to develop both in Britain and on the continent, the separation of Frisian from English (Siebs 1889, Stiles 1995, Kortlandt 2008) and Saxon (Århammar 1990) may have been less obvious.

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the limitations of reconstructed chronologies when discussing the emergence of distinct varieties from a common ancestral language. To begin with, in section 2, I will evaluate the criteria that are applied in the literature to the emergence of Frisian as a separate entity within West Germanic. Section 3 illustrates with various examples how some common assumptions are too rigid in their current form. As all reconstructions build upon some form of structuralist reasoning, I want to make some remarks about their reliability in section 4.1, while section 4.2 deals with “colonial languages” and dialect levelling as obscuring factors in the reconstruction of language history. In section 5, I will summarise the implications of such considerations for our understanding of language split and development.

## ***2. Criteria for language grouping***

In discussions about the historical reality of “North Sea Germanic”, “Anglo-Frisian” and the emergence of Frisian as a distinct unit in this larger grouping of West Germanic language varieties, a couple of more or less explicit assumptions are generally made:

- 1) Developments shared by several languages precede language-specific developments;
- 2) similar or identical developments following language-specific ones are by definition not shared developments;
- 3) shared developments have a larger geographical spread than language-specific ones and are therefore (cf. assumption 1) also older.

Sketches of the emergence of Frisian and English are mostly based on phonological criteria, but also on morphological ones. The distinction between shared and language-specific features follows from the reconstructed chronology. The

order of events is reconstructed with the help of structuralist argumentation.<sup>1</sup> Stiles explicitly formulates assumption 1 and 2:

In order to establish genetic relationship in a family-tree sense, the common [= shared, AV] changes must be earlier in the relative chronology than any significant separate developments. If the common changes are later, then it is a case of convergence. (Stiles 1995: 181)

Also Nielsen (2001: 513) implicitly seems to operate with assumption 1 when he mentions “[...] shared innovations implemented before O[ld] Fr[isian] and O[ld] E[nGLISH] began to diverge [...]”. Assumption 1 is also implicit in Bremmer’s text:

Practically all of these [9] phenomena are Ingvaemonic innovations within West Germanic, and [the initial 7] also apply to Old English, [...]. At a certain moment in time, Frisian underwent innovations which were not shared by the adjacent Ingvaemonic dialects, [...]. (Bremmer 2008: 288)

Assumption 3 is explicitly formulated by Van Bree:

There is a number of features that penetrate deep into the interior and for which the term coastal feature is therefore too limited. [...] Here follows a [...] listing [of such] early [items....] Next to that, there are younger features which have a much more limited coastal spread on the continent.<sup>2</sup> (Van Bree 1997: 11-12)

Section 3 will bring examples of developments where “old” is not always “shared” and is not always “widely spread”. Also the reverse is not always true. Special attention must be given to the possibility that inter-language variation and intra-language variation could be equally large at the time when a feature developed, and therefore such a feature may not be a reliable distinguishing characteristic between languages. The discussion in section 3 does not aim at a full coverage of such matters. The examples given there merely serve as illustrations of the complications involved in reconstructing the oldest stages of Frisian and closely related Germanic varieties.

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1. E.g. De Vaan (2011: 312) states that Kortlandt’s proposal “[...] is more attractive than that of his predecessors since it pays due attention to the synchronic vowel system in each of the reconstructed pre-stages [...]”.
  2. “Er is een aantal verschijnselen dat tot diep in het binnenland is binnengedrongen en waarvoor de term kustverschijnsel dus te beperkend is. [...] Hieronder volgt een [...] opsomming (V = vroeg) [...] Daarnaast zijn er jongere verschijnselen die op het continent veel duidelijker tot het kustgebied beperkt blijven. [...] (L = later)” (Van Bree 1997: 11-12).

### 3. Inter- and intra-group variation in North Sea Germanic developments

#### 3.1 Rounding of /a/ to /ɔ/ before nasals

The first example in this section concerns a feature that is generally considered to be one of the oldest North Sea Germanic features ( $\leq$  5<sup>th</sup> century): the rounding of /a/ to /ɔ/ before nasals /n, m, ŋ/, such as in *man* > *mon* ‘man’ (Stiles 1995: 199, Nielsen 2001: 520, Bremmer 2008: 287, Kortlandt 2008: 270). Here, “old” is certainly not “widespread” as, dialectally, it is largely confined to Old Frisian and Old English – with additional occurrences in the minor Old Saxon sources and the Straubing Heliand fragment, e.g. *mon* instead of *man* ‘man’ (Klein 1990: 203-206).

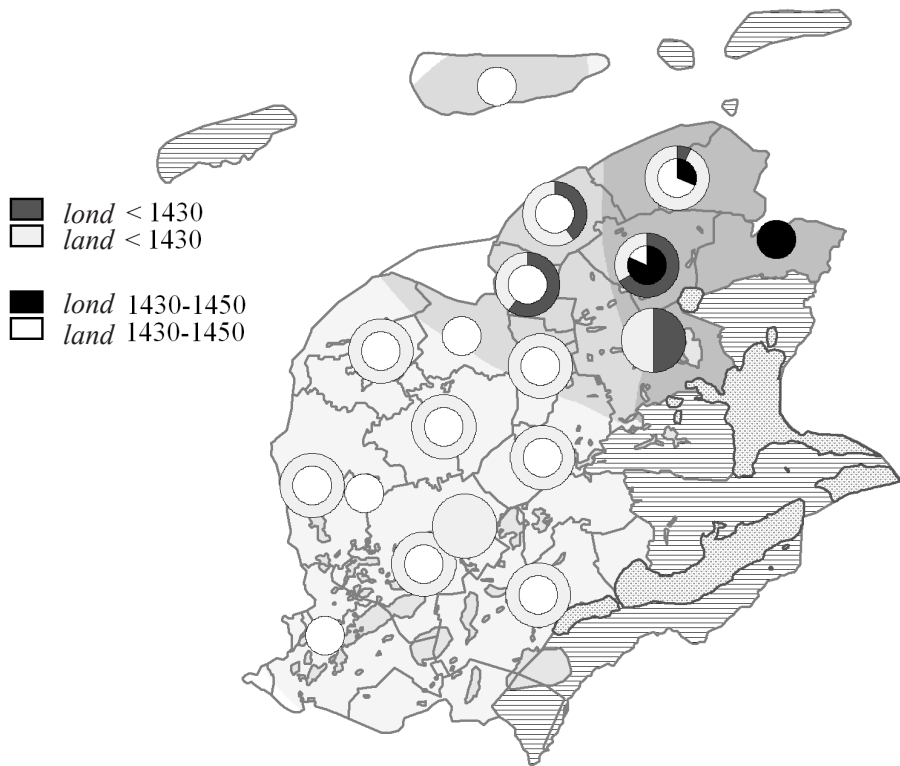
Lexemes in modern Frisian varieties and in Standard English show a rather diverse picture.<sup>3</sup>

	/a/	/ɔ/
Engl.	<i>man, hand</i>	<i>long</i>
Wfr.	<i>man, hân, lang</i>	<i>Longerhou</i> (PN)
Efr.	<i>laang, haun</i> <sup>4</sup>	<i>mon</i>
Nfr.	<i>maan</i>	<i>hun, lung</i>

Table 1. Examples of diverging developments of PGerm. /a/ before nasals in modern Standard English and Frisian varieties.

- 
3. Examples will be given from the three sub-branches of Frisian: West Frisian in the form of the standard language, East Frisian from the island of Wangerooge (Ehrentraut & Versloot 1996) and North Frisian as it is spoken on the island of Föhr (Sjölin 2002). Note that within each of these three groups the actual variation can be extensive. Also English dialects show considerable variation (cf. e.g. Viereck & Ramisch 2002: 82-83).
4. Old Frisian  $\bar{o}$  can develop into *au*, such as in *bauk* ‘book’, and therefore one needs to consider the option *hond* ‘hand’ > *\*hōnd* > *\*haun*. There are not many words with Old Frisian  $\bar{o}$  before *n*. There are a few which seem to have Old Frisian  $\bar{o}$  although not from PGerm.  $\bar{o}$ : OF *one* ‘on’ with word initial lengthening > Wang. *oon*; PWGerm. *\*mānō-* > OF *mōna* ‘moon’ > Wang. *moon*, OF *mōnath* ‘month’ > Wang. *moont*. A counterexample with OF  $\bar{o}$  before *m* seems to be Wang. *blaum* ‘flower’. But it is not the nasal that counts, but the fact that in general OF  $\bar{o}$  becomes Wang. *au* before labials and velars: *m* is a labial, *n* is not (Versloot 2001a: 426). My conclusion is that the lengthened vowel in *hond* was something like [ɑ:] or [ɔ:].

Every lexeme and sub-branch of Frisian has its own reflexes. In none of the language varieties referred to here has the tendency of rounding been consistently applied.



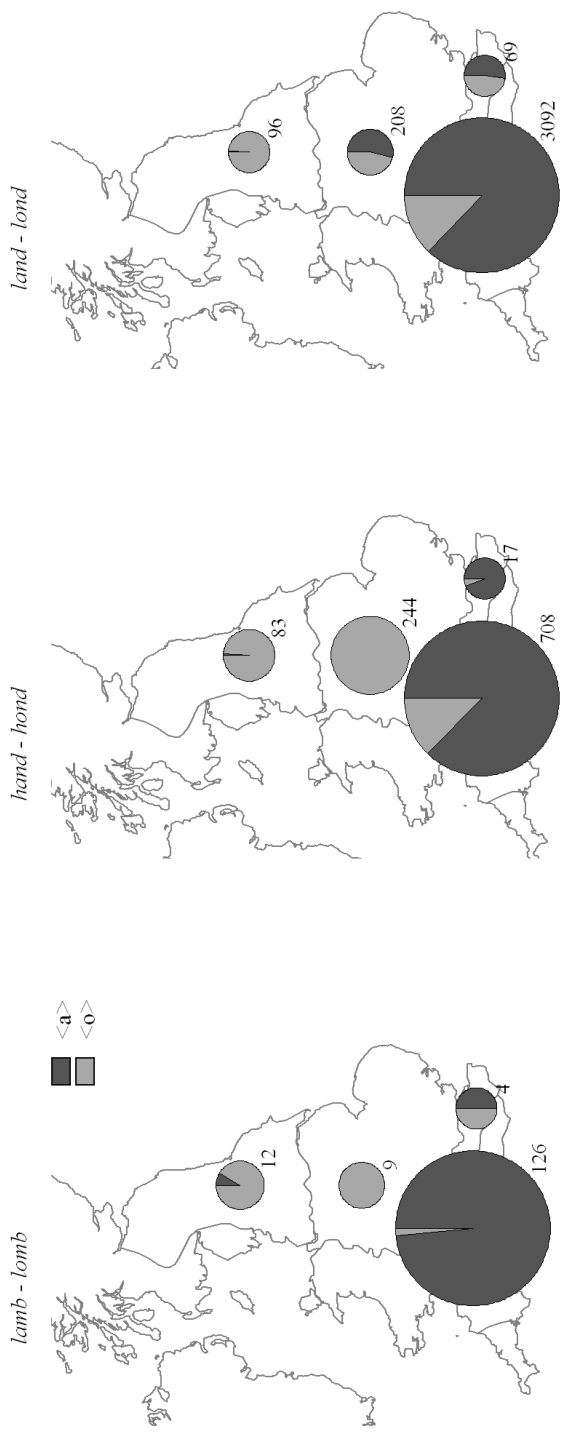
Map 1. The dialectal distribution of the spellings <land> and <lond> in Old West Frisian charters between 1380 and 1450.

Rounding is neither a recent nor a stable phenomenon in Frisian. Map 1 shows the geographical variation of forms with <a> and <o> in West Frisian during the period between 1380 (the oldest preserved charters) and 1450, when the spelling <lond> disappeared from West Frisian entirely. During this period, the variant <lond> was pushed to the north-east. In western sources from about 1300 (the *Older Skeltenariucht*, and the oldest Frisian charter from 1329) we only find

forms with <a> (Versloot 2008: 74). The village *Longerhou*,<sup>5</sup> however, is located much more to the west, suggesting that there had been an earlier period of retreat of the /ɔ/-region at a time before c. 1300. Common Modern West Frisian forms such as *oar* ‘other’ and *goes* ‘goose’ (< \**anþar*, \**gans*) attest to a stage with [ɔ] everywhere in West Frisian. Neither the lengthened [ɔ] nor the rounded PGerm. *ē* (e.g. Old Frisian *mōna* ‘month’ < \**māna*, Modern West Frisian *moanne*) merged with Old Frisian /o:/ in Old West Frisian (Versloot 2001b: 767).<sup>6</sup>

However, also the conclusion that /a/ is a late-mediaeval innovation from the west may be too hasty. Two combs with runic inscriptions, both from the 8<sup>th</sup> century and both from Groningen, show the spellings **kabu** and **kobu** < PGerm. \**kamba-* ‘comb’ where later Old Frisian manuscripts write nearly only <o>-forms (Looijenga 1997: 178-179). This is not the place to discuss the fate of PGerm. /a/ before nasals in detail (cf. Boutkan 1997 for a discussion of the pertinent developments in Old West Frisian). Phonetically, it was probably [a] or [ɔ]. As PGerm. /u/ remained before nasals in Old Frisian (Siebs 1901: 1203), this [a] or [ɔ] was an allophone of /a/ from a phonological point of view, but phonetically it came close to or merged with /o/ < PGerm. /u/ with *a*-mutation. This ambiguous phonological position caused the shifting outcomes in the modern dialects.

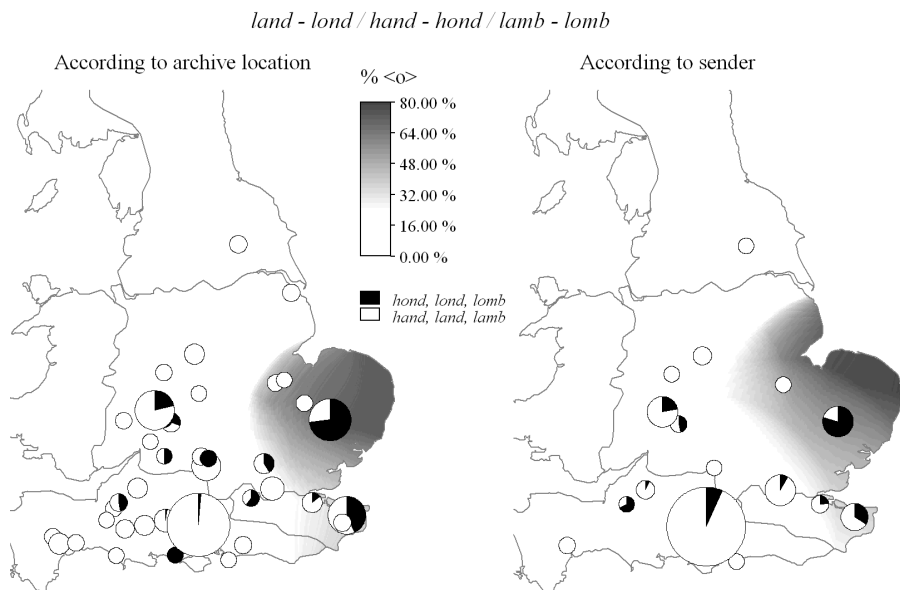
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5. The oldest attestations are *Langherahof* 1440; *Longerhow* 1495 (Gildemacher 2007: 152). Other examples can be mentioned, such as *Lonjee* < \**Long Ee* (near to *Longerhou* and Bolsward) and *Longbuorren* (Dronryp, near Franeker), *Longerskarren/Longe Schar* (Oppenhuizen, near Sneek). For another interpretation of *Longerhou* and *Lonjee*, cf. Hoekstra 1985: 101-102.
  6. Siebs (1901: 1181) claims that the long variant merged with Old Frisian /o:/ in West Frisian.



Map 2. The macro-dialectal variation in Old English between spellings with <a> and <o> in the words 'hand', 'lamb' and 'land'. Map based on the geographical information in the Toronto corpus (Healey), the Sawyer-list (Sawyer), Campbell (1977: 4-10).



Also within Old English, there is geographical variation, which again varies per lemma, cf. Map 2. In general, the <a> forms are more common in the south, the <o> forms in the north. At the same time, in Mercian, the <o> forms are much more common (100%) in the lemma ‘hand’ than in the lemma ‘land’ (46%). Zooming in on the geographical distribution, using Old English charters, the picture becomes even more detailed (Map 3):



Map 3. The micro-dialectal variation in Old English between spellings with <a> and <o> in the words ‘hand’, ‘lamb’ and ‘land’. The charter locations are based on the Sawyer-list (Sawyer), and the data come from the Toronto corpus (Healey).<sup>7</sup> The left-hand map is based on the location of the archives where the charters are kept, the right-hand map is based on the assumed location of the sender’s scriptorium (e.g. a king’s court). The emerging tendencies are very similar.

7. Many thanks to Elżbieta Adamczyk (Poznań) for her work in compiling the actual charter database from the mentioned sources.

Map 3 shows that the <a>–<o> contrast cuts through not only Old English as a whole, but even through the sub-dialect of “Mercian”, just as West Frisian was not uniform. This example suggests that the rounding of /a/, which is generally assumed to be old, was a phonetic tendency with lemma-specific phonemicisation, followed by extensive geographical shifts – a process that covered several centuries.

### 3.2. Loss of word-final /n/

The second, somewhat younger feature to be discussed here is the loss of word-final /n/ in Old Nordic, Old Frisian and Northumbrian Old English: Map 4. There is scant positive evidence for this in the Frisian runes (6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century), in the Westeremden B inscription: “**duna** asf. *n*-stem ‘dune, hill, terp’”. The object is dated to the late 8<sup>th</sup> century (Looijenga 1997: 183-185). Old English has the ending *-an* here (Campbell 1977: 248). The /n/-apocope is absent in (early) Runic Norse (Krause 1971: 123 ff.). According to Moberg (1944, in: Haugen 1984: 197), in North Germanic, the development can be dated to the period 650-850. In Northumbrian, the process is on its way in the early recordings from the 8<sup>th</sup> century and fully developed in the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Campbell 1977: 4-5, 189). These developments seem to be contemporaneous in the three languages in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

In North Germanic, we know about two varieties which preserved nasal vowels far later than the 8<sup>th</sup> century. For 12<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic, the nasalisation is described for *ĩ* < \**in*, Icelandic *í* (Haugen 1972: 38-39). Since then, the feature disappeared without any trace. In the present-day Elfdalian dialect in Sweden, the reflexes of former nasals are still there in some instances, such as in *ø*, cf. Icelandic *á* ‘on’ (Sapir 2005: 23).<sup>8</sup>

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8. It should be noted that in all other instances such as infinitives, weak nouns, etc. the nasalisation is gone, also in Elfdalian. For 12<sup>th</sup>-century Icelandic, no nasalisation is marked in an infinitive such as *syna* (Haugen 1972: 17). Elfdalian has a nasal vowel in the word *gos* ‘goose’, Swedish *gås*, which is the product of an early development (Stiles 1995: 199).



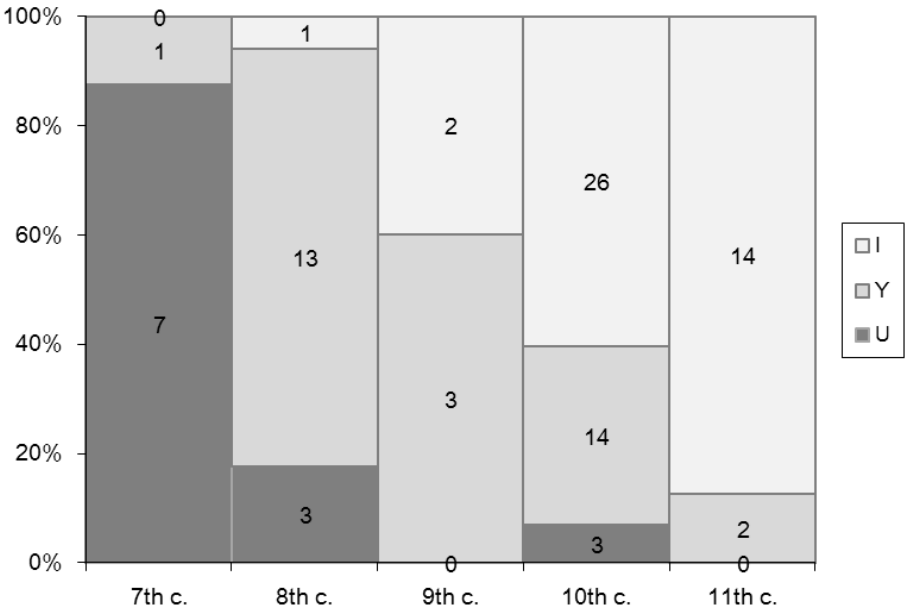
Map 4. The geographical spread of /n/-apocope in Old English, Old Frisian and Old Nordic.

While an infinitive such as *fara* ‘to sail, to go’ is identical in all the aforementioned varieties, in other contexts there are differences. In Old Frisian and Northumbrian, final *-n* in the unstressed sequence *\*-an* was eliminated in infinitives, weak adjectives and weak nouns, adverbs, numerals, and some prepositions (Bremmer 2009: 41). Northumbrian and Frisian show shared retention of final /n/ in the plural of the past tense, e.g. *foron/foren* against forms without /n/ in Old Nordic: (*þeir*) *fóru* (Campbell 1977: 189, Bremmer 2009: 41).<sup>9</sup> The feature shows a contiguous spread around the North Sea within a specific timeframe, although reflexes of the nasals could survive for several centuries later. Despite its wide occurrence, it is not an early development. Moreover, its conditioning is language specific, the change having coming about in two stages: nasalization of the pre-final vowel and (sometimes centuries later) loss of the final nasal.

9. In all three varieties, /n/ is retained in the past part. Old Norse *farinn* (masc.), *farin* (fem.), Northumbrian and Old Frisian *faren*.

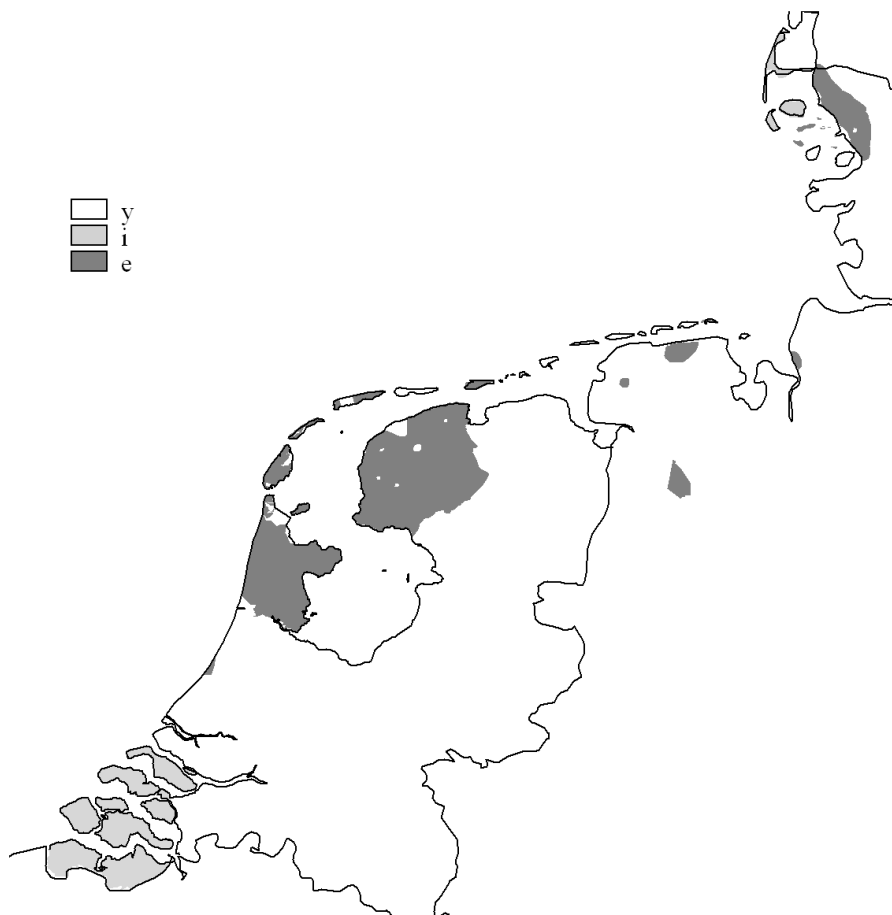
3.3. Delabialisation of *i*-mutated PGerm. /u/ and /u:/

The next example concerns the *i*-mutation and subsequent delabialisation of PGerm. /u/, such as in English *bridge* < PGerm. \**brugjō*. The three stages of the process are clearly present in the data from Old English (Graph 1):



Graph 1. The reflection of *i*-mutation and delabialisation in the spelling of the word for ‘bridge’ in Old English charters from the 7<sup>th</sup> till the 11<sup>th</sup> century (based on Healey & Sawyer; cf. Campbell 1977: 122, 132 = §§ 288, 315-317).

The relevant instances with <u> do not show the source of the *i*-mutation anymore: <brugge>, <brucege>. From that I conclude that the spellings with <u> from the 7<sup>th</sup> century indicate that *i*-mutation still operated on the allophonic level, but was phonetically already implemented. Subsequently, the delabialisation of *i*-mutated /u/ starts in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, to become dominant in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Undisturbed *i*-mutation and delabialisation of /u/ would lead to /y/ and finally to /i/, but several varieties of English show the spelling <e> = /ɛ/, such as Kentish (Kentish Glosses, cf. Campbell 1977: 122) and some charters of Mercian origin: Charter 108, 573, 1352 (Sawyer).



Map 5. Delabialisation of *i*-mutated /u/ in the word for ‘bridge’ in Frisian and adjacent dialects on the continent.

Most varieties of Frisian attest to a delabialisation to /ε/, except for the Insular North Frisian dialects, attesting to Old Frisian /i/, cf. North Frisian *brag* (with common /a/ < /i/). As a substratum word from Frisian, the form *breg* is found in several archaic coastal Dutch dialects. For Frisian, the dating is somewhat earlier than for Old English: the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Gysseling 1962: 17). To the south, in the dialects of Zeeland and in coastal Flemish dialects, the form *brigge* is common.<sup>10</sup>

10. The maps do not represent the actual sociolinguistic reality, but an archaising picture based on recordings from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Another example with delabialisation in the Dutch coastal dialects is the Flemish form *din* ‘thin’, Standard Dutch *dun* [døn], Frisian (W) *tin*. Because of the diverging development of PGerm. /p/ to voiced Dutch /d/ as against the voiceless Frisian and English /t/ and /p/, the initial /d/ in *din* testifies to the Franconian origin of the Flemish form, with the delabialised vowel being North Sea Germanic. As the Franconisation of the southern coastal regions of Flanders, Zeeland and southern parts of Holland had already started in the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Buccini 2003: 207 ff.), the delabialisation in Zeeland and Flanders may have taken place simultaneously with the Franconisation. The delabialisation took place then in a Franconian Flemish dialect with North Sea Germanic phonetic reflexes.

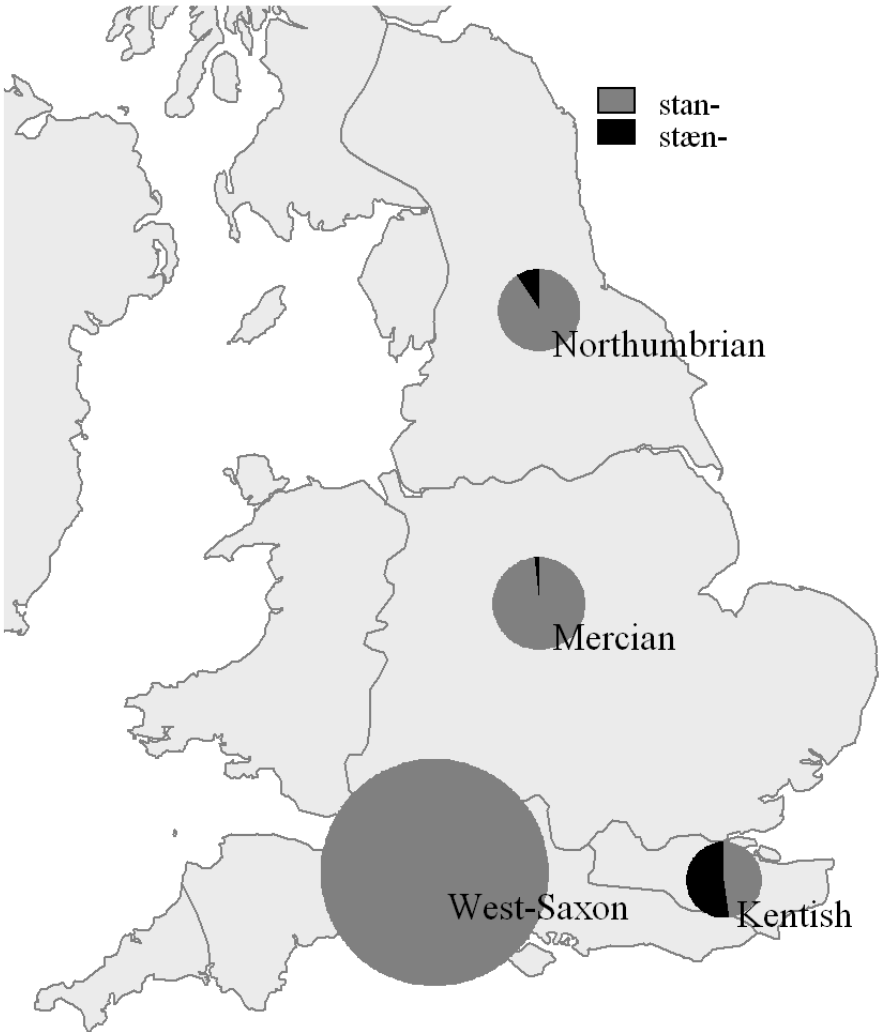
Altogether, this development, significant for the development of the Old English and Old Frisian vowel systems, is a relatively late, not exactly contemporaneous one, and one which had different results throughout the languages (cf. already Kuhn 1955: 28).

### 3.4 *The development of PWGerm. /ai/ and /a:/ (= ē')*

English and Frisian seem to exhibit a profound contrast in the development of PWGerm. /ai/, considering the modern English *road* vs. Wfr. *reed* ‘lane’. The English <oa> comes from an older /a:/, while Wfr. <ee> is the regular expression of an older /æ:/ (Versloot 1991; cf. Hoekstra 2001: 725); in velar contexts, Old Frisian developed /a:/ (De Vaan 2011).<sup>11</sup> On closer inspection, the contrast is far less sharp. The /æ:/ is also found in Kentish as illustrated in Map 6. The four Kentish attestations marked in the corpus as “early” only have <a>.

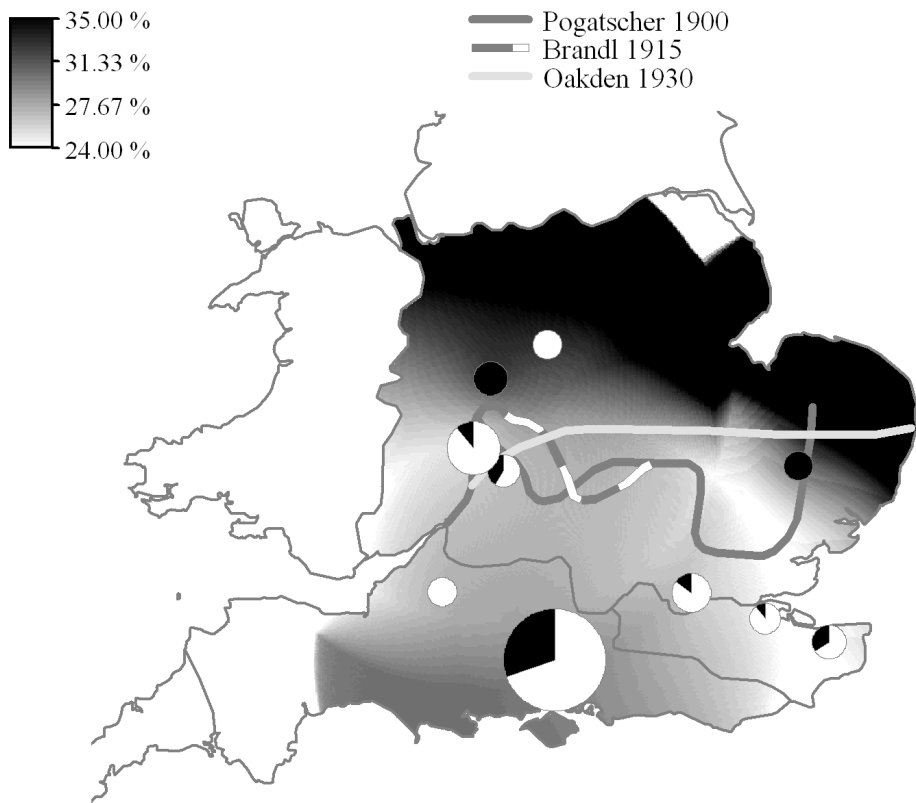
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11. Kortlandt (2008) has proposed that both English and Frisian went through the stage /a:/ and that Frisian fronted this /a:/ to /æ:/ under certain conditions (De Vaan 2011). I am not convinced by Kortlandt’s argumentation. I hope to be able to return to this topic in a separate publication.



Map 6. Reflexes of PGerm. /ai/ in Old English (data from Healey).

A similar alternation, now between /æ:/ and /e:/, is found both in Frisian and English for the reflexes of PGerm.  $\bar{e}'$ . Insular North Frisian dialects attest to a Proto-North Frisian /æ:/, whilst the other dialects attest to /e:/ (Hofmann 1964). A similar alternation between /æ:/ and /e:/ is found in Old English, cf. Map 7:



Map 7. Reflexes of PGerm.  $\bar{e}'$  in Old English (data from Healey) with the percentage of the occurrence of the /e:/ reflex being indicated. The results are compared to other studies, based on place names and street names as mentioned in Crowley (1986: 107-109).

The early branching off of the Insular North Frisian dialects in the 8<sup>th</sup> century suggests a common Frisian stage with  $\langle \bar{æ}:/ \rangle < \bar{e}'$ , which would be the older stage in Old English as well. In the oldest Mercian texts from the 8<sup>th</sup> century, also  $\langle \bar{ae}$ ,  $\bar{æ} \rangle$  are found, while later on  $\langle e \rangle$  dominates (Campbell 1977: 7, 51).<sup>12</sup> Old Frisian is only attested from the late-12<sup>th</sup> century onwards. When and how the transition from  $\langle \bar{æ}:/ \rangle > \langle e:/ \rangle$  took place in Frisian, remains uncertain. On a more abstract level, the variation within the individual languages is even more extensive:

12. Note that Campbell does not take this as evidence of  $\langle \bar{æ}:/ \rangle$  at the oldest attested stage of Mercian; rather he purports this to be an arbitrary spelling variation



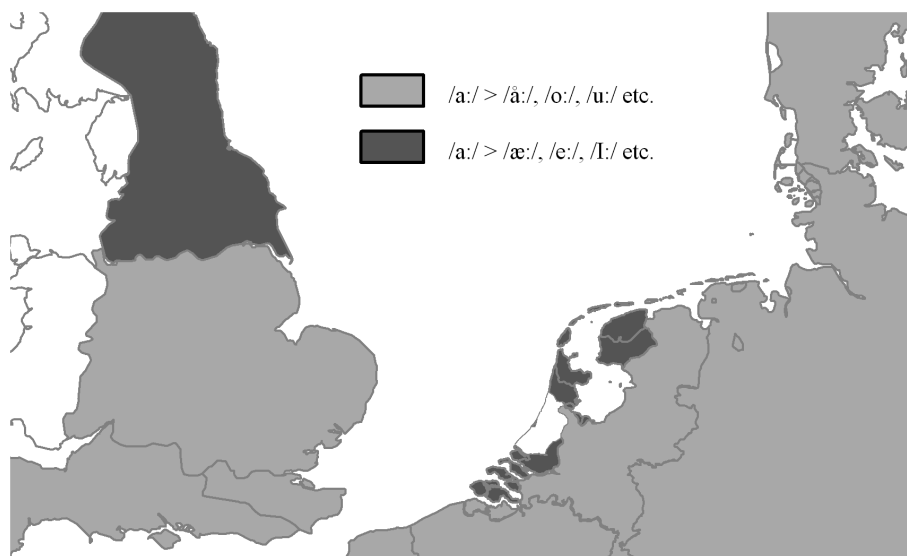
PWGerm.	OE (W-S)	OE (Kent)	Proto- WFr.	Proto- Nfr.	Wfr / Eng.
/o:/ + <i>i</i> - mutation	/e:/	/e:/	/e:/	/e:/	<i>grien / green</i>
/a:/ = $\bar{e}$ '	/æ:/	/e:/	/e:/	/æ:/	<i>skiep / sheep</i>
/ai/	/a:/	/æ:/	/æ:/ ~ /a:/	/æ:/ ~ /a:/	<i>reed ~ geast / road, ghost</i>

Table 2. The realisations of PWGerm. /o:/ + *i*-mutation, /a:/ and /ai/ in several varieties of Old English and Old Frisian (W-S = West Saxon).

Apart from the split of PWGerm. /ai/, which is shared by all Frisian varieties, Table 2 shows that the exact development of the three Proto-West Germanic vowels varies considerably across Old English and Old Frisian. Some of the similarities and differences among the varieties are due to later (not necessarily contemporaneous) developments, such as Kentish /a:/ > /æ:/ or West Frisian and Kentish /æ:/ > /e:/. For Old English, at least some of the early development can be traced in the written sources, but for Old Frisian this is not possible. This makes a comparison of contemporaneous Proto-English and Proto-Frisian problematic (to say the least).

### 3.5 Parallel developments in later time

For the grouping of West Germanic, considerable weight is assigned to parallel phonological developments, such as the split of PWGerm. /a:/ =  $\bar{e}$ ' into a more palatal vowel in the North Sea Germanic dialects, Old English and Old Frisian, as against an open or open-back vowel in the continental dialects, Old Saxon, Old Dutch and Old High German (Nielsen 2001: 520). If we extend the time scope, it turns out that a similar contrast re-appears within the West Germanic group in a similar geographical configuration and across established language groupings:



Map 8. Reflexes of late-mediaeval /a:/ from different sources in the modern dialects.

Map 8 shows the modern reflexes of late-mediaeval /ra:d/, representing different lexemes in the various languages. The (Early) Middle English /ra:d/ represents the word ‘road’ with /a:/ < PGerm. /ai/. Old Frisian /ra:d/ means ‘red’ with PGerm. /au/, while the Middle Dutch and Middle Low German and Middle Danish /ra:d/ are cognates of the modern High German *Rat* ‘council, advice’ with PWGerm. /a:/ (=  $\bar{e}'$ ). The alternation between fronted or rounded realisation in the modern languages reflects more or less the old contrast between Anglo-Frisian and the other languages for PGerm.  $\bar{e}'$ : the coastal Dutch dialects, West Frisian and northern “Anglian”, i.e. Northumbrian and Scots, have fronted realisations: /ɛ:/, /e:/, /ɪ.ə/; “Franconian”, i.e. Dutch and High German, Low German and North Germanic, but now also East and North Frisian and southern English, have rounded realisations: /ɔ:/, /o:/, /u:/, /u.ə/.

The development of PWGerm. /a:/ is relevant to the discussion whether North Sea Germanic features reflect a common pre-stage from the time when the tribes in question were adjacent on the continent or whether they developed through over-sea contacts after the Great Migrations. We do not know the answer. In the case of late-mediaeval Germanic /a:/, we know where it started from, we know the context and we know the outcome: the developments took place when people were already in their place; there is no specific contact between the western

parts of Friesland and Holland and Northumbrian Britain in the late Middle Ages and still these regions show shared developments in their phonology. There is a methodological contradiction in regarding the development of PWGerm. /a:/ as an important differentiating feature in the delineation of West Germanic dialects, when the same contrast cuts through established entities such as Dutch, Frisian and English 800 years later.

### *3.6 Concluding remarks*

Focusing on the pertinent details as far as they can be discerned from historical attestations, it turns out that early North Sea Germanic features show much diachronic and geographical variability. Other developments of a later date, such as the delabialisation and the loss of word-final /n/, show a similar fuzzy spread in time, space and phonological conditioning. These characteristics make it problematic to pinpoint these features as clear-cut items on a chronological or geographical tick list (several versions are given in Kortlandt 2008). The identification of languages as separate units may rather be seen in terms of an accumulation of features over time in a diffuse wave-like model as formulated by Stiles:

[...] the entities we are dealing with in the continuum do not equate straightforwardly with the later languages, or even their dialects. [...] As one pursues the entities backwards in time, they dissolve into a haze of indeterminacy. The later West Germanic daughter languages have emerged from this steaming broth [...]. (Stiles 1995: 206-207)

## ***4. Non-linearity in language reconstructions***

The previous section was an illustration of Stiles' "haze of indeterminacy". In the following section I would like to elaborate upon two factors that bear upon the reconstructability of language history and may give more depth to Stiles' remark that "the entities we are dealing with in the continuum do not equate straightforwardly with the later languages, or even their dialects" (Stiles 1995: 207).

### *4.1 Unexpected order of things*

For reconstructions of the past, we rely on a reasoned order of (phonological) developments. However, when we gain access to linguistic data from the time to which our reconstructions apply, the reconstructions may prove to be incorrect. The Anatolian branch of Indo-European, discovered in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and

being older than any of the other attested Indo-European languages, is a telling example in this respect. On the one hand, it beautifully confirmed the existence of the reconstructed laryngeals in Proto-Indo-European. On the other, it showed strong deviations in the field of verbal inflections and the gender system (Clackson 2007: 115 ff.).

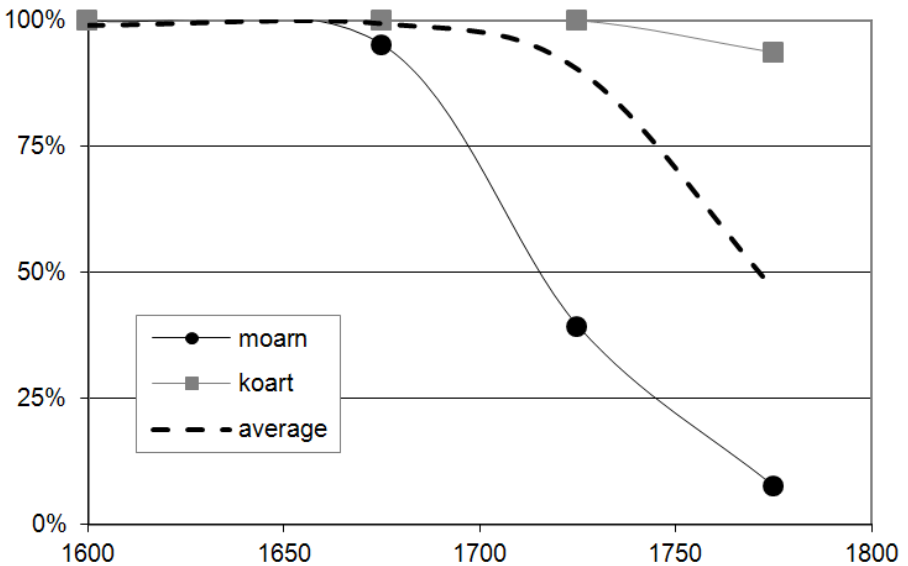
I would like to mention two illustrative instances from Frisian. The first one is Hofmann's brilliant structuralist-phonological reconstruction of the Proto-Frisian vowel systems (Hofmann 1964). His conclusion that *i*-mutation must be older than monophthongisation, which is a completely sound conclusion from his argumentation, is not likely to be correct as it is contradicted by factual evidence from early Germanic languages, including Frisian runic inscriptions (Nielsen 2000: 117-118). It is therefore not considered in any current reconstruction of events, such as in De Vaan (2011: 313) or Bremmer (2009: 29). But the problem needs further attention, and I plan to return to it in print at a later point.

The second example concerns a more recent development from historical West Frisian. Here, the early-modern short /a/ before /d, t, s, n, l/ becomes /ɔ/ in the modern language, such as in *kat* [kɔt] 'cat'. West Frisian early-modern /r/ before /d, t, s, n, l/ became mute, such as in *bern* [bɛn] 'child', but historical /a/ + /r/ + /d, t, s, n, l/ does not join the development to /ɔ/, such as in *hart* [hat] 'deer'. The logical reconstruction would be that /a/ > /ɔ/ is older than the loss of /r/ in the same context, otherwise *hart* would be \*[hɔt]. This order is mentioned by Hoekstra (1988: 51). An analysis of the spelling of 18<sup>th</sup> century West Frisian texts shows that /r/ became mute during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, more specifically between 1750 and 1800.

However, the same texts that so accurately reflect the loss of the /r/ show no traces of any spelling <o> for the historical short /a/. There are initial appearances in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, e.g. in the Clay Frisian dialect (Miedema 1968: 15) and in Workum (Winkler 1874: 437),<sup>13</sup> and it is well established in the language from c. 1884 (Siebs 1889: 55). The primary language sources indicate that the development of /a/ > /ɔ/ is younger than the loss of /r/. The explanation is that the vowels before /r/, even after the loss of /r/ itself, still had a reflex of it. This reflex can still be found in the Town Frisian dialects (Versloot 2002: 252-255; Bezooijen 2006). After all, the order of things is phonetically sound. However, the reconstructed order using the materials from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries is exactly the opposite of the reconstructed order on the basis of the modern evidence only.

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13. The curious thing is that Winkler describes this as a feature on its retreat: "Deze uitspraak is nog niet geheel verdwenen" (idem). This deserves further attention.



Graph 2. *r*-deletion in West Frisian in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The graph shows two sample words with *r*-deletion, one being of the type most prone to *r*-deletion (*moarn* ‘morning’), the other with the most resistant phonological context (*koart* ‘short’) and the average over a series of eight words from different phonological contexts. Data from the Frisian Language Database (<http://tdb.fryske-akademy.eu/tdb/index-en.html>).

It is exactly these kinds of logical argumentation that are applied in the reconstruction of the emergence of Old Frisian from the other Germanic languages, such as in Stiles (1995), Van Bree (1997),<sup>14</sup> Versloot (2001b), Bremmer (2008), Kortlandt (2008) and recently again Repanšek (2012). However logical the arguments may seem, one has to be prepared for the unexpected as well. Evidence

14. Van Bree (1997: 11-16) uses the geographical spread of phenomena as a primary criterion to distinguish between early and late developments, rather than structural-phonological ones. Even this line of argumentation fails. This can be illustrated by the deletion of the prefix of past participles, such as in German *geschlafen*, Dutch *geslapen* and Frisian/English *slept*, which is classified as “early” by Van Bree and hence as having taken place on the continent, before the Great Migrations (idem, p. 16). This feature is historically attested and is for Frisian (Bremmer 2009: 38) and English (Brunner & Johnston 1970: 73) younger than the year 1100.

from older sources, however scarce they may be, is the only way to obtain more certainty about reconstructions of the past (cf. Quak 1990: 366).

#### 4.2 Colonial languages

Other sources of unexpected, non-linear developments are language contact, language shift and especially language mixing in the form of so-called “colonial” languages, where a new form arises out of the language varieties spoken by immigrants from several places. Nielsen (1998: 80-83) clearly describes how such processes create a situation where it is not possible to reconstruct further backwards in time, simply because the earlier situations have been erased through dialect mixture and levelling.<sup>15</sup> In this context, I see no point in linking similarities between Old Frisian and Old English dialectal features to a common origin in the pre-migration period in the way that Kortlandt (2008: 270-271) does.

An additional complicating factor in colonial languages is the possible survival of a local substratum population. We could, in fact, distinguish between two extreme scenarios, which in reality often go together in different proportions:

- 1) colonists with a different linguistic/dialectal background occupy a so far (almost) unsettled region and develop a new variety through dialect levelling, where the impact of different varieties is controlled by aspects such as the prestige of the speakers, order of arrival, etc. (Nielsen 1998: 82). This is applicable e.g. to the North Frisian varieties;
- 2) a demographic minority of prestigious language speakers evokes a language or dialect shift with two basic tendencies: the new variety will be based on a compromise between prestigious variants, and the new variety will exhibit local substratum features. Town Frisian is a good example of this, but also the recent insight that the history of Dutch can only be understood as a case of language contact and shift from Frisian to Franconian (Buccini 1995, De Vaan 2010).

In both cases, the new language variety is not the genuine continuation of the previously spoken vernacular of that region, its geographical provenance cannot be pinpointed unambiguously, and it presents a new selection of available variation, possibly augmented with substratum features.

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15. Not to be confused with the wrong assumption that dialect features of colonial languages would *proportionally* reflect the different origins of the settlers.

A phenomenon related to this is an evolutionary *bottleneck*: the development of a species (or, in our case a language) runs through a small group of individuals, who are the ancestors of all later members of the group. In linguistics, such a case is represented by the Italic group of Indo-European languages in relation to the Romance languages. All Romance languages, including all the current varieties spoken in Italy, derive from the dialect of the city of Rome. This Rome-dialect was originally only one of the varieties of the Italic group, which also included languages such as Sabellic and Faliscan (Fortson 2010: 275). Modern Romance varieties spoken in Italy have no direct genetic relationship to the original Italic dialects spoken there. They all went through the *bottleneck* of the dialect of Rome. As a consequence, all developments antedating the bottleneck are shared. Shared, old features can therefore also attest to a bottleneck in the past.

It is not only a dramatic event such as the Great Migrations that interrupts historical reconstructions. Also, later on, the linguistic landscape can be highly dynamic and many dialects and language varieties are not the result of a consistent development from the time of the Great Migrations onward, but of later shifts, which go beyond the simple expansion of features through a dialectal landscape, leading to several wider or narrower bottlenecks in the development of languages.

A telling example can be taken from the Dongeradeel dialect in West Friesland. The proverbs written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Dongeradeel dialect by Bogerman from 1542/1551 (Boer 1897) exhibit a language variety that appears to be an almost direct predecessor of the current dialect of Schiermonnikoog (Spenter 1968: 17, 21).<sup>16</sup> The current version of Frisian spoken in the Dongeradeel region is a variety of Clay Frisian, as it is spoken more to the west. Still, the Dongeradeel dialect as described by Kloosterman (1907) exhibited some phonological traits that were at that time not found in the western Clay Frisian variants, such as the pronunciation [ɛ:] in *bean* ‘bean’ for western [bɪ.ən]; Schiermonnikoog has *baan* [ba:n] and in Bogerman, the plural <banen> is attested. In the west, this [ɛ:]-realisation, which developed from Old Frisian /a:/, was lost around 1700.<sup>17</sup> So, early-20<sup>th</sup> century Dongeradeel Frisian attests to the 16<sup>th</sup> century development of Old Frisian /a:/ > /ɛ:/, which did not take place at that time in Dongeradeel itself, where /ba:n/ would be the genuine form. Some time between 1600 and 1700, the region went through a dialect change where the local dialect was completely replaced by a western

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16. Spenter (1968: 21) stresses rather the differences between the two varieties.

17. This follows from the development of the so-called West Frisian “breaking” (Hoekstra 2001), which presupposes a centralising diphthong.

variety of Frisian, including the pronunciation [bɛ:n]. In this way some archaic western features were preserved in Dongeradeel. The example illustrates that “genetic” continuity does not automatically match geographical continuity.

A mediaeval example of a gap between reconstructed extension and historical data is the assibilation of the velar consonant as in English *bridge*. All surviving Frisian dialects attest to non-assibilated forms, e.g. West Frisian *brêge*, East Frisian *brig*, North Frisian *brag*, while English shows assibilation in *bridge*. Scots place names, however, attest to a form without assibilation: *brig* (Robinson 1987: 64). On the continent, place names attest to assibilation in this word, such as in *Wymbritseradiel*, with a mediaeval Dutch translation *Waghenbrugge*, and *Britsum*, both in West Friesland, and forms such as *Brudgis* for *Brugge* (Flanders) (Gysseling 1962: 13-14). From this, I conclude that we have no exact idea about the former spread of this phenomenon in Frisian before the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when the written sources first start to appear.

The consequence of this for linguistic reconstruction is that we may be able to reconstruct a logical order of phonological changes, but that we cannot make solid inferences about their former geographical spread and origin based on evidence from dialectal distribution several centuries later. This caveat holds both for 13<sup>th</sup> century Frisian and for 9<sup>th</sup> century English in relation to the reconstruction of early mediaeval developments.

## 5. Conclusion

The methodological reflections in sections 3 and 4 are intended to illustrate that chronological tick lists presupposing consistent developments are reconstruction artefacts that may show only a limited resemblance to the real order and extension of events. Clearly, there was an order of things and a historical reality of the emergence and spread of linguistic features, but this does not necessarily fit the reconstructed order. When historical data allow some insight into the course of events, we get an impression of “waves”, starting from perhaps multiple origins, moving with increasing or decreasing intensity through the Germanic linguistic space, sometimes crossing other waves with their individual origins, direction and time lapse. Sometimes it rather seems to be a diffuse emergence of a feature over a wide area, where various speech communities make different choices from the variation available in all of these communities. The case of *bridge* – *brêge* in 4.2 seems to follow this pattern. This comes close to what is known as the “bush theory” in evolution: “Evolutionary ‘sequences’ are not rungs on a ladder,



but our retrospective reconstruction of a circuitous path running like a labyrinth, branch to branch, from the base of the bush to a lineage now surviving at its top” (Gould 1977: 61-62).

The whole sequence – or rather “bush” – of *Lautgesetz*-like changes is continuously disturbed *and* reshaped by demographically and socio-linguistically motivated changes: the movement of people and the adoption of other (more prestigious) language forms and varieties.

It will be this combination of linguistic innovations, their spatial-temporal spread, together with the sociolinguistic circumstances that create new linguistic realities, which led to the emergence of an entity that we might call the Frisian language. A careful exploration of all available linguistic material and an acknowledgement of the fact that many language phenomena will always remain unknown may bring us somewhat closer to the full story of this process.

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