
Versloot, A.

Publication date 2006
Document Version Final published version
Published in Us Wurk

Citation for published version (APA):

I was surprised to find this book appearing on my desk, and I am not the only one. No Frisian scholar that I know had ever heard of this research project, and no Frisian scholar is mentioned in the ‘Acknowledgements’. This is important for two reasons. That Frisian may apparently be a subject of interest to scholars outside the small circle of Frisian scholarship, and that Frisian considered not as a discrete unit may be used to contribute to a universal typology of language features. A negative aspect, especially for the author, is that she has not managed to negotiate the minefield of Frisian dialects and phonological history completely unscathed.

As the title states, this study addresses diphthongs in Frisian. Frisian is here taken in its broad sense, from Old Frisian to modern West, East and North Frisian dialects. The goal is to grasp a better understanding of distinctive phonological features concerning diphthongs in Frisian and to “[...] detect certain typological trends.” Frisian was chosen because “Frisian dialects have been particularly noted for the wealth and variety of their diphthongs.” (page 2).

The author treats Old Frisian and all the living modern dialects one by one and evaluates the diphthongs for possible distinctive features: length, roundness, accentuation and directionality (Chapter 1). After a comparative analysis of all Frisian varieties (Chapters 2 and 3), diphthongs in several West Germanic languages are studied (Chapter 4) and their typological aspects compared to the Frisian. Finally, some general conclusions are drawn (Chapters 4.2 and 5).

In the first place, Frisian is normal in the sense that the abstract diphthongs /AU/ and /AI/ are the most commonly occurring in the language, and this is the case too in other West Germanic languages and most languages of the world. But most Frisian dialects show a lot more diphthongs. Bussmann identifies three features of Frisian diphthongs that are typologically marked (Sections 4.2 and 5.1):

- The first is length. Diphthongs are phonologically long in most languages. In Old Frisian, Helgolandish and Wiedingharder Frisian length is sometimes a distinctive feature, as in the case of Old Frisian riucht ‘right’ with short /iu/ versus stiura ‘to steer’ with long /iû/.
- The so-called darkening diphthongs, like /ia/ and /io/, constitute a marked type of diphthong with falling accent and rising sonority. Old Germanic languages had this
type of diphthong but these were abandoned in most modern Germanic languages.

In Frisian they survived as a type. A related, also marked, type are the centring
diphthongs. These appear in some other Frisian dialects, such as Standard West
Frisian.

- It has been claimed that languages cannot have both rising and falling diphthongs,
but some Frisian varieties do.

So far the main conclusions and, as far as I am able to judge, the material and presented
analysis are concerned, I think they stand. But things have sometimes gone seriously
awry at the level of details.

The task was not simple: Frisian dialects have not been described in a uniform way
and using a uniform approach. The various source data, many at least 50 years old,
"confront today's scholar with a confusing variety of antiquated, idiosyncratic nota­
tional systems." (page 53). Unfortunately, Bussmann has apparently missed the Hand­
buch des Friesischen/Handbook of Frisian Studies. The author has tried to convert the
spellings applied in several monographs into modern IPA notation. This was definitely
not an easy task. Sometimes it goes wrong, e.g. on page 165, where Standard Dutch
and Terschelling <ui> are transcribed as /ey/ and /ui/ respectively, deviant transcrip­
tions for the same sound. But all in all the task of phonological interpretation of given
spellings seems fairly accurately fulfilled.

The main omission is authorial overlooking of Århammar's article on Old Frisian
ïaI (Die Friesischen Wörter für 'Rad' ('Wheel'). In: Kopenhager Germanistische
Studien, Bd. I, 1969, pp 35-84.) This article treats complex developments in the Old
Frisian ïaI. The most important outcome of the article is that the Old Frisian /ia/ and
/iui/ must have been rising diphthongs in every Old Frisian dialect, even in cases where
the modern representation is a monophthong or a falling diphthong, like standard Wfr.
biede 'offer' < Ofr. biada. Bussmann considers the Old Frisian /ia/ and /iui/ to be 'fall­
ing'. The consequence is that she has to assume a whole bunch of incidental develop­
ments to account for the modern forms. She even tries to deduce Schiermonn. tjail
'wheel' from a falling diphthong /ia/ by assuming a development /ia/ > /iel/ > ëi/ > /ëiI
> /jëiI > /jëil/ instead of /ëiI > /iaI/ > /jaI/ (cf. Schm. baim < Ofr. bám). In particular in
connection with the complicated development of Ofr. /iaI/ and /iui/, several etymological
mistakes are made, like not recognising Wfr. dief 'thief' as a Dutch loanword (pho­
onological Frisian is archaic tsjeaf), deducing ljocht 'light' from Ofr. liacht (where dialec­
tal forms ljacht / l(je)echt are the proper examples; ljocht is an analogue formation ac­
cording to the verb *liuchta) or, another case, deducing Schierm. seeunde 'sin' from
Ofr. sende, instead of sonde. It does not seem useful to me to mention here every ety­
mological mistake in detail, but there are quite a few.

A proper application of the outcome of Århammar's paper would imply different
conclusions for the Old Frisian part. It would also imply different viewpoints to be
adopted in diachronic discussions throughout the book (cf. page 163, where we again
find the statement that when "[...] dealing with darkening falling diphthongs, [...] ac­
cent shift is not observable in WFrís. dialects."). As the book is mainly concerned with
synchronic phoneme inventories, these diachronic mistakes do not overly influence the
general outcome. For Old Frisian, however, it would mean that this dialect did not have
darkening diphthongs (falling accent, rising sonority) but that accent and sonority had
been levelled out. As a consequence it would become questionable whether Old Frisian
even had rising diphthongs, because Old Frisian /ia/ developed as glide + (long) vowel.
Modern Frisian 'breaking'-diphthongs are also interpreted this way by Bussmann (fol­
lowing Booij and Visser, page 59).

It may be of interest to add two minor synchronic observations. In 3.1.2.7 the Hind­
elooper H-diphthongs are considered not to be phonemic because their distribution is
predictable. But in words like *bird* [bldt] 'beard' en *hert* [hert] 'heart' the diphthongs
may be historically predictable but they form synchronic minimal pairs with *bit* 'bit'
and *het* 'what'. At least phonetically, these diphthongs are short and contrast with e.g.
[I.t] in e.g. *beald* 'statue', which would plead in favour of their phonemic status.

Another intriguing case is that of the opposition between WFr. *dei* 'day' and *daai*
'dough'. In the Walden-dialect the difference is both qualitative and quantitative: [dae1]
- [daai]. In the Klaai-dialect the length opposition has been levelled out and the pronun­
ciation in both instances become something like [daai]. At the southern fringe, espe­
cially among older speakers, a clear distinction [daai] - [daai] can/could be heard. The
marginal status of this phenomenon fits nicely into the typological characterisation of
length oppositions in diphthongs as being marked. This opposition has existed in West
Frisian only since the 19th century, when the pronunciation [daai] for *dei* came into be­
ing and soon disappeared again.

Altogether, this study is a valuable contribution to an integral study of Frisian varie­
ties and, what makes it even more interesting, it shows that elaboration of Frisian mat­
terial can be used to contribute to the debate concerning international theoretical linguistics.
The general conclusions hold, but many mistakes may be found in etymological
details. The diachronic observations are not valid, mainly due to wrong interpretation
of Old Frisian /ia/ and /iu/. The most intriguing question, as I see it, is why most Frisian
dialects on the one hand convert marked diphthongs into unmarked sequences - topo­
logically a logical development - and on the other create new marked diphthong se­
quencies, e.g. Ofr. *biada* 'to offer' (be it with /ial, as Bussmann supposes, or with /ial or
even /ja:/, still a marked sequence) > mod. Hallig Frisian *bitide*, but Ofr. *stëm* 'stone' >
mod. Hall. Fr. *sîan* (with /ia/). To find answers to this question a careful reassessment
of Bussmann's data is required.

Arjen Versloot
Fryske Akademy
Ljouwert

61