Knooppunt Halbertsma : Joast Hiddes Halbertsma (1789-1869) en andere Europese geleerden over het Fries en andere talen, over wetenschap en over de samenleving
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Summary

Joast Hiddes Halbertsma (1789–1869) – Dutch scholar, Frisian writer and Mennonite minister in Deventer – maintained contacts with the greatest European philologists of his time, but also with other scholars who, although less well-known to us, played an important role in the European linguistic research of the time. His correspondence shows that Halbertsma had a rather critical attitude to modern linguistic methodology, and that he was not alone in his criticism. The methodology had been primarily developed in Germany. Although both the success of the German linguistic methodology and the criticism expressed by Halbertsma and a number of other scholars had their roots in scholarly debate, they also involved a political and social dimension.

It was evident to nineteenth century philologists that eighteenth century philological research was inadequate. Assumptions concerning the age and kinship of various languages were strongly determined by religious dogmas, and could no longer accommodate the linguistic data which was becoming increasingly available. The pressing question arose of the relative position of the various European languages, in relation to each other and in relation to older eastern languages. In addition, the political instability of the late eighteenth century focused attention on old legal texts. In an attempt to legitimate the rights of royalty, local rulers and the masses with respect to one another, a number of ‘indigenous’ legal documents were brought to bear. These documents induced an in-depth study of formerly relatively unknown old vernaculars. The need for thorough knowledge of these languages grew, as did the need for a meticulous scientific methodology for developing such knowledge. In various European regions, the late eighteenth century saw the emergence of an emphatic interest in such texts as old Frisian legal documents: scholars in Aurich, Holstein and Sleeswijk, Groningen and Leeuwarden made editions of these texts, thereby setting in motion research on Frisian. Frisian also played a role in the context of the advancement of the Dutch language, which had become a point of interest in the second half of the eighteenth century. The respectable age of the old Frisian legal documents, the ‘democratic’ aspect of the laws and the history of the Frisian people as they were described in old sources, as well as the unclear position of Frisian among other languages meant that this language continued to interest a new generation of scholars who, in the wake of the Napoleonic wars, were furthering linguistic research while at the same time working on the building of Europe, and more particularly of their own country.

Around 1820, Rasmus Rask and Jacob Grimm played a particularly important role in stimulating the study of language, with their almost scientific approach to linguistics. They compared texts from various periods and various languages, and on the basis of this comparison determined the essential characteristics of a given language. They considered the
sound shifts which occurred in consecutive historical periods to be an autonomous process. Language could therefore be studied as a natural phenomenon. Certain languages proved to have sound shifts in common during certain periods, while others did not, and this further fed the process of comparison between languages. The work of Grimm was considered, both in Germany and abroad, to be the new norm for serious linguistic research. The zeal he displayed, as well as his success, were closely related to the situation in Germany following the European upheavals.

Halbertsma, as a scholar with a broad orientation and with more than average knowledge of Frisian, was an attractive interlocutor for Grimm, and Grimm was in turn a source of information and knowledge for Halbertsma. Their correspondence, which deals with research into Old Dutch, German, Gothic and Frisian, but also with politics, illustrates their similarities and differences in opinion and style. Grimm and Halbertsma shared the ambition to contribute as scholars to the rebuilding of Europe, where political and social relations had changed fundamentally since the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. However, the direction envisioned by Grimm, who wished, with the help of his linguistic research, to assist the strongly fragmented and repressive Germany to rise from its own ashes into one great German Empire, led to much resistance from Halbertsma. Closer consideration reveals that this resistance was rooted on the one hand in fundamentally different view of scientific research and on the other hand in a fear of a German annexation of Dutch territories.

Halbertsma’s views on scientific research were strongly influenced by his vision of mankind and society. This vision was fed by Halbertsma’s Mennonite doctrines, which focused primarily on a personal relation with God, and rejected dogma and coercion. Freedom (for individuals, religious communities, but also for peoples and countries) was an important aspect of his vision, but this freedom should serve the ‘common good’. The freedom to pursue self-development was to lead to a society of strong citizens able to serve the common good – not by ignoring internal differences and uniting under a dominant voice, but on the contrary by ensuring that with the help of these differences, no single sound could threaten to drown out the diversity of voices. In his scholarly work, Halbertsma therefore emphasized time and again the role of the spoken language as opposed to the written language and the various accents and dialects as opposed to the dominant standard language. Frisian, with its many accents and dialects, provided an excellent opportunity to spread his vision of humankind and society. Due to the fact that, like many of his contemporaries, he considered Frisian to be one of the constituent elements of Dutch, his message was primarily a contribution to the advancement of Dutch society. However, his vision can also be discerned in his contacts with the international scholarly community. For instance, his resistance to the ascendency of a single scientific theory of methodology is prompted by his conviction that differences, in opinion and style, must form the basis for a healthy society. If only for this reason, it was in his view undesirable for the German model to be considered the ultimate scientific methodology. But he also objected to the absolute value attributed to a methodology which had been developed on the basis of rather limited knowledge of an equally limited number of languages. The political instability and the related threat of German annexation of the Netherlands stimulated Halbertsma to advocate a Dutch form of linguistic research.
Halbertsma was not alone in his objection to the German linguistic model, as is primarily apparent in the correspondence between Halbertsma and the Italian scholars C.O. Castiglioni and B. Biondelli. His contacts with them and with other eminent scholars, whose names are less familiar today – Englishmen such as J. Bosworth and L.L. Bonaparte, but also Germans such as M. Firmenich and J.A. Schmeller – show that linguistic research in the first half of the nineteenth century was very dynamic, and offer insight into the social relevance of this dynamism.