

## On the identity and language of the East Frisian people

*"Säi hebbent tēgen däi Düütsken spöölt (They played against the Germans)", said grandma Johanna in past times. She was a real East Frisian woman from Rhaudefehn. And the Germans? Well, she wanted to state, that the opponent team was from the region of Oldenburg. Many East Frisian people referred to themselves not as Germans and also their language was called Östfräisk or Östfräisk Tóól.*

### Historical context

The term 'Deutsch' and 'Plattdeutsch', 'Niederdeutsch' respectively, are relatively new terms in East Frisia. History tells why. When the last east Frisian prince died in 1744, East Frisia belonged to Prussia. East Frisia was a region with five spoken languages: Ostfriesisch was colloquial language, Latin was scholarly language, Frisian was a minority language. Dutch was the main written language in the western part and Hochdeutsch in the eastern part.

The language of the new Prussian administration after 1744 was Hochdeutsch, but this Hochdeutsch was not understood in all parts of the region. From 1818 on the administration in Hannover demanded the sermon in evangelical reformed churches to be in Hochdeutsch. Eight years later it was ordered by the administration to maintain the church books in Hochdeutsch. It was not until 1850 to 1880 that the dutch language finally disappeared in East Frisia. The Hochdeutsch became the only written language in whole East Frisia<sup>1</sup>. Colloquial language still was Ostfriesisch.

The East Frisian people referred to themselves primarily as 'Rheiderländer' or 'Emder' e.g. and secondly as 'Friese' or 'Ostfriese', even after World War II, but never as 'Deutsche (Germans)'. WW II refugees and people that lived behind an imaginary line close to Oldenburg were called 'de Düütskers (Germans)'. In 1919 the book 'Dat Hus sünner Lücht' was published by F. Lottmann (1880 – 1918), born in Emden. The main characters in the book talked about 'de Düütskers', which probably was meant discriminative in that times.

In 1936 Tjabe Wiesenmann published the book 'Hochdeutsch und Ostfriesisch', until then the only comprehensive research on language<sup>2</sup>. The publishing company Schuster wrote in 1977 on republishing of the book: "Wiesenmann emphasizes a bit too much the independence of the ostfriesisches Platt.". Additionally, the republication was renamed by Schuster to 'Einführung in das ostfriesische Niederdeutsch (Introduction in ostfriesisches Niederdeutsch)'. Tjabe Wiesenmann only tried to document the differences between Hochdeutsch and Ostfriesisch in his book. The Ostfriesische Landschaft writes<sup>3</sup>:

"In 'Hochdeutsch und Ostfriesisch' presents himself as a brilliant and patient pedagogue. He understands the problems of his students in learning and knows how to solve these."

The book gets praised, also by the Ostfriesische Landschaft, for several reasons. This is why it is puzzling that the publishing company Schuster in Leer accuses Tjabe Wiesenmann of

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<sup>1</sup> Marron Fort. Die Tradition des Niederländischen in Ostfriesland. <https://uol.de/einblicke/26/die-tradition-des-niederlaendischen-in-ostfriesland>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ostfriesischelandschaft.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/BIBLIOTHEK/BLO/Wiesenmann.pdf](https://www.ostfriesischelandschaft.de/fileadmin/user_upload/BIBLIOTHEK/BLO/Wiesenmann.pdf) (zuletzt abgerufen am 6. November 2020)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ostfriesischelandschaft.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/BIBLIOTHEK/BLO/Wiesenmann.pdf](https://www.ostfriesischelandschaft.de/fileadmin/user_upload/BIBLIOTHEK/BLO/Wiesenmann.pdf) (zuletzt abgerufen am 6. November 2020)

emphasizing the independence too much. Also, the publishing company adds to the preface in the republication without any arguments: “The Ostfriesisch hardly differs from other languages spoken in northern Germany.”. The renaming was not explained. Obviously they felt the book is good enough for a republication but the independence of the Ostfriesisch was not wanted and it was not called Ostfriesisch anymore.

With the acceptance of Niederdeutsch as regional language in 1999 the term Niederdeutsch gets even more promoted. The Ostfriesische Landschaft as a federal institution is required to use this term. What probably was used to be a scientific term nowadays is fixed in the east-frisian society. The Hochdeutsch was promoted in the 1970-years by punishing the usage of Ostfriesisch<sup>4</sup>. With the spreading of Hochdeutsch and renaming the language a large fraction of the east-frisian people were pushed into a change of their identity.

It is only three generations ago that grandma Johanna talked about 'däi Düütsken' and saw them as another nation. Many young East Frisians nowadays would say “but we are in Germany?”.

### Identity and Acknowledgment

One part of the East Frisians still feels strongly connected to the Frisian nationality today. Some years ago, a sticker was published with the text: “I am German citizen with Frisian nationality”. Citizenship here is clearly separated from the term nationality. Strangely, the German translation for 'Staatsangehörigkeit (Citizenship)' in passport and identity card is 'nationality'. This is also true for various dictionaries. But citizenship and nationality are two different things from a legal perspective. In countries like Russia and China, up to today, it is clearly differentiated between citizenship and nationality<sup>5</sup>. Citizenship means, which state do you belong to, where do you pay taxes. Nationality originates from latin 'natio' and means something like 'which nation do you come from'<sup>7</sup>.



Fig 1: Sticker saying, "I am a German citizen with Frisian nationality". Source:

<sup>4</sup> Taz.de. „Mein“ und „dein“ auf Platt. <https://taz.de/Niederdeutsch-im-Kommen!/5287076/>

<sup>5</sup> Andreas Kappeler. Russische Geschichte.

<https://books.google.de/books?id=8iQXAAwAAQBAJ&pg=PA13#v=onepage&q&f=false>

<sup>6</sup> Klemens Ludwig. Vielvölkerstaat China.

<https://books.google.de/books?id=uSIJ8CosHbMC&pg=PA13#v=onepage&q&f=false>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.wortbedeutung.info/natio/>

A small fraction of the East Frisian people nowadays still refers to itself as 'Friese'. It is noteworthy that East Frisia, although many people do not know, is not a homogenic but very heterogenic region. Over the past centuries a lot of different groups came to East Frisia. For example:

- Religious refugees from the Netherlands
- Around 50.000 war refugees from eastern Europe
- The Boatpeople from Vietnam
- Around 700 Sinti in Leer

For the older generations it can be assumed, that two world wars, the misery afterwards and coping with the past lead them to feeling German nowadays. Also, the 'Hochdeutsch' made them feeling even more connected to the Germans.

The question, whether the East Frisian people are Germans or Friesen, was finally answered with the acceptance of the 'Rahmenübereinkommen zum Schutz nationaler Minderheiten (framework convention for the protection of national minorities)' on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1998. The Friesen, Dänen (danish minority), Sorben (Sorbs), Sinti and Roma are accepted as national minority. This means the German government officially accepted those four nations in Germany as national minorities. And nowadays there are several groups that identify with this convention.

The political party *Die Friesen* supports the interests of the Frisian people in East Frisia. The *Friesische Forum* asked the Bundesministerium des Inneren (Federal Ministry of the Interior) for a statement (and received an answer) and the interfrisian *Groep fan Auwerk* conducted activism-like activities. For example, they pasted the welcome-signs at the German-Dutch border with a large sticker saying 'Oost-fryslond'. In 2020 the *Jungfräiske Mäinskup* was founded, to support the languages Ostfriesisch and Saterfriesisch. They also promote cultural self-determination.



Abbildung 2: The welcome-sign at the German-Dutch border. Source:

### Language

The spoken language in East Frisia often is denoted as 'Plattdeutsch' or 'Niederdeutsch'. Those terms primarily were used by native Hochdeutsch-speaker but also were used by so-called 'Plattdeutsch-' and 'Niederdeutsch-Muttersprachlern' (native 'Plattdeutsch-' and 'Niederdeutsch-speaker'). But these terms are questionable.

'Plattdeutsch' refers to a time, where the language was seen as 'simple' (platt) and was despised. This devaluation of the language requires banning this term and this is why the *Jungfräiske Mäinskup* rejects this term.

The term 'Niederdeutsch' is scientifically founded and it tries to establish a connection between the different languages in northern Germany. We as Frisians reject this term because our original language is Frisian and not German.

The East Frisian singer Stefan em Huisken says on his webpage<sup>8</sup>:

“In my opinion there is nothing against it, when the East Frisian people, which are highly active in supporting their language, call their language proudly 'Oostfreeske Taal' – and ignore all clear distinctions between Frisian and 'niederdeutsche' language variations, and even arouse misconceptions (namely: this language is 'Frisian'). Well, they see themselves more as Frisians than as 'Sachsen (Saxonian people)' and this is why the name 'Oostfreeske Taal' is an expression of their lived identity.”

Stefan em Huisken describes the name of the language, but in terms of content the Östfräisk Tóól is not comparable to the 'Niederdeutsch'. Opposite opinions stating that the Frisian content, except for the Saterfrisian, is already extinct in whole East Frisia, do not see, that the situation is different.

The process of disappearing took a very long time and finished in villages like Stedesdorf in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and on the island of Wangerooge in the year 1930, respectively in 1950 in Varel, where Frisian was spoken for the longest time. But the language never disappeared completely.

Today we have a mixture with a large fraction of Frisian content and a strongly expressed sound diversity which is not present in the 'Niederdeutsch'. It clearly can be spoken of a mixture.

Therefore, there is no ending in the Frisian language, but a continuation in mixed form. This also can be seen in the naming of our language in its ancient form. An old Ostfriesie never speaks of 'Platdüütsk' or similar but names his language 'Östfräisk' or 'Östfräisk Tool'. A naming, which, in our opinion, should also be used in German. But this does not seem to satisfy science, that wants to separate 'Niederdeutsch' and 'Friesisch'. The naming 'Ostfriesisch' or 'Ostfriesische Sprache', how it is used in the language itself, seems to be against science. Only few scientist accept the category 'Friesisch-Niederdeutsch', what this language usually belongs to.

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<sup>8</sup> Stefan em Huisken. Plattdeutsch, Niederdeutsch, Sassisk, Oostfreeske Taal – Ja was denn nun?  
<https://emhuisken.de/wordpress/2017/09/plattdeutsch-ja-was-denn-nun/>