

Identity and Language of the East Frisians

"Säi hebbent teegen däi Düütsken spöölt," Grandma Johanna used to say. Grandma Johanna was a true East Frisian from Rhaderfehn. And the Germans? Oh, what she meant was that the other team came from the Oldenburg area. Many East Frisians did not refer to themselves as German, and their language was always called Oostfräisk or Oostfräisk Tóól.

Historical Context

The terms "German" and "Low Saxon" (or Plattdeutsch and Niederdeutsch) are relatively new in East Frisia. History shows us why. When the last East Frisian prince died in 1744, East Frisia fell under Prussian rule. In the 18th century, East Frisia was a multilingual region with five languages: East Frisian Low Saxon was the common spoken language, Latin was used for scholarly purposes, Frisian was a minority language, Dutch was used in the west, and High German was the written language in the east.

After 1744, the language of the new Prussian administration became High German, but around 1800, it was not widely understood in the Reformed regions. From 1818 onwards, the Hanoverian government demanded the introduction of High German sermons in Reformed churches, and eight years later, it was decreed that church records had to be kept in High German. Between 1850 and 1880, Dutch finally disappeared from East Frisia, making High German the sole written language in the region¹. However, the spoken language remained East Frisian Low Saxon.

Until after World War II, East Frisians primarily identified as Rheiderländer or Emden rather than Germans. They referred to displaced persons and everything beyond Oldenburg as "däi Düütsken." In 1919, the book *Dat Hus sünnner Lücht* by Emden-born F. Lottmann (1880–1918) was published. In it, the main characters referred to "de Düütskers" in a derogatory way.

In 1936, Tjabe Wiesenmann wrote *High German and East Frisian*, at the time the "only comprehensive linguistic study"² of the subject. In the 1977 reissue, the publisher Schuster from Leer wrote: "Wiesenmann perhaps emphasizes the independence of East Frisian Low Saxon a little too much." The book was also renamed *Introduction to East Frisian Low Saxon*. However, Wiesenmann merely aimed to highlight the differences between High German and East Frisian. The Ostfriesische Landschaft (an East Frisian cultural institution) praised Wiesenmann's work, describing him as³:

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

² https://www.ostfriesischelandschaft.de/fileadmin/user_upload/BIBLIOTHEK/BLO/Wiesenmann.pdf (zuletzt abgerufen am 6. November 2020)

³ https://www.ostfriesischelandschaft.de/fileadmin/user_upload/BIBLIOTHEK/BLO/Wiesenmann.pdf (zuletzt abgerufen am 6. November 2020)

"A brilliant and patient educator. He understands his students' learning difficulties and knows how to solve them."

It remains a mystery why the Schuster publishing house accused Wiesenmann of overemphasizing East Frisian's independence, yet still found the book valuable enough for a reissue. However, they insisted on downplaying its uniqueness by stating, "East Frisian differs little from neighboring North Low Saxon dialects."

With the recognition of Low Saxon as a regional language in 1999, the term Niederdeutsch (Low Saxon) gained more traction in East Frisia. The Ostfriesische Landschaft was required to use this term officially. What initially seemed like a scientific classification has now become firmly established in East Frisian society. High German was actively promoted in East Frisia until the 1970s, often at the expense of East Frisian Low Saxon⁴. The spread of High German and the renaming of their language led to an "identity shift" for many East Frisians.

Only three generations ago, Grandma Johanna referred to "däi Döütsken" as a foreign people. Many young East Frisians today would say, "But we are in Germany, aren't we?"

Identity and Recognition

Some East Frisians still strongly identify with Frisian nationality. A few years ago, a sticker was created with the slogan: "I am a German citizen – of Frisian nationality." Here, citizenship is distinguished from nationality.



Interestingly, the German term Staatsangehörigkeit (citizenship) is translated as nationality in German passports. In English, one would expect the translation to be citizenship, but the official translation remains nationality, a distinction also found in various dictionaries. However, citizenship and nationality are legally different concepts. Countries like Russia and China clearly differentiate between the two⁵⁶. Citizenship refers to state affiliation (where one pays taxes), while nationality (from the Latin natio) refers to ethnic or cultural identity.

A small portion of East Frisians today primarily identify as Frisian. However, East Frisia is not, as many assume, a homogeneous region. Over the centuries, many different groups have settled there, including religious refugees from the Netherlands, around 50,000 displaced persons from Eastern Europe, Vietnamese

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

⁵ Andreas Kappeler. Russische Geschichte. <https://books.google.de/books?id=8iQXAwAAQBAJ&pg=PA13#v=onepage&q&f=false>

⁶ Klemens Ludwig. Vielvölkerstaat China. <https://books.google.de/books?id=uSIJ8CosHbMC&pg=PA13#v=onepage&q&f=false>

boat people, and about 700 Sinti people in the Leer district. For the original East Frisian population, two world wars, post-war hardships, and coming to terms with the past contributed to a shift in identity, leading many to identify as German today. The introduction of High German further strengthened this connection.

The question of whether East Frisians are German or Frisian was formally resolved with the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities on February 1, 1998. This agreement recognized Frisians, Danes, Sorbs, and Sinti/Roma as national minorities in Germany. Some East Frisian groups now identify with this framework.

The party Die Friesen advocates for the interests of the Frisian national minority in East Frisia, while the Frisian Forum successfully sought a legal opinion from the Federal Ministry of the Interior. Meanwhile, the inter-Frisian Groep fan Auwerk has taken a more activist approach. For example, they once covered the "Welcome to Lower Saxony" sign at the Dutch-German border with a sign reading Oost-Fryslond. In 2020, the Jungfräiske Mäinskup was founded to preserve and promote the East Frisian Low Saxon and Sater Frisian languages while advocating for cultural self-determination.

Language

In East Frisia, the spoken language is often referred to as Plattdeutsch or Niederdeutsch. These terms were primarily used by High German speakers and have since been adopted even by native speakers of Plattdeutsch. However, these terms are problematic.

The term Plattdeutsch originally carried a derogatory connotation, implying that the language was "simple" or inferior. Due to this negative historical association, the Jungfräiske Mäinskup rejects this term.

The term Niederdeutsch is academically justified and attempts to describe the linguistic relationship between the dialects of northern Germany.

The East Frisian singer Stefan em Huisken stated on his website⁷:

"I see no problem if the highly active and successful promoters of Low Saxon in East Frisia proudly call their regional language 'Oostfreeske Taal'—even if this blurs distinctions between Frisian and Low Saxon variants, or even leads some to mistakenly believe it is 'Frisian.' They simply feel more like 'Frisians' than 'Saxons,' and thus, the language's name reflects their lived identity."

Although Huisken was only commenting on the name of the language, in reality, Oostfräisk Tóól is not the same as Low Saxon.

⁷ Stefan em Huisken. Plattdeutsch, Niederdeutsch, Sassisk, Oostfreeske Taal – Ja was denn nun? <https://emhuisken.de/wordpress/2017/09/plattdeutsch-ja-was-denn-nun/>

Opponents who claim that Frisian disappeared entirely from East Frisia (except for Sater Frisian) obscure the real picture.

The decline of Frisian took place over centuries, with the language disappearing in places like Stedesdorf in the 18th century and Wangerooge in 1930. However, Frisian never completely vanished.

Today, what remains is a contact language with strong Frisian influences and a rich phonetic diversity lacking in Low Saxon. The Frisian identity has survived the language shift, as reflected in the original name of the language. Older East Frisians never refer to their language as "Platdüütsk" but call it "Oostfräisk" or "Oostfräisk Tóól" - a term that, in our opinion, should be used in German as well.