

Linguistics in Reading and Life Thereafter

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In the context of celebrating “Fifty Years of Linguistics in Reading”, this paper takes the perspective of a student who studied Linguistics in Reading and then embarked on a career with the help of the knowledge acquired here. The student came to Reading, discovered Linguistics more or less by accident, and went to the University of Kiel in Germany during his year abroad where he in turn discovered the North Frisian language. After graduating in Reading, he returned to Kiel where he helped found and develop the Department of Frisian Studies, first basing his own teaching and research on ideas accrued in Reading before developing a curriculum and research interests for Frisian and European minority languages, both of which resulted strongly in a number of European activities.

1. Introduction

In his very readable article *Learning to be a linguist* David Crystal quotes a publication by the Philological Society (Brown & Law 2002) showing that most linguists of the time had become linguists more or less by accident. Many had started off studying philology, and had then ended up in linguistics, “not usually having any clear idea of what it was – knowing that it was different from philology, but not being entirely sure about its status or future direction” (2016: 198). This is more or less true of my own career.

2. Studying in Reading

When I came to Reading in 1967, my original plan was to study French and German. On arrival I discovered I needed to study three subjects for the First University Examination (FUE). While casting around for a third subject I came across Linguistics, which seemed interesting, so I chose that. By the time FUE came, I had become fascinated by Linguistics, or at least parts of it, and thus decided, contrary to my original plan, to study Linguistics with a language. As I had spent six months in Germany as an assistant teacher prior to coming up to university, I decided that my final course of study should be German and Linguistics, a decision which I have never regretted, though I still very much enjoy working with French.

Looking back on my time in Reading, I realise now with hindsight the excitement there was in the department. Linguistics was finding its feet and we were part of it, although not consciously aware of this at the time but being carried along on a wave of enthusiasm. For me personally, abstract theories about language were not quite my forte; getting to grips with real people speaking real (albeit strange) languages in real linguistic situations, and trying to analyse and understand these languages and language situations, was what really interested me, admittedly for a long time unconsciously. It is difficult for an undergraduate to rationalise his strengths and weaknesses, his interests and his sometimes muted interest. I also enjoyed speaking different languages, so for me a combined course German and Linguistics was ideal.

I will remember Frank Palmer's lectures on the history of linguistics at nine o'clock on a Friday morning - a time not popular with all students - and it was wonderful to see him coming into the seminar room, carrying a pile of books, all resplendent with a profusion of slips of paper marking the pages which were to be quoted. If I remember correctly, Professor Palmer never really had a manuscript for his lectures - in fact a characteristic of most of the teaching staff, looking back. I do not remember lecturers 'lecturing' to us in the sense of reading a manuscript, as is often the custom at a German university with the concept of the 'Vorlesung'. The best example of a lecturer without a manuscript was David Crystal who would pace up and down in front of the blackboard, divulging his thoughts on intonation patterns, but not being bound by a manuscript. There was a definite correlation between a lecture being held freely and the interest it incurred, an insight which has to a degree influenced my own teaching and public lecturing.

Perhaps the most decisive aspect of the course in Reading was the year abroad, and here luck played an important part. During the year abroad we had to write a thesis on a linguistic topic. I had the great good fortune to have Professor W.B. Lockwood as my tutor who was himself well-experienced in fieldwork in a small language community, having compiled a pioneering grammar of Faroese (Lockwood 1955). It was he who suggested I should go to Kiel, Germany, to do some work on North Frisian. When I looked at him and asked him in all innocence what North Frisian was, his reply was simply: "Go to Kiel and find out!". Although Lockwood was in the German Department, this reflected the approach in the Linguistics Department as well, best exemplified by Frank Palmer's attitude that one should "get out there and get on with it".

2.1. The year abroad

When I arrived in Kiel I discovered the North Frisian Dictionary Centre (*die Nordfriesische Wörterbuchstelle*) which had been founded in 1950 to produce a comprehensive dictionary of the North Frisian dialects. Here again I was very lucky: the head of the dictionary was the eminent Germanist and Nordic scholar Hans Kuhn; however, as he had retired, he could only devote a little time to the dictionary. There was one lexicographer, a very kind Frisian, who was slightly surprised that a British student should be interested in the language, but who introduced me to the Frisian dialects. We discussed various ideas for a project and decided on the phonological analysis of a hitherto unknown village dialect. To do this he bought a portable tape recorder (UHER Report 4000). As chance would have it, a sister of his was married to a farmer in the village and there was a free bedroom on the farm. This then became my quarters for six weeks in January and February 1970. I was also introduced to a number of Frisians in the village who were all willing to help in the project.

Thus I lived on the farm, walking every morning and afternoon to one or other of my informants, carrying the tape recorder in my rucksack in order to make tape recordings and to analyse the complicated sound system (20 monophthongs and 7 diphthongs). This I found most exhilarating; I was working with real people and with real language and, as I slowly began to appreciate, in a fascinating linguistic situation. I was very grateful to the training I had received in Reading with the language classes where we had practised analysing unknown languages with informants, and had happily spent hours in the language laboratory internalising the cardinal vowels. This was very good training for what I was now experiencing in the field.

2.2. Graduation in Reading and back to Kiel

On my return to Reading in October 1970, I handed in my thesis, hoping it might be possible to go back to Kiel to continue my work. Professor Lockwood greatly encouraged me here and wrote a positive reference which helped me gain a scholarship from the German Academic

Exchange Service.¹ After graduation I was thus able to return to Kiel in October 1971, only to find that the previous lexicographer had left, and so I was now on my own with a young Frisian student who was in charge of the administration. It was decided I should continue doing field work, documenting the dialects on the mainland - a task I thoroughly enjoyed. As I had no means of transport, I had to hitchhike to North Frisia from Kiel, sleeping in a youth hostel, and then hitchhiking around the various villages. Eventually my parents lent me some money and I bought myself a small Volkswagen “Beetle”.

When my scholarship ended, I was given a post in the dictionary to continue my field work, which also enabled me to write an M.Phil thesis. As I had by now discovered that to work in this area one needed knowledge of Danish, I applied for a scholarship from the Danish Government which enabled me to study at the Jutish Dictionary Centre at the University of Aarhus (*Institut for Jysk Sprog- og Kulturforskning*) in 1974, five months I also greatly enjoyed.

3. The development of Frisian Studies in Kiel

When I started in Kiel, there was only the Frisian Dictionary Centre. However, this was a time of student unrest and the dictionary became a meeting point for the dissatisfied Frisian students who wanted inter alia Frisian to be recognised as a subject of study. After much discussion the students approached Dietrich Hofmann, the professor of Old Germanic and Nordic Studies, who himself had worked on the Frisian dictionary, and asked him to establish Frisian Studies as a university subject. This he was only too willing to do and in December 1972 Frisian was officially recognised as a subject of study. It did, however, take until 1978 for the Department to gain its own professorship. It did mean that a curriculum was needed for Frisian, and eventually I, officially only a lexicographer, became involved in teaching and developing courses, which again was a challenge I thoroughly enjoyed. As there were but few materials available, we had more or less to start from scratch. This, in retrospect, very much reminded me of the situation in Reading. Reading was developing Linguistics; we were developing Frisian Studies.

During my work in the Dictionary Centre and in the Department of Frisian Studies, I had the great good fortune to have an excellent colleague, Ommo Wilts, himself from Lower Saxony, from 1973 to 2002, and we formed a very productive partnership, our personalities and interests complementing each other in many ways. As an example, we divided North Frisia up into two parts: Ommo concentrated on the islands of Föhr, Amrum and Sylt, working with those dialects, whereas I concentrated on the mainland dialects.

We were both keen to help the language community in its attempt to promote the language and culture and we both had the distinct advantage here of NOT being Frisian. What do I mean? Since the drawing of the Dano-German border in 1921, and especially in the aftermath of World War II, the relationship between the German majority and the Danish minority in Schleswig-Holstein was somewhat acrimonious. Unfortunately this conflict pervaded the Frisian language community such that it was mooted there were no ‘Frisian’ Frisians but only ‘Danish’ or ‘German’ Frisians. As Ommo and I obviously belonged to neither category, we could and did work with both groups. Realising that this national-political struggle was counterproductive to the promotion of the Frisian language, we organised a conference in Sankelmark, near the Danish border, in 1978 on *Friesisch heute* (‘Frisian today’), deliberately trying to take the Frisian language and culture away from the political battlefield

¹ I was not the only one whom Lockwood greatly helped in their career. Anthony Rowley (German and Linguistics 1970-74) went on to become professor of German and head of the Bavarian Dictionary in Munich, and John Simpson (MA in Medieval Studies 1976, now retired) became chief editor of the Oxford Dictionary in 1993.

into the area of Science (Walker & Wilts 1979). This played an important role in fostering cooperation between the different groups.

Thus by this time my colleague and I were working on the Frisian dictionary, teaching in the Department of Frisian Studies and conducting research. We were also active in the language movement which ultimately led to conflict both within the Department as well as in the Faculty which centred around the question as to the responsibility which a linguist or university department may have towards the language community whose language, literature and culture they are representing, teaching and researching at a university level. Both my colleague and I wanted to support the language community, whereas there was a body of opinion which deemed it inappropriate for a scientist to become involved with a language community. Language promotion has nothing to do with Science. As I became aware in the course of time that this basic conflict was not restricted to Kiel alone, I wrote an article on the topic, trying simultaneously to clarify matters in my own mind (Walker 2012). Again I can perhaps quote David Crystal here who states that a feature of British Linguistics was that Linguistics should actually be useful, Applied Linguistics being an important factor (2016: 202-203). I had learnt about language policy and language planning with David Wilkins in Reading and here was a classic example of how this could be implemented - but it led to conflict. This was no reflection on Reading, I hasten to add!

3.1. Teaching in Kiel

As there were hardly any materials for teaching Frisian in tertiary education, we had to start from scratch. Slowly a curriculum developed, based firstly on language acquisition and the interests of the teaching staff. Students had, for example, to learn at least two Frisian dialects for which it was necessary to produce language courses. We did this for three dialects. My own fields of teaching were often a continuation and development of that which I had been taught in Reading, in a Frisian context. Thus my seminars were often centred around dialectology, lexicography, sociolinguistics and European regional and minority languages; in dialectology, for example, students were introduced to field work, and in lexicography taught how to compile a dictionary. Naturally in each case the history of each sub-discipline was discussed, following Professor Palmer's example. However, as the teaching usually took place in the departmental library, I did not need to carry piles of books into the seminar room – they were already there!

As multilingualism was one of the subjects I taught, reflecting the situation in North Frisia, I gradually adopted a policy of making my seminars themselves multilingual. Thus at the beginning of each semester I would ask the students to describe their linguistic biographies, then I would address each student in his or her L1 if this was part of my own repertoire. This way I hoped that students would become used to the constant switching of languages and also gain at least some passive competence in the languages concerned. These were mostly the various Frisian dialects, High German, Low German, Danish and English. When we had Japanese students visiting us, I had to admit defeat. However, when I gave a lecture to a Japanese delegation in Kiel, I started in Japanese, having asked my youngest son to translate some sentences for me. This is a habit I acquired while working with the *European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages*. When giving a lecture in front of an audience with a minority language, I usually start in the language, citing a few sentences which some kind colleague has translated into the particular language for me and which I have noted down in phonetic transcription – thanks to Reading's Phonetics Department, Peter Barnes, Peter Roach et al. This has a double function: it quietens my nerves and usually puts the audience in a receptive mood.

In this context French fulfils a special role. I teach in French when I do not want the students to understand me, or only partially. German students often have only limited competence in the language. Thus, when in a seminar on minority languages I describe how children socialised in a minority language were often forced through an educational system in

a language which they had difficulties in understanding, I demonstrate the misery these children must have been subjected to by teaching for 30 minutes in French, forbidding my students to speak a word of German. This didactical approach seems to be quite effective.

As I also had to teach Frisian Literature with but little knowledge of literary theory, I joined forces with a colleague from the Department of German Literature and we gave joint seminars, she specialising on the literary theory and I putting the literary works in an historical and cultural context, such as the theme of migration to the USA. This reflected the successful idea of joint ventures with Linguistics in Reading.

An important part of teaching was the field trips. Each semester we took a group of students up to North Frisia, either to the mainland or the islands, in order to gain first-hand experience of the area, and above all to become acquainted with the language community with whom some would later be collaborating. It also gave the students the opportunity to test the theories I had been expounding in class. These field trips always proved very popular both with the students and the Frisians alike, often giving their work fresh impetus (Walker 2010).

Field trips were also organised to West Frisia in the Netherlands and the Saterland in Lower Saxony as West and Sater Frisian were part of the curriculum. We also visited the universities of Groningen and Amsterdam where Frisian is taught. It has always been considered important to promote relations in the field of Frisian scholarship and today, for example, there is a regular exchange with the University of Groningen. Students are also encouraged to participate in the tri-annual *Frisian Philological Congress* and the annual *Frisian Language Day*, both held in the *Fryske Akademy* (Frisian Academy) in Ljouwert/Leeuwarden. Advanced students are often invited to present a paper.

As Frisian is a European minority language and is taught as such in seminars on the sociology of language, there are also occasional trips to other linguistic minority areas. One Frisian association, the *Friisk Foriining*, organises a ‘language trip’ to another linguistic minority every two years, and in this context I have myself organised trips to the Gaelic community on Skye (in 1999), the Breton community in Brittany (in 2008), and the Sámi in Northern Finland and Northern Norway (in 2014). Our students are invited to participate in these trips. As we are affiliated to the Department of Scandinavian Studies, I also took a group of colleagues and students up to the Shetland and Orkney Islands in 2012.

As already indicated, after the establishment of Frisian Studies as an academic subject in 1972, the teaching was in the hands of the Professor for Nordic Studies, Dietrich Hofmann, who gave classes in Frisian philology in addition to teaching Nordic philology. He was assisted by one or two speakers of Frisian who gave courses in their native dialects.² He also supervised the first two doctoral theses in Frisian Studies.³ After the introduction of the professorship for Frisian Studies in 1978, the curriculum was further developed and there were three of us teaching: the Swede Bo Sjölin as professor, Ommo Wilts and myself as well as the native speakers giving language courses. When Sjölin retired in 1997, the professorship remained vacant for two years until the West Frisian Jarich Hoekstra came in 1999. He has successfully introduced full BA and MA courses and given the Department a sound scientific foundation. Unfortunately, when Ommo Wilts retired in 2002, he was not replaced, meaning that Jarich Hoekstra and I were then responsible for practically all courses with approximately forty to fifty students each semester. After my own retirement in 2013, I was very relieved to have a successor.

² For an overview of Frisian Studies in Kiel up to 1978, see Walker (2004). For a short overview of more recent activities within the Frisian Department in Kiel, see Walker (2015). A comprehensive history of Frisian Studies in Kiel has still to be written.

³ I have always been quietly quite proud that my thesis was the first doctorate in Frisian Studies in Kiel, gaining my doctorate in 1980. Reading was, as it were, leading the way.

3.2. Research

When I first came to Kiel, I concentrated on dialectology as there was – and still is – the need to document the Frisian dialects as the Frisian language is a highly endangered language.⁴ The students that Lockwood sent out to Kiel in the following years for their year abroad were a help here as three worked on North Frisian and two on Low German dialects. So far all but two of the mainland village dialects have been recorded and the phonology analysed. Together with the recordings made especially by the Swedish Frisian scholar Nils Århammar, we have approximately 600 hours of tape recordings in the Dictionary Centre.

Although my dialectological research was an end in its own right in the sense of documenting the language, it also served the codification of the language or, to be more exact, of the dialects. As has already been stated, the aim of the North Frisian Dictionary Centre was to compile a comprehensive scientific dictionary of all the North Frisian dialects. This changed with the advent of the “renaissance of regional and minority languages” around the beginning of the 1970s, as the Frisian language community requested us to produce dictionaries of single dialects. Thus the material collected hitherto was re-sorted and we started with the production of dictionaries for individual dialects, both Frisian-German and German-Frisian. So far some twelve dictionaries have been published under the aegis of the Dictionary Centre, and two more are in preparation. These are complemented by a large thesaurus of the Frisian dialects, now available on the internet, encompassing lexicographical work, grammars, texts and so on in all dialects. The thesaurus is designed to allow scholars throughout the world to avail themselves of Frisian material for study.

A further field of research is the multilingualism in North Frisia where five linguistic varieties are spoken: North Frisian (which in turn is sub-divided into ten main dialects), Low German, High German, Jutish (a Danish dialect) and Danish. One might add American English, as many people from the islands of Föhr and Amrum have emigrated to the USA and then returned. As the government in Schleswig-Holstein wants to promote the smaller languages, including Frisian, I argue that we first need an analysis of the multilingualism in North Frisia before attempting language planning. Thus, for example, I have a project at present on linguistic biographies, examining how people over the course of time have acquired their languages, based on the hypothesis that this will differ from generation to generation and place to place.

Finally I work on the question of Frisian as a European minority language, analysing its situation and status, especially within the realm of education, and compare this with other linguistic minorities in Europe.⁵

Perhaps the most important publication hitherto was the *Handbuch des Friesischen / Handbook of Frisian Studies*, which a team of Frisian scholars published in 2001, giving an overview of research in all fields of Frisian Studies in 79 chapters and 845 pages (Munske et al. 2001). With this publication we hoped to put Frisian squarely on the international scientific map.

4. Europe

Due to my experience working in North Frisia, and my enthusiasm for Europe and linguistic minorities in general, I have in the course of time been involved in a number of activities in Europe, some of which can be briefly summarised here.

⁴ In 2005 I published a book analyzing the phonology of six village dialects of which five have now disappeared. Thus I have literally sometimes been working with the last speakers of the respective dialects (Walker 2005).

⁵ For two overviews see Walker (2001) and Gorter & Walker (2001). For Frisian in education, see Walker (2015).

One important development was the founding of the *European Bureau for Lesser used Languages* (EBLUL) in 1982, first based in Dublin, and later in Brussels. I helped found the German member state committee and was its deputy chairman from 1992 to 1999. EBLUL was very active and I can give two examples here. After the reunification of Germany we organised a conference in Budyšin/Bautzen in collaboration with the *Sorbischer Schulverein* (Sorbian School Association) on bilingual education. We invited colleagues from different parts of Europe to come and discuss with the Sorbs their systems of bilingual education, and to compare them with the Sorbian model, working on the principle that we wanted to learn from each other. This led to a fruitful exchange of ideas. In 2001 we organised another congress, this time in Berlin in conjunction with the Federal Ministry of the Interior on *Sprachenvielfalt und Demokratie in Deutschland* (Linguistic Diversity and Democracy in Germany) (European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages 2002).⁶ One main aim here was to try and establish minority language politics, which were relatively well developed at a regional, i.e. Länder-level, at a national level. This proved successful and today there is a committee and an albeit modest secretariat for the autochthonous minorities in Berlin.

Other organisations I have long been involved with are the *Fryske Akademy* in Ljouwert/ Leeuwarden, the Netherlands, and *Mercator Education*, later integrated into the *Akademy*. In 1988 the *Akademy* organised the first international conference on European minority languages in primary education, the EMU project, a major stepping stone in the field of minority language education, subsequently leading to a fruitful development of this field at international level. I was one of the two rapporteurs here.

Again in an educational context I was from 2005 to 2006 member of an expert committee in Brussels, invited to organise in conjunction with the European Commission the congress *Regional and Minority Languages in Education Systems* in April 2006. Here I was, inter alia, responsible for the workshop *Teacher training for minority languages*.

As a result of my experience with minority language issues, the Federal Ministry of the Interior selected me in 1999 as one of three candidates to represent the Federal Republic of Germany in the Council of Europe's committee of experts for the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*.

4.1. Connections to other universities

Over the years I have from time to time been invited to give guest lectures at universities and scientific institutions in different parts of Europe. However, outside the immediate sphere of Frisian activity, three universities stand out: the University of Uppsala in Sweden, the Agder Academy of Sciences and Letters in Kristiansand, Norway, and the University of the Basque Country in Donostia/St. Sebastian, Spain.

In 2002 I was invited to be a guest researcher in Uppsala. This led to the founding of a small research group *Minorities around the Baltic Sea*. Following a conference in 2004 we published a book on the development of minority politics in the ten countries around the Baltic Sea since World War II – Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Russia (Åkermark 2006).

It was a great honour to be elected a fellow of the Agder Academy of Sciences and Letters in Kristiansand, Norway in 2011.

After retirement in 2013 I have so far taught twice a course at the University of the Basque Country in Donostia/St. Sebastian on regional and minority languages in education. I hope to be able to continue this enthralling venture.

⁶ An anthology of the autochthonous minority languages in Germany was presented in the congress, however, without Romani as our Sinti and Roma colleagues would not allow their language to be written (European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages 2001).

5. On building bridges

One aspect which I have always considered to be very important in my work is that of building bridges, or at least trying to. As a British citizen working in Germany who grew up in the shadow of World War II, I have always been conscious of the need for reconciliation between our two countries. Thus much of my work – scientific, social and political – can be seen in the light of working for peace, here and in Europe generally. I consider it a privilege that I am able to work with young Germans, teaching and training them, demonstrating that people of different nations can live and work together very well.

In the Frisian context one of the first challenges facing my colleague Ommo Wilts and myself was to build bridges between the different factions within the Frisian people. As we were not alone here and as some of the ‘old warriors’ have since passed on, peace now reigns to a large degree among the different groups.

A further step was to build bridges between the various autochthonous linguistic minorities in Germany. This was made possible by the *European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages* (EBLUL) which had a member state committee for every state in which all recognised regional or minority language groups were represented. EBLUL also made the next step possible which was to build bridges between linguistic minorities throughout the European Union. For a time fruitful networks of scientists, activists and others developed throughout Europe, all following a common cause: the promotion of regional and minority languages. The EBLUL era and all the concomitant activities at European, national and regional level of the time did indeed make for a most exciting period. It is sad that EBLUL has now disappeared.

In 2001 I tried to build a further bridge, to the allochthonous minorities in Germany. In the two-day congress *Sprachenvielfalt und Demokratie in Deutschland* in Berlin, I had hoped to invite a representative of the Turkish community, himself a prominent politician in the Green Party, to give a lecture on the theme from the perspective of a German citizen with Turkish roots. Unfortunately one autochthonous minority threatened to boycott the congress if a member of an allochthonous group were to be invited. As in the ensuing lively discussion most of the other minorities generally supported this position, I was forced to change my concept. Allochthonous minorities were not to be invited to the congress: my attempt at building a bridge here had failed. We shall, however, one day need to build this bridge.

6. Summary

Thanks to my training in Reading and Professor Lockwood’s initiative, I was sent on a path which has proven over the past 45 years most exciting and rewarding. When I came to Reading I had no idea what life had in store for me; however, Linguistics pointed me in the right direction. What I learnt in Reading I developed further, first in a Frisian, and then in a more general European context as the various disciplines evolved. My general principle though was to open and go through doors that presented themselves, and there I continue today.

Over the years I have also been very grateful for my contacts with scholars from Reading who have from time to time also visited me, especially W.B. Lockwood, but also Frank Palmer, David Crystal, and Peter Trudgill, whom I never actually had as a teacher in Reading but who has proven a cherished friend since.

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