

[0903]

## BESPREEK

**Paulina Wanke, *Das Helgoländische*.** Dissertation Kulturwissenschaftliche Europa-Universität Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder). Norderstedt (2008), Books on Demand, 388 pp. ISBN 978-3-8370-1955-1.

Wanke's study focuses on Heligolandic Frisian<sup>1</sup> and its vitality at the beginning of the current millennium. While estimates in the literature claim that about 500 people speak Heligolandic Frisian, Wanke states in the introduction to her dissertation that there has not been a systematic count of the number of speakers of Heligolandic Frisian conducted for decades. Due to globalisation and the growing number of people moving from the mainland to the island (Heligoland) Wanke postulates that the actual number of Heligolandic Frisian speakers might be much lower than 500 and that the language might be on the brink of extinction. Wanke therefore sets out to describe the current sociolinguistic situation on Heligoland; to determine the vitality of the Heligolandic Frisians as an ethno-linguistic group, as well as to investigate which factors play a role in the vitality of a minority language.

After a short introduction, Wanke explains the aim of her research and the outline of her dissertation in Chapter 2. She provides a short overview of the history of Heligoland and its inhabitants, and pays special attention to the fact that the Heligolandic Frisians have never had their own political territory, and have lived in isolation for a long period of time.

Chapter 3 focuses on the empirical part of the study. It sets out with a description of the participants and the method used in the investigation. This is followed by a short description of the results. Wanke's study counts 57 participants, all of them with at least one parent from Heligoland. These 57 have been issued a questionnaire concerned with the vitality of the Heligolandic people as an ethno-linguistic group. The questionnaire consists of four parts: i) information about the personal background of the participants; ii) their use of the Heligolandic Frisian language; iii) their attitudes towards Heligolandic Frisian and their perspective on its future; iv) their opinions on the socio-cultural situation of Heligoland and the Heligolandic identity. In addition, Wanke conducted in-depth interviews with 9 informants about the same questions as those given in the questionnaire.

The results show that the elderly people on the island of Heligoland report to use Heligolandic most. They do not pass the language on to their children,

---

1. One of nine dialects of North Frisian spoken on the German island of Heligoland.

however. Most participants in Wanke's study indicate that the Heligolandic culture is still very important to them; it is reported that these informants are proud of their ancestors and that they see the Heligolandic culture and traditions as an important part of their identity.

In Chapter 4 Wanke puts her results in the context of Giles', Bourhis' and Taylor's (1977) vitality theory looking at the traditional three determinants of ethno-linguistic vitality: the status, demographic strength, and the amount of institutional support the group has. Wanke concludes that the social and socio-historical status of the Heligolandic Frisians is strong. The participants of her empirical study identify themselves with the Heligolandic culture and are proud of it. Historic events have kept them together as a group and strengthened their socio-historical identity. The linguistic status of Heligolandic Frisian, on the other hand, is very weak. Wanke (2008:235) estimates that only 20% of the Heligolandic population are able to speak the local linguistic variety and notes that people are not willing to make efforts at maintaining the native variety, generally speaking. Wanke notes how younger people do not see any advantages in learning the variety and would rather learn a language like English, which they claim is of more use to them in terms of education and career. Moreover, Wanke notes how the restriction of Heligolandic Frisian to private domains reflects its worrisome social status.

When it comes to demography, Wanke concludes that the vitality of the Heligolandic Frisians is rather low. Factors contributing to the low demographic strength that have not previously been mentioned are the high number of mixed-marriages and the increase in emigration of young Heligolandic Frisians. Wanke also mentions the increasing tourist numbers as a factor which leads to a lower demographic strength of the Heligolandic Frisians as it results in a higher proportion of non-Heligolandic (temporary) inhabitants of the island.

As to institutional support, Wanke considers the entire group of North Frisian dialects as a whole. She concludes that the amount of institutional support for this group is small. Informal support is almost non-existent as North Frisian plays a very small role in the media and has never been a language used in church. There never was a lot of industry on Heligoland, which is, according to Wanke, the main reason for youngsters to leave the island in order to find better job opportunities on the mainland. Tourism is mentioned as the only source of institutional support that Heligolandic Frisian could receive, through the focus on revitalising old habits and traditions in local tourist activities. Wanke notes, however, how tourism leads to a great amount of contact with other languages and cultures and can also in fact endanger the Heligolandic identity and language. On the formal side of institutional support Wanke mentions the possibility that children have to be educated for some part in North Frisian. This factor, however, is less strong than expected as said education is provided on a voluntary base only. The recognition of North Frisian as a minority language in Germany is naturally mentioned in this chapter too, along with the right that North Frisians have to use their language in public. Wanke makes a note of how these official recognition efforts have been futile, mostly

because speakers themselves hold the attitude that not enough people can write, or even speak, the language.

In her final chapter Wanke reviews and discusses her findings. Her comments on the future perspective for Heligolandic Frisian can be summarised in that she does not see a lot of hope for the survival of the linguistic variety. Wanke's concerns that it might be too late to revitalise Heligolandic Frisian are founded in the small remaining amount of speakers of the languages, as well as in the rather negative language attitudes inhabitants of the island hold. She does, however, give a few suggestions that could contribute to the revitalisation of the Heligolandic Frisian language, such as providing more political and financial support and setting up "Patenschaften", where older native speakers of Heligolandic Frisian teach the language to the younger generation.

## EVALUATION

Wanke's overview of the vitality of the minority language Heligolandic Frisian is timely. Her work is reminiscent of that of the Mercator's Regional Dossiers, which provide information about European minority regions (Mercator 2013). Wanke's book is structured in a logical manner and easy to read. However, we do have a few theoretical, methodological and analysis-related concerns with the work. Our first point of criticism concerns the theoretical framework used in the book. Wanke uses the vitality framework by Giles et al. (1977) to determine the ethnolinguistic vitality of Heligolandic Frisian. This framework has been around since 1977, and bears signs of ageing. We believe that a more valuable framework for Wanke's study would be UNESCO's (2003) Language Vitality and Endangerment instrument, as it explicitly takes into account how minority and regional languages respond to new domains and media. Wanke's fieldwork was done at a time when communication through texting and social media was becoming an increasingly large part of people's day-to-day life. We know from other minority language areas in Europe that these digital developments have led to an increased presence of minority languages in people's lives. We therefore wonder what the extent is of, for example, the use of (symbolic) phrases and words from Heligolandic Frisian in text (and instant) messaging. Also, hypothetically speaking, if an individual is concerned with creating an online dictionary of Heligolandic Frisian and is successful at doing so, the ramifications could still be huge for the vitality of a linguistic variety. In sum, we miss a modern take on the vitality instrument used by Wanke.

Another point of criticism we have concerns the methodology employed in Wanke's study. The work is based entirely on results from nine in-depth interviews and a written questionnaire, to which 57 individuals responded. The interviews and questionnaires consist of self-reported accounts only. Taking into account that this manner of measuring ethnolinguistic vitality is rather subjective, some of Wanke's results are also questionable. She concludes, for example, that almost no young

Heligolandic people are able to speak Heligolandic Frisian, and that the language might become extinct very soon. This is a conclusion that is not based on an actual language proficiency test. We wonder whether it is really true that the participants have no passive knowledge of the language, for example.

Furthermore, Wanke's participant group is very small. According to the website of the community of Heligoland, around 1.500 people live on the island (Gemeinde Heligoland 2013). Only 57 of these participated in the study, i.e. about 3.8% of the entire population. 44% of Wanke's participants are 50 years old or older. Only 21% of the participants are 20 years old or younger. The conclusions drawn in Wanke's study about the age category 15-20-year-olds are highly problematic as this group consists of three participants only!

Yet another point that caught our attention is Wanke's informant selection criterion of only including subjects with at least one parent from Heligoland (Wanke 2008: 41). Her questionnaire contains the question: "Do you have parents that come from Heligoland?", while in the analysis of the responses to this question 13 participants (23% of the entire participant group) do not have parents that come from Heligoland at all (Wanke 2008: 104). It seems odd to pose a selection criterion that 13 participants do not meet, and yet include the data from these 13 in the eventual analysis, as Wanke does.

Another problematic point we have concerning the questionnaire is the following. In an attempt to measure the participants' knowledge of Heligolandic Frisian, Wanke asks the question "Können Sie Helgoländisch?"<sup>2</sup> (Wanke 2008: 67). In this context the verb "können" can mean being able to *speak* or being able to *understand* Heligolandic Frisian. From the phrasing of the question, it is not clear what was meant, and so it remains unclear what the results of this question tell us exactly.

When it comes to the analysis of the quantitative data in Wanke's study we have a comment regarding the actual presentation of the results. Bar charts are used presenting the number of people that gave specific answers, instead of the percentage of people, making it extremely difficult for the reader to compare results across groups. This is particularly problematic as the groups that Wanke distinguishes are not equal in number.

Our final critical point about Wanke's analysis is the lack of distinction made between people who speak Heligolandic and people who do not speak Heligolandic in the analysis of responses to questions of identity and language ideology. In our opinion it would have made sense to differentiate answers from the two groups to questions such as "How much prestige do you think the Heligolandic Frisian language has?" (Wanke 2008: 133). People claiming to speak Heligolandic Frisian are likely to have a different view on the status of the language than those who do not claim to speak it.

---

2. Translation: "Do you know Heligolandic Frisian?"

To conclude Wanke's work is very interesting in the context of research on North Frisian. However, in the broader context of minority language research, it could have done with a methodology and theoretical foundation that was more up-to-date. In our opinion the usage of self-reported speech data is something that should be combined with actual language testing and collection of linguistic data, especially in minority language communities. The usage of digital tools, and perhaps even crowd-sourcing, of language data could have vastly increased the data size in Wanke's study, and at the same time increased the validity of the conclusions. We contend that future work on the vitality of minority languages must focus more on improving and updating language testing and sampling instruments. In this way a more reliable calculation of speaker numbers can be reached, which could only improve the measure of vitality of minority languages.

*Femke Swarte*  
University of Groningen

*Nanna Haug Hilton*  
University of Groningen

#### *References*

- Gemeinde Helgoland. 2013. <http://www.helgoland.de/helgoland/gemeinde-helgoland-rathaus.html>. Retrieved: 30.10.2013.
- Giles, H., Bourhis, R. Y. and Taylor, D. M. 1977. Towards a Theory of Language in Ethnic Group Relations. In: Giles, H., Coupland, J. and Coupland, N. (eds.), *Context of Accommodation. Developments in applied sociolinguistics*. Cambridge: University Press: 1-68.
- Mercator. 2013. <http://www.mercator-research.eu/research-projects/regional-dossiers/>. Retrieved: 29.10.2013.
- Steensen, T. 1996. Nordfriesland im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. In: Nordfriisk Instituut (ed.), *Geschichte Nordfrieslands*. Heide: Boyens & Co: 206-435.
- UNESCO. 2003. Language Vitality and Endangerment. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/language-vitality/>. Retrieved: 29.10.2.