

The position of Old Frisian adverbs of degree

A number of differences have been observed between the adverbs of degree found in the North Sea Germanic languages and those in the Continental languages. Old English and Old Saxon share a number of features that distinguish them from High German and Dutch, such as the dominance of the adverb of high degree *swîþe/swîðo* ‘strongly’, which is not found in High German. The Old Saxon system of degree marking undergoes a drastic transformation during the transition to Middle Low German, as, from the thirteenth century onward, the system in latter bears little resemblance to the former and is closer to High German and Dutch (Visser, forthcoming). Shared developments also took place between the Continental languages, an example of which is the rise of the adverb *sêre* ‘very, sorely’. This raises the question if and to what degree similar developments are found in Old Frisian, which (somewhat confusingly) corresponds historically to Middle Low German, not Old Saxon.

Using data from the *Corpus Old Frisian* (van de Poel 2019) and the *Integrated Frisian Language Database* (Versloot & Nijdam 2006/2011), the present study seeks to contextualise the position of Old Frisian and to establish a chronology when it comes to the usage of adverbs of degree.

In Old Frisian, the North Sea Germanic adverb *swîthe* ‘strongly’ is relatively rare and can be found in only two different texts: the *Seventeen Statutes*, which is possibly the oldest Old Frisian legal text (Bremmer 2009: 9, Sjölin 1969: 9), and *How the Frisians Conquered Rome* (J, A). In the former, this adverb is found in all but one manuscript, including later post-classical ones (see Sjölin 1966, Versloot 2004: 288-289), though absent in the earliest manuscript that contains this text (R1). The latter text is of an uncertain date (possibly thirteenth century, Siebs 1901: 533), though it only survives in later West Frisian manuscripts. Therefore, *swîthe* was likely confined to early texts, and its usage in later manuscripts reflects an archaism. Other adverbs such as *ful* ‘fully, very’, the second most common adverb of degree in Old English, is also common in Old Frisian in every period.

Like in Middle Low German, *sêre* ‘very, sorely’ is a common adverb in Old Frisian, though its distribution is notable. It is quite rare in the Old East Frisian manuscripts, being restricted to two instances in a later manuscript (F) and one instance in the poem *Fon alra Fresena Fridome* (H2) that was copied from a Western exemplar (Bremmer 2009: 169). As such, usage this adverb is mainly used from the fifteenth century onward, meaning that the language took part in the shared innovation found in the other Continental West Germanic languages. *Fele* appears as an independent adverb of high degree in all periods, though it is only found with comparatives in post-classical manuscripts. This usage resembles Continental West Germanic but differs from Old English and Old Saxon.

Although based on a relatively small number of attestations, the adverbs of degree associated with the Continental “Middle” Germanic languages are only solidly attested in the later West Germanic texts. While the main adverb associated with North Sea Germanic continued to appear in later copies of older texts, it seems plausible that they had fallen out of common use before that point. This is further supported by the fact that the *Gesta Fresonum* (A), a longer Old West Frisian text from the fifteenth century, extensively uses *sêre* but never *swîthe*. As such, a clear diachronic pattern can be observed within Old Frisian: most North Sea Germanic features of the system of adverbs of degree are restricted to the early chronological layers, while the Middle Germanic innovations are mainly found in the later post-classical texts. The developments thus resemble Middle Low German to a degree.

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