

Virtual Frisian: A comparison of language use in North and West Frisian virtual communities

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Social networking sites have become ubiquitous in our daily communicative exchanges, which has brought about new platforms of identification and opened possibilities that were out of reach for many minoritized communities. As they represent an increasing percentage of the media we consume, these sites have been considered crucial for revitalization processes. However, the growing importance of social media may also pose a problem for minoritized languages, as the need for communication with a wider audience seems to require the use of a language of wider communication. One way in which this apparent need for a global language can be avoided is by creating virtual communities where the minoritized languages can be used without competition, a virtual breathing space.

This study analyzes language practices of eight communities: four North Frisian and four West Frisian virtual communities. The analysis focuses on the languages used in each community, the topics discussed, as well as the status of the minoritized language in the community. A total of 1,127 posts are analyzed to determine whether these communities function as breathing spaces, the factors that may foster or prevent the emergence of these spaces, and the similarities and differences between these two sociolinguistic contexts.

1. Introduction ‘Breathing spaces’ for minoritized languages as conceptualized by Fishman (1991: 58–59) have long been suggested to offer speakers of minoritized languages opportunities and platforms where their languages can be used for basic daily interaction without competing with a majority language (see García 2009; Cenoz & Gorter 2017). These breathing spaces have often been described as physical spaces: a school, a village, a classroom, a neighborhood, etc. The concept of breathing spaces has also been adopted to describe virtual communities based on social media platforms (Belmar & Glass 2019; Cunliffe 2019), such as Facebook. Virtual communities are not restricted by geographical boundaries, and hence the use of languages – including minoritized languages – is also no longer restricted to these boundaries (Belmar & Glass 2019). This not only allows speakers to interact without meeting in a physical space, it also offers them the possibility to stay in contact with other speakers of their minoritized language community who live far away from the traditional language area. Moreover, it also offers people world-wide a chance to join and

foster minoritized language communities which they could have never had access to before.

In this paper, we are examining which factors may foster the development of virtual communities as breathing spaces, as characterized by Belmar and Glass (2019). In order to do so, we analyze posts from Facebook pages and groups related to the traditional language areas of two closely related minoritized languages: North and West Frisian. Looking at language use first, we are going to examine the classification of online communities as breathing spaces before discussing what factors seem to have a positive impact on the development of these virtual communities as breathing spaces. The two speech communities studied in this paper make for an interesting comparison, due to their apparent similarities. They are both officially recognized minority languages and their speakers are settled in quite similar areas in rural Western Europe, but their sociolinguistic contexts differ widely, particularly in regard to number of speakers and institutional support for the language.

2. North Frisian context

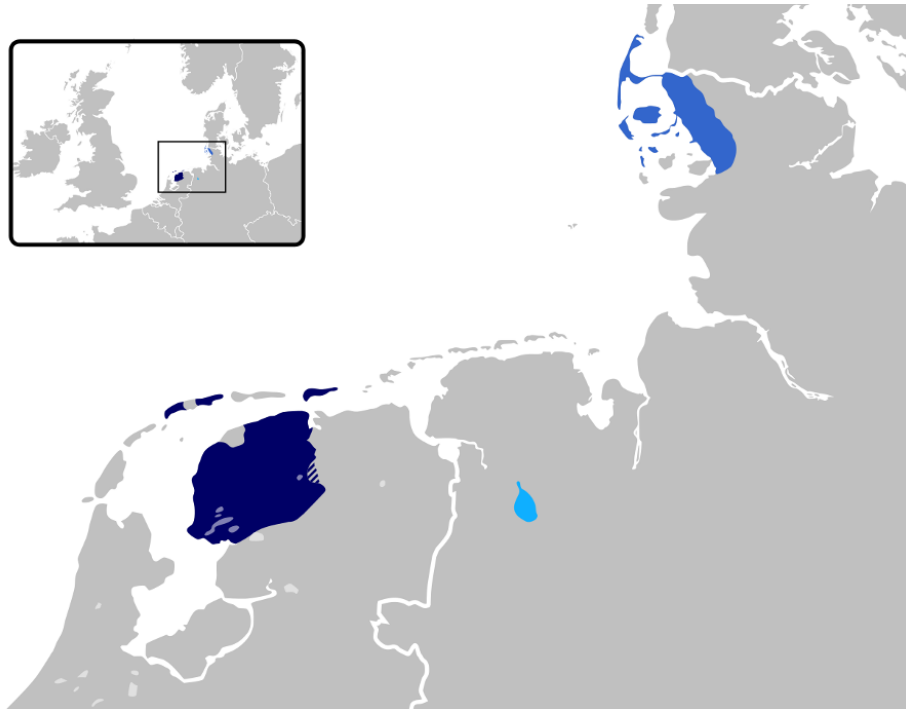


Figure 1. Map of the current distribution of Frisian languages: West Frisian in deep dark blue, North Frisian in blue, and Saterland Frisian in turquoise (figure by Arnold Platon, distributed under CC-BY-SA 3.0 license).

North Frisian is traditionally spoken in the northern part of the Nordfriesland district in Schleswig-Holstein, the northernmost federal state of Germany, ca. 50 km alongside the coastline down south from the Danish border, as well as on the islands of

Sylt, Föhr, Amrum, Heligoland, and islets (Halligen) in the Wadden Sea. While there is no official record, it is estimated that there are anywhere between 5,000–10,000 speakers of North Frisian, which corresponds to 3–6% of the whole population of Nordfriesland (Walker 2001; Århammar 2008).

It is crucial to note that a standard variety of North Frisian has never been established. Walker and Wilts (2001) list nine varieties spoken around the year 2000, though Århammar (2008) suggests a decline to merely two centers for the North Frisian language community: the western part of the island of Föhr and the village of Risum-Lindholm on the mainland. These two centers represent the two major group varieties: Island North Frisian and Mainland North Frisian (Walker 2001; Århammar 2008). They are reported to be mutually intelligible only to a certain degree (Walker 2001). This is especially noteworthy, since speakers of different varieties tend to resist attempts to build some sort of wider North Frisian – let alone Frisian – community, as they often focus on a more localized peer group community. According to Walker (2001), North Frisian speakers regard their own dialect as the epitome of the Frisian language, and they do not usually engage with other dialects.

Despite the lack of a standard variety, there are orthographic conventions for each variety. However, speakers of North Frisian usually acquire their reading and writing abilities in a standard High German speaking school and would only get in touch with Frisian education if special Frisian lessons were offered at their local schools. North Frisian is only taught in very few schools, and it is not even offered throughout the entire school curriculum. If a local variety of the language is taught at all, this is most likely in primary school (ages 6–10) on a voluntary basis. It is only at the grammar school of the island of Föhr that students are able to choose North Frisian as a major subject for A-levels qualifications (usually ages 17–18). Consequently, literacy in the North Frisian orthography, which slightly differs from standard High German conventions, is predominantly found among students of higher education (known in Germany as *Gymnasium*), who frequently leave Nordfriesland after their schooling. This may also have an effect on the use of North Frisian for online communication, as this occurs predominantly in written form.

According to Heyen (2020), the use of social media platforms among speakers of North Frisian corresponds to trends in the rest of Germany (see, for instance, Feierabend et al. 2017; Schlobinski & Siever 2018). The most frequently used service for digital interaction or computer-mediated communication is, by far, the messenger service WhatsApp. Facebook still plays an important role, though fewer users claim to use it as frequently as WhatsApp. While Instagram also seems to play a very important role, especially among young users, Twitter is hardly used among North Frisian speakers at all.

In digital media, speakers of North Frisian claim to use the language mainly in private conversations, such as WhatsApp chats. There are only a few public posts on Facebook, mostly in groups or pages that deal with a regional or local topic. The reasons for this, as speakers themselves point out, are: a) the rather small audience of such posts – that is, the very small community of speakers for each variety – and b) most speakers feel that they lack proficiency in the north Frisian orthography. Both of

these reasons for not using minoritized languages online were also found in previous studies such as Belmar's (2020a) survey of minority language use on social media, and Jongbloed-Faber et al.'s (2016) survey of the use of West Frisian on social media.

3. West Frisian context West Frisian is spoken in most of the Dutch province of Fryslân, as well as a few neighboring villages of the province of Goningen. It is estimated that about 61% of the population of Fryslân has West Frisian as their first language, and about 89% can understand it (Klinkenberg et al. 2018). Alongside Dutch, West Frisian has been somewhat present in the education system in Fryslân since the 1980s (for more information on the West Frisian language in education, see Gorter & Jonkman 1995; De Jager & Van der Meer 2007; Van Ruijven & Ytsma 2008; Bangma 2009; Varkevisser & Walsweer 2018; Provinsje Fryslân 2019)

However, the presence of the language in the education system remains controversial and to a large extent incidental. In fact, many have claimed that the revitalization programs in Fryslân have not been successful in improving the general attitudes towards the language (Hilton & Gooskens 2013; Belmar 2019; Belmar et al. 2019) and, especially, that these programs have failed at increasing writing skills in West Frisian (De Jager & Van der Meer 2007; Belmar 2018; Belmar 2019). In fact, according to Varkevisser & Walsweer (2018), almost 70% of the primary schools in Fryslân are exempted from teaching West Frisian spelling.

This, in turn, may have an effect on the use of West Frisian online. Since most online communication on social media still tends to be written, rather than oral, not knowing how to spell – or rather, not being familiar with the standard written form of the language – may pose an obstacle difficult to overcome for speakers of minoritized languages. In recent research on the use of West Frisian on social media, however, there have been claims that about 56% of West Frisian teenagers use the language to some extent on the social media platforms WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter (Jongbloed-Faber et al. 2016), albeit with idiosyncratic spellings and often with highly regionalized forms. This same study found out that West Frisian was used the least, even by native speakers, in status updates on Facebook, which seem to be explained by the perceived small audience these posts could reach (reminiscent of the results in Belmar 2019 and Belmar 2020a). Other surveys have found more conservative numbers, such as 37% of people under 19 years old claiming to use West Frisian in WhatsApp 'often' (Klinkenberg et al. 2018).

4. Virtual communities as breathing spaces The ubiquity of social media in the daily lives of most of us has led to what Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes (2011) labeled the 'Performance Era' (see also Kelly-Holmes & Atkinson 2017). This era is characterized by the quasi-constant emergence of communities, many of them with an interest in a particular language, which are no longer bounded by location or ethnicity. Virtual communities have brought about a de-territorialization of the concept of language (Belmar & Glass 2019), and have provided minoritized languages with the means to establish 'breathing spaces' at a relatively low cost. The individual is, therefore, free to take part in these communities as they please (Moriarty 2015), and no

longer needs to observe spatial or temporal constraints to participate or even create such communities.

Breathing spaces are conceptualized by Fishman as physical spaces which allow members of a minoritized language a place for interaction without competition (Fishman 1991). Considered to be part of language transmission and language maintenance measures, Fishman does not describe breathing spaces as institutionalized activities of language teaching like schools or educational centers, but rather as places where speakers can meet and use their language in “at least a few areas of basic, normal daily interaction” (Fishman 1991: 59). Transferring this concept to digital interaction, virtual communities might offer what Fishman suggested, since they allow speakers to set up virtual spaces that are topic-related and user-restricted and which allow users with similar interests or backgrounds to interact away from dominant discourses and, importantly, dominant languages. In this case, we can consider virtual communities as any online-based group sharing a common interest and sharing a common virtual meeting space (like forums, websites, hashtags, groups, pages, etc.). This has also been suggested by Cunliffe (2019), who also transfers this concept of ‘breathing spaces’ to virtual communities and acknowledges their potential to connect users “to create an audience in which speakers of the minority language dominate” (467). In fact, membership of a virtual community is not exclusive. Just as members of a local village community may also be part of a local club, virtual communities can create a complex ecology of communities closely related through their shared interests.

These virtual communities, in fact, may be the key to prevent audience design strategies from tokenizing the use of minoritized languages. The term audience design was introduced by Bell (1984) to describe the principle by which speakers primarily accommodate their linguistic expression to their addressee. That is, the language and the style of a communicative exchange is shaped by accommodation to each other, designing our utterances on the basis of what we know – or assume – about our addressee. The term has later been used in media studies to discuss language use directed towards imagined audiences (see, for instance, Marwick & Boyd 2011), a key aspect of successful media campaigns. More recently, it has been used to discuss language choice in online settings (see Johnson 2013; Androutsopoulos 2014), where the audience is in principle imagined but it can also be selected (see Cunliffe et al. 2013; Belmar 2020b). However, many social media users seem to choose the dominant language and/or English to address the wider audience of their profiles (Jongbloed-Faber et al. 2016; Belmar 2019). ‘Desire to be understood’ was in fact one of the main reasons given by the participants in both Belmar (2020a) and Heyen (2020) when asked why they did not use their minoritized language on social media. Thus, minoritized languages are at risk of only being used when targeting a very specific, smaller audience (Belmar & Glass 2019; see also Cunliffe et al. 2013). If one can find – or create – a community where the language can be used to address almost the entirety of its members, this problem could potentially be solved.

According to Belmar and Glass (2019), a virtual community may function as a breathing space for a minoritized language when it shows one or more of the fol-

lowing characteristics (Table 1). These characteristics are to be understood in the context of the wider community of speakers, the sociolinguistic situation of the language(s) in question as well as the make-up of each particular community. In fact, what constitutes a breathing space depends on all these factors, and this list of characteristics aims at describing the baselines upon which a breathing space can be built for different communities.

Table 1. Characteristics of a virtual community functioning as a breathing space for a minoritized language (adapted from Belmar & Glass, 2019: 16)

Characteristic	
A	The minority language is the only language of the community
B	The minority language is the preferred language of the community, though the use of other languages is accepted.
C	The minority language is the subject of discussion (especially if the discussions are in the minority language)
D	The status of the minority language as a language (rather than a dialect) is not contested.

5. Methodology In this paper we will explore the potential role of some virtual communities as breathing spaces for North and West Frisian following Belmar and Glass's frame (2019). In order to do so, we collected posts from Facebook¹ groups and pages (N=1,127) between January 1st and February 28th 2019.² In total, we analyzed 343 posts for North Frisian (from 1 Group and 3 Pages) and 784 posts for West Frisian (from 2 Groups and 2 Pages; see Table 2).

5.1 Selection of virtual communities The groups and pages discussed below were chosen according to two main criteria. First and foremost, topic relatedness was essential. This could mean both a strong focus on the area where the languages are spoken (e.g., groups serving as an online forum for users from a particular area, such as a town or a municipality) and a focus on the language itself and/or the local identity (since these have been found to be linked to the use of regional languages, see McMonagle et al. 2019). Secondly, only groups posting on a regular basis (at least one post per month, as available in group info descriptions on Facebook) were taken into account.

There is a slight difference between groups and pages on Facebook which needs to be explained. While groups function as some sort of open forum for their members, pages can rather be seen as non-private profile pages for companies, associations, organizations, or people of public interest. As a consequence, posts on a page are only

¹Facebook was chosen as it seems to be the most prevalent social media platform among North Frisian speakers (Heyen 2020).

²The information on likes and members for each of these groups and pages is provided as a point of reference, but it is not used in the analysis of the data. This is because this piece of information was retrieved in May, three months after the posts analyzed in this paper were collected.

made by the owner(s) of a page, while posts in a group can be made by any member of the respective groups. In other words, pages often represent a more top-down approach to language policy, whereas groups, in general, represent more bottom-up approaches (see Cunliffe 2019). This, of course, determines the discourse and language use of the community. In both cases, however, any user is able to view posts and add comments – in the case of closed groups, that is only true for subscribed members.

Table 2. Information on the Facebook groups and pages from which the posts were collected

Group/Page	North Frisian / West Frisian	Members / Likes	Followers ³	Posts analyzed
Et Nordfriisk teoter	North Frisian	167	71	7
Ferring stiftung	North Frisian	389	408	21
Forum Föhr – Alles rund um die Insel Föhr	North Frisian	8,000	–	308
Friisk Foriining	North Frisian	185	201	7
Fryslân en de Fryske taal	West Frisian	2,315	–	445
Fryske taal	West Frisian	2,033	–	249
Jongfryske Mienskip	West Frisian	639	644	57
Leeuwarden	West Frisian	17,070	17,251	33

In this study, we considered posts in closed groups, giving full disclosure upon joining the group that we were researchers observing language use. Posts by all individual users – be they from open or closed groups – presented here have been anonymized to grant basic privacy.

5.2 Analysis Building on Belmar and Glass's (2019) characteristics of virtual communities as breathing spaces for minoritized languages, as well as Belmar's own work with Catalan and Aragonese virtual communities (2020b; 2020c), the posts selected from the virtual communities will be analyzed in three areas, namely:

- Language(s) in use (see, for example, Reershemius 2010; Jongbloed-Faber et al. 2016),
- Topics discussed (see Moring 2007; Cunliffe et al. 2013),
- Status of the minoritized language in the community (see, for example, Paricio-Martín & Martínez-Cortés 2010).

³Note that this only applies to pages, where users can either like a page (usually shared in a user's profile information) or follow it (not shown in their profile information, but still getting updates from the page). For groups, users only have the option of becoming members.

For both the North and the West Frisian contexts, we expect Frisian to be used in these communities if they are to function as breathing spaces of any kind, and the use of the language to discuss topics beyond metalinguistic reflection is also expected. Finally, as a baseline for any breathing space, the status of North or West Frisian as languages in their own right is openly acknowledged, recognized or even advocated for in these virtual communities.

The posts collected, therefore, were classified according to the language(s) used in the main post – that is, without considering the languages used in the comments, but including the languages of any attachments in the main posts, such as images or videos. These posts were then reviewed for common topics by the authors, who, after a preliminary approach, agreed on five main categories for the whole collection:

- Frisian language,
- The Frisian Area (Nordfriesland – Fryslân),
- Literature,
- News,
- Others.⁴

Each post was assigned to one category exclusively, considering the main topic of the post. For example, a post on a recently published book written in Frisian was sorted into Literature. Despite being a piece of news, such a post contained information on a literary publication, and even though the book is in Frisian, the post focuses on the book rather than on the language itself. Eventually, the categorization of posts was mutually checked by the authors for consistency.

6. Results: North Frisian For North Frisian, three Facebook pages and one Facebook group were studied (see Table 2). In this section we present the results of our observations, focusing on the languages used in these virtual communities as well as the topics discussed in the posts.

6.1 Facebook group: “Forum Föhr – Alles rund um die Insel Föhr” This Facebook group is a closed group, which means that users must apply for membership first before being able to read or post anything. The information provided by the administrators under the *about*-tab on Facebook describes this group as a forum for all topics, mainly regarding the island of Föhr: “Diskussionen rund um alle Themen sind erwünscht [...] Schön ist es auch wenn es ein Föhr Forum bleibt” (Discussions about all topics are accepted. It would be nice if it remains a forum on Föhr). Adverts are also allowed.

Posts were overwhelmingly in High German (henceforth referred to as ‘German’), with only a very small set containing some additional North Frisian content (see Table 3).

⁴This last category consisted of posts on various topics that one could broadly label ‘everyday life’, ranging from greetings to small talk.

Table 3. Number of posts in the Facebook group *Forum Föhr – Alles rund um die Insel Föhr* classified by language(s)

Language(s)	Number of posts	% of posts
German	305	99.3%
North Frisian + German	3	0.7%

Table 4. Number of posts in the Facebook group *Forum Föhr – Alles rund um die Insel Föhr* classified by topic

Topic	Number of posts	% of posts
Others	258	83.8%
News	29	9.4%
Literature	12	3.9%
Frisian Area	9	2.9%
Frisian language	0	0%

In general, the posts dealt with topics from everyday life (83.8%; see Table 4). A few of them were posted by users who do not live on the island but visit it occasionally or on a regular basis and want to express their emotional connection to it. The other posts seemed to be written by people living on the island and included locally relevant articles in the news (9.4% of the posts) as well as topics categorized under ‘Frisian area’ (2.9%), containing a broader collection from pictures of local landscapes to local events and opening hours of local businesses – the data was collected during off-season period, when a lot of small businesses are closed. Stories and anecdotes, and content referring to books in North Frisian, make up 3.9% of the collection (referred to as ‘literature’). This was also the category with posts containing North Frisian, although this only occurred in posts shared from another Facebook page also included in this study (*Ferring Stiftung*). These shared posts consisted mainly of advertisements of recently published books in North Frisian, which the publishing company advertised with videos of a North Frisian speaker reading some passages out loud. However, even in these shared posts, North Frisian would – if visible at all – only appear in the book’s title: no comments by the user sharing the posts were written in North Frisian, nor were any of the comments on the shared item.

6.2 Facebook page: “Ferring Stiftung” In contrast to the Facebook group presented above, *Ferring Stiftung* is a Facebook page maintained by an institution of the same name. *Ferring Stiftung* is a Föhr-based research institution of the North Frisian language and culture which publishes their research in both German and North Frisian. This page is used as the institution’s representation on Facebook. *Ferring Stiftung* offers both academic and non-academic publications and events with a strong focus on the varieties of the islands of Föhr and Amrum, but also on the local history and cultural expressions. It is also home to the archive of the island, and it manages an extensive digitized open-access photo archive.

Table 5. Number of posts in the Facebook group *Ferring Stiftung* classified by language(s)

Language(s)	Number of posts	% of posts
German	11	52.4%
North Frisian + German	10	47.6%



Figure 2. Example of a vocabulary quiz focusing on the varieties of Föhr and Amrum.



Figure 3. Book advertisement in *Ferring Stiftung*.

In the 21 collected posts, we can clearly observe the work of the institution. Posts were mostly related to the institute's work, as nearly half of them (47.6%) dealt with either North Frisian language (33.4%) or literature (14.2%; see Table 5). These postings were usually advertisements of North Frisian books and hangman-style quizzes of North Frisian words, and they also made up the only posts containing some written or spoken North Frisian (see Table 6). In fact, none of the posts was presented in Frisian only, as they always appeared with a translation into German. The format, however, varied. The quizzes offered just one single Frisian word which had to be translated into German (see Figure 2). In the advertisements for books, only the title appeared in Frisian (see Figure 3), whereas short videos captioned as “Wi snaake fering” (We speak Frisian) usually contained a short passage from a book which was read out loud in Frisian and was accompanied with a German description of the book's content (see Figure 4). Nevertheless, any additional information was presented exclusively in German, as it was the case for most of the series-style “Frisisk Flashback” format, an initiative to share vintage photos from the archive of the institution (see Figure 5).

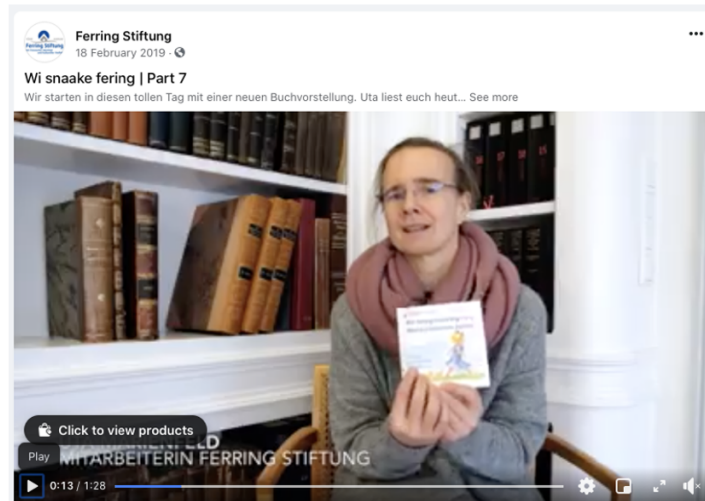


Figure 4. Still image from a video presenting a new book in both German and North Frisian.

Table 6. Number of posts in the Facebook group *Ferring Stiftung* classified by topic

Topic	Number of posts	% of posts
Frisian language	7	33.4%
Others	7	33.4%
Frisian Area	3	14.2%
Literature	3	14.2%
News	1	4.8%



Figure 5. *Friisk Flashback* example.

6.3 Facebook page: “Friisk Foriining” *Friisk Foriining* is a mainland-based association which is involved in activities to maintain the North Frisian language and empower speakers through cultural activities. The association maintains this Facebook page, the goals of which are described as conserving and supporting the North Frisian language and culture: “Das wichtigste Ziel der Vereinigung ist die Bewahrung und Förderung der friesischen Sprache und Kultur” (The association’s most important aim is to preserve and support the Frisian language and culture).

Table 7. Number of posts in the Facebook group *Friisk Foriining* classified by language(s)

Language(s)	Number of posts	% of posts
North Frisian	5	71.4%
North Frisian + German	1	14.3%
(No text)	1	14.3%

There were only 7 posts during our collection period, but among these, there was just one post in which German appeared alongside North Frisian and one post with no text at all. This means that 84.7% of the posts – 6 out of 7 – contained North Frisian, and 71.4% – 5 out of 7 – were written in North Frisian exclusively (see Table 7). Posts on this page dealt mostly with events and activities of the association (see Figure 6), and over half of the collected posts (57.1%) dealt with the North Frisian language (see Table 8), particularly the mainland variety of Bökingharde. As already observed in the posts of *Ferring Stiftung*, *Friisk Foriining* also featured a series-style format: “Et uurd foon e waag” (The Word of the Week), where a word with a short description of its meaning is presented every week, usually accompanied by a photo or an image that illustrates the meaning of the word (see Figure 7).

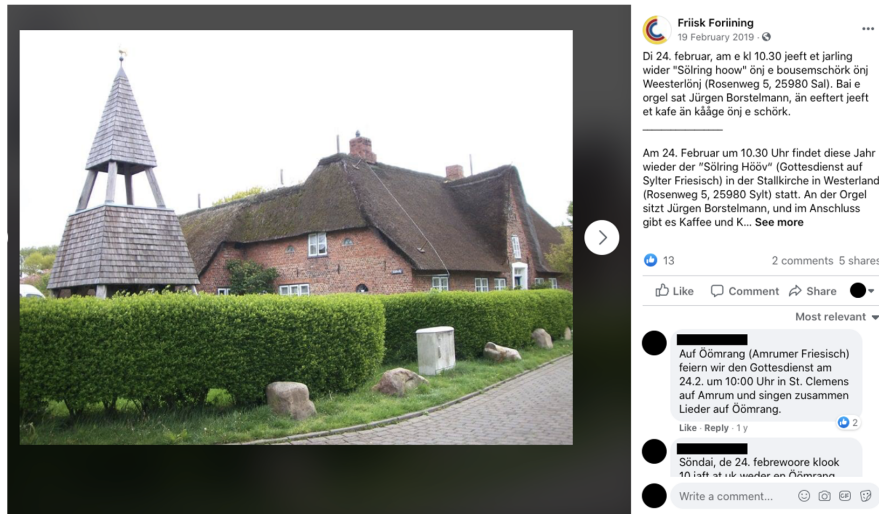


Figure 6. Announcement of an event in both North Frisian and German, with comments in both German and North Frisian.

Table 8. Number of posts in the Facebook group *Friisk Forining* classified by topic

Topic	Number of posts	% of posts
Frisian language	4	57.1%
Frisian Area	1	14.3%
Literature	1	14.3%
Others	1	14.3%
News	0	0%

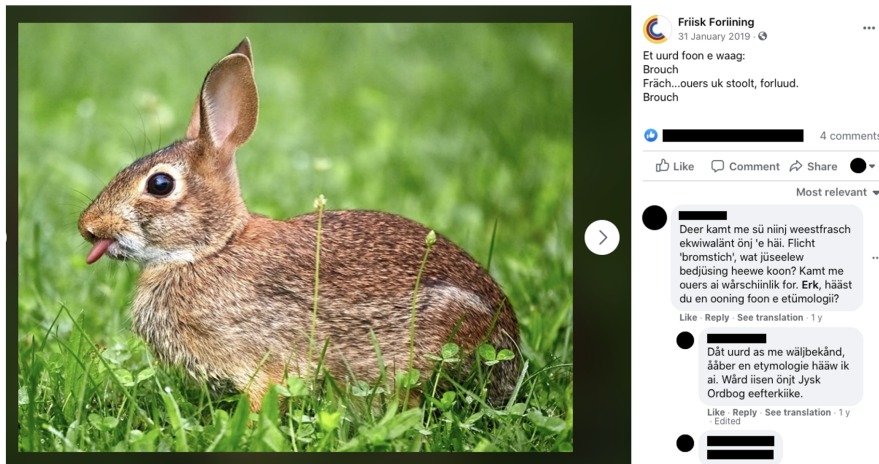


Figure 7. Example of the series ‘*Et uurd foon e waag*’.

6.4 Facebook page: “Et Nordfriisk Teooter” This is a Facebook page that represents a semi-professional theatre company with the same name: Et Nordfriisk Teooter (The North Frisian Theater). The description of the page is a short description of the company itself: “Et Nordfriisk Teooter bietet modernes friesisches Theater mit deuthen Übertiteln” (Et Nordfriisk Teooter offers contemporary Frisian plays with German captions). This theatre company, mainly made up of amateur actors, is a relatively young mainland-based association connected to Friisk Foriining. Et Nordfriisk Teooter could be seen as a language empowerment tool as well, since they try to engage young people to get involved in speaking North Frisian by acting in semi-professionally produced and performed contemporary plays, breaking away from the traditional image of tales or comedy theatre which one often associated with North Frisian plays in particular and vernacular plays in general.

Table 9. Number of posts in the Facebook group *Et Nordfriisk Teooter* classified by language(s)

Language(s)	Number of posts	% of posts
North Frisian + German	4	57.1%
North Frisian	2	28.6%
German	1	14.3%

Nearly every one of the few posts contained North Frisian (85.7%, or 6 out of 7), more often alongside German (57.1%) than exclusively (28.6%; see Table 9). Unsurprisingly, most of the collected posts advertised the plays and overall work of the theatre company (see Figure 8). Shortly after the collection period, a new play was about to premiere (see Figure 9). These posts have been classified under ‘literature’ (see Table 10) with one exception: a post that sought to attract people to become actors in the company. One more post was of difficult classification for its combination of literature and local focus: an announcement of a North Frisian short stories and poems reading event to take place during the *Biike* (annual bonfires on February 21st in Nordfriesland).

Table 10. Number of posts in the Facebook group *Et Nordfriisk Teooter* classified by topic

Topic	Number of posts	% of posts
Literature	5	71.4%
Frisian Area	1	14.3%
Others	1	14.3%
Frisian language	0	0%
News	0	0%



Figure 8. Announcement of an event in both North Frisian and German.

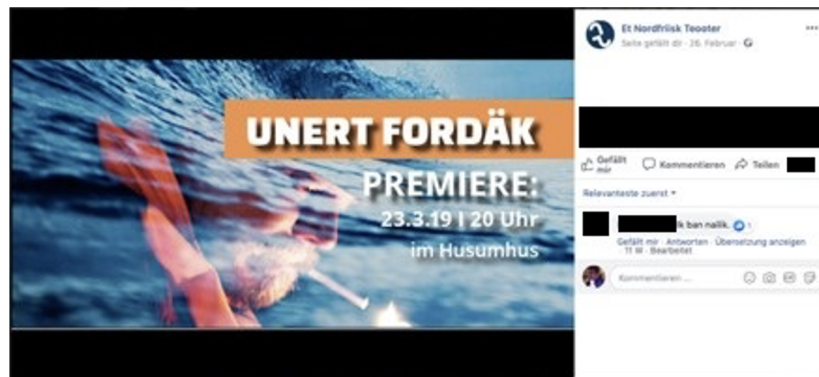


Figure 9. Post in North Frisian and German announcing the premiere of a play, with a North Frisian comment.

7. Results: West Frisian For West Frisian, two Facebook pages and two Facebook groups were studied (see Table 2). In this section, we present the results of our observations, focusing on the languages used in these virtual communities as well as the topics discussed in the posts.

7.1 Facebook group: “Fryslân en de Fryske taal” This is a community-led Facebook group, with no particular organization behind it. The description of the group simply states that Fryslân only has one language and that is Frisian: “Fryslân hat in eigen taal en dat is it Frysk”. Despite this, this is the most multilingual of the virtual communities analyzed in this study, with 12 languages being used in the 445 posts of the sample (see Table 11).

Most the posts are in West Frisian only (57.5%), surprisingly followed by Ostfriesisch Low Saxon (10.3%). Bilingual posts in Dutch and West Frisian make up 9.0% of the sample, followed by posts in Dutch only (8.8%). On top of that, many other languages were used in the posts for this group, including other minoritized varieties in the Netherlands (such as Bildts, Liwwadders and Limburgish) as well as other European languages (such as German, North Frisian, French, Platt Low Saxon⁵ and Russian) (see Table 11).

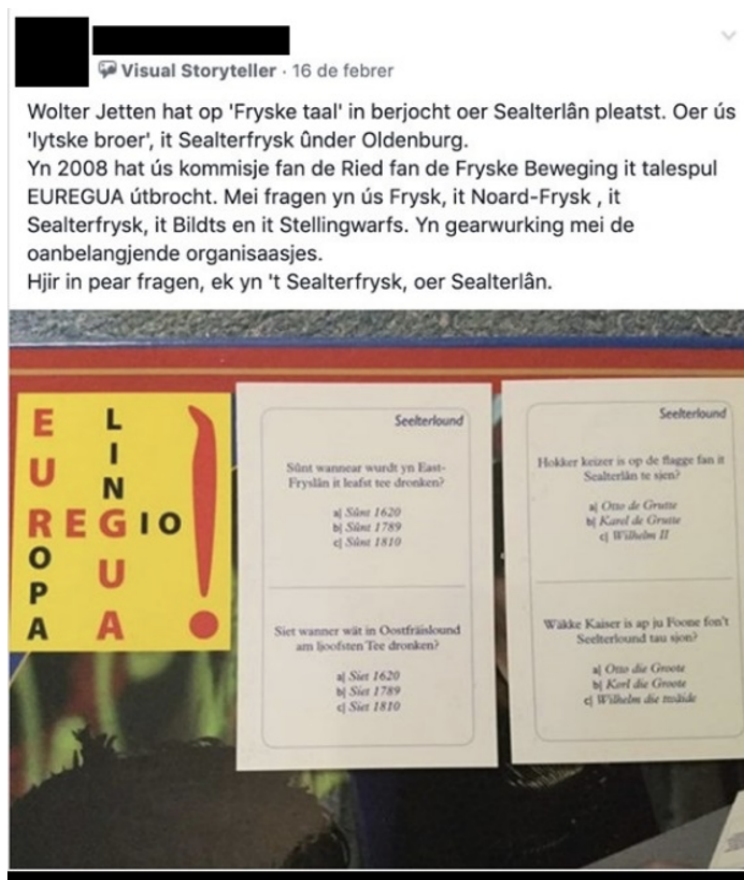


Figure 10. Post in West Frisian on Saterland Frisian.

⁵The label Platt Low Saxon may refer to several different varieties of Low Saxon/Low German. This label was used by the users themselves to identify the language they were writing in.

Table 11. Number of posts in the Facebook group *Fryslân en de Fryske taal* classified by language(s)

Language(s)	Number of posts	% of posts
West Frisian	256	57.5%
Ostfriesisch Low Saxon	46	10.3%
West Frisian + Dutch	40	9.0%
Dutch	39	8.8%
Dutch + English	11	2.5%
German	9	2.0%
West Frisian + English	9	2.0%
English	8	1.8%
West Frisian + Dutch + English	8	1.8%
German + Ostfriesisch Low Saxon	3	0.7%
Bildts	2	0.5%
Dutch + English + Liwwadders	2	0.5%
North Frisian	2	0.5%
Dutch + English + French	1	0.2%
Dutch + Limburgish	1	0.2%
French	1	0.2%
German + North Frisian + Platt Low Saxon	1	0.2%
Limburgish	1	0.2%
Platt Low Saxon	1	0.2%
Russian	1	0.2%
West Frisian + French	1	0.2%
West Frisian + Limburgish	1	0.2%
No text	1	0.2%

Most of the posts in this Facebook group (27.2%) had the Frisian Area as their main topic (see Table 12), followed by almost a quarter of the posts focusing on the Frisian language (mainly West Frisian, but 4 posts dealt with North Frisian and 2 with Saterland Frisian or Seeltersk) (see Figures 10 and 11). Interestingly, discussions about the news were very prominent (21.6%). Much less common, but still quite prominent, were literature posts, mostly poems written and shared by the community members themselves (and not exclusively in West Frisian). The discussion topics of this Facebook group seem to go well beyond the strictly local, embracing a wider idea of ‘Frisian’ (which we can see in the posts on other Frisian varieties) as well as discussing language issues in the Netherlands beyond the province of Fryslân and West Frisian itself (see Figure 12).

7.2 Facebook group: “Fryske taal” Similarly, *Fryske taal* is also a community-led Facebook group with no language organization behind it. With a very simple group description – “Grutsk op it Frysk” (Proud of Frisian) – the group is open to anyone interested in Frisian and Fryslân.

⁶Of these, 4 were on North Frisian and 2 on Saterland Frisian (also known as Seeltersk).

Table 12. Number of posts in the Facebook group *Fryslân en de Fryske taal* classified by topic

Topic	Number of posts	% of posts
Frisian Area	121	27.2%
Frisian language	111 ⁶	24.9%
News	96	21.6%
Others	85	19.1%
Literature	32	7.2%

**Figure 11.** Post in German on North Frisian.



Figure 12. Post in West Frisian on the officially recognized languages in the Netherlands.

Most of the posts (almost 90%) are exclusively in West Frisian (see Table 13). This is a remarkably high percentage, especially taking into account the high number of posts analyzed (249) as well as the fact that this is a community-led Facebook group. In other words, West Frisian is by far the dominant language of the group, even without an organization pushing for its use in this particular context. We do find, however, a diverse set of Germanic languages in the group, ranging from English, Dutch, and German to minoritized varieties such as Bildts, Platt Low Saxon, Saterland Frisian (or Seeltersk), and North Frisian. In addition, some comments in Stellingwerfs, West Flemish, and Gronings were also found, illustrating the active use of receptive multilingualism in the interactions among the members of this virtual community.

Table 13. Number of posts in the Facebook group *Fryske taal* classified by language(s)

Language(s)	Number of posts	% of posts
West Frisian	222	89.2%
West Frisian + Dutch	10	4.0%
Dutch	9	3.6%
English	2	0.8%
Bildts	1	0.4%
West Frisian + English	1	0.4%
West Frisian + German	1	0.4%
West Frisian + Platt Low Saxon	1	0.4%
West Frisian + Seeltersk	1	0.4%
German + North Frisian + Platt Low Saxon	1	0.4%

Poetry is a very common topic in this Facebook group (see Table 14), with over a quarter of the posts consisting of poems written by members of the community. Discussions on the Frisian language – be it its lexicon, its grammar, or its sociolinguistic situation – are also quite common (21.7% of the posts), even including the North Frisian and Saterland Frisian varieties. Members also discussed other local issues in Fryslân, as well as the news in general. In addition, the administrator of the group sometimes prompted discussions with open questions to all community members (see Figure 13).

Table 14. Number of posts in the Facebook group *Fryske taal* classified by topic

Topic	Number of posts	% of posts
Literature	68	27.3%
Frisian language	54 ⁷	21.7%
Others	54	21.7%
Frisian Area	44	17.7%
News	29	11.7%



Figure 13. Open question from the administrator of the group prompting a discussion of Frisian books.

7.3 Facebook page: “Leeuwarden” On a very different note, this is the official Facebook of the visitleeuwarden.nl website, funded by the local government. The aim of this page is to encourage tourism to Leeuwarden, which is expected to be mostly made up of Dutch-speaking tourists (Deputearre Steaten fan Fryslân 2016; see also Jeuring 2017; Hopwood 2019).

⁷Of these, 2 were on Seeltersk and 1 on North Frisian.

At first sight, the total lack of West Frisian is most striking. Not a single post contained any word in Frisian (see Table 15) – with the exception of the Frisian name for Leeuwarden, Ljouwert, which is also an official toponym and was not considered enough to count as a post containing some West Frisian. English makes an almost anecdotal appearance in two bilingual Dutch-English posts.

Table 15. Number of posts in the Facebook group *Leeuwarden* classified by language(s)

Language(s)	Number of posts	% of posts
Dutch	31	93.9
Dutch + English	2	6.1
West Frisian	0	0%

Almost all the posts in this page focused on Leeuwarden, praising it and its tourist attractions (see Table 16, under Frisian Area) as well as specific events taking place in the city. There was no mention of the Frisian language at all. In fact, for a user with no knowledge of Leeuwarden and/or Fryslân, looking exclusively at the posts collected for this study would give the impression that Dutch is the only language spoken in the city.

Table 16. Number of posts in the Facebook group *Leeuwarden* classified by topic

Topic	Number of posts	% of posts
Frisian Area	20	60.61%
Others	13	39.39%
Frisian language	0	0%
Literature	0	0%
News	0	0%

This is even more alarming if we take into account that the data collection for this project was taken in the aftermath of the Leeuwarden-Fryslân 2018 European Capital of Culture (see Figure 14), which had multilingualism – and particularly West Frisian – as one of the main focuses.

7.4 Facebook page: “Jongfryske Mienskip” This is the Facebook page for the organization of the same name, Jongfryske Mienskip (Young Frisian Community). They define themselves as a financially independent organization with three main goals: achieve cultural autonomy for the Frisians; intensify contact with other Frisian territories; and create new media in Frisian.

In line with their main objectives, the vast majority of the posts analyzed were either exclusively in West Frisian (87.2%) or bilingual West Frisian-English (3.5%). Dutch, English, and German are all also used to some extent (especially in posts that seem to be targeting the wider Frisian-speaking community) (see Table 17).



Figure 14. Post in Dutch celebrating the opening of the Leeuwarden-Fryslân 2018 European Capital of Culture.

Table 17. Number of posts in the Facebook group *Jongfryske Mienskip* classified by language(s)

Language(s)	Number of posts	% of posts
West Frisian	50	87.7%
Dutch	3	5.3%
West Frisian + English	2	3.5%
English + German	1	1.8%
Dutch + German	1	1.8%

As expected from the description of the organization, most posts in the page deal with the Frisian Area, understood as all the territories where Frisian is or was spoken, that is, the coastal territories from present-day Fryslân in the Netherlands to the German-Danish border. In fact, the page is used to advertise trips to other Frisian territories (see Figure 15) as well as an array of events taking place across the Frisian territories (see Figure 16). Interestingly, this page makes use of memes in West Frisian to publicize their events (see Figure 17).



Figure 15. Post in West Frisian announcing a trip to Helgoland, in Nordfriesland.



Figure 16. Post in West Frisian (and North Frisian in the original) celebrating the 'biike'.

Table 18. Number of posts in the Facebook group *Jongfryske Mienskip* classified by topic

Topic	Number of posts	% of posts
Frisian Area	28	49.1%
Frisian language	12 ⁸	21.1%
Others	10	17.5%
Literature	6	10.5%
News	1	1.8%

**Figure 17.** Meme in West Frisian advertising an event.

8. Discussion With two exceptions, the Facebook groups and pages analyzed in the present study function as breathing spaces according to the characteristics put forward by Belmar and Glass (2019). The status of both North and West Frisian as languages in their own right – rather than being perceived as ‘inferior’ dialects of either German or Dutch – was not contested in any of the virtual communities studied in this paper. However, language use varied widely across communities, ranging from largely monolingual to highly multilingual communities, with varying diversity in the discussion topics in each community.

⁸Of these, 1 was on Seeltersk.

8.1 North Frisian None of the three pages (*Et Nordfriisk Teooter*, *Friisk Foriining*, and *Ferring Stiftung*) contests the status of North Frisian as a language. Nevertheless, the use of the North Frisian language differs widely across communities. There is no page that uses North Frisian as the community's only language, other languages being used both in the posts and in the comments. Though not every post collected for this study had comments, comments on North Frisian were only present in *Friisk Foriining* and *Et Nordfriisk Teooter*. It would be too easy to instantly link this to the observation that these two pages are the only ones with a stronger use of the North Frisian language, especially since the examples collected are very few. Therefore, it is important to consider which users follow these pages and who are the users that comment on posts. In fact, the user profiles that comment on the North Frisian posts are often the same in both groups and can in most cases be connected to people somehow involved in activism in the Frisian community – both on the internet and in local events.

However, this does not necessarily mean that posts in North Frisian do not have any effect or do not elicit any reaction in North Frisian (top-down language policy). As shown in the examples, users do reply to content that is targeted at them. The more 'serious' Frisian content in *Et Nordfriisk Teooter* and *Friisk Foriining* gets more attention from more committed and proficient users than the advertising and playful content of *Ferring Stiftung*, which does not only focus on the local and traditional community but also targets tourists and other people with a broader interest in life on the North Frisian Islands. This can be related to the audience design strategies discussed previously in this paper. Even though the status of North Frisian as a language is not contested in *Ferring Stiftung*, North Frisian only plays a marginal role in posts and is not visible at all in the comments, as the page seems to aim at a broader audience made up mostly of non-Frisian-speakers (even if its members may still be fond of the language). Thus, speakers of North Frisian likely do not take part in this community by using their language, as it would not be easily understood by other community members. While the page *Ferring Stiftung* does create a space where North Frisian is not contested, it is questionable whether it also creates a community that really encourages the use of the language.

The only North Frisian group that is really community-driven (i.e., without any organization or association maintaining the group), *Forum Föhr*, is the only one that does not function as a breathing space at all, considering the characteristics put forward by Belmar and Glass (2019). *Forum Föhr* is a large group which deals with a lot of topics surrounding the local community. Although it does not explicitly contest the status of North Frisian as a language, North Frisian is not even once the topic of discussion, nor is it used in a single post. Once again, this can be linked to the "desire to be understood" (see Belmar 2020a and Heyen 2020), since this group aims at an audience of users from all over the island, of which only a quarter are estimated to actively use North Frisian (Walker 2001; Århammar 2008).

8.2 West Frisian Three out of the four West Frisian virtual communities analyzed in this study feature most of the characteristics that Belmar and Glass (2019) list

when describing virtual communities functioning as breathing spaces for minoritized languages (see Table 1), namely: the minority language being the preferred language of the community; the minority language being a prominent subject of discussion; and the status of the language not being questioned.

Except for the Facebook page *Leeuwarden*, the other three virtual communities (*Fryslân en de Fryske taal*, *Fryske taal*, and *Jongfryske Mienskip*) show a consistent majority of posts and interactions in West Frisian, be it monolingual or bi-/multilingual posts. The community-led Facebook group *Fryske taal* shows a staggering 89.1% of monolingual posts in West Frisian, a surprisingly high percentage when considering the linguistic variety also found in the same group (see Table 13). In fact, the most striking feature of the two community-led West Frisian Facebook groups analyzed in this study (*Fryslân en de Fryske taal* and *Fryske taal*) is their highly multilingual nature. With at least a dozen languages used in these groups and a majority of closely related Germanic languages at play, receptive multilingualism seems to be the norm in online interactions between the members of these communities. It is important to highlight here that no organization is behind these Facebook groups advocating for the use of West Frisian, rather it has become the main language of the community even when some members may not speak it (bottom-up language policy development). In fact, it seems that a common shared interest in Frisian and Fryslân is what keeps these communities engaged, as members post and share about the language and Fryslân the most.

Despite its more prominent use of monolingual posts, the Facebook page *Jongfryske Mienskip* also showcases a more open conception of ‘Frisianness’ by including all the historical territories of the Frisians, similar to what can be inferred from the observations of the Facebook groups. In fact, this organization frames the community around the geographies and practices of these territories rather than the province of Fryslân, using Dutch, German, and English to reach a larger audience.

Finally, the only virtual community run by a governmental organization (the Facebook page *Leeuwarden*) is also the only one where no trace of breathing space for West Frisian can be observed. The only West Frisian word one finds in this Facebook page is the Frisian name for the city of Leeuwarden (*Ljouwert*), as the official name of the city is bilingual (Leeuwarden/Ljouwert). The West Frisian language is completely absent from these posts otherwise. In fact, it seems that such a page is designed to target potential visitors to the city, which are expected to be mostly Dutch-speaking (Deputearre Steaten fan Fryslân 2016) or English-speaking foreigners.

9. Conclusion This study highlights the difficulty of comparing sociolinguistic phenomena across allegedly similar contexts. Despite a common interest in Frisian studies in both areas and their status as officially recognized minoritized languages in Western European countries, the contexts of North and West Frisian appear to be extremely different. For one, the size of the community of speakers and, hence, the number of users in social media interactions varies notably.

In both North and West Frisian examples, we observed the existence of virtual communities where the minority language is often the subject of discussion (and these

discussions tend to take place in the language in the case of West Frisian) and where the status of the language as a language in its own right is not contested. In addition, we also observed three instances of communities where the preferred language was West Frisian: *Fryslân en de Fryske taal*, *Fryske taal*, and *Jongfryske Mienskip*; in contrast to only one where the preferred language was North Frisian: *Friisk Foriining*. According to Belmar and Glass (2019), all the virtual communities analyzed in this study can function as breathing spaces except two: *Forum Föhr* and *Leeuwarden*. It is no coincidence that both communities are aimed at boosting tourism in the local area: the landscapes, traditions, and sometimes a few words (such as the use of “Ljouwert” in *Leeuwarden* or referring to books written in Frisian in *Forum Föhr*) are commodified to sell experiences (Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes 2013), but this commodification is done in the dominant language and, perhaps, English. Indeed, audience design strategies (Androutopoulos 2014; Belmar & Glass 2019) may be the explanation of the observable lack of use of the local minoritized languages in virtual communities aimed at promoting tourism.

It is worth noting, however, that active participation in virtual communities takes place in many ways, and we have no way of measuring how many people read the posts without commenting or liking them. It is important to keep in mind that for a virtual community to successfully work as a breathing space, its members need to engage with the language, and the degrees of intensity of this engagement may vary greatly. This ‘hidden participation’ (Belmar 2020c: 122) is extremely difficult to measure, but it could be at the basis of further engagement with the community and, by extension, with the language (see Soria 2016 and Belmar 2020a on digital language presence). For Fishman (1991: 59), breathing spaces need to provide a platform for normal daily interaction, which can narrowly be understood as active production and consumption in the language. However, the frame for virtual communities as breathing spaces put forward by Belmar and Glass (2019) expands this definition to encompass other uses of language beyond visible production, acknowledging that success of these spaces will be contingent on the characteristics of the (wider) community itself, as well as the needs of each community member.

The data collected suggests that institutional support may help to establish virtual communities as breathing spaces, as suggested by Paricio-Martín and Martínez-Cortés (2010) when discussing online use of Aragonese. This is especially true for North Frisian, where top-down language policies seem to be effective in eliciting language use. While there is an observable lack of use of North Frisian in more community-driven groups, those North Frisian pages maintained by organizations with a stricter focus on the North Frisian language do seem to encourage the use of the language. Of course, this may also simply coincide with users/followers who are already more interested in the language to begin with, but we also observe that the use of North Frisian in the main posts of pages encourages replies in North Frisian.

Therefore, some institutional support for the minoritized language seems to greatly encourage its use online, in tune with other claims and findings in previous literature (see, for instance, Diki-Kiridi 2007; Paricio-Martín & Martínez-Cortés 2010; Jongbloed-Faber et al. 2016; Heyen 2020; Belmar 2020c) This institutional support

often translates into the language being present in schools, where speakers can learn how to write it. This turns out to be a major factor when using the minoritized language online, as previous studies report insecurity about one's own language skills as one of the main factors to not use the minoritized language online (Jongbloed-Faber et al. 2016; Belmar 2019; Belmar 2020a). We observed this in our corpus as well, with a sizeable number of posts (over 30%) dealing with grammar, vocabulary, and/or spelling. Most of these posts, in fact, were initiated by members themselves asking for help to improve their language skills. These insecurities, fostered by a lack of instruction in the language as well as harsh peer language policing, often limit the use of the language to a few topics, mainly the language itself (as suggested in Belmar & Glass 2019; see also Reershemius 2010 on Low German discourse online limited to meta-linguistic topics), and can potentially lead to a complete shift towards the dominant language in online use.

On a more positive note, the West Frisian virtual communities analyzed in this study show an extremely rich and diverse language ecology beyond what we had expected. The larger West Frisian community seems to act as a gathering point, a platform where other minoritized Germanic languages – including the other Frisian languages – are also used and discussed (see Tables 11, 12, 13, 14, and 18). This could in fact be a result of the stronger presence of West Frisian in provincial institutions and even perhaps just due to a larger number of speakers. What is more relevant here is that these virtual communities remain open to these receptive multilingualism practices and that dialogue between speakers of different Germanic languages is encouraged and fostered.

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