The position of Old Frisian adverbs of degree

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The position of Old Frisian

- West Germanic language attested 13th – 16th century (see Table 1), though certain texts go further back
- Primarily a legal language
- Contemporary with Middle Low German, Middle Dutch, and Middle English: There has been discussion whether it is Old or Middle Germanic,
- Strong North Germanic character and linguistically conservative. Often compared to Old English and Old Saxon, sharing many innovations with the former especially
- However, an Anglo-Friso proto-language seems untenable
- Two main dialects: East and West (Western manuscripts generally younger)
- Lexical and grammatical interference from Middle Dutch and Middle Low German is common, more prominent toward the end of the period8,9
- No research on adverbs of degree in Old Frisian

Table 1. An overview of the Old Frisian manuscripts included in the analysis9

The position of Old Frisian adverbs of degree in early West Germanic

- Clear differences between Continental West Germanic and North Sea Germanic
- Best observed when comparing Old Saxon and Middle Low German, since the system in Low German seemingly undergoes dramatic transformations in line with the loss of other North Sea Germanic features
- In Old English and Old Saxon, the most dominant adverb is swithe/swîtho ‘very, strongly’, not found in High German and Dutch, rare in Middle Low German
- Differences in usage. gearwe/garo ‘fully’ with perception verbs (e.g. witan, cunnam ‘to know’), but with adjectives and adverbs in High German and Middle Low German
- Old/Middle High German, Middle Low German, and Middle Dutch flîvu/îlîvu ‘much, very’ with comparatives, but only positives in Old English or Old Saxon
- Continental “Middle” Germanic languages display a rise of the adverb sêre ‘very, sorely’ mainly with negative words. Dominant in Middle Dutch and Middle Low German Early attestations in Old Saxon and Old High German are present.
- One adverb present everywhere is hearde/hardo -e/-harto ‘firmly, very’

Goal

Seek to determine the position of the adverbs of degree in Old Frisian. To what degree is it North Sea Germanic? How is the language affected by Continental developments? Does it line up with Old or Middle Germanic?

Method

- Data collected from the Corpus Old Frisian
- Additional material (A and charters) from the Integrated Frisian Language Database
- Material collected in a database: adverb, degree, modified phrase, inherent polarity, polarity of the environment, position, context, text, manuscript, and dialect
- Corpus annotations ignored when necessary
- When the same text appeared in multiple manuscripts, only the oldest version was included, unless the adverb or the modified phrase differed

Results

Figure 1. The H2 manuscript
Figure 2. The frequencies of the adverbs of high degree in Old Frisian

Swîthe

- Found in two texts: The Seventeen Statutes and How the Frisians Conquered Rome, with verbs and adjectives respectively
- Former is the earliest legal text. In all version except R1, which has felo ‘much, very’. Earliest layers from the 12th century
- Latter only preserved in two later manuscripts (I, A)

Sêre

- Most frequent adverb of high degree, like Middle Dutch and Middle Low German
- Mostly with negative words (52%)
- Rare in the Eastern manuscripts: appears to be a lexical adverb. Modifies werda ‘to hurt’, binda ‘to bind’, and urberna ‘to burn’. Once in F with strîda ‘to quarrel’
- Attested with adjectives only in Old West Frisian
- Especially dominant in the 15th century Gesta Fresonum (A, 25x)

Fulu/felo

- Notable for its ablaut variation
- Also rare in Old East Frisian: With adjectives only in Fon alra Fresena Fridome (H2, 2x with stern ‘strong’), which has a Western exemplar. Possible Middle Dutch influence because of the spelling with -e
- More common in Old West Frisian: Also found with comparatives

Other adverbs

- Herde attested only once (I), though highly frequent elsewhere
- The only adverb of degree with a large number of attestations in Old East Frisian is elle ‘all, fully’
- The second most common adverb of degree in Old English, ful ‘fully, very’ is also common in Old Frisian and blurs the line between high and absolute degree
- A cognate with Old English gearwe, *jere conspicuously missing

Conclusion

- Based on the above, the system of adverbs of degree bears little resemblance to Old English and Old Saxon, and it resembles Middle Dutch and Middle Low German instead, thus in line with Middle Germanic
- Swîthe could belong to an older register based on its distribution
- The lack of early attestations for sêre may indicate that it entered the language at a later time and possibly first in Old West Frisian
- The situation may be comparable to Old Saxon and Middle Low German, though not supported by a loss of other North Sea Germanic features, and we do not know what the Frisian system was like in the 9th century
- Implication: Adverbs of degree show more indications of language contact than phonological features. A general pattern?

References