

# **Sustaining Frisian: a qualitative evaluation of policy impact on the protection of the Frisian linguistic heritage in West Frisia**

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**Abstract:** The integration of minorities in the so-called Old Continent has been a recurrent issue since the advent of the political structure of the European nation-state. As the first decades of the 21st century have shown, with cases like the Catalan, Corsican or Scottish, some European national minorities have begun reevaluating their place in the states they are a part of, partly due to the need for linguistic and cultural recognition. This situation showcases how important their integration is to preserve states' integrity and stability. Following this logic, this research paper tries to analyse the effectiveness of protection policies of the Frisian language, a minority language in the Netherlands spoken by 420.000 individuals approximately.

Since the 1950s the Frisian language has held legal recognition in the Dutch state, with increased protection until our days. However, it has to be taken into account that languages vary in prestige, number of speakers, and sociolinguistic characteristics. Despite equal rights on paper, practical disparities persist, impacting aspects such as the quality of education in the language or the linguistic landscape. As a result of these dissimilarities, the literacy levels of Frisian speakers have been severely affected. It is important to note that the Frisian language has a notable cultural significance, as it plays a vital role in the creation of its speakers' identity. This is why the survival of the language cannot solely rely on its de jure recognition. The efficacy of the current policies must also be evaluated. Moreover, understanding the community's attitudes towards Frisian, along with other challenges that the language faces, is also essential for the development of future, and more useful, policies that ensure the thriving and survival of this minority language.

This study employs a case study approach to assess the effectiveness of the protection policies using the Ethnolinguistic Vitality model, which systematizes factors of language protection combining three socio-structural factors: demography, institutional support and the status of the language. Furthermore, this research adds a new layer on the previous research regarding this topic, by using a qualitative strategy based on semi-structured interviews of diverse stakeholders engaged in the protection of the Frisian language in the Netherlands.

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**Keywords:** Frisian, minority languages, cultural policy, language protection, ethnolinguistic vitality.

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## 1. Introduction

The integration of national minorities has been a struggle for European states since the emergence of the European nation-states in the XIX Century (Vallès & Martí i Puig, 2015). It is worth mentioning that the so-called Old Continent, not so long ago, in the 1990s, was reminded of the importance of a proper integration of national minorities with the wars that provoked the Breakup of Yugoslavia (Veiga, 2011). The stiffness and contradictory nature of the Helsinki Accords (1975), especially between the 3<sup>rd</sup> (Territorial integrity of states) and 8<sup>th</sup> (Equal rights and self-determination of peoples) points of the "Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between Participating States" (also known as "The Decalogue"), was one of the main political cliffs in the solving of the Yugoslav case (Veiga, 2011).

During the last two decades of the XXI century, several European national minorities have started to reconsider their status with regards to the state they belong to. In the last decade, there has been several examples of this logic: the Scottish referendum for independence in 2014, the Catalan process of independence, that saw Spanish police beating peaceful voters and has conditioned Spanish politics until this day, or the Corsican struggle, that triggered the proposal of President Emmanuel Macron for Corsican autonomy within the French state (Dodman, 2023). These claims of national freedom are not only based on economic justifications, but also regarding the survival of their minoritized cultures in states with different hegemonic cultures.

Since several European countries have national minorities, the preservation, respect, and inclusion of their heritage should be an important topic for cultural policy in order to preserve the stability and integrity of those countries, especially with regards to minority languages. The mother tongue of an individual shapes partly its personality, hence the recognition -in this case legal protection of the language and the rights of its speakers- is a must for a welfare state, if it wants to assure the wellbeing of the totality of its citizens. When a native speaker of a language is denied of speaking his mother tongue, or discriminated for doing so, in the place where its language is endemic to, this person is being denied of part of itself. Moreover, if a state cannot guarantee the complete rights of a minority language speaker, for example in the public healthcare or education systems, the services that this individual will receive will be from an inferior quality, damaging its welfare and quality of life compared to the ones of a majority language speaker. In addition, it is important to highlight the fact that the mere existence of this heritage can enrich, and also make more

diverse and open, the country which those minorities inhabit, and therefore should be preserved. Minority cultures and languages are commons that enrich the country they are part of, and their preservation should not incumbent the members of the minority but the state's *populus* especially when they are endangered.

Frisian is the official second language in the province of Fryslân, The Netherlands, following the national language, Dutch. The province has around 650,000 residents, two-thirds of them live in rural areas and one-third in its four largest cities. The Frisian language is more commonly spoken in rural areas than in cities. In 2020, it was recorded that Frisian is the first language for 48% of the residents, and another 13% were raised bilingual with Frisian and another language, primarily Dutch (Jongbloed-Faber, 2021). It is worth mentioning that, historically, Dutch has dominated education and many other domains in Fryslân, especially in the public sphere. This has provoked that most people learn Frisian at home, which causes that literacy skills are typically developed in Dutch (Jongbloed-Faber, 2021).

According to a survey done by the Provincial Government in 2020, a significant majority of the population (84%) has a great level of understanding of the Frisian language and 64% is able to speak it well, but only 16% can write it proficiently (Jongbloed-Faber, 2021). In the domestic sphere, the same survey recorded that 43% of the residents speak Frisian with their partners, and 45% with their children. Attitudes towards Frisian are mixed: most Frisian speakers support its use, but a minority, often non-speakers, do not favour it (Jongbloed-Faber, 2021).

In terms of international recognition, Frisian is labelled as vulnerable by UNESCO. It was recognized as a regional or minority language under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) in 1998 (Jongbloed-Faber, 2021). This forced the Dutch government to protect and promote it across various public domains, including education, public administration, and media. Despite this, Frisian's position in primary education remains precarious and needs improvement (Jongbloed-Faber, 2021). The ECRML defines regional or minority languages as those traditionally used by nationals of a state who are numerically smaller than the rest of the state's population and distinct from the official language(s) (Jongbloed-Faber, 2021). The term 'minority language' reflects the unequal power dynamics between speakers of majority and minority languages, often leading to fewer opportunities for minority language use in official domains. Despite theoretical equal rights

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under the ECRML, practical disparities exist, affecting education quality and literacy in minority languages, and consequently, their use in writing and on social media (Jongbloed-Faber, 2021)

Following the aforementioned logic, the aim of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of the implemented policies aimed at preserving the linguistic heritage of the Frisian minority in the Netherlands. In this regard, this academic work will be guided by the following research question: *Have the policies implemented to protect the West Frisian national minority's linguistic heritage been effective to their future goals of preservation and sustainability?* As a means to answer this question, this academic work will explore how these policies contribute to the preservation of the West Frisian linguistic heritage, particularly in educational settings, and in fostering a sense of identity among the community members. Furthermore, the research will examine the long-term goals of the West Frisian minority regarding linguistic preservation -understood as a way of preventing it from decaying or protecting it from being destroyed- and assess the value of such preservation efforts in maintaining cultural diversity and ensuring sustainability -understood as the quality of being able to continue existing- for future generations.

This research follows a logic that understands that the main objective of social sciences is not to contribute to the accumulation of knowledge, but to comprehend phenomena that is perceived as socially and culturally relevant by the researcher (Viladot i Presas, 1996). Moreover, it stands by the narrative that states that the objective of a social scientist is not to spread objective data, because this is an impossible endeavour. It is impossible for humans not to put their biases and perspectives on social sciences, because there is no absolute truth in human phenomena (Fontana, 2018). Being aware of that fact, the duty of a social scientist is to defend their vision through objective subjectivity, using the scientific method and scientifically collected data to back its discourse, and to collaborate to the scientific and societal debate (Fontana, 2018). Therefore, this plea works as a disclaimer showcasing the complicated nature of cultural policy and its political angles. It is worth mentioning this due to the fact that topics, like the one this paper is about, may be deemed as political statements to question its scientific validity. Needless to say, performing apoliticism has an intrinsic political bias, as performing a lack of bias is having a bias.

The structure of this paper is the following: first, a theoretical framework is established, describing the importance of minority language and its preservation, showing

what Ethnolinguistic Vitality is, and applying it to the specificities of the Frisian language in The Netherlands. Secondly, the research design and methodology are described. Thirdly, the results are exposed, tackling every aspect of Ethnolinguistic Vitality: Demography, Status, and Institutional Support. After that, limitations are discussed, followed by the conclusion and recommendations.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1. Minority languages and the importance of preservation**

Languages, as any other outcome of the human race which does not attack, threaten or contradict universal rights like Human Rights, are a unique common that simply has value for its uniqueness. Taking into account the fact that there is no other place in the known universe in which language has ever existed or been created -at least as we know-, it may seem logic to preserve every language because of its uniqueness and harmful nature. Moreover, languages can be the fabric of peoples identities and, by themselves, they do no harm to people. Having stated that, it is key to highlight the fact that not all languages are equal, especially since the historic dynamics of nation-state formation, that begun in the 19th century, and, also, due to demographic development, not all languages are equal in terms of prestige, number of speakers or importance within a country (Heminga, 1999). This is why this research tackles the preservation of a minority language, which can be described as a language historically spoken within a specific region of a country by citizens who constitute a smaller group compared to the rest of the country's population and is distinct from the official language of the country -not encompassing dialects of the official language nor the ones spoken by migrant groups- (European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, 1992).

Global dynamics, fruit of the Globalization, have proven to be a threaten for minority languages, already in a position of disadvantage with the majority language (Colautti, 1994; Kircher et.al., 2023). Unequal bilinguistic situations, which always favour the majority language, condemn minority languages to a social ostracism, through diglossia, that ends up resulting in the agonising death of the weak language (Colautti, 1994; Radatz, 2020). It is only needed for a generation to stop teaching the language to their younglings for the language to die, as it has been the case with Occitan or Briton in France (Radatz, 2020).

The importance of minority languages, and the need for its preservation, tends to be overlooked by the speakers of the majority language, since they are not crossed by this bias



of oppression -following the postulates of the Intersectional Theory, which, paradoxically, does not take this particular bias into account, because it was not elaborated by a person who was crossed by this axis of oppression-. This showcases the fact that the minority itself is the one that needs to be aware and take care, by itself, of the preservation of the language, because if the members of the community do not do it, it is very unlikely that other people will (Radatz, 2020). It may be important to point out the fact that the use of a minority language is encompassed by the United Nations in its definition of minority rights, which defends that individuals belonging to national or ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities (hereafter referred to as minority individuals) are entitled to the enjoyment of their own cultural practices, the freedom to profess and observe their religion, and the right to utilise their native language, both privately and publicly, without any form of discrimination or interference (UN, 1993).

## **2.2. Objective and Subjective Ethnolinguistic Vitality (EV)**

In 1977 Giles and other scholars of sociolinguistics elaborated a model that systematises the factors that make the preservation of languages possible (Viladot i Presas, 1996). This model proposes the combination of three socio-structural factors -the demography of the linguistic community, the institutional support that it receives, and the status of the linguistic group- in one factor named Ethnolinguistic Vitality (EV) (Viladot i Presas, 1996; Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). The academics stated that the *objective* EV -known only as Ethnolinguistic Vitality when formulated by Giles- of a language and its speakers could be measured through the evaluation of documents and scientific studies (Viladot i Presas, 1996; Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). Moreover, they argued that EV is an extremely valuable indicator of how likely a minority group is to survive as a distinctive unit within a particular situation of linguistic contact (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020).

Few years afterwards, in 1981, Bourhis and other researchers expanded Giles' previous model adding the language speaker's perspective, naming it *subjective* EV (Viladot i Presas, 1996; Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). They acknowledged the fact that it is also crucial to take into account how status, demography and institutional support is perceived by the language community, and measured it using specific questionnaires (Viladot i Presas, 1996; Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). It is worth mentioning that the perception that a linguistic group has of its language's vitality in its own territory may not necessarily be the same as the objective vitality, due to the fact that subjective EV may be biased by degree of

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cultural identification of the speakers which specially affect the status dimension (Viladot i Presas, 1996). Furthermore, It has been stated that the cultural identity and subjective EV are positively related (Viladot i Presas, 1996).

This paper uses the framework elaborated by Bourhis Giles and Rosenthal (1981) to analyse the situation of the Frisian language in The Netherlands, by tackling the three dimensions that form Ethnolinguistic Vitality: Demography, Institutional Support, and Status (Bourhis et.al., 1981).

The demographic dimension encompasses the factors that are related to the number of speakers and their distribution amongst the territory (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). They encompass the size of the ethnolinguistic group, both in absolute terms and, in comparison, to the relevant out-group, along with their distribution patterns. Demographic elements also involve birth rates and migration figures. Ethnolinguistic groups experiencing favourable demographic trends are expected to have more EV compared to those with unfavourable trends (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020).

Institutional support pertains to the level of representation a language group receives across the institutions of a nation, region, or community, encompassing government, education, culture, media, as well as economic and social provisions (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). Increased institutional support correlates with higher Ethnolinguistic Vitality (EV) for a language and its speakers (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020).

Status factors encompass the prestige variables of a linguistic group within the inter-group context. This involves the status of the language itself and that of the linguistic community where it's used. The former is largely influenced by the degree of legal and official recognition, while the latter is shaped by socio-economic and socio-historical contexts (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020).

In addition to the traditional aspects of status outlined by Giles and colleagues (Giles et.al., 1977), subsequent research on Ethnolinguistic Vitality has delved into linguistic landscapes within the status framework. Linguistic landscape refers to the presence of a language in public and commercial spaces, such as road signs, billboards, street names, place names, shop signs, and government building signage. While some scholars include spoken language in public spaces as part of the linguistic landscape, written language predominates in linguistic landscape studies (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020).

The linguistic landscape serves as a visible and immediate indicator of the relative power and status of linguistic communities within a territory, fulfilling two primary functions. Firstly, it communicates the linguistic characteristics and territorial boundaries of the region to individuals. Secondly, it holds symbolic significance, as the absence or presence of one's language on public signs influences how one perceives their membership in a language group within bilingual or multilingual settings (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). Importantly, languages with higher perceived status and visibility in the linguistic landscape are assumed to possess greater Ethnolinguistic Vitality (EV). The status of a language is primarily determined by its legal recognition and the status of the speech community where it's used (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020).

### **2.3. Subjective and objective EV of the Frisian Language in West Fryslân**

The aim of this research is to try to answer the question “*Have the policies implemented to protect the West Frisian national minority's linguistic heritage been effective to their future goals of preservation and sustainability?*”. In order to give a response to that question it crucial to clarify what the linguistic heritage of West Fryslân is. Frisian is a Germanic language of the continental group that belongs to the big family of Indo-European languages (Viladot i Presas, 1996). It is divided into three subdialects: Western Frisian, spoken in the north of the Netherlands, Eastern, in certain strongholds of the old Oldenburg, and Northern, on the island of Heligoland, on the coast of Schleswig in the north of Husum and on the islands of the same coast as far as Sylt (Enciclopèdia Catalana, n.d.). Having stated that, it is important to discern the subjective and objective EV of the language in the territory object of study.

- **Demography**

In 2019 the Province of Fryslân calculated that its number of inhabitants amounted to 647.000 people and estimated that around 420.000 of them had Frisian as their home language, but practically all Frisian speakers are bilingual speakers of Dutch (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020; Kircher et.al. 2023). It also has been stated that 89% of the total population of the region is able to understand it, 70% can speak it, 59% can read it, and 19% can read it (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020; Kircher et.al. 2023). In addition, scholars have pointed out that even though the number of children growing up in Frisian-speaking households remained constant in the last decades, the number of speakers is declining due to

an increasing number of seniors and a decrease in nativity (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020).

The Province of Fryslân comprises approximately the 10% of the territory of the Netherlands (Heminga, 1999). Fryslân is not a highly urbanised region, economically relying to the agricultural exploitation of the land and, in recent decades, on tourism (Heminga, 1999). Even though the province constitutes a distinguishable territory, and its residents are distinguished of other ones that live in the Netherlands because they use Frisian language, its capital, Ljouwert, has Dutch as the main communication language between its citizens (Viladot I Presas, 1996; Heminga, 1999).

- **Institutional support**

The official recognition of the Frisian language in the Netherlands started in 1950s, as a result of the so-called Frisian Civil Rights Movement (Heminga, 1999). In 1955 the Dutch government passed the Decree on Education in the Frisian Language, that allowed the use of Frisian in primary schools, and, a year later, the language was allowed in courts of law thanks to the passing of the Act on the Use of Frisian Language in the Justice System (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020).

In the 1970s and 1980s the central government ensured its compromise with the protection of the Frisian language, after some reports done by the Commission on the Frisian Language led to the approval of the Administrative Agreement on Frisian Language and Culture, which went into force in 1993 (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). Two years after came the recognition of the Frisian language as an official administrative language of the Netherlands, thanks to an amendment to the General Administrative Law Act (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). In the supra-national context, the Dutch government agreed on the protection of the language and culture of the Frisian people by ratifying, in 2005, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020).

It is important to highlight that in this century, the government of the Netherlands has expanded further its compromise with the protection of the Frisian cultural and linguistic heritage through the Act on the Use of the Frisian language (2013) and the Administrative Agreement on Frisian Language and Culture (2018), which delegated competences to the provincial government for applying protective measures (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher,

2020). The local government promotes the language and culture through the provision of schemes, subsidies and grants. It subsidises institutions such as the provincial library and archive, known as Tresoar, the Frisian History and Literature Centre, the scientific research institute Frisian Academy, and the language promotion institute Afûk, also known as the General Commission for Frisian Education (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020).

On Monday the 8th of April 2024 the central government of the Netherlands, represented by the Minister of the Interior Hugo de Jonge, and the Commissioner of the King in Fryslân, Arno Brok, signed the agreement for the protection and promotion of the Frisian language and culture (Bestjoersôfspraak Fryske Taal en Kultuer (BFTK)), for the years 2024 to 2028. The BFTK, besides sealing a contribution of 18 million euros by the central authorities, set the five main priorities: ensuring the visibility of Frisian in the public space, foster the digitisation of Frisian, improve the presence of the language in education and in scientific research, ensure language transfer between generations and apply a decentralised language policy. On top of that, the Commissioner Eke Folkerts reaffirmed the efforts of the Provincial Government towards the equalisation of Frisian and Dutch in many domains and to increase the availability of cultural content in Frisian language. Moreover, within the framework of this covenant the Fryske Akademy agreed on providing funds and human resources for the universities of Amsterdam and Utrecht (Fryske Akademy, 2024).

Media in Frisian is regulated by the Media Law of 2008 and the Administrative Agreement on Frisian in the Media of 2018 (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). There is one TV and Radio Broadcaster that has programs in Frisian, and bilingual newspapers of provincial range as well as some municipal ones that are Frisian (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). Facebook also allows users to establish its layout in Frisian.

Frisian education is regulated and dictated by the Dutch government through national education policies (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). Those mandate the obligation of having Frisian as a subject from primary education until the second year of high school, there is no specification on the quality or quantity of hours of Frisian class (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). Recently, the provincial government has approved grants to encourage the presence of the language in education (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). Regarding higher education, there is only one University in the Netherlands that has a department of Frisian studies, the University of Grins (Groningen in Dutch), and it only has one lecturer and a temporary full professor. In that same institution, a Frisian track in the BA in Minorities and

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Multilingualism is available as well as a subject in one module of the MA in Multilingualism (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). Teachers of Frisian language can get their qualification at NHL-Stenden, the University of Applied Sciences in Ljouwert (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020).

In terms of subjective EV, the study done by Kircher and Kuipers-Zandberg (2020) showed that all participants of the questionnaire named the province as the main promoter of the protection and safeguard of the language, but not the national government which has competences on, for instance, education (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). Participants also were aware of the different types of media in Frisian and valued them positively, as well as the Facebook features. Regarding education, there was almost no awareness that the fact that Frisian is mandatory in schools was a result of national policies. Moreover, there was few consciousness of the fact that Frisian is mandatory in high schools. Most of the responses, collected in the consulted bibliography, regarding education criticised the level of Frisian knowledge of teachers in the education system, but everyone knew that Afûk offered classes (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020).

Finally, it might be worth adding that some scholars contend that the institutional support for promoting and safeguarding the Frisian language in the Netherlands stems not from the Dutch government's recognition of fundamental rights, but from a deliberately slow and bureaucratic display of paternalistic benevolence and power over the minority (Heminga, 1999; Radatz, 2020).

- **Status**

Frisian has been labelled as vulnerable by UNESCO in 2010 (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020) (Kircher et.al.,2023). As it has previously been shown, Frisian language has not a great presence on social life even though 70% of the population uses it as household language. The public presence of the language is little, as it has been previously shown in the media paragraph in institutional support or by the fact that only 3% of the business signs in the capital are integrally in Frisian and only 2% are bilingual (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). Academics have highlighted the desire of Frisian speakers for a more consistent and ubiquitous presence of the language in the public space (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). It is important to note that, based on the Act on the Use of Frisian Language (2013), every municipality has the competence over the language of public signage, and most of the towns

with Frisian signs are in rural areas (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). This highlights one of the main problems of Frisians: it is regarded as a peasant language.

Numerous minority language communities have faced marginalisation from speakers of the dominant language, leading them to fight for support and acknowledgment. Traditional speakers are often unfairly stereotyped as 'ignorant peasants' and subjected to ridicule due to their way of speaking or accent (Kircher et.al.,2023). Many minority languages have been labelled as anachronistic, associated with backwardness and considered a spanner in the wheels of progress, the labelling of a minority language as peasant follows this logic and can be seen in cases like the Catalan, Basque, Brittonic, Occitan, Corsican, Sard or Friulian (Colautti, 1994; Cenoz & Gorter, 2017; Radatz, 2020). Moreover, the fact that the region does not have an economically vibrant and Frisian-speaking capital adds fuel to this perception (Viladot i Presas, 1996). This situation is entrenched in the logic of what is called Banal Nationalism (Biling, 1995): an invisibilisation of nationalistic behaviours and manifestations of the nation-state. As the historian and politician Albert Botran stated: “everyone is a nationalist, more consciously or more banally, because everyone participates in the reproduction of one national identity or another. That is why hegemonic nationalisms are, of course, those with the most powerful reproduction tools. Therefore, there is no need to call it nationalism or look for synonyms” (Botran, 2024). Then, visible political or cultural manifestations of a nation without a state are labelled as reactionary nationalistic -often as far-right- positions, even though most of them are progressive and liberating (Radatz, 2020).

Linguistic discrimination in Fryslân has been studied in recent times, especially regarding the interactions with domestic tourists (Koning, 2022). This study recorded diverse testimonies of Frisian speakers in Fryslân that have been discriminated by domestic tourists for speaking their language, which carry the idea that the territory is less advanced than the rest of the Netherlands and that Frisians are stubborn and unapproachable (Koning, 2022). All the participants stated that they have experienced negative experiences with regards to discrimination by Dutch tourists (Koning, 2022). Between those, it might be important to highlight confrontations by tourists with Frisians due to the inability of the letters of speaking “proper Dutch” or the case of a hotel in which management prohibited workers of speaking Frisian between them due to complains of the costumers, which is a violation against the rights of minorities recognised by the UN (1993) (Koning, 2022).

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It is also important to take into account the status of the language regarding new speakers, those who are not native speakers but consciously decide to learn the minority language (Kircher et.al., 2023). These new speakers, as has been recorded by academics, face linguistic insecurity and scrutiny by the native ones, mostly correcting them or refusing to speak Frisian to them (Kircher et.al., 2023). This responds to either a bunkerisation process of the linguistic, that encloses the community mostly by a result of discrimination, or as an indication of politeness, due to the fact that most minority language speakers perceive as inappropriate and rude to speak the minority language in the presence of a speaker of the majority one (Kircher et.al., 2023).

The study done by Kuipers-Zandberg and Kircher in 2020, with regards to subjective EV in the Frisian speaking community, documented that most of the participants that took the questionnaire stated that Frisian has little to no economic value. The respondents discerned that it was only valuable in Frisian speaking working positions, which they affirmed that there are less than a few years ago (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). Even though they all were aware of their right of speaking Frisian in judiciary court or with the administration, they mentioned that it is unusual to get a response in Frisian due to the inability of most public servants to fluently speak the language (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). All participants expressed that they would appreciate a response in the language of the territory (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020).

To study the impact of social media use on the vitality of minority languages, Frisian has been used as a paradigmatic example (Jongbloed-Faber, 2021). This research concluded that even though Frisian speakers generally tend to use Dutch over Frisian, in the last years there has been an increase of usage of the autochthon language of Fryslân. Jongbloed-Faber (2021) argues that people who have Frisian as their mother tongue are the ones that use it more, even though that Frisian usage tends to be conditioned by the environment in which the speaker express themselves. In this regard, the researcher mentions that having examples of users of Frisian seems to favour the usage. It is worth adding that communication in the net, as a digital translation of the social reality, seems to follow the patterns of linguistic use than in the physical space: interpersonal or private communication, through platforms like Whatsapp and Snapchat, is where most people use Frisian, but when addressing the public digital space, in social networks like X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram or Facebook, Frisian speakers tend to use Dutch. However, although the academic concludes that Frisian faces a challenge in social media environments: due to the fact that it is mostly a spoken language,



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because 81% of its speakers are illiterate (they do not know how to write the language), their speakers use the majority language to communicate. The need for communication and the lack of knowledge has provoked the emergence of a Dutchified version of Frisian (Jongbloed-Faber, 2021).

To sum up, the Province of Fryslân has around 420.000 of its 647.000 inhabitants using Frisian as their home language, and nearly all of them are bilingual in Dutch. Moreover, 89% of the province's population understands Frisian, 70% speaks it, 59% can read it, and 19% can write it. Fryslân is not highly urbanized, and its endemic language is mainly spoken in rural areas.

The language has been legally recognized since the 1950s, as a response to the Frisian Civil Rights Movement, that guaranteed the use of the language in the Justice System and its teaching in schools. During the following decades the institutional support received augmented substantially, both in The Netherlands and internationally. In recent years, the institutional support has shifted towards delegating more competences to the Provincial Government and supporting local institutions, with the Act on the Use of the Frisian Language (2013) and the Administrative Agreement on Frisian Language and Culture (2018). In 2024, a new agreement allocated 18 million euros for the protection of the language, setting its priorities towards public visibility, digitization, presence of the language in education and science, and intergenerational language transfer.

The presence of Frisian in education is mandated from primary school to the second year of secondary, but with no specific requirements of class quality or hours and there have been several criticisms on the proficiency of teachers. Higher education offers very limited Frisian studies, primarily at NHL-Stenden and at the University of Grins (Groningen).

Regarding the status, the Frisian language tends to be perceived as a private language, since its public presence in the linguistic landscape is reduced. There is no unified policy over public signage and signs in Frisian are primarily found in rural areas, which reinforces the stereotype of considering Frisian as a "peasant language". Even though Frisian speakers have linguistic rights, most of the consulted literature shows that responses in Frisian, in public institutions, are rare due to the lack of fluent public servants. Despite these challenges, Frisian speakers express a strong desire for greater public use and institutional support for their language.

### 3. Research design & methodology

With regards to responding the question: “*Have the policies implemented to protect the West Frisian national minority’s linguistic heritage been effective to their future goals of preservation and sustainability?*”, like previous research in the matter, (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017) (Coster, 2020) (Koning, 2022) this research will use a qualitative research strategy using semi-structured interviews. As this research did not find previous literature on the topic that uses those types of methods, their usage could provide a new angle on the topic.

The research design for this study employs a case study approach, that focusses on the effectiveness of policies aimed at preserving the West Frisian national minority’s linguistic heritage. A case study approach is particularly suited for this research, as it allows for a thorough and contextually rich scrutiny of the topic object of study, in this case: the policies aimed at the protection of the Frisian language in the Netherlands (Bryman, 2020).

One of the goals of this research is to provide groundwork for the development of future policy to protect and foster the use of the Frisian language. Hence this research ties to disseminate and analyse the opinions and nuances of diverse experts in the matter, the viewpoints of whom would be considered relevant in the shaping of policy. One might consider the research method as a dummy version of a cabinet of experts, that should be consulted to ensure the efficiency of future policies.

This paper is a response to the call made by Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher (2020), of expanding their research using other methodologies. In this case, this paper uses qualitative methods as the mentioned research used quantitative ones. Specifically, eight semi-structured interviews with members of public and private institutions that try to preserve Frisian linguistic heritage, based on an interview guide [see appendix A]. Due to the mandatory requirements, established for the elaboration of a master’s Thesis for the Master in Cultural Economics and Entrepreneurship at the University Erasmus Rotterdam, ten interviews were conducted and eight were analysed [view the Limitations chapter]. This requirements state that for research like this one it is mandatory to conduct between seven and ten interviews with experts.

As demonstrated by other academic studies (Merriam, 2009), this form of qualitative research is particularly well-suited for engaging with Frisian language experts and gathering detailed, specific information from them. Additionally, this method of data collection offers

flexibility and adaptability during the interview process (Merriam, 2009). This allows the interviewer to explore topics that were not anticipated during the preliminary research before the interview. Moreover, this type of interviews facilitates the glimpsing of the point of view of the person who is being interviewed, allowing the interviewer to quickly encourage tangents through follow-up questions, and permitting the comparison between the results of the interviews (Bryman, 2020).

Having stated that, it might be important to acknowledge some limitations of this methodology: the interviewees could hide part of the reality or not provide all the information they have (Merriam, 2009). In this case, given the situation of the Frisian language and the limited research on the topic, it does not seem like a big concern. It is not unreasonable to believe that experts on the language may genuinely be interested in contributing to the advancement of knowledge regarding this topic.

The interviews were conducted via online videoconference software and had a length that ranged from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. Due to difficulties reaching out all interviewees, all interviews were done during the first two weeks of May 2024. The content was recorded with the perk that the videoconference program offers and transcribed using another perk of the same program, which is powered by AI. The raw transcript was then edited, using the recording to correct mistakes done by the AI and, then, manually coded [available in the author's archive]. For the coding, every interview transcript was divided according to the three dimensions of Ethnolinguistic Vitality, Status, Institutional Support and Demography. After that, specific codes for every dimension were applied, such as "Demographic changes", "Media and Internet" or "Education" [see complete coding book in the Appendix B].

The used sample tries to create an overview of public and private actors that build the groundwork for the preservation of Frisian Linguistic Heritage. The data sample for the interviews include members of the following organisations:

- **Afûk (Algemeine Fryske ûnderrjocht Kommisje)**

This is an institution dedicated to the preservation of the Frisian culture and language. It is based in Leeuwarden since its creation in 1928. Afûk provides educational services, such as courses of Frisian language in its headquarters, and provides consultancy services and support for the implementation of Frisian language in schools. Moreover, this institution also provides translations of books in Frisian and translations of Frisian books to other languages,

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it also publishes its own magazine in Frisian and manages the biggest bookstore that sells Frisian books (Afûk, n.d.).

- **Tresoar**

Tresoar is the repository of Fryslân's history. It has the mission of connecting the past of the province, with its present and future. It holds an extensive archive with a vast collection of materials related to the history of Fryslân (Tesoar, n.d.).

- **Frisian National Party (FNP)**

It is a Frisian nationalist political party, founded in 1962, that advocates for a federal political system which would grant more autonomy for the Frisian region. It also demands the protection and recognition of the Frisian language and the Frisian control over its gas reserves (FNP, n.d.). Nowadays it holds 4 seats in the Provincial Council of Friesland, and it is a member of the government coalition of the Province of West Frisia.

- **Fryske Akademy (Frisian Academy)**

This is a scientific institution dedicated, since its foundation in 1938, to the research of topics regarding the Frisian culture, language and people. It belongs to the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) and has undertaken projects such as the West Frisian-English Dictionary and the authoritative dictionary of the West Frisian language, in 25 volumes. Furthermore, the Fryske Akademy maintains a close relationship of collaboration with the University of Groningen, with regards to research in the realm of Frisian Studies (Fryske Akademy, n.d.).

- **Omrop Fryslân**

It is the only Frisian-speaking public TV and radio Broadcaster, which was founded in 1988. The totality of their programs, both in TV and Radio, is in Frisian, while its website is bilingual. Recently, they have expanded their activities to digital platforms, where they provide content in Frisian as well (Omrop Fryslân, n.d.).

- **Fries Museum (Frisian Museum)**

The Fries Museum is a museum in Leeuwarden that shows different Frisian crafts and art, as well as showing the history of the Frisian people from 1200 to the 2000s. It also hosts the museum of the Frisian Resistance during the Second World War and a café that serves local specialities (About the Museum, n.d.).

- **NHL-Stenden**

This is the University of Applied Sciences in Ljouwert, where teachers of Frisian language can get their qualifications and, since 2025, journalists would get their qualifications on Frisian culture and language. Moreover, some of its researchers are investigating the multilingualism alongside primary and secondary school teachers, with the aim of shaping future linguistic educative policy. (NHL Stenden, n.d.)

#### **4. Results**

In order to discern how Frisian linguistic heritage is protected eight different stakeholders and experts in the matter were interviewed. Their testimonies are shown in this chapter using anonymous coding, representing every person with the letter R and a number. Moreover, the pronouns used for referring to them individually are gender neutral, as a way to ensure their anonymity. The results obtained, by conducting semi-structured interviews, were divided amongst the three categories that conform the Ethnolinguistic Vitality of a language: Status, Institutional Support and Demography (Giles et.al., 1977; Bourhis et.al., 1981; Viladot i Presas, 1996; Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020).

##### **4.1. Institutional support**

Institutional support refers to the extent of representation a language group has within various institutions at the national, regional, or community level, including government, education, culture, media, and social and economic services (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020).

Regarding institutional support for the Frisian language, all interviewees expressed their positive opinions regarding the institutional support, especially after the signature of the covenant in April 2024. In fact, R3 admitted that “if it was not for the institutional support, things would be very bad”. The respondents praised the provincial government and the shift done by the central government towards paying more attention to the minority languages in The Netherlands in recent years. However, R1 indicated that “there is still a monolingual perspective on how you deal with languages in this country”.

Some voices were somewhat sceptical about the role of politicians in the protection of the language. For instance, R7 alerted “there has been a lot of ups and downs, and spirals going on. Politics is not very reliable”, which could be complemented by the response of R6 “not every field can be tackled by politics, the government and laws”.

The BFTK was also widely acclaimed by the respondents, especially by the increase on governmental funds and central government involvement in the matter. It was defined with terms such as “ambitious”, “extensive” or “necessary”, and applauded for being a way to promote linguistic assertiveness. Furthermore, R7 remarked that one of the virtues of the agreement is that it came from a political consensus, in which the extreme right was not present. The interviewee declared: “It was a combined effort of different political parties, from the right to the left. That made me feel very positive, because it is not good if the support for a language only comes from one side of the political spectrum”.

The goals set for 2030 and 2050, which establish the policy objective of widely increasing the number of Frisian speakers and a severely decrease of illiteracy in the language alongside measurable ways to assess its accomplishment, were congratulated by R1, R4 and R7. Regarding the covenant and its objectives R7 expressed their fear of a future cut on government spending if some of the goals are obtained. This interviewee also pointed out, as a way to prove their fear: “yesterday I got a call from the provincial government that they are going to cut some things as well. [...]getting some extra (funding) from the Dutch government is now taking away from us (funding) from the provincial government”.

The biggest flaw, indicated by the interviewed experts, with regards to institutional support for the Frisian language in Fryslân was how the language was treated in education. They all were knowledgeable that approximately only 25% of the schools in Fryslân offer classes of Frisian language (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020). The deficiencies of the Frisian education system can be summarized by this quote from R6: “the education is not sufficient enough to deliver people that write the language”. Moreover, R2, R3 and R6 remarked that this deficit of the educational system has been like this since the 1980s, when Frisian language was incorporated in the school’s curriculum. As stated by R6: “it is very much an oral language, that is because they have not had a proper education in our language for.....well, never”.

50% of the interviewees mentioned that the lack of application of the legal requirements regarding the teaching of Frisian language in primary and secondary schools was because the teachers did not want to apply it. Some of them blamed this to a discriminatory position by the teachers, but others blame the lack of qualification of teachers which deems them incapable to teach Frisian. As R1 stated: “I have to work with schools and teachers with a lot of resistance, most of the times against the language.”.

To provide an explanation to this phenomenon, R3 explained why they believed schools could get away with disobeying the law: “That has to do with the school autonomy, which is one of the basic building blocks of Dutch democracy. General voting rights for women were approved because there was a deal to keep Cristian schools and give them autonomy [...] It goes back to 1919, and it is in the Constitution. That is difficult to touch because Cristian schools are afraid that they are going impose other things on their schools”.

On top of that, another aspect that was mentioned as the cause for the non-appliance of the legislation regarding the teaching of Frisian was the ineffectiveness of the inspections done by the government. Amongst the experts, two motives arose: the exemption policy applied and the lack of control over inspections by the provincial government. As R4 stated: “Schools feel like they can get away with it because we have had an exemption policy from the provincial government for a long time”. Furthermore, R6 criticized the quality of the inspectors adding that: “we are still depending on the quality of the inspectors of the Dutch government to make sure that the Frisian language is being taught correctly. And so there is still a lot of paternalism going on there. So those controllers are not from the province, but from the central government”. In this regard, R3 expressed how the demand for provincial control over school inspectors has manifested in the political landscape and in the agreement: “actually, we are asking for a very long time for a Frisian inspector, but this is really something out of the question for The Hague. [...] we tried to have it in the agreement.”.

Another concerning educational area for many of the interviewees was the university sphere. Most of them expressed their concern over the lack of Frisian itineraries in Dutch and foreign universities. R2 expressed their incredulity on the matter, declaring that: “You can study Welsh in universities [a language with a similar number of speakers], why is there a half professor for Frisian [referring to the situation with the Frisian chair in the University of Grins]? I do not understand, because Frisian is one of the oldest languages that has been preserved. I do not quite get it, but it also depends a lot on the enthusiasm of the people”.

As a response to the reluctance of teaching Frisian in educational centres, 75% of the interviewees believed that the necessary approach had to be convincing the schools about the virtues of multilingualism. The quality of multilingualism is, by the words of R8: “in the context of multilingualism, in language development in general, Frisian can help a lot to learn other languages. Just as any other home language you might have can help you in learning new languages”.

Another flaw of the education system, which was signalled by five different experts as one of the causes of the lack of appreciation of the language by Frisians, was the absence of Frisian or local history classes in schools. As explained by R5: “we see that almost nothing is told about Frisian history at school, some teachers do but most of them do not”. This expert also expressed the ties between Frisian history and language as: “it is a total package with language, you have to connect material culture to linguistics, you have to see it as a total package.”. It is very important to mention that the shortcomings in the teaching of history were not considered a sole problem of the province of Fryslân. R5, stated: “it is a big problem in The Netherlands, because people have no idea about their history.[...] When you become more aware about your own history, you can use in a positive way these ideas in modern discussion”.

As mentioned by R1: “outside education, there are still lots of problems, also in court”. R1,R2,R3,R4 and R8 touched on the difficulties for Frisian speakers to use their language in court, as it has been their right since the 1950s. The situation was described by R8: “They have fought for the right to use it in court. For example, you can ask in court to be addressed in the language but it is still a problem here. It is still been laughed about because they will tell you: Well, we do not have anyone available, and you speak Dutch right? “. R3 and R4 nuanced this statement, adding that: “there is a problem with interpreters, people have to indicate 8 days before that they need an interpreters, whereas it is a right that you have” and “we do not have a lot of translators”. R2 and R3 provided more context explaining that, while the interviews were conducted, there was a strike of the Frisian interpreters, demanding better salaries.

The helplessness of Frisian speakers when addressing other institutions, for R8, was the same as in court: “So in the same way, when you call the tax office, you should be able to do it in Frisian, but it never happens”. It might be important to add that this situation happened also when addressing private companies, like ING. Seven of the interviewees were aware of the case of linguistic discrimination by this banking institution, that occurred in February 2024 (Omrop Fryslân, 2024).

## 4.2. Status

The status of a language refers to the different factors that encompass how set language is perceived in the community in which it is spoken. It takes into consideration variables such as its prestige amongst speakers and non-speakers. It is important to give consideration to the



fact that the status of a language is shaped by the socio-historical developments of the community and its legal protection (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020).

Most of the interviewees affirmed that the Frisian language is vital in Frisian identity construction. Having said that, all the respondents, being Frisian speakers or not, remarked the lack of value that Frisian speakers give to the language. As one of the respondents stated (R4): “Like many minority language speakers, I was not really aware of how special it was to speak Frisian”, which coincides with the statement of R6: “a lot of Frisians have some sort of ignorance towards the language”.

The lack of use in public communication could be due to the stereotypes related to the Frisian language, which labels its speakers as farmers and less intelligent and cultured, which was mentioned and experienced by some of the interviewed experts. This is subconsciously learned from an early age by children, as R1 stated: “when I was little, and we went on holidays with my family, and I heard children speaking Dutch I always thought they were more intelligent. I give this as an example to show that a lot of Frisian people think that Frisian language is a language of simple farmers and that Dutch [...] is far better”. Having mentioned that, it is worth noting that all the interviewed experts remarked that in the last years there has been a positive shift towards the appreciation of Frisian, both by the government and by Frisian speakers.

One of the most remarked facts related to the status of the language, that was highlighted by seven interviewed experts, was the attitude of Frisian towards the usage of the language. The biggest concern mentioned was the fact that most Frisian speakers always tend to change the language when approaching a person they do not know. This attitude was justified by some of the respondents, R1, R2, R4, R7 and R8, as a subconscious behaviour to not appear rude towards strangers, even though most of the inhabitants of the province of Fryslân can understand the language. As R4 stated: “(changing the language) I guess from an early age [you learn] that it is not the proper thing to do [speaking Frisian] and you do not want people to feel excluded. If you want to be nice, then you always have to speak the majority language”.

The aforementioned reluctance of Frisian speakers to use the language in the public sphere might also be related to the lack of presence of the language in the landscape. Most of the signs in the province, counting public signage and private labelling of businesses, are in Dutch, as noted by 75% of the respondents. In this regard, an increase on the visibility of

Frisian in the streets was highlighted, by a vast majority of the interviewed experts, as one of the aspects that could increase the status of the language. The lack of public presence is also translated into media, there is no newspaper only in Frisian, as noted by R2.

The lack of presence of Frisian in the landscape of the Frisian, added to the lack of proper education of Frisian in the province, seem to have relegated the autochthon language of Fryslân to the household use. As stated by R6: “I still hear people that speak the language but only use it with their family and do not know that it is very important using it somewhere else. They are not proud enough of the language”. On this subject, R7 added: “people feel like it is still a language that you should use at home and is not taken very seriously”.

The absence of public presence of Frisian in the public sphere can also be seen in social media, as a virtual translation of daily life. Three of the interviewees, which are studying the presence of Frisian in social media or work in social media related jobs, pointed out that there is a lack of use of Frisian amongst public content such as Youtube and TikTok. R2 declared that this is due to the fact that “they mostly choose Dutch because then they think they will have a wider audience”. On the other hand, one expert defended that the presence of the language in the net is quite remarkable. Besides that, all respondents agreed on the fact that the appearance of role models that use Frisian on the internet, hence influencers, would greatly benefit the status of the language, especially among younger speakers. The lack of role models in modern mediums could be the cause of what worried R2: “it is not trendy, hip or in vogue, or whatever you want to call it, to speak the language”.

Where the experts agreed that Frisian is used the most is in interpersonal conversations through the internet, hence in the private sphere of social media. In this regard, it is important to highlight what R4 stated regarding the use of Frisian in direct message platforms: “speaking Frisian and texting in Dutch is usual in Frisian speaking families. [...] they feel like their level of Frisian is not high enough to text each other in Frisian”. This latter testimony remarks what R3 stated: “actually Frisian is not very much a written language”, which is tied to the shortcomings in the educational field stated in the previous section.

From the dialectic relationship, between the fact that most of the Frisian speakers are illiterate in their language and the need they have to communicate with each other through direct message apps, has led to emergence of a new form of written language. This new way of writing Frisian, which according to R4, R6 and R8 is based on the phonetics of the

language rather than the rules established when the language was standardized, has divided the linguist community. On one hand some academics, R2 and R7, defend that this is a symbol of the deterioration of the language and should not be encouraged. On the other hand, other experts defend its use as an evolution of the language, consequence of the material conditions.

Like in the BFTK, intergenerational transmission is one of the biggest worries between the interviewed experts. R4 highlighted the importance of transmission, elevating it to the category of policy: “family language policy is also an important factor, in the sense of how language is transmitted to the younger generation”. In that regard, R1 feared that “very young children already understand that school language is Dutch, and a better language”. This is aligned with what R2 admitted: “if you go to a school yard, then you do not hear Frisian anymore”. The lack of intergenerational transmission was mentioned by R3, R4, R7 and R8, because they had experienced it in their own families. Furthermore, R3 mentioned that, as a result of parents not teaching Frisian to their kids, “the language is moving towards a sort of dialect of Dutch with Frisian substrate”. The fact that Frisian not only competes with the majority language in the Netherlands, Dutch, but with the global language, English, was also pointed as one of the factors, mentioned by several of the interviewees, which could compromise the transmission of Frisian to the next generation.

With regards to the economic value of the Frisian language R1 highlighted the fact that managers of some shops and hotels in the big cities in Fryslân think that their workers should address their clients in Dutch, because doing it in Frisian would be perceived as rude. With regards to this logic, R3 commented that almost no one dares to ask for linguistic competences when hiring new employees. This situation might be pointed as a consequence of the stereotypes related to the Frisian language, mentioned above.

Contrary to the logic pointed out by R1 and R3, 50% of the interviewed experts, more concretely R4, R6, R7 and R8, emphasized the fact that “if you know Frisian, you have a job”. The lack of teachers was widely known to the interviewees, which they pointed out as one of the factors that provoked the alarming educational situation, was viewed as an opportunity for people to obtain a well-paid job. Moreover, the demand of professionals capable of writing properly in Frisian is that high that R6 admitted that Omrop Fryslân is organizing a minor in Frisian journalism, alongside NHL Stenden, due to the fact that the

journalists they are hiring do not have the basic linguistic competences nor the historical and cultural knowledge to develop their tasks.

### 4.3. Demography

The demographic dimension of EV encompasses the factors that are related to the number of speakers and their distribution amongst the territory, as well as the size of the ethnolinguistic group, both in absolute terms and, in comparison, to the relevant out-group, also including birth rates and migration figures (Kuipers-Zandberg & Kircher, 2020).

All the interviewees were aware of the population distribution patterns and percentages of speakers, but some of them had pointed out diverse factors that are shaping, or could reshape, the demographic situation in the province of Fryslân.

R2 reflected on the conundrum provoked by the arrival of refugees from Ukraine, and their relation to the minority language. The interviewee admitted that it is normal for them to learn Dutch language if they want to integrate to Dutch society, especially if they eventually move out from the province. Moreover, the expert added that there tends to be some comprehension of Frisian language and culture by the refugees: “[Ukrainian refugees] they know that their language is, more or less, similar to Russian, so they can understand that there are differences [between Dutch and Frisian] and we want to speak our language”.

R3, R6 and R8 emphasized on the impact of internal migration, from other provinces of The Netherlands. R6 highlighted that with this new wave the presence of English in the linguistic landscape has increased. R8 called attention on the fact that most internal migrants are willing to learn the language and the culture. Moreover, R3, besides seconding what R8 said, brought to the fore how a change in the current housing policy in The Netherlands would affect the demographic structure of the province: “we think that this would destroy our landscape and societal structure [...] 40.000 extra houses mean 100.000 extra people, creating a disbalance in the Frisian makeup and in the Frisian language”.

R4 highlighted brain drain as a challenge for the province: “A lot of young talent moves out of the province, because it is generally seen as the province that has less job opportunities and it is one of the poorer provinces of the Netherlands”. The interviewee underlined the lack of superior education institutions, besides NHL Stenden and the campus of the University of Grins, as the main factor that forces young students to leave Fryslân. I

might be worth noting that R3 encompassed this process to a bigger global phenomenon of concentration of population groups in big cities.

## **5. Discussion**

The results of the interviews do not contradict the data showed in the Theoretical Framework but add more information to the table. Regarding the demographic dimension of Ethnolinguistic Vitality of the Frisian language not much was added, besides some fear of a possible reshaping of the province's structure due to internal migration caused by a change in housing policy. In addition, it is worth mentioning that the interviewees were aware of the statistics regarding the population's proficiency in the region's language. The issue of brain drain and how Frisian has to compete with English, due to globalisation, were also topics mentioned by the interviewed experts.

The interviews show that the experts are positive on the efforts made by the government to protect the language, especially the role of the Provincial Government but also the centrals. The 2024-2028 Agreement on the Protection and Promotion of the Frisian Language and Culture was also well regarded by the experts, and its setting of tangible and measurable goals for 2030 and 2050 was highlighted as one its biggest virtues.

As highlighted in the consulted literature, education was pointed out as the main flaw of the institutional support towards the language. As in the Theoretical Framework, the level of teaching was questioned, but the main critique was the relentless of schools to apply the current legislation that mandates the presence of Frisian in the curriculums. Some interviewees blamed the schools' members as the cause for lack of application of the law in 75% of schools in Fryslân, but also the ineffectiveness of government inspections was pointed out. Furthermore, the stiffness of the Dutch educational system, that gives a notable degree of independence to schools, was pointed out as another cause. Moreover, the information provided by the consulted literature and the results of the interviews also coincide in mentioning lack of Frisian tracks in higher education as a problem.

Analysing the results of the research, two aspects could be highlighted because they were not mentioned in the consulted literature. The first one is the lack of history lessons in schools, which could be one of the causes of the lack of appreciation for the language that many Frisian speakers have. The ignorance towards the struggle of past Frisians, in periods like the Frisian Civil Rights Movement, could be a factor that hinders Frisian speakers to

have a sense of proudness regarding their language. Besides that, the second aspect not mentioned in the Theoretical Framework how multilingualism is viewed as a way to convince schools to incorporate Frisian lessons in their curriculums. It might be worth noting that the lack of presence of this approach in the Theoretical Framework is most likely due to the fact that it was not a topic that concerned the theoretical approach of the research, rather than a discovery of the practical chapter of the paper.

With regards to the institutional support, the right of addressing the judicial system in Frisian was nuanced by the results of the interviews. Even though it is a stated right since the 1950s, it seems to be a right only *de jure*, because of a lack of interpreters, which are badly paid, and some discriminatory practices done by some public workers Frisian speakers face difficulties with when trying to exercise their rights. This situation seems to be present in other stages of the public administration, like the tax office, and was also mentioned in the theoretical chapter.

The interviews show that Frisian language is key to the identity construction of Frisian people, but Frisian speakers do not give the language much value. As noted in the literature consulted, stereotypes play a role in the perception of its speakers, which are labelled as peasants and less intelligent. In addition, the interviewees also responded in concordance to the literature with regards to how Frisian speakers approach strangers: using Dutch instead of Frisian. As noted, this attitude tends to be attributed to the perception that many speakers have of being perceived as rude when using Frisian. Furthermore, this attitude is reproduced by business managers, which may result in discriminatory practices, some of them recorded in the consulted literature.

Concerning aspects tackled by the BFTK, the lack of presence of the Frisian language in the linguistic landscape is viewed as another aspect that enforces the idea that the language has to be relegated only to the private use. As mentioned, both by the bibliography and by the interviewees, the absence of Frisian in media and public labelling is a concerning issue that affects the preservation of the language. In addition, intergenerational transmission was also identified by the interviewees as a concerning issue for the long-term survival of the language.

As noted in the Theoretical Framework, the results of the interviews coincide stating that the private perception of Frisian is translated into the digital sphere, where the language is used in private interactions, but Dutch is used when addressing the public layer of the net.

In the digital context has emerged a new form of written Frisian, which is the result of the dialectical relation between the need for communication amongst Frisian speakers and their illiteracy in their tongue. Contrary to what was recorded in the literature review chapter, the respondents did not emphasize the Dutchification of this variant of Frisian. This new form of writing the language does not obey the grammatical norms established when the language was standardized but follows a phonetical logic. As a response to this, some experts use it as a sign that show the deterioration of the language, but others view it as an evolutionary step of Frisian.

Contrary to what was extracted from the consulted readings in the Theoretical Framework, the results of the analysis of the interviews show that some the experts indicated that knowing Frisian opens the door for having job opportunities, in a province that is one of the least wealthy of the Netherlands. The shortage of proficient professionals in Frisian has forced companies to have their own formation programs, that train individuals in competences that should have been provided by the education system. This seems to contradict the statements recorded in the bibliographic assessment that there are less job opportunities for Frisian speakers than some years ago but coincides with pointing out that those opportunities are only in Frisian speaking positions.

## **6. Conclusions**

As in the vast majority of social science research, this paper does not provide a tautological response to its research question. If one asks *Have the policies implemented to protect the West Frisian national minority's linguistic heritage been effective to their future goals of preservation and sustainability?* the short answer can be located in the grey areas between an affirmative and a negative answer.

As was acknowledged by many of the interviewees, if it was not for the state action the Frisian language in Fryslân would be in a worst position than where it is nowadays. Having stated that, the situation of the language showcases a notable failure of the Dutch welfare state, in its role of acting as benevolent body that guarantees the rights of all of its citizens. The current situation does not ensure the maximum wellbeing of hundreds of thousands of its citizens. Those citizens should be able to exert their right of using their mother tongue when addressing the state officials, as it has been stated legally since the 1950s. In this case, the state is not providing those citizens the optimal service it could offer.

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This failure seems not to be a result of a deliberate malignant policy of cultural annihilation, but the fruit of unawareness, carelessness, and indolence.

This unawareness, carelessness, and indolence have condemned 81% of the Frisian speakers to illiteracy in an official language of the state. With regards to that, one might point out that those statistics are more suited for a European country from the beginning of the XIXth century. The lack of enforcement of the current educational legislation -in force since the 1980s- that guarantees the presence of Frisian in schools until the second year of secondary school, has condemned the language to be relegated to the oral record. The statistics show that only 19% of the speakers are able to write in Frisian, which is a result of Frisian language being told only in 25% of the schools in the province because either the schools do not want to teach it, or they do not have proper teachers to do it. Showcasing the virtues multilingualism seems to be the strategy that advocates for the application of the current legality are using to turn the tides. This strategy is a result of the failure of policy, because policy is sustained by a carrot and stick logic. Here the stick (sanctions for those who do not respect the legality) has not been seen in 50 years, which has made the carrot (multilingualism) in.

When facing this situation, astute researchers or policymakers may ask themselves the question: “What would have happened if for 50 years 75% of the schools refused to teach mathematics, because they do not want to do so or because they do not have teachers who could do it?”. The impossibility of this scenario could be interpreted as a hint that shows how Frisian has been perceived by the authorities: as a sort of burden.

The subjacent state’s disregard for the language, the lack of presence in the linguistic landscape and the few options to study or use the language in higher education could be indicators of why the Frisian speakers tend to use their language in the private sphere and address unknown people in Fryslân using the majority language. The language is perceived as a peasant’s tongue, and using it indicates a smaller educational level because it is not present in high stances. This is translated on the Internet where, as a copy of the three-dimensional world, the same patterns apply. Frisian is used for interpersonal communication, but Dutch is used in the public digital sphere.

As a result of the dialectical encounter between the need for digital communication and the high rate of illiteracy in Frisian amongst Frisian speakers, a new variant has emerged. This variant has divided the experts’ opinions between those who deem it as a deterioration of



the language and those who indicate that it is an evolution of the language. Maybe there is a need for revising the grammatical constructions of Frisians. The objective of this paper is not to take a position in this ongoing debate. Having said that, this situation has to be mentioned because it is a clear indicator that the language is being used and that Frisian speakers want to use their language to express themselves. Moreover, one could touch on the fact that if the Frisian speakers would have been taught to write in their language, as it is legally required for 50 years, this situation would not have happened.

As showcased in the analysis of the results, the experts pointed out that there has been a hopeful shift on the central government's perception of the need for protection of the Frisian language with the signature of the Agreement for the Protection and Promotion of the Frisian Language and Culture (Bestjoersôfspraak Fryske Taal en Kultuer). This new agreement, that sets tangible and measurable goals for 2030 and 2050, could be the tool that breaks free most Frisian speakers from the contemptuous view they have on their mother tongue. The lack of knowledge they have on their history and linguistics, and the absence of tools at their disposal to gain this knowledge, makes difficult the creation of a bottom-up hegemonic movement that advocates for a change. Hence, this top-down approach seems to be the most suited to reverse the situation. It is worth adding that this type of policy has the difficulty of having to partly be enforced by a government whose members -at least the vast majority of them- are not biased by the axis of speaking a minority language, therefore they lack the first-person experience of what this means and. In this regard, more role models that use Frisian and more presence of the tongue in the linguistic landscape would help. Thankfully the agreement for 2024-2028 takes it into consideration.

## **7. Limitations and further research**

It is important to highlight the main limitations of this research. The first one recalls the fact that the researcher is a native speaker of another minority language, this could have affected how the matter has been approached due to similarities between cases that might have added an emotional layer on the research. Having cleared that, it is vital stating that this has not affected the objectivity of the approach on the topic nor the use of scientific methods for the investigation. Moreover, this shared bias, according to the intersectional theory, could have added a more comprehensive approach on the topic. It would also be a fallacy to question the reliability of the research due to the possible biases of the researchers, because, as pointed in the introduction, it is impossible to affirm absolute truths in social sciences and

for researchers to absolutely abstract themselves of their biases. Furthermore, as this research is partly based on the results of interviews, their biases might also be present in the results chapter.

The second limitation worth addressing is the fact that the researchers did not speak any of the official languages of The Netherlands, Dutch or Frisian. This situation, which forced the interviewees to do the interviews in English, could have provoked that some nuances would have been lost in translation. Furthermore, this also has limited the research regarding the access to primary and scientific sources, which the majority is in Dutch or Frisian. This fact has forced the investigation to rely on the few recent publications available in English.

Technical limitations also affected the research. Instead of the eight interviews analysed, ten interviews were conducted but in two of them the voice recording malfunctioned. Hence, two interviews could not be transcribed nor codified. Those interviews were with the former chairman of Frisian studies in the University of Grins and the professor that filled his position temporary. The perspective from professors of the highest education institution that offers Frisian studies, and its comparison with the perspective provided by members of the technical university NHL-Stenden, would have notably benefited this research.

The requirements and schedule of the research may also have affected the research. Because of them, members of prominent institutions or stakeholders in the Frisian landscape were left out of the investigation. Further research could complement this paper by interviewing members of Dingtid, Tumba, teachers in secondary and primary schools, public workers in municipalities and healthcare, members of the government of the Province of Fryslân, members of the YungFrisk initiative or politicians who are against the application of policies to protect foster the Frisian language.

It is mandatory to mention how the signature of the agreement for the protection of the Frisian language and culture 2024-2028 affected the outcome of the research. The possible policy recommendations of this paper have been severely altered by the signature of the covenant, which coincided with the latter stages of the research, that tackled many of the proposals that were going to be recommended, deeming them outdated. Besides the alteration that the agreement did to this particular research, it is a clear demonstration of the relevance of the topic object of study and its societal implications.

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Finally, it might be important to add that this researched paper made use of AI tools like a translation machine and APA referencing perks, as well as spelling and grammar control perks.

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## **Appendix A: Interview guide**

1. Presentation (description of my research and its aims, why I am interested in the matter...)
2. Tell me about yourself, what is your relationship with the Frisian language, both personally and professionally?
3. From your perspective, what is the status of the Frisian language, is it a vital language?
4. Which factors contribute most significantly to the status of the Frisian language within the community?
5. What are your thoughts on the economic value of the Frisian language?
6. Are there any specific challenges that you believe that need to be addressed to ensure the long-term survival of the language?
7. Have you perceived any shifts on the perception of Frisian language?
8. Have you experienced any type of discrimination for speaking the language?
9. Can you describe the public presence of Frisian in Fryslân?
10. Can you provide insights on the current governmental initiatives aimed at protecting the Frisian language (especially the agreement)?
11. Do you think that more autonomy for the province would improve or foster the use of the language?
12. Which is your opinion on the educational system, are its efforts enough for ensuring the survival of the language?
13. Welsh, which has a similar number of speakers than Frisian, is very present in university, within the country and abroad. Why do think this is not the case for Frisian?
14. Which are, in your opinion, the challenges posed by institutions, both private and public, with regards to the language (ask about ING)?
15. How would you describe the role that the language plays in the internet?
16. Have I forgotten to ask you anything that you feel like would be useful for my research?



**Appendix B: Coding book**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
<b>Institutional support</b>	<u>Education</u>	Impact of educational policies on language preservation	“Schools feel like they can get away with it because we have had an exemption policy from the provincial government for a long time”
	<u>Other public services</u>	Situations related to the usage of Frisian	“They have fought for the right to use it in court. For example, you can ask in court to be addressed in the language but it is still a problem here. It is still been laughed about because they will tell you: Well, we do not have anyone available, and you speak Dutch right? “
	<u>Authorities</u>	Perception that the respondents have with regards to governmental institutions.	“there has been a lot of ups and downs, and spirals going on. Politics is not very reliable”
	<u>Policies</u>	Perception that the respondents have with regards the current policies that encompass the protection of Frisian language	[the covenant] “It was a combined effort of different political parties, from the right to the left. That made me feel very positive, because it is not good if the support for a language only comes from one side of the political spectrum”.
<b>Status</b>	<u>Language &amp; identity</u>	How the Frisian language shapes individual and collective identities	“Frisians think that their language is very important”

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<u>Speaker's attitude</u>	Attitudes of speakers while using the language, encompassing motivations, perceptions and behaviours	“they always tend to change their language [...] lots of Frisians have some sort of ignorance towards the language”
<u>Stereotypes</u>	Derogatory situations faced by Frisian speakers because they used set language	“when I was little, and we went on holidays with my family, and I heard children speaking Dutch I always thought they were more intelligent. I give this as an example to show that a lot of Frisian people think that Frisian language is a language of simple farmers and that Dutch [...] is far better”
<u>Economic value</u>	Economic value given to the Frisian language by Frisians	“if you know Frisian, you have a job”
<u>Changes</u>	Any type of changes in the language, from its usage, composition or transmission	“the language is moving towards a sort of dialect of Dutch with Frisian substrate”.
<u>Linguistic landscape</u>	Public presence of the language	“I think it can definitely be improved when I think about the public domain. I feel like it mostly has a symbolic value than an instrumental value”
<u>Presence in the net</u>	How the Frisian language is used in the internet, both in the public sphere and in an intercommunicative layer	“speaking Frisian and texting in Dutch is usual in Frisian speaking families. [...] they feel like their level of Frisian

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			is not high enough to text each other in Frisian”.
<b>Demography</b>	<u>Demography</u>	Notable demographic aspects that have or may alter the relationship that Frisians have with their language	“A lot of young talent moves out of the province, because it is generally seen as the province that has less job opportunities and it is one of the poorer provinces of the Netherlands”

### **Appendix 3: Interviewee profiles**

#### **R1**

**Age:** Middle age

**Gender:** Male

**Level of education:** University education

**Nationality:** Dutch

**Workplace:** NHL-Stenden

**Occupation:** Associate professor in a research group called Multilingualism and Literacy

**Type of interview:** Videocall

**Date of interview:** 06/05/2024

#### **R2**

**Age:** Middle age

**Gender:** Male

**Level of education:** University education

**Nationality:** Dutch

**Workplace:** Tresoar and European Bureau for Lesser used Languages

**Occupation:** Librarian

**Type of interview:** Videocall

**Date of interview:** 07/05/2024

#### **R3**

**Age:** Middle age

**Gender:** Male

**Level of education:** University education

**Nationality:** Dutch

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**Workplace:** FNP

**Occupation:** Advisor

**Type of interview:** Videocall

**Date of interview:** 08/05/2024

**R4**

**Age:** Young adult

**Gender:** Female

**Level of education:** University education

**Nationality:** Dutch

**Workplace:** NHL-Stenden

**Occupation:** Researcher in a group called Multilingualism and Literacy

**Type of interview:** Videocall

**Date of interview:** 15/05/2024

**R5**

**Age:** Middle age

**Gender:** Female

**Level of education:** University education

**Nationality:** Dutch

**Workplace:** Fries Museum

**Occupation:** Curator

**Type of interview:** Videocall

**Date of interview:** 15/05/2024

**R6**

**Age:** Middle age

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**Gender:** Female

**Level of education:** University education

**Nationality:** Dutch

**Workplace:** Afûk

**Occupation:** head of the language promotion team

**Type of interview:** Videocall

**Date of interview:** 15/05/2024

### **R7**

**Age:** Middle age

**Gender:** Female

**Level of education:** University education

**Nationality:** Dutch

**Workplace:** Omrop Fryslân

**Occupation:** Linguistic policy advisor

**Type of interview:** Videocall

**Date of interview:** 16/05/2024

### **R8**

**Age:** Middle age

**Gender:** Female

**Level of education:** University education

**Nationality:** Dutch

**Workplace:** NHL-Stenden/Fryske Akademy

**Occupation:** a research group called Multilingualism and Literacy

**Type of interview:** Videocall

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**Date of interview:** 17/05/2024