

Beyond two infinitives: infinitival variation across Frisian

Frisian has two morphologically distinct infinitives: one ending in *-e* (pronounced [ə]) and one ending in *-en* (pronounced [n]). These forms occur in different syntactic contexts. For instance, the *-e* infinitive appears as the complement of modal verbs, as in (1), whereas the *-en* infinitive appears with perception verbs, as in (2).

- (1) Do moatst it ek sizz-**e** as it dy net sint.
you must it also say-INF_e if it you not please
'You need to say it too, if it doesn't suit you.'
- (2) Wy sjogge de kat in mûs fang-**en** achter yn 'e tún.
we see the cat a mouse catch-INF_{en} behind in the garden
'We see the cat catch a mouse in the backyard.'

In the first part of the talk, I investigate the Frisian infinitival system theoretically, starting from the description of Standard Frisian. In much of the literature (e.g. Visser 1989; Hoekstra 1997; Bergstra 2020), the distinction between *-e* and *-en* infinitives is analyzed as reflecting a noun–verb divide, with *-e* as a verbal infinitive and *-en* as a nominal one. I argue, however, that not all *-en* infinitives behave as this analysis would predict. This suggests that a simple two-way distinction does not fully capture how infinitives are used in Frisian. I compare the Frisian system to English and show that the distributions largely overlap. I then briefly sketch an alternative way of looking at the system and some of the questions that arise from it.

In the second part, I turn to empirical data to see whether the patterns described for Standard Frisian are reflected in speaker behavior. I first examine SAND (Barbiers et al. 2007) data to see to what extent the traditional distinction shows up in usage. I then present the design of a survey we are currently conducting, in which speakers record themselves producing sentences with infinitives in different syntactic contexts. The survey covers not only West Frisian, but also Sater Frisian and several varieties of North Frisian. Together, these data will help us get a clearer picture of how the infinitival system in Frisian works, and how possible changes might affect the theoretical analysis.

References

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