

**United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names**

Second session

New York, 3 – 7 May 2021

Item 12 of the provisional agenda *

**Geographical names as culture, heritage and identity, including
indigenous, minority and regional languages and multilingual issues**

Putting Frisian names on the map

Submitted by the Netherlands **

* GEGN.2/2021/1

** Prepared by Jasper Hogerwerf, Kadaster

Introduction

Dutch is the national language of the Netherlands. It has official status throughout the Kingdom of the Netherlands. In addition, there are several other recognized languages. Papiamentu (or Papiamentu) and English are formally used in the Caribbean parts of the Kingdom, while Low-Saxon and Limburgish are recognized as non-standardized regional languages, and Yiddish and Sinte Romani as non-territorial minority languages in the European part of the Kingdom. The Dutch Sign Language is formally recognized as well.

The largest minority language is (West) Frisian or *Frysk*, an official language in the province of Friesland (*Fryslân*). Frisian is a West Germanic language closely related to the Saterland Frisian and North Frisian languages spoken in Germany. The Frisian languages as a group are closer related to English than to Dutch or German. Frisian is spoken as a mother tongue by about 55% of the population in the province of Friesland, which translates to some 350,000 native speakers. In many rural areas a large majority speaks Frisian, while most cities have a Dutch-speaking majority. A standardized Frisian orthography was established in 1879 and reformed in 1945, 1980 and 2015.

There is a lot of attention in Friesland for geographical names as part of the linguistic and cultural identity of the province. Topographic maps and databases over the years reflect the development of the Frisian language and its role in society, and the importance of geographical names in this emancipatory process.

Early history

For a long period of time, the Netherlands were a union of largely independent states or provinces, who themselves were responsible for mapping their territory. In Friesland for example, at the end of the 17th century the provincial executive ordered the creation of the ‘Frisian Atlas’, also named ‘Schotanus Atlas’ after its author, Frisian surveyor and cartographer Bernardus Schotanus à Sterringa. Only with the centralization of government in the ‘French period’ (1795-1813) a national military surveying and mapping agency was set up. With the creation of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, these activities became part of the ministry of War. In 2004 the Topographic Survey of the Netherlands was transferred from the ministry of Defense to Kadaster and integrated in this latter agency.

The Schotanus Atlas and subsequent national topographic maps of Friesland show one constant element: they are all in Dutch and the geographical names used on the maps are – to present-day criteria – almost exclusively in Dutch as well. Only in the course of the 20th century the emancipation of the Frisian language starts to evolve and gradually changes the situation.

This does not mean however that Frisian names were completely absent on the maps. Some names are equal in Frisian and Dutch: *Akkrum*, *Britsum*, *Hallum*, *Mantgum*. Other name variants nowadays considered Dutch originate in Old Frisian, like the Dutch city name *Sneek*, from which the current New Frisian name *Snits* has developed. The distinction between Dutch and Frisian names is thus not that sharp.

First Frisian names

In the Netherlands, municipalities have the competence to establish place names and street names. The first place names consciously established in Frisian language, date back to the 1950s: *Nij Beets* (1950), *Koufurderrige* (1951), *De Tike* (1952) and *Wytgaard* (1957). All these four were ‘new’ villages, former hamlets that had no established name before. Three of them were already present on topographic maps with their Dutch names: *Nieuw Beets*, *Tieke* and *Wijtgaard*. Nevertheless, the municipality chose for the Frisian name as officially established name.

This may be the consequence of the principle, confirmed in 1953 by the Dutch government, that national government will use the Dutch name in case a municipality would establish both the Frisian and the Dutch name. The Frisian name would be used officially only when it is the only official name. In practice, the Dutch government rejects the idea that geographical features can have more than one

official name. This principle is still valid today: in the Key Register Addresses and Buildings (*Basisregistratie Adressen en Gebouwen*, BAG) introduced in 2009, municipalities can register names of populated places (*woonplaatsen*, literally ‘places of residence’) and streets (*openbare ruimtes*, literally ‘public spaces’) with one name only. Although the intention might have been to keep public administration simple, this would prove to be a crucial choice. In combination with the complete municipal autonomy to establish geographical names, this has led to a jumble of Frisian and Dutch official names in Friesland.

The Topographic Survey of the Netherlands at first did not follow the governmental decision of 1953. Still in 1968, an internal directive confirmed what had been previous practice: “With the exception of building names, Frisian toponyms (...) are translated to Dutch as much as possible.” When surveying the topography of a Frisian map sheet, topographers added to the ‘surveyed name’ a ‘translated name’ between brackets. Only these translated names appeared on the maps. To help with the translation work, a list of common Frisian generic terms had been added to the directive: *bosk* – *bos* (forest), *brêge* – *brug* (bridge), *buorren* – *buren* (neighborhood, town), etc. Some generic terms remained untranslated, according to the directive because no Dutch equivalent is available for them: *dobbe* (excavated pool), *finne* or *fenne* (wild meadow), *gea* (land), *pet* (excavated peat pool), *reed* (drive), *war* (low meadow), *wijd* (lake, in Frisian *wiid*), etc. This resulted in strange name constructions on maps, like *Geaweg* (Frisian: *Geawei*, only *wei* being translated), and some translations were not successful: the road along the east bank of the lake *Tjeukemeer* (Frisian: *Tsjûkemar*) was described on the topographic maps of 1960 and 1964 as *Marweg*, only to be corrected to *Meerweg* on the map of 1974.

Although the 1950s saw the Frisian language gaining legal recognition in education (1955) and the judiciary (1956) and Frisian being commonly used in municipal council meetings, it was not until the 1980s that large-scale replacements of official Dutch place names with official Frisian names were implemented. At that stage, street names in Frisian were already a familiar sight. In the intermediate period, 5 more village names in Frisian were established: *De Knipe* (1970), *Boksum* (1972), *It Heidenskip* (1979), *Ysbrechtum* (1984) and *Jonkerslân* (1988). *Boksum* also fits better to the current Dutch spelling rules than the former name *Boxum*.

Acceptance of the Frisian language

In the 1970s a number of Frisian municipalities started a preferential policy towards Frisian place names on town signs, placing them above the Dutch names without replacing the formal Dutch names. In the municipality of *Hemelumer Oldeferd* the Dutch names even disappeared from the signs. This led the Topographic Survey to reconsider its aforementioned directive. After all, if map users are increasingly confronted with only Frisian names ‘in the field’, a map with only Dutch names deviates more and more from reality and becomes less useful. Therefore, in 1979 a new internal directive was published prescribing the addition of Frisian names on the map, between brackets under the Dutch name, in case only the Frisian name was displayed on town signs. For bilingual signs it was still considered redundant to add the Frisian name on the map. Street names however were henceforth rendered on maps as they appeared on street signs and no longer translated to Dutch.

Town signs with only Frisian names were still rare in 1979. As a result, maps from the 1980s show Frisian names only for small hamlets. Back then, the map making process still took multiple years and map sheets were only updated and published in an 8- to 12-year interval. Since 2015, all topography of the Netherlands and all maps are updated on a yearly basis. The map sheet with *Hemelumer Oldeferd* was published in 1986, when the unilingual Frisian town signs had already been replaced by bilingual signs and according to the internal directive, there was no more need to render Frisian names on the map. In the large-scale municipal reform in Friesland of 1984, *Hemelumer Oldeferd* was dissolved and merged with neighboring municipalities. The new municipality of *Nijefurd* decided for bilingual town signs.



1970



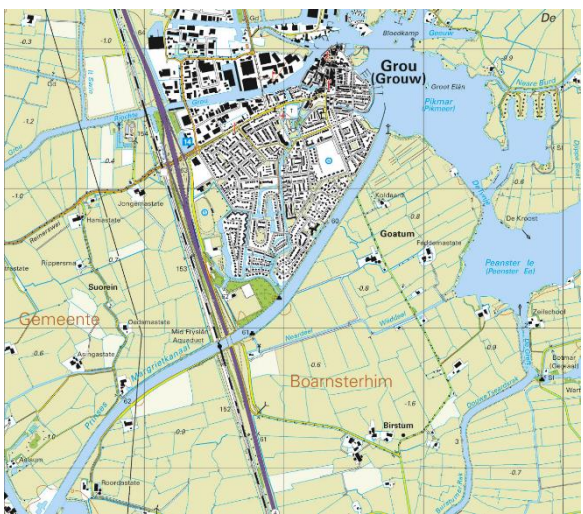
1982



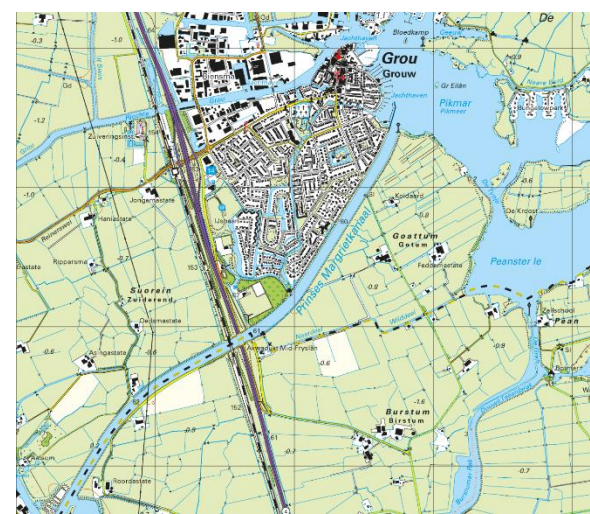
1993



2000



2010



2019

Figure 1: Detail of the topographic map 1:25,000 of the Frisian village of Grou – in Dutch: Grouw – in the map editions of 1970, 1982, 1993, 2000, 2010 and 2019.

Some of the municipalities chose to formally change their municipality's name to Frisian. In 1989 two of them, *Boarnsterhim* and *Tytsjerksteradiel*, decided to go a step further and formally replaced all Dutch village names in the municipality with Frisian names. This was the only way Frisian names could be used in official documents. In the next two decades, five more municipalities decided to 'Frisify' all village names: *Littenseradiel* (1993), *Ferwerderadiel* (1999), *Dantumadiel* and *Leeuwarderadeel* (2009), and *Menameradiel* (2010). Several other municipalities made intentions to do the same, but did not proceed.

The large-scale 'Frisifications' again made the Topographic Survey change its Frisian names policy, to rendering all names on the map as they appeared on signs. Maps from the early 1990s for the first time show some Frisian village names in primary position, with Dutch names between brackets below. In most areas, populated place names in Frisian were added between brackets under the Dutch names, as they appeared in second position on town signs.

Although this seems to be a logical choice now, at that time it was a rather revolutionary step. The prevailing opinion still was that standardization of geographical names meant registering only one name per geographic feature. In European 'nation states' like the Netherlands with a long tradition of one national language, it went without saying that all names were rendered in this national language. Ferjan Ormeling, who was to become professor in Cartography, broke this dogma in 1983 in his dissertation with a plea for the rendering on maps of names in minority languages, in areas where these minority languages are predominantly spoken. As a transitional measure, it would be desirable to display both the national and the minority language names.

We have to conclude that for Friesland – which officially changed its name to Fryslân in 1997 – these principles have only partially been put into practice. As only part of the municipalities in the Frisian language area has formally replaced the Dutch names with Frisian names, in many cases the Dutch names remain dominant. On topographic maps we got stuck in what was meant as a transitional situation: rendering of both names for each populated place.

Importance of expertise

Rendering names on the map based on the way they are displayed on place name signs has resulted in a rather opaque map image. Some municipalities diverted on their signs from the official status and gave Frisian names a preferential position over the official Dutch names, while other municipalities chose to display only Dutch or only Frisian names on the signs. In the polder *Het Bildt* in the northwest of Friesland, which was reclaimed and colonized in the early 16th century by people from South Holland, a special Dutch-Frisian mixed language or dialect called *Bildts* is spoken. Names in this language appeared on place name signs and were promptly registered as Frisian names in the topographic database and on the map. Lack of knowledge of the Frisian language also led to various language and spelling errors. All this caused repeated complaints from Frisian authorities and institutions about 'unusable' maps that did not properly reflect the official status of the names.

In 2008 Kadaster contacted the province of Friesland and the Frisian Academy (*Fryske Akademy*), to try improve its Frisian toponymic data. Arjen Versloot, then researcher at the Frisian Academy, now professor of Germanic Languages at the University of Amsterdam, provided a list of all official, Dutch and Frisian populated place names in the province. Dutch and Frisian place names were registered in TOP10NL according to this list. TOP10NL was introduced in 2008 as the digital topographic database that forms the basis of the Key Register Topography (*Basisregistratie Topografie*, BRT) and for all topographic maps of the Netherlands. On the maps, official place names were rendered in primary position, with the other name between brackets below. Following the introduction in 2007 of official water names in Frisian or local language in almost the entire province, all water names were re-registered in TOP10NL and on the maps as well, again according to a names list and a database provided by Arjen Versloot. This meant registration and rendering of official water names in local languages in *Het Bildt* and the southeastern *Stellingwerf* region. In the latter region traditionally a Low-Saxon language or dialect called *Stellingwerfs* is spoken, although nowadays most people speak Dutch.

A new round of large-scale municipal reforms from 2011 to 2019 has led to the merger of (parts of) municipalities with different language and name policies into new municipalities. Thanks to the ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages by the Netherlands in 1996, the ‘Frisification’ of place names cannot be reversed, as this treaty stipulates local government reforms may not affect the status or position of recognized minority languages. On the other hand, replacing the remaining Dutch place names with Frisian names does not seem to be a favorable option in most newly formed municipalities.

In September 2020 however, for the first time a newly formed municipality, *Noardeast-Fryslân* decided on a plan to replace all Dutch populated place names with Frisian names, if local communities agree to it. In the eastern part of the *Kollumerland* region bordering the province of Groningen, where traditionally a Low-Saxon language or dialect called *Kollumerlands* and nowadays mainly Dutch is spoken, some villages are expected to stick to their Dutch names. About half of the other official place names in the municipality will not be affected by the name change either, as they are in Frisian already or their Dutch and Frisian names are identical. The latter also applies to *Dokkum*, one of the 11 historical Frisian cities and the only one for which the Frisian name is identical to the Dutch name.

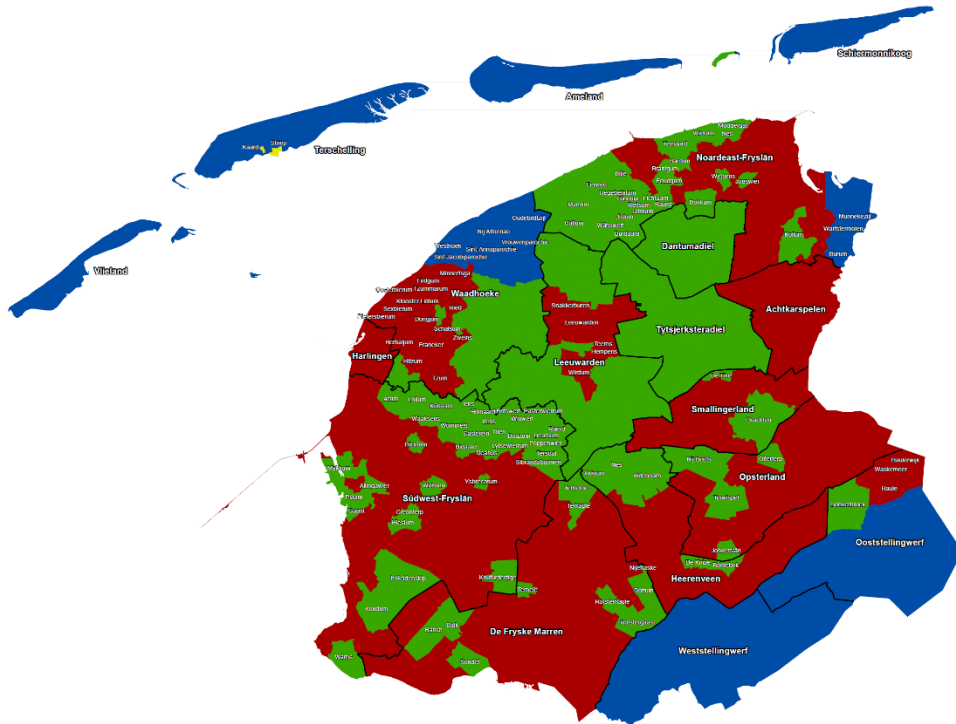
It remains to be seen if other municipalities will follow the example of *Noardeast-Fryslân* and still change the remaining Dutch names to Frisian names. In the meantime, the illogical and opaque status quo is perpetuated, in the official registration of populated places in the Key Register Addresses and Buildings (BAG) and on the topographic maps. Whether an official place name is Dutch or Frisian does not depend on whether Frisian is spoken in the city or village, nor on how many people speak Frisian or support the use of Frisian place names. It is only the result of a political decision made in the past by municipalities that in most cases do not exist anymore.

To provide map users with at least some insight which names are in Frisian or in Dutch, in 2015 Kadaster decided to render all place names in Frisian in italics on its maps, while at the same time removing all brackets around the names in second position. Since then, as a rule Frisian names in italics are rendered in primary position with Dutch names in smaller font size below. Even if no official name exists, as in the case of small hamlets or dispersed settlements. Only if the Dutch name is still the official name, this name is rendered in primary position, with the Frisian name in italics below. For water features in Friesland, with the exception of a few well-known lakes, only the official names are rendered, almost all of them being names in Frisian or a local language.

In the topographic database TOP10NL always both the Frisian, the Dutch and the official names are registered for populated places, water features and administrative areas (the municipalities and the province itself). Also for ‘geographical areas’ like regions, polders, forests, heath areas and field names, both the Frisian and the Dutch name will be registered. For street names and building names, languages are not specified as usually only one name is used and registered. This can be a Frisian name, a Dutch name or a name in a local language.

To specify where names in Frisian are registered and must be present in the Key Register Topography, for internal use a ‘Frisian language area’ has been determined. As already indicated, in some parts of the province Frisian is not the traditional local language. It is not logical to register and render Frisian names in those areas. This concerns the islands of *Vlieland* and *Ameland*, the polder *Het Bildt*, the *Stellingwerf* region south of the river *Kuunder* (name in *Stellingwerfs*) or *Tsjonger* (name in Frisian), and the eastern part of the *Kollumerland* region. On the island of *Schiermonnikoog* and on parts of *Terschelling*, some people still speak a distinct Frisian island dialect. Names in these dialects are registered only if they are actively used on signs or maps, for example as field names on *Terschelling*. The Frisian standard language is not used on the islands. In the remaining part of the province, all Frisian names for populated places, waters and area features are registered and rendered on maps. In some cases, local Frisian dialect names have been formally established as Frisian names, such as *De Westereen* (informal Standard Frisian: *De Westerein*; Dutch: *Zwaagwesteinde*) and *Hylpen* (informal Standard Frisian: *Hynljippen*; Dutch: *Hindelopen*).

Place names



Water names

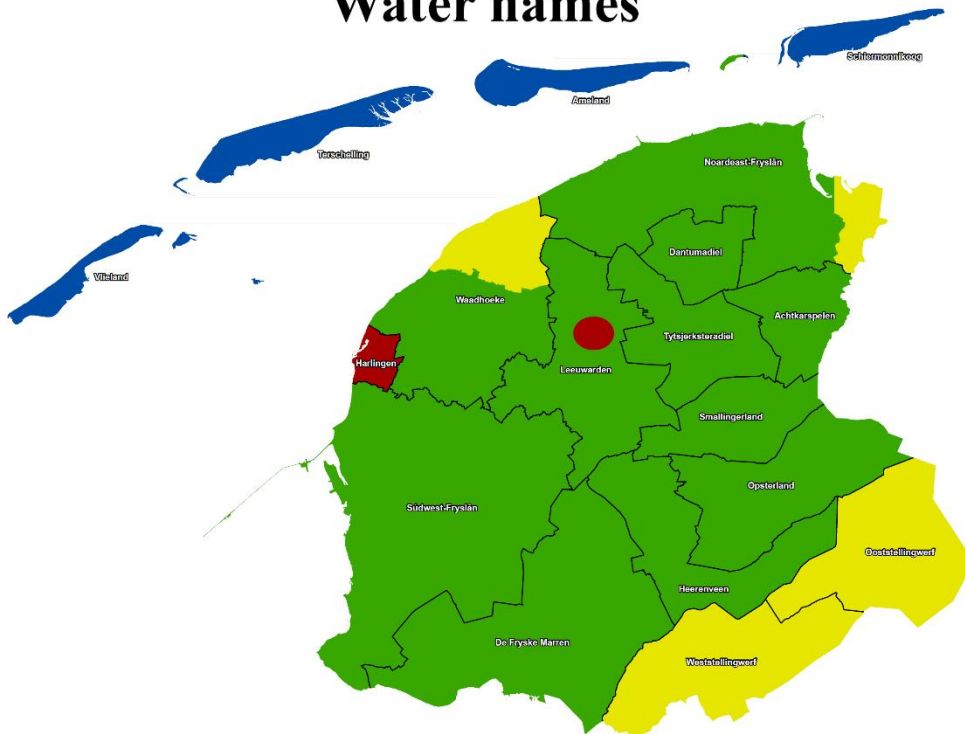


Figure 2: Status of Frisian names and registration of place names and water names in Friesland in the Key Register Topography (BRT). Green = Frisian names are official, Frisian and Dutch names are registered; Yellow = local language or dialect names are official, official and Dutch names are registered; Red = Dutch names are official, Frisian and Dutch names are registered; Blue = Dutch names are official, only Dutch names are registered. The green and red areas on the first map together with the islands of Schiermonnikoog and (parts of) Terschelling form the Frisian language area.

In *Opende* and *De Wilp*, villages in the province of Groningen on the border with Friesland, Frisian is traditionally spoken but not recognized as an official language or minority language. Recognition of Frisian is limited to the province of Friesland. The respective Frisian names of these villages, *De Peen* or *De Grinzer Pein*, and *De Wylp* are therefore not registered. The same applies to Frisian exonyms of cities, villages and other topographic features in other parts of the Netherlands.

The Key Register Addresses and Buildings (BAG) is the main source for official names of streets and populated places in the Key Register Topography (BRT). Additionally, bilingual Dutch-Frisian name lists and databases are used for all other place names and water names in Friesland. Thematic external data sources help to update specific feature types and provide information on the names of these features. Kadaster cooperates with local historical societies in the Netherlands to collect and update toponymic information in the Key Register Topography. The correct rendering of Frisian names is verified by linguists of the Frisian Academy and Arjen Versloot.

Names standardization as a solution

Despite all efforts to register and display geographical names in Friesland as correct as possible, the situation remains complicated. More uniformity in the naming policy both within and between municipalities, can be achieved by standardizing geographical names on a provincial and national level. Therefore governments on various levels should coordinate their methods and procedures, and set up mutually agreed rules and regulations for the registration of geographical names. Although UNGEGN recommended and urged for the national standardization of names already in its first UN resolutions of 1967, the Netherlands still have not established a national names authority. Naming policies are not coordinated between governmental organizations.

The complicated variation in inter- and intra-municipal policies regarding the use of Frisian and Dutch names as official place names, can be eliminated by creating the possibility to register multiple names for one populated place or public space in the Key Register Addresses and Buildings (BAG). When both the Frisian and the Dutch name can be registered as official name of a populated place, no sensitive choice between them has to be made anymore. This would match the bilingual character of the province: Dutch and Frisian are official languages since 1995 (formalized in 2014 with the Use of Frisian Act) and both languages are spoken by a large part of the Frisian population. The sometimes heated local debates and discussions on ‘Frisification’ would finally become a thing of the past, although two official names in some cases might create new discussions on which name should be prioritized.

The long history and complexity in the registration of Frisian names on topographic maps and in topographic databases demonstrate the importance of both geographical and linguistic knowledge and expertise, as well as insight in the local situation and the role of geographical names as part of the cultural heritage of a country or region. In that respect, Frisian names remain a point of attention for Kadaster.

Points for discussion

The Group of Experts is invited to:

1. Take note of the development and complicated situation of Frisian names in the Netherlands;
2. Take note of the proposed standardization solutions as described in the report;
3. Comment and provide input on these solutions.