1. Introduction

1.1 Objectives

This comparative essay primarily investigates the question of why under similar circumstances there is a very active ethnic minority representation in Sleswick consisting of Danes and Frisians while there is nothing comparable in the Lower Rhine (-definition is given in chapter 8) area representing the Dutch speaking minority when Dutch was the official language there until 1815.

This essay not only attempts to analyse similarities and differences in the circumstances of these border areas, it also tries to define the ethnic and linguistic groups, their interests and attitudes towards their native culture and languages, their rulers and, to a certain extent, considers re-classifying them when alternative views are available. It tries to describe the sometimes devastating effects of nationalism, in particular what German nationalism had on the two areas of South Sleswick and the Lower Rhine, which were originally not “German” in modern understanding.

This essay also attempts to rectify stereotypical views often present in Denmark and in The Netherlands with regard to the modern Federal Republic of Germany. All too often Germany and German is described as being of ancient origin. The modern language called “German” has nevertheless an ancient origin but, as will be demonstrated, its classification, use, association and the name given to it is of a rather recent origin.

Attention will be given to the Low Saxon language (also called Low German or “Plattdütsch”): on the one hand it was used to diminish the Danish influence in Sleswick, on the other it was itself discriminated by not being treated as a language in its own right. Moreover, the Low Saxon related Dutch language was effectively classified as “Low German” in the Low Rhine by the Prussian authorities which, in turn, led to the de facto denial of any official status towards Dutch and discrimination of the Dutch language as a whole by the Prussian (and later German) authorities. But there are also many misconceptions when looking at the linguistic history of Sleswick, in particular the situation in the city of Flensborg. Both German and Danish historians often overlook the fact that the daily language in Flensborg and the south of Sleswick was neither Danish nor standard German but Low Saxon. Because it was ignored or denied that Low Saxon forms a language in its own rights these areas were simply categorised as German speaking when they weren’t which had severe consequences during the era of nationalism in the 19th century. Therefore, this essay aims to vindicate Low Saxon as a language in its own rights, with its own culture and history and as a cognate language of Dutch just as much as Danish, Swedish and Norwegian are all closely related but are languages in their own right.

Another focus will be on the limit of the Low Saxon expansion into Sleswick and the Dano-Scandinavian colonisation as far south as Holsten.

The investigations of the Lower Rhine will focus on the historical relation towards the neighbouring Dutch and Belgian regions of Limburg, - how much it originally formed a unit with them, what led to the division, if autonomy or self-determination movements existed, and to what extent they succeeded or failed.

In order to be able to compare the common heritage, struggles and developments of the Lower Rhine and Limburg, a historical description is integrated into a common epilogue. A deeper investigation is done into the episode of the Rhenish separatist movement in the
1920’s and how much this constituted an ethnic and / or regionalist movement similar to other such movements in Sleswick.

As a fundament a digression into the definition and history of nationalism is set at the beginning of the essay. The general development of nationalism is mirrored against German nationalism because it left a significant and decisive mark on both, Sleswick and the Lower Rhine and this also included a deeper look into the meaning of the term “Deutsch” (German) and the essay is also aimed at demystifying the apparent ancientness of the German national state.

To get a clearer picture of the current situation of South Sleswick and the Lower Rhine, a deeper investigation into the linguistic situation and history appeared necessary in order to be able to create an overview and to eventually formulate policies to improve the situation in the context of European integration.

Lastly the question is raised of how far Dutch, Lower Franconian and other Franconian dialects / languages can or should be recognised and given official character as e.g. through the ‘European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages’ and in the ‘European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities’ in the respective areas of North Rhine-Westphalia. In particular, the modern district of Cleves formed an integral part of the Dutch speaking areas and one of the first documents of written Dutch, the “Wachtendonkse Psalmen” were written at the Lower Rhine and thus, form an important part of Dutch history.

However, this essay does not aim to promote separatism, nationalism or any kind of chauvinism whether it comes from the majority towards the minority or vice versa. The Federal Republic of Germany offers a great level of self-determination towards its federal states; culture and education are federal state affairs and also includes recognition of local languages and its promotion and its use for education, just as it has been adopted by the state of Sleswick-Holstein in recent years.

This would also be possible for North Rhine-Westphalia. Spending my first schooling years in the Lower Rhine, I was astounded when the first geography lessons were introduced and the atlas handed out to us read: “Our Land: North Rhine-Westphalia”. I had expected it to say “Germany” but it did not, so I looked through the atlas and the more I learned about North Rhine-Westphalia, the more I identified with it and with it the idea of federalism and regionalism. This also motivated me to further investigate local history and through this I also discovered the common history and culture the Lower Rhine shares with the provinces of Limburg in the Netherlands and Belgium as well as the Eupen-Malmedy region in Belgium. Having a family background which is associated to the Danish and Frisian minority in Sleswick-Holsten, I quickly realised the similarities to the situation of the Lower Rhine but also the lack of awareness and organisations to maintain and promote the distinctive Lower Franconian-Dutch heritage.

From a legislative view, there would be nothing which could stop the Lower Rhine from receiving a similar status as South Sleswick in regard to Lower Franconian and Dutch. The general attitude of the state-constitutions (Länderverfassungen), the German General Law (Grundgesetz) and also the European institutions have been set up to avoid any kind of re-emergence of extreme nationalism, discrimination, prejudice and uniformism. Thus, it appears that every region, every minority, and every ethnic group can claim its rights in reference to the legislation at various levels if the population so wish to do so. The final word rests with the people of the Lower Rhine if they want recognition of their local languages and dialects.
There are, of course, dangers when raising such demands as can be seen during the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Such kind of regionalism and nationalism, which resembled the era of nationalism in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20st century, has only created new borders, new restrictions, divisions and separatism and eventually violent conflicts, something which Western Europe appears to have surpassed with European integration and the Schengen agreement. Therefore this essay endeavours for a Europe of tolerance, free from prejudice and discrimination and to rectify dividing borders erected during the age of nationalism not by creating new ones or moving them but by further dismantling them. The aim should not be to replace one official language with another but instead to learn the language of the neighbours, in particular where the local heritage shares traditions and local dialects with the cross border regions. Eventually, this could also serve as a model for global integration without the loss of the many different cultures and languages globally inherited.

Most of Eastern, Central and Western Europe have been re-united since the fall of the iron curtain in 1989 and the Schengen agreement was extended as far east as the Baltic States. At the same time a fence has been erected by the European Union between the Baltic States and Russia (or respectively Belarus) where free travel used to be possible when all were part of the Soviet Union. It thus appears the iron curtain was not removed but simply pushed further east. India, Israel and the USA are erecting fences, sometimes even electric ones, to guard their territory and often they separate ethnic groups and families which previously could cross the border freely at any time and any place to meet their kin on the other side of the national border (as is the case between India and Myanmar), thus effectively re-creating iron curtains. It maybe that while the abolishment of the iron curtain in Europe and the establishment of the Schengen agreement constituted great advances in free travel and cross border re-integration, the new iron curtains erected since have outweighed this progress. Consequently, this essay also aims to show the advantages of abolishing borders and re-integrating border areas with each other instead of separating them further.

Initiatives such as the recently announced objective of the Saarland federal state government to make the Saarland effectively bilingual German-French (Flensburg Avis, article from 24th January 2014, “Saarland vil være tosproget”, http://www.fla.de/artikel/Saarland-vil-vaere-tosproget-1615a.html ) point to the right direction. Giving the Dutch language an official status in the Lower Rhine region will certainly help to implement such initiatives along the German-Dutch borders and could serve as an example for other internal border areas in Europe and globally.

An ever increasing global economy, division of labour and automatisation could create more free time and wealth which, in turn, could lead to tourism becoming an ever increasing source of income. The touristic attractiveness of any region or country will certainly be enhanced by the existence of more cultures instead of only one and “uniformism”. In this context, recognition and support of ethnic and linguistic groups can only be to the benefit of the encompassing state, nation, federation or confederation, in whichever form.

A word has to be said about the East Prussian philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder whose idea of developing the values of the renaissance and the French revolution into a pluralistic global vision formed a framework for this comparative essay. German nationalists often saw in Herder the theoretical creator of the German national state. They overlooked the fact that Herder had a global ambition and viewed national states as stepping stones towards a peaceful, liberal, pluralistic and equalitarian Europe and eventually a global order. Herder demanded “that nations peacefully cooperate and compete in trade and intellectual endeavours for their mutual benefit”; and he pleas that they should indeed
“actively work to help each other”. Herder did not seek to “seal off nations from each other's influence or to keep them static” and he insisted that there must be no “Favoritenvolk”(favourites); he “recognises and welcomes the facts of normal inter-linguistic and intercultural exchange, and of linguistic-cultural development”. Nor did his commitment to national groupings “involve a centralised or militaristic state” and he strongly advocated the disappearance of such a state and its replacement by loosely federated local governments with minimal instruments of force (Forster, Michael, "Johann Gottfried von Herder", The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), 9. Political Philosophy, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/herder/). As such, his pluralistic pacifist cosmopolitanism could form an interesting alternative to homogenising forms of cosmopolitanism. In this spirit, this essay wants to make a case for the regional and minority groups on the Danish-German and the Dutch-German borderland.

In writing this and not becoming over ambitious, I will have to set a scope in order to define and frame the area of investigation and thus cannot avoid creating virtual borders. And however much one might view him or herself as a world citizen he or she will eventually be asked somewhere by someone: “Where are you from?”. I hope that this essay may also inspire one to investigate more thoroughly where we are from and provide alternatives to the common response “Germany”, “The Netherlands” or “Denmark”, etc.

The investigations are effectively divided into three main chapters for each respective region:

From the beginning until the French revolution in 1789
From 1789 until 1945
From 1945 until today

Each period reflects the general developments in both the Sleswick border region and the Lower Rhine – Limburg border region:

Until 1789 both regions effectively formed one unit and differences only appear transitionally and gradually, not abrupt.

With the French revolution the age of nationalism also began which lead to division and alienation in the regions once a border was created between them.

Eventually, WWII brought the age of nationalism in Western Europe to an effective end and driven by the European integration process the border regions have the opportunity to slowly grow together again. But, as will be shown, the Sleswick border region is striving much more actively for “re-integration” than the Lower Rhine and Limburg appear to do.

Minor discoveries which became apparent during the investigations also appear in the essay such as the existence of Dano-Scandinavian place names south of the Eider in Holsten (chapter 4.1.) or the on-going High-German consonant shift in the area around Neuss at the Lower Rhine until recently (chapter 11.3).

1.2. Limitations and Weaknesses

The essay is focussing primarily on the two regions of South Sleswick and the Lower Rhine although occasionally a wider geographical context has to be taken in account such as the
whole of Sleswick or the Rhineland in order to receive a clearer picture and be able to
describe the developments. Investigating the historic and linguistic developments alongside
the whole German-Dutch border would have been interesting but had certainly been too
ambitions for the capacity and resources of the author. Neither was the author able to conduct
any empirical studies in the respective regions for the same reason. A wide range of
investigations have been conducted for this essay such as the history of nationalism, the term
“Dutch” or the extend of Dano-Scandinavian place names into Holsten but appear necessary
to clarify the historic and linguistic developments and to demonstrate the objectives of the
essay.

1.3. Terminology and Language of the Essay

After deliberating whether to write the essay in either Danish, German or Dutch I eventually
chose to write it in English in an attempt to appear impartial and neutral, also linguistically.
The author has to admit that the preferred option would have been to write in Low Saxon but
this would probably hamper the distribution of the essay since the knowledge of Low Saxon is
rather limited these days.

Furthermore, I have decided to use the historical English term “Sleswick” for this essay
instead of the currently more common German term “Schleswig” or the Danish term
“Slesvig”. This appears to be more politically neutral. The historical term “Holsten” is used
instead of “Holstein” since the “i” is derived through a German misinterpretation of the term
Holsten. I have also decided to use the term Low Saxon instead of the more commonly used
Low German because it manifests the renewed status of being a language in its own right and
it also appears more neutral considering its status in the Netherlands where it is indeed
described as Low Saxon only.

Another problem occurred around the term “Dutch” which can confuse readers since it is not
only exclusively used to describe the contemporary official language of The Netherlands but
can also apply to what is nowadays described as “German” as, e.g., in “Pennsylvania
Dutch”. Therefore I have elected to use the term “Netherlandic” in certain circumstances to
make clear what language is exactly meant in certain situations.

Finally, I used the term “Dano-Scandinavian” in certain circumstances because originally the
term Danish was also applied in a wider context than contemporary and there is some
archaeological evidence that some of the settlers in Sleswick had their origins in regions
which are nowadays a part of Sweden.

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