11. Summary

Both South Sleswick and the Lower Rhine appear comparable in their origins and relation to German culture and they share a similar fate of becoming “Germanised” (in the sense of adopting the standard (High-)German language for official purposes and subsequently as cultural language) which may lead to the almost entire disappearance of the original local languages (Southern Jutish, Low Saxon, Frisian, Lower Franconian-Dutch). There are also historical parallels between the regions but there are also significant differences which led to different developments.

Germanisation of the Lower Rhine region started with the demise of the Rhine-Maas written standard and brought Standard German as official and cultural language in the 16th century. However, substantial parts of the northern Lower Rhine retained Lower Franconian in the form of standard Dutch as official language such as the Duchy of Cleves and the Geldrian enclaves called “Upper Quarter”. After the Geldrian Upper Quarter was allocated to Prussia at the Vienna congress of 1815 serious Germanisation was implemented as shortly afterwards the use of Dutch was “discouraged” by the Prussian authorities. Lower Rhine Dutch together with Low Saxon was viewed as a “Low German” and subsequently experienced the same discrimination and fate (as Low Saxon). This resulted in the de-facto end of Dutch for official, religious and education purposes and the exclusive use of standard German for the whole Lower Rhine.

The process of Germanisation in South Sleswick started with the demise of the Low Saxon language in the 16th century, but from a Danish perception the start of the Germanisation is often correlated to the moment when Danish was replaced by Low Saxon for official use in the 15th century. The adoption of Low Saxon is often viewed as the beginning of German integration. However it has to be taken into account that in the 15th century no German State existed (in the modern sense, the Holy Roman Empire is not to be considered as a predecessor as shown in chapter 2.) and Low Saxon has to be viewed as a language in its own right closer related to modern Dutch than to modern standard German as shown in chapter 11.1. Thus, it is correct that the demise of Danish started with the adoption of Low Saxon in the 15th century but the view that Germanisation started with the adoption of Low Saxon in Sleswick has to be rejected. Besides, Northern Sleswick adopted the Danish bible translation of 1550 and Danish retained its status as religious and educational language until 1867 while South Sleswick adopted Luther’s Standard German original bible translation of 1522 instead of Bugenhagen’s Low Saxon translation of 1533 and this marked the serious beginning of the adoption of standard German as official language and, thus, Germanisation. But the commonly spoken languages remained still either Southern Jutish, Frisian or Low Saxon in South Sleswick and the Lower Franconian dialects in the Lower Rhine until at least WWII and both South Sleswick and the Lower Rhine retained their multilingual character until then.

Thus a similarity between Sleswick and the Lower Rhine appears: The Northern parts of the Lower Rhine and Sleswick retained respectively Dutch and Danish as church and subsequently
educational language while the Southern parts adopted standard German in the form of Luther’s bible translation while the spoken languages were still Lower Franconian (thus Dutch) and Southern Jutish (thus Danish) in character.

In the wake of the Renaissance and the French revolution events took a different course in South Sleswick and the Lower Rhine. By then both were substantially exposed to Germanisation but nevertheless they went on different paths:

1. Until 1867 South Sleswick never formed part of a German State or the Holy Roman Empire. It was ruled over by the King of Denmark who at the same time was the Duke of Sleswick. In contrast the Lower Rhine had always formed part of the Holy Roman Empire (except from the Geldrian Upper Quarter until 1815) while large parts were already ruled by Prussia even before the French rule over the Lower Rhine. After Napoleon’s defeat, the area as a whole was integrated into the Prussian State as part of the Rhine Province as acknowledged by the Vienna congress in 1815. In South Sleswick this integration only took place after the Danish defeat in 1864 and the integration of Sleswick as part of the Prussian province Sleswick-Holsten in 1867.

2. In contrast to South Sleswick, the religion of the Lower Rhine was different to the one of the ruling Prussian State which led to a different emphasis when attempting to challenge the Prussian rule.

3. In comparison to the situation in Sleswick, the demands and movements appear more muted and marginal and the general public, whether in the Lower Rhine/Limburg or the Rhineland as a whole, appear more indifferent. A reason for the lack of vociferous movements demanding liberal, equalitarian, regional or linguistic rights (e.g. to maintain Dutch) may be due to the prolonged poverty of the region after being a major battlefield during the 80 year Dutch War of Independence which ended in 1648. The muted participation of Limburg in the Belgian uprising is a good example of having a “lethargic” attitude of being “exposed to superior forces anyway” and of staying out of trouble otherwise the poverty might worsen. This lethargy and general distrust towards any external powers may have prevented Limburg and the Lower Rhine from all too much enthusiasm for the Belgian Revolution, German nationalism or the Rhenish Republic, as the general attitude appears to be one of indifference. This is in contrast to Sleswick which, although involved in wars and conflict, was never as severely affected by the 30 year war ending in 1648 and it therefore remained more prosperous. In addition, trade across the North Sea and Baltic Sea added additional wealth and may have also contributed to making demands towards the absolutist authorities.

4. For a long period ethnicity was not an issue in the Lower Rhine region since Dutch (as a form of the local Lower Franconian) was an official language throughout the Lower Rhine Duchies of Cleves and Gelderen until it was subtly discriminated against and abandoned in the middle of the 19th century. 

In South Sleswick, Danish was gradually withdrawn as an administrative language in the 15th century, and Low Saxon lost its official status in the 16th century. Danish finally lost it’s
remaining status as religious and educational language by the end of the 19th century and Frisian never had an official status. Therefore the question of language and with it of ethnicity was much earlier an issue in Sleswick than it was in the Lower Rhine. In addition, ethnicity in the Lower Rhine was also characterised by the catholic religion while the Prussian State was dominated by a protestant Lutheran administration. In South Sleswick the religion of the Danes, Sleswick-Holsteners and Frisians was Lutheran-Protestant and therefore ethnicity was characterised mainly by language.

Nevertheless, motivated mainly through external events such as the French revolution and the ideas of the Renaissance, movements eventually appeared both in South Sleswick and the Lower Rhine which along with calls for general participation, equality and the rule of law, also demanded autonomy for the areas, although in the larger context, respectively for the Rhineland and Sleswick-Holsten.

As described in chapter 2., two forms of nationalism subsequently appeared: ‘territorial-political’ and ‘romantic-ethnic’. Both elements were also present in the autonomous and separatist movements in the Rhineland/Lower Rhine and the autonomous and ethnic movements in South Sleswick. But the romantic-ethnic nationalistic ambitions were certainly much more visible and predominant in South Sleswick than in the Lower Rhine. In fact, the ethnic-romantic ambitions in the Lower Rhine were only present in the little splinter group around Joseph Smeets and referred to Rhine-Franconians and not Netherlandic sentiments as would at least have been expected in the northern part of the Lower Rhine. But both the Rhenish Autonomy Movement and the Sleswick-Holsten (autonomy) movement were foremost regional movements aiming at achieving as much autonomy and sovereignty in a liberal-democratic context as possible and, ironically, both were failing until these aims were finally enforced upon the defeated Germany by the British occupiers in 1946. The Danish and Frisian movements in South Sleswick and the activists in the Rhenish Republican People’s Party (RhRVP) around Joseph Smeets in the Rhineland referred to ethnic-romantic ideas not necessarily excluding territorial-political ambitions. But whereas the RhRVP had not achieved any notable impact, the Danes and Frisians in South Sleswick achieved some success culminating in the recognition by the new Sleswick-Holsten constitution in 1990 and part III of the European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages and the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995).

But while the Rhenish Autonomy Movement also included strong Catholic sentiments, the Sleswick-Holsten Movement was initially a purely political-liberal one were even ethnicity played only a minor role. A strong pro-German nationalistic element appeared later in the Sleswick-Holsten movement which then almost encased the movement’s original ambitions. In contrast to South Sleswick, the separatist and autonomous movements in the Rhineland began to resemble much rather the Belgian movements leading to Belgian independence from the
Protestant dominated Netherlands. In South Sleswick, religion was never a matter of suspicion or subversiveness since Danes, Sleswick-Holsteners, Frisians and Prussians were all Lutheran-Protestant, as mentioned above. The strong attachment and association to catholicism in the Lower Rhine may also be the reason why this was given priority above linguistic issues, while the language question became eventually dominant in Sleswick.

But the effects of the Renaissance and the French revolution brought about another similarity to the regions, here between the (Netherlandic) Duchies of Luxembourg and Limburg on the one hand and the Duchy of Holsten on the other. Both became a part of the German Federation after 1815 while being ruled by a monarch residing outside the German Federation, respectively the King of the Netherlands and the King of Denmark. For both the odd situation appeared being a part of respectively the Netherlandic Kingdom and the Danish Commonwealth whose laws they had to follow while simultaneously having to abide to the laws of the German Federation. This similarity then disappeared during the 1860 with Luxembourg becoming independent and Limburg becoming fully integrated into the Netherlands while Holsten became fully integrated into Prussia and subsequently the German Empire. Had the Danish King Christian IX been able to suspend or postpone applying the new Danish constitution to Sleswick in 1863, Sleswick and Holsten could have seen a similar development as Limburg and Luxembourg.

Finally, the division of Sleswick into Northern and Southern after the plebiscite in 1920 with Northern Sleswick becoming a fully integrated part of the Danish Kingdom while the Southern part remained a part of Prussia and the German Empire created a situation similar to the one between Limburg and the Lower Rhine after 1867 with Limburg departing from the German Federation and becoming fully integrated into the Netherlands while the Lower Rhine remained in the German Federation and became a part of the subsequent German Empire.

11.1. Is there a case for applying the ERMTS part III and/or part II for the Lower Rhine in regard to Dutch and Lower Franconian?

In general, the Lower Rhine appears in its composition, its historic relations and present position in relation to Dutch but also in the larger context of the Rhineland to the other neighbouring states Belgium and Luxembourg to be comparable to the South Sleswick region. But it lacks the facilities like Danish schools, Danish library, Danish newspaper available to the Danes, Frisians and Low Saxons in Sleswick. It would thus be consequent if the states of North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate would, in accordance to their cultural sovereignty, consider recognising Dutch, Lower Franconian, Ripuarish-Franconian and Mosel-Franconian as minority or regional languages. Not only would this eventually fulfill old demands already raised by previous separatist movements but also help European integration since the Franconian languages are also spoken in respectively Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands.
In particular in the modern districts of Cleves and Wesel, Dutch used to have an official role until the 1840s and the local dialects are still Dutch in character. In the districts of Heinsberg, Neuss, Viersen and the cities of Mönchengladbach and Krefeld Lower Franconian would certainly qualify for recognition of part II as is the case for Limburgish in the Netherlandic province Limburg. Strictly speaking, this area could linguistically also be considered for Dutch but the Southern Lower Franconian dialects spoken there have already developed a certain distance to standard Dutch in its current form thus a treatment similar to the one of Southern Lower Franconian “Limburgs” in the Netherlands appears more adequate. Whether such a recognition can be extended to the Lower Franconian speaking areas on the East Bank of the Rhine is more difficult to assess since a separate identity appears somewhat less apparent.

This separate identity is on the other hand certainly existing in the remainder of the former Prussian Rhine province’s West Bank of the Rhine. The Ripuarian-Franconian speaking municipalities of Kerkrade, Simpelveld and Vaals in The Netherlands have been categorised as Limburgish and have therefore received recognition through part II of the ERMTS. In addition, Mosel-Franconian (Luxembourgish) has an official status in Luxembourg as the national language. Taking this into account there certainly would be a case for recognition of Ripuarian-Franconian and Mosel-Franconian, in North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate according to part II of the ERMTS. Besides the linguistic justification, there also exists a separate identity and culture, as has been shown by the separatist Rhenish activism from 1798 until 1933. With the establishment of the federal states of Northrhine-Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate much of the political demands have now been achieved and it would be consequent if the respective federal states also recognised Dutch, Limburgish-Lower Franconian, Ripuarish-Franconian and Mosel-Franconian as minority or regional languages according to part III or part II of the ERMTS. Since ethnic Rhine-Franconian sentiments were uttered by the RhRVP in the 1920s and attempts were made to receive international recognition for a separate Rhenish identity in contrast to a German one (as Schlemmer has demonstrated) even consideration of part III is justified. But it is, of course, disputable, how much the RhRVP reflected popular opinion. Schlemmer also recognised a different perception in the Lower Rhine, particularly in the far northern districts around Cleves and Gelderen, and the historic, cultural and linguistic investigations of this review confirm that a strong orientation towards The Netherlands is found in these districts. It is therefore disputable whether a Rhine-Franconian identity is existing there while a Netherlandic-Dutch identity is much more apparent, or at least, existing in conjunction with a Rhenish one.

If Dutch and Luxembourgish (in the form of Moselle-Franconian) would receive an official status in respectively North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate, the question would arise whether there is also a case for standard German to have an official status in Luxembourg, Belgium and The Netherlands. Standard German is already an official language in Belgium (in the Eupen-Malmedy district) and Luxembourg (where it is the third official language). However, declaring “German” as a minority or regional language on the Dutch side of the border in general
does not appear adequate since it never played any significant role there. Standard German was never written or spoken on the Dutch side, except for the municipalities of Kerkrade, Vaals and Simpelveld. As already mentioned above, these municipalities have a Ripuarian-Franconian dialect and standard German had a minor role as official language in the past as e.g. for the small Lutheran community in South Limburg (see chapter 7). It could therefore be argued that these three municipalities may have the right to give German an official status if they so wish to. However, extending such an official status for standard German to the whole of Limburg or all the border areas would be overbearing and inadequate. But that does not mean that knowledge of standard German should not be encouraged through education and other institutions. Since standard German is nowadays the de-facto language of daily business in all parts constituting the Federal Republic of Germany, knowledge is certainly important to all Dutch border areas and bilingual courses and classes could be considered in the same way as has been suggested in the Saarland for the case of French.

As already mentioned in the introduction, tourism could also become an increasingly important factor for all regions, including the Lower Rhine. From a tourism perspective, the Lower Rhine is rather undeveloped and usually does not feature as a major tourist destination. Recognising Lower Franconian and Dutch could create awareness and interest of the region since the touristic attractiveness of any region or country will certainly be enhanced by the existence of more than one cultures and “uniformism”.

In turn, such recognition would also help contradict stereotype ideas about the modern Federal Republic of Germany and manifest its status as an open, tolerant, multi-cultural state with a lot of regional varieties and cultures. If similar steps towards Limburgish and the other Franconian languages are taken up by the Netherlands and Belgium this could become another model for how regions separated by national borders could overcome them again and re-unite without violence and animosities or the need to create new borders or relocating them, just like South and North Sleswick are doing already. The framework of the European Union and the national legislation of the F.R. of Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands do certainly not form an obstruction any longer and it is up to the people themselves to grab the opportunities and benefit from each other’s culture, historic experiences and knowledge.

Considering the fact that Lower Franconian is rapidly disappearing in the Lower Rhine and is not seriously maintained by the younger generation, there is a chance that the last remaining native speakers will die in the not too distant future. Proclaiming Lower Franconian as an official status would certainly raise the prestige of the language and assist those remaining speakers to publicise and speak their language without feeling rural, uneducated or backward. But if Lower Franconian would become extinct this may, in turn, hamper any requests for a status or recognition because it would no longer be a “living” native language. Any status given then would become a symbolic move lacking authenticity and continuity and would make the case for recognition ever more questionable. Therefore, if there exists a desire to receive any recognition
or status for Lower Franconian and Dutch in the Lower Rhine, action has to be taken now before
the language has effectively ceased to be a living one.

The same fate applies for the Low Saxon and North Frisian languages since there is no national
state which has them as a primary national language. Therefore it appears even more difficult to
maintain them alongside modern trends and avoid that they degenerate into dysfunctional and
symbolic languages. That institutions of higher education such as the Dutch Language
Department called “Haus der Niederlande” of the University of Münster still describe Low
Saxon as a “German dialect” (and consequently struggle to deny that Dutch itself may also be
viewed as a “German dialect”) does not really help the case of Low Saxon (and Dutch) in the
Federal Republic of Germany.

However, if Low Saxon, Lower Franconian (Dutch) and North Frisian effectively become
“dead” languages that does not automatically mean that any recognition or status should cease.
They still form an important part of the local history; traditions and local culture are based on the
languages and to understand them, knowledge of the “old” languages is required, just as is the
case for Latin or Sanskrit. Place names often have Low Saxon or Frisian explanations and create
a separate identity for the inhabitants. This makes it also interesting for outsiders to enquire and
explore and in turn promotes tourism.

Yet it’s true there are examples that languages with relatively few speakers can be continued and
even retain the status as the common/general language in the respective locality as is the case for
Faroese on the Faeroes or Romansch in numerous communities in southeastern Switzerland and
there are even examples of successful language revivals as e.g. Hebrew in Israel. But this
requires the initiative and confidence of the people themselves and a constructive attitude of the
authorities of the encompassing state. The latter is now certainly provided through the European
legislation and the national legislation in the respective European states.

So the sooner the initiative is taken to have Lower Franconian and Dutch recognised in the
Lower Rhine, the better it will be but as mentioned before, the people themselves should decide
to take the initiative. In contrast to previous decades and centuries, the general population can
nowadays decide, define and determine what the Lower Rhine will look like in the future.

11.2. Final thoughts

In retrospect, the legacy of the Rhenish separatist movement is an interesting aspect of how far
the modern Federal Republic of Germany does not rather represent an extended Rhenish
Republic instead of a German national state. This was also often claimed by the government of
the German Democratic Republic (Historisches Lexikon Bayerns: Rheinische Republik - Die
). Looking at the heritage and demands raised in particular by the Rhenish separatist group led by
Hans Adam Dorten, there is certainly a case because the similarities between their ideas of a western orientated federal Germany and the foundation of a Rhenish State resemble in many ways the modern Federal Republic of Germany and the states of North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate. Taking into account that the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic, Konrad Adenauer, who also had links to separatist groups and argued himself for such a Rhenish- or West German Republic (although only as a federal state of Germany) the claims of the GDR government appear to be substantiated. But the claim of the GDR government was not aimed at praising the Bonn government but much rather at accusing them of being un-patriotic (in respect to Germany). Unpatriotic certainly in regard to German nationalism as conceived through the establishment of the German Empire in 1871 and extremist ideas appearing even before. However not in regard to the ideas of the Renaissance highlighted by Herder and neither to the 1848 uprising which included many calls for a decentralised federal state in a liberal democratic context. Ironically, the GDR itself collapsed in 1989 because the communist dictatorship was no longer able to sustain their hold on power once the Soviet Union began to disintegrate. Modelled upon the Federal Republic establishment, federal states were established (or re-established) in the former GDR which then became part of the Federal Republic of Germany, thus extending the “Rhenish Republic” onto the former GDR territory. The fact that the Federal Republic of Germany is much more founded on the ideas of the Rhenish separatism, the 1848 revolution and figureheads of the Renaissance such as Herder means this should be much more emphasised by the Federal Republic itself to help change certain stereotypical ideas about the modern German state. Recognition of Dutch and the other Franconian languages in the Rhineland could be another stepping stone to change the perception abroad and help European integration.

It is also interesting to realise that this Federal Republic is functioning successfully while it is only bound together by a Basic Law. There is not a single constitution for the whole German Federal Republic but rather each federal state has its own constitution, giving each state a strong legal position. But the Basic Law works in many ways as a constitution while it does not challenge or overwrite the constitutions of the individual federal states, something which one day perhaps could become a model for a further integrated Europe.

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