

**PART 2**

*The Northern Seas*





## Linguistics of Contact in the Northern Seas

*Marco Mostert*

The organizers of this conference on “Empires of the Sea” have given a definition of empires as “extensive, composite systems of control, often created through conquest and characterized by internal political and cultural diversity.”<sup>1</sup> I want to take the reader to the ‘empires’ of the northern seas in the pre-modern period. By “northern seas” I mean the north Atlantic, the Irish Sea, the North Sea, the Baltic, and the White Sea. But although there were networks of many kinds established on the shores of these seas, I doubt whether we can in fact speak of ‘empires’ in the sense of the definition, as the political constellations found there were by no means “systems of control” in the modern (or even early modern) sense of the term as explained in the “Introduction” to this volume. Nor were there many instances of ‘conquest’ that can be attributed to the political constellations present in this huge area – and if conquest did take place, its character was not much different from the kinds of conquest taking place in land-bound empires. What we do observe is a political and cultural diversity in the maritime networks that is similar to that observed in pre-modern empires. There were attempts, some of them successful, at developing systems of political or naval dominance, employing trade routes, trying to control sea-ports, coastal regions and islands. In that sense there were developments that might have resulted in the kinds of “empires of the sea” that the organizers want to focus on. It has been observed, however, that the merchants and skip-pers such ‘empires’ might want to control could, whenever their coastal settle-ments were under threat, on occasion simply up sticks and move away to safer havens.<sup>2</sup> Because travel by sea tends to be easier and faster than by land, and because the seas provide wide areas that are difficult to control, controlling sailors and merchants is not as easy as controlling land forces.

Nevertheless, attempts *were* made in the northern seas to exercise some kind of political and economic control. By using ships, populations living on the sea-board might be dominated. For any kind of peaceful dominance to be possible, communications with the coastal communities needed to be maintained. In

<sup>1</sup> See the Introduction to this volume.

<sup>2</sup> Blockmans 2010, referring to Gipouloux 2009, 21, 125ff. For the late medieval period, see now also the relevant chapters in Blockmans, Krom and Wubs-Mrozewicz 2017.

practice, this meant that forms of spoken communication needed to be developed, and languages chosen whose speakers could be understood by some at least of the members of the communities that formed part of the, of necessity rather loose, constellations that might be called metaphorically ‘maritime empires’ – whether they were primarily economic networks maintained by long-distance traders or political power networks. This suggests that a *lingua franca*, defined as a language that is adopted as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different,<sup>3</sup> is a necessary prerequisite for empires – both for land-bound empires and maritime ones. I would like to present some evidence of the languages chosen for this purpose, as prerequisites for the development of maritime empires. Which languages were available on the seaboards of the North Atlantic, the Irish Sea, the North Sea and the Baltic, and which of those languages provided the role of *lingua franca*?

A second, related question has to do with the fact that, as the study of many an empire has taught us, whenever writing is available, written communication and administration are likely to be developed to help the exercise of control over the communities within the constellation that is the empire. Which written languages were available to take on these roles? Were those languages vernaculars or, as is the case on most of the shores of Western Europe (with the exceptions of Irish and Frisian),<sup>4</sup> were there examples of written languages that had been developed or adopted by the neighbours of the coastal communities? In almost all cases for which we have evidence, Latin provided a model for some, if not necessarily all, uses a written language might be asked to fulfil. Written Latin had been around on the shores of the North Sea and, albeit to a lesser extent, on those of the Irish Sea and the Baltic, from the times of the Roman Empire. In many cases, German (or rather Low German) was to prove a viable alternative in the later Middle Ages.

Before we will look at some of the evidence, a final caveat. I am a historian, and no specialist of historical linguistics. I am asking questions about language use that are inspired by the social history of communication rather than by the

3 The definition is that of the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2nd edn. rev., ed. C. Soanes and A. Stevenson (Oxford, 2005), 1019.

4 In Ireland an indigenous language, Old Irish, was promoted to the status of a written language without the intermediary of Latin. When the Irish and the Frisians started to write in their own language, in the case of the Frisians as late as the thirteenth century (see Bremmer 2004; an English edition is promised for *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy*), they were aware of the written languages of their neighbours. It is typical of the regional cultures of Western Europe that most people are both bilingual and biliteral: they can read their local spoken language, but only use the dominant regional written language when they write something down (Haarman 2008).

disciplines that occupy themselves with the languages of the past.<sup>5</sup> This means that I cannot speak with the authority of students of the history of the individual languages involved on the questions put before. I doubt, however, whether there are indeed any specialists capable of dealing with *all* these languages, for at a rough count there are some *sixty* languages that may have been spoken at one time or another in the premodern age on these northern seas, ranging from the Inuit languages of the Greenlanders via the Germanic, Slavonic and Baltic to the Finno-Ugritic languages, not to mention rarer visitors from southern climes. Fortunately, there exists an excellent reference work dealing with all languages that were once spoken and still are spoken on the European continent, in the recent two volumes on *Western European Languages* and the one-volume *Lexikon der Sprachen des europäischen Ostens* published in 2002 and 2008.<sup>6</sup> One cannot find all the information one might want in these three volumes. Being written by linguists, the information on the written forms of a language (if, that is, a language *did* have a written form) tends to disregard the kind of legal and documentary evidence that is most likely to have been made, used and kept in the administration of the kinds of economic and political constellations we are interested in here – the earliest ‘literary’ texts, when they exist in written form, are mentioned without fail, but they belong to registers other than those of pragmatic literacy.<sup>7</sup> Fortunately it is not all that difficult to supplement the articles in these lexica on the topic of the written registers of the languages used on and around the northern seas.<sup>8</sup>

Let us now see what is thought to be known about the languages spoken, the languages chosen to act as a *lingua franca*, and the languages available in a written form that might have been used for administrative purposes by the dominant groups in these maritime networks and empires.<sup>9</sup> The linguistic

5 Cf. Burke and Porter 1994, 1995.

6 Okuka and Krenn 2002; Ammon and Haarmann 2008.

7 Cf. Britnell 1997 or, for a very short introduction, Mostert 2012, 12–13.

8 Mostert 2012, 181–236, ‘Language’, is a start; the literature mentioned there can be supplemented by the *International Medieval Bibliography*, which is part of <http://www.brepolis.net/>. An attempt can be made to discuss the same questions for the (ancient and early medieval) Mediterranean, using the guidance of Meiser 2015.

9 Information on the languages mentioned can be found in Ammon and Haarmann 2008, vol. 1 (Anglo-Norman, Breton, Cornish, Danish, German (High German), Dutch, English, Faroese, French, Frisian, Galician, Gaulish, Gothic, Greenlandic, Hebrew, Iberian, Basque, Icelandic, Irish, and Welsh), Ammon and Haarmann 2008, vol. 2 (German (Low German), Greek, Gutnish, Lombard, Latin, Manx Gaelic, Mirandesish, Ancient and Medieval Nordic, Norwegian, Orkney and Shetland Norn, Picard, Russenorsk, Scottish Gaelic, Scots, Swedish, Vandalic, and Yiddish), and Okuka and Krenn 2002 (Curonian, Estonian, Finnish, Ingrian, Karelian, Kashubian, Kukussi-Votic, Latvian, Lithuanian, Livonian, Masurian, Merja, Old Prussian, Polabian, Polish, Pomeranian, Proto-Slavic, Russian, Sami, Veps, Votic (Votian), and the languages of the *Slavia submersa*).

evidence is sometimes meagre at best, and therefore we will need to consider all of it, even if some of it may seem less obviously relevant to students of maritime empires. Hopefully, its relevance will nevertheless become apparent to the topic of this volume as well.

### The Irish Sea

Let us begin with the Irish Sea. I will summarize roughly which languages are known to have been spoken here – and will need to go into some detail, if only to give an impression of the complexity of the linguistic question. The oldest languages of which we have any trace that were spoken here, in Scotland to be precise, were the Pictish languages, evidence of which survives from the third century. Slightly later, the Celtic languages, Irish, Breton, Cornish, Welsh, Scottish Gaelic and Manx Gaelic make an appearance, from the fifth century onwards. Celtic languages are spoken on all shores of the Irish Sea, and presumably one may have developed a way of understanding one another. From around 800 onwards speakers of Medieval Nordic, a term used for the ancestors of the Scandinavian languages, came to the Irish Sea. Meanwhile, on the eastern shores English, another Germanic language, had been developing in Britain after the departure of the Roman legions; it had begun pushing the speakers of the Celtic languages westward, and after the English in their turn had yielded to the Normans, the French dialects known collectively as Anglo-Norman came to the fore. It was when this language was dominant in England that, from 1169 onwards, Ireland was conquered, so that Anglo-Norman was heard in Ireland as well. In Scotland, by the fifteenth century Scottish Gaelic had declined in importance, and Scots, the English language of Scotland, had won the day. As the Celtic languages were considered to be notoriously difficult to learn, and as Anglo-Norman was the dominant language among non-Celtic speakers, it is not surprising to find that French took over as *lingua franca* around the Irish sea; it was spoken by the elites on all shores of the Irish Sea, but also, slightly more surprising perhaps, by merchants and even ordinary sailors.<sup>10</sup> This must have had to do with geographical factors: the seaways northwards from the Iberian peninsula and from the French Atlantic coast to the Irish Sea are relatively easy to navigate, and contacts with speakers of French, a language of prestige which was spoken by large numbers of people in the region, must have been useful for communication in many registers.

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<sup>10</sup> Kowaleski 2009.

As the winds will bring one relatively easily from the Iberian Peninsula to the Irish Sea (as indeed to the wider North Atlantic), it is not excluded that speakers of pre-Roman Iberian languages from the northern coasts of Spain, or the speakers of Mirandesish, the smallest variety of Iberian-Romance, languages which have been attested in Roman or post-Roman times, or indeed speakers of Galician and Basque may have ventured into the Irish Sea as well. But they did not settle on its shores, and therefore did not capture the enduring attention of maritime empire-builders – if, that is, the Irish Sea ever knew maritime empires.

Which written languages were available for legislation and administration from the fifth century onwards? From that early date, written Irish (Old Irish) existed, and we know that the Irish developed an impressive legal literature quite early on. English was written from the sixth or seventh century onwards. French, both in its Anglo-Norman and continental varieties, was available from the eleventh century. The Scandinavian languages developed a culture of the written word (apart from their runic literacy, which was known in Old and Medieval Nordic) only from the twelfth century onwards, when they were no longer politically present in the Irish Sea. Breton and Scottish Gaelic also developed rather late, at the end of the fifteenth century. All these written languages had some sort of model in written Latin, and the Scandinavian languages and Scottish Gaelic also had a competing model in Old or Medieval Nordic. But despite the availability of several written languages (and alphabets), no single one was used in the whole area of the Irish Sea for administrative purposes. The time when English was to take on this role still lay in the future.

So, what do we know about the Irish Sea in the pre-modern era? Presumably in the early Middle Ages the Celtic languages may have served as a *lingua franca*. This role was later taken on by French. But there was no single economic or political constellation that availed itself of this linguistic situation to build a maritime empire on the shores. Or maybe the medieval kingdom of England can be seen as a candidate as a founder of a maritime empire after all. On consideration, the pre-modern Irish Sea, although it may seem a prime candidate for developing a maritime empire, at least from a linguistic point of view, did not develop such a political constellation. The area did form networks with the North Atlantic – and presumably with the ports and sailors of the northern Iberian Peninsula – but there was no control whatsoever by any single ethnic or linguistic group.

### The North Atlantic

What about the North Atlantic? Here the situation was different – up to a point. For one thing, the linguistic situation was far more homogeneous.

Granted, there may have been some Irish influence on Iceland, where monks may have settled for a time even before the Scandinavian settlers came,<sup>11</sup> and on Greenland Inuit languages were spoken at the same time as Icelandic, but the languages developing out of Medieval Nordic were dominant here. In the Viking age, i.e. from the eighth century onwards, speakers of the West Nordic variety (Norwegian and Icelandic but also Faroese and Orkney and Shetland Norn, which was also spoken in the most northern part of Scotland, Caithness, and on the Hebrides) completely controlled the waves. Slightly later, Danish, one of the East Nordic languages, although it was centred on the shores of the North Sea and Baltic rather than on those of the Northern Atlantic, became important as well. This had political reasons. The kings of Norway managed to gain control over the unruly Scandinavian settlers on Iceland. From the late fourteenth century, the kingdoms of Norway and Denmark were joined, and Danish influence increased in the North Atlantic.

The Scandinavians managed to understand one another fairly well. They communicated in the same way that is practiced between Scandinavians today. When a Norwegian talks to a Dane, he speaks Norwegian, but he speaks more slowly and distinctly than usual, and avoids using typically Norwegian words which he knows do not exist in Danish. With some experience, it is not difficult to speak Norwegian and be understood by a Dane, and if they adapt to the situation in the same way, then they will understand each other. This is what linguists call semi-understanding or semi-communication.<sup>12</sup>

There is solid evidence for this type of communication around the North Sea. An Icelandic saga written about 1250 provides the following information about the language situation in England c. 1000 AD:

The language (*tunga*) in England then [1000 AD] was the same as in Norway and Denmark. But the languages (*tungur*) changed in England when William the Bastard conquered it. From then on French became current in England, because he was from France.<sup>13</sup>

The saga's author implies that Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse were the same language. He is evidently thinking of oral communication, as to his mind the spoken word belongs to the same language when the two languages were mutually

11 At the end of the eighth century: *Dicuil: Liber de mensura orbis terrae*, ed. and trans. J. J. Tierney (Dublin, 1967), 76.

12 Slightly adapted quotation from Nedkvitne 2014, 89–90, referring to Jahr 1999, 129. The following paragraphs amount to amended quotations from Nedkvitne's article.

13 Nordal and Jonsson 1938, 70, quoted by Nedkvitne 2014, 90.



intelligible. This is confirmed by another saga, describing a Norwegian who fled after the defeat of the Norwegian army at Stamford Bridge in 1066. He met a peasant on his way and tried to conceal his identity, but the peasant said: “you’re a Norwegian, I can tell that from your speech” (*mál*).<sup>14</sup> The two were able to communicate, but the dialect or language differences were so evident that the Anglo-Saxon peasant was able to guess the home country of his conversation partner. If this linguistic situation existed in the North Sea, it was even more pronounced in the North Atlantic, where only Nordic languages played a role, languages which were perceived as being but different ways of speaking the same language. There was no question of having to ‘choose’ a *lingua franca*; there was but one candidate.

As for written language, the system of runes, considered indigenous, coexisted with literacy based on the Latin alphabet. Pragmatic literacy could use Latin, but quite early on it also used the local vernaculars. On Iceland and on the other islands there was influence of the language and practices of the Norwegian and Danish overlords as well. On the Faroe Islands, e.g. the first surviving document in Faroese is the so-called “sheep letter” of 1298, a document about sheep breeding, written by a Norwegian.<sup>15</sup> From the fifteenth century onwards, charters there are written in Danish – a situation which suggests cultural dominance, although the evidence is rather too slight to posit that the Faroe Islands were part of a Danish maritime empire. This is an instance of a feature typical of the regional cultures of Western Europe. Most people are both bilingual and biliteral: they can read their local spoken language, but only use the dominant regional written language when they write something down. In the North Atlantic ‘region’ this meant that the choice of a written language for administrative purposes was no problem either; it had to be one of the vernaculars that were perceived as a single language, and it might as well be the vernacular of the dominant political group, i.e. Norwegian or, slightly later, Danish.

On occasion, there must have been visitors from further afield in the North Atlantic as well. Before leaving the North Atlantic, it may be worthwhile to mention that Arabic was heard in Iceland in early modern times as well. Pirates from several countries, including the Barbary Coast, raided its coastal settlements. During this period, many Europeans were also taken captive by Mediterranean pirates and sometimes sold into slavery in the Arab world. One

14 Snorri Sturluson, *The Saga of Harald Hardradi*, c. 94, trans. M. Magnusson and H. Pálsson, *King Harald's Saga* (Harmondsworth, 1966), p. 154, quoted by Nedkvitne 2014.

15 Sandøy 1965, 237, referring to Sørli 1965. In 1310 a Faroese clerk staying in Bergen wrote a revised version of this *Seyðabrævið*.

slaving expedition is inaccurately termed the Turkish Abductions in Icelandic historiography. This was an expedition in 1627, conducted by a Dutch convert called Murat Reis (or Jan Janszoon), and the captives were taken to the Barbary Coast to be sold. The incident is still remembered in Iceland.<sup>16</sup>

### The North Sea

But let us move on to the North Sea. Here, starting clockwise from Norway, the languages in the early Middle Ages spoken included Norwegian and Danish, North Frisian, Low German, Frisian, Dutch, French (Picard), English and Scottish Gaelic, and almost everywhere Latin could be heard (as a second language, if not as a mother tongue). Earlier still, we may assume that Gaulish and Pictish languages might also have been heard, but we have too little evidence to discuss that. For a while, Frisian, spoken from the sixth century onwards along the coastal strip of the Netherlands and eastwards towards the river Weser and beyond, may have served as a *lingua franca*. This is suggested, e.g. by the fact that in Old English 'Frisian' seems to have been synonymous with 'trader'.<sup>17</sup> Around the year 1000 Danish might have taken over, as Danish political expansion not only was directed towards the North Atlantic but also towards England and Normandy, and also eastwards, towards the south of present-day Sweden. In the non-Scandinavian parts of the North Sea, the political influence of Danish seems to have come to an end with the battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066, when an attempt to regain the English throne was thwarted. As we have already seen, as long as the language used was of the Germanic family, no formal education was necessary to be able to make oneself known to its speakers, even if only in the registers available to semi-understanding or semi-communication. This meant that, in the later Middle Ages, Low German could come to the fore as a *lingua franca*.

Let us briefly consider language contact between speakers of a Scandinavian language and speakers of Low German. There is evidence that Hansa merchants and Scandinavians communicated orally in Bergen and other Scandinavian towns with each partner in conversation using his own mother tongue. The difference between *Mittelniederdeutsch* and the Scandinavian languages as spoken from 1250 to 1550 was smaller than between *Hochdeutsch* and the modern Scandinavian languages. In Novgorod the Hansa merchants

16 See Ólafur Egilsson, *The Travels of Reverend Ólafur Egilsson*, ed. K. Smári Hreinsson and Adam Nichols (Reykjavik, 2008).

17 Whitbread 1946.

used translators, but there is no evidence of translators in Bergen or other Scandinavian towns. A comprehensive correspondence between the Hanseatic *Kontor* in Bergen and the town councils in Lübeck and other Hanseatic towns has been preserved. Here the organisation in Bergen, mentioning numerous full-time and part-time officials, gives no indication of a translator. There is no evidence of a pidgin language – that is, a simplified language using words from both languages. Also lacking from the sources is any indication of language problems. There is no mention of people having learnt the other language as a foreign language, or of their being able to speak the other language. This is easy to understand if they in fact spoke their own language when communicating with the other group.<sup>18</sup> There are a huge number of loanwords from *Mittelniederdeutsch*, or Middle Low German, in the Scandinavian languages; this is natural if Scandinavian town dwellers became used to listening to Hansa merchants speaking Low German. In Bergen the local dialect had many more Low German loanwords than in the rest of Norway, which remained the case up to the nineteenth century. Today many of these dialect words have disappeared.

Our modern distinction between ‘language’ and ‘dialect’ is primarily relevant in a situation where there are written traditions for vernacular languages. Two different orthographic and grammatical norms for writing correctly yield two languages. Consequently, Danish and Norwegian are today seen as two different languages. If two persons write according to the same norm but speak differently, there will be two dialects. An illiterate person will only distinguish between people who he can understand orally, and those he cannot. People who understood each other in Old Norse were said to belong to the same *tunga*, which had as its basic meaning “the tongue in the mouth.”<sup>19</sup>

What was the social and cultural result of this extensive oral semi-communication? When both ethnic groups spoke their own language, there was no reason to understand German as ‘superior’ to the Scandinavian languages. In cultural contacts the inferior group normally has to learn the language of the superior group, but not vice versa. This situation did not arise in Scandinavia. The Scandinavians never learnt Low German in the same way as they learnt French or Latin. There was linguistic equality between Scandinavians and Hansa merchants on the oral level.<sup>20</sup>

Further to the south, there is evidence of mutual comprehension between the English and the Frisians (and later the Dutch). Let me present two

18 Braunmüller 1993–1995, 14–25, and Jahr 1999, 131–135.

19 Nesse 2009a, 119; 2009b.

20 Nedkvitne 2014, 90–92.

examples. The earliest forms of the place name Muiden, at the mouth of the Vecht, have *muthan*. Through a number of sound changes this has become Modern Dutch Muiden. Now the name of the English port on the Channel Plymouth once contained the element *muthan*: the name simply means ‘the mouth of the Plym.’ In English *muthan* became ‘mouth,’ as in Dutch it became ‘muiden.’<sup>21</sup> These were changes that took centuries – and yet modern-day fisherman and sailors in the Dutch navy, who did not follow courses in historical linguistics, call Plymouth Pleimuiden, as if the name of the port had partaken of Dutch sound changes. This means that an awareness or understanding of these sound changes seems to have been far more general than one would have assumed. That the English (or at least the inhabitants of East Anglia) at the end of the sixteenth century could still more or less understand Dutch is proven by a comedy in which a kind of Dutch is used, and a contemporary audience was apparently also able to understand Dutch, for without such an audience the play would have been incomprehensible and would hardly have been a success.<sup>22</sup> Whether to English ears there would have been much difference between Dutch and Low German remains to be seen. In any case, in the later Middle Ages Low German was the *lingua franca* of the North Sea, on its eastern and southern as on its western shores.

Had there been at any time a single maritime empire in the North Sea, it would have been spoilt for choice in the written languages available for its administration. Latin was in use everywhere, French (both in its Picard and Anglo-Norman varieties) was used from the eleventh century onwards in registers of pragmatic literacy, and Dutch and Low German would have been available to any such empire in the later Middle Ages as well. But no durable ‘empire’ was established. The only candidate that might be up for consideration was the Danish kingdom, which paired interests in the North Sea with similar interests in the North Atlantic and the Baltic. These interests were based on naval power, but they were realised in different periods, with the English dream evaporating in 1066, before dreaming of influence in the North Atlantic had started in earnest. And the Danish settlements in Normandy and the Netherlands had become assimilated to the dominant French and Frisian/Netherfrankish cultures in a matter of a few generations. If one wants to call this shifting Danish power network an ‘empire’ (*pace* Canute and his ephemeral ‘empire’), it proved to be a moveable feast.

21 The name *Plym Mouth* is first recorded in a Pipe Roll of 1211, after the change from *muthan* to *mouth* or *muiden* respectively had been accomplished some time previously.

22 Thomas Dekker, *Shoemaker's Holiday* (1599), Act 3; cf. Loyn 1962, 85.

## The Baltic

Finally, let us have a brief look at the Baltic. Linguistically this area is the most interesting, in that the languages available for the role of *lingua franca* come from several mutually incomprehensible language families. Let us pass over in silence Gothic, Lombard and Vandalic, languages which occur in the first centuries of our era on the southern shores of the Baltic, but were spoken by peoples who made their mark mainly on the shores of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Let us rather start with the Scandinavian languages in the West, Swedish (and Gutnish on Gotland) and Danish, and continue anti-clockwise with Lower German, also a Germanic language. Then we arrive at areas where Slavonic languages and dialects are spoken: Polabian, Kashubian, Polish and Masurian -and further to the north-east we will encounter another set of Slavonic languages and dialects, which will develop into Russian. But first we encounter the Baltic languages: Old Prussian (spoken until the seventeenth century in what we know as East Prussia), Lithuanian and Latvian. Then we come to the Finno-Ugritic languages, stretching from Livonian and Estonian in the south by way of Finnish and Karelian to Sami, the language of the Lapps (or Sami) in the north. Different from the linguistic situation in the North Sea and North Atlantic areas, but maybe less different from the situation in the Irish Sea, there was no way of arriving at a language that would have been comprehensible to the native speakers of all of these languages. And yet in the Baltic, too, maritime networks developed, with links to the networks in the North Sea (as is made clear, e.g. by the presence of the Frisians and later the Flemish and Dutch as traders and intermediaries between north and south). Swedish, which extended its influence eastwards, might have been a candidate (it is still the second national language in Finland), but its influence on the southern shores of the Baltic remained limited.

In the Baltic, as in the North Sea, Low German became the *lingua franca* as if by default. In fact, German was used as a *lingua franca* from the western shores of the North Sea to the lands of the Ukraine and Romania in the southeast and to Scandinavia and Finland in the north. In the late medieval Baltic German was a language of trade, politics, religion and culture. The use of German was so overwhelming, that in Estonia the other languages are subsumed under the heading *undeutsch*.<sup>23</sup> And indeed, a Dutchman can relatively easily understand the language of most of the archival sources from Estonia, as they seem to be written in a dialect that has much in common with that of the Dutch northern province of Groningen. Incidentally, the late medieval

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23 Selart 2014, 37.

maritime networks of the Baltic and the North Sea proved to be very durable indeed. In Walter Kempowski's autobiographical novel *Tadellöser und Wolf*, set in the German port of Rostock in the 1930s and 1940s, contacts with people from East Prussia and Poland, Denmark and Belgium occur. The protagonist's German-speaking father claimed that, in the First World War, he had no problem understanding the Flemish that was spoken on the Western front – even in the early twentieth century a linguistic continuum, linking the Flemish dialects with those of speakers of Low German along the shores of the eastern Baltic, seems to have persisted.<sup>24</sup>

German was not just another spoken language: it was a written language as well, and as such it came to compete, at least in certain registers, with Latin. Wherever German came to be used, it came into competition with Latin (especially in the field of law and the government of the towns, which in Europe north of the Alps and east of the Rhine were developed mainly with the aid of German settlers – because of this, the so-called Magdeburg law was used as far away from its city of origin as Romania). The development of written culture in East Central Europe, for instance, had to come to grips with the two written languages of Latin and German.<sup>25</sup> In the Baltic, apart from Scandinavian runic literacy, any language aspiring to the status of written language had the models of both Latin and German literacy to choose from. In matters of pragmatic literacy German was more often than not the preferred choice.

So it seems that the maritime networks of the Baltic, especially during the later Middle Ages, needed German to function. This did not preclude the use of Latin in situations of language conflict: a fifteenth-century disgruntled Polish *capitaneus*, who knew German very well, upon receiving a letter from a functionary in the Order of the Teutonic Knights in German, graciously wrote back in Latin, stating that, alas, “I could not at all understand the letter for this reason, that it was not written in the common idiom of the whole world, i.e. in Latin” (*non est scripta idiomate communi totius mundi, puta in latino*).<sup>26</sup> But similar instances of linguistic conflict were usually quickly solved, because German as a second language proved to be an important tool in the linguistics of contact between people of the most diverse ethnic and linguistic background, certainly in the Baltic.

24 W. Kempowski, *Tadellöser und Wolff: Ein bürgerlicher Roman* (München, 1971), chapter 3, at the beginning.

25 Cf. Adamska 2013.

26 *Codex diplomaticus Vitoldi magni ducis Lithuaniae, 1376–1430*, ed. A. Prochaska (Kraków, 1882), No. 508, p. 247, quoted in Adamska 2013, 363.

One will have noticed, however, that at no point in history was the Baltic the object of empire building – or at least no-one managed to found a maritime empire encompassing all of the Baltic in pre-modern times. Did that have anything to do with the complex linguistic situation? Our provisional conclusion might be that seas on whose shores languages from several linguistic families are spoken (in our case the Irish Sea and the Baltic) are less likely to suffer from maritime empire building. But the case of the Irish Sea in early modern and modern times proves that it is not impossible to build an ‘empire’, as the British managed to control that sea on all sides – and impose linguistic restrictions to precipitate the process.

### In Conclusion

To conclude, we have seen that the northern seas saw the development of maritime networks of various sorts. We have also seen that, despite sometimes very complex linguistic situations, choices of one or another language as *lingua franca* imposed themselves. Similarly, in those societies which used writing in the registers of pragmatic literacy, written languages imposed themselves for the purposes of legislation and administration. Whether or not these maritime networks qualified for the distinction of ‘empires’ remains to be seen. Only very few of them may have aspired to empire building. But I would like to suggest that this seems to be a problem of definition. In the Introduction to this volume, it is suggested that the insular world of the Scandinavian “Sea Kings” may be considered an ‘imperial system.’ If cultural and political diversity is considered to be more important than administrative unity as a characteristic of ‘empire’, then the maritime networks that have been discussed above from the point of view of their language may indeed be considered ‘imperial systems’. I have argued that, for such systems to survive, some sort of common language is necessary. The cultural and linguistic diversity encountered in empires of the sea may have been at least as important as their political diversity. If within an imperial system there was political hegemony as well, this was not necessarily twinned with linguistic hegemony, as the choice of a language that was adopted as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different, i.e. a *lingua franca*, seems to have been made mainly on pragmatic grounds. Especially on the shores of the Irish Sea and the Baltic the possibilities were limited because of the perceived difficulty of many of the native languages spoken there. In the North Atlantic, on the other hand, the Nordic languages could be readily understood by all. The French language used by sailors on the Irish sea was only coincidentally linked to the French

of the power elite that came to dominate its shores; the (Low) German of the Baltic was a language of trade before it could become, on the southern shores, a language of political hegemony; and the language of the North Atlantic simply was the only language available. Things were less clear cut on the (southern) shores of the North Sea. We find trade networks there as in the Baltic, but whether these networks would merit to be called “imperial systems” is hardly ever clear. What is clear, however, is that for empires of the sea to be viable at all, their linguistic diversity needed to be accompanied by some mutual comprehension, if only to deal with the practicalities of life at sea, trading, and the incipient attempts at state formation that were suggested to members of the groups that could claim political hegemony.

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