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REVITALIZING A MINORITY LANGUAGE

On the past and future of the Upper Sorbian
minority language in Germany.

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Cultural security is a multidimensional concept that first emerged in the social sciences back in the 1970s. John Burton, a scholar of conflict and conflict resolution, considers cultural security to be one of the most important human needs (along-

side physical security, equal access to goods, a sense of belonging, self-esteem, personal fulfillment, freedom and participation), the fulfillment of which can contribute to the prevention of violent conflicts, especially national and ethnic ones. Although the concept of cultural security is invoked in various contexts (e.g. securing material heritage sites during conflicts, or the westernization of the academic world), its most important dimension concerns the rights and protection of ethnic and linguistic minorities.

Cultural security therefore entails minorities' right to self-determination, to enjoy access to and make use of all public services. It also means people's abil-



ity to use their own language in all realms of life, not only private but also public. Ensuring the cultural security of minorities thus takes the form of a right to “linguistic security,” a concept which entails a certain duty on the part of the state and dominant society to ensure, safeguard, and promote the continuity of the minority group’s language. In the context of the French-speaking minority in Canada, for instance, Denise Réaume has defined linguistic security as the right to pursue the normal process of language transmission and preservation.

In today’s world, however, legal regulations alone are not enough to make a minority language safe. Indeed, the danger posed to such languages does not primarily stem from possible bans or legal restrictions on minority language use and transmission. Opting not to use a minority language is often the result of negative attitudes of the dominant community towards the minority language, a perception that it is of no practical use, as well as the loosening up of the boundaries separating the minority and the dominant group. Minorities therefore employ various strategies to secure themselves culturally and linguistically. However, these strategies are not always successful.

Maintenance strategies

The Upper Sorbs are a cultural and linguistic minority residing in Upper Lusatia, a region in southeastern Germany. It is estimated that there are about 40,000 people who identify as Upper Sorbs, of whom about 15,000 speak the Upper Sorbian language to varying degrees. Upper Sorbs have their rights as a minority



guaranteed in the constitution of the state of Saxony and in international documents, such as the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. In legal terms, therefore, the Upper Sorbs have their cultural and linguistic security ensured. However, this does not mean that their situation is stable and their language is secure.

Some Upper Sorbs are Protestants, others are Catholics. The Protestant Upper Sorbs predominantly underwent linguistic assimilation into the German community over the centuries, whereas Catholic Upper Sorbs largely maintained the intergenerational transmission of the language. Indeed, they formed a group that was separated from the Germans around them by a triple boundary: a linguistic boundary (Sorbs/Germans), an ethnic boundary (Slavs/Germans), and a religious boundary (Catholics/Protestants). It is also significant that Catholic Upper Sorbs see their identity, the cultivation of Sorbian customs, and the use of the language as inseparably interconnected. Thus, they find it difficult to allow outsiders into their group and,

The historic city of Bautzen/Budyšin in Upper Lusatia, in the southeastern part of the state of Saxony in Germany. In the city and surrounding Sorb-inhabited areas, bilingual signage is used

whenever dealing with German speakers, they invariably choose to adapt linguistically to them – switching to German, while reserving their own language and culture to be manifested only when exclusively among Sorbs.

This strategy, which has worked excellently for centuries, has nevertheless become less and less successful today, as exclusively Sorbian-speaking places have become almost non-existent. There are more and more mixed-language families, Sorbs are working professionally alongside German speakers, the German and Sorbian worlds are intertwined at almost all levels. So the strategy of reserving the language exclusively for in-group use no longer works. Upper Sorbs realize that in order for their language to survive, steps must be taken to “revitalize” the language – not only to reinforce the language where it still functions, but also to expand the domains of its use and bring in “new speakers,” people who were not raised in Sorbian-speaking homes and did not learn the language in family transmission, but learned it in the process of education and began to actively use it. For this to happen, people from Sorbian-speaking homes must accept such new speakers and be willing to share the

language with them. However, simply creating an educational system conducive to the emergence of new speakers is not enough. This is demonstrated by the case of the Upper Sorbian Grammar School in Bautzen/Budyšin, which applies a “2 plus” teaching system (teaching in two languages, Upper Sorbian and German, plus learning an additional language).

In my recent book *Upper Sorbian Language Policy in Education* (Brill, 2023), I analyze how the official language policy of the state of Saxony, which aims to ensure that all learners can achieve active bilingualism, diverges from the actual language practices at the level of social interaction among students and teachers at this school. There are three language groups studying side-by-side in each year group: those from Sorbian-speaking families, those who have had previous contact with the Sorbian language (e.g. in kindergarten and elementary school), and those who came to the grammar school with no or very little knowledge of the Sorbian language. However, the situation of having people with varying levels of Upper Sorbian proficiency is not exploited at the school so that those learning Sorbian have the best possible chance to become accustomed to the language. At the level of linguistic practices, both the Upper Sorbian and German communities follow the accepted rules and prevailing linguistic ideologies (ingrained beliefs about languages and speakers). Upper Sorbs follow a strategy of keeping the language to themselves and cordoning it off culturally and linguistically from those outside the community (continuing the age-old strategy of language maintenance), while those from German-speaking homes either feel that they are being kept away from the Upper Sorbian language and have no chance to practice it, or they feel discouraged and resentful towards the Upper Sorbs. And so, despite the existence of a bilingual school, actual revitalization of Upper Sorbian in the education system therefore turns out not to be proceeding very successfully – although there are certain exceptions.

Closer scrutiny

Our research at the school using ethnographic methods (in-depth interviews, focus-group discussions, participatory and non-participatory observations in and out of classes) has shown that young Upper Sorbs belonging to the Catholic community share very strong ties. These are based on a common language (a minority language amidst the surrounding German language) as well as on cultural practices related to community life marked by a calendar of religious holidays. This means that Catholic youth from Sorbian villages constantly meet outside of school, and their world there is also separate from the German world. The boundaries so demarcated are what give rise to their communal cultural and linguistic security: they

Photo 1
A “Bird Wedding”
– a traditional
Upper Sorbian folk
custom that combines
elements of folklore, music,
dance, and storytelling

Photo 2
A “Jolka”
Christmas Festival
in Upper Lusatia, 2018



can converse in Sorbian among their own community, and cultivate customs while deepening already existing in-group ties. Since these young people also stick together at school, rarely coming into closer contact with people from German-speaking homes, their sense that it is a strategy of cordoning themselves off that will allow them to preserve their language is reinforced.

My fellow researcher, Dr. Cordula Ratajczak, and I engaged in research work at the school and under the SMiLE project (“Sustaining Minoritized Languages in Europe,” Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, 2018–2019), which was dedicated to the state of revitalization of both of the Sorbian languages (perhaps here I should point out that in addition to Upper Sorbian, there is also the closely related Lower Sorbian language, which is spoken in Brandenburg, near Cottbus/Chóśebuz, and much more seriously endangered than Upper Sorbian). We did not focus solely on so-called native speakers of Upper Sorbian. Rather, we were also interested in other ways one might become a speaker of Upper Sorbian (e.g. via education or integration into the community), as well as what obstacles hamper motivated individuals from gaining recognition as legitimate speakers of the language. Our most important observation was that the Sorbian and German worlds remain greatly divided. Students at the bilingual grammar school who come from German-speaking homes are officially told at the beginning of the educational process that they will learn to speak Sorbian fluently over the next few years and achieve active Sorbian-German bilingualism. As the year pass, however, it turns out that just learning Sorbian as a foreign language does not yield much progress (as is generally characteristic of any foreign language teaching solely in school lessons). What’s more, they come to realize that their Sorbian-speaking classmates do not really want to talk to them in Sorbian, explaining this in terms of being courteous (the so-called “rule of politeness”) or a desire for efficient communication. Frustrated by their lack of progress in acquiring linguistic competence, many young people learning Sorbian end up not wanting to hear the minority language used in their presence.

A glimpse into the future

One of our interviewees, who, despite being from a German-speaking family nevertheless studied in a class designed for Sorbian speakers and quickly, without problems, achieved fluency in Sorbian, referred to the educational strategy at school as *Schubkastendenken* – “pigeonholing.” She explained that once a child ends up in one of the three groups, “Sorbian,” “German,” or “bilingual,” there is no escaping the classification. At the same time, belonging to one of the pigeonholes determines the choice of language and language practices in the group. Only those in



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the first group are considered legitimate speakers of Upper Sorbian, while the others must be addressed in German. Thus, the opportunity for learners to gain even passive competence in Upper Sorbian is lost. And yet, successful revitalization of Upper Sorbian, intended both to prevent the loss of active speakers and to open up a space for those who do not yet speak the language, requires the involvement of people who are not connected to the Sorbian group by primordial ties (of blood and kinship). This is because potential speakers of Sorbian include everyone who is willing and able to learn the language – including, first and foremost, German speakers from the immediate social surroundings of Sorbian speakers.

The creation of bilingual education, as a place where young people from Sorbian and German-speaking homes meet, was the first step toward tearing down the wall dividing the Sorbian and German worlds. It has not yet been dismantled, however, because students from the two disjoint worlds have not been actively encouraged to form a community and to communicate in Sorbian or bilingually regardless of their initial language level. What was lacking was an active language policy at the grassroots level, a policy that promoted Sorbian over German and encouraged students from German-speaking homes to become involved in Sorbian-language school and extracurricular life. Nonetheless, the first step toward Sorbian-German bilingualism has been taken, and recent years have seen more and more signs of the divide in Upper Lusatia being broken down. It seems that precisely such an opening up of the community – while of course taking care to ensure Sorbian cultural survival – is needed today to ensure the linguistic security of the Sorbs. A minority language is only safe if it can be spoken everywhere and with all people in the region (alternatively: in the presence of all people in the region) regardless of whether they identify as a member of the (Sorbian) minority or (German) majority. ■

Poster for a workshop held with Upper Sorbian youth, as part of the SMiLE project

Further reading:

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