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ANCESTRAL LANGUAGES LOOK TO THE FUTURE

Can local dialects and vernaculars carve out a future for themselves in today's world?

A children's dance troupe performing in Kashubian costumes at the Kashubian Festival – an outdoor event celebrating the 735th anniversary of the town of Jasień



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When you think of local languages or dialects, what comes to mind? Most people will think of waning folk traditions, the heritage of their distant forebears, or perhaps a grandparent who still speaks in a distinctive way. They might conjure up images of traditional choirs or dance troupes, staged performances of ancient rural rituals, or contests in which even children recite tales about threshing grain and plucking feathers. Neither modern technologies nor hip youth culture are likely to figure anywhere in anyone's mind.

This certainly holds true for people's perception of the local languages and dialects that exist in Poland. But this mechanism – whereby such languages or dialects are perceived purely through the lens of bygone eras and the lifestyles of traditional, especially rural

communities – is a wider phenomenon, characteristic of most language codes that function in a minority role among society. I write “function in a minority role” because this does not always have to actually involve being in the minority in the literal mathematical sense – there are languages that are spoken by a majority of the population in some area, and yet remain politically and culturally dominated by others. And I refer to “language codes” because the phenomenon may apply to ways of speaking that are commonly referred to as dialects or varieties, as well as others whose status as a dialect or separate language is a subject of dispute, and still others whose distinctiveness is accepted beyond doubt. No matter if we are talking about Mazovian dialects of Polish, the disputed Silesian dialect/language, or the Welsh language, for instance, there is a common denominator: the view that they are backward, not modern, is among the key reasons why they have begun to lose speakers in favor of an established dominant language, seen as having better future prospects.

Language revitalization

To rescue small languages, therefore, it is important to reverse this trend and give them new functionality in a changing world. This is the overall idea that motivates activists engaged in language revitalization efforts. Take, for example, the region of Upper Silesia in Poland, where grassroots movements in this direction have made significant inroads in recent years (despite a lack of support from the state) in striving to revitalize *ślōnska gōdka* (the Silesian language). Completely new spaces for using it have been opening up – from translations of works of world literature, such as a recent hit publication of *The Hobbit* in Silesian, to smartphone app interfaces, to expressions of LGBT+ culture. More and more texts are being written in a standardized orthography that takes into account local peculiarities of pronunciation in different parts of the region. A set of spelling rules and orthographic dictionary released last year by Professor Henryk Jarošewicz is intended to mark a milestone along the path toward creating a universally recognized literary standard, such as the Polish language enjoys. Modern terminology in Silesian is being coined on an ongoing basis – for instance, a cell phone is a *mobilniök*, settings are *nasztalowania*, and files are *zbiory*. More and more “new speakers” are learning the language from scratch, having not learned it in their family home.

This shift to modernity, however, is not endorsed by everyone. Traditional Silesian storytelling competitions, where participants tell nostalgic tales about old ways of life and sing festive songs in the language, are still going strong. The standardized orthography with additional letters is used mainly by activists, whereas ordinary Silesians often complain that it is



A selection of books
published in Silesian



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difficult, and continue to write their language based on their intuition, using the Polish alphabet. And if one were to ask a random passerby in Silesia to use their *mobilniõk*, success is definitely not guaranteed. Silesian has entered a phase involving a complex relationship between its traditional speakers and a growing community of activists and new speakers – a phenomenon likewise typical of other languages for which revitalization efforts have been undertaken, including Kashubian in Northern Poland, Breton in Western France, and Basque in the French/Spanish borderlands.

The role of ideology

People may hold a wide variety of views about languages and the way they can and should be used; these are known in linguistics as “language ideologies.” This concept was coined by the American scholar Michael Silverstein in the late 1970s, and it has since become one of the main research fields in modern sociolinguistics. In the context of endangered languages, theory is closely intertwined with practice, as identifying and influencing changes in those ideologies that negatively affect their viability is an important tool in the revitalization process.

One example of such an unfavorable set of views is called the “ideology of authenticity.”

Speakers of minority languages are fond of attributing their language with great antiquity. They see it as representing the speech of their forebears, resistant to change since time immemorial. Learning such a language is considered difficult; it must be acquired “naturally” from early childhood, as any outsider who tries to learn it will always sound artificial, especially if they do not adhere to a specific local variant. This romanticized view of a minority language is usually accompanied by a positive attitude towards it, considering it to be the “language of the heart” that “sounds so beautiful.” However, words like *Internet*, among many others, simply “cannot be expressed” in this lan-

A bilingual road sign,
stating the name of a village
in both Polish and Silesian



DAVID DOBOSZ/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

guage because, after all, there was no Internet back in our grandparents' times.

And so, those who advocate the ideology of authenticity complain that the language of their forebears is vanishing, while at the same time finding it strange and incorrect when efforts are made to try to equip that language with the tools needed to express modern concepts. Meanwhile, activists are working hard not to allow the language to turn into nothing more than a museum artifact. However, this does not mean they all share the same ideology. Disputes over spelling, over the degree of acceptance of dominant language influences, or over choosing among countless regional variants as the basis for codification are typical for all communities attempting language revitalization. Such disagreements, while typical, are not necessarily desirable. One of the major scholars studying language ideologies, Paul Kroskrity, introduced the concept of "ideological clarification" – a consensus among all parties involved – as a prerequisite for the success of language revitalization.

It is also important to remember that language ideologies do not exclusively concern the language itself but always pertain to the people who use it. The question of what a language should be like is ultimately a question of what the related community should be like. If, for example, the ideals of labor, family, and faith are held up as the traditional Silesian values, is there room among Silesians for those who do not adhere to religion, the classic family model, or the traditional work ethic, yet who nevertheless want to discuss feminism in Silesian? If the distinction between indigenous people vs. newcomers is a key identity marker for so many, reinforced by linguistic differences, is it truly possible for someone to just come to Silesia from elsewhere and learn Silesian? And do the residents of the differing parts of the region truly form a single group that needs a common literary language?

Successes and failures

No minority community has been able to avoid such ideological debates, and the ways in which they play out vary greatly. Analogous solutions may aid the survival of a language in some places, while in others, they may seem to have the opposite effect.

The standardized variety of Kashubian, for instance, where "television" is *zdrzélnik* and "advertisement" is *zachâcba*, is seen by many Kashubians as an artificial language, as distant from their own native tongue as Polish is. When Kashubian gained the status of a "regional language" in Poland in 2005 and school lessons in Kashubian were introduced in the region, contrary to expectations this nevertheless did not stop the decline the numbers of everyday speakers of Kashubian. By contrast, the codification of the internally diverse Basque, initiated back the late 1960s,



can be considered a success story. The standardized *euskara batua* has been adopted as a nationwide standard, and the number of Basque language users is increasing. In the Basque Country and Navarre provinces of Spain, among those under 24 years old, their proportion is more than twice as high as in the 65+ generation. The number of new speakers has even recently exceeded the number of speakers who have Basque as their mother tongue. Also in the French part there are now more Basque speakers among youngsters than in their parents' generation. This is a positive phenomenon, but elsewhere, it can also stir controversy. A classic example is the situation in Brittany. In this region of France, a vast divide has emerged between two groups of speakers of the local Celtic language: native speakers, mostly older people living in rural areas, who use local variants of Breton with a large number of French loanwords, and new speakers mainly concentrated in cities, who speak Breton in a manner rejected by many native speakers as artificial, puristic in terms of vocabulary, and strongly accented with French pronunciation.

Let's move on to Switzerland. The Romance dialects (Franco-Provençal) once spoken there have practically disappeared, with the western part of the country being completely dominated by standard French. Meanwhile, the Germanic dialects (Alemannic) in the east are thriving, and there is no indication that *Hochdeutsch* will supplant them in the foreseeable future. Why such different stories, despite both languages being used for centuries within the same country, sometimes even the same canton, in similar political and social contexts? The dynamics of linguistic processes turn out to defy simple, common-sense explanations. Despite numerous well-documented cases of language revitalization efforts in different parts of the world, we still cannot provide a definitive answer to the question of what can successfully ensure that they will have a bright future. ■

Bilingual street signs, in both Polish and Silesian

Further reading:

Olko J., Sallabank J. (eds.), *Revitalizing Endangered Languages: A Practical Guide*, 2021.

Schieffelin B., Kroskrity P., Woolard K., *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*, 1998.