

The Revival of Ethnic Language

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The Kashubs, an ethnic group situated in the north of Poland, are developing their cultural tradition and distinct language

The question of ethnic and language minorities in Europe is currently a subject of lively debate among linguists, sociologists, ethnologists and politicians alike. A "regional language" is defined as one spoken by autochthonous ethnic group, closely related to the majority language of the territory/state but not enjoying the status of an official language. Kashubian is a regional language spoken by Kashubs - a community in the north of Poland,

in the Pomerania region near Gdańsk. The number of Kashubs is estimated nowadays at 300,000-500,000, while the number of those who use Kashubian in speaking is estimated at 150,000-300,000.

The geographic setting of Kashubia has determined the history, political and living conditions of its population, as well as the linguistic contacts of the Kashubian language: i.e. contacts with Polish (in its standard and dialectal versions) over many centuries to the present day, with ancient West-Pomeranian Slavic dialects until the 18th century, and with German (both the standard language and Low-German dialects) until the end of WWII.

Some history

Kashubia has shared its history with Poland from the early times of the Kingdom of Poland (which existed from the Middle Ages until the last decade of the 18th century) through the modern age. During the times of partitioned



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The revival of the Kashubian tradition is visible in the various activities of associations and institutions promoting the region's culture and language

Poland (1772–1918) it belonged, together with other western regions of Poland, to the German state of Prussia. This was a time when the Kashubian ethnolect, persecuted by the political authorities but bolstered by its ties with standard Polish, struggled to resist Germanization. After WWI, Kashubia became a part of the newly independent Republic of Poland (except some western areas included into the German state). During WWII (1939–1945) this region, like the entire territory of Poland, was under German Nazi occupation. After the war it again formed part of the Polish state. The ethnic/national consciousness of the Kashubs has been a subject of interest for researchers as well as for Kashubs themselves. On the one hand, the Kashubian identity is recognized as a regional-ethnic one situated within the broad context of the Polish national identity, while on the other hand, quite recently certain Kashubs have indeed been declaring themselves to be of Kashubian nationality. The main factor of self-identification for Kashubs – next to their Catholic religion – is their language.

Sociolinguistic features

The important characteristics of Kashubian stem from its location on the north-western periphery of the Slavic languages. Its long-lasting contacts with the Polish language have had an important impact on Kashubian: since the 16th century, Polish has functioned among the Kashubs as a language of literature, linguistic communication on an intellectual level, and education, while their native ethnolect has been used within the family and in local oral communication. This persistent contact may be viewed as the coexistence of two closely related languages. Nevertheless, Kashubian, especially in its northern subdialect, is hardly comprehensible to native speakers of Polish. Another feature of this language is its differentiation into local dialects in terms of language structure (mainly phonetic and lexical differences). Three main groups of dialects have been recognized: a northern (characterized by frequent archaisms), central, and southern group. This fragmentation of Kashubian can cause problems for communication amongst the Kashubs themselves, as speakers from the southern dialect-area have difficulty in understanding those from the northern one.

Developing a literary language

Certain religious texts (books and manuscripts) from the 16th and 17th century have been recognized as literary monuments of the Kashubian language, although they are in fact written in the Polish language of that time and only “inlaid” with Kashubian vocabulary and grammatical forms.

Attempts to create a Kashubian literary language *per se* date back to the mid-19th century. The first to write in the Kashubian ethnolect was Florian Ceynowa, who considered Kashubian to be a separate language, with Polish as its “elder brother.” Attempts at establishing a



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The region of Kashubia is characterized by beautiful lakes and forests

literary standard for Kashubian have subsequently been repeated in the 19th and 20th centuries. Beginning in the 1970s, other efforts have also been made towards normalizing, unifying spelling and “intellectualizing” the Kashubian language. Literary output, encompassing sacral and secular texts by authors of all generations, has increased significantly since 1990 and has been actively promoted by such institutions as the Kashubian-Pomeranian Association, the Kashubian Institute (Instytut Kaszubski), as well as media sources and educational institutions.

Language policy

It has been a point of discussion whether Kashubian constitutes a separate language or is rather a dialect of the Polish language. The Kashubs in fact felt discriminated when hearing their tongue called a “dialect.” The problem of Kashubian’s status has been not a linguistic matter, but often a political one.

Nevertheless, Kashubian is gaining a more elevated status nowadays. It has been introduced into local radio and TV broadcasting, into some schools in the region, as well as, to some degree, into the Church. The literary language is rising in prestige, although its function is generally limited to the written form. Some problems in intergenerational transmission of the language are to be observed. While recently recognized as a living regional language, Kashubian remains endangered as a spoken tongue. It is a target of language policy on a state level. In 2005, the Polish parliament passed the *Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and the Regional Language* to protect minor and endangered languages. ■

Further reading:

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