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Opinion on the article by Till Wojto & Sabine Asmus „Kak wjele kompetentnych powědarjow dolnosorbšćiny jo w lěše 2024? Pówoblicenje na zaklaže aktualnych datow” (Slavia Occidentalis 2024/81(1): 159–168)

Personal statement:

As a researcher who has studied minority and minoritised language communities in Europe for over 20 years (with fieldwork in Upper and Lower Lusatia, Brittany, Wales and among various minority communities in Poland: Kashubian, Silesian, Masurian, Podlachian and Podhalanian), being involved in various formal and informal networks of minority languages researchers and practitioners, I consider myself an engaged sociolinguist. I conduct my research with what is good for the communities in mind, support them with my academic expertise, and speak out publicly in support of minorities and their languages. At the same time, I am a distinguished professor (full professorship in Linguistics and Cultural Studies obtained in 2024) for whom methodological accuracy is an inalienable condition of research. I am also convinced that research, especially in socially and ethnically sensitive areas, must be conducted and presented with the utmost precision and in a way that does not harm the communities.

In the following text I'll identify the main methodological, argumentative and ethical weaknesses of the article, which in my opinion should never have been published.

The concept of ‘competent speakers’

Noting the lack of recent research on the number of speakers of Lower Sorbian, the authors decided to take a shortcut and estimate the number of ‘competent speakers’. To do this, they used a definition close to that of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, somehow ignoring the fact that the level corresponding to this definition in the certification system (C2) does not even yet exist for Lower Sorbian. This already proves that whatever the number of ‘competent speakers’ is, it is only an assessment. As the authors state, competent speakers are “wósoby, kótarež mógu rěc wužywaš nadregionalnje a we wšykných rěčnych domenach a kótarež maju wšykne rěčne zamóžnosći (powědanje, słuchanje, pisanje, cytanje), pši comž njetrjeba se kuždy subsystem rěcy bžez brachow wobkněžyš” (p. 162). What does this mean in practice?

The tradition of sociolinguistic research on language endangerment, language shift and language revitalisation dates back some 40 years. A particularly sensitive issue in such research is that of ‘speakers’. In recent years, not only has the notion of ‘native speakers’ as the only competent speakers been challenged (Davies, 2003), but researchers have identified a great

diversity of speakers of endangered languages, in which the competence cluster is only one aspect among others, such as: sociolinguistic cluster (exposure to the language), performance cluster (use and attitudes), self-evaluation of speakers and linguistic insecurity (psycholinguistic aspects) (Grinevald & Bert, 2011, pp. 47-49). The creation of a typology of speakers (fluent, semi-, terminal, rememberers, ghost, neo-, last) and the presentation of their dynamics serves to help the community in its language revitalisation efforts, as each type of speaker requires a specific approach to encourage them to use their heritage language (Grinevald & Bert, 2011).

Another way of making a typology is through the way the language is acquired and lived. 'Traditional speakers' are therefore mainly people living in rural areas who have never had the opportunity (and therefore the need) to use the language outside their community and family life. This means that, as 'mother tongue speakers' of the language, they have never read or written in it. Another category, which we can also find in Lower Lusatia, are the 'rememberers', people who possessed the language in their childhood and/or youth, but due to the language shift did not use it and lost most of their active competences. Both research (e.g. Julia Sallabank's research on Guernesiais) and practice (e.g. Marija Elikowska-Winklerowa's *Pójsynoga* programme) show that it is possible to revive their language competences and how important these people are for the severely endangered language community.

The most important group is made up of Lower Sorbian speakers, who have learned the language through formal or informal education and use it from time to time, in certain areas and only in certain places. They have more or less extensive social networks in which the language may be used, but it has never been their aim to make it the language of all domains. Excluding them from the declared number of speakers does great harm to the community and the language (as it may affect their further motivation to use the language).

In comparison, the authors decided to focus on only one group, the 'elite'. They called them 'competent speakers'. The 'traditional speakers' are defined in the article only by their deficit ("maju lěbda kontakty mjazy sobu, jich rěčne zamóžnosći su cesto wobgranicowane na lokalny dialect") and are excluded from the statistics as 'incompetent' speakers. The same fate befalls 'learners' ("Characteristiske za wuknjece su wobkněženje standardizěrowaneje dolnosěrbsčiny w rozdźělnej kwališe, felujuce znaša dialektow, felujuce znaša tradicionelnych rěčnych domenow, felujuce znaša idiomatizmow a frazeologizmow a wót přédneje rěcy kradu wobwliwowana fonetika", p. 163). Interestingly, what is perceived by the authors as a weakness of the traditional speakers (that they only know their local dialect) is, in the opposite way, also perceived as a weakness of the learners (that they only use standardised and simplified language). Another excluded group are those who use some Lower Sorbian language at home, among friends, but do not work in this language professionally. This gives a completely false picture of the situation of Lower Sorbian speakers and potential speakers.

Why is the use of the term 'competent speakers' harmful? Firstly, **it gives the false impression that the authors are talking about the number of language speakers in general.** In fact, they are only talking about a very narrow group of 'professionals' of 'elite' who are required to have a high level of proficiency in the language. However, they present statistics that refer to all Lower Sorbian speakers, which is misleading for the reader. Lay people do not have to use Lower Sorbian in all domains, which does not mean that they are not 'speakers'. We should add here that such a group of 'competent speakers' is equally narrow in any minority language

community where education in the language is not compulsory, is not seriously evaluated, and potential jobs in the sector outside the institutions related to the language require knowledge of the language. Welsh is one of the exceptions in Europe.

Secondly, let us look at the situation of Lower Sorbian. Its use and transmission was severely restricted after the Second World War. It lost the competition with the dominant language. German became the language of all official areas (including education). In this sense, talking about a small number of ‘competent speakers’ is not even a methodological error, but a distortion of reality. Every community needs people who are trained in the language and who can work in institutions, culture and education. Nowhere is it the case that all speakers belong to this group, which can be called the ‘elite’. There are also people for whom Lower Sorbian can be the language of community life – whether they are ‘incompetent’ (illiterate in Lower Sorbian) traditional speakers or people who try to use Lower Sorbian in social networks and usually have only a limited knowledge of the language and do not use it in writing (or use it passively for reading).

Thirdly, by failing to assess the number of ‘competent speakers’ using appropriate methodology (see next section), they **arrogate to themselves the right to judge who is a legitimate speaker and who is not**. They ignore the personal efforts of learners and new speakers, as well as the language revitalisation potential of traditional speakers, their families and communities.

Methodological problems

Although the authors want to estimate the number of people who have a C2 level – they themselves point out that there is no test at this level for Lower Sorbian. As they write, since 2016 12 people have been certified B1, 3 people B2 (p. 163). Language certificate tests are only taken by people who are required to do so by the institution, i.e. people who start out as non-Lower Sorbian speakers but have to prove that they have made progress in the language. No layperson needs a language test! **Therefore there are no data on language level / competences of most of the speakers**. All the figures mentioned in the article are just assumptions based on other people’s individual assumptions based on feelings¹ (e.g. those working in Sorbian institutions), on what we could call ‘common sense’ (“Chtož znajo rěcny staw abiturientow Dolnosěrbskego gymnaziuma, musy pśiwdaś, až w nejwušem paže 10% abiturientow napšawdu maju rěcny niwow B2”, p. 164), and on methodologically unjustified calculations. There is no methodology behind it, it is just speculation. In any case, the figures given by the authors are based on methodologically sound statistical surveys.

The second methodological problem is **that language acquisition is seen as a ‘state’ rather than a ‘process’**. In the case of both Šula za dolnosěrbsku rěč a kulturu and Dolnosěrbski gymnazij, the arbitrary number of speakers is assessed as the average number of students in about two decades. However, no information is available on the current language use of those who completed their schooling after 1995. The calculations does not take into account that language competence depends mainly on the ability to use the language: to have a network of people with whom one can speak (oral competence) and to be forced to write and read in the language (written competence). This aspect is completely ignored by the authors. This is

¹ Some ethnolinguistic vitality surveys include questions about personal feelings about the state of the language (or the changing number of speakers) (e.g. Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020; TMO-Région Bretagne, 2025). However, the answers are not used to describe the state of the language itself, or to give the number of speakers of the language, but to discuss the level of pessimism/optimism about the language and its future.

particularly evident when they try to discuss whether they should include Lower Sorbian families among the ‘competent speakers’. Authors regret that there is no monitoring of their language progress. However, unless parents are not at the same time ‘Lower Sorbian professionals’, using Lower Sorbian in everyday life, they can at best be ‘fluent speakers’ (the term pointlessly criticized by authors in relation to the ZORJA project, as it tells much more about the speakers).

The third issue concerns **language certification as a method of assessing language competence** (which is a measure of ability and test-taking skills rather than knowledge of the language and ability to use it; see Shohamy, 2006). The debate about its limitations is serious, and not only in the field of endangered languages. However, it is in the latter area that it can have particularly negative consequences. The legitimisation of speakers on the basis of tests may itself lead to a loss of motivation to continue learning Lower Sorbian, since learners have been categorised as ‘incompetent’ in advance.

Conclusion: Ethical consequences of selective approach to the question of speakers in a situation of language endangerment

In conclusion, not only can we question the methodological accuracy of the study presented by Till Wojto and Sabine Asmus, we should also question its ethical position. Giving an imprecise number of an arbitrarily defined type of speaker in a situation of serious language endangerment (as is the case with Lower Sorbian) can do more harm to the community and all the language revitalisation efforts it undertakes than academically defined goods (having an article published? Participation in discussions about the state and revitalisation of Lower Sorbian?). If the number of speakers of Lower Sorbian is to be assessed, the same methods should definitely be used as in the most important studies on the ethnolinguistic vitality of minority/minorised language communities (Wales, Brittany, Scotland, to name but a few). In all these studies, respondents self-assess their language competence in four areas (understanding, speaking, reading, writing) on a 5-point scale (very good – not at all). The discussion of the results always presents different types of speakers with their differentiated language competences. Such surveys are used to improve language revitalisation strategies, not to question their meaningfulness.

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