

Maintaining minority language: for the
minority itself or for all?

The education project '2 plus' in Upper Lusatia
(Germany)

Dr. Nicole Dołowy-Rybińska

Institute of Slavic Studies

Polish Academy of Sciences

nicoledolowy@gmail.com

Sorbian minority in Germany

- Sorbs – Slavonic minority living in Eastern Germany;
- Distinction between Upper Sorbs (approx. 40,000) and Lower Sorbs (approx. 20,000);
- Upper Sorbian (approx. 12,000 speakers) and Lower Sorbian (less than 2,000 speakers);



Upper Sorbs



- Catholic Upper Sorbs – maintained intergenerational transmission;
- Threefold boundary:
 - Linguistic (Sorbian vs. German)
 - Ethnic (Sorbs/Slavs vs. Germans)
 - Religious (Catholics vs. Protestants)
- Relation between identity-tradition/customs-language perceived as inseparable.
- Consider themselves as ‘real’/ ‘true’ Sorbs;
- Difficulty for ‘new’ speakers/members to enter the community.

The need of revitalization strategy:



- The number of children born into Sorbian speaking families is declining greatly.
- The 'Witaj' [*Welcome*] project:
 - 1990s
 - Pre-school immersion (or quasi-immersion) education.
 - From 2000s also in primary schools and 2010 in the Upper Sorbian Grammar School as '2 plus' system: bilingual learning (in Sorbian, in German + 3rd language)



Sorbian Grammar School – in practice:

- From 5th grade to 10th grade pupils are divided into 3 groups:
 - native-speakers of Sorbian who have most of courses in Sorbian language (quasi-immersion education);
 - 2 plus (new-speakers): children from German-speaking homes who have some courses in Sorbian and Sorbian language lessons (quasi-bilingual education);
 - Sorbian as a foreign language (learners): children from German-speaking homes who learn Sorbian as a subject (2 hours per week).
- The distinction between these 3 groups is almost complete: they have no common lessons, no common excursions, no possibility and need to get to know each other.
- Only in 11th and 12th grade all groups have common courses and they are in German mostly.

German-speaking pupils feel separated:

W (learner)/ N (new-speaker) / M
(native-speaker)
F (female)/M (male)
15 (symbol given to interviewee)

WF14: Well, not only linguistically [we feel separated]. Because it is still like this, despite the meeting center, that these groups are sharply divided, Sorbian and German pupils take each their path. (...) In general, I think that the school made many mistakes when it comes to separating German and Sorbian pupils. It is clear that it wouldn't be possible to have common lessons with every subject taught in Sorbian, we just couldn't follow it. But concerning any other activities pupils should be connected better. Because it is not good that only in the 11th grade for the first time a kind of community is forming.

This distinction diminish chances of German-speaking pupils to improve their Sorbian:

NM7: I already asked many people if they could talk with me in Sorbian. And we speak Sorbian for 2-3 minutes, and they say: "No, we cannot speak Sorbian with you ". And it is always the same: "with some people it is possible to speak Sorbian and with others it is just impossible, it just doesn't work". And therefore no one speaks in Sorbian with us. And when we try, they don't follow you, don't correct you, they just say "ok, I understood". And I keep repeating "could you correct me?" and they correct one phrase and they say that they understood me anyway. And that is why we are not making any progress.

MF1: Well, yes, because they speak better and faster German than Sorbian. It is obvious **they** prefer **us** to speak **German with them** because their Sorbian is not good enough and it sounds strange. But I totally approve if they want to learn Sorbian.

German-speaking pupils lack motivation to acquire Sorbian language doubting to be ever accepted as a part of the community:

NF11: So I got a feeling that I keep pursuing something but I know that I will never reach it. And that is why I think I have no motivation to do something more for the Sorbian language. I could speak everyday with someone who knows Sorbian, and read Sorbian books, but I don't do this because I know that it won't give me anything. I don't feel a lack of acceptance as a German but I know I would never be accepted as a Sorb.

MF1: Of course one will **never be perceived as a Sorb** if only they come here and **learn Sorbian**. But if s/he lives here longer, learns the language and participates in our **customs and traditions**, then we could accept this person as a Sorb.

Some Sorbian native-speakers perceive German-speaking pupils as a threat for the Sorbian language:

MM5: Obviously, we are not happy when four girls speak German when only one of them is German. The question is if this would influence the language of the native-speakers (...). When you speak German at school, and also in the dormitory, then you can lose your Sorbian. I don't feel afraid to lose my Sorbian if I speak sometimes German, because I speak Sorbian at home, I have Sorbian friends, village, area... But **the fear is there**.

Actively encourage Upper Sorbs to speak Sorbian with learners:

NM7: Yes, sometimes I just want them to talk with me in Sorbian. For example, last week we had a history lesson. And there are only 5 Germans and 10 Sorbs who spoke with each other in Sorbian. And one girl said something to me in Sorbian. I was confused why did she speak Sorbian to me now, because she has never spoken Sorbian with me. And she did not stop in the middle of a phrase and "oh, I am sorry, I should speak German". Many people say so "oh, we shall speak German so everybody can understand us". And it was incredible, by the end of this day, I was thinking in Sorbian. I was sitting with my parents in the car, they asked me something, and I wanted to answer them in Sorbian.

Not to separate pupils during courses and afterschool activities:

WF17: I think native-speakers and not natives - those who are learning a language, they could be mixed together. It was always like that: German classes were with German classes, for example going on excursions, and Sorbian classes with Sorbian classes, so they really had no opportunity to mix together and to speak Sorbian. I would like it to be that way: we are all together, and some speak Sorbian, other German, but we can understand each other.

2 plus could function as immersion education:

NF19: At home we speak only German and in primary school we spoke Sorbian only during the Sorbian language lessons. It was only when I came to the Sorbian Grammar school that I started to speak Sorbian. (...) My teacher in the 4th grade said that it would be too difficult for me in the Sorbian class with native speakers but my mother said that it would be fine. My parents thought it was the only way to master Sorbian (...) And after a while I could speak Sorbian because I needed to.

CONCLUSION



- To establish an adequate educational programme a minority must answer the question to whom it is addressed?
- In the case of the Upper Sorbian minority it seems that the unspoken aim of the school is to maintain the Sorbian community (perceived as a linguistic, ethnic and religious one) and not to attract and integrate ‘potential speakers’ – learners and new-speakers.
- It is possible to do this but the Upper Sorbs themselves should accept them as a part of their community and not treat them as extras in the educational system.



Thank you!