

Sara Mičkec (Mitschke) 

Asymmetric Societal Bilingualism in Upper Lusatia: Narratives of Interlingual Upper Sorbian-German Families

Abstract

This article explores language practices and policies within interlingual Upper Sorbian-German families in the context of asymmetric societal bilingualism. In Catholic Upper Lusatia, where the intergenerational transmission of Upper Sorbian has been partially maintained, bilingualism remains largely confined to the minority group. While Upper Sorbian speakers also speak German, the dominant society is monolingual in German. Based on in-depth interviews with six interlingual families, supplemented by ethnographic observations, this study explores language attitudes that position German as the socially dominant language, whereas Sorbian is valued primarily within the family. The analysis reveals that although individual bilingualism is fostered within families and seen as a cultural asset, it does not necessarily translate into broader societal bilingualism, as the dominant language is generally perceived as the more appropriate in public life.

Keywords

asymmetric bilingualism, minority language, interlingual families, Upper Sorbian

Corresponding author

Sara Mičkec (Mitschke), Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland; **e-mail:** sara.mickec@ispan.edu.pl, **ORCID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0300-8687>

1. Introduction

Language practices and policies in Upper Lusatia, where monolingual German speakers live alongside and together with speakers of both German and Upper Sorbian, highlight the social dimension of bi- and multilingualism and raise questions about its stability and potential sustainability. The Sorbian-German case is an example of asymmetric societal bilingualism, where one segment of the population speaks two languages while another speaks only one (Marti 2023). Although both languages are spoken and officially recognised within the same, more or less defined, territory of the state, they hold minority and majority status, respectively. The majority language is used by a dominant group with greater social power and influence, which may also be numerically larger than other groups of speakers. The minority language is used by a subordinate and/or numerically smaller group within the same area. When a minority language is used by a subordinate group, it tends to occupy a lower social position, with limited legal status and lower prestige (Stavans & Hoffmann 2015). This dynamic is particularly salient when an autochthonous minority language is indigenous to the region and not spoken elsewhere. The relationship between minority and majority languages can be understood differently from a speaker-centred perspective or in terms of legal recognition and rights. From the speaker's view, numerical aspects are less relevant than social power relations and the negative experiences of minorisation resulting from using a non-dominant language (Flubacher & Purkardhofer 2022, 9). From a legal perspective, minority language rights are usually tied to designated territories under the territorial principle (Romaine 2013).

In contexts of unequal power relations between dominant and subordinate groups, language use often follows the principles of linguistic accommodation, favouring the language of the dominant social group. The linguistic subordination norm describes a situation in which minority language speakers switch to the majority language with or in front of majority language speakers (Hornsby 2011). This behaviour is both expected by society and interiorised by minority language speakers. Due to the asymmetrical distribution of language competences in society, convergence towards the dominant language is understood as politeness and courtesy and perceived as the only way to ensure smooth communication (Hornsby 2011). Additionally, the minority language is under pressure because, in terms of utility, it is perceived to have minimal practical and instrumental value in professional and academic contexts (Rosiak 2023). While minority languages may be important for

community life, their overall scope remains limited, as their use is restricted to fewer domains and lower-status contexts.

In situations of asymmetric societal bilingualism, the role of the family and its internal language policy becomes crucial (Lendák-Kabók 2022; 2024). This applies to both families in which both parents speak the minority language and families in which one parent speaks the majority language and the other also speaks the minority language. I refer to the latter as interlingual families. The family creates a space where parents shape and negotiate their aspirations for their children's individual bilingualism away from the public language dynamics, yet still shaped by prevailing societal norms.

In this article, I delve into how asymmetrical societal bilingualism reflects in the narratives of the members of interlingual families in Upper Lusatia, focusing on the perceived superiority of German and the important role of Sorbian in the family context. The unquestioned utilitarian value of German – along with purist ideals and negative attitudes towards features of multilingual speech and repertoires such as code-switching and uneven competence in both languages – positions German as the non-exclusionary, unifying language. This perception is reinforced by the limited instrumental value of Sorbian in achieving communicative goals. The study of Upper Sorbian-German interlingual families highlights the coexistence of positive attitudes towards the minority language within the family and community and towards the dominant language in societal and professional contexts. It shows that bilingual practices in the family setting do not necessarily translate into bilingualism in the public sphere, where norms of language use are slowly changing.

2. The Upper Sorbian-German Relationship: The Research Context

The Sorbs are an autochthonous Slavic ethnic group living in eastern Germany. This study focuses specifically on the Upper Sorbian community in Saxony. According to older estimates, there are between 13,000 and 25,000 Upper Sorbian speakers in Upper Lusatia (Elle 2010, 314–316). While Protestant Sorbian communities have experienced a significant language shift, the Catholic community in the administrative association of municipalities *Am Klosterwasser/Při Klóšterskej wodže* has managed to maintain the intergenerational language transmission to a certain extent (Walde 2004). Sorbian remains the language of

the community, spoken by about 69% of the population, including 1% who have acquired the language outside the family. The community is strongly attached to Sorbian traditions and customs, which are closely associated with Catholicism, a central pillar of community life.

Although both German and Sorbian are recognised as official languages in Lusatia, societal bilingualism in Upper Lusatia, including in the Catholic area, is asymmetric. Due to historical, political, and social pressures, Sorbian speakers are required to be proficient in German for (at least secondary) education, employment (with some exceptions in Sorbian cultural or educational institutions), and public life. In contrast, most German speakers do not know Sorbian, and it is not even required in Sorbian-speaking areas. This imbalance has led to Sorbian being primarily preserved within families, cultural institutions, and specific communities, while German dominates wider societal interactions, including in the Catholic community context (Dołowy-Rybińska & Ratajczak 2024).

In this article, based on research conducted for my PhD thesis, I will analyse how this asymmetric societal bilingualism is reflected in the discourses of interlingual families.

3. Research Methodology and Interlingual Families

Between 2021 and 2022, I conducted fieldwork in Upper Lusatia, where I grew up and spent most of my life. I interviewed and analysed data from six interlingual Upper Sorbian-German families in Catholic Upper Lusatia. The study explored language practices and family language policies through a biographical lens, which allowed me to focus on participants' experiences while avoiding unconscious bias stemming from my own background. I conducted 19 narrative biographical interviews, treating language biographies as evolving, relational accounts influenced by social dynamics, discourses, and ideologies. These narratives provided insights into language choices, practices, and evaluations within personal and broader social contexts. While the participants focused on their own experiences, their accounts also reflected community-wide attitudes and shared cultural knowledge. As Flubacher and Purkarthofer (2022, 8) note, language biographical research seeks to understand the social dimensions of language practices and ideologies, beyond individual life stories.

For the narrative biographical interviews, I followed Schütze's (1983) approach, allowing the participants to share their own language-related autobiographies before asking clarifying or thematic questions. I spoke

in Sorbian with Sorbian-speaking parents and older children, and in German with German-speaking parents. Younger children participated in language-related discussions through drawing language portraits (Busch 2013).

In addition to interviews, I used ethnographic open participant observations to capture language practices and ideologies in everyday life. Ethnographic methods are well established in sociolinguistic research (McCarty 2011) and widely applied in family language policy studies (e.g., Lanza 2021; Smith-Christmas 2016). Ethnographic approaches help to reveal covert motivations, embedded ideologies, and power dynamics in language practices (Hornberger & Johnson 2011). My aim was to understand how these factors influence language maintenance at both individual and community levels.

Interviews were transcribed using MAXQDA (2022), with basic discourse transcription conventions, noting features like pauses [...], laughter (@), truncated words (z-), loud/stressed syllables (FEJty), uncertain/unintelligible words (#tukli), and my comments (()), although not always consistently. Acknowledging the potential limitations of transcription detail (Pavlenko 2007), I re-listened to selected sections during analysis to minimise misinterpretation.

For data analysis, I used thematic analysis to identify key themes related to language preservation, practices, attitudes, and ideologies. Adopting a combined inductive and deductive approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006), I coded the interviews for participant-specific utterances and broader patterns. I then applied content-based discourse analysis, incorporating participant observations, to contextualise the narratives within broader community and social structures (Nekvapil 2003). Examining omissions and implicit details further revealed how participants positioned themselves and their languages within changing language landscapes.

This article is based on interviews with members of six nuclear, heteronormative, two-parent families living in villages in the Catholic part of Upper Lusatia. The families are referred to by codes: an uppercase letter for the family (A, B, C, D, F, J) and italicised lowercase letters for the parents (*m* – mother or *f* – father) or numbers for the child's age. The primary language used by the parents with the children is indicated by lowercase letters (*s* – Sorbian, *g* – German). The code *smi* refers to me as the interviewer.

All couples are interlingual, with one parent speaking primarily Sorbian and the other primarily German to the children. Three German-speaking parents grew up with Sorbian-speaking parents who spoke

German with the family (*Amg*, *Cfg*, *Jmg*). One Sorbian-speaking parent (*Jfs*) started using Sorbian later in life and now speaks it with his children.

The families' language policies (Lanza & Lomeu Gomes 2020) are mostly openly bilingual rather than Sorbian-centred, with the parents wanting to pass on both Sorbian and German to their children. However, few parents discuss whether the German-speaking parent should learn Sorbian. German is the primary language of communication between the partners, with some occasional Sorbian words. Only one parent (*Jfs*) uses some Sorbian to address his partner, and one German-speaking parent (*Jmg*) occasionally uses Sorbian with her young children at home.

Language use within the families follows various patterns. In three families (*B*, *F*, *J*), the Sorbian-speaking parent uses Sorbian with the children in the presence of the German-speaking parent, while in three others (*A*, *C*, *D*), only German is spoken. All children are active bilinguals and use Sorbian in at least some situations. They tend to use both languages among themselves, with German often being dominant, and most of them use Sorbian with their Sorbian-speaking parent. Some children speak both languages with bilingual peers, although many tend to be more confident with German.

4. German, The Language of Professional Advancement

Language attitudes are evaluative reactions (beliefs, feelings, behaviours) towards language varieties and their speakers. They typically occur along the two basic dimensions of status and solidarity, associated with upward social mobility and with social identity and in-group loyalty, respectively (Kircher & Zipp 2022). German is highly valued on the status dimension because of its utilitarian value in vocational training, tertiary education, and the work environment, and is thus associated with economic opportunities. Although there are job and education opportunities that include Sorbian or build on Sorbian language skills, the utilitarian value associated with German is higher. Sorbian may be seen as an advantage, but German is considered a prerequisite for professional advancement. For some, the link between German and the professional environment is so strong that they do not even consider the possibility of using Sorbian at work. D30, for instance, recalls his surprise at hearing medical staff in a hospital speaking Sorbian during surgery.

(D30)

A to za mnje jara běše tam w H. runje im opej stać a te su tam wšo na serbsce sej unterhaltwali, rozmohweli, te cyle ärzte mit den schwestern. A to ja tak šće gor njejsym widžať. A to sym ja pon tón jednu schwester pon prašať, kak to nětko klopwje, dokelž te tla trjebaja te cyle fachbegriffe tež, nětko tón skalpel oder daj mi něk to. A dokelž te maja, oder su tam šće jara wjele stare ärzte tež měli, a te schwestern a te su wšě móhli serbsce a tam su te pon na serbsce tam operěwali. A to sym ja eben myslať: Mensch, kak to tak wšo dže. To ta šće dawa tajke něšto! To běše wirklich za mnje jara zajimawe. To ja tak šće njejsym widžať. Haj. To běše wirklich intresant.

And there in H., for me it was very [special], especially standing in the surgery room² and they were all *talking* in Sorbian, all the *doctors with the nurses*. I had never seen that before. And then I asked one of the *nurses* how it would work, because they also need all the *technical terms*, hand me the scalpel or now hand me this. And because they still have *or* had many old *doctors* there, and the *nurses*, and they all knew Sorbian, they operated in Sorbian. And then I thought: Wow, how it all works. Such things still exist! That was *really* very interesting for me. I hadn't seen anything like that before. Yes. That was indeed *interesting*.

D30's account about the hospital contradicts the common perception that Sorbian does not play a major role in working life. It challenges the conclusion that Sorbian cannot be an instrumental part of professional life because German is important for education and work. D30's astonishment at the language use in the surgery room may be all the greater because it involved an activity in which mistakes can have serious consequences and reliable communication is indispensable. D30's encounter with Sorbian in this situation differs from his previous experiences with Sorbian, prompting him to attribute it to the differing everyday linguistic realities across generations. He says that "many old doctors there, and the nurses" still worked in the hospital and that he was amazed that "such things still exist". He implicitly shows the marginal place of Sorbian (in the sense of active or receptive language use) in his linguistic reality. The implied comparison with older generations suggests his assumption that Sorbian played a more prominent role in the past. Although his positive reaction to hearing Sorbian in the professional context of a surgery can be seen as a moment of re-evaluating its potential, it also highlights that, even in the heart of the Sorbian-speaking area, he sees himself as part of a declining group of Sorbian speakers.

Many participants mention the necessity of German in professional life. Its positive evaluation in terms of usefulness in education and work influences language choices and often comes at the expense of Sorbian. For example, Sorbian-medium instruction in schools is sometimes seen as an obstacle or as unnecessary for further education and employment in a German language context. Amg sees German as the most important language for professional life. While she certainly sees opportunities to use Sorbian in specific career choices, such as Sorbian studies or working with a Sorbian craftsman, she notes that “work is also mostly in German”, implying that her sons are unlikely to need Sorbian in their working environment.

(Amg, 42)

Aber, wie gesagt, für's spätere Leben ist ja dann größtenteils Deutsch @. No, also, es sei denn, die studieren jetzt irgendwas, Sorabistik, oder @ sorbischer Lehrer oder ... No, aber, der Großteil wird in Deutsch stattfinden. No. Dass man diese Sprache kann und dass das nicht ausstirbt, ist alles gut. No, aber der Alltag, oder der meiste Teil des Lebens, ist ja dann, also wie gesagt, die Arbeit ja größtenteils auch in Deutsch. Außer man macht jetzt hier irgendwo bei einem sorbischen Handwerker seine Ausbildung, dann spricht man ja auch wieder Sorbisch, aber Berufsschule wird deutsch sein und alles.

But, as I said, for later life it's mostly German @. Yeah, well, now, unless they study something, Sorbian studies, or @ Sorbian teacher or ... Yeah, but for the most part it will be in German. Yeah. It's all good to know this language and that it doesn't die out. Yeah, but everyday life, or most of life, is, as I said, work is also mostly in German. Unless you do your apprenticeship with a Sorbian craftsman somewhere here, then again you will speak Sorbian, but vocational school will be in German and everything.

Amg's reflections indicate that she considers occupations involving or requiring Sorbian to be insignificant. Even though teaching at a Sorbian school involves the use of Sorbian, she depicts everyday life as being predominantly in German. Similarly, even if one trains with a Sorbian craftsman, “vocational school will be in German and everything,” and German remains essential. The phrase “most of life” likely refers to the amount of time spent at work, and not necessarily to afterwork life. Implicitly, however, Amg's account highlights how adapting to the language preference of the German dominant speaker in linguistically mixed situations reduces the opportunities for using Sorbian. The perception of Sorbian as a language that can only be used on limited

occasions leads her to question the practicality of receiving education in Sorbian. It becomes strikingly clear that the positive perception of Sorbian as a language with legitimacy to exist is somehow abstract and does not resonate with the lived experience of Sorbian, especially when *Amg* says that, technically, it is good to know Sorbian and not to let it die out, but in everyday life it is rather necessary to use German.

Students also experience Sorbian as burdensome. The daughter of family C, who is a very proud bilingual, contested the Sorbian-medium education at school and did not want to have it imposed on her. Her reasoning in the quoted excerpt is in line with that of *Amg*. After school, she explains, vocational training requires learning content in German; being taught in Sorbian leaves students ill-prepared for this next stage.

(C17)

A hewak je jen džěl wučerjow tež dawać, kotrež su, tym, te njejsu tak jara na te serbske drängwali kaž te tamne. Te su pon woboje rěčeli oder tež bóle němske, dokelž te tež wědža, kaž ja, jen to pon po tym wjac nima eigentlich serbsce, außer, hdyž jen na Serbski gymnazij dže abo tak. Hewak jen ta, hdyž jen, my tla smy normal wyša šula a potym jen čini jedne wukubłanje abo tak a tam tla to njeje wjace z tym serbskim a pon jen je kaž aufgeschmissen, hdyž jen wšo na serbsce ma a gor njewě kak to wšo na němske rěka. Vor allem bio, chemie, to pak sym ja pon wjesoła była, te su pon, kaž bio, chemie, physik, pon prajili: Ok, wir machen das jetzt auf Deutsch. Die ganzen Fachbegriffe, to lěpje za nas. To sym ja wjesoła była.

And there were also those teachers who didn't *push* for Sorbian as much as the others. They spoke both languages or more German, because they also know, like me, that you don't *really* use Sorbian afterwards, unless you go to the Sorbian grammar school or something like that. Otherwise, we are a normal secondary school after all, and afterwards you go into vocational training or something, and there it's no longer Sorbian and then you're like *lost* if you have everything in Sorbian and don't know what it's all called in German. *Especially biology and chemistry*, but I was glad that they said, like *biology, chemistry, physics*, 'OK, we'll do it in German now.' *All the technical terms*, it's better for us. So I was relieved.

Learning through Sorbian is only seen as useful for those pursuing further Sorbian education at "the Sorbian high school or similar institution." C17 contrasts this with "we are a normal secondary school", suggesting that after leaving school real life is dominated by German. Her perception of an overly strong Sorbian orientation at school is likely influenced by her parents, who consider German to be important and necessary. C17's mother, *Cms*, experienced difficulties when, after receiving a Sor-

bian education, she began her vocational training in a German-speaking environment. In the following quotation, she recalls meeting young colleagues at work who faced similar struggles and expresses frustration that she and they were not better prepared for the German-medium professional training.

(Cms, 44)

A nětko sym ja to na džěle tež sobu krydnyła, pola nas je jedyn wukubłanje činiť a tón je tež dyrbjať něšto powědać. A tón je so z jednej praktikantku rozmołwjať. A ta ma tež tajki problem. Te su činili jenož serbske, serbske, serbske a nětko wone to pytnu, kajke problemy te maja potom we wukubłanju, hdyž to dale dže. Z tej němčinu. Haj. Ja sym prajiła, to je pola mnje tež tak było. To mje mjerza, zo to tak je. Zo jen to bóle, m, te em wšě jowle hladaja, zo te te serbske, serbske wažne je, no. Ale z němčinu jen pak eigentlich dalešo přiidže. Ja njewěm.

And now I've also noticed this at work, one of our trainees also had to tell something. And he was talking to an intern. And she has a similar problem. They only did Sorbian, Sorbian, Sorbian and now they realise what problems they have during their training. With German. Yes. I said it was the same with me. It annoys me that it's like that. That you have more, m, here they all make sure that Sorbian, Sorbian is important, isn't it. But you can *actually* get further with German. I don't know.

For Cms, who had always been proficient in Sorbian and had never struggled with it, the difficulty with German was unpleasant. She maintains that Sorbian should not be prioritised over German in school, stating that "you can actually get further with German".

Sorbian-medium schooling is not seen as an opportunity to strengthen the minority language, but rather as an obstacle to mastering the next stage of life. The school's role in raising the prestige of Sorbian is therefore only symbolic, because in reality no one demands knowledge in standard Sorbian. What appears to matter more is the ability to fit seamlessly into a German-language educational and professional environment.

In a similar vein, Afs explains why it is necessary for the local firefighters to communicate in German among themselves in order to prepare for interacting with monolingual German firefighters from other places or coordination points. He argues that hesitation is detrimental to a firefighter's mission, and any efforts to use Sorbian in this specific environment must be subordinated to a smooth communicative ability in German. Speaking German is therefore necessary in order to train communicative confidence for all scenarios.

(Afs, 45)

wšo, štož je službnje, ja dyrbjju němsce činić, dokelž su tam techniske wurazy. Tam by sej jen něhdže dyrbjať, also to by jen dyrbjať, haj, jen by móht vielleicht to sčinić, ale hdyž jen nětko něhdže na jedne zasadženje jědže a tam je jedna druha wohnjowa wobora pódlu, z-, z [...] kónčin, kotrež žane serbsce njemóža, pon ja njemóžu na přikład prajić, Tamle ta klupa stej. To, to je kusk hubjene potom. No, oder pon tam stej, dort steht die Feuerwehrrpumpe, bitte bedienen, oder das Funkgerät. [...] A pon je, w tajkich wěcach, w zasadženjach tam tež druhdy wo sekundy dže. Tam dyrbi potom kóžda ruka cak, cak a to potom ...

everything that's official, I have to do in German, because there are technical terms. You would need to, well, you would need to, yes, you could maybe do that, but if you're going on a mission somewhere and there's another fire brigade there, from [...] ((neighbouring region)), who don't know Sorbian, then I can't say, for example, There is the pump. That, that is a bit bad then. Yeah, or there is, *there is the fire pump, please operate it, or the radio unit* [...] And with things like this, during operations, it is sometimes a matter of seconds. Every move has to be done in a flash, and that's ...

Since German is perceived as highly useful and above all necessary in the professional world, societal bilingualism is considered burdensome and time-consuming. Sorbian is viewed as an asset, but it does not replace the need for fluency in German.

5. Sorbian: The Language of Home, Community, and Attachment

In contrast to German, Sorbian is highly valued on the solidarity dimension. It is mentioned more often in relation to family, local community, and care work than in relation to educational and professional advancement. Positive attitudes towards Sorbian in interpersonal relations illustrate its importance for in-group loyalty, and Sorbian, as a language “that is evaluated positively on the solidarity dimension, is one that elicits feelings of attachment and belonging” (Kircher & Zipp 2022, 11). As a result, some participants saw Sorbian as useful in connecting with people who they felt were attached to Sorbian. Positive attitudes towards Sorbian in terms of solidarity and belonging are also noticed and acknowledged by those who feel more attached to or more proficient in German.

All Sorbian-speaking parents in my research spoke Sorbian with their children, underscoring its importance for direct interpersonal

communication and for the perception that its acquisition is linked to intergenerational transmission in the family and to close ties between individuals. The importance of Sorbian for the family was not explicitly mentioned, likely because the same applies to German. The use of both languages has to be negotiated within the family, with both languages contributing to family identity. What was explicitly addressed was the family's role in passing on Sorbian, especially by Sorbian-speaking participants who agreed with their partner to prioritise German over Sorbian in formal education. If German is seen as a prerequisite for later education and parents want their children to be prepared for it already during primary or secondary school, then it seems logical that they emphasise the importance of Sorbian for interpersonal relationships in the intimate family sphere.

Cms and *Cfg* expressed dissatisfaction with the current bilingual teaching concept, because they would like the teaching to be entirely or mainly in German. In the quoted excerpt, the beginning of our conversation refers to the fact that the teachers at their children's school do not like it when the pupils talk to each other in German and encourage them to speak Sorbian. *Cms*, on the other hand, thinks it is good that her children speak German with their peers and actively use both languages, Sorbian and German, from the beginning. Asked about her assumption about the teachers' motives, she says that the teachers were probably worried that the Sorbian language would disappear. In response, she tells me that she considers the use of Sorbian in the family to be more important for the preservation of the language than its use in school.

(*Cms*, 44)

Cms: *Ja pak sym z tej wučerku nětko tež powědała, [...] Ja sym prajiła, em: Haj, šón, zo tene fajn, super, te słowa te pon so zhubja, hyno, tene cyłe wurazy, te wulke a tak dale. Ja pak sym prajiła: Ta serbska řeč jenož wostanje, hdyž jen jow w swójbje serbsce powěda. To je nětko moje persönlichen měnjenje, hyno. Kaž hdyž něchtó nětko něšto studěruje a Bóh wě što, a doma, zno sym ja tež dožiwiła, te w serb-, wirklich něšto serbske činja a studěrowane su a wšo, ale doma wone němsce powědaja z tymi džěćimi. To tla tež bekloppt! Nětko moje měnjenje, no. Tajke bych to dyrbjeli grode! Ja přeco praju, štož doma powědane wodwje, to, to budže wostać. A nic ...*

smi: *Nó.*

Cms: *Nó. To je nětko moje měnjenje. Ja njewěm. Ja jemol tak praju. M.*

smi: *No haj, wone jen wažny džěl je! Also bjez- To žane prašenje njeje. Nó.*

Cms: *Hdyž jen kóždy džerń něšto powěda.*

smi: *Nó, nó.*

Cms: A jowle te maja tón móžnosć. Hdyž mój muž doma je – hdyž wón jónu doma je – nětko su tla wone starše, to je hinak, hyno. Te z tym němsce powědaja, ze mnu wone serbsce powědaja.

smi: *M. Also z Wami je skerje serbsce takrjec a to, na gut, hačrunjež wón praji a- genau-*

Cms: A hdyž pak wón nětko tu je a my smy hromadže, ja druhdy mol něšto nutř rjesnu, serbske, ok. To pak je wuwzaće. Najbóle my němsce powědamy pon hromadže.

Cms: But I have also spoken to the teacher, [...] I have said, um: Yes, okay, it's fine, super, these words are disappearing, right, all these terms, the big ones and so on. But I said: The Sorbian language remains only if you speak Sorbian here in the family. That's my personal opinion, right. And not if someone studies God knows what, and at home, I have already experienced that, they-, they really do something Sorbian and have studied and everything, but at home they speak German with the children. I mean, that's crazy! Well, that's my opinion, yeah. Such people would have to ((speak Sorbian at home/with their children))! I always say, what is spoken at home, that, that will stay. And not ...

smi: *Yeah.*

Cms: Yeah. That's my opinion. I don't know. That's what I would say. Hm.

smi: *Well, it's an important part! So without- That's not a question. Yeah.*

Cms: If you talk a little bit every day.

smi: *Yeah, yeah.*

Cms: And here they have the opportunity. When my husband is at home – when he's at home – now they're older, it's different, right. They speak German with him, with me they speak Sorbian.

smi: *Hm. So with you more Sorbian, so to speak, and that, well, although he says and- exactly-*

Cms: And when he's here now and we're together, I sometimes throw in something, in Sorbian, okay. But that's an exception. We mostly speak German together.

By emphasising the importance of transmitting Sorbian within the family, *Cms* defends the decision to have her children taught in German, distinguishing between educational and interpersonal language use. If the latter is in Sorbian, the former does not necessarily have to be in Sorbian. Furthermore, she believes that Sorbian language education at school is less credible without home language transmission. For *Cms*, using Sorbian in private life is authentic, and indicates that someone is serious about Sorbian, and, ultimately, that they are part of the Sorbian community.

Many participants reflected on their childhood and youth without too much reference to language. *Jfs* recalls Sorbian community life, the

youth club, parties, the firefighters, and village festivities in a positive, emotional and expressive manner.

90

(Jfs, 40)

... also kaž prajene, přeco hromadže dźerželi, to je super było. [...] a pon smy započeli tón jugendclub wutwarić a činić a WŠO sami. A pon smy my [...] zaso přěni króč meju stajili. A PON je něšto lós było. My smy FEJty činili, ty, jesusmarja! A to su tež zes WJESki wjele, wjele wjace ludži tež přišli. Nětk tla, to tla total mało. ... To sy ty sobu měrkwať, zo to kusk šće bóle, na wie sagt man, mehr angenommen war das Ganze. Das war so Dorffeste tež. My smy přeco z wohnjowej wobory te wjesne swjedženje činili a my smy přeco zno jako džěci, jako młodostne sobu činili tamle. A pon smy my tam sobu nutř #tukli ((wukli?)), no ... und mitgemacht, das war ... te wjesne swjedženje, das war schon, dorfleben war schon GANZ anders wie jetzt, hyno. [...] Jowle, hier, kermušu. To je něšto jara wosebite było. Wjele, wjele wjace lós było. Wjace pomocniki su tež richtig, also da kannst du jeden, konntest du jeden fragen, die haben immer mitgemacht. Wšojedne štó. Auch die nicht so oft in der Jugend waren oder so. Hattest du die angesprochen, Ja komm ich. To je to, to je echt ...

... as I said, we always stuck together, which was great. [...] and then we started to build up the youth club and EVERYTHING on our own. And then we [...] put up the maypole again for the first time. And THEN there was something going on. We had PARTies, Jesus! And many, many more people came from the Village. Now it's just a few. ... You noticed that it was a bit more, how do you say, more accepted. That was, also village festivals. We always prepared the village festivals with the fire brigade and we always took part there as children, as young people. And then we joined in, yeah ... and took part, that was ... the village festivals, that was really, village life was REALLY different from now, right. [...] Here, here, church fairs. That was also something very special. There was much, much more going on. There were more helpers, so you can ask anyone, you could ask anyone, they always helped. No matter who. Even those who weren't with the youth so often. If you asked them, Yes, I'll come. That's it, that's really ...

Jfs did not grow up speaking Sorbian in his family but began using it in the community he felt so good in. The positive way in which he describes his youth in the village highlights his motivation to start using Sorbian. Although he does not mention language directly in the quote, he refers to a place where the people he felt at home with spoke Sorbian to each other.

D28 similarly emphasises the significant role of Sorbian traditions and local customs in her life, confirming the connection of Sorbian language and identity with the local community.

(D28)

A tajke něšto ja tež rady chcem, zo moje džěci to pon sobu wzaja, a zo wone to tež wuknu a tež tón lubosć namakaja, tež naše tradicije. To je tajke něšto rjane, ja přeco prajim, haj, tajkeho křižerja oder tajku družku, to je něšto jara fajn. A ja wo tym zno tajk-, ja sym zno feuer und flamme za tajke něšto a ja bych to rady, zo moje džěci to pon tež mol maja. Dokelž ja tež přeco widžim, ja mam tež wšo tu a to by fajn było, hdyž tam mol irgendsněchtó tak nutř rosće a to pon tež tak, tajku lubosć za to dóstanje. Also, mi to šón bych jara wažne było, hdyž ja pon mol džěci dóstanjem, zo to pon wšo tak dže, dokelž pola nas tež wšo tak normal je, zo znajmjeńša tajki, tajki hauch von serbsčina nutřka je.

And I would also like my children to take this with them, and that they also learn this and find this love, also our traditions. It's something so beautiful, I always say, yes, such a *křižer*³ or such a *družka*⁴, that is something very fine. And I'm really, I'm *really enthusiastic* about it and I would like my children to have it too. Because I see that I have everything here and it would be great if someone would grow into it and also develop such love for it. So that would be very important to me, if I ever have children, that it all goes like that, because everything is so normal with us, at least such a, a *touch of Sorbian* is in it.

D28's choice of words, such as *tón lubosć namakaja* ("find this love") or *Feuer und Flamme* ("really enthusiastic"), shows her attachment and her desire to pass this wealth on to her future children. Although she sees Sorbian as a self-evident part of life ("everything is so normal with us") and closely connected to what is dear to her, her ambitions to pass on Sorbian seem somewhat restrained when reading her remark that "at least such a, a touch of Sorbian is in it". D28 seems to be aware of the changing linguistic environments in which she and her mother grew up, as she is less confident in speaking Sorbian than her mother. She makes a conscious effort to use more Sorbian than she did in her youth – with her mother and others outside her close circle of friends. Her lowered aspirations when imagining passing on Sorbian to her future children may stem from a realistic assessment of what is feasible and a desire to avoid disappointment.

6. Conclusions

In contexts of asymmetric societal bilingualism within autochthonous minority settings, language maintenance within the family presents a significant challenge. While families play a crucial role in intergenerational transmission, they do not operate in isolation; their language

choices are shaped by broader societal pressures that favour the dominant language. In interlingual families, the use of the minority language is constantly negotiated, constrained by societal norms and beliefs that often limit the domains and contexts in which it is used.

The perception that the minority language is less useful or valuable in wider communication, particularly with non-minority speakers, weakens the motivation and pressure to achieve fluency. While emotional attachment to the minority language may remain strong within families and communities, its functional role is often overshadowed by the need for fluency in the dominant language. As a result, basic communicative competence in the minority language may be accepted as sufficient, while mastery of the dominant language is considered essential.

From a language policy perspective, this study emphasises that individual bilingualism does not automatically translate into societal bilingualism. Structural constraints make it difficult for individuals to maintain the minority language without external support. Therefore, effective measures to strengthen minority languages must go beyond encouraging individual family-based language policies. They should also focus on fostering a more favourable social environment – one that strengthens the minority language, enhances its visibility, and demonstrates its social and economic value. Only through such a comprehensive approach can the vitality of minority languages be preserved in the face of pressures from the dominant language and society.

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Notes

- ¹ In this article, I set aside additional languages that contribute to individual bi- and multilingualism, as the focus is on societal bilingualism in a majority-minority context.
- ² Italics in the English translations indicate cases of code switching.
- ³ *Křižer* – Easter rider: dressed in distinctive attire and forming processions, men on horseback proclaim the resurrection of Christ by singing hymns and praying on their way to a partner Catholic parish village.
- ⁴ *Družka*: the festive Sorbian-Catholic traditional costume worn by unmarried girls on special occasions.

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Asimetrična družbena dvojezičnost v Gornji Lužici: primer jezikovno mešanih lužiškosrbsko-nemških družin

Izvleček

Članek preučuje jezikovne prakse in politike v jezikovno mešanih lužiškosrbsko-nemških družinah in ugotavlja asimetrično družbeno dvojezičnost. V katoliški Gornji Lužici, kjer deloma še poteka medgeneracijski prenos gornjelužiške srbščine, ostaja dvojezičnost v veliki meri omejena na pripadnike manjšine. Medtem ko govorci gornjelužiške srbščine govorijo

tudi nemško, pa je jezik večine izključno nemščina. Na podlagi poglobljenih intervjujev s šestimi jezikovno mešanimi družinami in etnografskih opazovanj študija raziskuje jezikovno realnost, kjer je prevladujoči jezik v družbi nemščina, lužiška srbščina pa je cenjena predvsem v domačem okolju. Ugotovitve kažejo, da se dvojezičnost posameznikov v družinah sicer spodbuja in velja za kulturno vrednoto, a se ta ne odraža nujno v širši družbeni dvojezičnosti, saj v javnem življenju za ustreznjše na splošno velja prevladujoči jezik.

95

Ključne besede

asimetrična dvojezičnost, manjšinski jezik, jezikovno mešane družine, gornjelužiška srbščina