

# A PROPOSAL FOR A NEW CLASSIFICATION OF THE DIALECTS AND LANGUAGES IN POLAND

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In this article, the author proposes a classification of the dialects and languages spoken in Poland today. The Polish government, in the *Act of 6 January 2005 on National and Ethnic Minorities and on the Regional Languages*, presents the names of national and ethnic minorities in the country and declares that the members of each group have the right to use their own language. In the author's opinion, however, some parts of the act do not reflect the real language situation. Pointing out such contradictions, the author reclassifies the dialects and minority languages from a sociolinguistic point of view.

**Keywords:** sociolinguistics, minority languages in Poland, language policy, language situation, Silesian, Lemkian, Kashubian

Авторът на настоящия текст предлага класификация на диалектите и езиците, които се говорят в Полша днес. В закона от 6 януари 2005 г. относно етническите малцинства и техните регионални езици полското правителство представя имената на националните и етнически малцинства в страната и декларира, че членовете на всяка една група имат правото да използват своя собствен език. Според автора на статията някои части от закона не отразяват реалната езикова ситуация. Въз основа на тази своя хипотеза авторът прекласифицира диалектите и малцинствените езици от социолингвистична гледна точка.

**Ключови думи:** социолингвистика, минорни езици в Полша, езикова политика, езикова ситуация, силезийски, лемко, кашубски

## **Introduction**

It is generally thought that only Polish is used in the Republic of Poland. This opinion is right to some extent because, according to the census published by the Central Statistical Office of Poland in 2011, 92% of the population speak only Polish at home (Census 2011: 108), which means the language functions as the medium of everyday communication. If we are interested in the language situation from the sociolinguistic point of view, however, our view has to be expanded, because there are many minority languages and regional dialects of Polish in the country, and some of them have been the topic of serious public discussions, constituting

problematic issues. In this paper, the author considers the national and ethnic minorities in contemporary Poland and, taking the national language policy into account, proposes a new classification of the dialects and minority languages.

## 5. Language Policy: General Information

State language policies can be one of the most interesting themes not only for linguistics, but also for sociology or political science. *Language policy* is a term with many meanings, and it can be analyzed in various ways. Walery Pisarek, a Polish linguist, writes that we should take into account at least three aspects of language policy (Pisarek 2008: 80):

The **legal aspect** means administrative or political actions concerning languages. It appears most clearly in governmental decisions or acts. In the case of Poland, the *Act of 7 October 1999 on the Polish Language* and *Act of 6 January 2005 on National and Ethnic Minorities and on the Regional Languages* are the most representative official documents.

The **language culture aspect** concerns the ability of an efficient, correct use of a language — in layman's terms, how to use the language. This aspect we can observe in published materials, for example, textbooks or guides. According to the *Encyclopedia of General Linguistics* (Pol. *Encyklopedia językoznawstwa ogólnego*, Polański 1993: 321), the term “language culture” is used mainly in Slavonic countries.<sup>1</sup>

According to Pisarek, any kind of activities related to teaching foreign languages can be called the **educational aspect** of a language policy. Here, the term “foreign languages” includes not only “major” languages, such as English, French, German, etc., but also minority languages. Generally, the local or state government has the right to choose which languages are taught in compulsory education. For this reason, the educational aspect is useful when we consider how a governmental body guarantees the status of foreign (non-official) languages.

This paper focuses on the first aspect, i.e. the legal aspect, because the author analyzes how minority languages are treated at the political level in the Republic of Poland.

## 2. Short History of Language Policy in Poland

Under the reign of communism in Poland (called “the People's Republic of Poland” at the time) from 1945 to 1989, the ideology of the “moral and political unity of the nation” was

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<sup>1</sup> Lubaś and Pawłowski point out that two concepts (*language policy* and *language culture*) are often seen as the same thing. Pawłowski says this inaccurate understanding originates from a history of lengthy occupations by other countries, e.g., the Partitions of Poland and WWII. In these times, Polish had a symbolic role for Poles, and a tendency of language purism has existed until today (Lubaś 1975: 235; Pawłowski 2006: 8).

promoted so strongly that minorities' rights were ignored or abused. More precisely, the conception of "minority" did not exist during communist times, because the ideology implied the unity of the "Polish" nation. Alfred Majewicz and Tomasz Wicherkiewicz describe the minority policies of the communists and say that some of the actions carried out under these policies were of a criminal nature (Majewicz and Wicherkiewicz 1998: 55). For example, forced displacements and deportations of non-Polish people took place soon after WWII under the slogan of "repatriation." One of the most representative of such political actions is Operation Vistula in 1947, in which Ukrainians, including the Lemko people, were forced to go to the "Recovered Territories." Religious intolerance towards non-Catholic denominations also should be remembered. The Roman Catholic Church in Poland was very negative, especially against the Orthodox Church, throughout communist times. In extreme cases, using non-Polish languages in Catholic churches was banned or religious believers were prohibited from visiting non-Roman Catholic buildings (Majewicz and Wicherkiewicz 1998: 57).

Public discussions and book publications about minority issues became possible in the 1990s, after the dynamic political change in Eastern Europe. At the same time (in 1992), the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (ECRML) was adopted by the Council of Europe. Six years after the charter, the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities* (FCPNM) came into effect. In the 1990s, the situation surrounding minorities started to change radically not only in Poland, but also throughout Europe. Sven Gustavsson, a Swedish linguist, summarizes the reactions of member states to the charter and convention (Gustavsson 2006).

### **3. Current Language Policy in Poland**

Much later, a fundamental change took place in Polish language policy. In 2005, the *Act of 6 January 2005 on National and Ethnic Minorities and on the Regional Languages* (hereafter, "Act 2005") came into effect. Act 2005 recognizes the following groups as national or ethnic minorities:

National minorities: 1) Armenians, 2) Byelorussians, 3) Czechs, 4) Germans, 5) Jews, 6) Lithuanians, 7) Russians, 8) Slovaks, and 9) Ukrainians

Ethnic minorities: 1) the Karaim, 2) the Lemko, 3) the Roma, and 4) the Tatar

The Polish government recognizes that all of these minorities have the right to use their own language in both official and private life and to write their personal names according to the spelling rules of their language's orthography, though transliteration is needed if their writing depends on a non-Roman alphabet (e.g., Cyrillic letters, Hebrew alphabet). One who is interested in Polish language policy should examine the definition of a

“regional language.” Act 2005 says that a regional language is

- (1) traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State, who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State’s population; and
- (2) different from the official language of that State; it shall not include either dialects of the official language of the State or the languages of migrants (Act 2005: 9).

The Polish government, considering these definitions, recognizes Kashubian (Cassubian) as the sole regional language in Poland.

#### **4. Problems of Act 2005**

So far, we have taken a general view of Polish language policy. One who knows about minority rights abuse in communist Poland would be surprised at the radical change in the situation surrounding non-Polish languages. Of course, Act 2005 is one of the greatest achievements after the post-communism reforms. In the author’s opinion, however, some parts of the act need to be discussed about because of the lack of adequate understanding of minority languages.

(1) Act 2005 presents the names of national and ethnic minorities and allows them to use their own languages (minority languages), though it demands transliteration of non-Roman alphabet writing. However, the Act does not contain a specific definition of a “minority language.” On the other hand, a “regional language” is defined in detail in Chapter 4. This problem leads to (2), (3), and (4) below.

(2) According to the Act, users of a regional language (Kashubians, in the case of Poland) constitute “a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State’s population.” Needless to say, national or ethnic minorities also satisfy this condition. Act 2005 does not clearly explain the difference between users of a regional language vs. a minority language.

(3) Act 2005 does not mention Silesian in spite of the fact that it has been the subject of various public discussions. In the 2011 census, 817,000 respondents identified themselves as Silesian, and among them, 362,000 chose it as their sole identity; that is, they declared their ethnicity as Silesian, not Polish. The total number of people who identified as Kashubian was only 229,000. (Census 2011: 106) It is worth mentioning that Kashubian was traditionally treated as a dialect of Polish, as Silesian is now. Today, however, the Kashubian “dialect” has been promoted to a “language,” whereas Silesian retains the status of a “dialect.”

Statistical data and previous studies indicate that Silesian is an active local vernacular, meaning that it is used in the everyday communication of Silesians (Skudrzykova and Urban 1998: 176; Wicherkiewicz 2006: 657). It should be pointed that there are even some Silesians

who demand regional autonomy, e.g., the *Silesian Autonomy Movement* (Pol. *Ruch Autonomii Śląska*). The issue of autonomy is separate from that of whether Silesian should qualify as a regional language or not, but given the number of Silesians, Polish language policy should not avoid mentioning the status of their variety of speech.

(4) The Act 2005 recognizes the Lemko as an ethnic minority. *Lemko* is the name of an ethnographic subgroup called the (Carpatho-)Ruthenians. The name is used mainly in Poland; in Slovakia, this group is referred to as the Ruthenians (*Rusin* or *Rusnak*) (Rieger 1995: 133). As already mentioned, Act 2005 allows every minority group to use its own language. This means the act acknowledges the existence of the Lemko language. The classification of the language is, however, problematic. Some researchers, like Rieger, Shevelov, etc., say that Lemko is one of the Ukrainian dialects (Lemkian dialect) and do not label it a separate language (Rieger 1995: 133; Shevelov 1993: 994–995; Stieber 1982). Actually, Lemkian shares many features in common with Ukrainian (Rieger 1995; Sadakane 2013). On the other hand, some people, especially the Lemko intelligentsia who try to make it a literary norm, insist “the Lemko language” is a literary variant of Ruthenian.

The author agrees with Duda, who points out that the line between a language and a dialect is not clear-cut (Duda 2006: 109), because linguistic evidence (i.e., phonetic, morphological, and syntactic features) are not always useful to distinguish one variety of speech from another. Doroszewski, a Polish linguist in the interwar period, writes that “no political instructions arise from the genetic similarity of languages, and linguistic similarity does not, and should not, have an effect on political decisions.” (Doroszewski 1936: 4–6; translated by the author) In light of the opinions of Duda and Doroszewski, the problem of the Lemko language / speech variety does not seem to be a linguistic issue, but a political one, as is the case with Silesian.

## 5. Conclusion

The problems addressed in Chapter 4 are too complicated to treat as trivial matters. In this chapter, to conclude the paper, the author proposes a new classification of the dialects and languages currently spoken in Poland. Based on previous studies, official documents, and the problems discussed in this paper, the languages and dialects are classified into three groups, A, B, and C.

### **Group A:** Non-Polish languages

Armenian, Byelorussian, Czech, German, Hebrew, Kashubian\*, Lemkian\*, Lithuanian, Romani, Russian, Slovakian, and Ukrainian.

**Group B:** Polish and its dialects

Standard Polish, Lesser Polish dialect, Greater Polish dialect, Mazovian dialect, and Silesian dialect\*.

**Group C:** Controversial languages/dialects

Kashubian, Lemkian, and Silesian.

Group A comprises the non-Polish languages, in other words, the languages of the national and ethnic minorities and regional languages. The languages of the Karaim and Tatar, although they are non-Polish languages, are not listed because it seems that they have ceased to be used in Poland. According to the 2011 census, 2,000 and 300 people in Poland identify as ethnically Tatar and Karaim, respectively. Wicherkiewicz reports the following on language use.

Karaim: according to estimates, spoken by three persons;

Tatar: Polish Tatars ceased to speak their heritage language some 300 years ago (Wicherkiewicz 2006: 657).

Thus, Karaim and Tatar do not constitute an active language community in today's Poland. The author regards that they are recognized as ethnic minorities in Act 2005 because of the history and contemporary cultural activities of the Karaim and Tatar people. To return to our main subject, the status of Kashubian and Lemkian are at present controversial, as already mentioned. For this reason, the author marks the names with an asterisk and classifies them as Group C. Standard Polish and its dialectal variations are found in Group B. Each of the Polish dialects, except for Silesian, can be recognized without doubt as a regional variation of the standard (literary) Polish. All controversial languages fall into Group C.

The author's classification is affected by Dixon's proposal, which distinguishes between political and linguistic concepts (Dixon 1997: 7). From the viewpoint of traditional linguistics and dialectology, it would be possible to call each language of Group C a dialect (Kashubian and Silesian belong to Polish, and Lemkian to Ukrainian). If we think of the social and political functions of a language, however, the languages in Group C cannot be simply regarded as dialects, because they have the symbolic function of enabling speakers to distinguish themselves from major groups (i.e., Kashubians and Silesians from Poles, and Lemkians from Ukrainians); that is, each of the languages in Group C functions as a "distinctive marker."

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