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## LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY. THE CASE OF SILESIAN<sup>1</sup>

Bilingualism has long been observed in Silesia, a part of Poland which lies on the border between three cultures and languages: Polish, Czech and German. Some linguists consider Silesian one of the Polish dialects, others think it should be treated as a separate language. During the communist times the inhabitants of Upper Silesia were discouraged from using the local dialect at school or in public institutions. The situation has changed a lot since 1989 with the promotion of regional studies. Short characteristics of Silesian will be presented in the first part of the paper.

The main part of the project presents the results of a questionnaire which focuses on young people's attitudes towards Silesian. The respondents (100 Polish students of English philology) fall into two groups – half of them identify themselves with the region and the other half do not. How many respondents speak Silesian? Where do they use it and how do they evaluate it? What is the linguistic stereotype of a person living in Upper Silesia? These are just a few questions that suggest themselves in the context of the study.

### 1. Introduction

This paper was inspired by Tambor's (2002) article, where the author claims that dialects are gradually dying out and some young people see regional dialects as something definitely worse than standard Polish, something that is not worth learning and using, even if the dialect is spoken in their families. I wanted to find out whether it was true in case of Silesian and I simply decided to ask a group of my students a few questions concerning this topic in the form of a survey. The main aim of the questionnaire was to find out young people's attitudes towards Silesian. It was hypothesized that the general attitude of the respondents will be rather negative.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of the paper presented at 22<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Second Language Acquisition and Foreign Language Learning in Szczyrk, Poland (2010)

Before the proper analysis of the results of the survey, I would like to present a few facts and thoughts about Silesian. The first question that arises is about its status: is Silesian a dialect or a language? To provide a sample of the Silesian variety, let us read a short poem in Silesian, inspired by Psalm 23, written by Szołtysek (2010) (translation mine):

<i>Ponboczek choby pasterz, dobrze mie futruje</i>	God is my shepherd, He feeds me
<i>I tak dycki żłonaczy, że nic niy brakuje</i>	He always provides for me; I do not lack anything
<i>A bez, wszyjskie niyszczynścia tako mnie przekludzi</i>	I walk with Him through every misery
<i>co bych się diobła nie zlynkł, pierona i ludzi</i>	I fear no man, lightning or satan
<i>Ponboczek mie łożyżwio, i dusza i ciało</i>	God freshens me – my soul and my body
<i>Wszyjsko tyż mi dowo, co by niy brakowało</i>	He gives me everything
<i>czasu na rzykanie, ani tyż na robota</i>	I have enough time to pray and work – and eat tasty food
<i>I na pomaszkecynie, jak przidzie ochota.</i>	Every time I feel like it

Silesian is spoken in the historic region of Silesia, which is in south-west Poland and partly in the Czech Republic. Till 1989 it was classified as one of the Polish dialects and it was eliminated from official and formal communication of the Silesian community. Children were not allowed to speak Silesian at school and a person who spoke Silesian only was considered to be worse, uneducated and a member of the lower social class. Standard Polish was ‘purer’, more elegant and the language of formal education. This situation, characterised by Fasold (1991) as diglossic, changed in 1989, after the fall of communism. In the 2002 national census over 170 000 Poles described themselves as of Silesian nationality. One third of them (56 000) use Silesian at home. In 2007 the US library of Congress registered the Silesian language. In the same year a group of politicians introduced a project of a new law in Parliament – a project in which Silesian, like Kashubian, would have the status of a regional language. In 2008 an association for the promotion of Silesian was created. It is called *Pro Loquela Silesiana – Ferajn do pjustowania a prmuowanie slunskij godki*. If the project succeeds, Silesian could be taught at school, and could even enter universities. The process is not easy, as some think that this decision can have wide-ranging effects, e.g. it might open the door to separatist movements in Silesia.

To change the official status of Silesian we must formally codify its grammar, phonetics and spelling rules. Only then can we teach it to children or all those who would like to learn it. Also, Silesian must enter the world of literature. Linguists

differ in their answers to the question whether Silesian is a dialect or a language. Some linguists from Upper Silesia (e.g. Tambor 2008) and from abroad support the view that it is a regional, not a national language; they say that from the linguistic perspective it has all the features of an ethnolect. In fact, the answer to the question depends on politicians rather than linguists. But whatever the answer is, the future of Silesian to a great extent depends on young people in Silesia. What do they think about it?

## 2. The respondents and the questionnaire

100 students of English philology, aged between 21-22 from two schools (the University of Silesia, and the Teachers' Training College in Jastrzębie Zdrój) took part in the survey. The respondents were divided into 2 equal groups: 50 students (50%) identify themselves with the region of Silesia (henceforth S) and call themselves Silesians, or Silesian Polish; the second group – also 50 students (50%) – were non-Silesians; they consider themselves as outsiders, as their national identity is Polish only (henceforth nonS). There were 8 male and 42 female students in the first group and 15 males and 35 females in the second group. I used a direct method (Fasold 1991) for determining students' attitudes about Silesian. Both groups were given a questionnaire (for the full text of the questionnaire see the appendix), which contained 12 questions, of both open and closed types. The language of the survey was Polish and the questions concerned the following topics: Is the knowledge of Silesian a necessary condition for Silesian identity? What are their language attitudes? Is it embarrassing to speak Silesian? Is it a language or a dialect? The last point was about stereotypical views on the inhabitants of Silesia.

## 3. The analysis of the results of the questionnaire

### 3.1. The criteria of being Silesian – is it necessary to speak Silesian to be a Silesian?

The first question focuses on the respondents' linguistic identity and some of the factors that determine it: their birthplace, place of living and the knowledge of Silesian.

	<b>I was born in Silesia</b>	<b>I live in Silesia</b>	<b>I speak Silesian YES</b>	<b>a LITTLE</b>	<b>NO</b>
S	50 (100%)	50 (100%)	15 (30%)	27 (54%)	8 (16%)
nonS	20 (40%)	32 (64%)	–	6 (12%)	44 (88%)
total	70 (70%)	82 (82%)	15 (15%)	33(33%)	52 (52%)

As can be seen, knowledge of Silesian is not decisive for someone to identify himself with a given language group. Only about one third (30%) of the Silesian students are fluent speakers of Silesian, half of the group cannot speak it very well, and 8 of them (16%) do not speak it at all, but they are both Polish and Silesians because they were born in Upper Silesia and they live there. Members of this last subgroup do not have Silesian parents, but some distant members of their family (e.g. grandparents) might have come from this region of Poland. What seems more important here is the place of birth rather than the fluent command of Silesian. One respondent has no Silesian blood in his veins, does not know the dialect and yet he feels to be part of Silesia. What is also interesting is that most members of the first group say they are both Silesian and Polish or Polish and Silesian.

If we compare the results with the second group, we will see that the majority of the nonS students (64%) live and study in Silesia. Students whose identity is not Silesian might have been born or may live in Silesia, some of them might even have Silesian roots, but the majority of them (88%) cannot speak Silesian. As we can see, the fact that an individual is born and lives in Silesia is rather a necessary condition of Silesian identity, but certainly it is not sufficient. Here the knowledge of the dialect seems quite important. However, a small number of students in this group (6) speak Silesian a little on some occasions, even if they do not feel to be part of Silesian community.

To sum up, the respondents' answers support the thesis that the knowledge of a language is not a decisive factor about one's identity; some cannot speak Silesian, but identify themselves with the region (even if their family is not Silesian), while others might speak it, but do not feel part of Silesia (see also Tambor 2008).

### **3.2. Typical situations when Silesian is used**

The second question was answered by 48 subjects: 15 fluent speakers of Silesian and 33 students who use it to a greater or lesser degree, no matter whether their identity is Silesian or not.

Not surprisingly, Silesian is first of all spoken at home and with family members by 34 students; 18 respondents report using Silesian with their Silesian friends or neighbours; 14 students use it in a local shop. It can also be heard at schools, either during special lessons about the region, but usually in informal situations with other Silesian friends, as was reported by 11 respondents. Still others (4 persons, which is 8% of the group) speak Silesian at work or in some other places. The average native speaker of Silesian uses it to communicate with other Silesians. In mixed groups (Polish-Silesian) the subjects tend to avoid it – only 5 students out of 48 would be willing to use Silesian in communication with someone who does not know it.

### **3.3. Language attitudes**

It was assumed that three main evaluation types can be distinguished among students: positive, negative and neutral.

	<b>POSITIVE</b>	<b>NEUTRAL</b>	<b>NEGATIVE</b>
S	33 (66%)	16 (32%)	1 (2%)
nonS	19 (38%)	25 (50%)	6 (12%)
total	52 (52%)	41 (41%)	7 (7%)

Taking both groups into account, students' attitudes towards Silesian are positive (52%) or neutral (41%); only 7 students (7%) were not favourably disposed towards it.

33 students of the first group (with Silesian identity), to whom Silesian is a value, point out that the dialect makes the region more attractive, unique and interesting. They take it for granted; it is a part of the environment in which they live, part of their cultural heritage, an element uniting people living in this area. It is also an inseparable part of Silesian upbringing and mentality. Silesian evokes positive associations, especially if it is used for communication in families. "These are our roots, our traditions, our 'little motherland', so we should cherish it" were the most common answers. The aesthetic aspect has also been mentioned: the dialect sounds nice; it is melodic and makes one feel good and relaxed. Moreover, some students are fascinated with dialects, so they are interested in it from the linguistic perspective.

Those Silesians who describe their language attitude as neutral (32%) either speak Silesian a bit or not, but they respect other people using it, although they think that Silesian should not be spoken too often, and only in certain situations. It is a dialect, like any other. Sometimes they like it, sometimes they get irritated when they hear it. Generally, they are not interested.

Only one student in the first group had negative associations with Silesian, which, she feels, is perceived as an incorrect variety of Polish, full of vulgar words; furthermore, it is often laughed at, and it is not accepted by education centres. Such an opinion might have been caused by negative social experiences.

Positive (38%) and neutral attitudes (50%) dominate in the group of non-Silesians, too. It is claimed that all dialects are an obvious part of a given region and its culture, part of the tradition of the region, but everyone should be able to communicate in standard Polish.

Some of the students are not familiar with the dialect; they are not interested, as the dialect does not play any role in their lives. They treat it as a local attraction, but it is one's private affair if they use it or not. They think people should be tolerant of others. The subjective perception of the acoustic aspect of Silesian has also been mentioned – it seems funny to some of them; many German words can be found in it. Numerous students simply say "I don't mind when others use it".

Negative attitudes have been expressed by 6 students in the second group (12%). They find Silesian irritating or even repulsive: "it sounds as if the person were uneducated", "I have bad associations with it". Also, as non-Silesians, they do not feel accepted by the Silesian community. Thus, attitudes towards Sile-

sian include attitudes towards its users: if one does not like Silesians, it is rather obvious that they will not like the language they speak.

### **3.4. The willingness to hand down the knowledge of Silesian to the next generation**

The next point concerned the informants' willingness of teaching Silesian to their future offspring.

	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
S	43 (86%)	7 (14%)
nonS	13 (26%)	37 (74%)
total	56 (56%)	44 (44%)

Again, the results are positive. Of those who feel part of Silesia, most (43) students (86%) want their future children to speak the same language they do. The reasons seem understandable: they will be born here, and will live here. Silesian is a valuable element of their heritage, identity and tradition – and traditions should be cultivated. Everybody should know their roots, culture and language. Silesian will be picked up naturally, at home. This additional skill is not perceived as a barrier, but something that will enrich them and will enable them to communicate with their grandparents. Besides, the dialect should not perish.

As could be expected, the priority of those who not feel part of Silesian culture – 37 students (74%) – is to teach 'correct Polish' to the next generation; either that or they are simply not interested. If their children wanted to speak a dialect, they could learn the one that is spoken in the region their parents come from. Others say dialects will not be needed in the future. One student does not want her future child to 'dig old roots'; some also fear that their children will not be accepted by their friends.

Now, a more intriguing question is why 7 Silesian students (14%) do not want their children to know the dialect, and why 13 non-Silesians (26%) would not mind their children learning to speak it. Why should a Silesian not teach Silesian to his child? Because they do not need it; they could learn a foreign language instead; because their parents do not speak it. Why should a non-Silesian child learn Silesian? It is claimed that if one lives in a given area, knowing the language variety that is spoken in informal situations would be an additional skill. One can then communicate with older people who do not speak standard Polish or with their Silesian friends or others. Those who had Silesian ancestors could get to know their roots and the history of their family and the place they are from.

### 3.5. Silesian – a dialect or language? The status of Silesian as a standardized language

In question five the respondents were asked to agree or disagree with three statements concerning the importance of Silesian in society and its relation to Polish. They were also asked to justify their opinions. The results were as follows:

	<b>It is embarrassing to speak Silesian</b>	<b>First of all Polish, Silesian additionally</b>	<b>Silesian is a dialect/not a separate language</b>
	<b>NO YES</b>	<b>YES NO</b>	<b>YES NO</b>
S	46 (92%) 4 (8%)	50 (100%) –	40 (80%) 10 (20%)
nonS	49 (98%) 1 (2%)	48 (96%) 2 (4%)	45 (90%) 5 (10%)
total	95 (95%) 5 (5%)	98 (98%) 2 (2%)	85 (85%) 15 (15%)

It would seem that the answers should be different in both groups, but they are quite similar, irrespective of the fact whether one feels part of the Silesian community or not, so I will treat all the respondents as one group. 95% of the students say one should not be ashamed of one's own local traditions and dialects. It is natural for Silesians to speak their dialect. However, the general feeling is that everybody should know when and where to use it. For example, the respondents think it is not proper to speak the dialect in formal situations – in church, in universities, in court and in offices. Its proper place is in the home, in conversations with friends and during special local festivals and competitions. At the same time, the respondents admit that it is quite common for Silesian to be laughed at and looked down upon, especially among young people. If one wants to have a career, one must speak standard Polish. They think that is wrong, because we cannot evaluate people by the way they speak. The best solution is to know both Silesian and Polish. Sometimes people do not know anything about Silesia and have no idea what Silesian is like, but criticize people who live here. It would be strange for Silesians to pretend that they cannot speak it. Only 5 students out of 100 (5%) would be ashamed of using Silesian – they would not want to be seen as uneducated, without ambitions, primitive.

The second statement says standard Polish should be taught first. The knowledge of Silesian might be an additional asset. 98% of the students identify themselves with the statement. Silesia is part of Poland so Polish is the most important means of communication. It makes life easier, especially if one gets a job far from Silesia. First of all we are Polish, then Silesian. Additional lessons about the dialect or local culture at school would be a good idea, but first let us learn 'proper' Polish. The dialect is seen as an additional element of the local folklore.

The third question is whether Silesian is a dialect or a separate language and whether it should be standardized and included in a list of languages. The overall view represented by the informants (85%) is that Silesian is a dialect and should

not be treated as a separate language. They do not see any reason why it should have the status of a language. Its codification is possible, but then it might lead to treating Silesia as an independent country and Polish might lose its importance as the national language. Some say that we should codify the spelling system for linguistic purposes, but it would be an exaggeration to see Silesian as a separate language. After all, Silesia is not an independent country. Silesian is considered to be too similar to Polish, especially in its grammar.

15 % of all the respondents like the idea of standardization. Silesian should be treated in the same way as the language used in the Kaszuby region. One person even says that high-school students should be allowed to write their final exams in Silesian. Generally speaking, the students seem to like the concept of Poland's cultural and linguistic diversity. Even those who treat Silesian as a dialect, have nothing against its standardization.

### **3.6. Silesian in the media: watching or listening to programmes/music in Silesian**

One of the aims of the survey was to ask young people whether they liked watching or listening to programmes and shows offered in Silesian on TV or on the radio.

	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
S	18 (36%)	32 (64%)
nonS	9 (18%)	41 (82%)
total	27 (27%)	73 (73%)

Of those who listen to e.g. Radio Piekary, or watch TV Silesia, (27%) find shows in Silesian amusing and humorous either because they promote Silesian or remind them of their identity, or simply because it is a way of spending free time with their family. Silesian music is perceived as lively and nice. Programmes in Silesian appeal also to 18% of the non-Silesians; they are considered to be funny; furthermore, one can learn something about the region and the music makes you want to dance. Additionally, one can learn new words and in this way get to know the dialect.

However, in total, Silesian programmes do not appeal to more than three quarters of the whole group (73%) because they are considered infantile, irritating and of poor quality, or they create false stereotypes about the whole region. Half of the students do not understand the language spoken, or the sense of humour represented there. What is also given as an explanation is the irritating sound of Silesian pronunciation and poor quality of the shows. To conclude, the target group of these programmes are older people rather than young students.

### 3.7. A stereotypical inhabitant of Upper Silesia

Finally, the last task in the questionnaire was to finish the sentence: A typical Silesian..., with the intention of creating a list of features that characterise the whole group of Silesians. The descriptions given by the students can be divided into a few groups: they concern Silesians' appearance, profession, behaviour, positive and negative personality traits.

So – what is a typical Silesian like? The answers given by the respondents were the following:

- **appearance:** he is big with a big moustache, wears trainers and a denim jacket, smells of beer

- **profession:** very often he works in a coal mine or has some other hard job, retires early; she is a housewife who cooks well

- **behaviour:** he speaks Silesian, is attached to local traditions, cultivates them, is aware of his Silesian identity and the history of the region, is hungry all the time – likes traditional dishes – eats and drinks a lot, especially meat and dumplings with blue cabbage (*rolada*, *kluski i modro kapusta*) and Silesian cake (*kołocz*), tells racy jokes, plays a traditional card game (*skat*), has Silesian mentality: he works, does not talk much, is loud, knows Silesian culture and promotes it, sometimes wants autonomy for Silesia, says *ja* (yes) when he picks up the phone

- **positive personality traits:** sociable, simple, with sense of humour, honest, hard-working, open, religious, frank, helpful, tactful, hospitable, proud of his cultural background, joyful, likes to have fun, loyal, steadfast, open, family oriented, energetic, self-confident, strong-willed, very attached to his 'little motherland', trustworthy, he feels Silesian rather than Polish (was born here, lives here), is proud of being Silesian

- **negative personality traits:** uses vulgar words, despotic, stubborn, always ready to fight, looks down on non-Silesians (*gorole*) and does not understand them – especially people from Warsaw, is boastful of living in Silesia, primitive, xenophobic, drinks alcohol, common, vulgar, simpleton, ill-mannered, poorly educated, intolerant

The linguistic picture that emerges from the list is strikingly similar to Tambor's (2008) description of stereotypical Silesians, where hard work and integrity is valued, but at the same time where one is not ideal but likes earthly pleasures.

## 4. Conclusions

To conclude, the results of the questionnaire are not so pessimistic for Silesian, as it might seem. Although the number of the respondents was only 100, it seems that the answers are representative of the whole community, so some generalizations can be made.

Young people accept the cultural and linguistic diversity of the region and see it as a positive phenomenon. And although only one third of the Silesian students are fluent speakers of Silesian, the future of Silesian should not be seen in black colours. Silesian spoken by the inhabitants of Silesia and their identity are strongly connected. By the way they speak they are identified as members of the Silesian speech community. From using the same language as the group of Silesians they belong to, the students “draw strength and pride, as well as a sense of social importance and historical continuity” (Kramersch 1998: 65-66). It is not embarrassing to speak Silesian (*to ni ma gańba godać po ślonsku*).

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## Appendix

### Ślonsko godka – a questionnaire

Sex: M/F

1. Were you born in Silesia? YES/NO
2. Do you live in Silesia? YES/NO
3. Do you speak Silesian? YES/NO/A LITTLE
4. I am Silesian and Polish/ Silesian/Polish
5. I am Silesian because
  - a) I was born here
  - b) I speak Silesian
  - c) My parents (grandparents) are Silesian
6. Where and with whom do you speak Silesian?
  - a) at school

- b) in shops
  - c) at home
  - d) with neighbours and friends
  - e) other
7. In mixed groups – if even one of my interlocutors does not know Silesian – I USE/DO NOT USE it in conversations with them.
  8. My attitude towards Silesian is POSITIVE/NEGATIVE/NEUTRAL Why?
  9. I would like my children to know Silesian: YES/NO Why?
  10. Comment on the following statements:
    - a) It is embarrassing to speak Silesian NO/YES Why?
    - b) First of all let's teach standard Polish. Knowledge of Silesian might be an additional asset. YES/NO Why?
    - c) Silesian is a dialect – it is not a separate language. It should not be standardized and registered in a list of languages, its spelling system should not be established YES/ NO Why?
  11. I like listening to programmes in Silesian in the local media YES/NO Why?
  12. Finish the sentence: A typical Silesian...

