

Upper Sorbs and the Use of Minority Language Online: Some Advantages for the Upper Sorbian Language and Community*

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The Internet has divided endangered languages researchers into enthusiasts, seeing in it the chance for the survival of minority languages, and critics who point out that the presence of a minority language in the Internet does not influence its use in everyday life, hence: will not save it. The paper is based on examples from Upper Sorbian, a Western Slavonic minority language, spoken by about 12 000 people. We can divide websites in minority languages into two categories. First, websites demanding only passive knowledge of the language (to read information, as an illustration next to the text in the dominant language) and second, websites which demand active participation (blogs, forums, social networks etc.). The first type of websites have only prestigious significance for the language. The second type can't be overestimated. For researchers they constitute an important source of information about the living language, used by young people for whom in rapid communication the dictionary rules are not important. New words, expressions, constructions, influence of dominant languages and English can be observed. A minority will find a new space of language use in the Internet: the possibility to meet other people who know the minority language and to use its written form often for the first time.

Key words: Internet, minority languages, Upper Sorbian language, language community, new media

Ensuring access to media sources in minority languages is one of the greatest challenges faced by language minorities in Europe.¹⁾ In today's world, it is difficult to imagine the existence of any minority that does not have at least limited access to the media. It is through the wide range of media channels, such as the press, radio, TV and the Internet, that news is transmitted, and moreover the functioning of any language that does not have a written form and as such cannot be taught in schools or used in public life would be limited. If European languages, including minority ones, were only used orally, they would soon fall into disuse; they would be difficult to archive and protect.²⁾ Many researchers go as far as to state that there is no "better strategy (...) for ensuring minority survival than the development by minorities of their own media conveying their own point of view in their own lan-

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1/ This statement in fact applies not just to European minorities, but to all groups living within Western culture. However, it does not necessarily apply to minority languages that only function orally (without print or digital media).

2/ We should note the method of protecting minority languages imposed by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages: they are to be guaranteed a place in education, the judiciary, public administration and services, media, and cultural, economic and social lives. Each of these spheres requires the language to be used in a written form.

guage” (Riggins 1992, 3). Certain scholars express concerns that the media, in particular mass media, do more harm than good for minority languages, since they largely use dominant languages and transmit general/mass culture, which may speed up a minority’s assimilation. Joshua A. Fishman claims that the presence of minority languages in the media is not a priority in the battle to preserve them; he even mentions “the mass-media ‘fetish’ of some minority language activists” (Fishman 1997, 105-106; Fishman 2001, 482). Nevertheless, political decision-makers and representatives of the minorities themselves do strive to meet the broadest media needs in their own languages.

In the meantime, the media channels which played a decisive role in the 20th century – the press, radio and TV – are slowly shifting their function. Young people are gradually moving away from using them in favour of digital media as a source of entertainment and a key means of communication. As a result, in recent years, the debate on the role of the media in the protection of endangered languages has largely focused on the electronic media. With the growing use of new technologies, the debate over the role of the media in preserving minority languages is becoming increasingly heated, especially since the Internet seems to be the most controversial of all recently-developed media, also because it continues to develop rapidly, and researchers are unable to predict its future or analyse its individual types. The Internet splits researchers into two camps: skeptics who believe that digital media will drive minority languages into extinction, since the main language of the Internet, English,³⁾ is even weakening the position of national or other major languages, vs. enthusiasts of new forms of communication. The latter claim that the Internet provides great opportunities for minority languages, since it is sufficiently capacious for them to find their own space and rebuild any position they have lost to dominant languages (Cormack 2000, 3).

It does seem that only research into the use of minority languages in digital media by young people who have grown up during the Internet age can provide a reliable insight, especially when it comes to posing hypotheses on the Internet’s future impact on the use of minority languages. It is a paradox of a sort: older generations include more native speakers with far closer links to the language, yet it is only younger people, who tend to be bilingual from birth and are more closely assimilated into the dominant/global culture, who are fully able to embrace new media. We should therefore give some thought to the consequences of the Internet’s very specific nature as a medium, due to its use by language minority members who have grown up in an era dominated by digital media.

The article is based on field studies I am conducting among young people belonging to European linguistic minorities. During the last few years I have interviewed several dozen young Upper Sorbs (age 16 to 25) and asked them about their linguistic activity on the Internet as well as the use of ‘older’ categories of media in

3/ In 2012, the Internet was used by 2. 405 billion people [on-line: <http://www.Internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, accessed 19.06.2013]. Although for the majority English is not their first language, the highest number of accessed pages was in English, followed by Chinese, Spanish, Japanese, Portuguese, German, and Arabic [<http://www.Internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm>, accessed 19.06.2013].

the Upper Sorbian language. I asked about the use of Upper Sorbian Wikipedia, on-line dictionaries and other language facilities. I was curious about young people's image of their on-line language choices. In another part of my research I confronted them with my observations. In order to do so, I have conducted participant observations concerning not only young people's attitudes to the Internet, but the ways and frequency of using it in general and in the Upper Sorbian language in particular. I conduct regular on-line participant observations (Williams 2007) concerning the use of this minority language in social media. I am a 'silent member' of many groups on Facebook and on-line forums created by young Sorbs. Thanks to this I have access to their conversations, its language and content. An important source of information is the use of the Upper Sorbian and/or German languages in private Facebook pages. I have more than 20 Facebook friends from the Upper Sorbian community and I can observe all their on-line linguistic activities. This virtual observation has given me a great deal of interesting data to consider. Based on social research, the presented text is of a rather theoretical nature as I wanted to enumerate the possible benefits of the existence of the minority languages in the new media. Nevertheless, it is still too early to state definitely the influence of the Internet on minority languages as it depends on the Internet users, as I maintain in the conclusion of this text.

This article aims to present several potential advantages offered by new media to contemporary European language minorities. I am especially interested in the extent to which the presence of minority languages online is able to contribute to their survival by affecting behavior and the transmission of language between generations, and increasing the use of the language in everyday life. I will also discuss the consequences the online presence of minority languages can have how a group functions and how people create/recreate or maintain interpersonal bonds.

I will illustrate my views using the example of Upper Sorbian. Sorbs are a Western Slavic minority living predominantly in Eastern Germany, near the borders with Poland and the Czech Republic. Although they are a small minority, with a population numbering under 60,000 (Elle 2000, 18),⁴ there are further divisions within the group. Lower Sorbs occupy lands in the north, near Cottbus/Chóšebuz. Unfortunately, due to the difficult political situation during the 19th century (Cottbus lies in former Prussia, where assimilation policies were heavily pursued) and the events of the first half of the 20th century (including Hitler's rise to power and his persecution of the Slavs), Lower Sorbian is in critical condition, with estimates showing that it is used by no more than around 2000 people from the oldest generations. It is difficult to say at this stage whether the revitalization activities taken up by the minority will bring positive results. It is also impossible to analyse the effects of the Internet on the community, since almost the only websites written in Lower Sorbian are non-interactive. The situation in Upper Lusatia is quite dif-

4/ It is very difficult to assess the number of Sorbian languages speakers. No blanket sociolinguistic research has been done in the last 30 years. Ludwig Elle have published some important data (Elle 2010). Nonetheless it is still difficult to give a specific number of Sorbs and of the Sorbian languages users. We can try to estimate a realistic number of 2000 for Lower Sorbian and 12 000-15 000 for Upper Sorbian – this is as near as possible.

ferent. Located in Saxony, the lands were subject to a significantly milder assimilation policy, hence the Upper Sorbs experienced less persecution. However, a significant factor making it easier for Upper Sorbs to maintain close community links seems to have been their Catholicism, in contrast to the surrounding Germans and even Lower Sorbs. It is worth noting that those Slavs in Upper Lusatia who chose Protestantism were subject to powerful assimilation, not unlike that in Lower Lusatia. As such, the subject of my research is only the small group of Catholic Upper Sorbs, who have maintained their cultural and linguistic distinction for centuries. They are the only group where the language was transmitted between generations with no interruptions. Recent studies conducted by Měrcin Wałda (Martin Walde) from the Sorbian Institute (Sorbisches Institut/ Serbski institut) in Bautzen/ Budyšin have confirmed that in the small area known as Při Klósterskej wodźe (Am Klosterwasser), the majority (up to 70%) of the 8000 Catholic Upper Sorbs living in the area speaks Upper Sorbian, regardless of age (Walde 2004, 3-27).

Unfortunately, research also shows that even in that region the transmission of the language is weakening (although intergenerational transmission still exists), as younger people increasingly choose to identify with German language and culture, finding it more attractive and beneficial. There appear to be two main driving forces behind this choice. The first concerns the low status of Sorbian language and culture, and the associated discrimination faced by Sorbs, expressed by the German population through malicious jokes (especially hurtful for the younger generations), an aversion to the use of Sorbian in public places, and anti-Sorbian graffiti. This is made worse by the fact that the attitudes concern not just the older generations, but also younger Germans living alongside the Sorbs (Ratajczak 2009, 3-15). The other reason for shifting away from Sorbian culture is the weak economic situation of the region, heavily affected by unemployment. It means that young people are concerned they will not be able to find work in the Lusatia region after graduating from university, and will instead be forced to move to a different part of Germany or even further afield. This has a negative effect on their motivation to engage with their community and learn their native language. Nevertheless, for the majority of young people in the region, Upper Sorbian remains their native language or one of the languages spoken at home, although they are rather critical of their own competence. Many young people studied by Leoš Šatava state that they feel more confident using German than Upper Sorbian (Šatava 2005, 118-119). Such reports from young people whose native language is Sorbian are a major cause for concern.

Catholic Upper Lusatia is a fascinating subject of research into the effects of the Internet on the vitality of minority languages. There are no more than a few thousand Internet users in the region (as we should essentially only consider representatives of the youngest and middle generations). Since Upper Lusatia is a largely rural area, with the majority of inhabitants living in villages and small towns (the largest, Bautzen/ Budyšin, has a population of just 40,000), the majority of Sorbs work in agriculture or perform manual work. This situation, providing an obstruction to the uninhibited development of the Internet, highlights the importance this medium has on communication between young people, in contrast to

the role it plays in the lives of their parents and grandparents. I believe that the existence of this medium has a positive effect on young Upper Sorbs and their active participation in the linguistic community. However, in my view not every way a minority language exists in the digital media can have a real impact on its chances for survival.

Researchers analysing the position of minority languages and strategies for their revitalization note that only active use of the language in everyday life can bring about a reverse language shift. The presence of minority languages in public life, and even in schools, cannot improve their situation unless it is combined with people's ability and desire to use the language in their everyday lives. According to Fishman, only rebuilding the community which would use the minority language as its main means of communication in all situations could reinstate the language's former position. It is only then that it is possible for it to be transferred to younger generations as a living language in which people think, feel and express themselves. Only a continuity of intergenerational transmission of language can guarantee its stability (Fishman 1997, 355-359). It is possible for the media to have a positive effect on the use of minority languages, as long as they encourage active use of the language. It is likely that different media have a different effect on the preservation of languages (their archiving, standardization and so on) and their revitalization (use in everyday life). It is worth drawing a distinction here between broadcasting media and participation media (Dębski 2008). Although the former play an important role in the process of preserving minority languages by giving them a standard format allowing them to be taught at school, they do not have a significant effect on those language users who were not brought up speaking the minority language at home. However, they do improve language ability in people who already know and use it by raising its status and transmitting information, and – most of all – filling a space in the media which would otherwise be occupied by dominant languages (Moring 2007, 20). Participation media, on the other hand, force people to use the minority language actively, and as such they can have a real impact on its widespread use. The division into broadcasting and participation media can also be applied to digital media.

Certain websites, whose basic function is providing information and representation, can be classified as a form of broadcasting media. There are dozens of websites in Lusatia, promoting cities and municipalities across the region,⁵⁾ local organizations and associations (including scientific ones),⁶⁾ artistic ensembles, and various media outlets (print publications, radio and TV).⁷⁾ Their main purpose is to provide a wide range of information on activities, programs, events, and so on. As digital media go, such websites are only partially interactive: Internet users follow

5/ http://www.bautzen.de/bautzen_sorb.asp?mid=213&iid=433 (basic information on Lusatia).

6/ E.g. <http://www.witaj-sprachzentrum.de/>; <http://www.domowina.sorben.com/> (websites containing information on institutions, projects, and contact details).

7/ <http://www.serbske-nowiny.de/>; <http://www.mdr.de/serbski-program/rozhlos/> (press articles, radio and TV programs).

information displayed on the screen, in the majority of cases simply as recipients of the information rather than its co-creators. Unfortunately, such sites have little or no impact on the use of minority languages online, since they do not force the users to communicate and exchange information, instead making them passive recipients. I would like to stress that I do recognize the great importance of the existence of dual-language information websites, since they are highly significant for the status of cultures and languages, not just among the representatives of the minority group, but also by raising wider awareness of the presence of the minority culture and language in a given area. These websites can be regarded as pages “about minorities”, disseminating awareness of their existence, functioning, institutions, history and events. On the other hand, they are mainly used by representatives of the minority and frequently only transmit superficial information.

I am more interested in participation media than broadcasting media, since they have a greater effect on the use of minority languages. The Internet is a unique platform precisely because it is interactive; not only do users themselves decide what they view, when and how (thanks to the Internet’s hypertextuality, by clicking on a page, it is possible to change it, view references, or follow a trail different than that originally intended), but the very means of transmission is geared towards dialogue and exchange with other users (Lister et al. 2009). This means that the Internet creates a social space that exists virtually and/or “in real life”. In such a space, minority languages can become the main means of communication. Furthermore, the Internet is democratic: everyone is able to express an opinion on any subject, in any form and in any social space; in most cases, relationships between users exist on an equal footing. Of course, certain areas around the globe have limited or no access to the Internet, creating a social handicap for local communities. However, this is not a problem for Lusatia, where the main barrier preventing local inhabitants from accessing the Internet is insufficient technological proficiency. This mainly concerns the older generations, who are increasingly being excluded from the virtual world and, as a result, from various activities. This barrier and division between the younger and older generations is becoming increasingly marked in today’s world, including in everyday language. The language used by young people participating in alternative communities is different from the language used by native speakers of minority languages.

It will only become possible over the course of the coming decades to verify the hypotheses presented below, of the influence of the Internet on the survival of minority languages. As things stand at the moment, we can observe the behavior of young people, their use of minority languages in digital communications, and the presence of such languages on various websites. The future of minority languages will depend on whether their use online contributes to their vitality and transmission to younger generations. This will only become observable once today’s younger generations go on to have children of their own and choose which language to bring them up in. But already today, we can present some of the key hypotheses that are the source of the greatest hope and underlie the most promising research issues.

Changing the image of the minority language

It seems that the greatest advantage of the Internet is its ability to change the status of minority languages. Research shows that young people regard websites written in minority languages as interesting, while the very existence of such websites means that they perceive the languages as attractive and fitting the requirements of the modern world (Buszard-Welcher 2001, 337). This cannot be overestimated, in particular with regard to the Sorbian minority, already discriminated against by the dominant group. The shifting status of Sorbian culture is also important since the group's image propagated by the dominant media (and certain Sorbian organizations and media) is anachronistic and at odds with the contemporary world (Tschernokoshewa 2000, 50). Young people who see themselves as citizens of the world are often afraid of being classified as belonging to a group perceived as being socially backward; this is frequently the kind of image of minorities that is put on display during folk festivals, depicted as old-fashioned people in folk costumes.

While the existence of Sorbian content in broadcasting digital media is important, it does not have the same impact as using the minority language in online communication. Today's young people tend to spend a lot of time online, ready to connect with other Internet users through discussion forums, instant messengers, Twitter, Facebook, and so on. The majority of these communication channels only exist in the dominant language. A few years ago, researchers were expressing concerns that when software exists in the dominant language only, representatives of minority cultures will not wait for versions in their own language, but rather adapt their language and communication to suit the available technology (Cunliffe – Herring 2007, 132). However, the Sorbian example shows that this has not happened. The original concerns over the use of Sorbian online, stemming partly from a lack of availability of Sorbian-language keyboards and software, have been overcome. Sorbian arrived online even before the creation of Sorbian-language Mozilla⁸) and other programs. The situation is similar with Sorbian-language communication channels: while their interface tends to be in German, Sorbian is increasingly being used to communicate. There are growing numbers of Sorbian-language pages in the German Facebook domain, and Sorbian-made films are being uploaded to YouTube, often with Sorbian subtitles. It appears that young Sorbs have shown that minorities do not need to have their own, dedicated media; it is more important that they can adapt and use existing technologies for their own purposes. This allows young people to integrate Sorbian into other spheres of their lives, rather than creating a separate media space purely for communicating in Sorbian, distinct from German-language activities. All this means that the Internet and its content are helping overcome stereotypes that exist in the eyes of the minorities themselves, with regard to their growth and functioning in the modern world.

8/ Available to download from: <http://praskot.de/index.php?q=,download> (accessed 19.06.2013).

Minority languages in writing

Upper Sorbian has long written traditions, dating back to the days of the Reformation. However, in the past not many Sorbs were actually able to write in their own language. This was partly due to their lifestyles and type of work, lack of education (in particular in the language), and – most of all – the absence of a need to write in Sorbian. Although organized education in the language dates back to the mid-20th century and many (Pjech 1998) Upper Sorbs from all generations are able to write in the language, not many use this skill in their everyday lives. For most of them, the only contact with written Upper Sorbian came during their school-days, when they were required to write a piece of homework in the language. Setting intellectuals, artists working with the language, journalists and ethnic scholars aside, most people simply do not use written Sorbian in their everyday or official lives. In the majority of cases, even people who speak, read or watch TV in Sorbian do not write it at all. In my interviews young people – even students of Sorbian philology at Leipzig University – declared that they feel much more comfortable using German when writing than Sorbian.

The Internet in its various formats, on the other hand, requires the use of written language. It is the first medium promoting written Upper Sorbian on a wide scale, even if its orthographical and grammatical format differs from widely-accepted standards. As my informants stated: they do not focus on the correct form of their on-line comments or text messages.

This begs the question of whether the Internet, which uses everyday language with all its mistakes, contributes to the preservation of the language, or rather to its gradual degradation and eventually its collapse. The answer to this question is not simple, and largely depends on the point of view of the observer. Many researchers dealing with minority languages (especially the languages of those groups which did not cope well with the change in status from an old-fashioned ethnic group into a contemporary minority) wish to conserve the minority language in its raw form, as used by field workers, in rural and traditional environments, or in the form used by ethnic intelligentsia. They treat every change or introduction of new vocabulary as an intervention in the “natural” group’s life, as something artificial, imposed from the outside (for example by linguistic committees). However, minority languages, as all others, evolve, change and adapt to social and cultural changes. If this were not the case, it would mean that they were approaching their demise. Then again, researchers occasionally worry about their language’s “purity”, primarily because of the influence on it by the dominant language and/or English. However, such influences are inevitable. This is why, for linguists, the Internet could constitute an important source of knowledge about living languages, used by young people for whom dictionary rules are not important in rapid communication. New words, expressions, constructions, and influences from other languages can be observed through the language as it is used online. We can also see how young people apply code-switching and multilingualism in virtual conversations. This does not mean that teachers and writers should not be concerned about the correct use of the minority language; however, as long as the language is used constructively and creatively, it will remain a living language.

Learning minority languages

The Internet also provides new opportunities and ways of learning minority languages. For Upper Sorbian there are numerous online services and dictionaries (such as www.prasak.de, www.plexaure.de/doc/obersorbische-rechtschreibpruefung), language learning programs, materials and computer tools (www.sorbzilla.de). They allow all Internet users to translate individual words and install tools on their PC for writing in the minority language. Interactive online programs helping users improve their language skills step-by-step are also extremely useful for learners of minority languages. Such programs are in a preparation period for the Upper Sorbian language. Recent years have seen the development of games and educational CDs that make learning outside school and other organized courses easier. The WITAJ Language Centre (Rěčny centrum WITAJ / WITAJ-Sprachzentrum), responsible for language teaching in Upper Lusatia, is constantly developing new programs and concepts. It is also adapting them to existing needs and conditions. Interactive educational tools could have a positive effect on pupils in Upper Lusatia, especially on non-native-speakers, by encouraging them to study harder and enhance positive associations with the language. They could also have applications for people living outside the region, for example Sorbian couples who have emigrated but who wish to continue speaking Sorbian at home, allowing their children to learn the language of their ancestors even if they have no access to Sorbian-language schools.

The Internet also has a positive effect on language learning using direct methods, as well as having a direct effect on the child. The Sorbian-language Wikipedia⁹ should not be underestimated. Young people search for information on topics that interest them (such as subjects they study during Sorbian classes at school) online rather than in encyclopedias or textbooks (Head – Eisenberg 2010). If the given search term is available in the minority language, it is likely that when it is accessed, users not only learn about the subject they are interested in, but also broaden their vocabulary. My research shows that young Upper Sorbs use the Upper Sorbian Wikipedia only if: 1) they are looking for a term or necessary information connected with a lesson in the Upper Sorbian language (e.g. biology taught in Upper Sorbian) and 2) they want to use the information in the Upper Sorbian language context (for example to produce Upper Sorbian text).

Unfortunately the number of Wikipedia pages in any language depends exclusively on the people who create and upload them. At present, there are almost 7780 entries in the Upper Sorbian Wikipedia section; in contrast, the section in German – the dominant language in Lusatia – contains 1,597,416 entries. Upper Sorbs are a very small group and the Internet is not widely accessed by the older generation, who would be more likely to create Wikipedia entries. As such, there are two potential scenarios for the future: young people who speak Sorbian and live in a world dominated by digital media will either continue to expand online entries and create new, better pages in the language, or Wikipedia will only continue to expand slowly, losing its importance as a source of information for young people, who will

9/ <https://hsb.wikipedia.org/> (accessed 19.06.2013).

supplement their gaps in knowledge by using pages in other languages. Which scenario prevails will depend on the level of engagement by Upper Sorbs who also have the relevant technological savvy, and on the existence of the Upper Sorbian language environment (in particular Upper Sorbian education and use in the public sphere).

Disseminating information and promoting the achievements of Upper Sorbs

Digital media make it possible to disseminate information rapidly and on a vast scale, facilitated by the social media used to transmit the information to all interested parties. Websites such as Facebook provide a discussion platform, allow users to participate in events, and even use the 'like' and comment functions to affect their structure and content. This way of disseminating information about an event, new group, recruitment by an amateur theatre or local cultural projects raises awareness among practically all Internet users, allowing them to participate or support one another. Participation in cultural events can have a significant impact on young people's future. Nothing provides better motivation to engage with a minority's activities than active and conscious participation in culture (Dołowy-Rybińska 2012, 71-75). The Internet does not exist outside real life, but rather forms one of its integral parts, and the interaction between the spheres is extremely powerful. According to people engaged in promoting Sorbian culture and language, the Internet has been a key tool used to inform people about proposed events, and its effectiveness exceeds all other available means. However, groups need to be established by someone before they can grow and expand spontaneously, so their existence and activities are up to the Sorbs themselves. Young Sorbs strive to make the most of the Internet; one such example is the Facebook page of the Sorbian student club at the University of Leipzig "Sorabija" (currently 81 members)¹⁰ and other is a group "Sorbian Facebook/serbski facebook" with more than 600 members. When observing languages used in these two groups we can state that: 1) when a group is constituted of Sorbian language users (as Sorbian students in Leipzig) and is related to their internal problems, the only languages of communication are the Sorbian languages (primarily Upper Sorbian); 2) when a group is multicultural there are many languages used but still primarily Sorbian languages.

The Internet and forums within it are also significant for their ability to promote people, their achievements and creative output. For such a tiny minority, requiring formal donations to support its very existence,¹¹ other types of promotional activities (for example book publishing) remain out of reach of ordinary people. The Internet allows Sorbs to promote their achievements such as writing (for example on www.literarny-konopej.de), films (via services such as YouTube), and any other works (via portals such as Facebook) and provides a platform for recognition around the globe.

10/ Updated number from: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/162445257104476/?ref=ts&fref=ts> (accessed 19.06.2013).

11/ Through the Foundation for the Sorbian Nation (Założba za serbski lud/Stiftung für das sorbische Volk) subsidized by the states of Saxony and Brandenburg, and by the German government.

Multimedia and remediation

The Internet has combined types of communication previously exclusive to media such as TV or press, and individual telecommunications such as instant messengers and emails, to become a multimedia communications space. It comes together into a hybrid in which various means of receiving and transmitting content are intertwined. Users are able to utilize several communication channels at the same time; they are potential mass broadcasters when they actively distribute existing content or user-generated content such as videos, animations, blogs and any other format of information.

The multimedia nature of the Internet takes on a new significance in the case of Lusatia, since the Sorbs have limited access to non-digital media in their own language. Although daily Upper Sorbian-language press is available (“Serbskie Nowiny”), there are very few audiovisual media in the language. “Serbski rozhłós” radio transmits for 2-3 hours daily. The program, listened to by many Sorbs during their morning routines, covers local cultural events, reports on various aspects of daily life in the region, and features religious elements (focusing on local Catholics); the music focuses on traditional Sorbian folk, rarely straying into popular trends. Young people tend not to find the program very interesting. In spite of limited numbers of listeners, there is also a program “Satkula” aimed at young people, featuring music and topics relevant to them. This is important, since for small groups it is difficult to differentiate between various types of listeners, which by default excludes a significant number of potential users from a given medium. The problem is that Sorbian-language radio is only available at certain times of day, forcing the locals to select German-language programs at other times. In this respect, Sorbian television is in an even worse, one might even say, a dreadful state. Cable TV transmits a half-hour long program “Wuhlado” once a month. It generally includes a few reports presenting important events in the region, focusing on individuals and topics of particular interest to the Sorbian community. However, given that this is just half an hour per month, it could be said that the minority language has practically no presence on TV, since on a day-to-day basis community members only have national TV in the dominant language. Such limited airtime means it is impossible to even try to satisfy the requirements of different social groups within the Sorb community (young people, adults, or the elderly, intellectuals or agricultural workers). Additionally, the program presents an image of Lusatia as perceived by the producers of this only Sorbian-language program available in the region. Assessing audiovisual media in Sorbian leads to the conclusion that they are frequently perceived as unattractive, since they are non-commercial and as such not driven by viewing/listening figures and audience tastes (Brown 2005, 114). Sorbs tend to keep watching and listening purely out of sentiment and ties to their culture; however, this may drive younger generations away and towards selecting programs that will better meet their needs for information, entertainment, and so on. Furthermore, if Sorbian culture is portrayed in a single specific way, it may alienate those people who do not identify with this particular aspect of it, which in turn can drive them away from their own media; it also affects the image of Sorbian culture

as perceived from the outside. Unfortunately, due the size of the community, its status and laws that govern it, Sorbs do not have the option of creating media that would meet the needs and tastes of various smaller social subgroups.¹²⁾ This is where the Internet can come to the rescue.

Remediation is a process of certain media having an impact on others. As part of this process, certain features of the older media are expanded and improved by new media and new technologies, while others are changed or eliminated. New media are likely to change old media, which do not disappear, but adapt to the new situation (Bolter – Grusin 2000, 47). The Internet provides an almost unlimited space for old genres, allowing them to function and flourish in a new environment. Additionally, the cost of creating an online newspaper, radio channel or certain types of TV broadcasts is incomparably lower than equivalent transmissions in a non-digital environment. Online television allows audiences to watch programs at a time and place of their choice; similarly, online radio can be heard around the world. It is also possible to use the Internet to create, disseminate and read books. Sorbs are increasingly taking advantage of these options by accessing online news sources, TV and radio programs. However, they rarely take the further step of anticipating and meeting the needs of their audiences. As yet there have been no initiatives to create alternative radio or TV stations that would make regular broadcasts to a loyal audience. Audiovisual content created by young Sorbs is available on YouTube, an important channel for propagating culture and language among young people in Lusatia and further afield.

Online communities

The most important role played by the Internet is shaping and strengthening communities. Online communities can include language groups sharing a common cultural context. According to Mick Cormack, “Participation in particular linguistic practices can become an important constituent of an individual’s sense of identity, and a sign of his or her willingness to be seen as part of a specific collectivity” (Cormack 2000, 5). It could be said that the overriding aim of all types of minority media is creating and strengthening communities. For many reasons, including those listed above, digital media are better at fulfilling this role than traditional print and audiovisual media by being interactive; they are also home to growing numbers of online communities. Broadcasting media can only create an imagined community (Anderson 1983; Cormack 2007, 54), linked by the content they transmit, including myths, recollections, values and symbols (Smith 2007, 13-16). The Internet’s interactive nature makes it possible to build stronger relationships between members of a community, based on close two-way communication. Of course the communities and situations shared by a common language group do not have to be tied to a shared national or ethnic identity. Online communities are frequently formed around shared interest, common age or given subculture. One

12/ It is difficult to imagine commercial Sorbian-language media, as there are under 20,000 speakers of the language in all age groups. Such media would not be able to obtain sufficient funding.

type of such a “language subculture” may be an online community formed around people identifying with the Sorbian minority. Research confirms that people contacting others online generally do not strive to engage with strangers, but primarily communicate with people who already form a part of their extended social network (Boyd – Ellison 2007). Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007) also confirm that Facebook is largely used to maintain real-life friendships. They found that even though the original relationships may be weak, there generally tends to be an offline element common to people who are a part of a given online social network. In the case of Sorbs, it is especially important that the Internet does not force individuals into rigid choices about their identity, instead allows them to belong to several communities at once, regardless of where they live. As such, anyone interested in a minority culture, learning a language or belonging to the minority but no longer living in the region is able to join the network, communicate with other group members, and participate (virtually) in the minority culture. Young Sorbs who frequently find it difficult to identify resolutely as Sorbian rather than German (Šatava 2005, 181) can belong equally to communities of Sorbian students, German-language networks for fans of popular music, and so on. This means they are not faced with fixed ethnic boundaries (Barth 1969), which can be extremely limiting. The Internet also allows all users to create their own pages or networks; in many online communities, minority languages are regarded on an equal footing with those of dominant cultures, or even the ubiquitous English.

Language as used in digital vs. face-to-face communications

In recent years, young people’s participation in social networks such as Facebook, has grown rapidly (Ofcom 2008). As such, the question of what language they use in their digital communications is very important for the future of minority languages. Research conducted in recent years shows that when interacting online, participants tend to use the same language as they do when communicating with the same person face-to-face (Cunliffe et al. 2013, 82). This means that when two people speak to one another in Upper Sorbian, they are likely to use the same language in their online interactions. However, if they tend to speak German, they are more likely to stick with the language online. Studies conducted by Daniel Cunliffe et al. in Wales reveal that people who use a minority language (in this case Welsh) at home tend to exhibit different language behavior than those who learn the minority language at school. In Wales, the use of language also depends on whether the given territorial community uses the language on a day-to-day basis. The situation is different in Upper Lusatia, since ethnic boundaries between Sorbs and Germans are still powerful and strongly tied to the use of language. As such, division into online communities tends to be centered around ethnic background; Sorbs communicate with other Sorbs in Sorbian (even if the communities are based purely around shared interests), perhaps code-switching to make communication easier. However, in German-Sorbian groups, German tends to be the only language in use, which is likely linked to the social stigma associated with using Sorbian and concerns among the Sorbian minority about being perceived as “inferior” by the

German majority. In contrast to the study in Wales, I am conducting the early stages of my research using ethnographic methods (cf. Miller – Slater 2000). I observe and analyze selected Upper Sorbs' online behavior versus that used in various real-life situations with different people. I supplement my observations with analysis of Facebook content including various groups and events participated in by the locals, as well as other online forums. Preliminary comparative analysis of linguistic behavior in Upper (Catholic) Lusatia vs. Lower Lusatia, where young people are only taught the minority language at school (without reaching a high level of competence, in contrast to South Wales), confirms the theory that languages used in social networking reflect linguistic behavior in real life. This means that it may be difficult to change young people's linguistic behavior, although it should not be impossible (Cunliffe et al. 2013, 85). If we use the same language in digital media as we do in direct communication, we can formulate a hypothesis that the trend can be reversible. People who meet others through Upper Sorbian-language social networks tend to use the same language when communicating with those people in real life; initial language selection frequently drives the language used throughout the friendship. If the hypothesis turns out to be correct, it could mean that certain people who join minority language social media more or less by accident are likely to try using the language in direct communication with other members of the network. This brings us back to the inseparable associations and relationships between the virtual world and real life. The only condition that needs to be fulfilled: these people must have sufficient knowledge of the Sorbian language: from family, school or courses.

I have tried to demonstrate that the Internet has different ways of supporting minority languages; however, its most important role lies in enabling and supporting communication between people who have already declared their preferred language. It is also extremely useful for people who want to join minority groups, learn the language and contribute to the community. In their online presence, minorities are not closed monads with a fixed territory and close guards of their ethnic boundaries; people can join them to become local or long-distance members. There can be no doubt that the Internet and digital communication are essential parts of young people's lives, and are likely to become increasingly important. As such, a minority language's absence in the digital domain could mean its demise. Fortunately this has not been the case, and the many opportunities provided by the Internet's interactive and multimedia character give minorities prospects that are new and uncharted. That is why it is difficult to predict what kind of impact the new technologies discussed in this article will have on Upper Sorbian (or more broadly on endangered languages in general) in the perspective of, say, the next 25 years. However, it should be noted that it is not the Internet as such but its users and their linguistic attitudes and choices that have a real impact on the use of minority languages and their survival. By analyzing different types of online interactions, I have tried to show that whether the medium strengthens the position of minority languages or has a negative impact on them will depend purely on the activities of their speakers. If the Internet is to be home to Sorbian-language films, blogs or

social networks, they first need to be created and uploaded so they can start having an impact on people's choices of identity and language, and strengthening interpersonal bonds. So far, we can only say that the Internet has the potential to support the use of minority languages. Whether the given minority will make the most of this potential will depend on the people involved, as well as their motivation and creativity. The fact that the Internet is not just a broadcasting medium attesting to the existence of a minority and its language, but rather a participation medium, means that its users' active involvement is invaluable. In order for the Internet to be a medium for minorities rather than purely about them, it needs participants who will use it in their everyday lives in the minority language. As a result, activities suggested to young people in real life – shaping their attitudes towards their own minority and language and encouraging them to participate in the cultural life of the minority – will change the status of minority languages online, which in turn could help raise their popularity.

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