

# ETHNIC IDENTITY, LANGUAGE ATTITUDES, AND THE RECEPTION OF CULTURE AMONG STUDENTS OF SORBIAN SCHOOLS

*Leoš Šatava, Institute of Ethnology, Charles University*

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*“language choice in the case of bilingual youngsters will probably provide a more accurate guide to the state of vitality of the endangered language than statistics on language ability.”*

Gruffudd 2000: 177; paraphrased  
by Williams 2000: 37

## **Background**

The (Lusatian) Sorbs are one of the smallest Slavonic ethnic groups (comprising ca. 40-50,000 persons) and live in Lusatia (die Lausitz in German) in the eastern part of Germany, close to the border with the Czech Republic and Poland, around the towns of Bautzen (Budyšin in Sorbian) and Cottbus (Chošebuz).

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, Slavonic tribes referred to as “Surbi” in the chronicle of 631, settled in Lusatia. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, German nobility subdued the Sorbs and the German language and culture started to exert a strong influence on them. Between the 14<sup>th</sup> century and the year 1635, Lusatia was part of the lands of the Crown of Bohemia. The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a successful Sorbian revival as well as growing Germanizing pressure. After the two world wars, attempts were made (unsuccessfully) to create an independent Lusatia or to annex it to Czechoslovakia (respectively). In the former socialist GDR, for the first time the Sorbs acquired distinctive cultural rights, including a number of national institutions, a school network, and media; concurrently, however, in this show window of “Leninist national policy,” assimilation continued. Under the new democratic conditions since 1990 and

since the turn of the millennium in particular, endeavors to revitalize the ethnic consciousness of the Sorbs and their language have emerged and have been growing stronger.

In terms of ethnic consciousness, there are between 40,000 and 50,000 Sorbs today. However, only about half can speak Sorbian and out of this group only for about 10,000 persons is Sorbian the language of everyday life. Sorbian is, moreover, divided into two standard varieties – Upper Sorbian, the more vigorous variety spoken in the south (with about 20,000 speakers as maximum), and Lower Sorbian, the fading variety (ca. 6,000 persons) of the northern part of Lusatia. The only territory in which the Sorbs are still a majority and where the Sorbian language is the means of everyday communication (and medium of instruction in some schools) is the “Catholic region” (as against predominantly Protestant Lusatia) situated in Upper Lusatia, northwest of Bautzen/Budyšin. Most activists striving to maintain the continuity of Slavonic consciousness, language, and culture in Lusatia come from this region. The constitutions of both Saxony and Brandenburg guarantee to the Sorbs their cultural rights, which are dealt with in greater detail within other laws andplementary regulations.

In my numerous questionnaire investigations conducted at the Sorbian schools in Upper Lusatia between 1996 and 2001, I concentrated mainly on the ethnic identity of the respondents, their choice of the code and domains of use of either Sorbian or German,

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their attitudes to both languages, and on acceptance of Sorbian identity among young Sorbs aged 11 to 19.

I focused attention on the Sorbian Grammar School (henceforth only SGS), which is situated in Bautzen/Budyšin, the main urban center of the region. It is the only Sorbian-medium secondary school and includes grades five to twelve. To make the findings generally applicable, parallel investigations were conducted in higher grades of Sorbian middle schools (henceforth only SMSs; in Saxony these schools include grades five to ten) in the localities of Crostwitz/Chróścicy, Ralbitz/Ralbicy, Panschwitz-Kuckau/Pančicy-Kukow, Räckelwitz/Worklecy, Radibor/Radwor, and Bautzen/Budyšin.

The following text brings together a number of conclusions that are valid for the young Sorbian population as a whole.<sup>1</sup> With respect to the declared (ethnic) identity, the use of the Sorbian language, the reception of Sorbian culture, and attitudes of the students of the SGS and SMSs, some fundamental assumptions were confirmed:

- 1) Concerning self-identification as well as other levels of identity under discussion, Sorbian young people do not make one homogeneous whole.<sup>2</sup>
- 2) Substantial differences exist between respondents according to their age, sex, and place of origin.
- 3) Compared to the students of the Sorbian middle schools, the students of the SGS

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<sup>1</sup> The following text is an extract of the conclusions drawn in the sociolinguistic work entitled "Sprachverhalten und ethnische Identität. Sorbische Schüler um die Jahrtausendwende" (Šatava 2005). This book contains a great number of statistical data, tables and diagrams. It will be published in March 2005.

On the texts the author had published about the given topics earlier, see Literature/Bibliography. Cf. the outcomes of the questionnaire survey carried out at the SMS Ralbitz/Ralbicy conducted by the students themselves, in: Smoła and Wićaz 1998: 58.

<sup>2</sup> In this context, pursuing the rate of the standard deviation was particularly important.

have, on average, displayed a slightly higher rate of positive attitudes to some Sorbian phenomena.

The findings presented here may be further specified within several broad topics:

### **A. Sorbian ethnic awareness**

In their views of their identity, the A-students<sup>3</sup> of Sorbian schools were not unanimous. Only about one-third of the students identified themselves either clearly or exceptionally as Sorbs. Although, on average, Sorbian identity seems to rate slightly higher than the German one,<sup>4</sup> a large group identifies with the designation of "German" as well as with other levels of identity, such as regional and others. Only very few students, however, identify with the ethnonym Slavic. National awareness seems to spring from tradition rather than from conscious argument. Sorbian ethnic awareness of the A-students, therefore, tends to decline, and so does its strict delimitation, in comparison with their parents' generation (Šatava 1998b). In this sense we can speak about *Light-Identity*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of the surveys, the Sorbian school system was divided into A-type classes (with Sorbian-language instruction in the majority of school subjects) and B-type classes (Sorbian as one school subject only; most students are of German origin). Since the school year 2001-02, the strict division between A-and B-classes has been replaced with the new model of common bilingual education.

<sup>4</sup> "Ha ... te němske je za nas přeco tajki synonym za ,cuze', ,njeznate' ... před kotrymž so ty poprawom tež takle tróšku bojiš." ["And ... the German is always for us a synonym for ,alien', ,unknown' ...something you, actually, fear a bit, too."]; a female source (\* 1974), recorded in April 1996. Cf. Graphs of the semantic differentiation test on the relationship to the Sorbian and German languages in Šatava 1997a: 127–128.

<sup>5</sup> A similar situation was found, for example, among the Rhaetians in Switzerland (Arquint 1998: 21).

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The Catholic region<sup>6</sup> is the area of the highest degree of both the (Sorbian) young people's ethnic awareness and their language loyalty. The situation there is, however, quite complicated. The hypothesis that the degree of the Sorbian factor will be higher among students from its core area in Crostwitz/ Chrósćicy and Ralbitz/Ralbicy than among students from the fringes in Panschwitz-Kuckau/Pančicy-Kukow and Radwor/Radibor has not been confirmed, despite hints to the contrary. To analyze this, however, is quite complicated, especially when comparing the individual schools. Among other aspects, we should consider the fact that in Crostwitz/ Chrósćicy and Ralbitz/Ralbicy there were only A-classes at the time the survey was conducted and among their students were children who would probably have attended B-classes had they lived in another locality. We should also allow for the fact that while e.g. in the Crostwitz/Chrósćicy region the use of Sorbian has been a matter of fact, momentous and, therefore less "conscious,"<sup>7</sup> in the same situation in Radibor/Radwor a considerably greater "Sorbian awareness" is necessary. Generally speaking, the extent of Sorbian identity and the use of the Sorbian language should not be overestimated, not even in the heartland of the so far Sorbian-speaking area – the strong impact of language erosion and the decrease in self-identification with the "Sorbian" are already visible here as well.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "The Catholic region" (in contrast to the predominantly Lutheran rest of Lusatia) is situated approximately between the towns of Bautzen (Budyšin in Sorbian), Kamenz (Kamjenc) and Hoyerswerda (Wojerecy). Only in this area with ca. 15,000 inhabitants, is the Sorbian speaking population the majority (ca. two thirds; in some villages even 80–90 percent), and the Sorbian language is the medium of everyday communication of all generations. It is also only here, that the A-schools (see Note 3) with Sorbian as the medium of instruction) exist.

<sup>7</sup> In Crostwitz/Chrósćicy, the "Sorbian bastion," for example, there is no branch office of the national umbrella organization Domowina (sic!).

<sup>8</sup> Today's situation of the Catholic parishes has even been compared to that of the almost fully assimilated

In Bautzen/Budyšin and in the Protestant area in particular the level of "Sorbian factors" appears to be slightly lower. We are more likely to guess only to what extent this situation is due to a lower degree of endogamy in the respondents' family backgrounds and to what degree it is due to the predominantly German milieu of Bautzen/ Budyšin.

Respondents from the Protestant area, which has been almost fully Germanized, are hard to compare; it is obvious that in their case the living family tradition of speaking Sorbian and the enrollment at the SGS are themselves the declarations of the attitude.

The B-students, on the other hand, emphasize their "German identity;" yet a certain part of them feel connected with the Sorbian traditions, no doubt because of the partly Sorbian background of the parents.

When comparing the A-students of the SGS and the SMSs, the degree of (declared) Sorbian ethnic awareness of the respondents from the SGS is considerably higher while the degree of their "German" identity is a little lower. It is especially the rise in the declared Sorbian identity and attitude to the language in higher forms/grades of the SGS that shows this fact clearly.

## **B. Sorbian - language attitude and language use**

In considering this aspect, differentiation is important as well. For a relatively large number of the A-students, Sorbian is still the language of everyday communication (together with a lesser or greater degree of German, of course). Yet, they have grave shortcomings in Sorbian word formation, and their spelling competency is on a very low level.<sup>9</sup> Regarding the use of the Sorbian

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Protestant part of Upper Lusatia 50 to 70 years ago (Grojlich 1998: 21).

<sup>9</sup> It is a paradox that a great number of A-students are not able to spell the name of their native village correctly. Here are several examples: *Korzace* (= Kozarcy); *Ralbic*, *Ralbitzy* (= Ralbicy). Mistakes in the names of the villages can also be frequently found in road signs bearing the name of the place at the entrance to the village, e.g. *Smjerdzácá* instead of

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language, the same concepts apply as for the Sorbian awareness; it means that it is rather a tradition (family, local) than a conscious “program.”

Some of the B-students are also able to communicate actively in Sorbian – they are most frequently students from all-Sorbian or mixed families. On average, knowledge of the Sorbian language for the majority of the B-students is quite weak and mostly passive (sometimes even deliberately so). In this context it is very commendable that they often overestimate their own Sorbian competence.

As far as the sex of the respondents is concerned, it is conspicuous that it is the girls who develop a closer relation to the Sorbian language and declare more interest in its maintenance;<sup>10</sup> in comparison to the boys, they are also greater “consumers” of the Sorbian media (Šatava 1998b.) This may be linked to the head start girls have during their adolescence or to the possible impact of the traditionally “female” role oriented to the parents’ house and the like.

To compare the SGS students and those of the SMSs in the field of language seems quite difficult. As far as the comparison of the declared use of Sorbian in individual language domains is concerned, no fundamental differences between the findings from the schools were detected. Although the relationship to Sorbian was declared at the SGS in a greater degree, at some village schools – namely in Crostwitz/Chrósćicy (Pawlikec 2001) – a much “more Sorbian” milieu has, so far, been offered than at the SGS.

### **C. Sorbian Culture**

Enculturation and the active use of culture, or let us say its role in the lives of A-students, appears to be a relatively weak phenomenon. The young people feel a part of the international scene and prefer

contemporary (pop) music (mostly English), computers, or sport to traditional “national” cultural activities. Obviously, there are also relatively fewer such cultural activities, such as limited radio broadcasts and a small number of Sorbian books, magazines, and music projects. Among the B-students, “Sorbian” culture plays almost no role; on the contrary, it is often rejected and denigrated.

Despite certain differences in the reception of Sorbian culture (and active participation in it) discovered when comparing students of the SGS and those of the SMSs, it is extremely difficult to draw conclusions of general validity from them.

The results of the questionnaire survey confirm great heterogeneity of Sorbian students with respect to their ethnic identity, relationship to the language, and reception of Sorbian culture. Generally speaking, in spite of some positive cases, their feelings of belonging (and being active) among the Sorbs tend towards indifference.

This phenomenon has two levels: firstly there is the objective level, i.e. the position of Sorbs as a minority group in Germany and in Lusatia, as well as the particular, everyday personal and social living conditions of each individual. The second level is the subjective one, dependent on the will and wishes of the people themselves. Which of the two levels will be stronger and which will be weaker in their impact can hardly be determined. When compared to the pupils in the lower grades/ forms, Sorbian adolescents seem to experience a natural “crisis of (ethnic) identity,” which is most acutely felt between the ages of 15 and 17.<sup>11</sup> They do not want to stand out, be different from the others, and they often cling to German identifiers. Many imitate German young people<sup>12</sup> and the global (largely Anglo-American) cultural behavior;

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correct Smjerdžaca, or at bus stops, e.g. *Kocarcy* instead of correct *Kozarcy*, and the like.

<sup>10</sup> Similar findings were given for Wales (Lewis 1975: 123 and Baker 1992: 120).

<sup>11</sup> A similar finding for Wales (Baker 1992: 132; Gruffudd 1998: 210).

<sup>12</sup> Although the German language competence of the young generation is higher than that of their parents’...

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they also increasingly distance themselves from Sorbian culture, which now appears “unnecessary” (“*stary čapor*”), “boring,” not “cool” enough, or “*fajn*” enough (fine).

One 22-year old woman stated it this way:

*to je runje tutón čas mjez 14 a 20...zo maš ty...to serbske tež syte...ty maš to syte te serbske slyšeć a to chceš ty poprawom won...to němske ma něšto... wabi...po 20 so jen... najhusćišo wurajtwal jo...*

*na tej mlodžinje jen' to widži, zo...to najwažniše je cool być...k tomu tež sliša, zo jen...prawe klamoty ma, zo jen prawu hudźbu poska a pon tež, zo jen němsce powěda...*

It is just the time between 14 and 20... when you are...already fed up with the Sorbian ...you are fed up with hearing the Sorbian and you actually want away... the German has something ... it draws you ... after twenty one has ... mostly calmed down after a stormy youth...

In the young people one can see that ... it is most important to be cool ...and to it also belongs that one ...has the right clothes, that one listens to the right music and that one also speaks German. (tape-recorded in April 1996)

The situation in other minority groups of Europe – e.g. in Wales (Gruffudd 1997: 225; 1998: 213) – is often similar. At about the age of 20 or later, due to various factors such as greater maturity, a Sorbian partner, and others, this attitude can change again to the benefit of Sorbian.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>On the question of “language choice” see Bott-Bodenhausen 1997: 70 (cf. Baker 1992: 131–132; Gruffudd 1998: 210). Similar to Lusatia, young people in Wales frequently “choose” the language according to a particular situation, the dominant language of the group or a particular person (Gruffudd 1998: 213). According to Gruffudd 1997: 224, young people in Wales consider the Welsh language a more adequate medium in contact with old people and children rather than in peer communication.

To sum up, we can say that the A-students of the SMSs and the SGS *consciously* identify with their Sorbian background, language, and culture only to a small degree. Instead, these students *subconsciously* seem to adopt certain routines or stereotyped identities which, in case of changed living conditions (e.g. moving from a largely Sorbian-speaking village to a German-speaking neighborhood), can easily shift in the direction of German and German consciousness. In such cases, the Sorbian identity plays only its role as a family cultural tradition.<sup>14</sup> The fact of a lessened ethnic consciousness, a relatively blurred relationship to the Sorbian language (and its use), and also limited reception of Sorbian culture among Sorbian young people should be taken as a warning signal.<sup>15</sup>

Ethnic delimitation of the Sorbs is not sharp today. Only seldom do they declare themselves as an ethnic group, a nation; most often they refer to themselves by means of the ethnonym (Sorbs) or *a people*. Similar to many other minority ethnic groups, it is the language that is their main differentiating factor (Elle 1992a).<sup>16</sup>

When speaking about Lusatia, we should make careful distinctions. In the whole of Lower Lusatia and in the predominant part of the territory of Upper Lusatia, a *language shift* occurred about fifty years ago. The young generation of Sorbian ethnic origin is almost fully assimilated in those parts.<sup>17</sup> The

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<sup>14</sup> In simpler terms, it can be compared to the attitude of US citizens (Italian Americans, Czech Americans and others) to their ethnic background.

<sup>15</sup> This fact is particularly alarming because the SGS is the only institution offering education to the future intelligentsia (proto-elite) of Slavonic Lusatia.

<sup>16</sup> When the language principle prevails – cf. e.g. the Gaels (Glaser 2002: 10-11), in a greater degree the Friulians, the Occitans and others – it is often difficult to speak about an *ethnic group*.

<sup>17</sup> The situation in Greek Macedonia, for example, is a comparable one. Macedonian is spoken by persons over 65; among speakers aged 50-60 both codes can be encountered, while persons between 35 and 50 have a fragmentary or only passive knowledge of Macedonian, and young people have been almost fully Grecified (Schmieger 1998: 142).

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situation in the heartland, i.e. in the Catholic triangle between Bautzen/Budyšin, Kamenz/Kamjenc and Wittichenau/Kulow, and to some extent also in a specific case of the town of Bautzen/ Budyšin, is different.<sup>18</sup> Sorbian ethnic consciousness is still alive there, undoubtedly more so than among another minority ethnic group in Germany, such as the Northern Frisians (Holander 1988:2; cf. Steensen 1994: 26-28).

A rapid shift towards German, which occurred in the Protestant parts of Upper Lusatia and in Lower Lusatia in the 1940s and 1950s,<sup>19</sup> is not as likely to occur in the Catholic parts. Nevertheless, the Sorbian-speaking *milieu*, still relatively intact, is exposed to serious erosion, especially on the fringes. The percentage of only German-speaking or mixed families has been rising. Important warning signals point to a considerable weakening of Sorbian self-identification and the will to use Sorbian actively (and pass it on to younger generations also in many genuinely Sorbian or so far largely Sorbian families). The proportion of Sorbian young people affected by these facts can only be roughly estimated; the reality may be near 50%.<sup>20</sup> Findings and conclusions from bilingual Wales (Gruffudd 1997: 222)<sup>21</sup> concerning the majority of adolescents aged 16–17 who hesitate about the question of their language and ethnic belonging can, most probably, be

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<sup>18</sup> Particularly due to the concentration of intelligentsia, the presence of the Sorbs is still perceivable - though there may be less than 5 % of the town's population.

<sup>19</sup> Similar examples of the break in passing the language on to the next generation in most families within a few years only came about in Brittany in the 1960s or in Gaeltacht, the last Irish Gaelic-speaking parts of Ireland in the 1980s.

<sup>20</sup> "Demographic and Statistical Questionnaire Survey Among the Catholic Sorbs," a project of Dr. Martin Walde from the Sorbian Institute in Bautzen/Budyšin, will bring more concrete information; see the published part of the survey: Walde 2004.

<sup>21</sup> The author speaks about the approximately 20% of young people who orient to Welsh, 20% who orient to English, and 60% who are "undecided" in the question of language.

applied to Lusatia as well. The present day efforts to revitalize the Sorbian language and consciousness should, therefore, concentrate on winning the hesitant "grey zone" of the students over to the Sorbian side. Only in passing Sorbian and Sorbian consciousness on to other generations is there a chance for the further existence of Sorbian (i.e. also Sorbian-speaking) Lusatia. In order to achieve this aim, greater *readiness for action*<sup>22</sup> of the younger generation is, therefore, a *sine qua non*.

Some conclusions about the present trends ensue from the above facts:

– *With respect to age*: numerous data seem to confirm that in comparison with the lower age group, many young Sorbs undergo a significant *crisis of identity* in adolescence (particularly between 15 and 16, i.e. approximately in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades).

– *With respect to the sex of the respondents*: in general, it is girls who seem to maintain a slightly higher degree of Sorbian ethnic identity and a higher level of the relationship to the Sorbian language; among the female students of the SGS this is more distinct than among the female students of the SMSs.<sup>23</sup>

– *With respect to ethnic (self)consciousness*: on the one hand quite high values of the Sorbian factors found among the students from the Catholic region seem to be the outcome of identifying with the Sorbian; on the other hand, they are the mark of inertia of the family *milieu* rather than a conscious attitude resulting from deliberation. The level of ethnic (self)consciousness of young Sorbs from rural parts is often lower than that of A-students from Bautzen/Budyšin, brought up largely in a German-speaking milieu.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ajzen 1988; quoted in Baker 1992: 13.

<sup>23</sup> According to the findings, the ideal type of "the most Sorbian" person among Sorbian youth was a female student of the SGS, aged 12-14, coming from a traditional endogamous Sorbian family living in the Catholic heartland and commuting home daily.

<sup>24</sup> "Budyscy dwurěčni wotrostli ... wjesni so boja ... imitěruja, zo su Němcy ... nochcedža być hinaši ..."

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– *With respect to intergeneration shift:* compared to their parents, the feeling of double identity of the present-day young generation seems to grow stronger, and the significance of “Sorbian factors” in the sense of “*language intimacy*” (Haugen 1972: 325) seems to grow weaker.

– *With respect to the comparison of data on the respondents from the SGS and SMSs:* on average, data indicate a higher level of (declared) Sorbian ethnic identity, a stronger relationship to Sorbian (as against a weaker relationship to German), and general concern for the maintenance of Sorbian phenomena among the A-students of the SGS. This is also partly true for the reception of the (official) Sorbian culture.

The latter relates to the fact that the SGS is the only institution providing education to the most talented students (generally speaking), and despite all reservations (Šatava 1998a: 11) SGS is the main venue of the (ethnic-oriented) education of the Sorbian proto-intelligentsia.

In addition, a certain “national elitism” ought to be taken into account regarding the enrollment in the SGS itself, and it may explain the emphasis in education towards Sorbian awareness in this secondary education institution.

### **Conclusion**

In Lusatia, this comparatively complex view of the issue under discussion brought a number of new findings, precisely documented and statistically analyzed. For those who know well the everyday situation of Lusatian diglossia, many of the findings could have been anticipated; other results, however, may have been unexpected. With respect to the young generation of (Upper Lusatian) Sorbs, the data given by the Sorbian schools’ students themselves, which are, moreover, statistically valuable, are

available here for the first time. The data show, for instance, on which levels and in which domains the position of Sorbian is weak and on which level it is, by contrast, (perhaps unexpectedly) high. If the above-cited idea holds, that the language use of young people from ethnic-language minority groups is a “litmus test” of the vitality of their language (Gruffudd 2000: 177), then the documented findings are even more important.

Many of the data collected, however, do not concern the level of the language only; on the contrary, they also indicate the level of ethnic identity, an overall interest in Sorbian phenomena, the desire to participate in their maintenance, and other facts. In this context it is necessary to emphasize significant attitudes generally inherent in the way of thinking of young people: e.g. spontaneity, creativity (real or imaginary), independence, efforts at self-expression, and anti-authoritarian tendencies (Gruffudd 1997: 225, 2000: 178). In the course of the (national) education these attitudes should be taken into greater consideration than they have been so far (Šatava – In press).

The collected, analyzed, and interpreted information can become a valuable basis for practical measures within language planning, which has not developed very much in Lusatia yet. In a number of minority groups’ regions, language planning has already brought indispensable (and sometimes even outstanding) results in maintaining languages threatened with assimilation, and saving the ethnic identity of their speakers. Frequently, language planning has also become the hub of efforts concerning revitalization tendencies and the general direction of the targeted ethnic-language community.

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[“*Those who come from Bautzen/Budyšin have grown up bilingually... those from the villages are afraid ...they imitate being German ...they don’t want to be different ...*”]; A female source (b. 1974), tape-recorded in April 1996.

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