

Sara Mitschke

Negotiating language practices and policies in Sorbian-German families in Upper Lusatia

Summary of the doctoral thesis written under the supervision of Dr Hab. Nicole Dołowy-Rybińska, prof. of ISS PAS

The subject of this thesis is the broadly defined family language policy of interlingual couples in Upper Lusatia, Germany, who try to pass on both the minority language Sorbian and the majority language German to their children. In the thesis, I discuss the negotiation of family language practices when one parent does not speak Sorbian (and often does not understand the language). The background to the individual language choices in these families is the situation of the Sorbian community, which is striving to maintain its language and prevent a language shift to German. At the same time, people are not fully aware of the ingrained habits of linguistic subordination and accommodative convergence towards the German-speaking inhabitants of the region, which lead to the shrinking of Sorbian-speaking spaces where Sorbian could be spoken without question. Apart from the negotiation of language use, important topics of the dissertation are therefore specific language practices and strategies of language use as well as (individual) language attitudes and (societal) language ideologies.

The thesis consists of a theoretical and an empirical part. After the introduction, chapters 2 to 5 successively present the theoretical background of my study, the Sorbian context in Lusatia in Germany, my decision to study interlingual families in the Catholic region of Upper Lusatia and my position as a researcher, and the research methodology, which includes a biographical and partly ethnographic approach. In the empirical chapters 6 to 10, I first introduce the six participating families and then separately discuss language practices, language attitudes and ideologies, and language management as reported by the participants, before concluding the thesis with a discussion that summarises the observations and findings of the previous chapters.

The relatively young field of Family Language Policy (FLP) has grown considerably in the past good decade, drawing on research on multilingualism in many disciplines. The research that underpins our understanding of FLP includes research on bilingual child language acquisition from the perspectives of psycholinguistics and applied linguistics, as well as research on language socialisation. Coming from language policy and planning (LPP) research, FLP researchers naturally draw on LPP models, extending or debating them in relation to the specificities of the non-institutional family context. The study of language attitudes and ideologies plays another important role in FLP research, reflecting not only the motivations behind the specific practices of individual families and their members, but also the social embeddedness of their negotiations about language use. After introducing the relevant terminology in the research fields of multilingualism, language acquisition and socialisation, language attitudes and ideologies, and language policy and planning, I argue that the family is the ideal domain, context or space to study the various forces that influence language use. As an interface between the public and the private, it reveals the interplay between the macro and the micro, the explicit and the implicit.

Lusatia, inhabited by the Sorbian ethnic minority, is a specific multilingual context for FLP research. Families in such contexts share with those in immigrant minority communities the

experience of a hierarchical relationship between the minority or home language and the dominant language. The resulting pressure to use their languages in expected ways supports language shift towards the dominant language. In the case of autochthonous communities, this pressure is experienced over generations. This reduces their apparent advantage over families where only one parent uses the minority language with the children, while everyone else around them speaks the dominant language. Although members of autochthonous minorities have access to a community network of speakers and the support of institutional education in the minority language, language socialisation takes place in the context of language shift processes in the wider community. This, in turn, may spill over into the family domain and counteract efforts to maintain the minority language. The chapter introducing the Sorbian-Lusatian context in Germany presents in detail the background against which individual language negotiation processes take place. Particular attention is paid to the situation in Catholic Upper Lusatia, the region where I conducted the fieldwork and collected the material that forms the basis for the analytical part of the thesis.

In order to capture the change and processual nature of practices, attitudes and approaches to language use, I used narrative biographic interviews during my fieldwork. With younger participants, I used language portraits as a creative prompt to think and talk about languages and language use. These biographic methods were complemented by ethnographic participant observation in order to trace language practices in the moment of interaction. The fieldwork took place between September 2021 and February 2022. The analysis in the empirical chapters is based on 19 narrative biographic interviews, conducted with twelve parents from six families and seven of their children, aged 13, 15, 16 (2×), 17, 28 and 30, as well as the conversations around the language portraits of four children, aged 10 (2×), 11 and 12.

After a coherent introduction to each of the participating families, including their main patterns of use of Sorbian and German in the family, I discuss in the following three chapters – following Bernard Spolsky's tripartite model of language policy – language practices, language attitudes and ideologies, and language management. In the chapter on language practices, I focus on the linguistic environment of the families by exploring the general 'soundscapes' of the children. Although this is largely determined by parents' practices, children's agency also plays a role. In the chapter on language attitudes and ideologies, I look at the participants' relationship to language use within and outside the family and how they perceive and evaluate or explain and justify the use of Sorbian and German in different contexts. In the chapter on language management, I deal specifically with the linguistic negotiation processes already alluded to in the previous chapters. I trace the linguistic functioning of the Sorbian-German community and the positioning of individuals within it. In addition to the basic division of Spolsky's language policy model, in this chapter I also refer to Language Management Theory in the understanding of Jiří Nestupný and Björn Jernudd.

The analysis of the material shows that most of the FLPs discussed in the thesis are not Sorbian-centred. The desire to pass on Sorbian to the children is accompanied by a parallel desire to pass on German. The FLPs are therefore mostly openly bilingual. In most families, the children use Sorbian with their Sorbian-speaking parent and German with their peers. If they prefer to speak German with their peers, they are usually more confident in German than in Sorbian. Nevertheless, they are willing to use Sorbian when spoken to in Sorbian, especially if they have not yet established a relationship with the person in question.

The common sense understanding of language use in Catholic Upper Lusatia includes the understanding that German has a dominant position in relation to Sorbian. This includes positive attitudes towards German as the language of professional advancement and Sorbian as the language of home, community and attachment, as well as negative attitudes towards Sorbian as a potentially excluding language and the Sorbs as a closed group.

The negotiation of family language practices between parents is mostly not explicit. The goal of a bilingual upbringing of the children is implicitly negotiated through the German-speaking parent's positive or non-opposing attitude towards the transmission of the Sorbian language by the Sorbian-speaking partner. In the dissertation, I discuss conscious and unconscious parental choices that are relevant for the structure of the linguistic environment and the linguistic input children receive, as well as for the opportunities children have to engage with Sorbian. I also address the more explicitly discussed choices about the type of school children are enrolled in and the extent to which the Sorbian language should play a role in schooling. Such decisions depend on whether parents expect the school to play a role in the development of Sorbian language skills or whether they consider contact with spoken Sorbian in informal contexts to be sufficient. Among the examples of explicit language management, repeated requests and admonitions by adults to children to speak Sorbian stand out. On the other hand, the rule of adapting to speakers of German is sometimes explicitly explained to children. At the end of the discussion on language management, I take a look at factors that are relevant for the linguistic socialisation of children but which are not subject to management in the families participating in the study. The first, the personalities of the parents, is difficult to influence but can be taken into account when thinking about language use in the family. The second factor, the division of parenting and paid work in the family, is also not always freely negotiable but can have a major impact on the language input that children receive. Finally, the third factor, the use of media in different languages, is much easier to influence and choose as a resource for language socialisation.