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From: Michael Hornsby, PhD, DLitt, Prof. UAM.

RE: Assessment of the Ph.D. Thesis of Ms. Sara Mitschke

Thank you for the opportunity to review the thesis presented by Ms. Sara Mitschke, entitled *Negotiating language practices and policies in Sorbian-German families in Upper Lusatia*. The topic under investigation is highly relevant at the present time, considering the immense pressure minority languages, including Upper Sorbian, are experiencing at this time. It is a very original piece of work which will add greatly to our knowledge of Upper Sorbian and to minority languages in general.

The thesis is organized as a monograph comprised of nine chapters, plus a final discussion chapter. The chapter titles for this thesis are as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Theoretical background
3. The Sorbs and Sorbian in Lusatia
4. Studying family language policies in Lusatia
5. Research methods
6. Introducing the families and research participants
7. Language practices
8. Language beliefs – Attitudes and ideologies
9. Language management
10. Discussion

The thesis content is 277 pages long, which proceeds along firstly theoretical and then historical/sociological lines, before presenting the methodology used to collect the data. The remaining chapters describe and analyse the data generated from the fieldwork described in Chapter 5. The final chapter discusses some of the more important conclusions which the author has managed to formulate in the course of her research on this topic.

The thesis is framed to investigate language biographies in the context of Sorbian as an everyday language and especially in German-Sorbian bilingualism in families. Data in the thesis are primarily drawn from 19 biographical narrative interviews and 6 language portraits. These data were triangulated through additional ethnographic open participant observations. The subsequent treatment of the data was based on a thematic analysis and also a content-based discourse analysis. The researcher's overall goal is to understand better the nature of

negotiations of language use in Sorbian-German interlingual families in Catholic Upper Lusatia. The results obtained from the research are very clearly explained, provide a lot of detail, and are highly relevant for the field of minority languages.

Strengths of the manuscript:

The manuscript is very well written and has a logically sequential narrative established throughout. Correct, formal and academic language is used consistently well in the thesis, employing a relevant academic style. Punctuation conforms very well to British English rules. The researcher's focus on establishing the rationale for the methodological and theoretical foundations utilized in the study is detailed and comprehensive. The progression from the beginning of the thesis on the theoretical background which focuses on the key concepts in the study is logical and well-supported. These introductory chapters are an impressively deep and comprehensive treatment of the literature on multilingualism and how key concepts from this field are relevant for the present study. In particular, the reflective nature of much of the introductory chapters is a very welcome feature in that it allows the reader to sense that the data which follow is not posited as 'fact' but as 'positional', with the researcher clearly interacting with the participants in order to jointly create the data. Chapter 3 contains a very thorough and detailed background on the Upper Sorbian language and allows the reader to gain detailed knowledge of the linguistic situation in the research site. Very relevant and up-to-date literature is cited both here and throughout the thesis and indicates that the candidate has interrogated previous research very effectively.

The methodological chapter contains much attention to the data collection and analysis methods and then the thesis moves into an in-depth presentation of findings, with a re-working of the analysis, related to each of the participants. The analysis is thorough and reflects a clear understanding of and ability to apply biographical analysis methods. The findings are very rich and the description of each case is quite compelling. It is clear that great attention and care and time was spent with the data by the researcher to honour each participant's decision to participate in this study. The procedures for obtaining consent from the participants is very well described.

Critical commentary and areas for improvement:

Theoretical, background and methodological foundations (Chapters 1-4):

The comprehensive discussions on the theoretical underpinnings, the background and the methodology in the first four chapters were quite impressive, but also were a highly detailed for the reader. I do feel these could have been condensed somewhat. I also feel that many of the key concepts introduced in these chapters could have been better signposted throughout the thesis and more cross-referencing between these chapters and further on in those chapters which discuss the findings; this would have allowed the reader to have experienced a tighter narrative and argument on the issues the researcher has highlighted. In terms of signposting, the thesis objective of the study being explicitly based on Family Language Policy appearing on p. 26 is

too far in; this objective should have been made much clearer much earlier on. Also, the focus on interlingual couples which is mentioned in detail on p. 43 could have profitably been much more emphasised when it was first mentioned on p. 11, where the researcher tell us she will say more about it in Chapter 4, but does not say why this choice of participant is so important for the study. A statement that ethics review board approval was given for this study would be helpful/reassuring given the personal nature of the topic.

The post-structuralist framework mentioned on p. 10 could have been dealt with in a more detailed fashion, particularly as it is a framework that is certainly not accepted for studies which involve language by all researchers working in the field. It needed to be treated in a more circumspect way as well because I suspect most research participants would not recognise this framework as being operational in their daily lives, nor the use of the term ‘linguistic repertoire’ in section 2.3. Therefore, this approach would have been benefitted from a more applied use and more of an interconnection between the theoretical side and how the participants themselves would have described their own language practices.

Chapter 2 was, I felt, a little disjointed. There was a lot of good information about the main concepts explored in the thesis, but I failed to see attempts to make bridging connections between the different sections, which would have made the chapter much more cohesive. The descriptions of the different concepts could have been focused a little more on the main themes which were to be found among the narratives of the research participants and appropriately cross-referenced as a result.

Data collection, discussion and analysis (chapters 5-9):

Chapter 5, as previously mentioned, gives a very detailed and convincing account of the data collection. It was good to see some of the latest research cited here (particularly Flubacher & Purkarthofer, 2022), but the citation of their work in section 5.1.1. lacks the precise pages numbers necessary for the reader to verify the quotation or to read more about their approach. Chapter 6 contains highly detailed descriptions of the research participants, which is a bit arduous for the reader to absorb. My questions here are: what do such highly detailed descriptions bring to the study? Could they perhaps have been condensed a bit more and the full versions provided in an appendix? Perhaps a summary table of the main characteristics of the participants could have been provided somewhere in the chapter to aid the reader in getting an overview of the research participants. The author foresees this problem by noting that the extracts from the interviews tended to be exceptionally dense. Chapter 7 discusses language practices and choices, and I feel more explanation could have been provided at this point for the reader to understand what the author means by language ‘practices’ and ‘choices’, perhaps with more explicit cross-referencing with earlier chapters. I also felt that this chapter lacked an overall summing up paragraph, drawing all the strands together and making summative conclusions about ‘language practices’ in general. Chapter 8 could have benefitted, like the other chapters, from more cross-referencing with earlier chapters. I also felt the chapter was more descriptive and less analytic than I had expected; this was a missed opportunity for the author to put more of her own ‘spin’ on the data. Chapter 9 would have benefitted more from an ‘easing in’ to the field of language management and a reminder to the reader about this approach (and again cross-referencing with earlier chapters).

Concluding chapter (Chapter 10):

The discussion chapter contained many valuable points and commentary on the previous data discussed in chapters 6-9. However, I feel that these comments could have been better incorporated into the previous chapters in order to make them more analytical and less descriptive. Chapter 10 could then have served as a wider reflection on the main issues discussed in the thesis and included some examples from other similar situations, mentioned in the literature. This could have been a good opportunity to conclude the development of the research process, much in the way that the last three paragraphs of the chapter hint at this process on p. 253. If the thesis were to be published in book form, I would suggest a re-organisation of the layout as a result, together with a redistribution of the content, as indicated above.

Overall remarks:

Something I missed in the thesis was the lack of very clear research questions and related hypotheses. The overall objective of the research was established early on, of course, but I think this objective could have been broken down into clear questions the researcher wanted to ask – and answer – as she developed the research. I think these research questions are implied rather than overtly stated, so of course they are at the crux of the thesis, but the reader would benefit from them being explicitly spelled out for them.

Another issue is the ‘informal questionnaire’ which the author mentions. I think it would have been important to give us more information about this questionnaire – what the questions were and how they were delivered. This aspect of the thesis needed to be more transparent.

Finally, a concluding section that includes both practical implications and also validation strategies that were used would be useful. That is, what measures were taken to ensure that the findings were trustworthy, authentic and valid? One such criterion is that something about the findings should be surprising (not obvious) and also resonate with the reader. What surprised you about the findings? What did you find that you were not expecting to find?

Despite the critical commentary, the thesis overall succeeds in addressing the title of the work and contains many valuable insights which are highly informative, both from a specialist and generalist sociolinguistic point of view. As a result, this dissertation has earned a positive assessment from me and, in my view, the PhD candidate can proceed to the final stages towards earning a PhD title.