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Is our language Silesian?

Cieszynian ideological debates considering the Silesian language emancipation

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The subject of the dissertation is an analysis of ideological debates taking place in Cieszyn Silesia regarding the role and significance of this region and its linguistic varieties for the process of emancipation of the Silesian language, understood as granting it official status as a regional language or ethnic minority language, raising its social prestige so that it is perceived as a fully-fledged independent language, as well as standardizing it. The work is based on empirical field research, which resulted in 54 in-depth interviews with people involved in various ways in such debates (i.e., acting as ideology brokers), supplemented by references to media texts and other forms of discussion on this topic in the region.

The work consists of seven chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography. The first chapter is introductory and consists of seven sections. In the first section, I define the titular concept of “(language) ideological debates” and related terms such as language ideologies and attitudes, ideology brokers, and ideological clarification. The next section is devoted to doubts concerning such concepts as *language*, *dialect*, *patois*, *ethnolect*, *lect*, etc., and to my choice of terminology in this matter, which I consistently apply in the rest of the work. A special place is given here to the term *po naszymu* (‘in our way’), which in the Cieszyn-Silesian discourse, and thus in the content of the dissertation, functions in three meanings which are complementary only to some extent. The third section of the first chapter discusses the choronyms that are most important to the work: *Silesia*, *Upper Silesia*, and *Cieszyn Silesia*. The first two in particular are understood differently in different contexts, which is why I considered it necessary to discuss the evolution of their meaning and, on this basis, make my own terminological choices, which I will consistently adhere to in the rest of the thesis. In the introduction to this section, I also refer to theoretical inspirations that I have drawn from geographical literature, specifically the so-called new regional geography, which provides concepts useful for my analysis, such as the perceptual region and the schizophrenic region. Section four continues with a discussion of the most important ethnonyms – *Silesians*, *Cieszynians*, *stela* (‘from here’) – and again explains my terminological choices. Section five is an introduction to the context of the research, i.e. a definition of linguistic emancipation, followed by a historical excursus into the history of the Silesian language and the linguistic situation in Silesia, which is necessary for understanding the narratives discussed later. The sixth section provides a brief overview of the existing literature on the ethnic and linguistic identity of the inhabitants of Silesia, especially its changes over the last thirty years. I point out there that the issue of relations between the Cieszyn and post-Prussian parts of Silesia and the social perception of the activities of the (Upper) Silesian emancipation movement in the Cieszyn region have so far been poorly

explored, which means that, in my opinion, this dissertation fills a very serious gap in the field of Silesian studies. The last, seventh section of the introduction concerns methodological issues. In it, I explain who my interviewees were, attaching a table with a full list of them in anonymised form with assigned codes, which I will later use to mark their statements; what form the interviews took and how I transcribed them; how the research for the dissertation was linked to the tasks performed in the thematically related grant project *Linguistic Diversity in Poland*; what sources other than interviews I use in the dissertation and how quotations from them are presented; when the research was conducted (2021–2025) and how important this fact is for the interpretation of the content presented in the dissertation, which does not necessarily have to translate into the past or remain valid in the long term; and finally my positionality statement in relation to the area under study and the subject matter of my work as a person from a town on the border of Cieszyn Silesia who has been actively involved in Silesian language issues for several years.

In the second chapter, I examine ideological positions concerning the status of the (Cieszyn) Silesian language and its relationship with neighbouring languages, in particular Polish. First, as the most traditional view and one that has been repeated in the majority of academic and popular publications to date, I discuss the view that the Cieszynian variety is a territorial variant of Polish, often combined with the belief that it is archaic and Old Polish in character. This is counterbalanced by the opinion that we are dealing with a separate language or a variety that has the potential to soon become a separate language. Proponents of this position use various arguments, but these are clearly more often sociolinguistic arguments, referring to the functions that the Cieszynian variety already performs or is beginning to perform, or to the preferences of its users, resulting from a sense of ethnic distinctiveness, rather than references to systemic differences. Still others consider speaking *po naszymu* to be a chaotic linguistic mixture consisting mainly of Polish, Czech and German elements. There is also a view suggesting that the Cieszynian variety has its origins in the old Czech or Moravian languages. In addition, there are those who consciously distance themselves from taking a clear position, and the whole picture is further complicated by the fact that the terminology commonly used is sometimes seemingly contradictory to the ideological declarations of the interlocutors. A characteristic example is the use of the term *gwara* ('subdialect', 'patois') as one of the glottonyms, even by some people who do not categorise Cieszyn Silesian as a dialect in the taxonomic sense.

The third chapter is devoted to the issue of codifying the (Cieszyn) Silesian language. In it, I seek to answer the question of whether the region's inhabitants consider such an undertaking necessary and feasible. Here, too, the views of Cieszyn residents appear to be very heterogeneous. One of the arguments put forward by supporters of codification is the need for a standard in order to gain recognition of Silesian linguistic distinctiveness both in the eyes of the law and in the broader public perception as a 'serious language'. Secondly, some people see standardisation as a tool to support the revitalisation of the language, as it would then be easier to introduce it into school education and create learning materials for future new-speakers. The third argument refers to practical needs, as pointed out by people who already write in Cieszyn Silesian but feel uncertain due to the lack of a standard to refer to in case of doubts about correctness. On the opposite side are those who oppose the creation of a standard. One of their arguments is that dialects cannot be codified by their very nature,

as they are assigned different functions than the ‘national language’. It is not surprising that this view is expressed primarily by people who feel strongly attached to Polish identity and have an overall negative attitude towards the emancipation efforts in Silesia, not only in terms of language but also ethnicity. Regardless of declarations of identity, there is a widely held belief that the local language is too diverse internally for its codification to be possible at all, often combined with the fear that an attempt to create a single standard will lead to internal conflicts. Finally, there is a group of people who believe that through a tradition of writing dating back to at least the 19th century – and further developed thanks to figures such as Tomasz Sochacki and Karol Daniel Kadłubiec – a spontaneous codification based on the so-called classical spelling, i.e. a system of writing based on the intuitive use of the Polish alphabet, has already taken place to a certain extent.

Chapter four concerns the conceptualisation of the Cieszyn Silesia region in relation to Upper Silesia, and even Silesia in general – whether it is perceived as an (Upper) Silesian subregion or as a separate entity, and why. A large part of the inhabitants of Cieszyn Silesia distance themselves from Upper Silesia, which they refer to exclusively as the former Prussian part of the land. One of the arguments for this attitude is that the division of Silesia into Austrian and Prussian parts took place nearly three hundred years ago, so most of the elements of cultural heritage that are important today were shaped in the context of belonging to other state entities. Another argument concerns the memory of the events of World War II and the post-war period, where Cieszyn Silesia is associated as an area where the Polish national martyrdom narrative is a socially accepted norm, while Upper Silesia is, from this point of view, an area shaping its own cultural memory, largely in opposition to the Polish one. Attention is also drawn to the differences in the approach to the idea of Silesian ethnicity, with a much smaller percentage of residents identifying with it in Cieszyn Silesia than on the post-Prussian side. Some refer to religious issues, contrasting the multi-denominational Cieszyn region, with a large proportion of Lutherans, with the strongly Catholic Upper Silesia. The views of some Cieszyn residents are also influenced by the nationwide phenomenon of narrowing the concept of *Upper Silesia* in everyday and media discourse to the Katowice and Rybnik area or the Katowice conurbation alone. The latter issue is also related to the phenomenon of equating Upper Silesia in the narrow sense with Silesia in general, which means that for some people, the very category of Silesian identity may be problematic, and they prefer to refer to the *Duchy of Cieszyn* or the *Cieszyn Land*, completely distancing themselves from belonging to Silesia. On the other hand, a significant number of Cieszyn residents are in favour of treating the Cieszyn region as part of Upper Silesia. Their arguments refer primarily to two issues: many centuries of shared historical development, the legacy of which cannot be negated by the later division between two countries and the resulting socio-cultural consequences, as well as the logic of the geographical division into Lower and Upper Silesia, against which the additional distinction of Cieszyn Silesia as a separate entity is unfounded. Among this group, not only the attitude of fellow residents who distance themselves from their ties with (Upper) Silesia is sometimes viewed negatively, but also that of emancipation activists from the post-Prussian side, who allegedly ignore Cieszyn Silesia in their actions and rhetoric or do not sufficiently accept its cultural specificity. It should be emphasised that views on the relationship between Upper Silesia and Cieszyn Silesia do not correlate in any particular way with views on the status

of the Cieszyn variety or the need for its codification. There is also a common discrepancy between consciously articulated ideological positions and everyday linguistic usage. Even those who advocate for the unity of the Cieszyn region with Upper Silesia often intuitively use the latter term in a sense narrowed down to the post-Prussian part.

In chapter five, I consider how the question of whether Cieszyn Silesia belongs to (Upper) Silesia affects views on the place of the Cieszynian variety in the broader (Upper) Silesian context. The two most popular positions on this subject can be summarised in the following statements: 'These are two different languages' and 'Cieszynian is a dialect of Silesian'. Supporters of both views differ in terms of how significant they consider the differences between the Cieszynian variety and the varieties of the former Prussian Silesia to be, but they agree in principle on what these differences are. In addition to systemic features (the most emblematic of which are the endings of verbs in the 1st person singular) and vague notions of a 'different accent', there is a particularly popular belief that the language used on the post-Prussian side is much richer in German loanwords, which can be seen in connection with the arguments discussed in the previous chapter for the distinctiveness of Cieszyn Silesia from Upper Silesia, where associations with the more 'German' or 'Germanised' character of the latter area played an important role. However, there is no consensus as to whether the border between these two (sub)regions is also a linguistic border – some believe that it is so and that one could very easily recognise who comes from which side, even in the case of neighbouring villages; others, however, point to the transitional nature of the language in the borderland. I devoted the last section of the fifth chapter to verifying the thesis promoted by some Cieszyn activists that one of the key differences is the non-use on the Cieszyn side of the words *godka* and *godać*, which are emblematic of the Silesian language. In fact, they are used in the north-eastern part of the region and were treated as completely familiar by many of my interlocutors.

Chapter six is a continuation of earlier considerations, this time in the context of codification. Here, I seek an answer to the question of whether the inhabitants of Cieszyn Silesia feel the need – and see the possibility – of developing a single Silesian standard written language, or whether they believe that the Cieszyn region should be treated separately in standardisation efforts. It turns out that regardless of their views on all the issues discussed earlier, they are aware of the significant differences between their speech and that of former Prussian Silesia, and they almost unanimously express a desire to preserve these differences. There were very few cases of people willing to accept a unified standard of the Silesian language based on varieties other than those of Cieszyn. However, there is no unanimity in the approach to cooperation in codification with representatives of the post-Prussian part of the land. Some firmly reject this possibility, fearing that it will mean the imposition of a foreign Upper Silesian standard or the creation of some artificial intermediate norm. Others are willing to cooperate, provided that the proposed codification is pluricentric in nature, with the Cieszyn region as one of the centres. The discussions also show that many interlocutors are actually close to the ideals of the polycentric standard implemented in Corsica since the 1980s. It should be added that in Cieszyn Silesia, the so-called *śląbikörz* alphabet, as the proposed standard Silesian spelling, is not widely recognised, not to mention its extremely rare practical use. The variants of the so-called classical (Polish) spelling definitely dominate, which some defend as the most adequate

form of writing in their opinion. Others, however, notice its shortcomings and propose their own alternatives, often converging with the specific solutions of the *ślabikōrz* alphabet.

I devoted the seventh and final chapter of my dissertation to the borderlands of the Cieszyn region others than inter-Silesian, which, unlike its core, have been the subject of few studies to date, and where ideological debates directly or indirectly related to the main topic of my work are also taking place. Starting with the eastern borderland, i.e. with Lesser Poland, I describe the disputes surrounding the legitimacy of using the term *Podbeskidzie*, as well as the debates on the cultural and linguistic character of the right-bank part of the Bielsko-Biała County and the Żywiec region. In this context, a particularly interesting phenomenon is the *Lach* identity project, which has been implemented for over a decade by activists from the Bielsko-Biała County. As its leaders admit, their actions are a defensive reaction to the successes of the Silesian emancipation movement, which they perceive as a threat because it challenges the Polish national ideology, to which they, on the contrary, feel particularly strongly attached. This leads to the instrumental use of the local linguistic variety, which, despite its small number of active users, is becoming, in the eyes of the propagators of the new identity, one of the proofs of separateness from Silesia and the Silesians. On the western border, with Moravia, I am interested in the concept of *Lachia* as a region, as well as the issue of local language varieties, traditionally called *Lachian*, which, despite their typological differences, are now eagerly treated by Silesian emancipation activists as one of the variants of Silesian. The debate on this issue is clearly asymmetrical. While activists from the Polish part of Silesia refer to the local heritage and take up the cause of Óndra Łysohorsky, who wrote in the Lachian literary language he created himself from the 1930s to the 1980s, on the Silesian-Moravian border itself the issue of the Silesian language is only considered by a few people, and the group of active participants in debates on this issue is even smaller. Regional identity is most often constructed in relation to the contemporary functional region within the Czech Republic, with its actual centre in Ostrava, and the sense of Silesian or even Upper Silesian identity – also present among some residents, with particular emphasis on the Hlučín area – does not usually imply a belief in belonging to the same linguistic community as the Silesian population in Poland or in the Trans-Olza area. Nevertheless, there are isolated cases of local activists who maintain contacts with activists from Poland and promote the idea of reviving the so-called Lachian varieties as an element of the pluricentric Silesian language. In order to obtain the most complete picture of the situation, I also look at the southern borderland with the Slovak Kysuce region, which has been the subject of dialectological and ethnographic disputes in the past, but today is the only one that is not the subject or background of any noticeable ideological debates.

In conclusion, I summarise the thesis. The most important conclusion from the entire study is that in almost every issue analysed, the participants in the Cieszyn-Silesian ideological debates appear to be a very diverse group, and that the ideological position taken on one specific topic does not necessarily have an intuitive impact on others. Any attempt to distinguish any coherent ‘camps’ within the Cieszyn community would be doomed to failure. In reality, we are dealing with a veritable mosaic of views, with each individual participant in the ideological debates presenting a slightly different set. In this way, surprising convergences are possible between people who would otherwise stand on opposite sides of the conventional barricade, but also huge differences among those who at other times share the same opinions. I also did not

notice any particular correlations between the views presented and factors such as gender, age, religion or origin from a specific part of the region. The research for this work was qualitative in nature and focused on a specific group of people involved in activities and discussions around language, so it is not possible to draw quantitative conclusions about the popularity of particular narratives and views among the general population of Cieszyn Silesia. However, it should certainly not be expected that 'ordinary people' would share opinions that are not referred to by committed ideology brokers. In this sense, this work is an exhaustive, comprehensive study, the most complete ever written on the subject of language ideologies in Cieszyn Silesia and the relations between the Cieszyn region and Upper Silesia.