

# Lithuanian language in spoken media: Plagued by Disease since 1990?

## INTRODUCTION

During the last decade well-known members of the Lithuanian intelligentsia (writers, actors, philosophers) have many times noted that during the Soviet period they still managed to serve culture, to maintain their creative freedom, to foster spiritual values and to struggle for the survival of their nation, irrespective of any political oppression. The years of independence have raised feelings of regret for many a cultural figure over the demise of morals in society and the entrenchment of consumerist mass culture. In their view, this voluntary opening up to the West that took place in 1990 signalled a rather more serious threat for the nation than even the brutal Soviet period (cf. Miliūnaitė 2006: 113). When researching social transformation, a phenomenon typical among post-Soviet countries, Lithuania's cultural philosophers often see not only concern over their nation's future, but also "a longing for positions held during the Soviet period, for society's attention and the political influence from that time" (Putinaitė 2007: 292). Recently, members of the intelligentsia are more often joined by some of the more well-known Lithuanian language gatekeepers. One of them, known even as the "language pope" Aldonas Pupkis, in his book *Kalbos kultūros studijos* (Language Culture Studies, 2005) expresses regret that in contemporary society linguists, the former "unquestionable authorities on language" during Soviet times, "are not always respected and are not unreservedly trusted" (Pupkis 2005: 336). As in the case of the intelligentsia, attempts at regaining this authority are made by speaking out about grave threats. There are warnings that, due to the "word for word" understanding of the freedom of speech, unrestricted democracy and the "imperialism" of the English language, the Lithuanian language is akin to a "seriously ill patient" at risk of dying if society does not heed the instructions of the "doctors":

"The Lithuanian language is a seriously ill patient" [...] And a seriously ill patient dies, or, with the major help of doctors (linguists) and close ones (society), is set

back on their feet and can recover. The correctness of language is the greatest concern of today's language treasurers – it is the obligation of all the language-oriented intelligentsia, and ultimately the cultural and patriotic concern of all of society (Pupkis 1997: 1).

The particularly strong patriotic ties between a nation and its language are recalled in a positive light under occupation conditions as well; society tried to defend itself against Russification by learning correct language from linguists, thereby joining the struggle “for Lithuanian-ness and the future of the nation”. A respectful approach to language was ensured in the public arena of that time also, especially in television, which performed the role of a teacher of pure and correct language. Yet from 1990 talking about the demise of language in the spoken media, reflecting the condition of Standard language itself, has become commonplace. A typical example of such assessments can be taken from some announcements that appeared in the press in 2006 about “pure language days” organized by some well-known philologists from the Lithuanian Language Society. They reviewed all the television channels' programmes from a particular period and noted all the linguistic errors made by the hosts. One of the conclusions from this raid was as follows:

But there is clearly still too much language impurity in television; language itself is degraded to a level of mockery and loses its significance as a national value. It is about time the importance of that value is understood; we need to understand the cultural uniqueness of our standard language (Pupkis 2006: 11).

Just what was the transformation that occurred in Lithuania's spoken media after 1990 that has resulted in it receiving such strict condemnation by language gatekeepers? The answer to this question lies in this article's overview of global spoken media changes and political transformations in post-Soviet countries after 1990 and their correlations with the requirements expected of television and radio language.

## LANGUAGE IN SPOKEN MEDIA BEFORE 1990: *THE MAJOR SOCIETAL TASK OF LINGUISTIC EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE CULTURE*

Spoken media in all of post-war Europe took on a mission to strengthen a nation's unity, foster a sense of identity and nurture and educate society. Holding a state institution's monopolistic status, it communicated with its audience invoking its government-sanctioned authority (Pečiulis 2005: 29). In Eastern European countries during the Communist period, television also took on a propagandistic mission. Its main objectives, as identified by Jakubowicz, were

to create an ideologically correct symbolic environment, filled with content designed to socialize the audience to the ideas and values of Communism and thus to educate homo Sovieticus. An equally important goal was to use the media to provide evidence of the system's success in attaining its goals and to attest to the truth of its claims to superiority over capitalism, thus serving to strengthen and perpetuate Communist rule. The media also served the purpose of mobilizing support for and participation in the development effort in general and, in particular, the various drives and campaigns launched by authorities. (Jakubowicz 1995).

These objectives were supplemented in Lithuania and most likely in the rest of the Soviet Union as well, by correct language requirements for the entire mass media. Even as far back as thirty years ago, Aldonas Pupkis referred to this government approbation in a Language culture textbook for university students:

All our means of mass information serve to spread the most advanced ideology and foster a Communist worldview. Carrying out these tasks properly is possible only by using proper, living and correct language. That is why the culture of language is a state and political concern. Indifference towards the culture of language would mean being indifferent to the Communist ideals of our society (Pupkis 1980: 83-84).

As we can see from the quote, the adequacy of media language to standard variety norms was considered a crucial requirement for promoting the right ideology in a totalitarian society. That is why it is understandable that there could have been no doubt about standard Lithuanian in its role in legitimizing this ideology. In this way, the correctness of language, as set by its gatekeepers, was approbated by the Communist government and assumed something close to the power of the law. What was the television and radio of the time like? Only people who were ideologically and linguistically well-educated became programme hosts. The texts were mainly prepared in advance and read over several times by not only Communist propaganda experts but linguists as well. In those days, there was absolutely no room for improvisation. Thus, there were no language errors either, which might normally appear during spontaneous speech. Therefore the spoken media of that time duly carried out its linguistic mission of being a standard of correct Lithuanian language for the whole of society. This is confirmed by a notice from 1987 from the main norm-setting institution – the Lithuanian Language Commission:

Television and radio perform a “major societal linguistic education and language culture task”, while the “impeccable language of most radio and a large part of television programmes helps spread and entrench codified lexical, compositional and syntax norms, with announcers’ language serving as an example for pronunciation and accentuation” (Komisija 1989: 16).

To summarize the period up until 1990, we could say that the ideal conditions for spreading spoken standard language in television and radio were created both

by its ideological mission and by the very nature of spoken media at the time: the monological nature of language, the pre-preparation of texts, and the linguistic aptitude of announcers as the main spoken media commentators.

## LANGUAGE IN SPOKEN MEDIA AFTER 1990: *WE ARE APPROACHING THE LIMIT OF LANGUAGE DEGRADATION*

The economic and political reforms that began to be implemented in the Soviet Union in 1985 introduced changes, and spoken media that had not changed in several decades (following the example of pan-Union television) saw new direct telecast programmes on Lithuanian television (especially from 1987) featuring less ideological content, less pre-prepared speech and more entertainment. Tora Hedin, who wrote on similar changes in Czech television after 1989, underlines that “societal changes have meant that mass media programming has been broadened over a very short time, while taboos concerning language use and topics of conversation have lifted” (Hedin 2005: 128). Following examples from the West, spoken media rejected maintaining paternalistic relations with its audience and started creating new genres and a new media culture (“tabloid/infotainment programmes, with a focus on the personal and subjective”) (Hedin 123–124). Freedom of speech came into effect as television and radio opened their doors to the people – speakers from different social groups and speakers not educated in “correct” language. Then, and today, the main spoken media characteristics are dialogicity, spontaneous speech, and expressivity. A symbol of this new era was the appearance of the first non-state commercial broadcasters (the first independent radio station (M-1) in Lithuania was established at the very end of 1989), bringing to an end the monopoly of state broadcasters. New channels displayed an ever-greater change in relations with the audience. Competing for the viewers’ attention, they rather quickly acknowledged and were guided by the formula used in Western journalism:

Stronger commercial pressures on the (broadcast) media force them to maximise their audiences and therefore to increase ‘rapport’ with their audiences, i.e. to find the popular wavelength that makes the audience tune in to the particular channel. The media therefore increasingly have to ‘speak the same language’ as ordinary people do, and to abandon their highbrow, paternalistic modes of address (Schroder, Philips 1999).

This most probably explains why representatives of such modes of address disappeared from television and radio, including the main proponents of spoken standard – professional announcers. They were replaced with television hosts who main-

ly focused not on a mission of spreading correct language, but accommodation – adapting not only to the likes and interests of audiences, but taking on the mode of language closest to audiences.<sup>1</sup> A paradox typical of spoken media in Lithuania in recent times is that the people who become popular programme hosts are actually those who have for many years received criticism for their incorrect language, their “unnatural” pronunciation and so on. However, the executives of commercial radio and television stations often ignore the requests of language gatekeepers and even some viewers to remove certain “bad” speakers, as usually it is precisely the participation of these hosts that guarantees high programme ratings, and thus greater advertising revenue for these commercial enterprises.

This is where the conflict mentioned in the beginning of the article stems from; language gatekeepers state that spoken media language is a reflection of the language used by society (i.e., we hear Lithuanian as it actually is), and also counter that television and radio no longer uphold the mission alive during the Soviet period – to teach society the correct spoken Standard – language as it should be, according to prescriptive teaching methods. Later in this article we shall look at this situation in Lithuania’s spoken media more closely, focusing on the essence of this ideological conflict. This will help answer the question raised in this article’s title of whether language in spoken media has really declined during the twenty years since Lithuania’s independence.

After 1990, language norm-setters presented their concerns regarding the serious “illness” plaguing the Lithuanian language during the period of occupation to politicians who decided to apply special protection measures. In this way the correctness and purity of the Lithuanian language is still officially considered as both a state and national foundation. From a legal aspect this ideology is entrenched as mandatory for all media. The Law on the Lithuanian Language, passed more than fifteen years ago, requires that all spoken media language should be proper. The State Language Inspection enforces abidance by this law by having the power to levy monetary fines to television and radio station directors if their programme hosts make errors from the main list of language errors. Spoken media, as in earlier times, must teach the people proper language and feature model speakers. Linguists who today criticize spoken media language acknowledge the impact of the transforma-

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<sup>1</sup> A similar strategy is also applied by political leaders of late, that is, regular participation in various TV shows. The following of such measures of *ordinary person* image creation is usually forced upon politicians by conditions dictated by contemporary media, especially television. In struggling for voters’ attention the politician is forced to *mediatize*, i.e., become popular in media which is competing for high ratings. For the same reason there are more examples of colloquialization in political discourse – normally typical in media. When using an everyday, informal communication speaking manner and like words, or displaying public behaviour not expected of a politician, one can be almost certain to receive media attention – one’s name will make the newspaper headlines and feature in television news programmes.

tions that took place in society on language in the public space, yet they refuse to abandon correct language requirements that were established in the Soviet period, underlining the aforementioned legally imposed patriotic and national status of correct language. James Milroy calls such ideology-bound countries Standard language culture countries. The monitoring authorities active in these countries are concerned with “maintaining uniformity” (Milroy 2007: 136) and the preservation of language itself. Expressing any doubts against this ideology or its authorities implies being against national identity, as the correctness of language is given national value status:

It is characteristic of the standard language ideology for people to believe that this uniform standard variety with all its superimposed rules of correctness is actually the language itself (Milroy 2007: 136).

Maintaining this belief, some television viewers and radio listeners, used to the language standards of Soviet times in television and radio are also angered by language errors and send their complaints to the language inspectorate, thereby strengthening the language gatekeepers’ positions in their need to satisfy society’s demands that correct language be heard on television and radio.

However today’s spoken media employees, as mentioned earlier, usually pay more attention to how people “actually” speak: Both language gatekeepers and sociolinguists agree that Standard Lithuanian is still not the mother-tongue of a majority of Lithuanians (dialects have survived in Lithuania, and in the larger cities unique regional varieties have formed), and that Lithuanian native speakers only start learning the Standard spoken variety in school, and rarely ever learn it perfectly (cf. Piročkinas 2011). Thus, even the ideal Standard requirements for journalists working in spoken media are rather difficult to realize:

One should stress that adherence to the approved norms has become not an easy issue for journalists, especially for those who speak spontaneously and without a written manuscript. The prescriptive norms go rather often against the internalised norms of the speaker (standard pronunciation and accentuation raise the most difficulties). Monitoring habitual expressions in the process of speech production in order to produce pure and correct language becomes rather difficult (Vaičekauskienė 2011).

So on the one hand, journalists do not speak as they should because they “don’t know how”, on the other, they speak just like the rest of modern Lithuanian society does. And if today, especially among the younger generation, any hints at uniformity appear more and more unfamiliar then it is understandable that spoken media also places more value on individuality and originality, even in speech. As a typical example of today’s spoken media representatives, allow me to mention the

results of my research conducted two years ago, published in the article “Bad Language and Sociolinguistic Competence” (Tamaševičius 2010). This was a case study of one particular television programme host and youth culture personality who regularly received criticism for breaking language norms and his “bad” language (for the purposes of confidentiality, he is henceforth referred to as journalist N). During the research period (2009–2010) he played various roles in various talk shows; he hosted a humorous Sunday evening talk show and participated as a celebrity in other talk shows, as well as in an entertainment comedy show and as a media expert on a radio debate programme. Having analyzed the speaking styles applied in various show genres, it was found that the journalist had an excellent sense of the language requirements needed for various show genres, that he could adjust his language to the collocutors and could accurately use different levels of formality in the language he selected (especially his vocabulary). The ratio between informal and formal style elements in his language obviously fluctuated. In entertainment shows, conversations with good friends or collocutors of a similar age, he maintained his entertainment and youth culture celebrity image – his language contained many expressive characteristics of informal style (particularly slang vocabulary). In the same show, but when speaking with an erudite, authoritative person of an older age, the journalist balanced between maintaining respect for his collocutor (omitting slang and expletives) and keeping with an informal entertainment comedy show genre (where morphological informal style characteristics dominated). Thus, keeping in mind the claims of language gate-keepers who state that in his language ideal standard language norms are crudely violated and therefore label his language “bad”, the research results show something quite different – having analyzed his language in different show genres it was found that journalist N is expertly adept at adjusting his language in terms of the show genre, the role he is playing at the time, and in terms of his collocutors. This is an indicator of good sociolinguistic competence. That is something that language prescriptivists also discuss. However, as was already mentioned, official prescriptive language policy demands that the linguistic repertoire used in television and radio should not overstep the boundaries of the Standard variety (exceptions are possible, but only rarely, and only if their motivated usage is approbated by language authorities). Thus the first assessment tradition judges everyone who does not abide by the ideal standard language norms as a rule-breaker and bad speaker. Meanwhile, in the case of the second tradition the determining aspect is the ability to best adjust one’s speech to the fluctuating communicative situation, to apply language measures which can be ascribed to realistic norms and the realistic standard (Vaicekauskienė 2010: 172). And that requires one to be able to command as broad a range of linguistic repertoires as possible, even though for staunch supporters of homogeneity this type of over-stepping of official boundaries poses a huge threat:

It would not be a lie to say that here [in entertainment and sports programmes] there is no standard language, and every host speaks their own separate language (Pupkis 2006: 10).

This is one of the accusations mentioned by a language gatekeeper during the Pure Language Days (2006), which programme hosts exhibiting good sociolinguistic competence should accept as a compliment.

## CONCLUSIONS

The transformations that touched Lithuanian society left an indelible mark on spoken media. After 1990 it was dominated by completely new genres (e.g. infotainment) and familiarity and the rejection of a paternalistic, school-type manner of address became a typical feature of audience rapport. An ever-growing influence on the nature of spoken media is its commercialization and pandering to the likes and interests of viewers and listeners. Democratization and freedom of speech have determined that both in society in general and in television and radio this freedom to speak is given to people of various levels of education coming from different social classes, which is why programme hosts apply a somewhat more relaxed and informal style in addressing their collocutors. We appreciate that viewers and listeners prefer spontaneous and improvisational speech, rather than pre-prepared, directed speech. However language requirements concerning its correctness in spoken media remain the same as in those days when television and radio were institutions for the education, development and ideological nurturing of society. Particular weight behind this approach lies in the legitimization of programme hosts having to meet correctness requirements (keeping within ideal, prescriptive language norms) and the official support of traditions of linguistic nationalism that are still alive today. It is expected that the latter factors shall result in a negative assessment of future media changes in language (remorse over the further decline of our language), as the aim of media to adapt not only to the tastes of viewers and listeners, but also their language shall only grow stronger.

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## LIETUVIŲ KALBA SAKY TINĖJE ŽINIASKLAIDOJE: SUNKUS LIGONIS NUO 1990 METŲ?

*Santrauka*

Lietuvos visuomenę palietusios transformacijos paliko itin ryškų pėdsaką sakytinėje žiniasklaidoje. Po 1990 metų visuomenėje ėmė dominuoti visiškai nauji žanrai, santykiui su auditorija būdingesnis tapo familiarumas, atsisakyta paternalistinio, mokyklinio santykio su auditorija. Vis didesnę įtaką sakytinės žiniasklaidos pobūdžiui daro jos komerciškumas ir pataikavimas auditorijos pomėgiams. Demokratizacija, žodžio laisvė lėmė, kad tiek visoje visuomenėje, tiek ir televizijoje bei radijuje žodis suteikiamas įvairaus išsilavinimo, skirtingų socialinių sluoksnių atstovams, todėl kreipdamiesi į juos kur kas laisvesnį, neformalesnį stilių renkami ir laidų vedėjai. Pripažįstama, kad žiūrovai ir klausytojai su didesniu įdomumu klausosi spontaniško, improvizuoto laidų vedėjų ir dalyvių kalbėjimo, o ne iš anksto parengto ir surežisuoto. Tačiau reikalavimai kalbai, jos taisyklingumui sakytinėje žiniasklaidoje išlieka tokie patys, kaip ir tais laikais, kai televizija ir radijas buvo visuomenės švietimo ir ideologinio auklėjimo institucija. Ypatingą svorį tokiam požiūriui suteikia įstatymu įtvirtintas bendrinės kalbos normų laikymosi reikalavimas ir iki šiol oficialiai palaikoma lingvistinio nacionalizmo tradicija. Tikėtina, kad pastarieji veiksniai ir ateityje lems neigiamus žiniasklaidos poveikio kalbai vertinimus (apgailestavimą dėl tolesnio kalbos nuosmukio), nes žiniasklaidos priemonių siekis taikytis ne tik prie žiūrovų ir klausytojų skonio, bet ir prie jų kalbos ir toliau stiprės.

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ESMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: kalbos ideologija, sakytinės žiniasklaidos kalba, kalbos politika, socio-lingvistinė kompetencija

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