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Language ‘nationalisation’:
One hundred years of Standard Lithuanian

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More than a hundred years have passed since Lithuanian was shaped into a standard language. The chronology of the period marks key changes in language functioning and ideologies. This chapter introduces the period of formation of Standard Lithuanian (SL), then the years of Soviet modernism and, finally, the period of accelerated globalisation, with its outset coinciding with the restoration of Lithuania’s independence. Much attention is given to the historic context, which has led to a clearly articulated ideology of standardisation. Reference is made to fairly scarce data on SL usage.

NATIONAL STATE AND SL FORMATION

Lithuanian language historians categorise written SL as a late, consciously engineered dialect-selection standard; the process of selecting one dialect was reinforced by national movement and completed at the end of the 19th century. The selected dialect was the southern sub-dialect of West Highland (WH) (see Kaunas on Map 1).

Map 1: Lithuanian dialects (Institute of the Lithuanian Language, 2005)

There were several reasons for selecting the WH dialect. The region had a strong economic position and a number of patriotic intellectuals originated from there. The dialect had been used for writing since the 17th century in Lithuania Minor, a historical ethnic region of Prussia (which later formed part of the German Empire, East Prussia; most of the territory today is
that it subdued any features of either genre or individual style (Marčinkevičienė 2008). Paradoxically, because of the intense monitoring of the public domain, the spoken language could come to be associated with the ideal SL. As seen from the normative texts of the period, high standard speakers included actors and newsreaders, i.e. those whose speech was either pre-planned or based on a written text.

For Soviet ideology, the unification of behavior seemed to have been most instrumental. Public language was under the strict supervision of language editors. Language planning ideology was based on the priority of preserving ‘pure’ language. Still, it is difficult to say whether and to what extent this attitude was influenced by pre-war tradition, the use of historical forms of Lithuanian for Indo-European studies, and opposition to Russification, and to what extent it was the hidden ideology that strove to suppress symbols of national identity being used for the purposes of modern nationalism. Current research has shown that many cultural forms and practices were purposefully turned into museum exhibits. Either due to the above, or to the fact that natural development of a national state was suspended for 50 years, the ‘purity’ of SL as a symbol of national identity was declared as a priority over its instrumental function and remains so today.

Another distinctive feature of the Soviet value system was the presumption that people are inclined to negative influences, and hence needed to be educated. Individual language features, dialects and vernaculars were treated as impediments to the targeted linguistic ideal. As already pointed out, striving for uniformity is characteristic of late standards; however, in Soviet times and afterwards, this ideal was set very high. The following definition of SL featured in a textbook on the history of SL: “a cultivated, model language whose norms we treat as well-formed, obligatory to all and which we would not violate” (Palionis 1979: 5). Soviet times witnessed a number of publications on language norms. The Commission for the Lithuanian Language was set up in 1961; a glossary of lexical and grammatical corrections was prepared in 1976 and it became the bible of language editors. All the same, linguistic usage developed independently. The gap between the real and the ideal might have been due in part to the reasons why, in normative texts, standardisation was described as ‘work earning no gratitude’ from the ‘uneducated society’.

The language ideal and real usage

One of the most distinctive negative factors in the development of SL in Soviet times was the explicit policy of promoting Russian. Bilingualism limited the usage of SL to public domains. A decisive factor in SL development from the very beginning was assimilating intellectuals, mainly through deportation, mass murder and emigration. However, dialect levelling and the spread of SL were determined by the same factors as in other countries: mobility of the population, urbanisation and mass media.

Data on tendencies in SL usage is rather scarce and hardly ever based on a systematic analysis of empirical data; they derive mainly from normative articles of that time. Language corrections show a tendency to merely criticise spoken urban language – semi-private and rarely occurring spontaneous public speech, since written and spoken (or rather, read) media was subject to editing. As already discussed, the ideal was only attainable by newsreaders and actors, albeit not all of them. Linguists, editors, some journalists and writers were also among those who were categorised as more or less conforming to the set spoken norm, and this group comprised a few hundred or so language users. Other educated people, let alone ordinary people, were treated as unable to learn SL. Bilingualism and dialects, including different vowel qualities and different accentuation, were identified as threats. It had thus become common practice to require public speakers to undergo specific pronunciation training.

The ideological context was unfavourable for dialects. The Soviets imposed an attitude that dialects ‘hindered communication, were indicators of low education and remnants of feudalism’ (Girdziūnas 1981). In some provincial schools children were not allowed to speak dia-
lect even during the breaks; in local meetings people were requested to speak SL, which contributed to the feeling of being ashamed to speak the dialect. Since the 1990s, dialectal speaking has been rehabilitated. However, boundaries between dialect and standard have continued to be imposed. Diacritics were influenced by inter-dialects emerging in cities. The linguistic literature makes some reference to the preference given to the language spoken in Vilnius. The capital is claimed to have exerted an influence, albeit not exclusively positive, over the whole country (thus the Vilniaus dialect did not have the characteristics of an ideal). As late as 1970s the claim was made that the ratio of standardisation of spoken SL was not very high, since there were no people who would be born with that standard language (Girdenis 1973).

THE PERIOD OF INDEPENDENT LITHUANIA

Post-Soviet ideologies of language standardisation

In 1989 the restoration of an independent Lithuania instigated a national movement and the revival of a historical link with the pre-war state. At the same time, Lithuanians experienced the impact of globalisation processes and developments in information technology, as well as post-modern ideologies which were blocked under the Soviet regime. This contradictory situation, together with inherited practices of administering relations between the state and its citizens, influenced standardisation ideologies.

To protect SL from 'too much democracy' and globalisation, efforts are being taken to strengthen the institutional apparatus of language supervision. The State Language Commission is fully authorised to regulate language usage; its regulations are compulsory for all public space. The State Language Inspection and municipal language police have been established to oversee the implementation of policies and impose fines for grammatical, lexical and pronunciation 'errors' included in the List of Major Language Errors. Television and radio are required to take responsibility for disseminating established SL norms. Journals are closely watched, those who do not adhere to the codified norm are advised... to leave their jobs.

To justify such an extensive system of monitoring, romantic rhetoric is used: the preservation of language is said to be related to the preservation of the nation. Historical considerations as well as ignorant language users are blamed for the gap between prescriptive norms and actual usage. When code implementation fails and the codified norms are not adhered to by users (first of all in public domains), an attempt is made to change language habits rather than the norms. Society is referred to in paternalistic tones: people are said to be in need of instruction and advice as to which norms should be given preference, for their own sake. Urban surroundings are treated as particularly detrimental for the ideal language system; urban language is often called 'semi-language'. Even regional schools are blamed for 'skill gaps' in standard pronunciation. However, the idea of preserving dialects as a symbol of ethnic identity has been introduced, and this ideological dilemma becomes noticeable in initiatives from below: some local newspapers are published in dialect, a Wikipédia entry in Lowland dialect is being set up.

Thus in post-modern Lithuania language standardisation has become even more institutionalised. According to cultural philosophers, post-Soviet mentality can still be characterised by an opposition to modernisation. Language policy has become part of the Lithuanian culture of preservation, which 'sacrifices its viability and relevance in an attempt to preserve stability' (Damgirius 2008: 83–91).

At the same time, life conditions have changed radically. Post-modern values and the possibility of freely expressing one's ideas have uncovered a discrepancy between official language ideologies and the attitudes of language users. Though there is much support for the idea of preserving one nation and one 'pure' language, a great deal of criticism is levelled against the top-down language policy, both by vos papulų and by intellectuals. The normativists are accused of taking possession of the language and creating 'artificial' SL.

Alongside public discussions, a unique genre of parody has developed in Lithuania. Since the very first year of state independence, prime-time weekly TV, radio (later also Internet) comedy sketch shows have included scenes with normative linguistic characters who use ideal pronunciation and prescriptive rhetoric and correct the language of other speakers (five different shows with such sketches have been produced so far). Both archive copies and new sketches are being posted on YouTube alongside more amateurish equivalents. Popular folklore mimicking new coinages for borrowings is flourishing on web forums too. Another symptomatic phenomenon is a common phrase: 'I apologise to the gatekeepers'. This is very often pronounced before uttering a norm-violating (usually colloquial) form in public speech. It is meant as an explanation that a speaker is aware of the SL norm, but needs to use an 'incorrect' form for some purposes (and it might imply an effort to reassure the speaker against retribution from the Language Inspectors).

SL under the conditions of free state and free public language

As can be seen from the historical review, there have been considerable efforts to implement an ideal spoken standard. However, in independent Lithuania public space has been ruled by numerous changes. In 1993 commercial TV channels appeared, the number of broadcasters increased and, most importantly, spontaneous language use by different speakers to different audiences began to occur. It has been noted that contemporary mass media, both written and spoken, can be characterised by a much lesser degree of formality, by intertextuality, humour, elements of slang and borrowings (Kožiauskienė 2001; Marcinkvičienė 2008). Monitoring public space has become almost impossible, and it has turned out that the ideal standard could hardly be realised live: Democracy opened the door to the language what it is now rather than what it should be [italics added] (Miltiūnas 2009: 68).

Prescriptivists are not satisfied with the 'what it is now' orientation to SL, and their reports conclude that 'norms are falling apart' and that the language is approaching a 'state of degeneration'. Numerous journalists are severely criticised for common prosodic and phonetic deviations from WH-based 'received pronunciation' and for their informal style of speaking with pre-coined and correctly pronounced written text. In this context, research into the attitudes of well-known and experienced TV and radio journalists was launched. A qualitative analysis using six parameters (concept and models of good language, own linguistic behavior, attitudes towards language variation in media, willingness to conform to the SL norms, evaluation of language policy) showed that most journalists, even when asked directly in an interview, to a greater or lesser extent expressed a preference for the ordinary standard and are unwilling to obey the prescriptive values of official ideology. Modern SL is mostly supported by professional popular programme leaders, but set a 'different tone' to it.

A tendency to give preference to ordinary language has been confirmed by other tentative research. It has become obvious that, for more than a hundred years, no ideal usage has actually evolved. According to one journalist, 'it is obvious that each mass medium has to have a linguist who corrects each text, because people do not speak like this. It means that the official Lithuanian is a dead language'. The above-mentioned parodies can also serve as an indication of the gap between codified ideal norms and actual usage. Normative publications also themselves conclude that 'exemplary' speech is used by very few. Regional surveys claim that spoken SL competence of both students and teachers has been negatively influenced by dialects.
Regional dialects are still present in Lithuania; however, it remains unclear to what extent regional centres function as reference points for language prestige. It has been shown that social correlates of dialectal speaking include more mature age and lower education; the dialect is considered appropriate for private communication or jokes; it is still rare to find open preference for dialects as compared to SL being expressed. However, dialects are maintained by group solidarity (Ailiūkaitė 2005; Ramoniene 2006). It should be noted that surveys focusing on attitudes do not specify the content of SL and it is not very clear which variety of SL is being evaluated. It is highly improbable that it could be the purely based ideal variety, and 'standard' most likely refers to an unofficial modern standard identified with the dialect of Vilnius city. The linguistic literature also has some hints that the language of Vilnius is the preferred norm (Graudaitienė 1980). According to pilot experimental research, the personal traits of speakers of the Vilnius variety are evaluated more positively than those of dialect speakers, except in the dimension of social attractiveness.

DISCUSSION

From a sociolinguistic point of view the situation of SL is particularly interesting. Up to today, ideologists of standardisation have made efforts to establish an ideal standard based on so-called prestige norms. In practice, the ideal language, both written and spoken, is realised only at very great cost, with the help of professional editing work. Other varieties of SL are practically not acknowledged, and variation is accepted only to a small degree. SL is by definition treated as a fixed, norm-based construct which must be regulated in terms of correctness. This "correct" variety is said to serve as an identification symbol of the nation.

Then, standardisation strategies in Lithuania have largely remained unchanged over the years, except that the argumentation has changed. At the beginning of the 20th century a common language for the nation had to be created – in Soviet times as a defence against Russification, later, against the dangers of globalisation and democracy. Attempts to engineer extreme language homogenity cause dissatisfaction: there were some tensions in this regard in pre-war Lithuania, and now they have become even greater. What could be interpreted as a modestly positive ideological shift refers to dialects; however, SL has preserved its official intolerance of dialect interference.

Changes in broadcasting have insinuated the emergence of actual spoken SL. This is a variety with distinctive features of prosody and phonetics, which might be related to informal style. Its relationship with the accent of Vilnius awaits investigation. Another issue to be clarified concerns relations between media language and audience uptake. As one journalist involved in the above-mentioned study put it:

There is a tendency for mass media to become more and more stylised in attempting to identify their own audience. [...] The standard language, obviously, is needed; an attempt is made to use it, since it would be important to have all the auditors listen. However, there is a tendency to speak to your audience in your own language. A tendency to use an unofficial standard in public has shown that the reference point for the preferred norm is changing. It remains to clarify whose language variety is given preference.

REFERENCES


