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The relationship between official and minority languages in Poland

Streszczenie: Relacje między językiem urzędowym a językami mniejszościowymi w Polsce

Dla co najmniej 96% mieszkańców w Polsce 38 230 tysięcy obywateli Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej język polski jest językiem ojczystym. Znakomitej większości pozostałych 4% polskich obywateli język polski jest dobrze znany (niekiedy lepiej niż deklarowany język ojczysty) przynajmniej biernie. Polska należy więc obecnie do krajów o niskim odsetku mniejszości narodowych.

Najważniejszym dokumentem regulującym status mniejszości językowych w Polsce jest ustawa z 6 stycznia 2005 r. Za języki mniejszości narodowych uznane są: białoruski, czeski, hebrajski, jidysz, litewski, niemiecki, ormiański, rosyjski, słowacki i ukraiński, za języki mniejszości etnicznych – karaimski, łemkowski, romski i tatarski, a za język regionalny – kaszubski. Najliczniejszą mniejszość językową w Polsce stanowią osoby wskazujące niemiecki jako swój język ojczysty. Polska ratyfikowała zarówno Europejską kartę języków regionalnych i mniejszościowych (w 2008), jak i Konwencję ramową o ochronie mniejszości narodowych (w 2000).

Występują znaczne różnice między danymi pochodzącymi od rzeczników mniejszości a wynikami Narodowego Spisu Powszechnego z r. 2002 co do liczebności poszczególnych mniejszości. Powinien je zweryfikować następny Spis przewidziany na r. 2011.

Sytuacje konfliktowe między językiem polskim jako urzędowym językiem RP a językami mniejszościowymi występują najczęściej w zakresie napisów do publicznego użytku. Zazwyczaj chodzi o relacje między wersją polską a wersją obcojęzyczną. Niektóre z polskich dialektów pretendują do statusu języka regionalnego. Ta tendencja obecnie przejawia się najsilniej wśród mieszkańców Górnego Śląska.

38 230 000 citizens of the Republic of Poland live in Poland. For at least 96% of them, i.e. for 36 700 000, the Polish language is their native language. At least, formally. The vast majority of the remaining 4% of Polish citizens, i.e. about 1.5 million people, are familiar with Polish (sometimes better than with the declared native language); they have at least a passive knowledge of the language. These figures prove that Poland is currently one of the countries with the smallest percentage of national minorities. Before the Second World War, only 69% of the then Polish citizens declared Polish as their native language.

The most important document, regulating the status of national minorities and, in consequence, also linguistic minorities is the National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Language Act of January 6th, 2005. The law distinguishes between national and ethnic minorities: the difference is that the ethnic minority, unlike the national minority, is a group that does not identify with any nation that is currently organized in its own country. According to this criterion, the Polish law recognizes the existence of 9 national and 4 ethnic minorities in Poland. Moreover, users of the Kashubian language as a regional language are recognized as a linguistic minority (although not a national, nor an ethnic one).

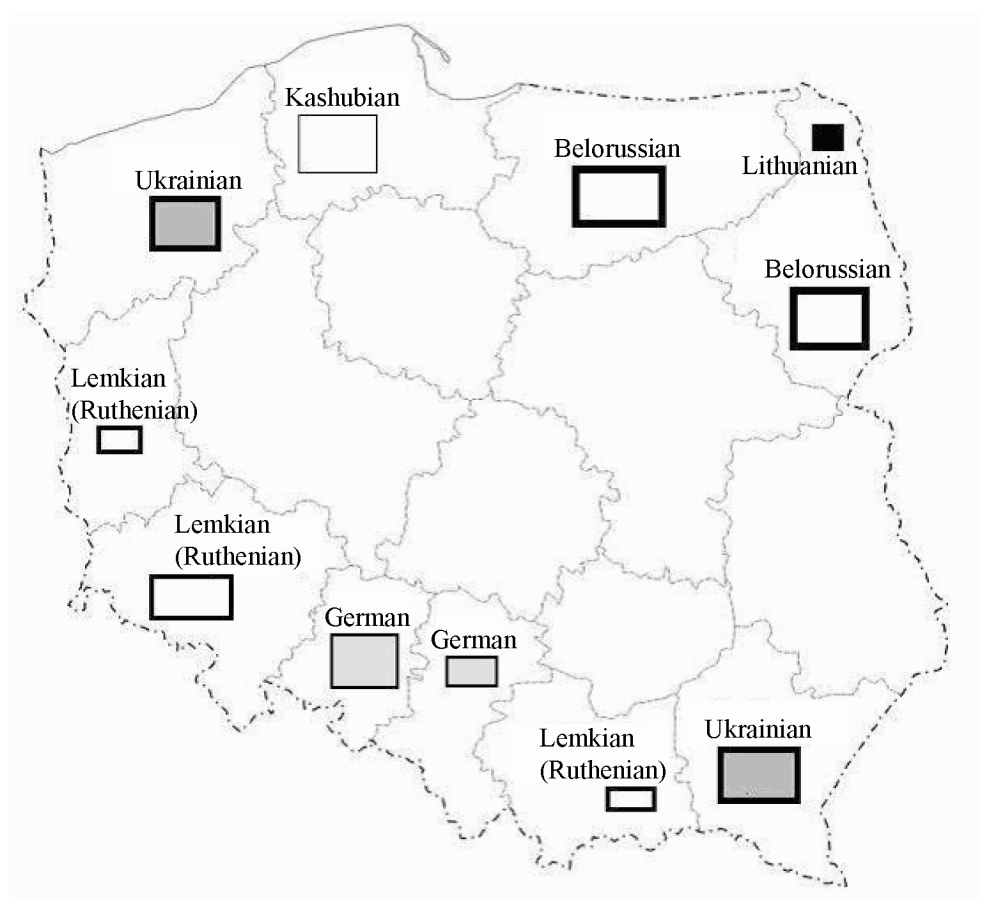


Fig 1: The biggest territorial concentrations of the minority languages in Poland

In a Statement made by the Republic of Poland with relation to the ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, Belarusian, Czech, Hebrew, Yiddish, Karaim, Kashubian, Lithuanian, Lemkian, German, Armenian, Romani, Russian, Slovak, Tatar and Ukrainian were recognized as minority languages. From these – as it has been already mentioned – the Kashubian language was designated as a regional language, Belarusian, Czech, Hebrew, Yiddish, Lithuanian, German, Armenian, Russian, Slovak and Ukrainian were acknowledged as languages of national minorities, while Karaim, Lemkian, Romani and Tatar – as languages of ethnic minorities; Hebrew, Yiddish, Karaim, Armenian and Romani were listed as non-territorial languages.

As far as the number of each of these fifteen groups is concerned, it is hard to determine as there is a large divergence between data submitted by representatives of the individual minorities and the results of the 2002 national census. In some cases, differences in numbers are like 5 to 1. In the 2002 national census, only 1.23% of those polled (which accounts for 471.5 thousand people) declared a nationality other than Polish but 2.3% (779 112 people) did not declare any nationality or only declared, in general, a nationality other than Polish. Respondents did not want to restrict themselves to one citizenship, explaining that they consider themselves members of two or even three different nations or linguistic communities. They then declared, only in general, a non-Polish nationality or did not declare any. Sometimes this concerned not only a lack of choice between e.g. Polish and German nationalities but also e.g. be-

tween Belarusian and Ukrainian. It is assumed that a declaration of nationality means also a declaration of native tongue. In two years, i.e. in 2011, there will be a new national census; it will shed new light on the controversies over the numbers of individual minorities. Figure 2 and Table 1 contain detailed data about the current number of speakers of individual languages of the national/ethnic minorities.

Moreover, members of other nationalities live on the territory of Poland, in particular: the Vietnamese (1808 people), French (1633), American (1541), Greek (1404), Italian (1367) and Bulgarian (1112). The numbers of these national groups and, as a consequence, speakers of their national languages, given in brackets, show that none of them exceeds even 0.05 per mille of the whole of Poland's permanent inhabitants.

The status of languages other than Polish and used by Polish citizens is regulated mainly indirectly, by laws concerning national and ethnic minorities. The most important of those regulations are:

- Article 35 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, which guarantees Polish citizens of national and ethnic minorities the freedom to keep and develop their own language.
- Education System Act of September 7th, 1991, which stipulates, inter alia, that public schools shall enable national minorities to learn their mother tongue.
- Radio and Television Act of December 29th, 1992, which stipulates that public radio and television shall take into consideration the needs of national and ethnic minorities.
- Polish Language Act of October 7th, 1999, which stipulates that notices and information in Polish, meant for public reception, may be accompanied by their foreign language versions (conditions for placement of these versions are determined by a regulation of the Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration).
- Act on System of General Jurisdiction Courts of January 6th, 2005, which stipulates that “A person who does not have a sufficient command of the Polish language is entitled to act in court using a language known to him/her and to use help of an interpreter, free of charge”.
- And, first of all, the National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Language Act of January 6th, 2005, which stipulates that in those municipalities where the number of residents belonging to a given minority is not lower than 20% of the total number of residents of this municipality: 1) additional traditional names in the language of that minority may be used along with the official names of places and streets, 2) the language of this minority may be used as an auxiliary language in contacts with municipality authorities. According to the 2002 national census, the 20%-condition has been met by 28 municipalities: in 22 municipalities the auxiliary language is German, in 3 Belarusian, in 2 Kashubian, in 1 Lithuanian.

Polish law does not use the terms of *indigenous* and *exogenous* languages but the difference between them ensues from the statutory definition and *enumeration* of the recognized national and ethnic minorities and communities which use a regional lan-

guage; pursuant to the current law, German is a minority language (so, an indigenous language) in Poland, but French or Italian are not (for they are recognized as exogenous languages).

The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages was signed by the Republic of Poland on May 12th, 2003, and ratified on June 13th, 2008. In its declaration, the Republic of Poland defined what it recognizes as a national minority and pledged to abide by certain provisos of articles 8-14 of the Charter. Moreover, the Republic of Poland ratified, on November 10th, 2000, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

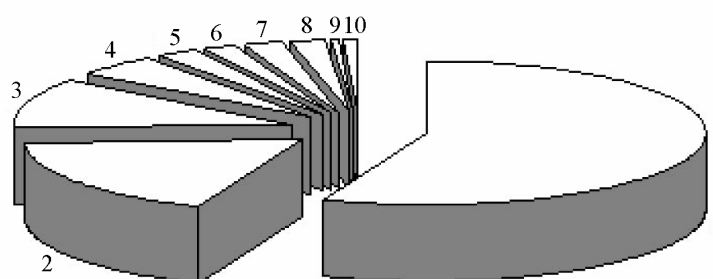
Bilateral agreements (declarations, treaty, arrangements, etc.) on cooperation in the area of culture and education play some part in the situation of national minorities. The Republic of Poland has entered into such agreements with the Czech Republic, Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Germany, Russia, Slovakia and Ukraine.

Domains in which the Polish language should be used as the official language of the Republic of Poland are determined by the Polish Language Act:

Situations of conflict between the Polish language as the official language of the Republic of Poland and minority languages occur in the area of notices and information for public use. Most often, they concern the relationship between the Polish and foreign language versions. Pursuant to the provisions (Regulation of the Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration), the Polish version should be placed above the “accompanying” foreign language version. Meanwhile, it happens in practice that it is rather the Polish version that accompanies the foreign language one.

Some of the Polish dialects aspire to the status of a regional language and, ultimately, even an ethnic language. The recent promotion of the Kashubian language from the status of a dialect to the status of a regional language helps to raise such hopes. This trend manifests itself most strongly among the inhabitants of Upper Silesia (from an administrative point of view, it is mainly the Silesian Province) where as many as 173 thousand inhabitants of this province declared the Silesian nationality, unrecognized by the Polish authorities, and, as consequence, the use of the Silesian language in a national census. Silesian Autonomy Movement is one of the organizations which seek the recognition of Silesians' language as a regional language. Apart from the issue of the Silesian nationality, the Silesian dialect has – in my opinion – a long way to reach the status of a language, due to its considerable internal diversification (the Silesian dialect consists of several local subdialects which differ significantly from each other).

The majority of the inhabitants of Poland are friendly towards minority languages. For some (older) Poles, it is a pleasant memento of the old Republic of Two, Three or even Four Nations. Situations which, even if not conflictual, pose a danger of conflict, occur in the borderland districts (especially in parishes), with a significant percentage of persons speaking the minority language. It concerns mainly the Polish-Lithuanian and the Polish-Slovak borderland. In case of the older generation of Poles, post-war resentments towards the German language are sometimes still intense.



1 - German (56,14%); 2 - Belorussian (17,89%); 3 - Ukrainian (11,36%);
 4 - Romani (4,72%); 5 - Russian (2,24%); 6 - Lemkian (2,15%);
 7 - Lithuanian (2,14%); 8 - Kashubian (1,86%); 9 - Slovakian (0,73%);
 10 - Other languages [Jewish, Tartar, Armenian, Karaite] (0,74%)

Fig. 2: The Structure of the minority languages population of Poland (according to the 2002 national census; 100% = 258 355)

The Polish legislation of the last couple of years explicitly distinguishes indigenous and exogenous languages among the languages used in present-day Poland, even though – as it was said above – it does not use such terms. The practical “indigenou-ness” is one of the conditions of reaching the status of a national or ethnic minority language. The National and Ethnic Minorities Act stipulates that a national and ethnic minority is a group of Polish citizens, less numerous than the remaining part of the population of the Republic of Poland whose “ancestors have inhabited the present-day territory of the Republic of Poland for at least 100 years”.

Minority	Number of the Polish citizens according to the 2002 national census	Number of the inhabitants of Poland according to national/ethnic organizations
German	147 094	300 000-400 000
Belorussian	47 640	250 000-300 000
Ukrainian	27 172	220 000-300 000
Romani	12 731	20 000
Russian	3 244	20 000
Lemkian (Ruthenian)	5 850	50 000
Lithuanian	5 639	30 000
Slovakian	1 710	15 000
Jewish	1 055	5 000
Czech	386	3 000
Tartar	447	2 000
Armenian	262	1 500
Karaite	43	150
Kashubian speakers	5 062	250 000-300 000
Total	258 355 = 0,67%	1 166 650-1 446 650 = 3,1%-3,8%
with the people who declared Silesian nationality	(431 508 = 1,13%)	

Table 1: National/Ethnic Minorities and Kashubian Language Community in Poland

I express my opinion about the attitude of persons speaking minority languages towards their language solely on my own responsibility, on the basis of observations and individual facts known to me. And so, it is my opinion that members of different minorities differ significantly in their attitude towards their language. In Poland, a high symbolic value is attributed to their regional language by Kashubians and to their mother tongue – by Lithuanians, Lemkos, Slovaks and Germans. Some minorities have already lost their language (e.g. Polish Karaims and Tatars).

In Poland, the most serious sociopolitical problem in the field of the linguistic minorities is, in my view, the problem of the future status of the present-day Silesian dialect. In my opinion, its promotion to the status of a regional language would not meet with the resistance it meets if this idea was not supported by movements that support the recognition of the Silesian nationality (with electoral consequences: the 5% electoral threshold does not apply to parties of national minorities, as e.g. the German minority, the only one that is represented in Polish Parliament by its two deputies) and the autonomy of Silesia.

The Joint Commission of Government and National and Ethnic Minorities is responsible, in Poland, for language planning-care-policy for minority and regional languages, as an consultative-advisory body of the Prime Minister, established in 2005, pursuant to the Act of January 6th, 2005. So far, its contacts with the Polish Language Council have been rather casual. Polish national committee of the Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages (EBLUL), or POLBLUL, established on January 17th, 2004, distinguishes itself with significant activity. Poland is the first country among the new member states of the European Union in which such structures were organized.

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