

Text and audio corpus of native Lower Sorbian Tekstowy a zukowy korpus maminorěcneje dolnoserbšćiny

Name of language: Lower Sorbian

Generic affiliation: Indo-European, Slavic, West Slavic, Sorbian

Country and region: Germany, Brandenburg, Lower Lusatia

Number of speakers of native Lower Sorbian: a few hundred

History

Sorbian tribes were first mentioned in 631 AD and the ancestors of today's Sorbs have settled in the region to become known as 'Lusatia' as early as the 6th century AD.

The first written document in (Eastern) Lower Sorbian is the New Testament (in the version of Martin Luther) translated by Mikławš Jakubica in 1548. Sorbian (used as a generic term for both Sorbian languages, Lower Sorbian and Upper Sorbian) comprises a large number of dialects. Since the 16th century, in the wake of the Reformation, both languages began to develop a literary variety. Because of natural and forced assimilation, the language area of Sorbian has shrunk considerably over the course of the centuries.

Although many dialects are already extinct or almost extinct, today's native dialect-based Lower Sorbian shows significant differences to the literary language taught in a few schools in Lower Lusatia. Despite the efforts to revitalize Lower Sorbian with the so called „Witaj“ (welcome) project, the fate of native Lower Sorbian seems to be sealed as today native speakers belong to the oldest generation.



Map adapted with permission of Haspelmath, M. and Tadmor, U. (eds): *Loanwords in the World's Languages. A Comparative Handbook*, Berlin 2009

Grammar and dictionary

Lower Sorbian has mostly retained its inherited synthetic (flectional) characteristics. It features an actively used category of dual or the verbal aspect typical for Slavic languages. A further feature is the supine, in Lower Sorbian a special infinite verb form usually used after verbs of movement.

During the long and increasingly intense contact with German, Lower Sorbian has borrowed a significant number of loan words. These borrowings are usually adapted to the Lower Sorbian language system. Due to the fact that today all native speakers speak German fluently, code-switching is quite common (often with interfering Lower Sorbian phonological characteristics).



10 years Witaj Kindergarten Sielow/Žylow, 2008; by courtesy of W. Meschkank

Permanent project team Sorbian Institute (Germany)

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Spinning room in Dissen/Dešno (ca 1920), traditionally an important institution contributing to language preservation, primarily by singing together in a group; by courtesy of Sorbisches Institut Bautzen

Freelance assistants for recording

Maria Elikowska-Winkler (head of the School of Lower Sorbian Language and Culture, Cottbus)

Gregor Wieczorek (editor in chief, Nowy Casnik - Lower Sorbian weekly magazine)

Juliana Kaulfürst (project coordinator for the Lusatian subregion of Schleife at Domowina, the umbrella organization of Sorbian societies)

Marcus Koinzer (student of Sorbian studies)



The congregation sings after a mass in Lower Sorbian in Tauer/Turje, Whit Monday 2007; by courtesy of W. Meschkank

Challenges and importance of the project

The biggest challenge for the Lower Sorbian DoBeS project is the small and very fast decreasing number of native speakers. The continuity of spoken Lower Sorbian dialects is most likely to end soon, when the few still existing native speakers have passed away. With all native speakers being of the oldest generation, gaining access to them or even convincing them to lend their time to the project is often problematic and requires extensive time and effort. Once identified, for some native speakers, using their mother tongue can also be emotionally challenging, as experiences of being ostracised and discriminated against evoke negative feelings like shame, although generally speaking the broader (non-Sorbian) population's attitude towards Lower Sorbian has obviously improved over time. Nonetheless, many native speakers of Lower Sorbian have barely used their mother tongue in their adult life. This is why, especially if they have difficulties expressing themselves equally well in Lower Sorbian as they do in German, they may feel awkward or become easily frustrated when using their mother tongue. It is therefore very important for our recording facilitators to bond with the participants and create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere for the conversations.



Choir Lužyca, Easter celebrations on Good Friday 2006 in Dissen/Dešno; by courtesy of W. Meschkank

The documentation of Lower Sorbian also captures the cultural heritage of Lower Lusatia and eastern Germany. While obviously relevant for linguistic research, the project also supports the current language revitalisation efforts in the region.

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