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Dialect prestige in contemporary Lithuania – a pilot study

Sociolinguistics is a relatively new research field in Lithuania. Studies in perceptual dialectology, as suggested by Dennis Preston from the 1980s on, are not found in Lithuania so far, even if the language situation is very suitable for such research projects. During a stay abroad in Lithuania, I became aware of a certain discomfort of Lithuanian students when asked to speak in their traditional dialect. Today, many Lithuanians do not speak a traditional dialect (cf. Zinkevičius 1994) any more and if they do, they use dialect only in private, informal situations. For me as a speaker of a high prestige Swiss German dialect, such a situation is hard to imagine, even if not unusual compared to other dialect situations like those in Germany or to some extent also in the United Kingdom.

In 2013, I decided to have a closer look at dialect use and dialect prestige among students at the Vilnius University. I wanted to find out, whether the questioned students think Lithuanian dialects have a low prestige, if they regard their dialects as a part of their identity, or if the Lithuanian dialects are only preserved as cultural heritage today and therefore keep a certain prestige. In order to answer these questions, both a qualitative and quantitative approach was needed. I therefore designed a questionnaire, which was completed by 285 students of the University of Vilnius, but also included interviews with language experts in my study.

More than 90% of the questioned students declared to be Lithuanian and to speak Lithuanian as their mother tongue. Only around 50% of all informants indicated to speak a dialect. Asked about their impression of the dialect's prestige, almost 70% answered that the traditional Lithuanian dialects have a low prestige. More than 90% of the questioned dialect speakers understand dialect as a part of their identity in spite of the dialect being a low prestige variety, as discussed before. The traditional Lithuanian culture is strongly connected with some dialects and it is therefore easy to understand why dialects are understood as a part of Lithuanians' cultural heritage. To sum up, the present study may indeed make clear that the traditional Lithuanian dialects have a rather low prestige, but it seems as if they are no longer treated as an everyday language, but more as an important and well preserved part of the very rich Lithuanian tradition and culture.

References

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