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One House, Two Languages

ABSTRACT

The author deals with the topic of family bilingualism, or—to be more precise—with the question of which language should be spoken while raising a child (or children) in a multiethnic and multilingual environment. An example of such an environment is the Czech part of Cieszyn/Těšín Silesia, where, in addition to the standard varieties of Czech and Polish, the unwritten mixed language *po naszymu* is also commonly used. The members of the local Polish minority use several codes on a regular basis: two ethnic languages in their literary and dialectal varieties, as well as the aforementioned mixed language, which functions here, in particular, as a language of communication within the family (familect). There are very few households where standard Polish is used as the means of communicating with children. This atypical linguistic behaviour of at least one of the parents is the focus of the author, who conducted a survey and obtained important information from people who decided to raise their children using standard Polish. She lists the factors that lead parents to such unusual linguistic behaviour and points out its risks, consequences and side effects. The conclusion of the article is that at least one language code is used in families that have chosen to speak standard Polish to their children, that the code intended for children may not be the same as the means of communication between the parents, that grandparents usually speak to their children in their own dialect, or that (Polish) kindergartens and primary schools are paradoxically an environment where even a child who has so far spoken only standard Polish quickly picks up the regional unwritten language.

KEYWORDS

bilingualism, diglossia,
Polish, communication,
family

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Introduction: Specific social and linguistic situation of Zaolzie (Trans-Olza)

The inspiration for this text was the long-term observation of the speech behaviour of bilingual and diglossic people coming from the multiethnic environment of Zaolzie. The aim of the study is not to present authentic conversations involving users of two (or several) languages or varieties, but rather the factors forcing the use of one language code or another. I am particularly interested in the motivation to consciously choose Polish (in its standard version) as the code in which to raise children among parents who know (and use) Czech and/or the local colloquial spoken language.¹

The names Zaolzie Silesia and Zaolzie appeared after the First World War, and they refer to the part of the former Cieszyn Silesia which, after the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, was added to Czechoslovakia. The area covers approx. 800 km² of the Polish–Czech borderland stretching along the Olza river, which in some parts constitutes the border between the two countries. The area was incorporated into Poland for 11 months before the outbreak of the Second World War, after which it became a part of the Third German Reich. After the war, it belonged to Czechoslovakia again, and since the division of this country into the Czech and Slovak Republics at the end of 1992, it has formed the north-eastern periphery of Czechia.

Poland and Czechoslovakia, both newly established in 1918, were equally interested in the industrialised and densely populated left-bank areas of the Olza River. The Polish side justified its stance on Zaolzie with ethnic reasons, while Czechoslovakia emphasised the need to use the railway connecting Prague with Moravia, Silesia and Slovakia. In the end, economic and strategic considerations prevailed over national considerations, but the peculiarities of this small region

1 The basis of this non-standardized code, called *po naszymu* [our speech], is the traditional West Cieszyn dialect that falls within the scope of the southern subgroup of Silesian dialects. That is why I use both of these concepts (the local dialect and *po naszymu* speech) as synonyms in the text. The traditional local dialect, called Zaolzie, is a territorial variant of the Polish ethnic language, while *po naszymu* speech is a mixed language and—depending on the individual—it may more closely resemble Polish or Czech. In other words, one may speak *po naszymu* in Polish and/or in Czech.

are still evident in the diverse ethnic consciousness of the native inhabitants and in the complex linguistic situation.

National awareness began to awaken here in 1848–1849, although initially the Spring of Nations had a generally anti-Austrian and anti-German character in Cieszyn Silesia.² In the second half of the 19th century, Polish ethnic awareness was gradually formed by the Church (especially the Evangelical Church) and the Educational Society of the Duchy of Cieszyn, as well as other local Polish unions, organisations and associations. Evidence of the “Polish” character of the area is provided by the sociodemographic data from the last Austrian census (1910), when almost 70% of the inhabitants within the boundaries of the later Zaolzie declared using the Polish colloquial language (*Umgangssprache*), i.e. the West Cieszyn dialect. It should be added that officially, in the Duchy of Cieszyn, several official languages were used (consecutively or simultaneously): Latin, German, Czech and Polish.

Schools have always played an important role in this region. At the moment, in Zaolzie there are 24 primary schools teaching students in Polish. The youngest children are sent by the Poles to the local Polish preschools, and the older children can study in a Polish secondary school in Český Těšín (the Czech part of Cieszyn).³

It is not difficult to conclude from even a brief outline of the history of (the Czech part of) Cieszyn Silesia that issues such as the national and state affiliation of the local population or their linguistic orientation and competence are very complex.

Outline of bilingualism and diglossia

There are many definitions of bilingualism or multilingualism. As a rule, their common basis is the fact that two (several) ethnic languages are used in communication. Diglossia is understood as the

- 2 For example, the weekly *Tygodnik Cieszyński* (since 1851, *Gwiazdka Cieszyńska*) was published in Polish, but supported financially by Czech donors and others.
- 3 In both poviats (Karviná and Frýdek-Místek) in which there is a Polish minority, there are 13 schools with years 1 to 5 and 10 full primary schools (with years 1–9). The total number of students in the 2022–23 school year is 2,105. Altogether, 314 students attend all the grades of the above-mentioned secondary school in 2022–23.

knowledge and active use of two unequal (in terms of prestige) ethnic language varieties (diversity or multitude of varieties), e.g. literary (cultural) language and dialect (bidialectalism). In other words, one of the codes is evaluated as better, and the other one is considered worse.⁴ In addition to the aforementioned convergence of positions on both phenomena, specialists list a multitude of types of bilingualism (diglossia), depending on what such interchangeable use of languages (their varieties) consists in, among other things.⁵ It is important to consider these phenomena from multiple perspectives, and not only from a metalinguistic (descriptive) or sociolinguistic (intersocial) point of view.⁶

I consider it exceptionally accurate to say that multilingualism involves the ability to verbalise the contents of the mind using two (several) codes, or the ability to express states of one's own linguistic consciousness through more than one linguistic system (Horecký 2002: 50). This approach does not require the degree of knowledge of codes to be specified, but it does draw attention to the mental operations accompanying the phenomenon. The creation of a text in a second language is never a literal repetition, but a unique result of mechanisms (strategies) of thought running through the circumstances of another language and captured by means of its system.

A perfect, yet very rare state is the situation in which such a change of cultural (cognitive) and structural contexts does not require a greater psychological effort. Another important aspect of multilingualism (multitude of varieties) is that, by learning a language, the individual (child) simultaneously forms their own identity

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- 4 Diglossia thus occurs in situations of cultural inequality, in which one code is definitely "weaker" (Wróblewska-Pawlak 2014).
 - 5 As a rule, a distinction is made between individual and social bilingualism, natural (native) and artificial (intentional) bilingualism, symmetrical (balanced) and asymmetrical bilingualism, full (total, submersive) and partial (immersive) bilingualism, active and passive (receptive) bilingualism, additive and subtractive bilingualism, etc. Bilingualism and/or diglossia have been analysed by (in alphabetical order) e.g. Peter Auer, Charles Ferguson, Joshua Fishman, François Grosjean, John Joseph Gumperz, Einar Haugen, Dell Hymes, Pieter Muysken, Carol Myers-Scotton and Uriel Weinreich, and in Poland by Michał Głuszkowski, Ida Kurcz and Urszula Żydek-Bednarczuk.
 - 6 One should pay attention to the cultural, cognitive, psychological and identity aspects, for example.

and defines their place in the community and in the world, as Elżbieta Czykwin (2002) and others have pointed out.⁷

Multilingualism and the use of multiple varieties of language are directly connected with *code mixing* or *code switching*. In the 34th issue of *Socjolingwistyka* [Sociolinguistics], Gabriela Augustyniak-Żmuda discusses these phenomena in a synthetic way, distinguishing code switching in the metaphorical sense—also known as conversational code switching, when a foreign language is used to highlight part of an utterance—from the situational sense, which depends on a change in the communicative situation requiring the use of a different language code.⁸ The most common situational code-switching factors include the linguistic competence of one's interlocutor,⁹ their social role, the (un)official nature of the conversation, public/private circumstances and preparation (being ceremonial)/spontaneity.

Two opposing aspects play an important role in valuing particular codes: the social reputation of one language and the marginality of another. In the case of a dialect or a mixed regional language used by a significant part of the linguistic community, it is difficult to determine if a code belongs to one or the other category. On the one hand, non-standard dialects or mixed codes are judged to be incompatible with ambitious communicative intentions. They are considered to be incompatible with “higher” objectives of socialisation (upbringing and education) of the youth because an important role in this process

7 However, I do not focus here on the consistency of language and identity.

8 Both situational and conversational switching occur in Zaolzie. The latter results from a lack of knowledge of relevant words from the civilisation vocabulary (names related to the reality) or from a mechanical naming of things and phenomena with Czech words. The lexical bohemisms are subject to sound adaptation and, as a rule, do not affect the (dialectal) morphological and syntactic structure of the utterance.

9 Another option is semicommunication, especially between speakers whose languages are close or related. This phenomenon, also called intercomprehension, means a mutual intelligibility of languages or language varieties, understanding the foreign code on the basis of knowledge of one's native code, and does not require communication in a common language. As a rule, semicommunication takes place subconsciously, and if the interlocutor is confronted with the other language relatively frequently, they easily acquire the ability to overcome obstacles (interference) in the form of transfers, i.e. they learn to overcome a negative interlanguage interference (*Intercomprehension*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intercomprehension> [access: 31.10.2022]; see e.g. Lipowski 2012).

is played by correctness and good example. On the other hand, cultural language is, in a way, artificial and contrary to family privacy. Moreover, dialects are associated with tradition and attachment to “one’s people,” a region, a highly valued local subculture, etc.

Empirical data: examples of a linguistic biography

In this section I intend to focus on childhood (early) bilingualism in the parent–child relationship and as an element of the family language (familiolact). The cases of family bilingualism presented below qualify, in part, as examples of native (natural, legitimate) bilingualism, resulting from the parents’ linguistic competence, from the practices of their family home, etc. On the other hand, the material collected in the survey manifests a conscious interference in the development of the child’s linguistic competence, opposing the linguistic orientation of the wider family, peer group and local community.¹⁰ In contrast to the situation in the Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia, there are few Polish families in Zaolzie who avoid the omnipresent colloquial mixed code when communicating with their children. Parents who choose to do so are generally among the most educated members of the local community, often having graduated from Polish studies. It is therefore difficult to encounter such people; moreover, they must be reliable, as the researcher has no opportunity to check the sincerity of their statements. A typical inhabitant of Zaolzie who identifies with the Polish nation uses the *po naszymu* speech, which is interchangeably called *narzecze* [the dialect].¹¹ Therefore, the purposefully selected survey questions were addressed to those people who, while raising their children, had to make a conscious choice between Polish or Czech (in their standard versions), or between standard Polish

10 We can see the contribution of socialisation in each, even in seemingly natural bilingualism. Wishing to communicate with their social environment, the child has no choice but to adopt the rules of their parents, grandparents or guardians. The naturalness of this bilingualism, however, lies in the fact that the young language user “experiences” the rules in a similar way. It is not a matter of simply learning a foreign language, but of gradually growing and maturing in the world seen from the point of view of a given linguistic code.

11 A similar attitude is presented by many local Czech citizens.

and the West Cieszyn dialect. With their partners or other relations, they usually communicate in another language code. It should be emphasised that all the respondents were natives, and none of the parents/guardians of the children had moved to Zaolzie from Poland. The survey included 11 questions and was anonymous.¹² The survey questions were as follows:

- Does the respondent's partner (the child's father/mother) also use standard Polish in their conversation with the child?
- Does the respondent use the same language code when communicating with their partner as with the child?
- Was this language behaviour initiated at the child's birth? Does this behaviour continue as the child matures?
- Does this happen consistently, during every conversation with the child?
- Does the form of speech (spoken or written) influence the language of communication with the child?
- In other situations (in the presence of grandparents, extended family, neighbours, colleagues, friends, in public places, etc.), does the respondent behave in the same way in terms of the language used?
- Was it similar in the respondent's family home? Was one of the parents, for example, a teacher in a Polish school, a native of Poland or a social activist for the Polish minority?
- Does the use of standard Polish in conversation with the child make the respondent uncomfortable or does it require an additional intellectual effort for the respondent?
- How does the respondent's social environment (relatives, friends, colleagues, etc.) react to this way of communicating with the child?
- Does the respondent's child also (consistently) speak Polish in other situations (at school, in the common room, during classes in school clubs, in the yard, with extended family members, etc.)?

12 The questionnaire was given to patrons of the Municipal Library in Czech Těšín who regularly visit the Polish-language literature section with their children. However, it turned out that only five people met the conditions of the survey.

- What makes the respondent behave linguistically in this way (i.e. use standard Polish rather than the dialect or Czech) when communicating with the child?

Answers:

1. The respondent is a native Czech with “Polish roots,” who has got two daughters (a 5-year-old and a 9-month-old). The father of the older girl is a Polish man from Poland; the respondent spoke Polish with him and she was very keen to raise their child to speak the same language. The second partner (the father of the younger daughter) is Czech. The communication between the partners is in Czech; neither of them has a special sentiment for the dialect. Both mother and father feel that it is not a suitable code for communicating with the children. The partners speak to the girls (who are raised together) in their mother tongues: the father in Czech, the mother—to both daughters (!)—in Polish. Only exceptionally, when the company is Czech-speaking, does the respondent “allow myself” to speak Czech with the children. Acquaintances are sometimes surprised that the mother speaks Polish to her daughter, especially to the younger one. Thanks to her partner speaking Czech, even the older daughter is fluent in both languages. The grandparents speak the dialect to the children, thanks to which the older daughter is able to use both varieties of Polish interchangeably (she chooses the code that is more appropriate to the given situation). In the family from which the respondent comes, conversations were held in *po naszymu*. Despite all this, the respondent finds speaking Polish to her children completely natural. It should be noted that she attended Polish local schools, she graduated from Polish studies in Ostrava and chose multilingualism as the topic of her master’s thesis. She is critical of teachers in the kindergarten¹³ which her older daughter attends. She is aware that her child speaks Polish better than some of the teachers there. For

13 When mentioning schools and kindergartens, the respondents mean the network of local educational institutions with Polish as the language of teaching.

the time being, the respondent does not know which school (Polish or Czech) her younger daughter will attend, but she is convinced that she will continue to speak Polish to her at home.

2. The respondent is the father of a boy who has a Czech mother; he speaks to his son in Polish. He himself comes from a family where one parent was a Pole from Poland and used only standard Polish. The mother speaks to the child in Czech. In conversations between the partners, the respondent speaks the dialect and his wife speaks Czech. The respondent does not use Polish consistently while talking to his son. He admits that he sometimes uses the dialect, especially when it comes to everyday topics. Standard Polish definitely prevails in conversations with the child during their trips to Poland. The respondent claims that his linguistic behaviour is not influenced by the presence of other people involved in a communication situation, and that he never takes into account their opinion. He knows that his son also uses the dialect outside the home. The father, however, does not intend to give up his communication strategy and believes that it will help the child do better at (Polish) school.
3. Another respondent has always consistently spoken Polish with her child, in the presence of other people as well. For teaching purposes, on occasion she introduces Czech or English into the conversation. This way of raising children was passed on to her by her parents. Her grandmother was a teacher in a Polish school, and the whole family was active in the Polish minority. The respondent does not find it difficult to use Polish. She also speaks Polish with her husband. In her opinion, the topic is interesting, especially for the local Czech people. When asked whether the child also speaks only Polish in other situations, the interviewee answered "YES." She added that "in Zaolzie it is easier to learn Czech ... than Polish. The quality of Polish in schools is poor, so I prefer to give my children a good language basis myself."
4. The respondent is the mother of three boys (10, 8 and 5 years old). Similarly to her husband (the children's father), she exclusively (consistently) uses Polish in conversations with her

sons, in both oral and written communication. While talking to her husband, on the other hand, she speaks the dialect. The parents speak Polish to the children at home and outside the home, irrespective of other participants in or witnesses to the conversation. The people around them express their admiration (“other parents wouldn’t be able to do that”) or surprise, which the respondent “doesn’t care much about.” Speaking Polish is not a problem for her. She admits that as the boys grow up and have different interests, it is difficult to avoid using Czech names or terms, so it takes some effort to maintain Polish. The children’s father sometimes talks to the children in *po naszymu* as a joke or in nervous situations, but this either amuses or embarrasses the children. The father shifts between cultural Polish and the dialect in the presence of his parents, because his relatives speak the dialect, too. The respondent claims that she picked up the tradition of speaking Polish (general, cultural) to her children from her own family. This was certainly how her parents behaved when their two daughters attended primary school. Moreover, the family regularly visited a close relative in Poland, which ensured that she had constant contact with the Polish language. The respondent’s parents were involved in the activity of PZKO.¹⁴ The respondent admits that at school she made spelling mistakes typical of Polish speakers from Poland (e.g. confusing h/ch, rz/ż and u/ó), which is generally not the case for children from Zaolzie. Connection with the Czech language and the dialect is guaranteed by the school environment and the “playground.” The respondent underscores that her sister has been living in Prague for 20 years but is still fluent in Polish, which she owes to her parents. The respondent is convinced that the children do not have a problem with code-switching, and she declares that Polish literary language is the mother tongue for both her and her sons. It should be added that the children

14 This is the abbreviation for Polski Związek Kulturalno-Oświatowy [Polish Cultural and Educational Association], the largest organisation for the Polish minority in Zaolzie. Importantly, the respondent reflected that her husband’s parents worked for the organisation, too, which did not influence their dialectal family language.

from this family also use the colloquial *po naszymu* outside the home. They learnt it (paradoxically) in the Polish kindergarten and at a school in which Polish was to be the language of teaching. The mother is aware of this and she is sorry to admit that not all teachers can speak “proper Polish.”

5. The respondent raised her (now adult) daughter using Polish, and she did so until the child was almost three years old, i.e. until the girl started attending a Polish kindergarten. The daughter heard the same language from her father, who in his previous relationship had raised his children in the dialect. Both parents also use the literary variant of Polish or Czech (e.g. at work) or, alternatively, they speak *po naszymu*. In conversations with her child, the respondent used Polish even in the company of other (unknown) people (e.g. at the doctor’s). Those around her accepted this fact without comment and they were unsurprised by such behaviour. The respondent still communicates with her daughter in Polish in written communication (notes, text messages, traditional mail or e-mail). The respondent justifies the change of code (from general Polish to the dialect) with the fact that she did not want to hinder her daughter’s contact with peers in the kindergarten. The respondent comes from a home where the dialect was used. However, she was used to reading Polish books and watching only Polish television. Her mother was a teacher in a Polish school (but not a Polish language teacher); her father had a technical education and worked in a mine. The respondent’s parents, i.e. the girl’s grandparents, have always spoken *po naszymu* to their granddaughter. The respondent does not regret her decision about the language of her child’s upbringing. She claims that she would do the same if she was to make the decision again. She considers it natural and advisable to speak correct Polish to her child. Her opinion is based on the possibility to send the child to a Polish school, among other things.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it has to be determined that the decision of families from Zaolzie regarding what language to communicate with children in is difficult, risky and not always positively evaluated by others. Based on the assumption that we should speak to a child using correct language, and in such a way as to facilitate their future education at a school with Polish as the language of teaching, it would be appropriate to choose cultural (literary) Polish. However, even at an early age, the child becomes familiar with a different code (usually the *po naszymu* speech of grandparents, neighbours and friends). They go to a kindergarten where their peers, and sometimes even teachers, speak differently. They encounter similar situations at school. Outside school and the family, Czech is the dominant language.¹⁵ *Po naszymu* speech is definitely the code that integrates the society of the Zaolzie region. Such speech is based on the West Cieszyn dialect, which is respected and maintained by the Poles in Zaolzie as the language of their “small homeland” and the speech of their grandparents and great-grandparents. Parents who decide to use Polish to communicate with their children must therefore demonstrate considerable courage. It is understandable that the majority of society approaches this phenomenon with surprise or criticism. However, the greatest obstacle for the parents who use proper Polish while talking to their children are the negative attitudes of the closest relatives.

One of the most important observations is that, in the families of the respondents, at least one linguistic code is used in addition to cultural Polish. Usually, it is the *po naszymu* speech, used in communication between parents or between grandparents and grandchildren. The respondents unanimously emphasised the fact that in the local (pre)school environment, a child raised to speak Polish quickly becomes proficient in using a mixed regional language, despite the fact that the language of teaching is Polish.

15 In minority schools, children start learning Czech in the second year, and they continue it in secondary school, at the end of which they pass one of the final exams in this language.

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