

# HAND IN HAND OR WORLDS APART? AN OVERVIEW OF TRANSLATION AND EDUCATION IN THE UPPER SORBIAN CONTEXT

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**Abstract:** The second smallest of the Slavic languages, Upper Sorbian (*hornjoserbšćina*) is a minority language spoken in Upper Lusatia, located in eastern Germany close to the Czech and Polish frontiers. Building on previous work, this literature-based preliminary study explores the intersection between the domains of translation and minority language education with regard to the Upper Sorbian language. Initially, a historical and contemporary overview of the relevant sociolinguistic environment is provided, which is followed by an examination of the links between translation and education in the Upper Sorbian secondary and tertiary education sectors, as well as in professional training for language professionals. In addition, particular attention is also paid to the role of Domowina Verlag, the Sorbian-language publishing house. Finally, relevant information and new developments regarding the provision of translation and interpreting within the Upper Sorbian context are also presented, and the need for further empirical research is outlined.

**Key words:** Upper Sorbian, translation, bilingual education, minority languages, Slavic microlanguages

## 1. Introductory Remarks

Upper Sorbian (*hornjoserbšćina*) is a minority language spoken primarily in Upper Lusatia (*Hornja Łužica*), a small and primarily rural area of eastern Germany located around the town of Bautzen (*Budyšin*) in the federal state of Saxony, close to the borders with the Czech Republic and Poland. Though there is some uncertainty regarding the exact number of current speakers (estimates range from under 7,000 up to around 25,000), it is the second smallest of the Slavic languages and is closely related to Lower Sorbian, a fellow Slavic microlanguage spoken in Lower Lusatia, in the neighbouring federal state of Brandenburg. Together with official language of the European Union such as Czech, Polish, and Slovak, as well as the minority language of Kashubian (spoken in the northern Polish voivodeship of Pomerania), the two Sorbian languages form part of the west Slavic sub-family of languages (Brězan & Nowak 2015; Sytsema 2015; Werner 2017).

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The Federal Republic of Germany is a signatory to the Council of Europe's European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Council of Europe 2021) and to that end, Upper Sorbian is recognised as one of the country's five minority languages and therefore enjoys specific protections and rights (Seehofer 2020: 4-5). However, as Marti (2016: 206) notes, the vitality of the language is not assured and it remains vulnerable. Although a solid body of work has emerged in recent years on aspects relating to the historical and contemporary role of Upper Sorbian in schooling within Upper Lusatia (for example, see Budarjowa 2014; Tuz 2018; Westphal 2018; Dołowy-Rybińska 2018, 2021; Dołowy-Rybińska & Ratajczak 2019), less attention seems to have been focused on issues pertaining to the specific role of translation in the education sector. This is despite the influence that translation policies can exert with regard to minority languages (Belmar 2017; Córdoba Serrano & Fouces 2018), as well as the existence of broader discussions examining the intersection of translation with multilingualism policies (for example, see Grin 2017; Pym 2021).

Building on the author's previous translation and interpreting-focused studies of other minority languages such as Irish and Luxembourgish within the European context (Hoyte-West 2019, 2020), this literature-based exploratory overview aims to examine, in a preliminary manner, the importance of translation within the Upper Sorbian education system and centres mainly on secondary, tertiary, and professional education. This will be done by providing a brief panorama of historical and contemporary aspects relating to the Upper Sorbian linguistic context, before exploring the intersection of Upper Sorbian-related translation with the wider education sector in Upper Lusatia and beyond, thus aiming to provide a foundation for subsequent empirical research at a later date.

## **2. The History and Contemporary Status of the Upper Sorbian Language**

Though small in size, Upper Sorbian has a long historical and cultural pedigree. Formerly spoken widely across much of what is now the modern German federal state of Saxony, over time its linguistic territory has diminished as its fortunes have waned. This can be ascribed largely to the overwhelming dominance of the German language, as nowadays all native speakers of Upper Sorbian are also native speakers of German. In addition, the region and its people have undergone significant geopolitical and economic changes over the past two centuries, as Upper Lusatia changed hands from the Kingdom of Saxony, to the German Empire, then Weimar and subsequently Nazi Germany, before forming part of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) from after the Second World War until German reunification (Kamusella 2005: 55; Brězan & Nowak 2015: 7-8).

These wide-ranging political changes have had significant ramifications for the usage and status of the Upper Sorbian language itself, especially with regard to literary and translational production in the language. As Stone (2015: 41) notes in his comprehensive study of the Sorbs, the first complete Bible translation into the language was made in 1728. In the nineteenth century, growing awareness of ethnolinguistic consciousness reached the Upper and Lower Sorbian-speaking lands, in common with

many similar such minority and minoritized groups across Europe. In cultural terms, this resulted, as Scholze (1999: 209) highlights, in the beginnings of Upper Sorbian as a language of literature, albeit on a relatively small scale. In political terms, this nationalism was to culminate in unsuccessful attempts after the First World War to establish a Sorbian-speaking entity, either as its own independent state or as part of Tomáš Masaryk's newly-formed republic of Czechoslovakia. Nonetheless, the early interwar years saw efforts to advance educational provision in Upper Sorbian. During the Nazi dictatorship and the Second World War, however, the Slavic origins of the Sorbs meant that their languages and cultures were denigrated and virtually banned. In the post-war era, though, both the Upper and Lower Sorbian languages became highly regarded and under East German rule were given official status in certain municipalities, with corresponding implications for the education sector. This included the opening of a bilingual grammar school in Bautzen, as well as a now-closed Sorbian-language teacher training institute in the town of Radibor (*Radwor*). These initiatives also led to the (re)establishment of independent Sorbian educational cultural institutions, and these organisations have continued after German reunification, even if it has been argued that the Sorbs are no longer seen as a privileged minority (for example, see Kamusella 2005: 55-6; Brězan & Nowak 2015: 7-10).

Particularly relevant for aspects relating to translation and education with regard to both Upper and Lower Sorbian are the activities of Domowina Verlag, the Sorbian-language publishing house, which was formally incorporated in 1958 and works closely with its offshoot, the WITAJ Sprachzentrum language centre, to bring relevant linguistic and pedagogical material to the Upper and Lower Sorbian-speaking public. Indeed, the publishing house is part of Domowina, a politically-independent body representing the interests of Sorbs in both Upper and Lower Lusatia not only at the local level, but also on the national stage. From the outset, the publications produced by Domowina Verlag have covered the whole range of literary production, including various newspapers, children's books, academic and popular literature, as well as pedagogical materials for both the Upper and Lower Sorbian languages (Maćijowa 2014: 295-296; Domowina Verlag 2021; WITAJ 2021a). Indeed, during communist times, notions of wider Slavic fraternity ensured that many literary works – including canonical works such as the great Russian classics by Tolstoy – were translated into Upper Sorbian (Scholze 2012: 2134). However, to date translations of Upper Sorbian literature into other languages remain less plentiful. As exemplified by Kamusella's (2021) recent publication on the new and first-ever German translation of the Upper Sorbian writer Jurij Koch's acclaimed novel *Židowka Hana* [The Jewess Hana] (1963), many literary works written in the Upper Sorbian language still remain untranslated and thus inaccessible to a non-Upper Sorbian-speaking reader.

This is not to say, however, that translation is completely invisible in the modern Upper Sorbian context. As noted by Werner (2017), bilingual German-Upper Sorbian signage is common in public places in Upper Lusatia, and thus represents part of the region's linguistic landscape. However, the names of the relevant toponyms in Upper Sorbian are typically written underneath the German, and often a smaller font is used. In addition, it has been observed that there can often be orthographical mistakes in the Upper Sorbian text used on these signs (Werner 2017: 157). Turning to mass media,

another example can be seen in the case of *Wuhladko*, the monthly Upper Sorbian television programme broadcast on MDR, the regional television station in central Germany, which is also available with German subtitles (MDR 2021).

### 3. Upper Sorbian Translation in Non-Tertiary Education

In modern Upper Lusatia, teaching in Upper Sorbian is available at a range of different educational levels. At the pre-primary level, Upper Sorbian-language kindergartens are available, where the linguistic immersion model emulates the Breton “diwan” model of language education (Budarjowa 2014: 303-4). Provision for tuition in the Upper Sorbian language also continues at primary and subsequently at secondary level. Notably, at the Upper Sorbian gymnasium in Bautzen, as Dołowy-Rybińska & Ratajczak (2019: 6) note, current language policy is based on the “*Konzept 2*” model, which builds on official EU recommendations for students to acquire proficiency in two languages additional to the mother tongue. In the Upper Lusatian context, this typically means both Upper Sorbian and German, plus a further language, with the stated goal that students achieve bilingualism in the first two languages (Sächsisches Bildungsinstitut 2017).

However, as Dołowy-Rybińska & Ratajczak (2019: 6) observe, the effectiveness of this policy has been questioned, given that students are streamed into different Upper Sorbian language groups based on their proficiency in the language, as well as factors such as parental preference, and teacher-based evaluation of their pupils. As such, only one stream generally achieves bilingualism – that is, with the range of school subjects taught in Upper Sorbian and German, whereas this is generally not the case for pupils participating in other streams. In addition, Dołowy-Rybińska & Ratajczak (2019: 6) highlight that this streaming also creates a divide between the pupils – and by extension peer groups – thus creating additional linguistic and social barriers between those who are fluent speakers of Upper Sorbian and those who may not be.

As might be expected, the use of translation in this context could be argued to be omnipresent, but somehow also remains very much in the background. The main example, as noted by Bržan & Nowak (2015: 33), is the translation of the relevant school textbooks used for various subjects such as mathematics, biology, geography and history. Indeed, syllabi are decided at the state level, and as such, the Upper Sorbian textbooks are direct translations of the German originals. On a practical level, this homogeneity ensures that students following certain school subjects in the Upper Sorbian stream(s) can follow exactly the same material as their counterparts educated fully or partially in German, and thus are not disadvantaged or have to complete extra schoolwork owing to linguistic aspects.

Although Domowina Verlag is the publisher of the Upper Sorbian variants of these state-sanctioned school textbooks, the responsibility for developing educational materials in Upper Sorbian lies primarily with the WITAJ Sprachzentrum, which – as mentioned previously – focuses on creating and promulgating pedagogical materials in both the Upper and Lower Sorbian languages. As such, a language certification programme for both Upper and Lower Sorbian has been launched (for more

information, please also see Hoyte-West (forthcoming)). This pioneering initiative comprises a series of independent language qualifications which are linked to the six levels of the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which appear to emulate similar such qualifications for major international languages, such as the Cambridge examinations for English, the Goethe-Zertifikat qualifications for German, and the DELF/DALF diplomas for French. At present, the language certificates for both Upper and Lower Sorbian are offered up to upper intermediate (Independent User – CEFR B2) level (Sprachzertifikat Sorbisch 2021). An examination of the website of the qualification reveals that translation does not currently appear to play any part in the examination process; however, once the full suite of qualifications is offered, it remains to be seen if it may play a role at the uppermost levels (Proficient User – CEFR C1 and C2).

However, some forms of translation-related activities do appear to take place in other WITAJ-developed pedagogical materials. In 2016, WITAJ Sprachzentrum created an online self-study portal for those interested in learning either (or both) of the Sorbian languages (Minderheitensekretariat 2018). At present, options are available for Upper and Lower Sorbian courses at the Basic User (CEFR A1 and A2) and Independent User (CEFR B1) level, which require the student to select a Sorbian language paired either with German or with English (Sorbisch Online Lernen 2021). In addition, this year (2021) has seen the launch of Sotra, the first Upper Sorbian-German machine translation programme. In common with many other types of proprietary translation software, Sotra uses neural machine translation to provide automatic translations between the two languages. This initiative will, of course, make a huge difference to translation and education in the Upper Sorbian language, both for learners as well as for advanced and native speakers. In addition, in developing this software it is hoped that eventually Upper Sorbian will be able to be integrated into ubiquitous online tools such as Google Translate (WITAJ 2021b), thus avoiding the current situation where the language is often misrecognised by machine translation software (for example, by the automatic language translator on Facebook) as being either Czech or Polish (Lausitzer Rundschau 2021).

#### **4. Upper Sorbian Translation in Tertiary Education and Professional Training**

Following the closure of the Sorbian teacher training institute after German reunification (RBB 2021), there is currently no tertiary institution located within the Upper Sorbian-speaking area itself. To this end, teacher training for both Upper and Lower Sorbian is now offered at the Institute for Sorbian Studies (*Institut za Sorabistiku*), which is based at the University of Leipzig's Faculty of Philology. Although the city of Leipzig also lies within the federal state of Saxony, nonetheless it is situated over 150 kilometres from the Upper Sorbian-speaking lands around Bautzen. As noted elsewhere (for example, see Böger 2017; Sächsische Zeitung 2021), there is currently a distinct shortage of teachers with the requisite linguistic skills in Upper Sorbian. To that end, a special year-long intensive training course is offered to help trainee teachers acquire the relevant level of language skills in Upper Sorbian

(Institut für Sorabistik 2021). In addition to teacher training degrees, the Institute for Sorbian Studies also offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Upper and Lower Sorbian language, literature and culture (Plavskaya 2019: 527).

In terms of academic and professional training for language professionals working with Upper Sorbian, there appears to be no state-accredited translation (*Staatlich geprüfter Übersetzer*) or interpreting (*Staatlich geprüfter Dolmetscher*) examination available at the time of writing (Landesamt für Schule und Bildung 2020: 12). In this regard, it can be argued that this is an apparent anomaly since professions tend generally to be highly standardised and regulated within Germany itself (Neal & Morgan 2000: 21). Indeed, although modules offering translation between Upper Sorbian and German translation are incorporated within the postgraduate MA degree programme at the Institute for Sorbian Studies (University of Leipzig 2018: 18), no full degree course is currently offered which specifically focuses on Upper Sorbian translation or interpreting studies. Indeed, a glance at the postgraduate conference interpreting and translation degree programmes available at the University of Leipzig also illustrates that Upper Sorbian does not feature as one of the active or passive languages available for study at the time of writing (University of Leipzig 2021a, 2021b).

Nonetheless, despite the apparent absence of relevant training courses for putative translators and interpreters with Upper Sorbian language skills, it is clear that there is a distinct demand for professional translation and interpreting services and that professional translators and interpreters do operate within the Upper Sorbian linguistic context. To this end, a further state-owned institution (*Serwisowy běrow za serbsku rěč w komunalnych naležnosćach*) was founded in 2019, which offers translation, interpreting, and language consultancy services for Upper Sorbian. These are available free-of-charge to municipal authorities in Upper Lusatia (Klein 2019). In addition, a voluntary list of translators and interpreters working with both of the Sorbian languages is available on Domowina's website (Domowina 2021). Further evidence of the demand for Upper Sorbian language services is illustrated by the recent delivery of high-quality simultaneous interpreting equipment to the public sector within Upper Lusatia. As such, the implications for wider Upper Sorbian language policy are significant, as illustrated by the comments made by David Stanik, the president of Domowina, who observed that the availability of simultaneous interpretation services would allow Sorbs to speak in their language in a wider range of meetings and fora (Klein 2020).

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Building on Upper Lusatia's complex historical and sociolinguistic background, this literature-based preliminary overview has shown that the intersection between translation and education is extremely important, but remains somewhat understated within the Upper Sorbian context. To return to the title of this study, however, both aspects certainly remain "hand-in-hand." At the secondary school-level, bilingual education programmes, with state-level syllabi which require homogeneity of teaching

materials, ensure that pupils are working with translated materials on a daily basis. In addition, future work to create advanced-level certifications for Upper Sorbian speakers may offer further possibilities to deepen the links between translation and education, thus building on recent achievements in developing online pedagogical materials as well as up-to-date translation software for this minority language.

At the tertiary and professional levels, although limited training options are currently available, the lack of full academic or professional translation and interpreting qualifications with Upper Sorbian remains a potential issue which may need addressing at a future date. However, in this regard recent initiatives to encourage more widespread usage of the Upper Sorbian language in the region's local administration may lead to increased demand for qualified professional translators and (conference) interpreters with the necessary linguistic expertise, thereby leading to the provision of further training and development opportunities for linguists with Upper Sorbian skills. By way of comparison, the existence of a similar demand-based trajectory was also noted in the author's aforementioned research study on Irish in the European context, which observed that the recognition of Irish as the twenty-third of the European Union's official languages – with the associated linguistic implications for that entity's institutions – also led to the development of a relevant Irish language-focused training course for conference interpreters within the Republic of Ireland itself (Hoyte-West, 2019). As such, this could provide a template for the creation of appropriate initiatives within the Upper Sorbian linguistic context. Yet what remains clear, though, is that further empirical research relating to aspects of the translation and interpreting of the Upper Sorbian language is certainly needed. In short, this is required not only to complement and deepen the observations of this exploratory literature-based overview, but also to provide a foundation for further comparative work with other similar minority language-based case studies both in Europe and beyond.

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