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TEACHING IN THE ABSENCE OF A STANDARD LANGUAGE[1]
A CASE STUDY OF UPPER SORBIAN

## 1. Standardisation of USo – status quo

Upper Sorbian (USo) is a Western Slavonic language in the Eastern areas of Saxony. As an everyday language, it is spoken today only in a primarily Catholic triangular area between Bautzen (Budyšin), Kamenz (Kamjeńc) and Hoyerswerda (Wojerecy). According to Walde (2014), in 2001 there were about 6,500 speakers in this region with a varying command of USo. Officially, these areas are bilingual: Sorbian-language education is provided from nursery to higher education and teacher training. In theory, the language enjoys equal rights in official domains, but USo is seldom used as a language for administrative purposes, creating a diaglossy situation for all speakers, an area which requires research. And while Sorbian translations of official German documents might exist[2] there are no official domains where the use of Sorbian would be imperative. Although it is possible to use Sorbian officially (one can, e. g., require a translator in court), this is rarely done for pragmatic reasons[3]. In addition, mass media in USo are scarce, with only three hours of daily local radio and half an hour of television every other week. There is one daily newspaper (name please) and a few monthly journals.

In public life, USo can be seen in the form of bilingual street and village signs (with the Sorbian name often misspelt and always in a much smaller font, cf. Tomčík). Since USo is not being used in governmental administration, the domains of the language are reduced. This has a knock-on effect on schools, where the teaching of standard USo at school is not vocational, but becomes merely an end in itself, which adds to the low prestige of the language.

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[1] Thanks to Sabine Asmus and Patrick McCafferty for many helpful hints and corrections.

[2] http://www.landtag.brandenburg.de/media_fast/5701/Verfassung_Niedersorbisch.pdf.

[3] While the Sorbian law of Saxony states that no disadvantages whatsoever can arise from using Sorbian when communicating with a state office (Sächsisches Sorbengesetz § 9 (1), there is at least a delay to be taken into account.
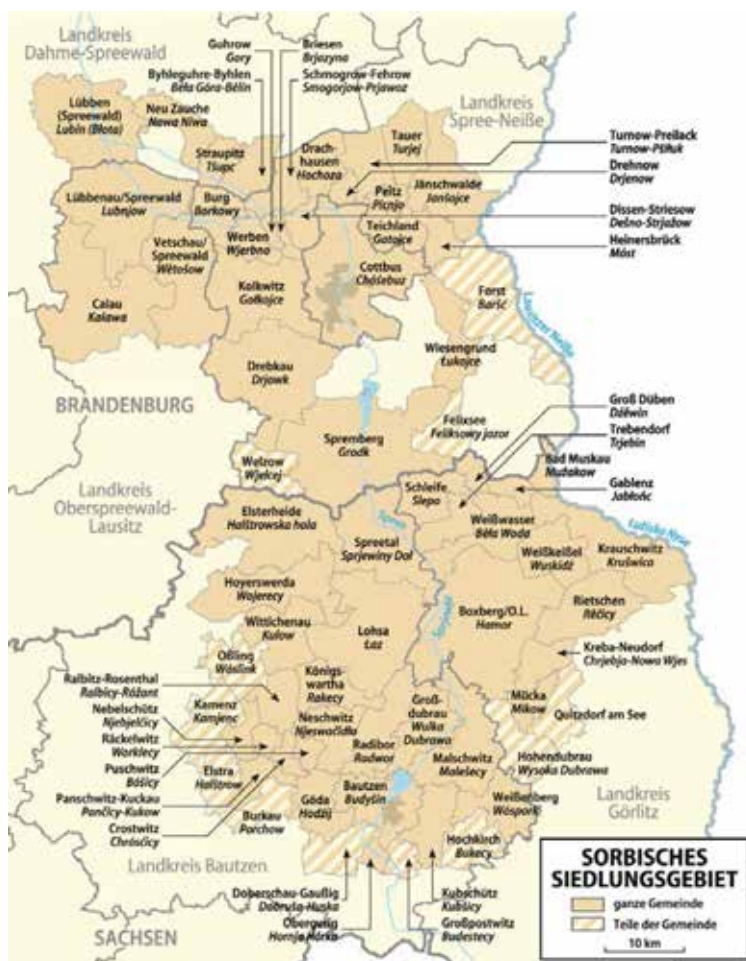
For the oral form of standard USo, similar restrictions apply: While legally possible, it is almost unthinkable that a Sorbian member of the parliament of Saxony would speak Sorbian and be translated for non-Sorbian members of parliament. Therefore, USo as an official language is more or less restricted to Sorbian institutions such as the Domowina or the Sorbian institute.

2. Standard USo today

The aforementioned lack of official domains for USo leads to a low priority for standardising the language. Admittedly, there is a standardising body, the *Hornjoserbska rěčna komisija,* but they deal almost exclusively with orthographical issues. For spoken USo, it is questionable what should be regarded as *orthoepy* or standard pronunciation.

The natural conditions under which we might expect to see a somewhat standardised pronunciation are the following:

Language in the media: Actors in a theatre, or speakers on the radio and on TV are usually professionals or semi-professionals who woud be expected to aim at a socially neutral, supraregional pronunciation. However, the few USo professionals who have had voice training, were trained in German with the effect that they tend to pronounce USo according to the standards they know, which are either a) German standard language pronunciation rules and/or b) Sorbian orthography, but not the USo phonological system. The same is true, maybe even more so, for choir singers.

School teachers´ language: Teachers are language professionals so one would expect them to promote the standard language (reference here please). But for practical reasons speakers of USo tend to restrict themselves to the curriculum, or the materials in schoolbooks (cf. Šěnowa 2015). Also, since the central task of primary school teaching is the acquisition of reading and writing skills, not much emphasis is put on pronunciation. With regard to the goal of alphabetisation, one might argue that a pronunciation which is as close as possible to the spelling (which might be called *hypercorrect*) might be desirable, even if it deviates considerably from the usual pronunciation, since it facilitates memorising etymological spellings.

USo in official contexts: These are contexts in which notable members of the language society talk officially in front of other Sorbian speakers[4]. USo speakers then tend to pronounce hypercorrectly (to various degrees): this is again a natural reaction which can be interpreted as sticking to what is standardised (i.e. spelling).

3. USo "wobchadna rěč"

The terms *wobchadna rěč* resp. *Umgangssprache (colloquial)* are widely used in the USo grammars (Šewc 1968, Faßka 1981, Faska 2003) without being defined by the authors[5]. So we find *wobchadna rěč* being used for the following concepts[6]:

Unmarked language use: In this sense, *wobchadna rěč* is merely unmarked everyday USo language. This is important for language teaching, since it is the ultimate goal of an L2-learner to be taken for a native speaker (this is obviously true not only for learners of USo, see Birdsong 1992).

Inferior, undesirable language: Here *wobchadna rěč* carries the distinctly negative connotations of slang with reduced grammar, a lexicon overfrought with ad-hoc loanwords and code-switching[7].

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[4] These context are not very frequent, because in most larger groups there are a few people without compentence in Sorbian, which means German is spoken as a matter of course.

[5] It is not even clear whether *colloquial* or *vernacular* would be a more appropriate translation, and the discussion of these terminological issues must be outside the scope of this article. Therefore, I will use the Sorbian expression as a placeholder in this chapter.

[6] See Šěnowa (2015) for an in-depth discussion with examples.

[7] Šěnowa (2015:3) cites a USo teacher with the words: "I will never teach the colloquial – a teacher has to set an example!" The fact that *colloquial* is highly ambiguous is nothing specifically USo and associations of *colloquial* language with *sub-standard* is common (Kretschmer (1999:219)).

Non-standardised regional language form: Scholze (2008) claims that there is an additional layer of Sorbian between the standardised written form and the Catholic dialect[8], which she calls *obersorbische Umgangssprache (hornjoserbska wobchadna rěč),* the grammatical system of which she presents in her PhD thesis[9].

4. Learners and their goals

Since the number of USo native speakers is relatively small and decreasing fast[10], language teaching is vital for preserving the language. We can divide the USo learners roughly into two (maybe three) groups:

1. Witaj is a Sorbian revitalisation programme aiming to expose children to the Sorbian language in kindergartens[11]. These children would then ideally go to a school which partly uses Sorbian as the language of instruction, thereby enabling the children to reach full competence (Norberg 2006, 2010).

2. Children at Sorbian schools: in Upper Lusatia, these are mostly native or near-native speakers (cf. de Meulder & Werner, in press). This group is the crucial one when it comes to passing on the language to the next generation, so from the point of language preservation it is imperative that they feel as comfortable and fluent as possible in the language (Fishman 1991, Florey 2009, UNESCO 2003).

3. Adult learners who know how to read and write in their L1 (typically German), and whose first exposure to USo is typically through a teacher and written media, mostly in summer courses or evening classes, and in some exceptional cases through friends or partners without formal tuition. Their ultimate success is being mistaken as a native speaker by the native speakers because their language is being perceived as authentic.

Obviously, there are many highly debatable issues about the *Witaj* programme (the discussion of which is outside the scope of this article), but realistically we cannot expect these early learners to become fully-fledged native speakers. Most probably these children will remain "semi-speakers" (Dorian 1977) with *some* command of Sorbian, and even that will be unstructured (e.g. no metalinguistic competence due to the lack of formal language lessons; only partial linguistic competence; little conversational abilities) and probably faulty (because their teachers do not have enough Sorbian). The impact of this programme has yet to be investigated, but it is hoped that at least some of these children will eventually become part of the second group.

In the remainder of this article, I will concentrate on the difficulties which arise because of a lack of orthoepy, and I will argue that the common everyday language should be used as the basis for standardisation and teaching of pronunciation. In the context of an endan-

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[8] The Catholic dialect is the USo dialect being spoken in the aforementioned triangular Region between Bautzen, Kamenz, and Hoyerswerda.

[9] For Scholze (2008), *vernacular* is probably a more appropriate translation of *wobchadna rěč.*

[10] According to numbers published in the USo Newspaper *Serbske Nowiny* from Nov 30th, 2015, the number of schoolchildren with fluent Sorbian has decreased by 53% since 1994, while the overall number of schoolchildren in the region has increased.

[11] For an in-depth discussion and language survey, see Schulz (2015).

gered language, this is vital since learners cannot be expected to ever achieve unmarked or authentic pronunciation because there is no stable base of competent and confident native speakers who could correct them.

5. Standardised areas of USo

Orthography

Orthography has been standardised for USo by means of the *Prawopisny Słownik* (Völkel 2005) which is, in spite of its name, a bilingual German-USo dictionary. It contains no indication of the phonetic realisation of the entries, but contains examples for morphological forms which are known to be difficult for native speakers. So orthography is standardised for USo.

Lexicon

According to estimations by the author, the most expansive German-USo dictionary is Rězak (1920), which contains about 70,000 USo lexical items- about twice as much as the two-volume Jentsch (1989/91) and more than the *Prawopisny Słownik* (Völkel 2005) with about 55,000[12]. This shows that older works contain many lexical items no longer present in modern USo lexicography[13]. USo fiction also contains lexical items which are not registered in any dictionary (e. g. *so pjećikować* = 'to do a boring and tiring job'). Finally, there are many Sorbian expressions which are not found in the literature or in dictionaries, sometimes for puristic reasons[14], e. g. *někomu wotlazować* 'to drag somebody over the coals'. This is also true for many typical obscenities such as *knota přahać* 'to masturbate' or *špjera* 'cunt'.

It is therefore hard to tell how much of the USo lexicon is actually registered in contemporary dictionaries, which is disheartening considering that the non-registered lexicon is prone to die out with the last speakers of the generation who still know it. So while the lexicon is standardised, it is severly underresearched.

Grammar

During the 1980s and 1990s, the standard grammar of USo was collated by Faßke (1981), which, however, focuses on inflectional morphology. Faska (2003), which is based

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[12] Since we are contrasting German-USo and USo-German dictionaries here, comparing the number of headwords does not help.

[13] The difference becomes even more apparent considering that many of the headwords in the Prawopisny Słownik are place names and its derivations (which are not really lexical items) and modern lexicon like *dilema*, *tema*, *helikopter* and so on.

[14] During the 19th century many German loanwords were systematically expunged from the dictionaries and literature (Jentsch 1999), but not from every-day speech.

on Faßke (1981) but has been extended to encompass syntax and phonology, is now the accepted school grammar. It also gives examples for pronunciation.

6. Open Standardisation Issues

It is not possible to present a comprehensive account of all the problems connected with the standardisation of USo[15] within the scope of the article, but a draft picture can be deduced from the examples given.

Pronunciation

As mentioned above, there are no phonetic transcriptions in existing USo dictionaries. Teaching materials are restricted to general (and vague) observations on pronunciation[16]. This leads to insecurity and imitated pronunciation (cf. Heinz (2002: 448) with similar observations for Welsh):

In formal speech, we often find German [v] for Sorbian (bilabial) <w, ł> instead of [w] or [zero] (depending on the position) and even German [y] for USo <y> instead of [ɨ] or [ʊ], especially in those cases where <y> is pronounced [ʊ] in every-day speech, e.g. *być* 'to be'[17]. The deviation between (etymological) spelling and every-day pronunciation thus causes speakers to prefer a pronunciation which seemingly "fits better" to the spelling in formal contexts (=spelling pronunciation). This always inadvertedly means pronouncing according to German letter-to-sound rules, not according to USo phonological and phonetic rules, even if this introduces new sounds into USo. Hence, while [v] is not completely foreign to USo, it is very rare and generally restricted to loanwords like *kofej* 'coffee' and *bifej* 'buffet, sideboard'.

Assimiliations

Assimilations are mentioned by both Šewc (1968/1984) and Faska (2003) but they tend to be neglected in teaching since they are not particularly apparent in writing. In Slavic languages, assimilation is generally regressive, involving assimiation of the place as well as voice of stops and fricatives. Thererfore, for *wučba* 'teaching', we expect [ʧ] > [ʤ] because of the following voiced stop [b]. In unmarked pronunciation, *wučba* is thus homonymous with *hudźba* 'music' since the difference between initial <h> and <w> is usu-

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[15]   Some have been dealt with elsewhere, e.g. Werner (1996) for the distribution of dual endings or Wornar (1999) for the analytic future tense.

[16]   E.g. "**e** ist meist offenes e wie in deutsch *hemmen*" [= e is mostly open e as in German hemmen] (Šołćina/Wornar 2012:14).

[17]   Schuster-Šewc (1968:33) states about pronuncing *być* als [bʊʧ]: "Tuto wurjekowanje njewotpowěduje hs. ortoepiji" [=This pronunciation does not comply with USo orthoepy Orthoepie ist nicht bekannt im Engsichen ... pronunciation rules?]. This is a strange assertion given the fact that a) this pronunciation is the only one known in USo dialects and b) that there is no USo orthoepy which could be violated.

ally neutralised before a labialised back vowel. For similar reasons, *haňba* 'shame'[18] is generally pronounced ['hajmba] ([n] before labial stop assimilates to [m]) and *zamknyć* 'to lock' as ['zaŋknʧ] (dental [n] before velar stop assimilates to velar [ŋ])[19].

Mute initial <w>

Wowčerk (1951: 20), which was the standard school grammar during GDR times, stating that initial <w> is often not pronounced in colloquial speech before <r> or <š>[20]. However, word-initial <w> is *always* pronounced when preceded by a preposition which retracts phrasal stress and thus affects the syllable structure of the phrase, e.g. *na wšo* 'on everything' [ˈnawʃɔ]. In other contexts, a native speaker will *never* pronounce it. I would like to argue that a standard for pronunciation needs to reflect the unmarked spoken contemporary form rather than an artificial spelling convention.

Palatalisation

A special problem are palatalised phonemes[21]. In writing, they are very salient because of the added <j> (<bj, (fj), mj, nj, pj, rj, wj>), but in normal speech they are usually realised as unpalatalised. Sometimes, the realisation as an unpalatalised consonant is obligatory, especially in front of closed [e], e.g. <rj> in *rjenje* 'beautifully' [reˈnʲɛ]. In some other positions, such as in the case of a palatalised labial in front of a back or central vowel, an approximant *must* be pronounced, e.g. *spja* 'they sleep' [spja]. In most other positions, palatalisation with approximant and loss of palatisation (most common) is possible (e.g. *činja* 'they do' [ˈʧinʲja, ˈʧinʲa, ˈʧina]) so it is unclear what should be adopted as the standard. Since the approximant is obligatory in some phonetic environments and since these cases are in agreement with the spelling, speakers in official situations tend to overpronounce palatalisation in accordance with the spelling. Again, I would argue for a pronunciation which takes into account the practice of native speakers based on solid linguistic descriptions of the phonetic or lexical environments in which palatalisation is obligatory, optional or prohibited.

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[18] The letter <ń> is used – inconsequently – for historically palatalised /ń/, synchronically it is always unpalatalised and sometimes preceded by [j].

[19] These regular changes pose problems to learners who have not been introduced to them, especially when trying to understand fluent speech.

[20] "Vor *r* und *š* bleibt *w* in der Umgangssprache am Wortanfang meist unausgesprochen: *wrota* Mz. Tor, *wšo* alles". Wowčerk does not give a definition of *colloquial*.

[21] For a comprehensive discussion of palatalised phonemes in USo as well as issues of orthoepy, see Jocz (2014).

Epenthetic [j]

The so-called epenthetic [j] , an unetymologically inserted [j], is irregular both in spelling and in pronunciation. In some cases, it is *always* pronounced and written, e.g. *tajki* 'such', *kajki* 'what for'. Sometimes it is not written, but always pronounced, e.g. *kaž* 'such as' [kajʃ]*, kóždy* 'every' ['kʊjʒdɨ]*, zašły* 'past' ['zajʃwɨ]. In other cases it is optional, e.g. *ćěkanc* 'refugee' ['ʧɪka(j)nts]. These pronunciations have be learned since there is no general rule. Again, the deviations of everyday pronunciation and spelling lead to linguistic insecurity, which is increased by those cases in which we find heterogeneity even amongst native speakers. While the spelling is standardised (although not consistent), the pronunciation also needs standardisation.

Other phenomena

Faska (2003) gives some examples of pronunciation, but no general rules to help the learner. Like Schuster-Šewc (1968: 24f.), he explains assimilation of voiced and unvoiced stops (Faska 2003: 4), but for most other phenomena, e.g. the loss of [w] (written <ł>) in root syllables after labial and velar in front of a rounded vowel as in *chłostać* 'to punish' ['kostaʧ] (ibid., 6), he only gives examples withouth stating the underlying rule[22].

Schuster-Šewc (1968: 31) correctly mentions the lowering of [ɪ] to closed [e] before palatalised consonants[23] and to open [ɛ] after the accent, but goes on to give incorrect examples claiming that [ɪ] should be pronounced in *wĕdźeć* 'to know'*, bĕžeć* 'to run'*,* and *chĕža* 'house'[24]. A few pages later, however, he gives *chejža* [sic!] as the "correct" pronunciation for *chĕža* which not only contradicts his earlier examples, but incorrectly neglects the change of initial *ch to [k].

All authors differentiate between unaspirated [k] (<k>) and aspirated [kʰ] (< *ch, <ch>), whereas in contemporary pronunciation there is no such difference (Jocz 2014: 156ff.).

There are other words which provide problems because their pronunciation has changed significantly over the last centuries while the spelling still reflects an older or even reconstructed form. Although these are important for authentic pronunciation, they are not mentioned in textbooks or systematically dealt with in grammars.

There are some words which are highly irregular with regard to their everyday pronunciation, e.g. *tchór* 'polecat' [tfʊʁ], *hołb* 'dove' [hʊjp][25], *pluwy* 'chaff' [pluj][26]. However, these pronunciations are currently not registered in dictionaries or textbooks.

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[22] Schuster-Šewc (1968:34) incorrectly states that this loss of [w] is not even acceptable in *młody* 'young', although in fact a pronunciation *[‚mwɔdɨ] is unknown.

[23] There are exceptions to this rule which have to be learned, such as *bledžić* 'to talk nonsense', *rjedźić* 'to clean' which have an open [ɛ]. Neither author mentions them.

[24] In the second edition from 1984, this passage has been eliminated.

[25] Even Schuster-Šewc (1968:40) who tends to give hypercorrect pronunciations has [hʊjb] here.

[26] A special case is also *wysoki* ´hoch´, because Sorbian does not have initial *wy-* [wɨ], but reflects old *vy- depending on the lexeme and dialect as [wɔ-], [hɔ-], [wu-] or [hu-], so *wysoki* is pronounced as [wʊsɔˌki] or [hʊsɔˌki].

Then there are apparently irregular words whose pronunciations are in fact in accord with general rules of USo phonetics. For example, in some words, the USo syllable structure, which does not allow for sonoric local minima within a syllable, requires sound substitutions (e.g. *łžeć* 'to lie (at sb)' [wʒeʧ] > [bʒeʧ], *wši* 'lice' [wʃi] > [pʃi]) or metathesis (e.g. *ržeć* 'to quake' [rʒeʧ] > [ʒreʧ], *ržany* 'rye (adj)' [rʒanɨ] > [ʒranɨ], in spelling *šmica* 'midge' < *mъšica) or the loss of sounds as in *čerw* 'maggot' -> [ʧɪr] (with raising and centralising of [ɛ] to [ɪ] because of the historical and now lost palatal word-final consonant). Since these rules are not always clear-cut, they are not made explicit in the grammars. Furthermore, the pronunciations of these examples are not given in dictionaries.

7. Conclusions

USo suffers from a lack of standardisation, which means that verifiable teaching goals and benchmarks are missing in many areas of the language (phonetics, phonology, morphology, lexicon). If no such goals have been agreed upon, the learning targets which nees to be achieved in order to reach these goals cannot be defined either which makes quality management an impossible task.

In this paper, I have argued that an important step towards the standardisation of USo pronunciation would be to introduce phonetic transcriptions in USo dictionaries which is state of the art for school dictionaries of other languages. These transcriptions, which should reflect actual contemporary realisation of the language rather than hypercorrect, German-influenced forms, could first of all serve as recommendations. They would enable the learner to check their pronunciation against realistic language learning targets. Such materials woul also constitute a very important step for language revitalisation because the sound system of a langauge is acquired and has to be corrected at a very early stage of learning. In view of the declining number of native speakers and, therefore, an increasing impact from second-language learners, the preservation of an authentic form of language is more important than ever.

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[27] Sorbian authors normally publish in Sorbian under their Sorbian names and unter their German names elsewhere. Here, Helmut Faska and Helmut Faßke, Jana Šołćina and Jana Schulz, Edward Wornar and Eduard Werner are the same persons respectively.

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Teaching in the Absence of a Standard Language. A Case Study of Upper Sorbian

Summary

The teaching of Upper Sorbian (USo) is of increasing importance for the survival of this language. A challenge faced by learners is the lack of standardisation. Reliable standardisation has been conducted only in the area of orthography, which offers little indication about pronunciation. Pronunciation, however, is generally missing in all USo dictionaries, and teaching materials offer only general observations. Learners of USo mostly belong to one of two groups which require different teaching strategies: on the one hand, second-language learners aim to achieve authentic pronunciation; native speakers, on the other hand, struggle with the contrast between the standardised etymological orthography and the phonetic representation in everyday language (partly addressed in Šołćina 2014a/b).