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The development and current state of the linguistic landscape – the case of the Wymysorys language

Introduction

Wilamowice is a small town in southern Poland, situated between Bielsko-Biała and Oświęcim in the province of Silesia. It has a population of over 3,000 and covers an area of about 10 square kilometres. The phenomenon of Vilamovian culture goes back to the thirteenth century, when, according to oral history and local tradition, in the wake of a Tatar invasion, the Duke of Oświęcim decided to populate the area with settlers from Western Europe. Hailing, in all likelihood, from the lands of modern Flanders and Alsace, they brought over their own languages, which, over time, gave rise to Wymysorys (*wymysiöeryś*) – a separate language that has been the subject of academic fascination for decades now.

For centuries, Wilamowice maintained strong trade relations with a number of business and merchant hubs in Europe and continued to expand its textile industry, which, in turn, led

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to frequent contacts with dominant European cultures. While these circumstances could have facilitated the rapid erasure of the nascent tongue, neither the language nor the local culture were ultimately assimilated, but were instead preserved through consistent and continuing local use. The language itself was subsequently exploited for political purposes in the early twentieth century, when newly emerging states sought to determine the true allegiance of the Vilamovian people.

During the Second World War, the locals were forced to sign the *Deutsche Volksliste* (German People's List) on account of their usage of Wymysorys, considered a Germanic language. Although the list classified them as *Eingedeutschte*, the second-to-last category reserved for people with indeterminate ethnic status, the Vilamovians were unequivocally identified as German by their neighbours after the war, their immediate and official rehabilitation notwithstanding. Consequently, already in 1945, local communist party cadres and officials moved to ban the language,¹ traditional garb, and practices that could be considered manifestations of a separate, distinct culture. Refusal to comply was punished with deportation to remote areas of the Soviet Union or imprisonment in former German concentration camps in Wadowice (Wadowitz), Jaworzno (Neu-Dachs) or Oświęcim (Auschwitz). This separate cultural identity was also used as a pretext by local communist party officials to expropriate the richer Vilamovians, stripping them of land and property.

Wary of further persecution, Vilamovians abandoned their native customs, their traditional garb and their language. They also stopped passing on elements of their identity to their children, which led to whole generations of Vilamovians growing up without any notion of their ancestors having had a separate culture or separate traditions. In the 1990s, Wymysorys was used only by a handful of elderly locals, while most of the youth lacked even the most basic grasp of their own cultural heritage. Only cultural revitalization efforts, launched in the early twenty-first century by the "Wilamowice" Regional Performance Group and the "Vilamovians" Association, gradually encouraged some Vilamovians to return to their roots (Szlachta-Ignatowicz & Wicherkiewicz, 2019).

An outline of the linguistic landscape in Wilamowice

The fact that the community of Wymysorys speakers is small, and spread across only the small area of the town, makes it a good candidate for all sorts of revitalization experiments on the one hand, and offers a prime environment in which to observe the processes taking place within it on the other. One such process involves shifts in the linguistic landscape and

¹ The official document carrying the proscription, dated 1 May 1945, can be found in the private archives of Barbara Tomanek.

its specific usage across a variety of levels. In the case of Wilamowice, the classic interpretation of linguistic landscape – introduced into linguistics by Canadian scholars Rodrigue Landry and Richard Bourhis (Landry & Bourhis, 1997, p. 25) and interrogating the strict usage of language itself in a given space – might require a more interdisciplinary approach, one which construes it as a constituent of the local cultural landscape. On account of its specific character, the Wymysorys language survives not just in reality, but also in virtual space, which has not heretofore been considered an obvious component of linguistic landscapes.

Dating to the nineteenth century, the oldest preserved iconographic sources depicting the town of Wilamowice and its surroundings carry precious little information about the public, widespread usage of either Wymysorys or any other language in this matter. Unlike other small towns in Galicia, the town of Wilamowice carries no signage in any of the languages used by the locals at the time: Wymysorys, Polish, German or Yiddish. That does not mean that no topographical or cultural descriptions survived – the notes in parish records clearly illustrate that they were in widespread use.²

At the time, the most prevalent example of expressing a separate cultural identity involved iconographic use of traditional Wilamowice garb worn by women. This customary attire emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and for years was a source of great pride for the locals (Król, 2009). Additionally, it clearly denoted a distinct cultural and economic identity (Nijakowski, 2007, p. 111). Very expensive, particularly by contemporary standards, it was one of the most complex ensembles, especially in terms of variants, to emerge in folk and bourgeois traditions in Europe in that particular period, which, in turn, made it the focus of much admiration amid frequent display (Król, 2013, p. 117). The oldest recorded portrayals of the traditional Wilamowice garb include murals that once graced the main auditorium of the town's former cinema (currently the Rogowa restaurant) – a fresco from the turn of the twentieth century, depicting Vilamovian women at work, and a 1980s Jan Grabowski church fresco,³ depicting two Vilamovians on their way to church. Both paintings were eventually destroyed in the course of incidents unfolding against a backdrop of nationalist and ethnic strife, brought about by politically active Poles and Germans in the 1920s and raging ever since.

While prior to the Second World War most scholars examined the language and traditional dress of the Vilamovians through an ideological lens, seeking to identify characteristics

² Records from the Wilamowice parish archives.

³ A picture of the interior from the archives of the "Vilamovians" Association.

that could corroborate their Slavic or German ancestry (Biesik, 1921; Mojmir, 1930), the situation changed dramatically after 1945. The aforementioned ban on using the language and traditional attire, proclaimed by communist party cadres from neighbouring villages, not only sealed the fate of the language, but also influenced the reception of the dress for years to come. From that point onwards, it was typically seen as either “German” or “Nazi”. That framing took deep root in the subconscious of the denizens of nearby towns and villages, as evidenced by the fact that even as late as the 1980s, the reaction to the first outlines of the fresco of two traditionally dressed Vilamovian women on their way to church going up on the wall was so strong that the parish priest ordered them painted over the very next day, compelled by the outcry from people who had settled near Wilamowice from elsewhere. Although only a single episode in the long history of persecution and harassment, that particular event made a lasting mark on the collective memory of the Vilamovian community:

[...] there were two women wearing Vilamovian outfits, walking on to church; it was right below where the choir loft sat inside... When T. saw it, he immediately went to the parish priest to bemoan having pictures of women in Nazi garb adorning the church. After dressing the preacher down, he forbade him to go ahead with the Nazis and the traditional dress. So they painted it over. [...] Folk were too scared to say anything.⁴

Although the examples above do not pertain directly to the specific usage of Wymysorys in space, it might be a good idea at this point to interrogate into the attitudes that locals living in nearby towns, people who settled there after the war, and Wymysorys speakers themselves have exhibited not that long ago. Enforced for years after the war, the official ban and the harassment it engendered have both left lasting marks on the consciousness and behaviour of the Vilamovians. Another version of the attire, developed after the war and later popularized by the “Wilamowice” Regional Performance Group, founded in 1948, offered a much safer alternative.⁵ In 1959, it received the official stamp of approval from the Central Office for Folk and Art Industry, which further reinforced its “de-Germanization” (Linek, 2014, pp. 40–41).

In the 1990s, when an entire generation of children with no knowledge of post-war realities slowly began entering adulthood, and when the breadth of Vilamovian culture

⁴ Interview with a Vilamovian native (born 1922), conducted on 10 December 2016 by Justyna Majerska-Sznajder.

⁵ Promoted by a number of different post-war institutions, the narrative which held that the outfit was a “Flemish-Scottish-Ukrainian-Turkish mixture, melted and recast in the Polish mould” (Polskie Radio, 1969, Pierzowiec Wilamowski) allowed many to take advantage of its values without being accused of promoting Germanness.

was distilled into folklore, early manifestations of the re-emergence of the town's separate cultural identity included changes in its landscape, such as the appearance of the traditional Vilamovian garb in advertisements or signage. At that point, the Wymysorys language was considered dead, and few people wanted to reintroduce it into the linguistic landscape, often for fear of further ridicule, which was often used to harass speakers in the years after the passage of the ban. Instead of using the language in public signage, efforts were made to stress the town's distinct cultural identity in other ways.

Language visibility in revitalization efforts

One particularly important turning point in the re-emergence of Wymysorys in the cultural landscape came in 1996, when a piece of graffiti written in the language appeared in a key location in the town – the façade of a textile factory situated next to the town's main square, right by the main road. It was an unprecedented instance of using the *Wymysiöeryś* language visually and doing so in public, while simultaneously, and paradoxically, drawing on its somewhat secret nature. Although the graffiti piece, put up by disgruntled locals, was misspelled (the declensions were missing, among other errors) and drew on the glossary included in Józef Latosiński's *Monografia Miasteczka Wilamowic* (A Monograph of Wilamowice) (Latosiński, 1909), its message was clear: it was an offensive remark aimed against the local parish priest.⁶ The piece was rounded out with a painting of town's coat of arms, added in by the authors of the scathing words. Of particular importance was also the fact that the authors of the graffiti piece were not related to any group involved with cultural heritage preservation efforts, nor was the town stage to any revitalization initiatives at the time.

Although the incident carried little educational value and offended local sensibilities (both linguistic and moral), it marked a seminal moment in the visibility of Wymysorys in the public sphere, which demonstrated that the language finally reasserted itself as a fully valid means of communication in the minds of the Vilamovians, who sought to emphasize the symbolic power of their tongue in the area (Marten, Van Mensel, & Gorter, 2012, p. 6) and attempted to draw on it long before the use of Wymysorys became a "fad", so to speak. The appearance of the graffiti piece coincided with a handful of radio and TV broadcasts

⁶ The inscription read: "DYR PYFFUŁ MYT FU GRUSE HYTA: DU HAET S'GYŚPIŁ!" (original spelling), which could be freely translated as: "You damned conceited man from the big house, you're less than hogwash!".

that sparked widespread media interest, which, in turn, prompted a shift in language policies (Ahearn, 2013, pp. 33–35).

Since then, instances of Wymysorys use in public space continued to emerge, a development noted by outside researchers (Ritchie, 2016, p. 67). The main thrust in this area, however, came from NGOs and community organizations. One of the first of such initiatives involved bilingual exhibitions organized by the “Vilamovians” Association, which offered a pretext to showcase Wymysorys as a rightful, legitimate language. A corresponding arrangement was used for posters and signage advertising similar events. The practice soon spread into the efforts of other organizations and associations, which began introducing Wymysorys into their own printed materials and other types of content they produced. This marked considerable progress in the matter, because as of 2016 such efforts had yet to spread beyond the walls of the aforementioned organization (Król, 2016, p. 253). In most cases, the shift was motivated by a desire to emphasize the importance and distinctness of local cultural heritage and identity. Some of the decision-makers stressed the need to support revitalization initiatives, and characterized the visual promotion of the language as their own contribution to these efforts:

[...] It’s no trouble to us, really; we pay for these banners anyway, and this way at least we’ll have something new [...]; that’s how we [the organizers – author’s note] can contribute, when we don’t speak it ourselves...⁷

In some cases, however, the re-emergence of Wymysorys within the space created by those organizations was driven by potential benefits it stood to bring. Bilingual labels were used in regional food competitions, trade shows and other regional competitions. Sometimes, the “exotic” appeal of the language was used deliberately, as an additional asset or a way to draw attention. There were also instances where the supposed need to employ two languages was an explicitly external factor: “[...] because it’s always much more elegant, when it’s in Polish and Wymysorys”⁸.

Over the past decade, a reinvigoration in a number of other spheres has been observed, including both the private and the public, the real and the virtual. Wymysorys began to materialize across a variety of levels, heretofore either overlooked or impossible

⁷ Interview with the head of the Wilamowice chapter of the Country Women’s Association, conducted on 24 November 2018 by Justyna Majerska-Sznajder.

⁸ Interview with the director of the “Wilamowice” Regional Song and Dance Performance Group, conducted on 25 April 2014 by Justyna Majerska-Sznajder.

to penetrate. The language appeared on plaques and car stickers – the overwhelming majority involved displays of familial sobriquets written in Wymysorys⁹ or highlighted the town name. The fad initially originated with professional truckers and later spread to ordinary car drivers. Wymysorys also found its way “into the graveyard” – fortunately only figuratively, rather than literally, with the latter option envisaged by early twenty-first century scholars (Wicherkiewicz & Zieniukowa, 2001, p. 498). Even as late as 2001, some researchers continued to argue that Wymysorys would die out in the next dozen years or so. Official records mention a contemporary monolingual headstone, stylized to match past aesthetic principles. Recently, scholars have also observed a re-emergence of fondness for headstone portraits, oval-shaped pictures of elderly locals, more rooted in local culture, wearing traditional Vilamovian garb. The word “Wymysöu” adorned the flag that Vilamovian climbers brought up with them to Mont Blanc, and has also appeared on backpacks and T-shirts worn by tourists abroad, as well as on a number of commemorative trinkets and gadgets.

Today, each such excursion leaves a trace in our virtual reality. With each photo posted on social media platforms and other applications, the visual reach of Wymysorys grows. Much of the work in this particular field is performed by highly engaged youth, moving with ease through modern digital and technological landscapes, and creating a tendency among their peers to not only use Wymysorys, but to show off that usage as well. In 2014, a fanpage was launched on Facebook, where its young administrators publish one Wymysorys word every day;¹⁰ at the peak of its popularity, the fanpage reached over 5,000 users,¹¹ which is more than the entire population of Wilamowice. In 2015, Vilamovian users of the platform began collectively changing their display names to their local appellations and familial sobriquets, or their own versions thereof. In closed discussion groups, young people are sharing memes and original collages. Unfortunately, these materials remain unavailable to a broader audience, as, wary of academic scrutiny, the users refused to grant access to their uploads to outsiders.

However, constant attention from scholars and academic intrusions, and the resulting speaker fatigue, have nevertheless yielded tangible benefits. Teenagers involved with

⁹ In Wilamowice, most families have a familial sobriquet, which allows them to distinguish themselves from other families bearing identical names common to the area.

¹⁰ The “Język Wilamowski” Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/jezykwilamowski2/> (“Język Wilamowski”, n.d.).

¹¹ The figure was quoted in an interview with the administrators of the “Język Wilamowski” Facebook page, conducted on 10 February 2019 by Justyna Majerska-Sznajder.

revitalization efforts have since launched an independent series of events to promote the language, *Wymysiöeryś Špröh Tag*. The first of these took place in July 2018 and was closed to the general public, intended solely for speakers of the language. The organizers themselves said that they primarily wanted to set up something that would not involve any external actors, something held entirely in Wymysorys. Apart from a variety of activities and contests, the organizers also set up an urban adventure game, in which the participants were tasked with tagging as many public objects as possible using Wymysorys phrases, then photographing them and uploading the pictures online to popularize the language. The tagging was done using chalk to avoid any potential accusations of vandalism, so the markings themselves did not last all that long. But the initiative testified to the need of the language to reassert itself within the landscape in the wake of its own re-emergence in the consciousness of its new speakers. It also subverted the stereotypical portrayal of teenagers as shunning the real world in favour of acting primarily online.

Likewise, over the past two decades, the public sector has shown considerable will to reintroduce Wymysorys into the cultural landscape. In 2011, pursuant to the decision of the Wilamowice Estate Council, township authorities adopted a resolution to install official bilingual welcome signs by the two main roads leading into town. The panels featured the phrase *Skiöekumt y Wymysöü*¹² in large type, a couple wearing traditional Vilamovian garb, and a medallion with the bust of the Roman Catholic Archbishop Józef Bilczewski, a Wilamowice native and patron of the town. Although the decision to install the signage signalled a marked shift in local policies, some town councillors, particularly those brought up in an era when Wymysorys speakers were still harassed, continued to argue that such conspicuous use of the language “could become dangerous”.¹³ Barely a couple of days after the installation, the signs were defaced by juvenile perpetrators from nearby towns and villages, but all were quickly renovated.

Thanks to the openness of local authorities and the intense involvement of the Artes Liberales Faculty of the University of Warsaw in the revitalization efforts, further initiatives were soon under way. For a long time, the visibility of Wymysorys was limited to small-circulation materials and assorted commemorative publications. That was the case until 2018, the bicentennial of Wilamowice being granted town privileges. To mark the occasion,

¹² The correct spelling is “Skiöekumt y Wymysöü”. The misspellings resulting from errors on the part of printing businesses are discussed later in the essay.

¹³ Statement from a township councillor (born 1952) and Wilamowice resident, made on 29 September 2013 at a meeting of organizations active in the Wilamowice municipality.

the township authorities commissioned bilingual banners featuring the Wilamowice coat of arms and the inscription: “200 jür fum tottraht fu Wymysöu” (although the correct spelling is “200 jür fum śtottraht fu Wymysöu”), and posted them around the town, where they remained for the next twelve months. Later that year, Dr Justyna Olko from the University of Warsaw’s Artes Liberales Faculty inspired another initiative, one which entailed the printing of new, trilingual banners promoting Wymysorys, written in Wymysorys, Polish and English. The undertaking involved three institutions and locations: the township authorities building (the banner saying “Wymysiöeryś štejt uf!”, meaning “We’re getting Wymysorys back on its feet”), the Wilamowice school complex (where the banner said “Dö kuzwer wymysioeryś”, meaning “Here, we speak Wymysorys”), and the Township Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation in Wilamowice (where the banners featured Christmas and Easter greetings). This considerably raised the profile of the language. Unfortunately, the banners were soon damaged by strong winds, and their new owners failed to take adequate measures to repair them, making the entire undertaking a mostly *ad hoc* affair.

Objects showcasing Wymysorys have also been crafted for religious reasons. In 2016, acting on a motion submitted by the local Roman Catholic Holy Trinity Parish, town authorities erected a monument of Saint Józef Bilczewski, Archbishop of Lviv and Wilamowice native. The inscription on the granite plinth, which named the Archbishop the town’s patron saint, marked the first time Wymysorys was used on a monument in an official capacity. The inscription read: “Der patrön yr śtat Wymysöu”.

It should also be noted that Wymysorys has been making inroads into academia, not just as a research subject but also as a spoken language. This has to do with an influx of native Wymysorys speakers into academic circles. One key practice in this particular area involved raising the visibility of Wymysorys in academic publications, facilitated by young Vilamovians and people associated with the revitalization efforts. When used as an implement rather than subject of research, the visibility of Wymysorys in academia allows for a reframing of its speakers’ linguistic ideology. Practices like these lend further legitimacy to the language in the speakers’ eyes, because they show it as capable of discharging its communicative function in all walks of life. At times, this visibility is profoundly ephemeral, reduced to headlines and individual sentences, forewords (Mętrak, 2019), sometimes longer texts (Chromik, 2019; Król, 2018). Given emerging practices and a growing number of Wymysorys speakers involved with the revitalization movement, it is possible that the first study drafted solely in Wymysorys will be arriving shortly.

Commercialization of the language

One significant challenge the Wilamowice locals face in the course of efforts to revitalize their culture is its commercialization, which Wilamowice has been stage to since 2015. Its gradual expansion can be seen as a by-product of the grant, overseen by Bartłomiej Chromik, intended to finance the creation of a tourist hub in the Wilamowice township, based around the Wymysorys language and the culture which it underpins.¹⁴ Apart from efforts to reshape local linguistic attitudes, the project's priority objectives also included attempts to increase tourism revenues by focusing on cultural tourism and the Wymysorys language. The project spawned trilingual signage marking out the tourist trail running through the town. The signs, which identified key historical locations and landmarks in the town, have appeared not only in its centre, but also in some less frequented spots, and the indigenous toponyms they featured helped restore their memory to the locals themselves (Alderman, 2008, p. 196).

Although generally received well, the efforts nevertheless elicited some protests – in one of the neighbourhoods, for example. The locals, who commonly called the area “Thirteen Houses” or “Thirteen Shacks” (“Dreca hyta” in Wymysorys) were dismayed by the appearance of the neighbourhood's full name on the signs – “Dreca hyta, fyca diw”, which translates to “Thirteen Houses, Fourteen Thieves”. Because the name had historical provenance and its initial part was in widespread use, the signage remained unchanged. The town also released a series of gadgets and memorabilia showcasing the local language. T-shirts, tote bags and assorted handicraft soon began appearing on the town's streets (as locals bought goods that promoted their culture and heritage) and in virtual spaces, as keepsakes from tourist trips.

Wymysorys also began appearing in the private sector. 2011 saw the first advertisement to incorporate two languages; an insurance firm put up an ad in the main square in Wilamowice (from where it has since disappeared, unfortunately), which used the Wymysorys word “ferzyhyn”, or “insurance”. The company had no ties to any of the revitalization efforts. Although the example was a one-off, rather than a comprehensive initiative, it provides a crucial illustration of the extent to which the revitalization has succeeded – from total ignorance and outward denial of the language to large-scale shifts in linguistic policies and the introduction Wymysorys into the business realm. In recent years, businesses have

¹⁴ Project no. 66/UD/SKILLS/2015, financed by the Foundation for Polish Science under its IMPULS competition.

come up with a number of ideas for how to integrate Wymysorys into their operations. For example, a local cooperative bank installed displays in its teller areas to show Wymysorys words to waiting customers. Despite the success of these and similar initiatives, most of the ideas have unfortunately remained unimplemented.¹⁵

The business-oriented usage of Wymysorys by companies hailing from outside Wilamowice, usually located in neighbouring towns and villages, is radically different. References to the distinct identity of Vilamovian culture and its “folklore” are often used as assets by companies seeking new financing. In 2016–2018, three businesses declared their intention to promote Wymysorys in their grant applications, which translated into additional points in their respective grant competitions.¹⁶ Only one of the three firms, however, from nearby Piszowice, followed through on its promises, and began selling grocery tote bags with the words “brut, putter, ajyn” (the correct spelling is “brut, puter, ajyn”, which translates to “bread, butter, eggs”).

Both native Wymysorys speakers, as well as people who have no association with the language, usually see nothing wrong with outsiders learning it and using it for commercial purposes. The reactions are different, however, when similar efforts are made by businesses from nearby villages. Although these efforts do indeed promote the language, they rarely, if ever, get the blessing of the Wilamowice community. This refusal is driven primarily by the memory of years immediately after the war, when the people from neighbouring towns and villages, exploiting the provisions of the communist ban mentioned earlier in this essay, would often steal traditional Vilamovian outfits from their owners (Król, 2013, p. 111). The still-fresh memory of these transgressions might explain the Vilamovians’ aversion toward seeing their neighbours take advantage of their cultural heritage for profit.

The question of who has the right to control cultural heritage has long been debated among social and cultural activists involved with managing and incentivizing ethnic groups. On the one hand, from a bottom-up angle (Łodziński, 2016, pp. 229–230), the position of the Vilamovians is perfectly understandable. Exploiting cultural elements such as language or traditional attire for profit is considered second-order, “soft” discrimination. On the other hand, however, from

¹⁵ One such planned initiative from 2018 entailed forming a partnership between one of the local businessmen and the “Vilamovians” Association, which would then introduce bilingual signage in local discount grocery shops. Unfortunately, the project was put on hold due to insufficient funding.

¹⁶ Primarily local grant programme for entrepreneurs, organized by the “Bielsko Lands” Local Action Group and the “Bielsko Country” Local Fishing Group.

a top-down angle, which sees the whole of Vilamovian culture as part of a broader cultural heritage, efforts like these are definitely advisable, as they ultimately support the preservation and continued development of this particular culture, regardless of their initial motivation.

Problems, challenges and predictions for the future

Regardless of who actually controls the heritage, the usage of Wymysorys in public space usually requires a translator. The middle generation lacks proficient speakers, but the coming years may offer numerous opportunities for improvement in this respect, as new speakers, currently in elementary, middle and secondary schools, will be joining the workforce.

Despite prolonged efforts to reintroduce the language into the landscape of the town, the revitalization initiatives continue to be frustrated by a bevy of factors. Further efforts are still needed in the field of linguistic ideology and augmenting awareness among speakers and locals. In the long term, such efforts could protect them from making the mistakes mentioned in the examples above. Often enough, the blame for these sorts of situations lies with printing companies, which make spelling errors at the design or copywriting stage, or simply lack the necessary characters – *â* has been known to cause particular trouble to graphic designers, because most commercially available typefaces do not carry it. When such a mistake appears in the linguistic landscape, it tends to be repeated by locals down the line, because few of them have access to verified sources or have the required knowledge to use the language correctly.

The picture of linguistic visibility, painted by the examples mentioned above, is also rather unclear. In most of these cases, Wymysorys is used as the second language, typed out in smaller script, using a less visible typeface. While there were indeed instances where it was Polish that was relegated to the background, most of them were the result of deliberate choices made by local organizations or academic circles involved with the revitalization effort.

The Wilamowice town authorities continue to hold much influence over the visibility of Wymysorys in public space. Keeping in mind the history of past persecution, additional efforts should be taken to reshape attitudes and language policies, in order to further help the town on its way to achieving full autonomy and self-determination in terms of controlling its own cultural heritage (Godlewska, 2014, pp. 162–163). Such an approach could help eliminate the negative influence of people living in nearby towns and villages, who might hamper the re-emergence of Wymysorys in the town's linguistic landscape.

Despite the shortcomings of all prior initiatives aimed at reintroducing Wymysorys into the local landscape, similar efforts should continue to be pursued, as each one yields considerable value. The very fact that these initiatives continue to emerge within a community whose language was banned and its speakers harassed, a community which keeps the memory of these events alive and to whom each gadget and each sign is a powerful statement. While primarily symbolic in character, seeing their once-suppressed language once again used in public space is very important for members of the local community, because it gives them a sense of being treated on equal footing with not just the Polish-speaking majority, but also with other, legally recognized minorities (Dołowy-Rybińska, 2013, p. 129).

The legal status of using Wymysorys in the cultural landscape

The lengthy battles to change the legislation pertaining to Wymysorys and the debates around its classification have not yielded any resolution as to its particular legal status in Poland. The past two decades have been rife with efforts rooted in a number of academic and everyday realms, all of which were intended to revitalize the language and force a shift in language policies. Despite prior endeavours, pursued locally by activists from community organizations, as well those undertaken by the Artes Liberales Faculty or the Centre for Engaged Research on Cultural Continuity, Wymysorys remains unrecognized as an official minority or regional language. It is not covered by the provisions of the 2005 National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Languages Act or the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which Poland ratified in 2009. Because the language lacks a clear legal status, its use in public space is restricted and so is its existence within the landscape. Apart from all the privileges a recognized, protected language enjoys, amending the aforementioned 2005 act would also bring much needed improvements in terms of the visibility of Wymysorys in the cultural landscape.¹⁷ Pursuant to Article 12 of the act, Wymysorys could in such a case appear next to Polish in official names of municipalities and physiographic objects, which would then allow the locals to legally use it on road and street signage. Although

¹⁷ Although the inclusion on the list of protected languages offers a bevy of opportunities, the move would not come without certain drawbacks. Recognizing only declarative usage of the language, without acknowledging its attendant ethnic identification, could possibly lead to statistical interferences and preclude speakers from enjoying the privileges carried by being included on the list.

the National and Ethnic Minorities Commission officially recommended the amendment of the 2005 act to the Marshal of the Sejm on 1 March 2018, the matter is still far from resolution. That, however, did not in any way dissuade activists and new Wymysorys speakers from undertaking ever new efforts to increase the presence of the language in their town.

Conclusion

The collaboration between the Wilamowice community and academic centres has recently resulted in a number of research trips and exchanges with other minorities struggling to preserve and increase the visibility of their languages. This, in turn, facilitated an exchange of ideas between respective activists and helped them devise and implement their own sets of good practices. The project called “Engaged humanities in Europe: Capacity building for participatory research in linguistic-cultural heritage” played a crucial part in the latter instance.¹⁸

Using Wymysorys for plaques, signage and monuments, or drawing on visual representations of traditional local garb is an important identity marker. Regardless of motivation – profit, ancestor veneration or pride in separateness – the undertaken efforts inexorably become an element of local language policies, which, in turn, can breed conflict. All the same, commitment to further endeavours continues to be of great importance to the people of Wilamowice. As the number of examples showcasing the Wymysorys language in the cultural landscape continues to grow, one can only hope that the tendency will hold true in the coming years. Despite a lack of historical traditions, institutional support, appropriate funding and an encouraging atmosphere, the accomplishments of the past decade have been many. For such a small community, every example, even the smallest one, remains very visible and fixes itself in its collective consciousness. Regardless of the correctness of the examples and the results they could yield, at this point the viability and vitality of Wymysorys is dependent primarily on new speakers and people whose ideological position flows from their sense of separate cultural identity. We must believe, therefore, that in the future both the law and decision-makers will continue to favour linguistic diversity in the landscape and will see it as an opportunity to reclaim the Wymysorys language.

Translated by Jan Szelągiewicz

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Rozwój i stan krajobrazu językowego – przypadek języka wilamowskiego

Język wilamowski, którym posługują się mieszkańcy Wilamowic (wym. *Wymysoü*), od początku XX wieku interesuje naukowców wielu dziedzin – nie tylko lingwistów i etnologów. Został on przywieziony przez osadników z Europy Zachodniej w XIII wieku na teren obecnych Wilamowic – małego miasteczka na Śląsku leżącego między Oświęcimiem a Bielskiem-Białą. Na skutek zakazu wydanego przez władze lokalne w 1945 roku używanie wilamowskiego było zabronione, a wszelkie publiczne przejawy odmiennej kultury ostro karane, w związku z czym liczba użytkowników wilamowskiego zaczęła drastycznie maleć. Zainteresowanie badaczy ostatnimi czasy wzbudza nie tylko kwestia dokumentacji tego mikrojęzyka o germańskich korzeniach czy stan etnolingwistyczny. Obserwacji podlegają również obecne efekty zaaplikowanych w ostatniej dekadzie procesów rewitalizacji językowej i zmiany

lokalnej, a także państwowej polityki językowej. Mimo braku instytucjonalnego wsparcia, społeczeństwo użytkowników oddolnie podejmuje inicjatywy, których efektem jest między innymi pojawianie się wilamowskiego w krajobrazie kulturowym. Ostatnie działania użytkowników języka świadczą o tym, że opuścił już kręgi lokalnych aktywistów i ponownie, po latach zakazu, funkcjonuje samodzielnie w społeczeństwie, ewoluując i przybierając nowe formy.

Słowa kluczowe:

krajobraz kulturowy; rewitalizacja językowa; krajobraz językowy; język wilamowski; Wilamowice; Wymysiöeryś

The development and current state of the linguistic landscape – the case of the Wymysorys language

Wymysorys is a micro-language with Germanic roots spoken by residents of Wilamowice, a small Silesian town situated between Oświęcim and Bielsko-Biała, where it was brought by settlers from Western Europe in the thirteenth century. It has been the subject of scholarly interest among specialists in a number of fields, not only linguistics and ethnology, since the early twentieth century. Following a ban issued by local authorities in 1945, the use of Wymysorys was prohibited and public manifestations of local culture were severely punished. This policy resulted in a drastic decline of the number of its users. The recent interest of researchers is focused not only on the documentation of Wymysorys or its sociolinguistic situation in the past and today, but also on the effects of its revitalization in the last decade. Despite the lack of institutional support, the users' community has been engaged in grass-roots initiatives leading to the emergence of Wymysorys in the cultural landscape. Recent activity of its users indicates that the language has already spread beyond the circles of local activists and, after years of persecution, functions again in society, evolving and taking new forms.

Keywords:

cultural landscape; language revitalization; linguistic landscape; Vilamovian language; Wilamowice; Wymysorys

Note:

This is a translation of the original article entitled "Rozwój i stan krajobrazu językowego – przypadek języka wilamowskiego", which was published in *Adeptus*, issue 14, 2019.

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