COGNITIVE STUDIES | ÉTUDES COGNITIVES, 25
Warsaw 2025

Article No.: 3496
DOI: 10.11649/cs.3496

Citation: Szatkowski, P. (2025). Between standard Polish and Masurian: The language of Masurian elders based on field research data. *Cognitive Studies | Études cognitives*, *2025*(25), Article 3496. https://doi.org/10.11649/cs.3496

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Between Standard Polish and Masurian: The Language of Masurian Elders Based on Field Research Data

Abstract

This study examines the linguistic characteristics of the oldest generation of Masurian speakers based on field research conducted between 2019 and 2023 in Masurian counties. Using a case study approach, the research focuses on the mixed linguistic code employed by elderly interlocutors whose speech most closely approximates the historical Masurian ethnolect. The study explores the sociolinguistic dynamics shaping the mixed code, including the interplay between Masurian, Standard Polish (SP), and German influences.

The analysis demonstrates that while the phonetic and syntactic structures of the interlocutors' speech exhibit significant Masurian traits, their lexicon is predominantly influenced by Standard Polish, with only a marginal presence of Germanisms. This contrasts with historical data from the mid-20th century, which indicated a higher prevalence of German lexical borrowings. The research highlights the role of sociopolitical changes, particularly post-war Polonisation efforts, in shaping the linguistic landscape of the region. School education, social integration pressures, and negative perceptions of German and Masurian linguistic elements contributed to the decline of the Masurian dialect and the emergence of individualised mixed codes.

The study also considers the typology of the mixed codes spoken by contemporary Masurians. Rather than a simple linear spectrum between Standard Polish and the Masurian ethnolect, the research suggests a triangular model incorporating direct post-war German influence as an independent variable. The analysis includes a case study of four elderly interlocutors from different parts of Masuria, detailing phonetic, morphological, and lexical features of their speech.

Keywords: Masurian dialect; code-mixing; linguistic shift; language contact; code-switching; sociolinguistics; Polish–German bilingualism

1 Introduction. Method and Premise of the Research

The purpose of this study is to present the findings of field research conducted in Masuria between 2019 and 2023, specifically within Masurian counties. The central premise of this article is to analyse data derived from selected semi-structured and unstructured interviews conducted over recent years with descendants of the pre-war Masurian population who reside, at least for a significant portion of the year, in Poland. The study explores the interviewees' beliefs, language practices, and narratives concerning Polish, the Masurian ethnolect (dialect, a contested *lect*), and German.

The data presented in this article form part of my unpublished PhD dissertation, which was successfully defended in 2023. The materials were collected from a diverse group of descendants, spanning different age groups. My field research conducted between 2019 and 2023 resulted in more than fifty interviews. For the sociolinguistic analysis of the conditions prevailing among the descendants of the pre-war indigenous Masurian population, I selected 48 interviews. The sample revealed an overrepresentation of women (28 women and 20 men). Also overrepresented were individuals over the age of 70 (23 participants, including several over 90), while those under 40 were underrepresented (5 participants). The difficulties in reaching younger interlocutors were primarily related to their lack of time, lack of interest, or lack of confidence

in the knowledge they possessed. The initial research framework was based on a series of semi-structured interviews supported by a questionnaire. However, in practice, the structured portion of the interviews frequently evolved into more fluid, narrative-driven conversations. Among the oldest participants, adhering strictly to the interview script proved particularly challenging. In cases where it became evident that a return to the semi-structured format was unfeasible, I prioritised obtaining key information while focusing on recording instances of code-mixing and code-switching.

All recorded interviews underwent transcription. In instances where mixed codes were used, or where elements of Polish or German dialects appeared, a semi-phonetic transcription system was employed. This approach was inspired by established scholarly conventions, such as those used in *Bajki Warmii i Mazur* (Koneczna & Pomianowska, 1956) and *Północno-polskie teksty gwarowe od Kaszub po Mazury* by K. Nitsch (1955). This analysis employs a case study approach, focusing on the mixed code. Mixed code can be understood in two ways:

1. the effect of code mixing understood by sociolinguists such as Bokamba: *the embedding of various linguistic units such as affixes (bound morphemes), words (unbound morphemes), phrases and clauses* (Bokamba, 1989, p. 278).
2. interpretation rooted in Polish dialectology, which refers to mixed code as *a variety that has emerged at the intersection of Standard Polish and its dialectal varieties* (Kurek, 2002, p. 75). H. Karaś (2010) refers to mixed code in this manner:

   The most common variety currently found in rural areas consists of mixed codes, that is, varieties of Polish that incorporate both standard Polish and dialectal elements. In the speech of various inhabitants, even within the same village, this mixture can be observed, manifesting in varying degrees of intensity regarding linguistic features typical of both standard Polish and the dialect. […] *Sometimes, it is nearly standard Polish with only slight traces of dialectal influence, for example, in pronunciation or vocabulary.* (own translation)

Both instances of a mixed code were used by several of the oldest interlocutors encountered during the aforementioned research. These individuals represent a group whose language, in my estimation, most closely approximates the historical Masurian ethnolect.

To ensure terminological clarity, it is necessary to define the term *ethnolect*, which I use interchangeably with *dialect* or *Masurian dialect*. This issue is elucidated by Franciszek Grucza in the third volume of his work. According to his conceptualisation, an *ethnolect* is "the polylect of any ethnic community". The term *polylect*, as defined by Grucza, refers to "the language of any community or human group". As he emphasizes, certain types of ethnolects can simultaneously function as both natiolects and dialects (Grucza, 2017, p. 89).

A crucial aspect of this definition, in my view, is its emphasis on the existence of a specific ethnic community characterised by a distinct linguistic variety, without making a definitive determination as to whether this community exists wholly or partially within the boundaries of a broader national entity or constitutes a completely separate group. The application of the term *ethnolect* in the Masurian context is a deliberate choice, intended not so much to assess the degree of distinctiveness of Masurian dialects in relation to Standard Polish, but rather to highlight the existence of a Masurian ethnic group exhibiting diverse national and identity-related orientations, which include a wide spectrum between Polish, Polish–Masurian, Masurian, German–Masurian and German identity (Sakson, 2017).

The primary objective of the PhD thesis was to explore the interlocutors' narratives regarding their personal and familial linguistic biographies, as well as to examine contemporary linguistic practices. However, the interviews with the elder interviewees revealed a significant portion of linguistic traits that will be listed and discussed in the paper.

2 Emergence and Decline of the Language Varieties of Masuria

Masurians, as a borderland community, found themselves at a linguistic and identity crossroads. Traditionally, they spoke territorial varieties of the Masurian dialect, which is part of the broader Masovian dialect

(Perzowa, 1987). The colonisation of Masuria by settlers from Mazovia spanned several centuries and progressed unevenly, with the earliest evidence of a more intense Mazovian presence in Masurian lands dating back to the early 14th century (Dubisz, 1978). Simultaneously, colonists from Germany and other regions arrived in these newly conquered lands following the Teutonic Knights' subjugation of the Prussians. Additionally, it has been hypothesised that a segment of the Baltic Prussian population participated in the recolonisation of these areas after the Teutonic conquest as part of the so-called internal colonisation. The Prussian language played a certain role in the settlement of the so-called *Große Wildnis* (Białuński, 2002, 2019; Biskup, 1991).

Despite the diverse origins of the region's inhabitants, the most commonly spoken linguistic code was the Masurian dialect, which existed in several varieties. Currently, two primary Masurian dialect groups are distinguished: the West Masurian dialect and the East Masurian dialect. Within the East Masurian dialect group, some scholars have also identified Central Masurian features (Ananieva, 2015; Dubisz, 1978; Nitsch, 1954). Additionally, the Ostróda dialect is considered a genetically distinct dialect, although its speakers have been, arguably, also recognised as part of the Masurian ethnos (Sembrzycki, 1889).

The development of the Masurian dialect, apart from its foundation in the Masovian base dialects, was significantly influenced by several factors, including Upper German, Low German, and Middle Polish, as well as early Modern Polish religious texts – particularly the language of Masurian hymnal books (Kancjonał) and editions of the Gdańsk Bible (Dubisz, 1978).

Masurian dialects began to decline in the second half of the 19th century in favor of the German language. However, the most intense phase of this language shift occurred primarily from the 1870s onward. The effects of events from that period – including the unification of Germany, the introduction of universal education in German, the expansion of railways, and broader technological and social developments – were delayed but became increasingly evident at the beginning of the 20th century.

Statistics from German administrative offices indicate a gradual abandonment of the Masurian–Polish language, which was classified either as Polish or as a distinct language, Masurian, depending on the context (Belzyt, 1996). During this period, a substantial number of German loanwords entered the dialect and gradually became an integral part of Masurian. The peak of German linguistic influence among the native population of Masuria coincided with the aftermath of World War II, when German ceased to function as the official language of administration and education, and when large-scale deportations to Germany, along with the incorporation of Masuria into Poland following the redrawing of borders, profoundly reshaped the region's linguistic landscape.

Pre-war residents who remained in Poland after the war often had to learn the Standard Polish language. In most cases, German was the primary language used at home, while Masurian functioned as the language of the older generation. This linguistic pattern was also reflected in the family linguistic biographies recounted by my interlocutors during the research.

After the war, elements of the German language were perceived negatively by the new inhabitants of the region, who primarily came from Masovia and the Eastern Borderlands. This perception is also evident in the material I analysed – the presence of lexical Germanisms (which I assess as the most consciously used linguistic elements) is surprisingly rare. I attribute this to the difficult experiences of the post-war years, which most of my interlocutors described. Based on both official and unofficial conversations with my interviewees, I estimate that approximately three-quarters of them experienced either physical or verbal violence related to their ethnic, linguistic, or religious background. At least one-third reported various forms of physical abuse, particularly during the period of the Polish People's Republic. These experiences, affecting not only the oldest generation, fostered an atmosphere of uncertainty, discrimination, and social resentment. Meanwhile, the proportion of inhabitants with Masurian roots steadily declined, which further reinforced the shift towards Standard Polish. As a result, the Masurian people increasingly found themselves living as a diaspora within their own homeland.

3 Instances of the Mixed Code of Masurian Elders: Interpretation of the Data and Discussion

In these specific conditions, highly individualised mixed codes emerged. However, it is worth noting that, despite their individuality, these codes also shared certain common features. In the next section of this paper, I will analyse the mixed code used by four interlocutors – three men (from the counties of Mrągowo, Ełk, and Szczytno) and one woman (from Szczytno County).

The first interlocutor was a man over seventy years old from Mrągowo County, residing in Giżycko County. He is designated with the reference MG-70, which should be interpreted as follows: a male resident of Giżycko County, aged 70–80.

In this interlocutor's speech, certain lexical, phonetic, and grammatical features of Masurian have been preserved with remarkable clarity – both in terms of frequency and quality – such that the local community perceives him as a Masurian-speaking person.

The language of the other interlocutors, particularly those born before 1970, also exhibited some characteristics of Masurian speech. Thus, it could already be classified as a mixed code, albeit one under the dominant influence of Standard Polish. However, only the interlocutors MG-70, ME-80 (a man over 80 years old from Ełk County), KS-90 (a woman from Szczytno County, over 90 years old), and MS-80 consistently used a mixed code that retained numerous features resembling the imagined original, *pure* Masurian dialect. Although Masurian cannot be identified as a creole variety, this parallels the concept of the *basilect* as the "purest", yet least prestigious, variety of a creole language (Stewart, 1965).

Notably, the speech of middle-generation respondents (understood as 40–60 years old), and even some of the older ones, does not fully conform to the basic definition of a mixed code due to the sporadic presence of linguistic elements indicating a Polish–German mixed code rather than a blend of a territorial Masurian variety with Standard Polish. These German features are unlikely to have been mediated through Masurian. For instance, the frequent pronunciation of [ʁ] or [ʀ], which was not documented by early researchers of Masurian, may instead represent a linguistic remnant of post-Masurian, German-speaking families.

Interviewee MG-70 was a retired farmer of average financial standing. He did not start a family. The recorded conversation lasted approximately 45 minutes. Initially, I spoke to the interlocutor in Masurian. However, after noticing that he used a mixed code rather than a *pure* Masurian variety, I instinctively began using a mixed code as well. Similarly, I intuitively engaged in code-switching between Standard Polish and a mixed Masurian–Polish code.

In the interlocutor's family home, both German and Masurian were spoken. His father, who was from the Giżycko County area, spoke Masurian, while his mother, a native of Szczytno County, was a German speaker.

According to the respondent, a variety of Polish more closely resembling the standard language – likely in the form of a mixed Polish–Masurian code – began to be used in his family around 1948. It is highly probable that the language shift progressed most rapidly among the youngest inhabitants of Masuria, strongly influenced by the newly established Polish-language education system. Other recorded conversations from the region seem to support this hypothesis. Respondents frequently pointed to school (where language change was enforced by the system) and the playground (where interaction with Polish-speaking peers facilitated spontaneous language acquisition) as the primary environments in which young indigenous inhabitants underwent Polonisation.

The process of language shift was not always peaceful. Some interviewees reported instances of verbal and physical violence perpetrated by teachers and classmates. In one extreme case, a school principal threatened to remove German-speaking children from their parents if they did not learn Polish. Under such conditions, the process of Polonisation proceeded rapidly. According to testimonies collected during the research, school-age children were typically the first in their families to undergo Polonisation and subsequently took on the role of teaching Polish to older family members.

The interlocutor grew up in a large family, with seven brothers and one sister. Although he did not discuss his siblings extensively in a linguistic context, he did mention that one of his brothers encountered

difficulties in the army due to speaking Masurian. However, he did not provide further details, as the conversation soon shifted to another topic. The interviewee's grandparents passed away early, so he has no recollection of them. Thus, it can be reasonably inferred that the elements of Masurian speech preserved in his language were transmitted primarily by his father.

At this point, it is also worth discussing a few key attitudes and beliefs expressed by the interlocutor:

1. Masurian shares characteristics with Standard Polish:
   To mozna powiedzieć, to człojek jek bedzie to miał ten, bendzie pszerabiał, to pujdzie[1] – the interlocutor explains that one can express an idea in Masurian by continually modifying Polish linguistic features into Masurian ones.
2. German requires practice to retain proficiency (suggesting it is an L2 for the interlocutor):
   A tylko po niemiecku ja chfile moment nie [mówię], i dziękuje. I wychodzi.[2]
3. The interlocutor values education, particularly foreign language learning. He taught German to his nephew's daughter:
   bo casami mówi, ta M. ot siostrzeńca dziewc·ina to mówi – wujek – nauc mnie po niemiecku. No ja juz jo tak nawet wzglendnie naucył, jek ona pojechała, jek to szybko na te szkolénie, bo to ona ma téch, seść zawoduf.
   […] *na alkohol – nie ma. To jus zero, to jus u mnie ferszlosen. Jak muwi: t·i chces sie ucyć, to tak. To ja tylko portmonetke otfiéram.*[3]

To illustrate the defining characteristics of the mixed Polish–Masurian code in the interlocutor's speech, I will analyse two extended excerpts from his speech, drawing upon the full transcribed text. It is important to note that these statements are often highly contextualised, making their interpretation difficult without reference to the entire conversation. However, for the purposes of analysing the mixed code, these excerpts provide highly valuable linguistic data.

(1) *Esce mozna powiedzieć, miała być, niał być, jek to… dwa miesiące pszed niało tu być te zawiązanie, to ja bokém. Nie, potprasał, pod-tégo, z jakiego powodu, z tégo powodu, ze ona, uóna, moja naże-cona to mozna pojedziéć i ciónikiem robiła i krow·i dojiła i ten taki… Jak taki, jeki robot. A mozna powiedzić, a ona, a ji siostra, to t·ilko butelka i ten. I ona powiedziała, one wiedziały, że ja troche pszy kasie stoje. To ona powiedziała: dla P. tszeba kupić meble. A ja tak sobie w duchu pomyślałäm, muwie, zeby b·i ona powiedziała, ze ona chce nowe meble, nie? A te stare oddać, to ja b·im renko machnoł, niech ma, to jest rodzina, ne? Ale jezeli dla niej nowe, specjalnie nowe, o nie, nie, nie. Jak na wódkie starc·i, to na meble tes musi starcyć. A jek by powiedziała te stare, no cemu nie – kup sobie. I tak mozna powiedzieć, ze jus wsz·istko było tak zawiązane, ze jus miał… więcy jak pewne było. A ja później tylko uciecko. W·imknoł sie i poszet! No to co, jak …. pszed zac·ina komb·inować, a po wszystkiém, to ten. To mozna powiedzieć byłem… t·i sobie rad·i nie das, a ja tak sobie w duchu pomyślałäm – t·ile co ja, to sobie rade dam. Mozna powiedzieć, ja, to jak to mówi – papierosy nie pale, nie pije, to mnie zawse…*[You could say… it was supposed to happen, how to put it… two months before, everything was supposed to be settled, and I just stepped aside. No, I didn't push it, not for any reason… well, the reason was that she – my fiancée, you could say – she worked with the tractor, she milked cows, and all that… like, all that kind of work. And, you could say, she and her sister, well, they only cared about the bottle, you know? And then she said – well, they knew I had a little money set aside. So she said: We need to buy furniture for P. [fiancée's sister]. And I thought to myself – if she had said she wanted new furniture, right? And that she wanted to give away the old [furniture], I wouldn't have cared, I'd have just waved my hand and said 'fine, let her have it, it's family', right? But if it was about buying brand new furniture just for her – oh no, no,

[1] You could say that if a person takes it [a phrase in Polish] and starts modifying it [into Masurian], it will work.

[2] But if I don't speak German for just a little while – and that's it. It disappears.

[3] Because sometimes, M., the nephew's daughter, she says, "Uncle, teach me German." Well, I actually taught her quite decently, before she went away to that training course. Because, you know, she has six different professions. […] For alcohol – there's no money from me. That's a strict zero, completely out of the question for me. But if she says, "I want to learn", then yes. In that case, I just open my wallet.

no. If there's money for vodka, then there's money for furniture too. If she had said she wanted the old [furniture], then sure – why not, go ahead and buy yourself some. So, you could say, everything was already arranged, everything was set, more than certain. And then, I just ran. I slipped away and left! Well, what else could I do… she started scheming, but by then, it was already done. You could say… You won't be able to manage by yourself. But I thought to myself – I can handle living by myself. I don't smoke, I don't drink, so I always [will manage]…]

(2) *Ale ten, po druge te co… mozna powiedzieć, ja wziołem i mozna powiedzieć niałém na tsz·i lata to niałém d-żewa tak. Bo ten, u leśnika… W domu robiłém, w noc·i, a u ludzi ted·i ciónikiem w dzień, zeby to dostać, ten grosz. No jek ja pojechoł do tego, to leśnik muwi, muwi: pszido te, muwi, co, muwi, do roku, areszt miel·i, to psz·iszli i mozna powiedziéć wzieli i béndo robić, a t·i t·ilko ab·i w·iwoź i, muwi, w domu zwal. To ja do tego klawisia poset i mi powiedział, muwi, weź daj mi dwa robotniki, zeb·i ten. A ja niałém galon w·ina. Na ciągniku stawił, … zamknąć klamkie. No i ten… oni pszyszli robić, ale tak wolno robio, ja muwie, no to weźniem troche napijem, troche dam napić i zara bédzie robota lepiéj sła. No to nic, tylko raz – poszła. I robota szła. I ten, zawse jednemu, to mozna powiedzieć, będzie zara szt·iwn·i i zara będzie opiernic. To ja móje do sziefa, zasetem, móje, mózie, – mogie zmienić te robotniki? Bo, jak to muwie, szkoda tych' robotnikuf, to muwi drugie dwa niech bédó. Tak, ale, móji, majó scéże pracować, a ja tylko tak: wlas ja na pole i ón·i zwalali, a ten, ja tylko naloł po szklance i… a on·i pomiędzy sobo jus nieli, kontakt tsz·imali, co tedy… ale to sie zmieniali, nie?* [But then, another thing… You could say, I got some, you could say, I had wood for three years, yeah. Because, you see, with the forester… I worked at home at night, and during the day, I worked with the tractor for people, just to make a little money. So when I went to see the forester, he said – he said, 'You know, they got a sentence less than a year, so they came and I took them, and they'll be working now. And you, all you need to do is haul the wood away and unload it at home. So I went to the prison guard, and I told him, 'get me two workers for this'. And I had a gallon of wine. I put it on the tractor and locked the latch. And well… the workers showed up, but they were working so slowly. So I said, let's have a little drink, I'll pour them a bit, and the work will go better. So, nothing else, just once – down it went. And the work got moving. And you could say, they were getting tired, and soon enough, they were going to get a real scolding. So I told the boss – I said, Can I switch these workers? Because, you know, it would've been a waste of them, and the boss said, Alright, let's get two others instead. But he said, They have to work properly. So I just went out to the field, and they kept unloading, and I… well, I just poured them each a glass, and then among themselves, they kept their… let's say, their understanding going. But, well, they kept switching out, you know?]

Based on the above excerpts, as well as the full transcription, the following characteristics of the interlocutor's mixed code can be reconstructed:

- Masuration (Mazurzenie): This occurs frequently, often systematically and regularly (*jus*, *zycie*, *pszyset*, Standard Polish forms: *już*, *życie*, *przyszedł*). However, occasional exceptions or variations are present (*wszystko*, *sybko*/*szibko*), as well as instances of *r'* undergoing Masuration (*psyset*, *patsał*; SP: *przyszedł*, *patrzył*). The pronunciation of *rz* lacks fricativeness. Additionally, *sz* is sometimes pronounced as *ś* or as an intermediate form between *sz* and *ś* (similar to *sziakanie*), as seen in *klawisia*, *śkoła*, *do sziefa*.
- Asynchronous pronunciation: The shifts of *mi* → *ni* and *wi* → *zi*/*ji* appear sporadically (*niał*, *niałém*, *po nieniecku* (one occurrence), *móji*, *mózie*, *pojedziéć*; SP: *miał*, *po niemiecku*, *mówi*, *mówię*, *powiedzieć*). However, no instances of asynchronous pronunciation leading to *bi* → *bzi*, *fi* → *fsi*/*si*, *pi* → *psi* were observed.
- Rare depalatalisation of *ś*, *ź*, *ć*, *dź*: Examples include *wziół*/*wziół*, *w sz'rodku*, *szwist*, *sz·istkie*.
- Jotation and labialisation: Jotation appears occasionally (*doji*), and labialisation is also present, particularly in the pronouns *on* and *ona*.
- Irregular occurrence of continuants of Old Polish *ā* as *å* or *o*: Examples include *uratowål*, *wdostål sie*, *pojechoł*, *naloł*.
- Initial *ja-* and *ra-* developments: The shift *ja-* → *je-* occurs frequently (*jek*), but no examples of *ra-* → *re-* were noted.

- Frequent replacement of *-ył*/*-ił* with *-uł*: Examples include *buł*, *otworzuł*, *odchiluł*, *położuł*.
- Denasalisation of final nasal vowel *ą* to *o*, *ó*, *u*: Examples include *majó*, *załujó*, *pszidó*, *pujdo*, *pomogo*.
- Minimal presence of lexical Germanisms beyond those known in Standard Polish: Even the highly recognizable *jo* (*yes*) was not observed. The number of non-standard Polish words is also low, though some were noted: *wdostać się* (Standard Pol. *dostać się*), *zrzebuwka* (SP: źrebna klacz).
- Frequent occurrence of é [e]: Examples include *pszeszwetlénie*, *niałém*, *siostszéniec*, *tégo*, *dobrégo*, *nowégo*, *bokém*.
- Occasional realisation of *ó* as *[o]*.
- Frequent pronunciation of *y* as *i*.
- Occasional unification of the inflectional genitive plural ending *-ów*: Examples include *pscołów*, *linijków*.
- Some instances of *-kę* → *-kie* and *-kie* → *-ke*: Examples include *poduskie*, *wudkie*, *renkie*, but *bokém*.
- Mobility of the verbal ending *-em* with occasional devoicing of the preceding consonant: Examples include *poset-em*, *zjat-em*.
- Characteristic accusative forms without the *masculine-personal* category: Example: *te robotniki*.

All the above-mentioned features, despite their irregular and sometimes even sporadic occurrence, generally correspond to local or regional characteristics of the Masurian dialect. However, there are also noticeable influences of the German language in both the phonetic and grammatical domains:

a) Soft pronunciation of final *-ch*, [x] → [x’]: *dojn·ich’*, *nich’*.
b) Certain constructions influenced by German syntax, such as *trzymać kontakt* (‘to keep in touch’) with the verb *trzymać* (‘to hold’), a structural borrowing from German *Kontakt halten* or *ot siostrzeńca dziewc·ina* where the additional element *ot* may be the grammatical borrowing from German *von*.

Based on the linguistic phenomena listed above, as well as the information provided by the interlocutor (thus analysing not only the linguistic layer but also the content of the conversation), the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The informant has retained a significant number of key phonetic features of Masurian.
- Although mazuration is consistently present, other features appear either unstable or atrophic. Particularly striking is the small number of typically Masurian asynchronous pronunciations.
- There has been a shift in lexical characteristics – the interlocutor does not use Germanisms, and Masurisms are rare. This suggests that vocabulary is the most consciously controlled aspect of language, making it more susceptible to self-regulation. The convergence of the lexicon with Standard Polish may be a result of the need for linguistic assimilation. Indirect evidence for this is the informant’s mention of his brother, who experienced discrimination in the army due to his use of Masurian.

The avoidance of both Germanisms and Masurisms may be motivated not only by the need for communicative clarity (as most inhabitants of the region do not speak Masurian, and German is primarily taught as a foreign language in schools) but also by the desire to blend in with the local community as much as possible.

It is also worth considering the possibility that the specific shape of this mixed code was not solely the result of the interlocutor’s conscious linguistic choices but rather a legacy inherited from his father in the form of systemic linguistic features. In this case, the interlocutor’s father would be the *creator* of a *familiolect* – a mixed code that gradually evolved to resemble Standard Polish:

- The mixed code used by the interlocutor exhibits a predominantly Masurian phonetic structure, a partially Masurian grammatical and syntactic structure, and a primarily Standard Polish lexical composition.
- Occasional phonetic and syntactic German influences, which are atypical for the Masurian ethnolect, suggest that the informant is trilingual. This linguistic situation cannot be understood simply as a linear spectrum from Standard Polish to a *pure* dialect, within which one could attempt to position the interlocutor’s speech. Instead, when analysing the language of contemporary Masurians, it is often necessary to adopt a triangular model, representing a spectrum of mixed codes situated between Standard Polish, the Masurian ethnolect, and the German language which has been used in parallel.

In conclusion, the interlocutor's mixed code exhibits a relatively strong influence of the Masurian dialect. The most unexpected aspect of this analysis is the omitting of loanwords from German (though not calques or grammatical structures, which can be less intuitive in the process of adjusting one's language practices in an attempt to hide one's origin), despite their wide presence in the Masurian community in the pre-war and post-war period.

In contrast, it should be noted that based on field research conducted in Warmia and Masuria (including Ostróda) primarily in the 1950s, the occurrence of Germanic lexical units was estimated at approximately 10%, while the overall share of German loanwords in speech was around 4% (Perzowa, 1987). The influence of the German language on the vocabulary of Warmian and Masurian speakers was particularly pronounced in domains related to technological progress. For example, approximately 40% of vocabulary related to construction and woodworking was of German origin (Siatkowski, 1958).

K. Sobolewska has drawn attention to the ideological marginalisation of German influence on the languages of the region, demonstrating that, contrary to earlier scholarly opinions, German influences were neither isolated nor marginal but often encompassed vocabulary essential for everyday communication (Sobolewska, 2014). A relatively high frequency of Germanisms is also confirmed by Dorota Rembiszewska's research on Georg Wenker's 19th-century linguistic surveys (Rembiszewska, 2015). Additionally, literary attempts to recreate the old Masurian language, as remembered from childhood, by native speakers such as Günter Donder and Dietmar Serafin also exhibit a high saturation of Germanisms, particularly nouns, though to a lesser extent verbs and adjectives (Donder, 2011; Serafin, 2023).

The marginalised presence of lexical Germanisms (but not necessarily the grammatical structures) in the mixed code of the oldest Masurians should, therefore, be understood as an adaptation to the prevailing linguistic norm and an effort to prevent negative reception or misunderstandings among listeners – most of whom are regional inhabitants without Masurian roots.

It is necessary to consider the mixed codes of Masurian speakers not only within a spectrum of linguistic features shifting between Standard Polish and Masurian. A third, equally significant factor must be accounted for – borrowings directly from German as one of the home languages. This situation differs from the typical linguistic influence of German penetrating mixed codes through local lects (subdialects, dialects, or borderland ethnolects of uncertain classification). Instead, German influence appears here as an independent, third linguistic component, absent (or only minimally present) in the original form of local speech.

The second interlocutor is a man in his 80s, originally from Ełk County and still residing there. Like the first interviewee from Giżycko County, he is a farmer. Although he possesses knowledge of the local Masurian lexicon, he uses it only sporadically – his speech primarily retains phonetic features of Masurian. I have selected several excerpts from the recorded interview to illustrate the scale of the phenomena under discussion:

(3) *F czterdziestym cwårtym f [miejscowość] to t·iko zostało tszech Niemcuf. Starse takie, jus dziåtki zostali.* […] *Piers·i råz, rozumie, to chiba jakoś f październiku cy listopådzie… Jagoda wyjechała tu stónd, tam na zåchut. To potem jekoś pszed Bozem Narodzeniem chiba to sie wrócili jesce, ta brigåda, bo mieli młocić zboze dla wojska, na chléb. A w sticniu to wszistko musiało stont wyrajzuować, bo chto nie wyjedzie, to znów miał być rozstszelany. A tam nie bardzo była i prawda* [In forty-four, in [place name], there were only three Germans left. The older ones, just the elderly remained. […] The first time, you see, was probably sometime in October or November… Jagoda left from here, headed west. And then, sometime before Christmas, I think, that brigade returned because they had to thresh grain for the army, for bread. And in January, everyone had to leave from here – because if someone didn't, they were going to be shot. And well, there wasn't much truth in that.]

(4) *Ja nierås jak jesce-m motoc·iklem jeździył, to patsuł, gdzie my tu jechali, a ja nigd·i nie mok tego trafić. Bo pamientał, ze my dzieś tydzień casu, to dzieś w jekiściem tam małem dómku tam otpocywali, ale gdzie, to nie wiem. Ja sukał tego miejsca i nie znalas* [Sometimes, back when I rode

a motorcycle, I would look around, trying to figure out where exactly we had traveled before. But I could never find the place. I remember that we had stayed somewhere for about a week, resting in some small house. But where exactly? I don't know. I searched for that place, but I never found it.]

(5) *Jesce tak w latach siedemdziesióntech, do osiemdziesiontégo jus potem nawet* […] *to strasznie sie opłacało koniec·ine* […], *pierws·i pokos, to tseba było kosić jus tak wcześniej, w maju, a drugi pokos to b·ił… to zalezało, jak było suchsie lato, dobre… to ona wtencas miała duzo nåsion, tech łepkóf… i te łepki to sie kosiło kosiarko, na gårste sie kosiło* [Even back in the seventies, maybe even into the eighties […] growing clover was really profitable. […] The first mowing had to be done quite early, in May, and the second mowing – it all depended on how dry the summer was, whether it was a good one. If it was, then the clover produced a lot of seeds, those little heads… and those heads had to be cut with a mower, gathered in bundles.]

(6) *I b·ili te kałamåże te, stojeli, to wszio b·iło jesce* [And those inkwells, they were still there, standing, everything was still there.]

Considering the language of this interlocutor from a phonetic perspective, the most characteristic phenomena include:

– Quite frequent mazuration.
– Pronunciation of *y* as *i*.
– Retention of *å* (other examples from the interview transcript: *pietnåście*, *siåć*).
– Occurrence of *ó* and *é*, particularly in the articulation of *ą* or *ę*, or before nasal consonants (e.g., *stróna*, *stónt*, *osiemdziesiontégo*).
– Pronunciation of the continuant of *ō* as *o* (*mok*, *młocić*, *Niemcof*).

Additionally, occasional instances of the following phonetic features were recorded:

– Initial *ja-* → *je-* (*w jekiściem mieście*).
– *-kt-* → *-cht-* (*w chturiściem miejscu*, *chto*).
– Broadened and prejotised pronunciation such as (*jech – ich*).
– Isolated cases of East Masurian pronunciation of palatalised *ch* before *e* (*suchie*).
– Locative and instrumental extended articulation with *-em* ending (*w jednem kierunku*, *w jekiściem mieście*, *w chturiściem miejscu*, *Bozem Narodzeniem*).
– Past tense analytic forms, e.g., *ja nie mok*, *ja sukał*, *nie znalas*, *my otpocywali*.

The free speech lexicon was generally consistent with Standard Polish, though some words from the Masurian lexical repertoire appeared, such as:

– *wyrajzować* ('to leave', from German *verreisen*; SP: *wyjechać*).
– *zgrzempa* ('steep roadside', SP *skarpa*).
– *szandarmeria* ('gendarmerie', cf. Masurian *szandar*).

The third interlocutor, whose speech I classified as an example of a mixed code with a significant Masurian component, is a speaker from Szczytno County, over 80 years old, also living in a rural area. Below are selected excerpts from the interview:

(7) *A po niemiecku f szkole. Matka jest z domu, od* […]. *No i jak plebiscyt akurat co b·ił, pszez te kilka tamoj casu, to…* […] *to podcas pleb·isc·itu w* […] *była szkoła. No ale do szkoł·i kto poset? Dziadek głosował za Polsko, miał pszejść do Polski. Akurat cięsko zachorował na zapalenie płuc i nie muk jechać, później jakoś tak było, że granica była zamknięta i nie mozna było przedostać sie. I matka nasa powiadała, ze kilka razy prz·iśli, to jém okna potłukli i bałaganu narobili i puźniej w skole był bałagan i tak dalej…* [They taught in German at school. My mother's family was from (surname and a place near Wielbark). And when the plebiscite happened, during that time… […] well, during the plebiscite in (place name), there was a school. But who actually went to school then? My grandfather

voted for Poland, he was supposed to move to Poland. But then he got seriously ill with pneumonia and couldn't go. Later, somehow, the border was closed, and it was no longer possible to cross. And my mother used to say that a few times, people came over, smashed their windows, made a mess, and later, there was chaos at the school as well, and so on…]

(8) *I terå weśm·i tu Nidzica, to tés całkem inne ludzie byli. Tu byli s pocontku te, nié? Od Wielbarga jus tam do Nidzic·i to wsio je ewangelik.* [And then, take Nidzica for example – those were completely different people. At first, you see, from Wielbark all the way to Nidzica, everyone there was Lutheran.]

(9) *No na psz·ikład posłem do sklepu i chciałem kupić ł·iske wazuwke, nie? Ale przecies kied·iś na ł·iske, na wazuwke, jak po niemiecku muwili? Nie pamiętam* […]*, ale m·i to muwilim „siepka", nie? Siepka. No i poszłem do tego sklepu i na niego muwie, że chciałem siepke kupchić. A co to jest „siepka"?* [So, for example, I went to the store because I wanted to buy a ladle, right? But back in the day, what did they call a ladle in German? I don't remember […], but we used to call it siepka, right? Siepka [a Masurian word derived from German *Schöpflöffel*]. So I went to the store and told the shopkeeper that I wanted to buy a siepka. And he looked at me and said, What is a "siepka"?]

(10) *Ja jak byłem w szkole, bo w szkole rolnic·i to byłem as w t·im,* […]*, to jak b·iłem w szkole rolnic·i, a tam przysłem pierse dni, to zawse chłopaki muwili: „ej, a co t·i tak gadas?" A ja muwie: „a ja wiem, co t·i gådas?"* [When I was in school – because I went to an agricultural school, you know, in (region name) – well, when I first got there, in the first few days, the other boys would always say, "Hey, why do you talk like that?" And I'd reply, "Well, why do you talk like that?"]

(11) *A ony piekły ciasta, te makowce, mónkuch'en, ji marmoladenkuchen takie, nie? b·ili… I tak'e ruzne piénkne ciasta.* […] *No ji te kuch·i zostawili mi, to wies, kazdégo, ekem tak ukrojuł, se kawałek zjåt, to dopieru-m popatszyuł, że uu nas ciasta piekó kobit·i, ale te ślachción·i!* [And they baked cakes – those poppy seed cakes, Mohnkuchen, and Marmeladenkuchen, you know? They made all kinds of beautiful cakes. […] And they left those cakes for me, you see. So, I took a knife, cut myself a piece, ate it, and only then did I realize – our women baked cakes too, but the *szlachciony* ladies [informal, somehow ironic term for people from around Ciechanów in Masovia; derived from *szlachta* – the noblemen, as opposed to the Masurians and Kurpians who were mainly of peasant origin]… well, theirs were something else!]

His idiolect, similar to that of the previous speaker, exhibits numerous Masurian features, including:

- The presence of *å* (*ziemniaki*, *świniaka*, *dziadek*, *båpka*, *chodzenia*).
- Pronunciation of *y* similar to *i*.
- Frequent mazuration.
- Replacement of *-ył*/*-ił* with *-uł* in first-person singular past-tense verbs (*buł*).

Unique features (based on the whole material) in the speech of interlocutor [MS-80], not observed in other speakers' speech:

- Accusative ending *-o* (*kuchnio* – 'kitchen', acc. sg.; SP *kuchnię*).
- Instances of prejotation and contraction of *-ej* to *-i*.
- Occasional prelabialisation of *o* and *u*.
- Occasional pronunciation of Polish *ę* as *ën*.

The interlocutor's language shows traces of code-switching, particularly from Polish–Masurian to German when searching for the appropriate word, as well as a limited presence of Masurian lexical items (*siepka*, cf. German Schöpflöffel, SP *chochla*, *łyżka wazowa*; *zasancować się* – 'to stay in trenches', SP *okopać się*; the iterative Masurian verb *piekać* for 'to bake'; *tlo* – 'only', SP *tylko*; *kuch* – 'cake', SP *ciasto*).

The fourth interlocutor The last set of examples also comes from Szczytno County and concerns the fourth interlocutor – a woman in her nineties – who was able to fluently code-switch between German (with strong East Prussian phonetics) and mixed Polish–Masurian.

(12) *To Trauta umerła, jo? Tam nich't ne mneska, ne?* […] *To wiencej óna mnała? Ba no jo… prziset cas i zmarła.* […] *To gdzie mnieskalisz'cie dotónt?* […] *Óna tez mnieskała w Sc·itne?* […] *I obzie ne z·ijó? Ba no śkoda.* [So, Trauta passed away, right? There's no one left there anymore, is there? […] So she lived there for a long time? Well, yes… time passed, and she died. […] Where did you all live until then? […] Did she also live in Szczytno? […] And there's no one left there now? Well, that's a shame.]

(13) *Po mazursku? Ale nemnecko, jo, cy nie? Polnisch? Po polsku? No po polsku to my po mazursku gadalim. No chiba.* […] *Po polsku gadal·im. My tu wszisc·i po polsku gadam·i. I Polaki, jek tu zasziedl·i, to po polsku, nó ji m·i sie prz·izwicajili, u nas w domu tata to tyz i mama po polsku gadali.* […] *Pamnentam.* [In Masurian? But also in German, right? Polish? In Polish? Well, speaking in Polish meant we spoke in Masurian. I think so. […] We spoke Polish. All of us here speak Polish. And when the Poles moved in, they spoke Polish too, so we got used to it. At home, my father and mother also spoke Polish. […] I remember.]

(14) *Po niemnecku gadalim, tés i po polsku, i jek sie da. Po mazursku to jest i po polsku. To samo. Wiency po polsku gadalim, mnie szie zdaje. Rodzice moje* [We spoke German, and Polish too, and however we could speak. Speaking Masurian is the same as speaking Polish. It's all the same. So we spoke more Polish, I think. That's what my parents did.]

(15) *F szkole né, dojcz.* […] *Duzo po polsku muwili rodzice, jo.* [At school? No, it was German. […] But at home, my parents spoke a lot of Polish, yeah.]

(16) *Wejnachten? No to b·ili świénta, to jus szie kupsiło czastuf, albo jek mojä mama to pchjekła ciasta, ji ja jim tam pomagała, ji tés pszijezdzali z rodzin·i.* […] *Ale tam tam teras esce, esce ot K'ét·i jes, su, dzieci pewno, né, dzieci n·i mnała, ale krewne, i znajume, to ón·i tam mieskajó.* [Christmas? Well, when the holidays came, we would buy some treats, or my mother would bake cakes, and I would help her, and the family would come over. […] But now, over there, some of the relatives from Kętrzyn are still around. She didn't have children, no, but her relatives and acquaintances – they still live there.]

(17) *Nó, mnelim gospodarke ji ojca Ruski zabzili. Tutaj był, w […] taki sołtys, on buł, c·i co, i nał taki dzwón i chodziuł bez [wieś] i dzwónuł: „Ludzie, uciekajcie do Némnec albo gdzie chcecie, bo Rusek jus jest na granic·i. Nó ji ón·i zaprzengli kón'e, mój ojciec i te najlepse rzec·i… Ja nałam sztér·ich braci.* [Yes, we had a farm, but the Russians took my father away. There was a village headman here in [place name], the kind of guy who had a bell, and he would walk around the village ringing it, saying: "People, run away to Germany or wherever you want, because the Russians are already at the border." So they hitched up the horses – my father and the rest – grabbed the most valuable things… I had four brothers.]

(18) *Jedén najmłods·i buł Pouul, to nał osiemnaście lat i pszisetlist ot stars·ich wojskowych, ze natichnast do Rośji, do wojska. I ted·i ojciec mu otpisał, ze ón ma gospodark'e, n'e puści brata, s·ina do wojska, ale… to pana weź'ném. I tak, ze ojciec sie pszebrał w te ubrane i poset do tyigo wojska. Ale i tén Poul poset. I ten Poul pod Moskwuo g'esz'prenkt i nic z nyigo ne b·iło.* [The youngest one was Paul. He was eighteen years old when he received a letter from the military command, saying he had to go to Russia, to the army. And then, my father wrote back, saying that he had a farm and wouldn't send his son to the army. But… in the end, they took him anyway. So my father disguised himself in Paul's clothes and went to the army instead. But Paul still ended up going too. And then Paul – near Moscow – was blown up, and that was the end of him.]

(19) *No ch·iba jo. Jek w nas·i sz'kole to tak. F* […] *méskało tes duzo éwangelikuf, alé wsz·isc·i chodzilim do t·i sz'koł·i, co stała. Ale przijezdzał casym ksiunc, ja pamnentam i religijó nas ucyuł ksiunc* […] *katolicki.* […] *Ale w kosz'ciele to ch·iba, ja né wiym, c·i to b·iło po nemnecku, te ksiendza*

odprawiali, Deutsch bul·i, ja, beszt·imt! [Yeah, I think so. In our school, that's how it was. In [place name], there were a lot of Lutherans living there too, but we all went to the same school, the one that was there. Sometimes a priest would come – I remember that – and he would teach us religion. A Catholic priest. […] But in church, I think… I don't know if the services were in German, but the priests spoke German. Deutsch, definitely!]

The last three fragments illustrate frequent instances of code-switching and mixing between the Polish–Masurian mixed code and German, with notable traces of the characteristic East Prussian pronunciation patterns in German, such as [aɪ] → [eɪ] or [ē].

(20) *Jo! I po polsku, i deutsch. Der war nicht Polizei /ēi/, aber Polizei /ēi/ hat gestraft, wenn… wir sollen deutsch sprechen.* [Yeah! We spoke both Polish and German. Der war nicht Polizei, but Polizei hat gestraft [There were not many police officers, but the police issued fines when [Polish was spoken]… we were supposed to speak German.]

(21) *Bo te Ruski t·im nas·im, gdzie m·im stojel·i, do domu, co nelim jechać* […]*, bo te Ruski wsz·isc·i t·im, tó samó drogó szli, co m·im stojeli. Jek prz·ijechali do nas, o matko jed·ina! Zaras t·isz, ale ojciec w stare ubrana sie ubrał, w takie ciymne, ale pewno na dole mnał cósz' nemneckie, albo co, bo mózili: t·iś jest N'emn'ec, i „idi suda".* […] *wieder… wieder, ojca ji prz·iprowadzili do takiego wundołka ji tot geschossen. Ja! Und unsere Pferde zwei /cwē/, dann hatten wir zwei /ei/ Pferd'e g'espannt, denn… sablamji odcinali, wiés, te… pusor·i ot kónuf* [Because the Russians – when they got to our place, where we were standing, to the house where we were staying […] well, the Russians all took the same road that we had been standing by. When they arrived at our place – oh dear God! Total silence. But my father put on old clothes, dark ones, but maybe underneath he had something German, or whatever, because they said: "You're a German – come here!" And then… again, again… they took my father into some kind of trench, and that was it. They shot him. Yeah! And our two horses – first, we had two horses harnessed, but then… they started cutting off the horse harness with sabres…]

(22) *und die hatten ein /ejn/ Russe zu arbeit /ei/, weisst? /ei/. Denn hamn (haben) sie den Russen erschossen. To iś t·i Rusek, służuł u N'emcóf? Pach! Ihn tot.* [And they had a Russian working for them, you know? And then… they [the Russians] shot him. "So, you were serving the Germans?" Bang! Dead.]

The non-German-language fragments of her speech were characterised by a high saturation of Masurian pronunciation features, including those found specifically in the Szczytno district, such as the depalatalisation of *ń*. Masuration appeared as a systemic trait, alongside the pronunciation of *y* as *i* and the depalatalisation of *ń*, which was either complete (*n*) or partial (*n'*). Additionally, depalatalisation of *ń* resulting from the asynchronous Masurian pronunciation of *m'* was observed, with realisations such as *mnała*, *mneska*.

Other medium-intensity phenomena included the shifts *ra* → *re*, *ja* → *je*, *cht* → *kt*, variously articulated *é* and numerous instances of *ó*, including in word-final positions. Also present was the contraction of *-ej* into *-y*/*-i*. Less frequently, prelabialisation of *o* occurred, along with Masurian asynchronous sequences such as *psi*, *bzi*, *zi* (*obzie*, *muzili*; SP: *obie*, *mówili*), prejotations, and influences from German phonetics, including palatalised *ch* (*nich't* – 'nobody', SP: *nikt*), partial depalatalisation of *ś*, *ć*, and the pronunciation of Standard Polish *ł* as a bilabial *v*. Numerous features of dialectal morphology have also been preserved.

4 Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the complexity and fluidity of the linguistic landscape among the oldest generation of Masurian speakers. The evidence presented suggests that while phonetic and syntactic elements of the Masurian dialect remain embedded in the speech of elderly interlocutors, their lexical choices are increasingly influenced by Standard Polish. This trend reflects the broader sociopolitical transformations that have shaped Masurian linguistic practices over the past century, particularly the impact of post-war Polonisation efforts, social integration pressures, and shifting identity constructs.

A particularly striking result of this research is the marginalisation of lexical Germanisms in the speech of the interviewees. Although historical data indicate that German lexical elements were once a prominent feature of Masurian, contemporary speakers appear to have consciously or unconsciously adapted their speech to align with dominant linguistic norms. However, the case study of mixed codes' phonetics and structures among Masurian elders further reveals that the language shift in Masuria should not be conceptualised as a simple linear shift between Masurian and Standard Polish. Instead, a triangular model is more appropriate – one that incorporates the lingering yet often hidden influence of German as an independent post-war factor.

A mixed code with a strong influence of Masurian features has now become rare. This underscores the need for further field research aimed at documenting and analysing the remnants of Masurian dialects, as well as investigating the local mixed code. Additionally, such research should seek to identify specific sociolinguistic factors contributing to linguistic phenomena, such as the speech of the oldest generation of the native Masurian population, as discussed in this study.

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Acknowledgment

This work was supported by a grant from the National Science Centre, Poland: "Masurians – the disappearing testimony of the linguistic past of the Polish-German borderland: The contemporary language practices of descendants of the native population of Masuria", Project No. 2020/37/N/HS2/01699 (Preludium 19).

This publication was prepared using the CLARIN-PL research infrastructure (http://clarin-pl.eu).

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland

Publishing history: Received 2024-08-01; Accepted 2025-07-26; Published 2025-12-31.