

**Magdalena Bartoszek**

ORCID: 0009-0006-3977-6529

## **POLISH LANGUAGE IN LITHUANIA: LANGUAGE CULTIVATION NOWADAYS**

Although Poland and Lithuania were geographically separated during the third partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1795, some regions of the current small Baltic country were incorporated into Polish territory after World War I in 1918. When both countries declared their independence, conflicts arose over defining their borders due to significant Polish and Lithuanian populations residing in regions claimed by both nations. One of the most challenging discussions was the division of the Vilnius Region, which was strongly influenced by Polish culture and tradition. In 1923, the territory was identified as part of Poland until the end of World War II, when the city of Vilnius was claimed and officially recognized as the capital city of Lithuania. However, the country came under Soviet Union rule, subjecting the population, including the Polish minority, to challenges and changes imposed by the Soviet regime. The Eastern influences have left a significant imprint on Lithuanian traditions and language (Namiotko, Konaszewski, 2017, 75).

Due to the long and complicated history of the country, Lithuania is a region of many nationalities and languages. In 2023, 83.6% of residents claimed Lithuanian nationality, while 6.4% identified as Polish, 5.1% as Russian, 1.7% as Belarusian, and 1.6% as Ukrainian. Additionally, 1% belonged to other nationalities. When it comes to the Polish minority, their highest concentration is observed in the Vilnius Region. In 2021 in the capital itself, about 17% of the population claimed Polish nationality, making it the second largest nationality group in Vilnius, following Lithuanian (European Commission, 2024). What is noteworthy is that the minority population are not immigrants; these are people who originate from the region, whose families have been living there for generations. Hence, they place significant emphasis on preserving their culture, traditions, and language.

Languages naturally evolve every day. Unfortunately, the changes that occur in the Polish language in Poland on a daily basis do not reach the Polish language in Lithuania, also known as 'simple speech'. When Lithuania was annexed by the Soviet Union, a strong emphasis was placed on the Russian language for the inhabitants. While Lithuania was reportedly the only country in the Soviet Union that still provided education in Polish for the minority, many children attended Russian schools for their education and only used their national language at home. As a result, despite a large percentage of Polish people in Lithuania using the language on a daily basis, their ability to read and write in Polish is incredibly poor. Most Polish people in Lithuania are trilingual, proficient in Lithuanian as the official language, as well as Polish and Russian. Additionally, young people are learning English at school. Such variety of languages present in the daily lives of the Polish minority in Lithuania influences the colloquial language they use. In common speech they perform an unconscious tendency to construct sentences that include words from each language. Due to the shared linguistic origins of Polish and Russian, individuals often experience interference between these languages. In Poland the common misconception claims that Polish people in Borderlands speak in Russian. Phonetically, they labialize the vowel 'o' and reduce letter 'e' into 'i', which are characteristics commonly known in Russian language (Geben, 2019, 27). Since the Polish language there does not evolve at the same rate, they still utilize archaisms such as '*stecka*', which in modern Polish is *ścieżka* (eng. a path). Moreover, the common use of the perfect adverbial participles such as *zjadłszy*, *poszedłszy*, *zobaczywszy* occurs while in modern Polish they are correct but not utilized as frequently. As mentioned, Polish minority in Lithuania in their 'simple speech' present the tendency for issues with differentiating Polish and Russian languages, leading to loaning words from Russian language, Polonizing them and adding to their Polish dictionary, such as word *maszyna* (from Russian *машина* – 'a car') or commonly used phrase *mnie nadojadło* (from Russian *мне надоело* – 'I am tired of this'). Additionally, the structure of sentences is also different, similar to Russian, where the subject always appears in the sentence. Moreover, differences can also be observed in the language etiquette used in the Borderlands. While official Polish language uses the formal addresses *pan*, *pani*, and *państwo*, in simple speech it is common to use the polite form '*wy*' when referring to singular individual, a stranger or an elderly person.

To embrace and cherish the Polish language abroad, modern Lithuania offers education in Polish. There are many preschools and schools where the full educational system is available in the Polish language (Roduner, 2006, 40). Children have the opportunity to study in over 20 schools and

31 lower-secondary schools, as well as pursue higher education at the branch of the University of Białystok in Vilnius, where instruction is also provided in Polish. More than half of Polish children living in Lithuania take the opportunity of getting education in Polish language in schools with a good level of education (Wołkonowski, 2017, 118); however, unified national exams in Lithuanian are still obligatory for all students in Lithuania. Polish schools also organize their own Polish language exams, which are mandatory for all students at the institution.

Media play a significant role as a source of information among the Polish minority in Lithuania. They offer not only daily local news but also national information about Poland. Many magazines, such as *Kurier Wileński*, *Nasz Czas* or *Tygodnik Wileńszczyzny* are available for the Polish community, providing information about current events affecting the minority in the area. National Polish television is also broadcasted in Vilnius as *TVP Wilno*. The official and most current news web portal in Lithuania, *Delfi*, offers a fully accessible database of information translated into Polish, also providing present information from Poland (Šimkus, 2013). In terms of radio, numerous stations, such as *Radio Wilno* or *Radio 'Znad Wilii'*, not only play Polish music but also broadcast Polish programs such as *Słowo o słowie* hosted by Professor Jerzy Bralczyk, providing an opportunity to embrace and learn about the Polish language, thereby expanding knowledge within the minority.

The social life of Polish people in Lithuania also significantly contributes to the cultivation of language and culture. Numerous organizations and institutions, such as the *Association of Poles in Lithuania* or the *Polish Discussion Club*, provide opportunities to stay connected with the Polish nationality abroad. They organize many music and art events, creating a significant environment for the minority and connecting Polish people all over Lithuania. Additionally, most churches in Vilnius offer masses in the Polish language at least once a day, attracting large numbers of people.

Although the Polish minority is acknowledged and widely accepted by the Lithuanian government, there are still issues occurring that trouble the minority in Lithuania. Despite being the largest minority group in Lithuania, street signs in the Polish language are strictly prohibited, which clashes with the rights of the minority. Additionally, an increasing number of schools are being closed due to a decline in the number of children opting for additional, non-compulsory Polish classes. Furthermore, until 2022, the use of Polish alphabet signs was strictly forbidden in official documents and in the last names of the Polish minority. For instance, since the Lithuanian alphabet does not include the Latin letter 'w', all Polish last names with this letter had it replaced with 'v'.

The Polish minority in Lithuania remembers not only to cultivate their national traditions but also their language. They embrace their culture on a daily basis, strengthening the sense of identity within Lithuanian society. A significant contribution to preserving their traditions is provided by Poland, which supports the Polish minority in Lithuania through cultural exchanges, educational assistance, and political representation.

## REFERENCES

- European Comission (2024). *1.3 Population: demographic situation, languages and religions*, <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/lithuania/population-demographic-situation-languages-and-religions> [accessed: 27.04.2024].
- Geben, K. (2019). *Współczesny język polski. Swoistość języka polskiego na Litwie*, Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla.
- Namiotko, U., Konaszewski, K. (2017). *From conflict to reconciliation. Creating the national identity of the Polish-Lithuanian borderland*, *Kultura i Edukacja*, 4 (118), 74–91.
- Roduner, M. (2006). *The Polish language in education in Lithuania*, Mercator-Education information documentation research/reserche.
- Šimkus, A. (2013). *Polish mass media in Lithuania*, <https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/prezentatation-polish-mass-media-in-lithuania-26/24837480> [accessed: 30.04.2024].
- Wołkonowski, J. (2017). *Education in Polish and a Level of Higher Education of Polish Minority in Lithuania*, *Kultura i Edukacja*, 4 (118), 106–121.