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NYKSTANČIO GEOLEKTO ATEITIS UNESCO SAUGOMAME OBJEKTE

The Future of an Endangered Geolect
in a UNESCO World Heritage Site

SUMMARY

The paper presents a Baltic language used on the Curonian Spit in Lithuania up to 1958. It evolved on the Curonian Spit between the 15th and the 18th centuries, on the basis of the dialect of Courland. It had a short lifespan and is extremely endangered. The Curonian Spit is a UNESCO World Heritage Site due to the unique nature of its cultural landscape. This paper aims to highlight the importance of research, preservation and the possible revitalisation of a small community language that played a highly significant role in the culture of a particular region.

SANTRAUKA

Straipsnyje analizuojama baltų kalba, vartota Kuršių nerijoje iki 1958 m. Šis geolektas Prūsijos teritorijoje formavosi XV–XVIII a. tuometinių Kuršo dialektų pagrindu, trumpai gyvavo ir beveik išnykęs. Kuršių nerija dėl savo unikalios gamtinio ir kultūrinio kraštovaizdžio yra įtraukta į UNESCO pasaulio paveldo sąrašą. Straipsnyje siekiama pagrįsti ir akcentuoti būtinybę tirti, saugoti ir pagal galimybes atgaivinti kuršininkų kalbą, kuri buvo svarbi Kuršių nerijos kultūrinio unikalumo dalis.

INTRODUCTION

It is natural that some communities of endangered languages have lived or still live in protected territories that have preserved their authentic cultural and lifestyle traditions. The activities of such communities are part of the reason why it is deemed necessary to preserve such areas. However, due to the historical and

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: kuršininkų kalba, sociolektas, geolektas, nykstanti kalba, kalbos atkūrimas.
KEY WORDS: Kursenieku language; sociolect; geolect; endangered language; revitalisation.

political circumstances, many such protected areas are inhabited by new settlers, who are neither the creators of the object or tradition that is preserved, nor their descendants.

According to 2018 data, the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites includes 1,092 sites around the world. In Lithuania, there are four geographical objects listed as cultural heritage sites. When the Curonian Spit was included on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, based on criterion number 5,¹ the main values of the object worthy of protection were defined: “The vitality, spirituality and special mood of the cultural landscape and its unique characteristics is further highlighted by authentic forms of local intangible heritage. These include the marine cultural heritage; traditional trades, folklore and artistic traditions; the ethnographic elements of the fishermen’s lifestyles; unique methods of protective coast and dune ridge management and forest maintenance; sustainable recreational activities and a cultural leisure tradition dating back to the 19th century.” While there is no question about most of the properties listed, it is worth paying attention to the line marked above, and to note that there is no mention of the regional language or dialect, its value, or the necessity to protect it. That is, the language is left out of the list, as if it had no relation

to it whatsoever. The autochthonous language is one of the assets that most require protection, being an all-encompassing instrument for the expression and creation of culture.² This should be especially stressed, as the cultural landscape in particular is the criterion for including the area in question on the UNESCO list. The culture of the Curonian Spit is invariably linked to the development of fishing as a trade. As the main, and for a long time the only, means of survival for the community, fishing was the foundation of this cultural human activity that adapted itself exceptionally to natural conditions.³ The fishing culture developed in the region from the 15th to the mid-20th century, until almost all the autochthons abandoned the spit at the end of the Second World War.⁴ Leaving their homeland, they took with them a unique Baltic geolect, *the Kursenieku language*. The space they left on the Curonian Spit was settled by newcomers from various parts of the Soviet Union. The political and social shift brought about a new wave of migration, and after 1958, there were almost no local people left in their homeland.⁵ By the end of the 20th century, the widely dispersed users of the *Kursenieku* language could be counted on the fingers of two hands (Kiseliūnaitė 1995, 2016), and nowadays there are only a few active speakers.

1. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LANGUAGE

The Curonian Spit was part of Prussia from the times of the Teutonic Order and later it was part of Germany to 1923. The migration processes of the Baltic

tribes provided the basis for the formation of a multi-ethnic community. The region continued to be inhabited by colonists from Prussian and other more

distant localities simultaneously with people of Baltic origin. German colonists lived on the Curonian Spit, especially on the southern part. By the First World War, the ethnic Baltic inhabitants of East Prussia had been assimilated and Germanised. Lithuanian-speaking villages survived only in the Klaipėda region. Lithuania declared the independent state of Lithuania at the end of the First World War, in 1918; and in 1923, it annexed some of the territory of East Prussia, the Klaipėda region, which was inhabited mostly by ethnic Lithuanians. Thus, partially Germanised Prussian Lithuanians and German colonists found themselves in the sovereign state of Lithuania, and became a minority, both ethnic and confessional (Lithuania has been a Catholic country since 1387, the Protestant-Lutheran faith was introduced in Prussia in the 16th century).

Lithuania also inherited the tiny but exceptional fishing community of the Curonian Lagoon. It used its own original Baltic idioma, which is referred to as *Kurische Sprache* or *Nehrungskurische Sprache* in German sources.⁶

The *Kursenieku* language evolved on the Curonian Spit between the 15th and the 18th centuries, on the basis of the dialect of Courland. It evolved not only as an ethnolect, but also as a sociolect of the Kingdom of Prussia: it was a language used exclusively by fishing families on the Curonian Spit and in the coastal area in the northern part around Klaipėda. Until the mid-20th century, the language survived as a national minority language of Germany, and later of Lithuania (from 1923 to 1939, and after the Second World War). It existed under conditions of permanent bilingualism, and did not have its own writing.

2. RESEARCH INTO THE KURSENIKU LANGUAGE

Research into the *Kursenieku* language started at the end of the 19th century.⁷ Linguists were attracted by the uniqueness of the language, and included it in the sphere of their academic interests. Research into the language since the 19th century has been conducted by several linguists (mostly German).⁸ Except for a small study by Plāķis (1927), and a doctoral thesis by

El Mogharbel (1993), later research on the *Kursenieku* language is fragmentary, covering only individual aspects; moreover, it is based on a small amount of data. Diachronic changes in the dialect, from the beginning of the 20th century to the present day, have hardly been explored. At the moment, the author of this paper is conducting most of the research.

3. ENDANGERMENT AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE KURSENIKU LANGUAGE

3.1. The UNESCO document "Language vitality and endangerment" (2003) outlines some factors determin-

ing language vitality. According to the factors, the *Kursenieku* language looks like this:

- Inter-generational language transmission: expired.
- Absolute number of speakers: < 10 (80 to 90 years old).
- Proportion of speakers existing within the total (global) population: extremely small.
- Language use within existing contexts and domains: passive.
- Response to language use in new domains and media: none.
- Government and institutional language policies: none.
- Community attitudes towards their language: not prestigious.
- Amount and quality of documentation: moderately documented.

3.2. There are several REASONS for the DECLINE of the *Kursenieku* language:

3.2.1. LONG-TERM LINGUISTIC ISOLATION FROM THE ETHNIC HOMELAND. After the wars with the orders, new settlers from Courland moved into the vacated spaces on the Curonian Spit in the 15th and 16th centuries. They were permitted to engage in fishing (Diederichs 1883: 49–52). The process of the Lettisation of the Curonians (an ancient Baltic tribe) had already started in the 15th century, and continued in Courland, their ethnic homeland. On the Curonian Spit, the dialect was separated from the ethnic homeland, and found itself in the territory of another state. Over 500 years, the layers of old dialects of Courland were overlaid by layers of innovations of the contact languages, which resulted in considerable changes to the language.

3.2.2. POLITICALLY AND SOCIALLY IMPOSED BILINGUALISM. Until the 19th century, the *Kursenieku* language was the language of an ethnic minority in Prussia, but it did not enjoy equal rights with

Lithuanian. Since the community of *Kursenieku* speakers was small, the Prussian government decided to hold services and teach in both Lithuanian and German (Forstreuter 1981: 292). The language shift from *Kursenieku* to German occurred in the southern part of the spit in the 18th century at the latest. From the end of the 19th century, German was also the only language of instruction in schools in the northern part. In this way, the *Kursenieku* language withdrew to fishing families. Under Lithuanian rule, from 1923 until the Second World War, the Klaipėda region enjoyed cultural autonomy and official bilingualism. Attempts were made to impose the Lithuanian language on the germanised *Kursenieki* society, but they failed: the inhabitants considered themselves to be German.⁹

3.2.3. A SMALL AND DISPERSED COMMUNITY AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR. At the beginning of the 20th century, the *Kursenieki* community had several thousand speakers. This was one of the reasons why the authorities both in Germany and Lithuania ignored the issue of the preservation of its language. In the autumn of 1944, when retreating from the Soviet army, the German army evacuated all local people. Some returned after the war, but they could not accept the Soviet regime, and in 1958 they took advantage of the opportunity to recover their German citizenship and leave the homeland for good.¹⁰ By the end of the 20th century, only a few individuals who used the *Kursenieku* language remained in Lithuania; but communication in their mother tongue was disrupted, and they switched to Lithuanian (Kiseliūnaitė 1995: 61).

3.2.4. THE DECLINING PRESTIGE OF THE LANGUAGE. In the mid-19th century,

Louis Passarge wrote that the Kursenieki had no sense of national identity, and made no effort to preserve it (Passarge, 1878:254). The Kursenieki community saw their children's future in Germany, but valued their mother tongue as an attribute of a certain ethnic identity and a sociolect (in communicating while fishing). Between the wars, when tourism was being developed on the Curonian Spit, the women who stayed at home and catered for holidaymakers (mostly from Germany) switched to German. The prestige of their native language grew in their self-awareness only after they had emigrated. Almost all the Kursenieki emigrated to Germany; however, they spread all over the country, and when their parents died, there was nobody with whom they could speak their native language.

When the political moods in Germany changed, the attitude towards the vanishing language changed. Here is Herta Detzkeit speaking to her compatriots: "We had to fight for our language, just like the Frisians and Sorbs..." She then adds: 'But it is us who should be blamed for its death: why haven't we taught the language to our children?'¹¹

3.2.5. The language WAS NOT TRANSMITTED TO THE NEXT GENERATION. It goes without saying that the majority of people appreciate a language for its communicative function: "Why should we learn a language that nobody understands except our family?" "What's the use of it in Germany?" The Kursenieki émigrés admitted that they found no rational motive for teaching their children their mother tongue.

4. COMMEMORATION AND/OR REVIVAL OF A VANISHING LANGUAGE?

Several steps are of key importance in order to fortify the vitality and the scientific and cultural significance of a vanishing language: documentation, scientific evaluation and standardisation, establishing its prestige, and stabilising and supporting its usage. The first two goals can be completed by linguists; while the other two require a positive attitude and support from society, which is difficult to expect without administrative resources. Not only academics, but also politicians and society at large have to hear discussions about the importance to the history of civilisations not only of living languages, but also those that are no longer used, and yet are documented and researched, or are being researched coherently. An example of the depressing

ignorance towards such tasks is the 2018 fire in the National Museum of Brazil, which, among other items, destroyed documents and audio recordings of indigenous languages that were preserved in the archives.

4.1. DOCUMENTATION. *Kursenieku* was the language of the local fishermen, and has never been official or acquired a written form. However, there have been attempts to record it for academic purposes by using the script of other languages.

4.1.1. The main method of documenting the language was recording the lexis and short texts. The first written source was a short dictionary of 278 words in Peter Simon Pallas' dictionary *Linguarum totius orbis vocabularia comparativa*. The first edition of the dictionary appeared in

two parts, in 1787 and 1789, and the second is considered to be the date of the first written monument of the Kursenieku language (Ivanickaja 2017: 13). The handwritten register of the lexemes of this dictionary in Latin script is of great scientific importance (Ivanickaja, 2017: 13). The documentation of the Kursenieku language in the 19th century was based on several writing systems.¹² Twentieth-century Latvian linguists (Plāķis 1927) and folklore researchers (Šmits 1933) used the modern Latvian script for the documentation of the Kursenieku language. The collection of texts assembled by Schmid (1989–1999) and a doctoral thesis by El Mogharbel (1993) used the international IPA script. There were other people, besides researchers, who tried to document the Kursenieku language.¹³ The author possesses a large handwritten register of lexis created by the German researcher Friedhelm Hinze. He intended to use the register for the creation of a dictionary of Kursenieku, but was unable to execute the project in time.

So essentially, we have a relatively colourful picture on our hands when it comes to the documentation of the Kursenieku language. There are written artefacts in the language from a period covering almost 250 years, and the most valuable are coherent texts, which allow us to recreate not only the lexical but also the grammatical system of the language, together with its development.

4.1.2. The author possesses around 70 hours of audio recordings, and several hours of filmed material, collected between 1995 and 2015 from the last remaining native speakers, as well as copies of audio recordings produced by previous language collectors (1961,

1980).¹⁴ In the case of a vanishing language, every facet, meaning also the recording of lexical and grammatical particularities, is important.

4.2. COLLABORATION BETWEEN SOCIETY AND RESEARCHERS: THE REHABILITATION OF THE LANGUAGE PRESTIGE, AND THE CONCEPT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE AS A WHOLE. If we follow the principle that the preserved properties of a preserved area should be viewed as a complex whole, and recognise language as an exceptional tool for creating ethnic consciousness, world-view and sustainability, we should also admit that academic efforts are not enough to maintain such positions. We have to find forms of collaboration not only with the local administration and state institutions, but also with the local community that currently inhabits the preserved area in question.

4.2.1. After World War II, the region of the Curonian Spit was affected by major demographic changes, and its present inhabitants do not have ethnic or cultural ties with the autochthons. We have an entire spectrum of attitudes that are directly influenced by political circumstances. We can see tendencies coming from the clichés of Soviet propaganda applied to the repatriated autochthons, indifference towards whatever is created in a “foreign land”. A slow and complex transition towards cultural tolerance¹⁵ is currently taking place. “Controversial character of preservation of cultural heritage, which is formed on the ground of theoretical mystifications disregarding landscape realities, traditional exterritorial thinking, generating incompetence in the conception of preserved cultural territories, and departmental disagreements manifesting in conflicting opinions of

cultural heritage institutions on various issues [...] dictate aggravating rational planning of preserved territories” (Kavaliauskas 2010: 61). Following a major demographic shift, the mental internalisation of an “alien territory” demands considerable time and effort, but placing a special emphasis on the importance of the “genius loci” in such a culturally and environmentally sensitive location as the Curonian Spit is highly important.

4.2.2. “The key problem of CS development as a site of World Heritage is related with harmonization of these main groups of interests: conservative cultural, environmental and recreational (tourism)” (Kavaliauskas 2010: 70). Language is one of the most important aspects, if not the most important, of cultural identity. The reasons for the disappearance of the Kursenieku language are characteristic of a number of languages, and have been described in theoretical works. The fact that the Kursenieku language is excluded from the list of preserved properties shows that not only the inhabitants of the region but also those responsible for compiling the list underestimated the cultural significance of the language. Ignoring the linguistic heritage is detrimental to the protection of the heritage, to the development of tourism, and to the cultural self-awareness of the inhabitants of

the Curonian Spit. The people employed in the culture, tourism and heritage protection sector make use of secondary and often unreliable sources and amateur interpretations in the media. Thus, they create a superficial, politically engaged and unrepresentative image of the location.

4.3. TO COMMEMORATE OR REVITALISE? Previous parts of this article express arguments as to why this short-lived and little-known language should not be forgotten, but should, at the very least, be commemorated (documented and researched). Is it worth considering the revitalisation of the vanishing language, if not for communication, then at least for cultural reasons? With the current resources, it would be possible to reconstruct a relatively recent segment of the language. Efforts are being made to convince Lithuanian cultural heritage institutions, the country’s cultural community, and its population, of the necessity for the preservation of the Kursenieku language, and the related cultural heritage.¹⁶ A year ago, the author, together with colleagues, completed the international project “Archive of the Language and Ethnic Culture on the Curonian Spit: Digitisation of Sources Artefacts”. By creating an online archive site¹⁷ (Jakulytė, Kiseļiūnaitė 2017), interest in the material included began to grow.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Regardless of how the Kursenieku idioma is viewed scientifically, as a language, geolect or dialect, its preservation is first and foremost related to the cultural value of the preserved territory.

2. With the inclusion of the Curonian Spit on the UNESCO World Heritage List,

a viable approach by the local community to the cultural heritage is a prerequisite for the coordinated development of the area.

3. Concerns expressed by the cultural and scientific community about the intangible heritage inspire the local community to learn more about the activities

of their predecessors which have created the uniqueness of the area.

4. In order to gain knowledge about the development of ethnoculture in the region, it is also expected that the Kursenieku language will be recognised as an integral part of their world-view. So far, the science-based promotion of the idea faces the inertia of the local community, and the regional administration is not interested in nurturing the intangible heritage.

5. In order to ensure the coordinated cultural development of the preserved territory, and to include the administration and the inhabitants of the region in the process, it is necessary to include the Kursenieku language in the description of properties worthy of preservation in the UNESCO World Heritage Site, and to provide legal protection for the language documentation, research and prestige.

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Endnotes

¹ “...to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change” <https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>

² “The death of a language inevitably leads to the permanent loss of oral traditions and expressions. However, it is these oral expressions themselves and their performance in public that best help to safeguard a language, rather than dictionaries, grammars and databases. Languages live in songs and stories, riddles and hymns, and so the protection of languages and the transmission of oral traditions and expressions are very closely linked.” <https://ich.unesco.org/en/oral-traditions-and-expressions-00053>

³ In 500 years, the locals created a fisherman’s world, unique to the region: ship constructions adjusted for a specific body of water, various types of nets and fishing methods, and ways of preparing fish for food consumption and sale. This led to the development of a family model, a homestead adapted to natural conditions and economic activity, traditions of collective work, a neighbour-first lifestyle, fishing-based folklore, mythology, and a sociolect.

⁴ For about 30 years after the war, collective fishing enterprises operated on the spit; however, they gradually grew weaker due to the rapid decline in the amount of fish available in the Curonian Lagoon. In independent Lithuania, commercial fishing is strictly regulated, and is only carried out by a few businessmen, most of whom live on the mainland.

⁵ In 1958, after the signing of a treaty between the Soviet Union and the Federal Republic of Germany, people who had had German citizenship in 1941 were allowed to leave for the FRG.

⁶ The original name for the language, *Kursenieku*, is used in the paper, as it is well recognised in the Latvian linguistic discourse, while the native speakers are called *Kursenieki*. Lithuanian terminology employs the following terms: *kuršininkų* (the language) and *kuršininkai* (the native speakers).

⁷ The inclusion of several individual phrases in lexicographical works or ethnographic descriptions of the languages in the Kingdom of Prussia is omitted here (Schiller, Kiselūnaitė 2015: 444).

⁸ For more on this, see Jakulytė, Kiselūnaitė 2017.

⁹ These unsuccessful efforts are well documented in *Chronik der Schule zu Nidden* (Nausėda, 2013).

¹⁰ Even though the Soviet authorities promised to be favourable towards the repatriated people, discrimination and the wave of deportations to Siberia did not leave either the Curonian Spit or other areas of the Klaipėda region untouched (Arbušauskaitė, 2000).

¹¹ Excerpt from the documentary by Helmut Schulzek *Wiedersehen mit Nidden*.

¹² For more on this, see Schiller, Kiselūnaitė 2015; Kiselūnaitė 2018.

¹³ Kwauka, Pietsch 1987; Pietsch 1982, 1991. We also found several fragments of short manuscripts by other authors.

¹⁴ Jānis Kušķis recorded several hours of material in 1961 on the Curonian Spit. Austris Grasis and Ilgars Bernovskis did the same with speakers who had emigrated to Germany.

¹⁵ The article by Anja Peleikis (whose parents were from Nida) describes the competition for the right to the cultural heritage on the Curonian Spit in post-Soviet Lithuania (Peleikis 2006).

¹⁶ For two years, at the initiative of the L. Réza Culture Centre, Kursenieku language and culture courses have been held in Juodkrantė.

¹⁷ <http://nerija.ku.lt:8080/knkkka/>