

# Language ‘nationalisation’: One hundred years of Standard Lithuanian

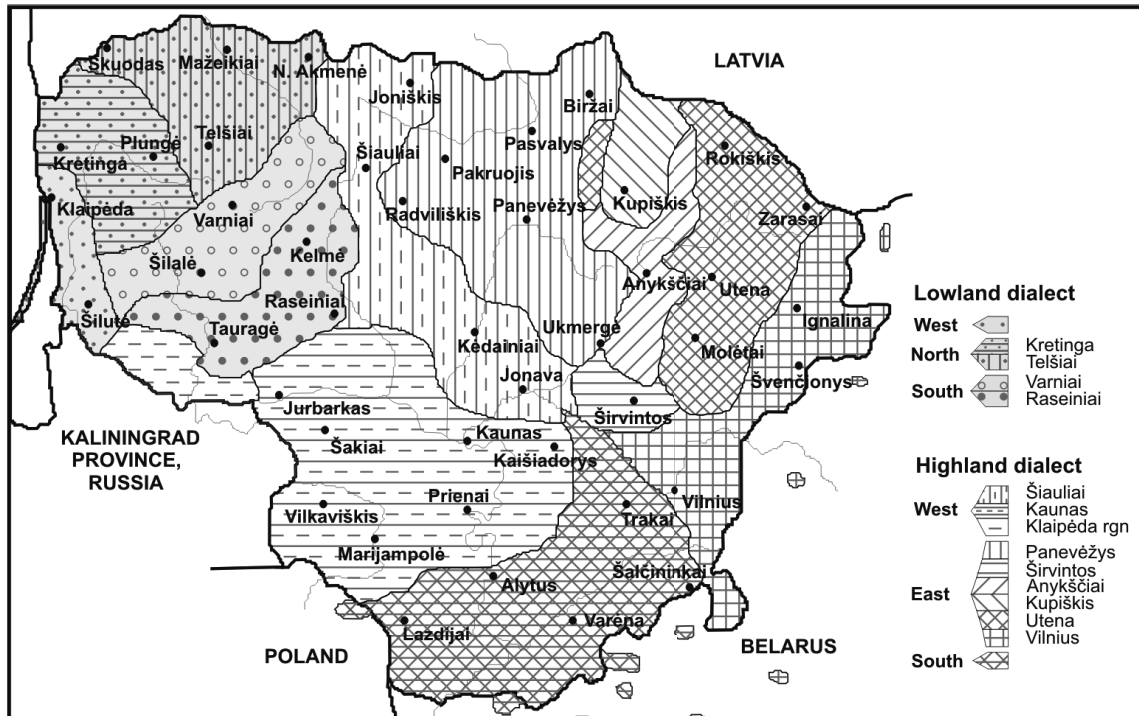
Loreta Vaicekauskienė

*Institute of Lithuanian language, Lithuania*

More than a hundred years have passed since Lithuanian was shaped into a standard language. The chronology of the period marks key changes in language functioning and ideologies. This chapter introduces the period of formation of Standard Lithuanian (SL), then the years of Soviet modernism and, finally, the period of accelerated globalisation, with its outset coinciding with the restoration of Lithuania’s independence. Much attention is given to the historic context, which has led to a clearly articulated ideology of standardisation. Reference is made to fairly scarce data on SL usage.

## NATIONAL STATE AND SL FORMATION

Lithuanian language historians categorise written SL as a late, consciously engineered dialect-selection standard; the process of selecting one dialect was reinforced by national movement and completed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The selected dialect was the southern sub-dialect of West Highland (WH) (see Kaunas on Map 1).



**Map 1:** Lithuanian dialects (Institute of the Lithuanian Language, 2005)

There were several reasons for selecting the WH dialect. The region had a strong economic position and a number of patriotic intellectuals originated from there. The dialect had been used for writing since the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Lithuania Minor, a historical ethnic region of Prussia (which later formed part of the German Empire, East Prussia; most of the territory today is

part of Kaliningrad Province of Russia). At the time of dialect selection, Lithuania Major was governed by the Russian Empire, which in 1864–1905 imposed a ban on publications using the Roman alphabet. Newspapers were, however, illegally brought in from Prussia. Using the same dialect for first Lithuanian periodicals was probably more practical.

Alongside tradition, dialect selection might have been determined by symbolic factors to do with the high status of Lithuanian within historical linguistics as an ‘archaic’ Indo-European language. The WH was described in German grammars of Lithuanian in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (August Schleicher 1856; Friedrich Kurschat 1876). The model was taken over by German scholars of that time and adopted in comparative linguistics; due to its better-preserved Proto-Indo-European morphological features, it was considered more valuable from the scientific point of view. Codification of SL was decisively influenced by West Highlander, Jonas Jablonskis (1860–1930) and his grammar (1901).

At the time of selecting a dialect for SL, the dialect of the capital Vilnius played no major role; the dominant language here was the local variety of Polish. When Lithuania became independent, the region of Vilnius was occupied by Poland and the capital was transferred to Kaunas, the second largest city.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the urban population of Lithuania was only 20% of the overall population, and it was either bilingual or trilingual. Lithuanian was used sparingly; Polish was dominant; Russian and Jewish were also prominent. The chances of either Vilnius or Kaunas becoming normative centres for spoken usage were slim, also because the written standard was taken to form the basis of spoken standard. Between the two world wars, Lithuanian was finally standardised (primarily the written code) and acquired the status of the national language. Efforts were made to ‘purify’ it from Polish and German loanwords. One of the principles of implementing SL was the following: ‘Lithuanian spoken and written standard is an ideal to be pursued by all Lithuanians’ (Zinkevičius 1992). As we shall see, this principle is still adhered to.

The spoken standard, adhered to by schools and the radio, was implemented slowly. To speed up the process, several pronunciation guides were published. Actors and newsreaders were to follow the codified norms and set an example to the people. The engineering of a strict standard ideal is a general characteristic of late standards. Based on already existing models of written and spoken standards of other languages, they have adopted the idea of invariance and required homogeneity of language usage almost at once; no variation was welcome (Subačius 2002). In other words, the boundaries of SL were clearly defined and interference from other dialects or languages was not tolerated.

## STANDARD LITHUANIAN DURING SOVIET MODERNISM

### *Ideologies of culture and language*

With natural processes of modernisation continuing in Western countries, re-occupied Lithuania lived through a period of stagnation. Sociologists referring to the development of the Eastern Block tend to adopt the term ‘Soviet modernism’, since social systems at that time acquired the specific features of a totalitarian regime. At first sight, Lithuania underwent the same industrial development. Urbanisation was rapidly changing the ratio between urban and rural populations; a major shift is claimed to have occurred around 1970, when cities made up half of the population (Anušauskas 2005). Soviet internationalisation, however, was rather specific: a policy of ‘mixing nations’ led to transferring Russian populations into the cities.

A major shift in forming SL was the monitoring of public life. Compared to pre-war Lithuania and developments in the West, the conditions of SL were rather different (cf. developments in Czechoslovakia, Hedin 2005). Retrospective analysis of the Lithuanian press shows that the ideological bias of the Soviet press was so strong, and public language so stiff,

that it subdued any features of either genre or individual style (Marcinkevičienė 2008). Paradoxically, because of the intense monitoring of the public domain, the spoken language could come very close to the ideal SL. As seen from the normative texts of the period, high standard speakers included actors and newsreaders, i.e. those whose speech was either pre-planned or based on a written text.

For Soviet ideology, the unification of behaviour seemed to have been most instrumental. Public language was under the strict supervision of language editors. Language planning ideology was based on the priority of preserving 'pure' language. Still, it is difficult to say whether and to what extent this attitude was influenced by pre-war tradition, the use of historical forms of Lithuanian for Indo-European studies, and opposition to Russification, and to what extent it was the hidden ideology that strove to suppress symbols of national identity being used for the purposes of modern nationalism. Current research has shown that many cultural forms and practices were purposefully turned into museum exhibits. Either due to the above, or to the fact that natural development of a national state was suspended for 50 years, the 'purity' of SL as a symbol of national identity was declared as a priority over its instrumental function and remains so today.

Another distinctive feature of the Soviet value system was the presumption that people are inclined to negative influences, and hence needed to be educated. Individual language features, dialects and vernaculars were treated as impediments to the targeted linguistic ideal. As already pointed out, striving for uniformity is characteristic of late standards; however, in Soviet times and afterwards, this ideal was set very high. The following definition of SL featured in a textbook on the history of SL: '[a] cultivated, model language whose norms we treat as well-formed, obligatory to all and which we would not violate' (Palionis 1979: 5).

Soviet times witnessed a number of publications on language norms. The Commission for the Lithuanian Language was set up in 1961; a glossary of lexical and grammatical corrections was prepared in 1976 and it became the bible of language editors. All the same, linguistic usage developed independently. The gap between the real and the ideal might have been one of the reasons why, in normative texts, standardisation was described as 'work earning no gratitude' from the 'uneducated society'.

### *The language ideal and real usage*

One of the most distinctive negative factors in the development of SL in Soviet times was the explicit policy of promoting Russian. Bilingualism limited the usage of SL to public domains. A decisive factor in SL development from the very beginning was annihilating intellectuals, mainly through deportation, mass murder and emigration. However, dialect levelling and the spread of SL were determined by the same factors as in other countries: mobility of the population, urbanisation and mass media.

Data on tendencies in SL usage is rather scarce and hardly ever based on a systemic analysis of empirical data; they derive mainly from normative articles of that time. Language corrections show a tendency to mostly criticise spoken urban language – semi-private and rarely occurring spontaneous public speech, since written and spoken (or rather, read) media was subject to editing. As already discussed, the ideal was only attainable by newsreaders and actors, albeit not all of them. Linguists, editors, some journalists and writers were also among those who were categorised as more or less conforming to the set spoken norm, and this group comprised a few hundred or so language users. Other educated people, let alone ordinary people, were treated as unable to learn SL. Bilingualism and dialects, including different vowel qualities and different accentuation, were identified as threats. It had thus become common practice to require public speakers to undergo specific pronunciation training.

The ideological climate was unfavourable for dialects. The Soviets imposed an attitude that dialects 'hindered communication, were indicators of low education and remnants of feudalism' (Girdenis 1981). In some provincial schools children were not allowed to speak dia-

lect even during the breaks; in local meetings people were requested to speak SL, which contributed to the feeling of being ashamed to speak the dialect. Since the 1980s, dialectal speaking has been rehabilitated. However, boundaries between dialect and standard have continued to be imposed. Dialects were influenced by inter-dialects emerging in cities. The linguistic literature makes some reference to the preference given to the language spoken in Vilnius. The capital is claimed to have exerted an influence, albeit not exclusively positive, over the whole country (thus the Vilnius dialect did not have the characteristics of an ideal). As late as 1970s the claim was made that the ‘ratio of standardisation’ of spoken SL was not very high, since there were no people who would be born with that standard language (Girdenis 1973).

## THE PERIOD OF INDEPENDENT LITHUANIA

### *Post-Soviet ideologies of language standardisation*

In 1989 the restoration of an independent Lithuania instigated a national movement and the revival of a historical link with the pre-war state. At the same time, Lithuania experienced the impact of globalisation processes and developments in information technology, as well as post-modern ideas which were blocked under the Soviet regime. This contradictory situation, together with inherited practices of administering relations between the state and its citizens, influenced standardisation ideologies.

To protect SL from ‘too much democracy’ and globalisation, efforts are being taken to strengthen the institutional apparatus of language supervision. The State Language Commission is fully authorised to regulate language usage; its regulations are *compulsory* for all public space. The State Language Inspection and municipal language police has been established to oversee the implementation of policies and impose fines for the grammatical, lexical and pronunciation ‘errors’ included into the *List of Major Language Errors*. Television and radio are required to take responsibility for disseminating established SL norms. Journalists are closely watched; those who not adhere to the codified norm are advised... to leave their jobs.

To justify such an extensive system of monitoring, romantic rhetoric is used: the preservation of language is said to be related to the preservation of the nation. Historical conditions as well as ignorant language users are blamed for the gap between prescriptive norms and actual usage. When code implementation fails and the codified norms are not adhered to by users (first of all in public domains), an attempt is made to change language habits rather than the norms. Society is referred to in paternalistic tones: people are said to be in need of instruction and advice as to which norms should be given preference, for their own sake. Urban surroundings are treated as particularly detrimental for the ideal language system; urban language is often called ‘semi-language’. Even regional schools are blamed for ‘skill gaps’ in standard pronunciation. However, the idea of preserving dialects as a symbol of ethnic identity has been introduced, and this ideological *détente* becomes noticeable in initiatives from below: some local newspapers are published in dialect, a Wikipedia entry in Lowland dialect is being set up.

Thus in post-modern Lithuania language standardisation has become even more institutionalised. According to cultural philosophers, post-Soviet mentality can still be characterised by an opposition to modernisation. Language policy has become part of the Lithuanian culture of preservation, which ‘sacrifices its vitality and relevance in an attempt to preserve stability’ (Daugirdas 2008: 83–91).

At the same time, life conditions have changed *radically*. Post-modern values and the possibility of freely expressing one’s ideas have uncovered a discrepancy between official language ideologies and the attitudes of language users. Though there is much support for the idea of preserving one nation and one ‘pure’ language, a great deal of criticism is levelled

against the top-down language policy, both by *vox populi* and by intellectuals. The normativists are accused of taking possession of the language and creating 'artificial' SL.

Alongside public discussions, a unique genre of parody has developed in Lithuania. Since the very first years of state independence, prime-time weekly TV, radio (later also Internet) comedy sketch shows have included scenes with normative linguist characters who use ideal pronunciation and prescriptive rhetoric and correct the language of other speakers (five different shows with such sketches have been produced so far). Both archive copies and new sketches are being posted on *YouTube* alongside more amateurish equivalents. Popular folklore mimicking new coinages of replacements for borrowings is flourishing on web forums too. Another symptomatic phenomenon is a common phrase: 'I apologise to the gate-keepers'. This is very often pronounced before uttering a norm-violating (usually colloquial) form in public and is meant as an explanation that a speaker is aware of the SL norm, but needs to use an 'incorrect' form for some purposes (and it might imply an effort to insure the speaker against retribution from the Language Inspectors).

### *SL under the conditions of free state and free public language*

As can be seen from the historical review, there have been considerable efforts to implement an ideal spoken standard. However, in independent Lithuania public space has been rocked by enormous changes. In 1993 commercial TV channels appeared, the number of broadcasters increased and, most importantly, spontaneous language use by different speakers to different audiences began to occur. It has been noted that contemporary mass media, both written and spoken, can be characterised by a much lesser degree of formality, by intertextuality, humour, elements of slang and borrowings (Koženiauskienė 2001; Marcinkevičienė 2008). Monitoring public space has become almost impossible, and it has turned out that the ideal standard could hardly be realised *live*: 'Democracy opened the door to the language *what it is now* rather than what it *should be* [italics added]' (Miliūnaitė 2009: 68).

Prescriptivists are not satisfied with the 'what it is now' orientation to SL, and their reports conclude that 'norms are falling apart' and that the language 'is approaching the boundaries of degeneration'. Numerous journalists are severely criticised for common prosodic and phonetic deviations from WH-based 'received pronunciation' and for their informal, ordinary style of speaking without pre-edited and correctly accentuated written text. In this context, research into the attitudes of well-known and experienced TV and radio journalists was launched. A qualitative analysis using six parameters (concept and models of good language, own linguistic behavior, attitudes towards language variation in media, willingness to conform to the SL norms, evaluation of language policy) showed that most journalists, even when asked directly in an interview, to a greater or lesser extent expressed a preference for the ordinary standard and are unwilling to obey the prescriptive values of official ideology. Modern SL is mostly supported by professional popular programme leaders, but even the 'serious' TV sector is marked by swinging individual attitudes. The primary data show a correlation between the attitudes of the respondents and their own language usage, but even the most formal and conservative code of academic programs fails to conform to the ideal standard (Vaičekauskienė 2011).

A tendency to give preference to ordinary language has been confirmed by other tentative research. It has become obvious that, for more than a hundred years, no ideal usage has actually evolved. According to one journalist, 'it is abnormal that each mass medium has to have a linguist who corrects each text, because people do not speak like this. It means that the official Lithuanian is a dead language'. The above-mentioned parodies can also serve as an indication of the gap between codified ideal norms and actual usage. Normative publications also themselves conclude that 'exemplary' speech is used by very few. Regional surveys claim that spoken SL competence of both students and teachers has been negatively influenced by dialects.

Regional dialects are still present in Lithuania; however, it remains unclear to what extent regional centres function as reference points for language prestige. It has been shown that social correlates of dialectal speaking include more mature age and lower education; the dialects are considered appropriate for private communication or jokes; it is still rare to find open preference for dialects as compared to SL being expressed. However, dialects are maintained by group solidarity (Aliūkaitė 2005; Ramonienė 2006). It should be noted that surveys focusing on attitudes do not specify the content of SL, and it is not very clear which variety of SL is being evaluated. It is highly improbable that it could be the rarely heard ideal variety, and 'standard' most likely refers to an unofficial modern standard identified with the dialect of Vilnius city. The linguistic literature also has some hints that the language of Vilnius is the preferred norm (Grumadienė 1980). According to pilot experimental research, the personal traits of speakers of the Vilnius variety are evaluated more positively than those of dialect speakers, except in the dimension of social attractiveness.

## DISCUSSION

From a sociolinguistic point of view the situation of SL is particularly interesting. Up to today ideologists of standardisation have made efforts to establish an ideal standard based on so-called prestige norms. In practice, the ideal language, both written and spoken, is realised only at very great cost, with the help of professional editing work. Other varieties of SL are practically not acknowledged, and variation is accepted only to a small degree. SL is by definition treated as a fixed, norm-based construct which must be regulated in terms of correctness. This 'very best' variety is said to serve as identification symbol of the nation.

Thus, standardisation ideologies in Lithuania have largely remained unchanged over the years, except that the argumentation has changed. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a common language for the nation had to be created – in Soviet times as a defence against Russification, later, against the dangers of globalisation and democracy. Attempts to engineer extreme language homogeneity cause dissatisfactions: there were some tensions in this regard in pre-war Lithuania, and now they have become even greater. What could be interpreted as a modestly positive ideological shift relates to dialects; however, SL has preserved its official intolerance of dialect interference.

Changes in broadcasting have instigated the emergence of *actual* spoken SL. This is a variety with distinctive features of prosody and phonetics, which might be related to informal style. Its relationship with the sociolects of Vilnius awaits investigation. Another issue to be clarified concerns relations between media language and audience uptake. As one journalist involved in the above-mentioned study put it:

There is a tendency for mass media to become more and more stratified in attempting to identify *their own* audiences. [...] The standard language, obviously, is needed; an attempt is made to use it, since it would be important to have *all* the audience; however, there is a tendency to speak to your audience *in your own...their* language.

A tendency to use an unofficial standard in public has shown that the reference point for the preferred norm is changing. It remains to clarify *whose* language variety is given preference.

## REFERENCES

- Aliūkaitė, D. 2005. Tarminis kalbėjimas: (galimi?) socialiniai kalbėjimo koreliatai, *Lituanistica* 61, 1: 38–47.
- Anušauskas, A. (ed.). 2005. *Lietuva 1940–1990*. Vilnius.
- Daugirdas, T. 2008. *Sparnuoto Arklio Dantys*. Vilnius.

- Girdenis, A. 1973. Bendrinė (literatūrinė) kalba. *Mūsų Kalba* 3: 45–47.
- Girdenis, A. 1981. Tarmės ir mokykla. *Mūsų Kalba* 3: 12–16.
- Grumadienė, L. 1980. Subjektyvusis kalbos vertinimas. *Kalbos Kultūra* 39: 91–93.
- Hedin, T. 2005. *Changing Identities: Language Variation on Czech Television*. Stockholm.
- Koženiauskienė, R. 2001. Žiniasklaidos retorika ir elitinė kalba. *Kalbos Kultūra* 74: 74–81.
- Marcinkevičienė, R. 2008. Žanrų kaita posovietinės Lietuvos dienraščiuose. *Darbai ir Dienos* 49: 197–217.
- Miliūnaitė, R. 2009. *Dabartinės Lietuvių Kalbos Vartosenos Variantai*. Vilnius.
- Palionis, J. 1979. *Lietuvių Literatūrinės Kalbos Istorija*. Vilnius.
- Ramonienė, M. 2006. Nuostatos dėl bendrinės kalbos ir tarmės: Joniškėlio atvejis. *Kalbos Kultūra* 79: 137–148.
- Subačius, G. 2002. Two types of standard language history in Europe. *Res Balticae* 8: 131–150.
- Vaicekauskienė, L. 2011. In press. 'Oficialioji lietuvių kalba yra negyva kalba: Žurnalistai apie lietuvių kalbos standartą televizijoje ir radijuje'. *Darbai ir Dienos* 55: 191–205.
- Zinkevičius, Z. 1992. *Bendrinės Kalbos Iškilimas*. Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidykla.