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Minority Languages in the Digital Age. Usage, Maintenance, and Teaching

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Which (mis)perceptions matter in minority language media research?

Reflections on/from an enquiry of digital language practices among Sorbian adolescents

This paper describes an enquiry conducted among adolescent speakers of Upper Sorbian, a west Slavic language that is recognised in the German state of Saxony and is classified as 'definitely endangered' (UNESCO n.d.). The study examined the online language practices of Sorbian-speaking adolescents (n=164). It enquired 1) to what extent digital media facilitate Sorbian-language maintenance and learning and 2) what influences language choice (German, Sorbian or other) in digital domains. Via questionnaire and group discussion approaches, participants indicated generally positive attitudes towards Sorbian but a preference for German online. Preferences and activities seem to be led by a combination of in-group dynamics (online and offline), as well as available technologies and online content (McMonagle 2019).

This study focused on the ways in which new media may *help* Sorbian (Cormack 2013). Minority language researchers (including this one) often hold the normative position of the potential of media spaces to be multilingual spaces. In the context of this study, this position was challenged by participants who perceive the 'multilingual' internet to be a space for just 'larger' languages, such as German. While this perception is substantiated by an actual lack of Sorbian-language software and digital content, some participants also questioned the value of (hypothetically) developing digital domains for Sorbian. This paper will therefore conclude with a meta reflection on 1) the beliefs and methods of minority language researchers and 2) subjective and objective factors that inform speakers' feelings about their language (Nagy 2000). As documented around the world, language endangerment occurs when speakers come into contact with more prestigious languages/varieties. The internet represents extended frontiers of such contact, but also open territory for exploration. The question is: who really holds the map in minority language media research?

References

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