KASHUBIAN – LANGUAGE OR DIALECT?

Paul Hopkins

Department of Linguistics
University of Victoria

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Most language variants are readily classified as independent languages (English, French, Japanese, Swahili, etc.) or dialects of a particular language (the Yorkshire dialect of English, the Parisian dialect of French, the Hokkaido dialect of Japanese, the Mombassa dialect of Swahili, etc.). There are, however, some language varieties about which, for a number of reasons, there is controversy as to whether they are independent languages or simply dialects of larger languages. Among these are Galician (said by some to be a dialect of Portuguese), Luxemburgish (said by some to be a dialect of German), Macedonian (said by some to be a dialect of Bulgarian) and Kashubian. It is the status of the latter which will be examined in this paper.

2.0 KASHUBIAN – A POLISH DIALECT

Within Poland, where Kashubian is spoken by some 150,000 people living in the countryside to the west of Gdańsk (Topolińska 1980:183), Kashubian has traditionally been regarded as a Polish dialect by most researchers.

2.1 The Linguistic Justification

The primary basis for the claim that Kashubian is a Polish dialect, albeit in a "extended sense" of the word (Pniewski 1935/36), is said to be a linguistic one. While the Kashubian dialects do have number of features in common which they do not share with neighbouring Polish dialects, such as non-penultimate word stress, a phonemic schwa, the lack of prepalatal fricatives and affricates, and (reflexes of) a high front oral vowel where typical Polish dialects have reflexes of a high front nasal vowel, most of these distinctive features have been argued by Topolińska (1974) to have developed only within the past five hundred years. In all other respects, Kashubian has developed out of Proto-Slavic just like all the (other) Polish dialects, and hence, it is argued, Kashubian should be treated as a normal, albeit peripheral and thus extremely conservative, Polish dialect.

Linguistic similarity cannot, however, in itself suffice to determine that two language variants are dialects of one language rather than two separate languages. Of course, if two language variants are so similar that they are mutually intelligible to a high degree, we are inclined to consider them dialects of one language, but Kashubian speech – particularly that of speakers of the northern dialects – differs from all (non-Kashubian) Polish dialects to such an extent that it can be understood only with difficulty by speakers of standard Polish.[1] Indeed, tests by Majewicz at the University of Poznań have shown that speakers of standard Polish unsensitized to Kashubian speech can understand a spoken text in Slovak – unambiguously recognized to be a Slavic language distinct from Polish – better than they can one in Kashubian.[2] In any case, there are many examples of language variants whose status as independent languages is unquestioned in spite of being mutually intelligible with other independent languages. With a little sensitization and goodwill, most speakers of Norwegian and Swedish can understand each other's languages, for example, with little difficulty. Most Slavic languages are very similar in number and type of grammatical categories and the percentage of shared vocabulary is very high in comparison with most other Indo-European families. As a result, all Slavic languages are mutually intelligible to a certain extent, and certain pairs (Czech – Slovak, Belorussian – Ukrainian, Slovenian – Serbo-Croatian, Macedonian – Bulgarian[3]) are particularly close. In this context, the fact that Kashubian

cannot be readily understood by Poles should be taken as an indication that Kashubian is not a Polish dialect but a closely related sister language.

2.2 Sociological Justifications

Other facts brought forward by Poles to justify calling Kashubian a Polish dialect include the small number of speakers of Kashubian, the fact that Kashubians do not constitute an independent political unity, and the fact that Kashubians themselves say that they are Poles.

The first two of these arguments are clearly based on false assumptions about the diversity of language and a necessary link between ethnic unity and statehood. Many languages have only a small number of speakers; even within the Slavic language family there are variants recognized as independent languages which have fewer speakers than Kashubian, such as Sorbian with its estimated 67,000 speakers (Stone 1993:594-595) and Ruthenian, spoken by some 20,000 people whose ancestors migrated from western Transcarpathia to Serbia two centuries ago (Shevelov 1993:996). And while it is a popular belief in Europe that 'a language is a dialect with an army', there a good 3000 languages spoken today and fewer than 300 states: even taking smaller administrative units such as provinces into account, it remains clear that most language communities do not constitute separate states. Thus, even if it is true that the Kashubians never had an independent country – and this is disputable, as the Pomeranian princes of the tenth through twelfth century were the autonomous rulers of this region even if they did have ties to the Polish court – this cannot be taken as evidence that Kashubian is not a language distinct from Polish.

A more serious obstacle to the recognition of Kashubian as a language distinct from Polish is the fact that Kashubians do not consider themselves an ethnic unit distinct from the Poles.[4] The self-image of a people is important in deciding whether or not their form of speech should be recognized as an independent language. Nevertheless, the social history of that people must also be taken into account, and I suggest that in this context it can be shown that a Kashubian does not think of himself as a Pole in the same sense that a citizen of Warsaw or Kraków does. Although the territory of the Kashubians was part of the politically and culturally autonomous Pomerania until the end of the thirteenth century, during the centuries of German domination the Slavic inhabitants of Pomerania increasingly came to identify themselves as a subgroup of the Poles in order to retain their Slavic identity. In this situation, a bipolar opposition came into being, with the German and Protestantism on one side and Polish and Roman Catholicism on the other. As those Pomeranian Slavs who adopted the Protestant religion were little by little coerced into adopting the German language and culture, those who refused to convert (the ancestors of the present-day Kashubians) increasing turned to their inland cousins for support. In order to gain this support, they naturally portrayed themselves as part of the Polish collective. There was no room in this equation for a separate Kashubian identity. In order to retain their cultural identity, Kashubians had to embed it in the Polish national identity. Thus, when a Kashubian says he is a Pole, he is merely affirming his membership in the Slavic culture which, in his eyes, has room for both Polish and Kashubian as speech forms of different function by potentially equal status. In this way, when a Kashubian author such as Jan Trepczyk (Trepczyk 1980) said that he was a Pole, but his mother tongue was (not Polish but) Kashubian, this should not be seen as a contradiction in terms.

2.3 The Political Justification

Polish dialectologists such as Karol Dejna (1992:31) claim not to be influenced by politics in determining that Kashubian is a Polish dialect. This claim is highly suspect given the strong Polish self-identification as a nation-state. When the Polish state was reconstituted at the end of the First World War, its claim to access by sea depended on establishing that the Kashubian region was populated by Poles. In post WW-II Poland, the integrity of the Polish territory has continued to be a topic of great sensitivity. Thus, any suggestion that Kashubian is a separate language has been automatically equated in this century first with an effort by Germans to undermine Poland's right to occupy the Kashubian corridor and then with a desire by "unpatriotic" Kashubians to break up Poland by establishing a separate state. However unfounded this association of linguistic separateness with political separation may be, it has made open discussion of Kashubian's linguistic status

impossible under the communist regime and even now it remains a bogeyman brought out time and again by Poles opposed to the increasing diversity in Polish society advocated by proponents of the Kashubian movement.

3.0 ALTERNATIVES TO A BINARY OPPOSITION: DIALECT – LANGUAGE

3.1 A Neutral Term

An terminological solution to this controversy has recently been explored by sociolinguists such as Alfred Majewicz (1986). Majewicz notes that the function of the Kashubian language in the society of its speakers is unlike that any Polish dialect: for the speaker of Kashubian, his language is distinct from Polish. While a Kashubian may forego speaking Kashubian for social reasons or to be understood by non-Kashubians, he will not mix it with standard Polish, and he will assign it certain domains of use. Thus, a sub-group of a people can establish its identity as an ethnic group through the use of a specific form of language, its *ethnolect*. This, in Majewicz's view, is the proper characterization of Kashubian.

3.2 Another Dimension: *Ausbau* vs *Abstand*

A functional characterization of this problem can also adopt the perspective of the language planner Heinz Kloss, who used the concept of development in function to describe language forms intermediate between the simple dialect and the full language; this terminology was first developed in the context of describing emerging Germanic languages (Kloss 1978) and then in categorizing the written languages of the world (Kloss & McConnell 1989). In this terminology, dialect and language should be distinguished primarily by the extent to which they are used, with a dialect severely limited in the number of domains (functions) where it can be used. From this perspective, Kashubian can be seen an *Ausbau* dialect, or dialect in progress, as Stone (1972) has shown, since it has developed a substantial literature and is used in some formal domains such as the mass media and religious services, but has not developed so far from Polish as to have *Abstand*, or separating distance, from it.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Can we finally answer the question posed in the title of this paper? It would seem that the answer is: no. As Majewicz (1986) points out, the classification of languages does not allow for a clear decision in this case. There are valid points of view from which Kashubian can be seen as a Polish dialect. There are also valid points of view from which Kashubian can seen as a language distinct from Polish. This is because Kashubian has developed beyond the status of a simple dialect, yet remains embedded in the Polish cultural and linguistic context. A change in this situation is not foreseeable in the immediate future.

NOTES

1 Polish is the only language permitted for classroom discussions in all but a very few schools in the Kashubian region. As a result, not only are all Kashubians of school age or older completely fluent in Polish, but most also believe that Polish is a 'better' language than Kashubian. Thus, like speakers of many other minority languages, most Kashubians usually use the a regional form of the majority language, in this case Standard Polish, in the presence of outsiders, so the average Pole will be unlikely to hear much genuine Kashubian without an extended stay in the Kashubian countryside.

2 It should be noted that Standard Polish is based to a large extent on the dialects of Great Poland, spoken in the region adjacent to where south-west Kashubian dialects are presently spoken, and could thus be considered a Polish dialect "close" to Kashubian. On the other hand, dialectal diversity in so great within Kashubian that even a speaker of southern Kashubian has

considerable difficulty in understanding a speaker of the northernmost dialects (unless they use Polish).

3 As mentioned above, Macedonian is one of the languages about whose status as an independent language there is dissent. In particular, the position of linguists in Bulgaria and Greece is that Macedonian is just a dialect of western Bulgarian. Here too, the linguistic features shared by Macedonian and Bulgarian vis-à-vis those of other language variants (such as the Serbian dialects) are taken to "prove" that Macedonian and Bulgarian are but dialects of one language.

4 In recent discussions, Kashubians seem willing to speak of themselves as constituting an *ethnic group*, that is, a group having independent cultural (including linguistic) traditions, but not an *ethnic minority*, which is seen as implying demands for political autonomy.

REFERENCES

Breza, Edward (1994) "Kaszubszczyzna wśród języków słowiańskich, jej status językowy [Kashubian among the Slavic Languages, its Linguistic Status]", in Jerzy Samp, ed., *Kaszubszczyzna w świecie* [Kashubian in the World] (Museum of Literature and Kashubian-Pomeranian Music, Wejherowo) 7-22.

Dejna, Karol (1992) "W sprawie 'statusu języka kaszubskiego' [On the question of the 'Status of the Kashubian Language]", in Edward Breza, ed., *Problem statusu językowego kaszubszczyzny* [The Problem of the Linguistic Status of Kashubian], Wojewódzki Ośrodek Kultury and Zrzeszenie Kaszubsko-Pomorskie, Gdańsk.

Kloss, Heinz (1978) *Die Entwicklung neuer germanischer Kultursprachen von 1800 bis 1950*, Düsseldorf, Schwann.

Kloss, Heinz and Grant D. McConnell (1989) *The Written Languages of the World: a survey of the degree and modes of use*, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval.

Majewicz, Alfred F. (1986) "A new Kashubian dictionary and the problem of the linguistic status of Kashubian", in *Collectanea Linguistica in honorem Adami Heinz*, PAN/Ossolineum, Wrocław, 95-99.

Pniewski, Władysław (1935/36) *Poradnik Językowy* [Linguistic advisor], 8/9, 200; cited in Breza (1994), 13/14.

Shevelov, George Y. (1993) "Ukrainian" in B. Comrie & G.G. Corbett (eds), *The Slavonic Languages*, London & New York, Routledge, 947-998.

Stone, Gerald (1972) "The Language of Cassubian Literature and the Question of a Literrary Standard", *The Slavic and East European Review*, 50: 521-529.

Stone, Gerald (1993) "Sorbian (Upper and Lower)" in B. Comrie & G.G. Corbett (eds), *The Slavonic Languages*, London & New York, Routledge, 593-684.

Topolińska, Zuzanna (1974) *A Historical Phonology of the Kashubian Dialects of Polish*, The Hague & Paris: Mouton.

Topolińska, Zuzanna (1980) "Kashubian", in A. M. Schenker & E. Stankiewicz (eds), *The Slavic Literary Languages: Formation and Development*, New Haven (Conn.), Yale Consilium.

Trepczyk, Jan (1980) "Kaszëbizna", *Pomerania*, 11/12:27-30.