

Bilingualism is an ability of a person or a society to use two languages. There are more bi- or multilingual people in the world than those using only one language. Acquisition and use of languages are often a result of important events taking place in the bilingual person's life, for example immigration or a marriage with a foreign language speaker. Sometimes they are historical events no one has control over, e.g. a change of the national status of a region where you live, escape from war-torn land, or forced displacement. The phenomenon of bilingualism evokes different emotions: it may cause pride, but also humiliation and shame. It can contribute to the social and/or cultural promotion, but it can also lead to stigmatization and persecution. To study various aspects of bilinguals' life, German linguists developed the method of language biography that derives from autobiographical method.

The aim of our Polish-German research team is to empirically examine whether language biography influences the use of language by a bilingual person. We chose two generations of bilingual Polish-German speech community, affected by important historical events. The study will include older persons living in Poland on the territories which belonged to Germany until 1945 (Masuria, Silesia, Pomerania, Lubuskie Region), who were born there before World War II, so still in the German state, and a middle generation born in Poland, on the same territories, but currently living in Germany. The study will focus on bilinguals belonging to these two generations, members of the same families and / or local communities.

We will check whether language biographies of people living in different conditions and different linguistic and cultural environments influence the use of Polish and German languages. Polish and German languages differ significantly in terms of syntactic and grammatical structures. Almost every German learning Polish and almost every Pole learning German struggles with some syntactic or grammatical structures. For example, word order in German sentence causes Poles problems and distinguishing between perfective and imperfective aspect is very difficult for Germans, whereas the use of the prepositional structures seems to be problematic for learners of both languages. Transfer the grammatical patterns from one language to another can be observed in the speech of bilinguals.. We plan to investigate if there are differences in the transmission of such patterns from Polish into German and vice versa in the speech of people belonging to these two generations. We will learn more about the processes of borrowing of linguistic structures.

Our project combines research methods of various disciplines: history, cultural anthropology and linguistics. The interviews conducted with the informants from the oldest generation will provide information about their individual experiences during the Second World War and in the early postwar years on the territories granted to Poland in 1945 after the change of state borders. From interviews with the middle generation we shall be able to find out the reasons for their departure to Germany and what problems they encountered after the emigration. How do they function linguistically and culturally? How do they communicate now in transnational families? What impact does it have on their languages?

These are the questions that will be answered by the Polish-German team formed by Slavic and German philologists. Such a team will be able to find answers without falling into the trap of a unilateral national perspective. In addition to scientific publications, we also plan to share the interviews on-line in the form of linguistic corpus of Polish-German bilingualism.