

Language revitalisation without native speakers: The cases of Breton in Upper Brittany and Sorbian in Lower Lusatia

Many minority language communities are attempting to revive their languages and this is proving to be a considerable challenge. As older speakers of the minority language die, their numbers are not being replaced by the same number of younger speakers, and these speakers might have learned the language in a different way from the older generations, for example at school, and not from their parents. In some cases, some families send their children to a particular school in order to learn the minority language and the parents have learned or are learning the minority language themselves. These people are known as 'new speakers' and quite often these parents and their children can find themselves isolated from older, native speakers because of distance or because they lack common interests with them. For example, younger families in Upper Brittany, in Rennes or in Nantes, may not have much contact with the remaining native speakers of Breton in Lower (Western) Brittany, or in fact be interested in the rural way of life these speakers represent. In Lower Lusatia, there are no traditional speakers left, yet there is a number of individuals and families who have adopted Sorbian as one of (or the main) language of communication in their daily lives. This is not, of course, a light undertaking but as the 'death' of minority languages such as Breton and Sorbian continues apace, it is very important for us to understand what motivates people to make such efforts and how they can slow down the process of 'language death' and, most importantly, how they might reverse it.

Thus language revitalization in these specific cases can be said to be taking place in more urban, non-traditional settings without much input from native speakers of the language. This project aims to explore this phenomenon, by interviewing key people within the communities (parents, children, educators) in order to discover just how these 'new' communities are dealing with the challenges of reviving and extending the use of a 'dying' language, when they face many linguistic and social obstacles in doing so. The project will also involve researchers entering the communities in question and participating in the daily lives of these speakers in order to discover, from an outsider perspective, how both the Breton and Sorbian languages are being used and enriched by new speakers in very specific settings.