

# **Lemko Language, *Quo Vadis?* Current Issues in the Linguistics Field of Lemko Identity: Loss and Revitalisation**

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The Rusyn language in Poland, mainly referred to as Lemko/Rusyn or Lemko, formed as the natural ethnolect of a community that has populated a region of the Carpathians between the Poprad and Oslawa rivers since at least the Middle Ages and has been under the identity and cultural influence of Eastern Christianity. The community's emancipatory model<sup>1</sup> of development and (self-)identification have been based in large part on the language determinant, which has in turn affected its development and status. The type and quality of its linguistic forms have obviously been determined by the type of culture (agricultural and pastoral), the landscape (mountainous), and form of civic life – that of a rural community that was mostly free of serfdom and generated a homegrown intelligentsia quite early on (between the 17th and 18th centuries), an intelligentsia that felt responsible for the fate of the nation and its identity (Duć-Fajfer 2013).

Thus, when nation-building processes began in Central Europe in the mid-19th century, the Beskid Region spoke out in its own language,

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<sup>1</sup> Here I refer to the concept of language emancipation used by Leena Huss and Anna Riitta Lindgren (Huss and Lindgren 2011; Lindgren 2013). Generally, the emancipation model is understood here as one opposite to the assimilation model.

which was an attempt to understand and place its cultural space in a polyphonic Galicia (Duć-Fajfer 2015: 137–156). At the time, two voices had great influence on the development, status, and position of the Lemko/Rusyn language among other languages. The first one, from 1860, belonged to Aleksij Torońskij (Тороньскій 1860) and held that the Lemko language (and the entire culture for that matter) was “*испорчена*” (i.e., contaminated) by foreign influences, and that the model for Ruthenian speech was to be found in and around Kyiv. The opposing voice was that of Matwij Astrjab (Астрябъ 1871), who pointed to the proto-Slavic pedigree of the Lemko language as being ancient and independent of both Great Russian and Little Russian, and called for respect for both it and its speakers: simple Rusyn highlanders who had faithfully preserved their Rusyness .

As one may conclude, considering the current status of the Lemko/Rusyn language, Astrjab’s voice prevailed, though the language would be dogged by various forms of degradation and depression of its potential throughout the entire process of its development. Starting in 1911, when the bimonthly (and later weekly) periodical *Lemko* started publishing entirely in colloquial Lemko, motivating the entire enterprise also by its linguistic aspect (Duć-Fajfer 2011), we may observe the gradual emancipation of both the language and the awareness of the Lemko community. The Lemko language was taught in schools from 1934 to 1939, and then, after a period of forced assimilation and Ukrainization of Lemkos under Communism, also largely performed with the help of the language (Duć-Fajfer 2001), Lemko was granted minority language status in Poland. It bears emphasis that the road to said achievement was laid by extremely determined and consistent activism on the part of Lemko elites, who never gave up demanding language and identity-related rights for their community, even during the difficult post-resettlement period. An important factor, among others, was the development and publication of a normative grammar of the Lemko language (Chomiak and Fontański 2000).

The recognition of Lemko as a minority language with full rights took place nearly in parallel to other variations of Rusyn being granted minority-language status in other countries , the opening up of political

borders, and the democratisation of East-Central Europe.<sup>2</sup> All that provided an opportunity for various efforts to preserve and develop Rusyn as the language of the stateless community of Carpatho-Rusyns, of which Lemko/Rusyn is a variant. The most significant and strategically important decisions regarding the Rusyn language community have been made at the four World Congresses of the Rusyn Language that have taken place so far (cf. Копорова 2015: 3–7).

In Poland, the Lemko/Rusyn language is protected on the basis of both entries in the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (Europejska karta 1992), henceforth “Charter,” ratified by Poland in 2003 and the 6 January 2005 *Law on National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Languages* (Ustawa 2005). On the basis of expert investigations into the implementation of the provisions of the Charter in individual states, the Lemko/Rusyn language has made it on the list of the seven minority languages in Poland with the widest range of needs and opportunities for use in the public sphere (Wicherkiewicz 2011a). Since 1991, the language has officially been taught at state schools as the mother tongue of Lemkos on the basis of parent-submitted statements. Every child is to have the opportunity to study their mother tongue; therefore, Lemko language lessons are held (three times a week) as soon as at least seven such statements have been submitted at a school. Should that threshold not be met, interschool instruction may be organized once three statements have been submitted (Rozporządzenie 2007). At present, the Lemko/Rusyn language is taught at 35 schools of all levels, from preschools to high schools. As of 2015, an estimated 281 children study it.<sup>3</sup> This state of affairs has persisted for nearly 10 years, with the trend being one of modest growth in the number of schools and students (Pogorzała 2009). From 2001–2017, the Pedagogical University of Cracow offered Philology majors a course of study that aimed to train specialists in the Lemko language, its literature, and culture, who could

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2 Except Ukraine, where Rusyn has not been accepted as a minority language until now, and former Yugoslavia, where the language of Vojvodina Rusyns in Yugoslavia has had a minority language status since the mid-twentieth century.

3 These are numbers published in the press based on the data journalists obtain from school districts.

become qualified teachers and overall Lemko Studies experts (Ватраль 2011).

Besides the field of education, the Lemko/Rusyn language is used in at least eight other functional fields: that of everyday life, art and literature, journalism, theater, associations, churches, advertising, and academia (Дуць-Файфер 2004). The most spectacular manifestations of the exercise of the rights minority languages are entitled to in Poland include the inclusion of Lemko place names on road signs in nine villages in the Lemko homeland, Lemko high-school final exams, and internet radio that has been broadcasting entirely in Lemko 24 hours a day since 2011.<sup>4</sup> Said initiatives have been and continue to be carried out mainly by young people,<sup>5</sup> who demonstrate a high degree of determination when it comes to emancipating their native culture, and its language especially. This is worthy of note because that is the generation that is already facing the question of how to make its way and what steps to take regarding the great paradoxes that have resulted in the current situation of the Lemko/Rusyn language being extremely ambivalent. After all, on the one hand it has achieved a position that is at least officially on equal footing with other minority languages, including Ukrainian, which has stereotypically been put forward as the literary language for the Lemko dialect. On the other hand, there is the obvious mere feigning so typical of Polish government agencies regarding most actions compelled by minority rights and the requirements of democracy. In effect, not only has state language policy repeatedly failed to protect and nurture; on the contrary, it has been suppressing and curtailing the development of minority languages (Duć-Fajfer 2015b).

The ongoing practice of putting Lemko in a position of subordination to or placement inside Ukrainian, contrary to its independent status, has

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4 [www.lem.fm](http://www.lem.fm)

5 These are mostly city dwellers up to 35 years old, most of whom studied Lemko at school. Some of them are graduates or students of Lemko philology and have high linguistic and ethnic awareness. Most of them are Lemkos by origin, heritage speakers of Lemko. Some of them have connected with the Lemko language, such as Lemko language teachers, journalists, interpreters, and editors of Lemko publications.

been detrimental and damaging. An example can be seen in the fact that a Ukrainian song was used by a Polish government agency when experts from the Charter recommended it promote the Lemko language. Alongside the Lemko language, schools in the Lemko homeland tolerate a hybrid, ideological form of it: “Ukrainian with Fundamentals of the Lemko Dialect.” The independent and full-fledged status of the Lemko language is often denied on the basis of statements by pro-Ukrainian activists with an interest in its degradation. Also detrimental is the absence of the requirements that are normally imposed on all activities that demand language competency. As regards the Lemko language (and similarly to other minority languages), it is officially permitted for professional work to be carried out without verification of service-provider language proficiency and without evaluation of output linguistic quality. In grant systems, the lack of such evaluation often leads to a linguistically appalling final product that is in turn taken to argue that the Lemko language is of low-quality, in addition to discouraging its study and competent use. The greatest damage is done when the Lemko language is taught by people who are not only not well-versed in the subject matter, but also sometimes practically do not even know the language. It is a similar case when books and periodicals are published without being reviewed to assure their quality in terms of language and substance. Many more similar examples of efforts undertaken by both the state and the community could be given (Duć-Fajfer 2015b), but I had merely wanted to point out some trends without going into a more in-depth review of examples that illustrate them.

Meanwhile, I would like to draw attention to another functional aspect of language: the attitude towards it of its speakers themselves, i.e., those for whom Lemko is an actual or hypothetical<sup>6</sup> mother tongue. In the interwar period, over 130,000 declared the Rusyn/Lemko language as their mother tongue on the 1931 census (Statystyka 1938). Meanwhile, today that number is 6,279 (Spis 2011), according to the most recent census in 2011. Also worthy of note is the fact that while the number of

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6 That is, according to their origin, they could be Lemko speakers, but in reality they often do not use Lemko in everyday life as they would fit were their mother tongue.

speakers of the Lemko language was equal to the number of declared *Rusnaks*/Lemkos in 1931, nearly 1/3 of the 9,640 people declaring themselves to be of Lemko nationality today do not speak Lemko as a mother tongue. This is the statistically visible assimilation process that has also led to statistical analyses, which place Lemko among threatened languages, with a status between endangered and severely endangered (Wicherkiewicz 2011b). This means that the natural process of intergenerational language transmission is increasingly being lost, and the youngest generation of speakers is shrinking in number at a very fast pace, even though one may still encounter families in which Lemko is the exclusive language of communication, including with the youngest members (Wicherkiewicz 2011b).

Studies on language attitudes among Lemkos conducted by Olena Duć-Fajfer, Justyna Olko, and Anna Maślana (Ватраль 2016) have shown that assimilative processes encompass ethnic identity and language in parallel, though they do not always completely overlap. The discernible continuum of attitudes among Lemkos towards their mother tongue is quite broad, ranging from sacralisation to the highest degree (encountered mainly among poets, activists, and those actively involved in preserving and revitalizing the language) to complete denial of both the value of and need for using the Lemko language to any degree at all.

No direct correlation can be determined between language attitudes and parameters such as age, education, place of residence, gender profession, etc. After all, on the one hand, it would seem that environments closest to that of a traditional rural community would be most conducive to the use of the Lemko language, and it might be said that such was the case until recently. Perhaps, full-fledged family language transmission still does occur in such environments. On the other hand, however, exclusion of the youngest generation from the language community is apparent in the abovementioned environments. Yet, it had seemed until recently that the city, education, and social advancement were disconnecting Lemkos from their language and identity. Today, we see that it is indeed in the cities that a conscious and committed process is underway among the educated and socially well positioned to preserve and use the Lemko language in as many functional fields as possible. It is there that spectacular language-emancipation phenomena are coming

to fruition, and also there that it is not all that rare to encounter full and natural intergenerational transmission and use of the Lemko language among the youngest generation. As regards the generational aspect, increasingly often it is indeed young people who exhibit much greater determination to preserve and develop their Lemko mother tongue than their parents or even grandparents. After all, they are already a generation that came of age outside the shadow barrier that had created trauma and a feeling of inferiority. They are also the beneficiaries of Lemko language instruction in schools. Hence, their linguistic awareness and the tools available to them often put them at the forefront of active language work and attitudes. However, it obviously needs to be stated that this phenomenon pertains to only the small percentage who are most visible in the Lemko community.

If one were to speak of a correlation of some kind, one is seemingly observable (though not completely unambiguous) between loss of natural language transmission and the territorial factor. After all, one cannot fail to observe the fact that Lemko youth in the Lemko homeland (i.e., ethnically Lemko lands) communicate practically exclusively in Lemko at their get-togethers, dances, musical ensembles, and other various occasions when they gather. Indeed, it is the other way around among Lemko youth “in exile” in the lands people were resettled to, where the number of Lemkos is significantly larger than in the mountains. Among the youth there, one hears Polish spoken nearly exclusively. It bears emphasis that while most of the young participants of such gatherings know the Lemko language quite well and use it to address the elderly, they use Polish in peer environments. What is interesting is that though manifestation of attachment to Lemkones in terms of nationality may be observed in ethnic attitudes among the aforementioned youth, they lack linguistic consistency. Nor are there any applicants from the “lands of exile” who might opt for Lemko Language Studies at the Pedagogical University of Cracow, and, therefore, these lands lack professional teachers and Lemko language instruction is in much worse a state there than in the Lemko homeland.

However, the aforementioned processes are not unambiguous. After all, the years 2015 and 2016 saw the opening of two new places of Lemko-language instruction in the western lands of exile (a preschool

in Przemków and an elementary school in Raszówka). Though the instructors do not have Lemko Studies qualifications, they have expressed interest in broadening their competencies and striving for quality of instruction. Contrary to my prior observations, I have recently encountered changes in language attitudes among young people and their communicating in Lemko. Although that does not change the general trends mentioned above, it does testify to the possibility of overcoming one-way, downward dynamics in linguistic processes.

For reasons of assimilation and civilisation,<sup>7</sup> the Lemko language is extremely hybridized in everyday use, often to a degree that it strongly resembles Polish in every linguistic segment.

In the case of Lemko, the assimilation to the dominant/official language natural to every minority language is being strengthened by three unique additional factors. The first is the dispersal and geographical scattering of the community resulting from the expulsions that took place from 1944 to 1946, and then Operation Vistula (1947). The second is the lack of an outside country where Lemko/Rusyn would be the dominant language and its condition be institutionally supported and protected. The third is the ideological diminishment of the status of the Lemko language and its being regarded as a dialect of the Ukrainian language that is not entitled to language rights or opportunities and lacks full linguistic potential.

Anti-assimilation measures have been underway ever since language awareness started forming among the Lemko intelligentsia, with the most significant being the emancipation of the Lemko language as the full-fledged mother tongue of Lemko/Rusyns . It is first and foremost literature that has played a large role here and performs perhaps the greatest function in revitalisation and emancipatory processes through the present day (Duć-Fajfer 2016; Watral 2014). Most of the spectacular initiatives mentioned above which helped Lemko achieve the status of being one of seven minority languages in Poland to which the widest

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<sup>7</sup> I am talking about civilization in Spengler's terms (O. Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, t. 1, Wien 1918, tom 2, München 1922), see Fromm about the consequences of such measures: E. Fromm (1951).

range of language rights are supposed to apply, are geared towards emancipation, meaning they stem from aspirations to develop as many functional fields of civic life as possible in Lemko's mother tongue.

Since emancipation is an obvious modus for preserving and developing endangered minority languages and regarded as natural, few realize its flipside. Emancipation takes place according to the dominant structures' principles of thought and operation, and is based on catching up to those who, having power (i.e., an army and a fleet), are the ones who set the standards. Regardless of various compensation mechanisms, emancipation will always lead to frustration and inferiority complexes regarding the mother tongue and culture, which can be seen as a primary assimilation factor. Aspiration to the standards of the majority a) deprives languages of their uniqueness and the inner cores that generate their entire cultural mechanisms, and b) puts minorities in the role of always playing catch-up to those who are in the lead and consider their way to be applicable to everyone, as well as in the role of accepting said centric thinking.

In the revitalisation efforts currently underway, advantage can be taken of the various strategies and tools<sup>8</sup> available thanks to speaker know-how and determination, as well as the opportunities offered by today's age. Of significance are not only the technological feasibility and media opportunities created by online interactivity, for example (which has been underestimated, if only on account of the dispersal of the Lemko community), but also the shift in the direction of revitalisation-related thought whose beginnings are already apparent in the Lemko language and identity. The basis of this shift is indigenesness, i.e., the aforementioned unique cultural and mental core that is at the heart of the distinctness and self-existence of indigenous languages. Revitalisation efforts should reach that core, activate it, and simultaneously protect what may be referred to somewhat metaphorically as the language's secret and its secrecy. For example, unlike Polish, which uses deverbal

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8 See, for example, the suggestions in Hinton (2001a, 2011b and 2013), Tsunoda (2005), Grenoble and Whaley (2006), Sallabank (2010), Baker (2011), Austin and Sallabank (2011), Grenoble (2013), Olthuis & Skutnabb-Kangas (2013) etc.

nouns often, the Lemko language uses verbs more often than deverbal nouns; the translation between these two systems is bound to be less than perfect. Categorisation and abstraction may serve as another example. The Lemko language tends to present multiplicity with the help of terms for individual, separate, concrete objects. That does not lend itself to translation with the help of collective terms available in Polish (as well as in other languages of highly-developed civilisations) : for example, Polish collective terms “parents,” “siblings,” can be only translated into Lemko as “mom and dad,” “brother and sister,” and so on. When such basic indigenous aspects of worldview get changed due to switching to Polish-language constructions, the heart of Lemko language worldview is lost, and one begins to think, see, and comprehend in Polish. Similarly acting linguistically traditional forms and ways of knowing not related to the rational and logical structures acquired through classroom education cannot be updated, restored, or used outside the unique context of one’s own language (Bergier 2016; Дуць-Файфєр 2015с) .

A fair share of revitalisation efforts should be based on activating this core of the language . At the same time, the dialectical diversity still tangible today in the Lemko language should obviously not be lost either (as has occurred in normalized, standardized languages). Language instruction needs to be carried out in such a way that would allow students to understand that there is more than one correct form that can be used. Instruction must be holistic and congruent with the traditional model of the world, as well as unique and different from that of dominant-language instruction and dominant knowledge transmission (Bergier 2016) .

I agree to all the conditions pointed out by (Crystal 2000: 127–144) as important for the revitalisation of endangered minority languages. The increase in prestige of minority language among its speakers due to the increase in its prestige in the eyes of the dominant community, due to the acquisition of a broader spectrum of rights by this language, due to its stronger presence in the educational system, due to the creation and maintenance of its textual, written representation, due to its use in electronic technology would definitely be a way of its strengthening. The actual emancipation of the Lemko language is mostly going on along the lines proposed by Crystal. However, as I mentioned before, that is a

way of viewing the language through the power system dictated by the power centers, based on rational ideologies. It is often the case that when we compare the value of a mother tongue to the value of the dominant language, when a minority language starts to develop systems similar to the dominant language, becomes understandable, interesting due to its difference, and at the same time such that a person can identify with it due to its ease of usage. This is an especially great danger for the Lemko language as well (Duć-Fajfer 2017).

Recently, in minority language communities there is an increase in understanding of the importance of constructing the value of mother tongues in accordance not with their relative value compared to the dominant language, but only with the native traditions (Battiste and Henderson 2000; Kuokkanen 2005; Kovach 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas Dunbar 2010; Chacaby 2011). Such understanding increases also in the Lemko cultural environment.<sup>9</sup> When one sees the young generation of Lemkos cultivate to a strong degree this feeling of independent value of their mother tongue and the awareness of their responsibility for its future, the destiny of the Lemko language cannot yet be said to be final. Placing the Lemko language among moribund languages does not seem to be a decision motivated by its actual condition.

This has been merely a random sample of trends in steps being taken towards revitalisation and the responsibility a portion of Lemko speakers have woken up to regarding the cultural wealth contained in the mother tongue that their ancestors have handed down to them. As we see that awareness of said responsibility is growing inside the younger generation of Lemkos, the fate of the Lemko language is not sealed. However, deciding to include it in revitalisation projects among languages that are being lost would not appear unsubstantiated or unwarranted by the condition it is currently in.

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<sup>9</sup> The examples of such thinking are immersion Lemko language programs introduced in the Pedagogic University in Kraków and in certain schools, the creation of an explanatory, not bilingual Lemko dictionary, the publishing of the series *Library of Lemko Classics*.

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