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## WYMSORYS LANGUAGE



The traditional language of the Southern Polish town of Wilamowice, Wymysorys is the smallest language in the West Germanic family. At the present time, less than 45 of the town's, just under 3000 inhabitants, speak Wymysorys as a native language with varying proficiency, of whom, the majority are over the age of 80. If not for recent efforts to engage the town's younger population in learning their traditional language, Wymysorys would be considered moribund, with only isolated cases of children learning the language since the conclusion of the Second World War. In 2009 the language was classified by UNESCO as "Severely Endangered" (Mosely 2009), that is the language is predominately spoken by an older generation, while successive generations have ceased to continue speaking their traditional language. Recent efforts to re-engage the present younger generation of speakers by both linguists and native speakers have met with considerable success and the position of Wymysorys appears to be improving for the first time since the conclusion of a Soviet ban of the language in 1956.

The classification of Wymysorys is a contentious issue and one that has been the focus of much of the scholarly work on the language over the past century. Historically, it has been grouped alongside languages such as Modern German as an Irminonic Language. This classification is at odds with folk-history of the last Wilamowiceans, who variously claim to be descendant of Frisian, Flemish or English settlers, a claim that has yet to be investigated on the basis of the genetic origins of the phonological and morphological innovations of Wymysorys (Ritchie, 2012).

Wymysorys has resisted the tendency to shift toward the majority languages (Polish and German) primarily due to a tradition of endogamic marriages and a relative isolation from the surrounding Polish villages. The Wilamowicean people preserved their language and maintained their separate ethnic identity and folk culture for many centuries, however, this state of affairs changed shortly after World War II. During the communist period the use of language as well as cultural practices (together with the traditional folk costumes) were prohibited by the Polish authorities. The ban was lifted in 1956 but as a result of the discontinuity in the intergenerational transmission, the number of Wymysorys native speakers decreased dramatically. The abandonment of previously common endogamy rule and the influx of non-native population further accelerated this process.

Currently, Wymysorys speech community is not entitled to receive institutional support for the maintenance and preservation of the language. It lacks official recognition by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, signed by Poland in 2003, and it hasn't been recognized by the Polish Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and on the Regional Languages. There is no Wymysorys instruction at school, no published learning materials and no official teaching program. However, according to the recent sociolinguistic research, more than 50% of the population declare it important for the children to learn songs in Wymysorys in the local schools, and more than 75% is convinced that the language should be preserved and protected as cultural heritage (Neels, 2012).

Over the last two decades, the language has become a subject of linguistic interest and a number of revitalization initiatives have been undertaken. Most of these initiatives emerged within the „Association Wilamowiceans”, a locally established NGO, and have been coordinated by the main revitalizer of the language – Tymoteusz Król. For the last couple of years he has been conducting private lessons of Wymysorys for a group of 8 students, mostly children. He has also gathered language documentation (more than 500 hours of recording featuring nicknames, folk tales, family stories, personal accounts, biographies, 40 songs, folk dress descriptions, genealogy, everyday talks, town history, customs and traditions). The revitalization efforts of Tymoteusz Król, with collaboration of linguists and other members of the association, have also involved orthographic and lexical standardization, didactics and literary work in the Wymysorys language (publishing of books and a dictionary) as well as the activities of the folk dance group “Wilamowice” (reconstruction of customs and traditions, song learning in Wymysorys).

In 2013 the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” of the University of Warsaw in collaboration with the “Association Wilamowiceans” as well as Polish and foreign scholars, began to carry out the project *Endangered languages. Comprehensive models for research and Revitalization*. The project focuses on three endangered languages in two countries: Nahuatl in Mexico; and Lemko and Wymysorys in Poland. Our main aims include the construction of a unique, efficient model for the revitalization of

each of these languages, as well as a more general, universal model for revitalization that could be applied to other endangered languages. These goals are being pursued in two ways: first, through interdisciplinary research including documentary work as well as investigation of both the cultural-historical background and the present state of the languages; and second, through close collaboration with Nahuatl, Lemko and Wymysorys native speakers and their communities. The collected resources serve to create dictionaries, grammars and manuals, among them the first Wymysorys textbook for children, together with a picture dictionary as well as monolingual story tales for children. The Faculty of "Artes Liberales" will also host an international conference on endangered languages' revitalization which will be held in the town of Wilamowice from 11 to 15 June. The conference seeks to explore new approaches to language revitalization and it will provide a space for native speakers, community members and scholars to exchange and discuss common experiences as well as to present and discuss contributions to scientific knowledge about studied languages.

The launch of our research project and the establishment of The Wymysiöeryśy Akademij – Accademia Wilamowicziana (WA-AW) at the Faculty of "Artes Liberales" in November, 2013 marks an important new direction in the conservation of Wymysorys and hopefully a chance for a new beginning for the language. WA-AW was founded in 2013 with the goal of creating a single academic body through which efforts in documentation and revitalization of Wymysorys could be coordinated. The WA-AW for the first time brings together native speakers, academics and community members in an international partnership of co-operation and understanding. On the 12.6.14 the WA-AW will release its first major publication, The Wymysorys Red Paper, which will outline future revitalization programs for the language, specifically concerning the introduction of Wymysorys in local schools.

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