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**Michał Głuszkowski,
Institute of Slavonic Languages
Nicolaus Copernicus University of Toruń, Poland**

Socio- and Psycholinguistic Aspects of Evolution of Minority Languages in the EU: the Polish Old Believers' Case

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The main aim of this paper is to show the relationship between sociological and psychological factors and the evolution of minority languages. It is based on the results of a research project on the Old Believers (starovery, staroobr'adtsy) community near Augustów in north-eastern Poland. The research in question was performed by the scientific workers of Slavic Languages Institute at Nicolaus Copernicus University of Toruń. The first observations made by this research group, were presented in the 1970's. There were also other research centers interested in the Old Believers, but nowadays the University of Toruń is the only one, which has continuous contact with the Old Believers community near Augustów.

The history of the Old Believers began in Russia in 1652, when the Patriarch Nikon introduced a number of reforms to their rituals. Some of the followers refused to accept the changes, including the new direction of processions (counter-sunwise instead of sunwise), the sign of the Cross made with three instead of two fingers and revision of sacred texts. Although these reforms may appear trivial to contemporary people, they had begun the disobedience of a part of the Orthodox Church. Those worshippers, who did not endorse Nikon's reforms, were officially deprived of church and civil rights at the synod of 1666. This was also the beginning of a schism in the Russian Orthodox Church (raskol). While the innovations were supported by Tsar Alexey Mikhaylovitch and his successors, the anti-reformists were severely persecuted, punished and even sentenced to death, both by church and state authorities. As a result, a large number of the Old Believers decided to live in exile – off the beaten track in Russia or in other countries, especially the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania and later also Bulgaria, USA, Canada and others.

The first Old Believers had settled in Poland in the end of the 17th century. In the beginning, there were several villages founded at the eastern frontier (present Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania), where the Old Believers were granted land and freedom of religious practices by Polish landowners. Due to the fact that they were constantly displaced by tsar's soldiers and most of their main centers were destroyed several times, the Old Believers moved to other Polish regions – the eastern part of

the Mazurian Lakeside and the areas of today's cities of Suwałki, Augustów and Białystok. After the Second World War, the town of Augustów with its surrounding villages (Gabowe Grądy and Bór) became the biggest Old Believers' centre. The other clusters, which were important in the 19th and 20th centuries, up to the First World War, are nowadays inhabited by an insignificant number of elderly old people and they have practically disappeared. The convent in the village of Wojnowo (Pupy) near Szczytno, well known as an important printing house of sacred books, was given by the last residing nuns to some private owners, who converted it into a hotel.

The history, culture and language of Polish Old Believers were comprehensively described in the 1970's and 1980's by I. Grek-Pabisowa, I. Maryniakowa and E. Iwaniec (e.g. Iwaniec 1977; Grek-Pabisowa 1999 – collected articles). All the texts relating to the language were based on the research and recordings made in the 1950's. Nowadays the situation has changed so much, that the enumerated works are only of historical value. Some changes have already been characterized by A. Zielińska in *Wielojęzyczność staroobrzędowców mieszkających w Polsce* (Multilingualism of the Old Believers living in Poland) but this work referred mostly to their Polish language (Zielińska 1996). The whole of recent linguistic and cultural metamorphosis of the community of our interest is possible to comprehend with the observations from the last 7 years and almost 200 hours of recordings in the archive of the Slavic Languages Institute in Torun.

As it has already been mentioned, the only considerably large communities of the Old Believers in Poland are the villages of Gabowe Grądy and Bór, which have approximately 250 inhabitants. There are also about 200 Old Believers in Augustów, but their religious identity has undergone an atrophy, which excludes them as the successors of their traditional culture. The Old Believers who came to Poland brought with them the culture, religion and language from their regions of origin. The villages of Gabowe Grądy and Bór were founded in the second half of the 19th century by the settlers from Pskov region. Living in a forest, without contact with the outside world, the Old Believers could preserve their distinctness. They were not bothered by Polish landowners, who esteemed the newcomers for their hardworking and peaceful disposition. Their strict religious rules, with numerous fasts and sacrifices, were conducive to keep the primeval Old Believer's identity alive through the ages. Isolation from the Russian 'language continent' resulted in them maintaining numerous archaisms in the field of tradition and language, what is typical for long-lasting 'language islands' (e.g. Dzięgieł 2003, 13). The Old Believers could live and work at will, almost independently of the outside world, because their contacts with the neighbouring Polish villages were delimited to situations when they were absolutely necessary. However, the self-created equilibrium between the preservation of their identity and the influence of Polish surroundings has been upset by successive historical events and processes.

After the First World War, the Republic of Poland regained independence. The inter-war period was very important for the institutionalisation and legalisation of the Old Believers Orthodox Church in Poland, which took place in Vilnius in 1925 (Iwaniec 1977, 72). This fact and the visit of the then President of Poland, Ignacy Mościcki, at the Old Believer Council in 1930, were of great value to their whole community. The increase in importance of the minority didn't affect much either their culture or identity; they were still living in isolated places but with the state legitimisation.

The evolution of all Old Believers' communities in Poland stepped up after the Second World War. It has to be admitted that the years 1939-45 were exceptionally tragic. There were cases of triple nationality – an Old Believer from the former German partition (Mazurian region) was conscripted by Wehrmacht as all citizens of Germany. While attacking a Russian village, he realized that he was killing his compatriots and surrendered to the approaching Red Army, declaring that he was Russian. However, he was not considered as a fellow countryman by the Russian soldiers and they imprisoned him in a P.O.W. camp. In the camp, he met a friend of his from the same Mazurian village who inclined him to join the Polish Army. He left his village as a German soldier and came back as a Polish one (Łatyszonek 2000, 39). The Old Believers from the Russian partition (the eastern part of Mazurian Lakeside and Augustów region) were displaced into Eastern Prussia as forced labourers (Iwaniec 1977, 97). The inhabitants of Gabowe Grądy and Bór, who spent the war in Tylsit district, found their villages looted and burnt down upon their homecoming, not only by the German Army but also by Polish neighbours. They had to live in dugouts until they built their new houses. Such cases on the one hand, and the Old Believers serving in Wehrmacht on the other, aroused mutual distrust between the Russian minority and Polish community. Though relatively strong, the distrust of the outside world was not able to stop the strengthening influence of civilizational changes on this traditional community. Electrification, roads, mass education and mass media have brought new values and outlooks upon life to the Old Believers. The traditional culture remained almost unchanged until people born before the war were in majority. The youth, educated in Polish schools, among Polish peers, were more eager to liberalize the harsh religious and cultural rules. In the past, it had been forbidden e.g. to smoke, drink alcohol, use the same dishes with non-Old Believers, and to be photographed. According to E. Iwaniec and I. Grek-Pabisowa (ibid. 223; Grek-Pabisowa 1999: 291-99) and also to S. Grzybowski's firsthand account (the supervisor of the University of Toruń research group), in the 1970's only the oldest men and women obeyed all religious and custom rules. The ban on smoking was not observed anymore by the middle-aged and young people, taking pictures became banned only at cemeteries and there were cases of children playing with the sacred books and getting them dirty. The main factors protecting the minority's identity from the mainstream culture and

amalgamation started to fade. However, there was still a kind of equilibrium between the developing world and the old people guarding tradition, which under certain circumstances might last for years (Karaliūnas 1988, 18-20). The changes in the Old Believers' community were slow and quiet but unavoidable.

Simultaneously, with the evolution of culture, the language changes were underway. The Old Believers from the villages of Gabowe Grądy and Bór are bilinguals; they use both northern-Russian Pskovian dialect and Polish language. For the oldest inhabitants of both villages who were born before the Second World War, Russian dialect is their primary language and they acquired Polish later (Paško 2004, 381). The middle-aged Old Believers learned both their languages simultaneously and it's difficult to determine which is the primary one. The youth was taught Polish first, because their parents wanted to ensure them a trouble-free education start. The traditional dialect is their secondary language, used while talking to older relatives and neighbours.

The influence of the dominant language on the minority dialect is strictly connected with the sense of cultural identity of the community (Straczuk 1999, 13). The weaker the factors integrating the group (e.g. common values, sense of national pride, loyalty to the heritage), the stronger and more intense are the changes in the minority's language. When a person uses two or more languages, some deviations from the norms of either language occur in his/her speech. These phenomena have been named 'interference' (Weinreich 1963, 1). There are all kinds of interference in the Old Believers' dialect: phonic (e.g. phone substitution of consonants – the northern-Russian phonemes have been replaced by the Polish ones), grammatical (e.g. reinterpretation of the gender category of substantives, integration of foreign lexis), and lexical (foreign lexis as such). Since the Pskovian dialect had been exposed to the influence of Polish language as early as in the 17th century, the emigrants had acquired some foreign lexis before settling in Poland (Doroszkiwicz 1991, 11). Each case of loosening of traditional bans entailed a larger total amount of interference. The oldest Old Believers are fully bilingual, without diglossia, i.e. hierarchical relation between the languages being used by them, with certain domains of use for each language (Zielińska 1996, 22; 125). They grew up in relatively isolated communities with no serious need of contacts with the outside world. The situation of the post-war generations was different, because education was much more widespread and lasted longer. They also needed to visit neighbouring Polish villages and the town of Augustów quite often to buy necessities and to sell their crops. The increasing number of the Old Believers getting education at their villages brought about migrations out of Gabowe Grądy and Bór. It has been observed that children from minority groups are often ashamed of their parents accent and distinctness and try to hide it (Micewicz 1975, 25). I also want to point to the possible conflict between the values of the minority and these of the dominant group (Mironowicz 2000, 53-54). The pursuit for social advancement often entails abandoning one's heritage and mother tongue

for the sake of assimilation with the mainstream culture (ibid. 52). The enumerated factors upset the former equilibrium and the period of the community's decline began.

The processes mentioned above triggered a chain of events after the system transformation in Poland, which started in 1989. The state-controlled economy was suddenly replaced by the market system. Small farms, with their low soil classes, stood little chance to be profitable in the new reality and there was communist welfare state to support them anymore. Together with the system transformation, new possibilities arose. The shops became full of goods which had been inaccessible before, but, in fact, they remained out of reach for ordinary people due to the lack of money. Such inconsistency between the desired values and accessible means gave rise to anomalies. All the roads to the 'Brave New World' lead through the dominant culture, that is why young people leave their minority communities with their narrow range of activities and choose amalgamation. The same is happening to the language. According to U. Weinreich's classification, there are two groups of factors stimulating and restraining the interference phenomena and language shift: structural and non-structural ones. The structural factors are always the same, e.g. similarities and differences between the grammar and phonic systems of both languages and structural weak points in one's vocabulary (Weinreich 1963, 64-65). The language systems of Polish and Russian were almost the same for inter-war generations, as well as for the contemporary youth. However, the prestige of the Old Believers' culture and of the dialect as such has changed. These are the non-structural, i.e. psycho- and sociolinguistic factors, which determine the evolution of the language while there are no stimuli from the structure. Of course, this kind of reasoning is only a simplistic outline which proves that more facts and examples from other minority communities are needed to give a comprehensive description of the language and social evolution of the Polish Old Believers.

A description of all language minorities, even if we reduce the list to Poland, is a complicated task, that's why I suggest considering only a few chosen groups and diasporas. Let us pay attention to the Kashubian minority. They are a western-Slavic people, who live in the central and western part of Pomerania. Do they use a separate Kashubian language or just another Polish dialect? Most of the sources and studies claim that Kashubian is the most sophisticated Polish dialect (*EGW*, 37), but they might as well be considered as Polish citizens of Kashubian nationality and language. Except for the turn of the 1980's and 1990's, when the Kashubians tended to achieve the social advancement by abandoning their language, they still have a strong sense of national pride (Latoszek 1997, 188). It is not a large group, according to the census in 2002, there were 5100 people declaring Kashubian nationality. However, they have always had a rich literature, periodicals and organizations (*EGW*, 37), which stimulated loyalty to their mother tongue and culture. The Kashubians are an example of a prospering minority with strong identity and resistance

factors against amalgamation. The main differences between them and the Old Believers are: literature, minority language schools, numerous associations and the number of fellow countrymen.

The next mentioned minority group seems at the first glance not to have anything in common with the Polish Old Believers. The language and social situation of Yugoslav migrants in Sweden were comprehensively described in the 1980's by a research team from Lund University (the JUBA Programme). Although the citizens of former Yugoslavia came to their new country not so long ago, especially in comparison with Polish Old Believers, there are many similarities among the language evolution of both groups. The young Serbs, Croatians and Bosnians living in Sweden in the 1980's, as well as the Old Believer youth nowadays, did not isolate from their peers (Stölting 1987, 123). The lack of isolation caused enhanced language interference, e.g. in the field of the grammatical category of case (Đurović 1983, 21-25). Good contact with Swedish classmates was one of the main factors causing the further amalgamation of the migrants. The same is being observed in the beginning of the 21st century in the Old Believers' community in north-eastern Poland. The migrants had left Yugoslavia for economic reasons and although some of them were associated in Yugoslav clubs, they had no intention of emphasizing their origin (Magnusson 1987, 142). In spite of all the differences between them and Polish Old Believers, it has to be admitted that such processes as the influence of social integration on the language changes are universal.

Another minority group compared to the Old Believers in Poland, are the Polish communities in Ukraine. Some Poles remained in the former eastern frontier region; the other places, in central Ukraine, had been founded earlier and stayed outside of the Polish border even in the inter-war period. In general, only the oldest members of Polish communities speak perfect Polish and are fully bilingual. The middle-aged Poles use Ukrainian more often than their mother tongue and in the youth generation it is very difficult to find a bilingual person. The minority language is abandoned while young people leave their villages for economic reasons (Cechosz-Felczyk 2004, 14). Similarly to the Old Believers in Poland, Poles in Ukraine are a language, cultural and religious minority and a lot of them are described as 'language islands'. The factor of assigning a different form to the dominant culture is often mentioned as extremely important for the group's identity (Dzięgiel 2003, 23-24; Straczuk 1999, 38-46). Despite these stimuli, a lot of Polish villages seem to move inevitably towards amalgamation.

The list of other minorities, more or less similar to the Polish Old believers, could be endless. I would like to analyse the perspectives of minority languages and communities in the EU. There are some documents and initiatives which are designed to protect and promote regional or minority languages as an endangered aspect of Europe's cultural heritage. One of them is the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, signed in 1992 in Strasbourg by the member States of the Council of Europe. The Charter contains a number of instructions which should ensure

protection of the endangered languages, e.g. making education available in minority languages, giving the possibility for users of regional or minority languages to submit oral or written applications in these languages, or making amendments in order to facilitate to the broadcasters the possibility to offer programmes in the regional or minority languages (*ECMRL*, §8; §10; §11). This declaration gives rise to numerous structural funds and initiatives and some groups take advantage of them. The Ministry of Education of the Republic of Poland organizes long-term courses and schools of Polish language in Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and other countries of the former Soviet Union (*CODN*). The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is only the starting point for real actions. Unfortunately, there are cases of wasting funds via miscarried programmes. The Romany nation is one of the most neglected groups in the EU, with a high illiteracy rating and which is often discriminated against. Poland has been given 8 millions Euro from the 'Equal' programme for preserving traditional occupations of Romany women. This is a perfect example of unprepared initiatives, because the only traditional profession of Polish Gypsies is fortune-telling (Bielecki 2006, 8) and it is impossible to make use of this money.

The Old Believers are also neglected. There is no institution which would take care of them and lead the community through the tangle of documents, declarations and bureaucracy. There are no people from the minority group, as such, to give rise to any activities which would entail the growth of the community. In my opinion, the Old Believers from Gabowe Grądy and Bór have already reached the 'critical mass' of accomplished social and cultural changes. The youth acquire Polish language as the primary one and use it in peer groups even within the community. System transformations and then joining the EU meant the end of traditional agriculture. In spite of numerous structural funds supporting farms in adverse conditions, the smallholdings have been set in one's way and only three farmers from both villages attempt to reform their farms. Although neither Gabowe Grądy nor Bór were collectivised in the time before transformation, there are the same social phenomena as in former state-owned farms, i.e. unemployment and lack of cultural life. Even young people who are devoted to their tradition, religion and language, have no possibility to stay in the community and leaving it always means abandoning their heritage. The Old Believer youth from the town of Augustów have almost forgotten the language and rarely go to masses in their church, so called 'molenna'. Without the young generation, the community is going to vanish in the coming years.

Paradoxically, the only impulses of activity in Gabowe Grądy and Bór prove that the community structure has changed. A workshop producing wooden lamps, employing approximately 15 workers, is the only developing enterprise in both villages; no one wants to continue the traditional Old Believer occupations. Though there is still an active female vocal band 'Riabina', the tradition and religion have lost their main value and cannot be considered as the resistance

factors against language change. Their language is full of symptoms of interference and in the youngest generation, with some exceptions, it has been reduced to a communicative minimum. This resembles the evolution of some Ukrainian-speaking minorities in the eastern part of Poland. Similar processes were observed in these communities in the 1970's and 1980's and in the beginning of the 21st century. The researchers visited empty or otherwise completely different villages (Janiak 2004, 120-21; 144). That is why the Torunian research group visits Gabowe Grądy and Bór every year recording the speech of the Old Believers as intensively as possible. We hope to gather enough materials for the longitudinal sociolinguistic analysis of particular idiolects, which is needed to describe the evolution of the dialect under dominant language influence, just before amalgamation. Still, there is the incorrigible, naive hope of an omitted super-factor which might change the seemingly determined fate of Polish Old Believers.

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Summary:

The author considers the community of his interest in the context of language and culture evolution. The Old Believers settled in Poland shortly after the schism (raskol) in the Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th century. They preserved their religion, culture and language, and simultaneously, through the ages, they absorbed the culture and language of Polish community, growing into a bilingual and bicultural community. However, the self-created equilibrium was upset. The period of the last 30 years with its urbanization, globalisation and system transformation did more to endanger the culture, language, identity and even existence of the Old Believers than the foregoing three centuries. My main intention is to describe the social and psychological factors which influenced the community of the Old Believers in Poland, and to find the prospects for their future, and also to compare their situation to a few similar, and different, minority societies and communities in Poland and other EU countries. Furthermore, I am trying to answer the questions whether the fate of endangered languages and dialects is already determined, and what are the solutions for the Old Believers. The comparison to other minorities shows some common processes affecting their cultural and language identity, which is related to bilingualism and diglossia, language socialisation and amalgamation with the dominant society. The processes and factors specific to the Old Believers are also pointed out. I have described the possible legal means and moves protecting endangered languages. I explain why the system transformation and joining the EU proved destructive for the Polish Old Believers and what is the 'critical mass' of accomplished cultural, social and demographical changes which make any improvement impossible.

Note on the author:

Michał Głuszkowski, MA in Sociology and Russian Philology, young research worker and Ph.D. student at the Nicolaus Copernicus University of Toruń, Institute of Slavic Languages, ul. Podmurna 9/11, 87-100 Toruń, Poland, e-mail: michg@stud.uni.torun.pl