

The importance of vitality and transmission of the Dzūkian language in the Lithuanian community in Poland and its role and meaning for the preservation of multilingualism

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Keywords: Lithuanian minority, Dzūkian, language transmission, Puńsk, Punkskas

This presentation emphasises the role of the Dzūkian language — the first language acquired by the region's inhabitants — in maintaining multilingualism among Lithuanians in north-eastern Poland. Once part of a dialect continuum, Dzūkian as spoken in Poland has diverged from its Lithuanian variants due to isolation, limited contact with Lithuania, and intensive contact with Polish. These changes affect phonetics, morphology, and syntax. Two main subvarieties exist: the Puńsk variant (spoken by the majority of speakers) and the smaller, more peripheral Sejny variant.

According to census data, 4,633 residents of the Podlaskie Voivodeship speak Lithuanian (5,422 across Poland), and 4,450 individuals identified as Lithuanian in their nationality declaration. The census does not specify which language varieties are used or in the domains in which they are employed.

Transgenerational language transmission currently appears stable. Dzūkian remains the primary medium of communication within families and in informal neighbourhood interactions. Most community members are multilingual, using Dzūkian, Standard Lithuanian, and Standard Polish on a daily basis. English is also increasingly common, particularly among younger and middle-aged speakers. Dzūkian is acquired first and serves as a foundation for future multilingualism, making the order of language acquisition crucial to the community's linguistic vitality.

In the context of declining birth rates and migration to larger cities, supporting mixed families in raising children bilingually or multilingually is increasingly important. The prestige of the local language should be promoted without positioning it in competition with Standard Lithuanian — the two should complement each other. Regional education, even in schools where Lithuanian is not the language of instruction, should include local history, culture, and notable figures.

Attitudes toward Dzūkian appear to have shifted in a positive direction since earlier surveys. Various initiatives now promote the language: theatrical performances, public lectures, vocabulary publications, and community events such as 'Versmė'. Dzūkian also appears on posters and social media, including during live broadcasts of local basketball matches — a significant marker of community identity.

While the use of Dzūkian is not endangered, the region faces significant challenges. Population decline, migration, and rising rates of mixed marriages are creating hybrid identities and reducing the community's size. Dzūkian exists between two prestigious languages: Standard Polish, the official state language, and Standard Lithuanian, a strong national symbol.

Lithuanian language education is available but concentrated in central towns like Puńsk, Sejny, and Suwałki. Demographic and economic pressures are causing it to diminish in smaller localities. To strengthen Dzūkian's vitality as part of both multilingualism and local cultural heritage, it is essential to develop resources, promote bilingual education, and highlight the benefits of linguistic diversity. Local activists, community leaders, and regional authorities play a crucial role in shaping the educational and policy environment needed to sustain this unique linguistic community.