Mitelojropa w 2009:
The Silesian Language and Central Europe

Creating an Einzelsprache is a long and often bitterly contested process, especially if not supported by the state in which a target speech community happens to reside. In Central Europe this is the typical situation of all the speech communities that are not fully recognized as ethnolinguistic nations with a nation-state of their own. In the literature, such communities’ Einzelsprachen (speech varieties, lects) are dubbed “minority languages.” But this category is confusing because, above all, the term is employed for referring to the languages of national minorities, be it Germans in Poland, Hungarians in Slovakia, or Poles in Lithuania. However, the Einzelsprachen of German, Hungarian or Polish are full-fledged national and official languages used in administration, education, and public life in Germany (alongside Austria and Liechtenstein), Hungary, and Poland, respectively. From the perspective of these ethnolinguistic nation-states, none of these languages suffers any minority status, which in this case is the sociopolitical disability of these speakers of the three Einzelsprachen who live outside “their” national polities (kin states).

Languages of stateless nations or ethnic groups (that is, nations or ethnic groups without kin states of their own) are more “minority-like” in whatever country, because none is an ethnolinguistic nation-state of their speech communities (contrasted as ethnolinguistic nations). In Central Europe hardly any state is interested in developing languages of this type into full-fledged Einzelsprachen because such a decision would be at loggerheads with ethnolinguistic nationalism’s principle of the normative isomorphism of language, nation, and state. Hence, a language of this kind is either sidelined and suppressed, or at best defined (from above, without consulting the concerned) as a mere dialect of the national language. In the former case, the process is known as (forced) assimilation, while in the latter as dialect levelling, which is equally forced by compulsory elementary education in the standard dialect of the national language. However, in both cases the expected effect is the same, namely, the disappearance of such languages and dialects from everyday public and private use. Rarely, due to some cataclysmic geopolitical events, like World War Two in Central Europe, a stateless minority language may be accorded some (international) protection, which helps to develop it into an Einzelsprache and secures recognition, both in the country of the speech community’s residence and abroad. This is the situation of Germany’s two Slavic languages of Lower Sorbian and Upper Sorbian, with 7,000 and 13,000 speakers (in 2007), respectively (Sorbian, Lower 2021; Sorbian, Upper 2021).

In 1992, the Council of Europe adopted a European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages, which came into force six years later, in 1998. The distinction between regional and minority languages was introduced at France’s insistence. Paris, however, was reluctant to sign this charter, which it did only in 1999. Afterward, the ratification was procrastinated until 2015, when the French Senate finally rejected the charter altogether. It appears that the category of regional language was to help the French government to refuse the label of (national) minority language to Dutch in Nord-Pas-de-Calais and to German in Alsace. The former is officially known in France as Western Flemish, while the latter as Alsatian. Poland, which signed and ratified the charter recognizes as minority languages all the Einzelsprachen (speech varieties, dialects) of all the officially recognized minorities. However, in 2005 an act was adopted that ranks the country’s recognized minorities into two groups, the first of the more privileged national minorities, and the other of the less privileged ethnic minorities. The former have a kin nation-state, while the latter do not. In addition, Poland recognizes a single regional language, namely, Kashubian, spoken and written by the Kashubs. But Warsaw does not perceive the Kashubs as an ethnic minority because they are officially defined as a regional group of the ethnolinguistically defined Polish nation. In today’s Poland, Silesian is the largest minority language spoken and written by over half a million people. Yet, irrespective of the Silesians’ wishes to the contrary, the state administration does not recognize this fact. The Silesians are officially defined as a regional or social group of the Polish nation, and their language as a mere group of subdialects (guary) of the Polish language. Some Polish scholars whose research shows the existence of a clearly delineated ethnic difference between Poles and Silesians prefer to speak about the Silesian ethnoloc to avoid using the ideologically “inappropriate” term “language.”

The grassroots movement for standardizing and recognizing the Silesian language coalesced at the turn of the twenty-first century. In 2007, Silesian was recognized as a language under the provisions of the ISO 639-3 standard, that is, at the international level and in cyberspace. A year later, in 2008, a Silesian Wikipedia went online and currently (2018) ranks as the 152nd largest Wikipedia by the number of articles among the world’s extant 302 Wikipedias. In 2009, the standard of Silesian spelling was adopted, and in the decade of 2009–2018 almost 50 volumes were published in this orthography.

From the perspective of ethnolinguistic nationalism, the litmus test of the viability of a national (ethnic) movement is
whether its popular support is sufficient for generating a range of resources that, on the one hand, serve as icons reconfirming the existence of a nation (or ethnic group) to other nations (for instance, a national flag or language), while on the other serve to prove that the nation (or ethnic group) in question is “modern” (for instance, presence on the internet). The difficulty is that typically all such icons and proofs need to be produced without any aid on the state’s part, though speakers of an (unrecognized) stateless minority language contribute taxes to such a state budget, like other citizens. One of the most difficult genres of such resources is the map of a continent in a minority Einzelsprache. In order to produce a map in a minority language the movement needs funds in the range of several tens of thousands of Euros, cartographic technology, and standardized versions of the names of countries, cities, towns, rivers, and mountain ranges. The sheer difficulty of meeting all these necessary preconditions is exemplified by the European Union member state of Malta. Apart from the co-official language of English, the nation-state’s national and official language is Maltese. But to this day no school or otherwise widely available Maltese-language map of the country or of Europe has yet been developed. The article on Europe in the Maltese Wikipedia provides maps of the continent in English and German, while the article on Malta provides maps of the country without any placenames.

The first-ever map of Europe in Silesian was made for Wikipedia in 2009. Andrzyj (Andreas) Roczniok is one of the first codifiers of the Silesian language, and in addition, between 2003 and 2017, he published the majority of the Silesian-language books. In 2012, I enquired whether he would be interested in developing a fuller list of Silesian-language place-names for a map of Central Europe. He agreed and the place-names he provided underpin Map 41. But the standardization of Silesian has not been completed and this language has not been recognized by Poland yet. The map is the first of its kind, and therefore, an imperfect, attempt at representing Central Europe through the lens of the coalescing Einzelsprache of Silesian. This explains the differences in spelling and terminological choices between the aforementioned Wikipedia map of Europe in Silesian and this Silesian-language map of Central Europe. Dariusz Jerczyński, the author of the first-ever extensive history of Silesia written from a Silesian national perspective (Jerczyński 2013), shared with me a detailed criticism of the Silesian forms of the placenames employed on Map 41. This amply shows how much spade work remains to be done in order to produce a Silesian-language map of (Central) Europe that would be accepted by the majority of Silesian-speakers. I am afraid that no map of this type will enjoy such wide acceptance prior to the recognition of Silesian as a (regional) language by Poland, and before the introduction of the subject of Silesian language and culture to schools across (Upper) Silesia. And even this may not be enough, as shown by the case of Poland’s recognized regional language of Kashubian, which is taught as a school subject. I also hoped to develop a map of Central Europe in Kashubian, but Kashubian specialists and activists who I approached informed me that by 2006 only the standardization of the Kashubian versions of the place-names in the ethnic region of Kashubia had been completed. Like the Maltese Wikipedia, the Kashubian Wikipedia’s article on Europe features maps of the continent in English and German, with Kashubian employed only for the names of the member states on the map of the European Union.