

## About Sorbian Language

The Sorbian language belongs to the Slavic family of languages and is closely related to Polish, Kashubian, Czech and Slovak. These languages, along with the extinct Pomeranian (for example, Slovincian) and Polabian (for example, Draveno-Polabian in the Hanoverian Wendland), compose the West Slavic language group. One common characteristic of Western Slavic languages and dialects is the development of the Indo-European "kt" to "c" (cf. in Latin *noktis*, or night, in West Slavic *noc*) in contrast to:

"č" in Eastern Slavic	"št" in Southern Slavic
cf. in Russian <b>ноч</b>	cf. in Bulgarian <b>ношт</b>

Once spoken between Bober River and Queiß River in the East, the Saale River in the West, the Erz and Lusatian Mountains in the South and approximately Frankfurt on the Oder-Köpenick-Jüterbog-Barby on the Elbe to the North, Sorbian is still used in Upper and Lower Lusatia, where the Old Sorbian tribes of the Milceni and Luzici settled. The steady decrease in size of the Sorbian language area was brought about by the following factors: the Old Sorbian tribes' loss of independence in the 10th century, the subsequent rural settlement of their territory by Franks, Thuringians, and Saxons, the expansion of German cities and trade, and the official ban of the Sorbian language that came into effect in the 13th century. The Sorbian language was completely driven out of territories outside Lusatia. Nevertheless, it left its mark on place and field names, as well as with individual relic words (for example, Gera from *gora*, or *mountain*; Leipzig from the Sorbian Lipsk originating from *lipa*, *linden tree*). The Reformation promoted the expansion of Christian teachings in the vernacular and, therefore promoted the written use of Sorbian. At this time the closed Sorbian language area reached the Bober and past Krossen in the North East, to Pleiske and the Northern bend of the Spree River (Fürstenwalde) to the North, nearing the Nuthe River in the West and Riesa on the Elbe River. The present Sorbian language area includes: the former Upper Lusatian counties Weißwasser, Hoyerswerda, and Bautzen, as well as neighboring parts of the counties Senftenberg, Kamenz, Bischofswerda, Löbau and Niesky, the Lower Lusatian counties Cottbus, Spremberg, with the bordering areas of the counties Lübben, Calau, Forst and Guben. (See map) The number of people in these Lusatian counties who have mastered the Sorbian language is estimated to be about 70,000.

The division of Sorbian language area in various political territories (the Margravates of Upper and Lower Lusatia, the Electorates of Saxony and Brandenburg, the Bishopric of Magdeburg, the Principality of Sagan) and the lack of a Sorbian economic and cultural center and the introduction of written Sorbian were the reasons for the development of various written forms of the Sorbian language after the Reformation. Two of these languages survived until the middle of the nineteenth century when they were finally accepted as standard languages: the Upper Lusatian standard language based on the dialect spoken in the area around Bautzen and the Lower Lusatian standard language based on the dialect spoken in the area around Cottbus. The development of the Upper and Lower Sorbian standard languages and their norms can clearly be seen in linguistic examples. They mirror the respective linguistical state at the time of their development and thereby make it possible to reconstruct this development. These early texts have a special value in the field of the Sorbian language because these linguistic examples are, in many cases, the only witnesses of the lingual characteristics of Sorbian dialects in modern germanisized territories.

The first extensive written Sorbian texts came about as translations of religious literature in the sixteenth century with the Reformation. Important documents in the history of the written Sorbian language are: "Fragment of a Agenda" (1543) by Zossen, the translation of the New Testament (1548) by M. Jakubica from Laubnitz, a handwritten hymnal and the "Wolfenbüttel Psaltery". The latter both come from the area of Luckau and are from the sixteenth century. Most of the Sorbian



texts from this time period, and even many from the seventeenth century including the first comprehensive Lower Sorbian grammar textbook (1650) by the Lübbenau Pastor J. Chojnan (1616-1664), remained in handwritten form. In this time period, written works had the best chances to be published if they fulfilled the demand for national education, even in a broader sense. The first printed book in the Sorbian language was the translation of the "Little Catechism" (Bautzen, 1574) by the Straupitz Pastor A. Moller (1541-1618) along with a collection of Lower Sorbian hymns.

In 1595, the first Upper Sorbian translation of the "Little Catechism" was published, along with "Teaching, How the Letters of the Wendian Language Are to Be Used and Pronounced" by W. Warichius (1564-1618).

Only a few Sorbian glosses preserved within Latin manuscript from pre-Reformation times (12th century) were found in Magdeburg. Numerous oaths of office in the Sorbian language, with which Sorbian underlings had to show allegiance, were believed to exist due to numerous oaths that survived from later times. The "Wendian Burgher's Oath" from Bautzen in the end of fifteenth century is one of these. Many Sorbian language texts from later times were lost due to violent or rash destruction. In 1667, the Elector of Brandenburg ordered that all Sorbian texts in Sorbian territories in the Brandenbrug electorate were to be confiscated and destroyed. This liquidation order was followed so thoroughly that the only proof of the existence of Sorbian literature from the Electoral area (Psaltery from 1653, Catechisms and Articles of Faith from 1654, Hymnals from 1654, Extracts from the Holy Bible from 1656) is the report of their destruction. Only a short time later in 1669, the Lübben Upper Konsistorium for Saxonian Lower Lusatia issued a similiar order of destruction. The newly published "Sorbian Primer" by School Director G. Ermelius in Kalau was also a victim of this destruction. Conflagration, the chaos of war and the deliberate destruction of Sorbian cultural assets, especially during the National Socialist period, led to even further destruction.

The existence of two Sorbian standard languages, and the areas in which they are used, was motivated more by history than linguistics. The unusual features of both these languages do not overlap in the same way as do the spoken dialects in Upper and Lower Lusatia. Individual linguistical features in the Upper Sorbian language are just as typical for many Lower Sorbian dialects - for example, the preservation of the consonant "r" after a "p" or "k" as in *prawo*, or *law*, and *krawy*, or *bloody*. The same is true vice versa -

example, the hardening of "š" and "ž"  
as in *šyja*, or throat, and *žywjenje*, or life.

This is also true for the following common differences between the Upper and Lower Sorbian languages. These differences have often been cited as proof of the territorially divided dichotomy of the Sorbian languages:

Upper Sorbian	Lower Sorbian

"h" ( <i>hora</i> - mountain, <i>sněh</i> - snow)	"g" ( <i>gora</i> , <i>sněg</i> )
"č" ( <i>čas</i> - time, <i>čorny</i> - black)	"c" ( <i>cas</i> , <i>carny</i> )
"ć, dž" ( <i>ćělo</i> - body, <i>džed</i> - grandfather)	"ś, ź" ( <i>śělo</i> , <i>źed</i> )
"-aj, -omaj" ( <i>dwaj wozaj</i> , <i>wozomaj</i> [with] two cars )	"-a, -oma" ( <i>dwa woza</i> , <i>wozoma</i> )
"-nyć" ( <i>wuknyć</i> - to learn)	"-nuś" ( <i>wuknuś</i> )
"-ej" ( <i>konjej</i> - horse {dative})	"-aju" ( <i>konjoju</i> )
<i>kwas</i> - marriage	<i>swajība</i>
<i>prajić</i> - to say	<i>groniś</i>
<i>košla</i> - shirt	<i>zgło</i>

These and other features of the Upper and Lower Sorbian standard languages do not have congruent circulation in areas where Sorbian dialects are spoken. So, for example, the characteristic *Supinum*, verb forms ending in "t" used after motion verbs, of the Lower Sorbian language is only found in dialects north of Cottbus. An example is:

**"I am going to sleep"**

Upper Sorbian	Lower Sorbian
<i>Póndu spać</i>	<i>Pojdu spat</i>

On the other hand, it is common in both Lower Sorbian and some Upper Sorbian dialects to use the same forms for dual accusative masculine for animals and dual genitive. An example is in Lower Sorbian, *Mam dweju konjowu*, or "I have two horses" and in Upper Sorbian (nominative dual), *Mam dwaj konjej*. This, however, is not common in dialects of Lower Sorbian from Horno in the county of Guben.

The Sorbian language area is known for a relatively strong language differentiation by territorial and local dialects. This, in part, can be traced back to the inherited characteristics from Old Slavic in the tribal dialects spoken by the Milceni in Upper Lusatia and the Luzici in Lower Lusatia. It is mostly, though, due to the different expansion of linguistic developments, both earlier and present. Within this development there were also linguistic innovations that reached all Sorbian dialects and are only common to Sorbian. For example, the specific construction of the future tense using the verb

*měć/měš*

with help from the prefix "z-", as in

**"I will have"**

--	--

Upper Sorbian	Lower Sorbian
<i>změju</i>	<i>změjom</i>

Another example is the coincidence of the *telt/tert* and *tolt/tort* groups as seen in Upper and Lower Sorbian with *mloko*,

Upper Sorbian	Lower Sorbian
<i>brjóh</i>	<i>brjog</i>

in comparison to Polish, *mleko* and *brzeg*. In this way, the Sorbian language area portrays itself as a continuum filled with a growing number of boundaries running progressively from South to North with different linguistic characteristics - as the distance increases, so do the number of dialectal differences. Such lingual boundaries occur increasingly at two points: first, south of the "line" between Hoyerswerda and Weißwasser, and North of Spremberg and Muskau. These occurrences separate the Sorbian language area into three dialectal areas: the original Upper Sorbian dialect area in the South (the old settlement area of the Milceni), the original Lower Sorbian dialect area (the old settlement area of the Luzici), and the area in the middle from Muskau in the East to Senftenberg in the West where transitional dialects are spoken. In this area, linguistic characteristics of Upper and Lower Sorbian are mixed. Individual dialects show different amounts of dialectal characteristics of both Upper and Lower Sorbian.

The original Upper Sorbian dialect area consists of: the Bautzen dialect which makes up the basis of the Upper Sorbian standard language; the Catholic dialect which is spoken in the Catholic parochials between Kamenz and Bautzen; the Wittichenau dialect which is close to the Catholic dialect; the Heide dialects in the parochials Groß Särchen, Lohsa, Uhyst/Spree (the Northern Heide dialect), Klitten, Kreba, and Reichwalde (the Northeastern Heide dialect); as well as the Nochten dialect which is characterized by the accent on the second to last syllable.

The original Lower Sorbian dialect area consists of: the Northeastern Lower Sorbian dialect around Peitz; the Northwestern Lower Sorbian dialect around Burg/Spreewald, Schmogrow, and Fehrow; the Vetschau dialect; the Cottbus dialect which is divided into the Western dialect with the parochials Briesen, Werben, Papitz and Kolkwitz; the Central dialect with the parochials Dissen, Sielow, Gulben, and Cottbus; the Eastern dialect with the parochials Lieskow, Heinersbrück, including Neuendorf and Maust in the parochial Peitz; the Southern Cottbus dialect in the parochials Kahren and Komptendorf; the Spremberg dialect around Wadelsdorf and Sellessen; and the Horno dialect that stands out from other Lower Sorbian dialects due to specific characteristics.

The different distribution of Upper and Lower Sorbian linguistical characteristics in the transitional dialectal area, as well as particular characteristics of its own, divide it into: the Muskau dialect; the Schleife dialect; the Bluno-Sabrodt dialect; the Spreewitz dialect; the Hoyerswerda dialect; and the dialect from Großkoschen near Senftenberg. The Sorbian language is the language in which classes are conducted in Bautzen, Radibor, Crostwitz, Panschwitz-Kuckau, Ralbitz, and Cottbus as well as being a subject in all school districts with a Sorbian population. There are newspapers, magazine and written works of belletristic, journalistic, and scientific nature in the Sorbian language. The language

is academically cultivated at the Sorbian Institute (Sorbisches Institut e.V.) in Bautzen, at the Institute for Sorbian Studies at the University of Leipzig, as well as at various Slavic Language departments around the world.

Translated into English by Heather Watson from Helmut Faßke's "Sorbische Sprache" in: Die Sorben in Deutschland. Macica Serbska, Bautzen 1991

