‘My Prison’ – a demonstration in Victory Square in Minsk, Belarus, with placards from people detained during the first weeks of protests, standing in a square the exact size of their prison cell (showing how many people were placed in such small cells) with their placards in Russian and Belarusian: ‘Thanks ? for raping, but not killing?; ‘We were not fed for two days’; ‘They said they would kill us and they would not be punished for that’ (Darya Buryakina, TUT.BY)

Belarusian: A state language in danger
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OGMIOS 68: 31 October 2020

1. Editorial

In this issue we celebrate the success of our first completely online annual conference. Obviously a remotely-run on-line international conference is not something that we had been aspiring to, before the COVID-19 pandemic came along and changed the rules for everything. But we succeeded, and the lessons we learned from it are worth reflecting on.

Also in this issue, we consider the plight of a state language which is actually in danger: namely Belarusian, nominally the national language of Belarus, alongside Russian. In the current crisis in that country, since the manifestly rigged re-election of Alyaksandr Lukashenka as president in August this year, the media have concentrated on other, more ‘urgent’ issues, such as the arrest and imprisonment of protesters. But Ogmios is concerned about the ongoing process of attrition of the native language, and you will find that crisis graphically described in words and pictures in these pages.

2021 marks 25 years since the founding of the Foundation for Endangered Languages – its constitution and articles of association, and the first of the annual conferences we have held every year since then. We have plans afoot for a celebration of this milestone in 2021, but as we are determined to make it a face-to-face event, we have to keep pushing back the date, and considering various options for the venue, until the current pandemic allows us to make firmer plans. So, nothing definite to tell you in this issue. Watch this space in future issues, and on our web-site www.ogmios.org.

Chris Moseley

2. Development of the Foundation

Subcommittees: Shaking the Foundation

During 2020 our executive committee has set up two subcommittees which are meeting regularly: firstly a Regulatory Subcommittee to review and where necessary overhaul our Constitution and Articles of Association, which have not been changed for many years. The aim is to bring these documents up to date to suit the current needs of the membership and the smooth running of the Foundation, especially the composition of its governing Executive Committee and the process of electing office-holders. Because of the unusual on-line nature of our annual conference in 2020, we didn’t hold the usual Annual General Meeting as a part of the agenda, so that event will be postponed until later in the year, or even early 2021, after the

Regulatory Subcommittee has overhauled the documents and can present them at the AGM.

Secondly, as mentioned in the Editorial, next year, 2021, FEL will have cause to celebrate 25 years of our Foundation’s existence. We have set up a Subcommittee to prepare for those celebrations. They will be a physical event, even if it has to be postponed, with distinguished invited guests who have played a part in shaping the Foundation, and we hope to make a special feature of the work of some of our many Grant recipients over the years. More news of this as the details become firmer.

FEL XXIV: our first on-line conference - London, September 2020:

Teaching and Learning Resources for Endangered Languages
University College London (UCL), UK

Back in 2019, when physical gatherings were still possible, plans were already under way to hold the 2020 FEL conference in London. The two volunteer hosts of the conference are both based at University College London: Riitta Valijärvi, who teaches Finnish at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, and Lily Kahn, Professor of Hebrew and Jewish Languages at the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies. The choice of the conference theme – teaching and learning materials in endangered languages – came naturally to them, as they have been authors and users of textbooks themselves, and also publish grammar books in smaller languages through the UCL Press. Their Call for Papers attracted a big response. But by the time it was necessary to think about practical arrangements – fees, accommodation, venues, excursions, entertainment – it was becoming obvious that the COVID-19 pandemic was here for a long time to come. It wouldn’t be practical to run a physical conference. However, far from wanting to cancel it, they grabbed the bull by the horns; harnessing the IT skills of the technical staff at UCL, they were able to provide a virtual venue – one of the hallmarks of academic and professional life in 2020! After all, the virtual format had some advantages over the physical: the expense of international travel was ruled out; expensive accommodation in London didn’t have to be found for the participants, people could join in as and when they wished. Of course, all the social lubricants that conference-goers enjoy, meeting old friends and making new ones in a new and exciting environment, had to be foregone. But there could still be entertainment – even on-line: a spellbinding concert of klezmer music was arranged by the Department of Jewish Studies. In the comfort of your own home – and the performers’ own home! More entertainment and instruction was provided by a Scottish Gaelic fiction reading event.

The conference was held over three packed days: 23rd to 25th September. The days were long, as it was catering to many time zones – the maximum number, as there were presenters from as far from London, our nominal venue, as New Zealand. The organisers took the precaution of making the Zoom facility open to as many as 300 attendees, because registrations were running
hot! In the end the attendance at any one time was not as intense as that. As there were no expenses on the conference, there were also no fees. This might have been a disadvantage for FEL, but that problem was neatly overcome. Riitta and Lily set up an on-line Just Giving account (you will find a note about that below) to raise money for the Foundation. In the end they raised a very creditable £1911 in this way, and although Just Giving does take a small cut of its own, the organisers have volunteered to make up that difference.

They were generous in accepting papers, a luxury we could now afford! This meant that there was always something going on – and time was rigorously kept by the speakers and the session Chairs. It also creates a potential problem for editing the Proceedings. But not such a serious problem really: papers will be chosen for publication which stuck most nearly to the overall theme of the conference: teaching and learning materials.

Now if you want to luxuriate in the memory of this unique conference, or if you missed it and want to catch up, you can, because it was recorded. The link to the conference recordings is now available: You can access them on the FEL24 YouTube channel:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5JJRvjO5eLUCnFbQwliva

This link is also be posted onto the FEL24 website (https://www.ucl.ac.uk/hebrew-jewish/events/2020/sep/online-foundation-endangered-languages-annual-conference-fel24).

The recordings are arranged by panel (with the three keynote speeches, the concert, and the Gaelic fiction-reading event posted separately).

Chris Moseley

Donations: JustGiving

As mentioned in the report on the 2020 conference, donations to FEL through the Just Giving portal were suggested instead of conference fees. Through JustGiving we raised £1911, which is 95% of the £2000 target we set ourselves. Now that the conference is over, there is still an opportunity to donate to FEL if you want to: you can find a link to JustGiving on the home page of our site www.ogmios.org.
FEL blog

Our FEL blog on our website welcomes your contributions. You can find it at www.ogmios.org/blog. Among recent postings is a blog by Tim Armstrong, who gave us such an engaging Gaelic reading session at our recent London conference. It’s called A novel way to learn a minority language: Writing a novel in the language. He presents his own Gaelic novel Air Cuan Dubh Drìlseach, which won the 2013 Saltire Society award for the best first novel. And you can also read a report from one of our FEL grant recipients, Nathan A. Wendte, entitled Ti Liv Kréyòl: A Learner’s Guide to Louisiana Creole.

3. Endangered Languages in the News

Fall in Welsh-capable teachers risks missing language target, report warns

By Steven Morris, from The Guardian, 6 August 2020

A “striking” decline in the number of newly qualified teacher able to teach in Welsh could undermine the country’s ambition to have a million speakers of the language in 30 years’ time, a report warns.

The Welsh language commissioner, Aled Roberts, expressed concern about the trend and called for the devolved government to take urgent action to reverse the fall.

Three years ago ministers in Wales launches a plan to almost double the number of Welsh speakers by 2050, with a key plank of the strategy being a steady increase in the number of professionals teaching through the language.

But the commissioner’s report says: “There has been a striking reduction in the last five years in the number of newly qualified school teachers who can speak Welsh or are able to work through the medium of Welsh.”

There has been a drop overall in the number of newly qualified teachers in Wales, the report points out. But it continues: “The 23% reduction of newly qualified teachers able to speak Welsh, and 27% reduction in those able to work through the medium of Welsh, far exceeds the 8% reduction in total newly qualified teachers.”

According to the report, there were 285 newly qualified teachers able to work through the medium of Welsh last year, compared with 388 in 2015.

Roberts said: “In order to be close to meeting the targets set by the government, we need a radical increase in the number of teachers in Wales able to teach through the medium of Welsh. Urgent action is required.”

Roberts said it was worrying that a “significant number” of teachers who are fluent or fairly fluent in Welsh do not teach in Welsh. He said this included people who grew up in English-speaking households, left school able to speak Welsh fluently but do not have the confidence to teach in the language.
The commissioner makes a string of recommendations including setting targets relating to Welsh language skills for providers of teacher training and doing more to promote grants to encourage more people to learn to teach through Welsh.

Dilwyn Roberts-Young, the general secretary of the Welsh teaching union UCAC, expressed concern at the figures. He said: “The Welsh language commissioner’s report rightly emphasises the need to have a clear vision for recruiting and retention of teachers and to facilitate pathways to learning Welsh and developing existing Welsh language ability.

“In attracting potential teachers to the profession there is a need to look at broader issues of appropriate salaries, reduced workload and clear career pathways, which can ensure that teaching in Wales is a valued profession.”

A Welsh government spokesperson said recruiting Welsh-medium teachers remained a priority. The spokesperson said the government provided “substantial financial incentives” and ran marketing campaigns to attract new Welsh-medium teachers.

Naxi language’s pictographic Dongba script harnessed for tourism in China

An article in The Economist (UK, 10 October 2020) described the harnessed of the almost defunct Dongba pictographic script of the Naxi people of Yunnan province for touristic purposes. Dongba is a writing system of great antiquity, believed to originate among the Naxi. It was never widely used for writing by the Naxi, being mainly confined to the shamanistic Dongba priesthood, some of whom survive today. The script, consisting of about two thousand pictographs, is still taught in schools in the Lijiang area of Yunnan today. But nowadays it is used mainly as an element of ‘local colour’ to attract tourists to the area; meanwhile Naxi users are urged to speak and write in Han Chinese if they want to be ‘civilised’. Naxi is a Lolo-Burmese language with over two hundred thousand speakers centred around Lijiang in Yunnan.

The Belarusian language under Lukashenka’s regime

by Dr. Hanna Vasilevich

Belarus is often referred to as a state with a weak national identity due to its shift to Russian language usage, which is, despite the official bilingualism since the 1995 referendum, characterized by the domination of Russian in the public sphere. The short period of the single official language status that the Belarusian language enjoyed from 1991 till 1995 has ensured a rise of the number of first-graders studying Belarusian at schools, up to 76 per cents (in the academic year 1994-1995), which was followed by a significant drop down after the referendum (37 percent in the academic year 1995-1996).

Moreover, most of the schools were shifted towards the Russian language program, while Belarusian language classes and schools were closed. The result of the referendum® was drastic for the Belarusian speakers since, despite the official bilingualism, it ensured Russian language dominance, so-called abnormal bilingualism, where Russian is used as by default while to use Belarusian one should put an extra effort and overcome many bureaucratic obstacles. This referendum, like all the other political initiatives initiated by Lukashenka, is questionable and disputable.

Thus, some foreign scholars, such as Grigory Joffe (of Russian descent), see the reintroduction of the Russian language as a natural process, so that the referendum of 1995 “legitimised the actual linguistic situation”, while others, such the French scholar of Belarusian descent Alexandra Goujon, on the contrary, contend that during that turning-point referendum people were not given a choice, while being manipulated to vote for all the questions positively, including the question on Belarus-Russian integration. Therefore, the results of the referendum do not really reflect either linguistic reality or people’s choice at the time.

The abnormality of the official bilingualism in Belarus has been caused by the combination of the following factors:

1. Denunciation of the Belarusian language

During his first (and only officially recognized) term, when Lukashenka was aiming for closer co-operation with Russia, the Belarusian language was very much denounced. Thus, after the referendum, numerous policies were adopted following statements made by President Lukashenka, who publicly disgraced the Belarusian language and encouraged the wider use of Russian:

People who speak Belarusian can do nothing else but speak Belarusian because in Belarusian one cannot express anything significant. The Belarusian language is mean. There are only two great languages in the world — Russian and English.3

Such denunciations induced the process of latent Russification that was embodied in the 1998 amendments to the Language Law, encouraging the unequal practice of bilingualism in Belarus, as an “and/or” formula was introduced, instead of insisting on using both languages, allowing the option of one of the two. Such changes, in combination with the other factors mentioned below, initiated a latent dominance of the Russian language. However, after the process of integration significantly slowed down due to rather aggressive Russian policies aimed at the introduction of the Russian rouble as the single currency in the Belarusian-Russian Union State which, according to many analysts

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1. Despite the rather high share of those voting for state bilingualism, 83.3% of those who voted represented only 54% of all those included in the voting list.


and observers could lead to the loss of Belarusian sovereignty, Lukashenka changed his rhetoric regarding the Belarusian language.

Later in 2010, Lukashenka himself claimed that “the most important national and cultural achievement [of Belarusians as a nation] is the Belarusian language.” This statement completely contradicts his previous statement that one cannot express anything significant in the Belarusian language, showing the gradual embeddedness of the Belarusian language as an inalienable element of Belarusian state policies and accepting the Belarusian language as an essential element of the Belarusian identity at the state level.

However, while recognising the Belarusian language as ‘the cultural heritage’ and a ‘national and cultural achievement’, Lukashenka favours the current official bilingualism.

3. Politicization of the Belarusian language. According to Goujon, Lukashenka’s government claimed that the linguistic policy conducted in 1991-1994 was “designed to discredit the Belarusian people”, while the introduction of Belarusian as the only state language, according to the 1990 Language Law, was presented as actions of the nationalist party members (Belarusian Popular Front), without any consideration of the “opinion of the people.” and thus imposing Belarusian on them.

Lukashenka for a very long time politicized the Belarusian language, directly linking it to the Belarusian opposition, thus labeling it as “benesfatiskaja mova”, i.e. the language used by the members of the BNF. Moreover, people speaking Belarusian on the street were seen as members of the political oppression and, on the eve of major political events, were often detained and faced close attention from the police.

Such practices have slowly changed since 2010, but it was only the grass-roots activities of recent years, aimed at the promotion of the Belarusian language, that significantly contributed to the popularity of the Belarusian language, and released people from the fear of the public usage of Belarusian.

They started as informal Belarusian language groups, like Mova ci kava, Moya nanova, Mowavieda, etc. and within quite a short time grew and became available not only in the capital but nearly all larger cities, gathering a significant number of people, joining to practice Belarusian, training their speaking skills, refreshing their knowledge of Belarusian and finding a partner or group of people for communicating in Belarusian.

2. Legislation and technical shortcomings.

Although the constitution guarantees the equality of the two official languages, all the relevant laws and bylaws contain the “either-or” formula. It means that to meet the formal criteria established by the constitution the usage of one of the official languages is sufficient. In practice, the Russian language is chosen by the majority. Virtually every activity of public bodies, organizations, individuals, or groups that impedes free choice of languages might be classified as an obstacle or limitation if it falls within the scope of this law and particularly deals with the relationship between the two official languages.

At the same time, the following Section Two of the Law entitled “Language of state bodies and other organizations” “de facto contradicts the principles set out in Art. 6. It uses the “either-or” formula concerning the language choice by various public bodies, i.e. for their documentation and public hearings they have to use “Belarusian and (or) Russian”. It is “or” which dominates over “and”, which means that documentation, acts, decisions, proceedings, etc. are issued only in one state language. Thus, “the law does not protect the equality of language because it does not require the official documents to be published in both languages.”

As a result, Belarusian legislation quite often lacks official versions of certain legal acts in one of the state languages, as the translation is not compulsory. In practice, more than 80 percent of the legal acts are issued in the Russian language. For instance, in 2014 only 13% of all resolutions of Belarus’ Council of Ministers were adopted in Belarusian, while only 3.1% of all normative documentation at the National Portal of Legal Information is available in Belarusian.

Such a formulation serves as a commonly used excuse in opting just for one language and thus not having necessary documentation in the other (Belarusian), also often referring to the economic shortcomings and budgetary limitations. Thus, state enterprises have documentation exclusively in Russian, often arguing that due to the close economic ties with Russia they opt for Russian and would not duplicate the documentation, as in Belarus Russian is one of the official languages (referring to the constitution). Technical shortcomings are often used as an excuse for not having documentation in Belarusian by the public bodies. Thus, medical institutions, banks, and courts use Russian for their documentation with no other options.

One of the profound cases which demonstrate the discrepancy between Article 17 of the Constitution and provisions of different laws which apply the ”either-or” formula and its fragmentary application is the case Lojka vs. Bielavieshestbank (2014).

As a client, Lojka wanted to have a contract with the bank in the Belarusian language. The bank refused to do so and was sued by Lojka who claimed that this refusal violated his rights. The position of the court was there is only the Law on Inquiries of citizens and legal bodies which prescribes that public officials must provide their answers in the language of the inquiry.

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No other legal act imposes such a requirement. As a result, the court argued that it is a matter for the bank to decide whether to use a certain language in contracting its clients. Interestingly, the court hearings took place in Russian, as the judge considered it a matter of the court’s choice as prescribed by the law. Thus, the issue of non-discrimination or equality was not a matter for the court, as it reasoned its decision by a formal language-related legal framework in Belarus. In other words, the argument that the bank formally meets the requirements of the law was more important than an abstract principle of equality and non-discrimination on the linguistic grounds. In the view of Valiancin Stafanovič from the Human Rights Center “Viasna”, this decision demonstrates that Belarus failed to provide its citizens with necessary facilities to ensure their constitutional right on the equality of the two official languages.

Hence, the choice between compliance with wording of the law and quite abstract principles of language equality in favour of the former could be interpreted as the state which itself makes privileges and limits rights on linguistic grounds by applying this “either-or” formula. The same logic is pursued by numerous other organizations that mark their commercial products exclusively in Russian.

A public campaign “Public management in Belarusian” (Spravavolžtzu pa-bielaruską) had multiple inquiries to numerous commercial companies asking about their readiness to ensure their potential customer’s right to receive information about products in Belarusian. As most cases demonstrate, the companies refer to Art. 17 of the Constitution, which provides them with the freedom of choice between one of two official languages which in its turn complies with the logic of the “either-or” formula. As a result, companies often opt for the Russian language, which ensures them a much wider Russian market. At the same time, it is quite common that Belarusian products sold in Belarus in addition to Russian also contain information in Kazakh, Moldovan/Romanian, or Ukrainian, but have no information in Belarusian. This approach again shows that at least a significant number of commercial companies address practical compliance of their services with formal requirements of the Belarusian laws and do not think in terms of their adherence to the principles of equality and non-discrimination on the grounds of language.

This situation requires a motion aimed at changes in the law on Customers’ Rights which would change its “either-or” wording to “both in Belarusian and Russian”. The motion could both have top-down and bottom-up origins. However, in both cases, it does need the good will of the Belarusian authorities to initiate changes in the domestic legislation.

3. Russian language by default

This factor is closely linked with the previous one. Russian language in most of the spheres with a small exclusion of cultural sphere is being used by default, meaning if one would not state she/he would like to opt for Belarusian, Russian would be used automatically. This applied to most of the spheres, including education. However, even if Belarusian is to be the option one should put in extra effort that requires extra time and often organizational capacity.

As a result of the country’s legislation and the practice of its implementation, in many cases, to exercise their constitutional right for primary or secondary education in the Belarusian language, parents have to submit special requests to relevant education authorities, which is a time-consuming and not always effective effort, and even in this case, there is no certainty that such an option would be offered. Thus, in 2018 a group of 21 parents from Minsk lost a case in the Minsk city court against the Pieršamajski district educational authority, who refused to create a pre-school group with the Belarusian language of upbringing in one of the kindergartens. In most of such cases, parents are asked to group up with other interested people to have their children educated in Belarusian to ensure a certain number of pupils/children in a group/class or to find another group/class, which in most cases requires additional travel to a different part of the city.

4. Trasianka factor

One more issue to consider is the so-called trasianka factor. Trasianka is a mixed way of speaking which embraces a very large range of vernacular speech – from predominantly Russian pronunciation with elements of the Belarusian language to predominantly Belarusian vernacular with elements of the Russian language. The popular vernacular differs greatly from the written standard of the literary language, and as the director of the Language Institute of the National Academy of Sciences, Aliaksandr Lukašaniec, admits, Belarusian is often identified solely with the literary language. However, in reality, varieties of the Belarusian language encompass two literary standards (the official variant and the so-called Taraškievia and a wide variety of popular vernaculars. Moreover, trasianka is considered part of this popular vernacular.

Thus, as Aliaksandr Lukašaniec admits, the scope of the Belarusian language is much wider than generally believed. Hence, the issue of interpreting what should be treated as Belarusian. Should one apply a wider definition, the number of Belarusian speakers may be quite high; whereas if one applies a traditional “narrow” definition, the number of Belarusian speakers on an everyday basis may be quite low. Lukašaniec assumes that this variety of the Belarusian language may potentially be used as a wider basis for the development of national languages to secure the basis for the full-fledged functioning of the national language within Belarusian society.

The results of the linguistic policy under Lukashenka

For the next 25 years, the Belarusian language was consistently significantly limited in a public sphere, limited to cultural and a very limited educational sphere, while Russian has been dominant in all the major spheres. Any attempt to promote the Belarusian language at the state level has been carefully examined and in most cases weighed against the statements of the official bilingualism and careful consideration of prevention of any nationalist actions that might lead to the inter-ethnic and inter-cultural conflict (with a specific reference to the situation in Ukraine).

Despite the state negligence and denunciation of the Belarusian language, since an official recognition by Lukashenka of the need and importance of the Belarusian language for the sake and preservation of the Belarusian nation and its identity (though merely public speeches with no or very little actual support for the expansion of the usage of Belarusian language), the number of grass-roots initiatives has shown people’s strong need and interest in the promotion of the mother tongue, while the success of those initiatives and their expenditure, shows the strong link and growing interest from the apolitical yet active social groups.

Moreover, the protests of 2020 have shown the national consolidation not only on the political vision and the country’s future development but also on various cultural aspects, proving that Belarusians are not divided either regionally (east vs. west), socially (intelligentsia vs. factory workers) or linguistically (Belarusian vs. Russian speakers). Thus, both languages were used by the protesters in their speeches and their banners, delivering their statements and vision. The pre-electoral speeches by Tsikhanouskaya and her team were both in Russian and Belarusian while the slogan – Vierym, Možam, Pieramožam – we believe, we can, we will win – is in Belarusian. The text of the song that became the symbol of Tsikhanouskaya’s campaign – Mury – was firstly written in Russian but then a Belarusian translation followed and in many meetings the songs were presented in both versions; during the protests the Belarusian version became more popular.

Dr. Hanna Vasilevich is Lecturer at the Europa-Universität Flensburg (Germany) and Board Chair of International Centre of Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Studies (Czechia). Dr. Vasilevich’s doctoral thesis was devoted to the Role of National Identity to the State Creation: the Case of Belarus. Her research interests cover national identities, ideologies, state-building, inter-ethnic and inter-cultural relations, and national minorities in Central and Eastern Europe. Among others, she is an author of several articles devoted to the analysis of the linguistic situation in Belarus, ethnic and linguistic diversity studies, and Belarusian identity. Relevant publications:


COVID-19 and lesser-known and minority languages

By the Editor

As we noted in the previous issue, the COVID-19 pandemic is a worldwide phenomenon and a constantly developing, fast moving one. Ogmios appears only every four months, so there’s no hope of us keeping abreast of the course of the pandemic, and how it affects speakers of endangered languages, on these pages. Instead I refer you to the excellent blog postings on the FEL web-site www.ogmios.org – look up the Blog link on the home page. At the time of writing this, we have postings about the CNRS interactive map and catalogue of information in lesser-used languages about COVID-19 from France, news of information provision for indigenous people in southern Africa, the provision for speakers of Chin languages in Burma, and a report on the initiatives of Anindilyakwa on Groote Eylandt in northern Australia.

First dictionary preserves rare Indigenous Australian language

From Daniel Boffey in Brussels, The Guardian (UK), 22 September 2020

A Belgian professor has completed the first dictionary of the Indigenous Australian language of Umpithamu after 17 years of research – but not before its last two active speakers passed away.

Jean-Christophe Verstraete, a professor of linguistics at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, worked closely with two sisters on a 500-page book and an audio app on which their voices were recorded for posterity. The women were the last two active speakers of Umpithamu, one of five languages deriving from the Lama Lama people of Princess Charlotte Bay,
on the eastern coast of Cape York peninsula in north-east Australia.

Verstraete said the women, for whom he gave eulogies at their funerals in 2009 and 2012, were convinced of the importance of the project but that they knew that they would most likely die before the dictionary could be completed. Some members of the Lama Lama people still understand Umpithamu, including the two sisters’ children, but it is not used in daily conversation. “They knew how important this was,” said Verstraete, who grew so close to the sisters that he called them amitha, meaning mother in Umpithamu. “The two women spoke it among themselves all the time and they would speak it to their children who always responded back in English.

“The Lama Lama people were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands in the 1960s and forced to live on reserves, where many died without ever returning to their homelands. The community have slowly moved back to their ancestral lands with the support of the Australian government. Under the Cape York tenure resolution programme in Queensland, 3.7m hectares (9m acres) have been transferred to Aboriginal ownership over the past decade, including 18 existing national parks and 10 new parks, totalling 2.2m hectares (5.4m acres). Verstraete said a combination of factors were likely to be behind the decline of the language, including an Australian government policy that sought to actively discourage its use over many decades. Of about 250 different Indigenous Australian languages, there are only about a dozen in active use today.

“The dictionary is therefore a form of heritage,” Verstraete said. “There are 600 copies for the community. It is a way of passing on the language to the descendants.” A niece of one of the sisters, Elaine Liddy, who works as a cultural officer and Indigenous ranger for the Lama Lama people, said she had been moved by the publication of the book, entitled A Dictionary of Umpithamu, With Notes on Middle Paman. “Myself, my siblings and the younger generations haven’t been taught our language. Our first language was English,” Liddy said. “This is certainly what the statistics reveal is a continuing decline in the use of the language in everyday exchange – shrinking demographic and geographic range. It is put very starkly in this quote from p. 74, for example: “The levels of Gaelic use and competence among the two younger age cohorts, parental and young, are now too low to enable effective transfer of Gaelic to the emerging generation, resulting in projected further declines in Gaelic ability for [the census of] 2021.” “Intercensal trajectories” are drawn up to ascertain what the figures are likely to have descended to by next year.

Since the book is not a continuous narrative, it can be used more as a handbook than a story of Gaelic. But it is a mine of information. It is greatly concerned with intergenerational transmission, and so of course there is detailed analysis of Gaelic-medium education, including pre-school education – or at least what the statistics reveal.

A stark warning is also expressed in this ‘Prognosis for Gaelic’ on p. 77: “The examination of census data suggests that the current trajectory of the remaining Gaelic-speaking networks in the islands is propelling the Gaelic group from the latter part of the residual minoritised phase into the penultimate phase of societal collapse. The projection for levels of Gaelic ability, based on an extrapolation of the current rates of decline, indicates that 10 of the 25 SDs [Study Districts] in the islands will be in the Moribund set by 2021.”

Apart from the detailed census analysis, other chapters deal with a “Survey of Preschool Children’s Language Ability and Use”, a “Survey of Language Use among Teenage Pupils in the Western Isles”, a “Community Sociolinguistic Survey of Gaelic Use and Attitudes in Three Islands”, an “Ability, Household Practice and Speaker Typology Survey in Three Islands”. Chapter 7 is called “Linking the Findings and Drawing Conclusions: Tracking a Trajectory of Decline”, and Chapter 8 “Contemporary Sociolinguistic Profile of Gaelic in Language Planning and Policy Context”. Concluding the book is Chapter 9, “Towards a New Model for the Revival of the Gaelic Community.”

Here are some of the questions that this reviewer, as a curious reader, might want to ask the compilers:
Are there any domains of contemporary life where the figures offer some hope for the future of Gaelic? Not on the present trajectory, but the final chapter of the book does offer some community development models that require a major realignment of policy, especially with regard to early-years education.

How does the use of Gaelic relate to the Scottish independence movement and the policies of the governing Scottish National Party? The study doesn’t concern itself with Scottish national politics, only with the Gaelic-speaking areas of the Highlands and Islands.

Might Scottish independence encourage any more regular everyday use of Gaelic? This is not part of the scope of the book.

What are the geographical areas in the Gaeltachd where the language is declining fastest, and why? The trend is fairly uniform in indicating decline; some islands, such as Benbecula, have a speaker population declining faster than others. A useful set of maps traces the decline through successive decennial censuses, showing percentages of Gaelic speakers in each of the 25 Study Districts.

Though the weighty volume is overwhelmingly statistical, and short on narrative, this is an admirably thorough study of the decline, over a crucial period, of one of Britain’s important indigenous languages.

Chris Moseley


This is a brilliantly engaging and colourful children’s book in the Lombard language, about a set of human and animal characters travelling to Milan, the centre of Lombard culture, and their adventures there. It is told partly in comic-strip form, and partly in a series of games, puzzles and mazes which involve the reader (not necessarily a child! A learner at least) in the history and monuments of Milan. It teaches a tremendous amount about the major city of Lombard culture while providing plenty of fun along the way. It even contains a Lombard recipe. Heartily recommended for anyone wanting to learn about Lombard language and culture.

Chris Moseley

Ligija Purinaša, Raibīs, Ingrida Tārauda: The Last Model / Pādejais Modeļs: Poems in Latgalian, translated by Jayde Will.


Francis Boutle Publishers continue their admirable mission of acquainting English-speaking readers with the small corners of the European linguistic landscape. We have already had several hefty parallel-text anthologies of many of Europe’s lesser-treated languages (Galician, Maltese, Breton to name but three) but recently they have branched out into small volumes of poetry. Last year we were treated to Valts Ernštreits’ fine collection People Like Us; now we remain in Latvia, but on the other side of it, the eastern side, for a collection of three young contemporary poets writing in Latgalian, a close relative of Latvian (some would even say a dialect, as they are more or less mutually comprehensible) spoken in the easternmost province of Latvia. The language does have a literary tradition, and a standard orthography, so that is a good start. And it has a substantial core of speakers – 164,000 in 2011, which is nearly a tenth of the population of Latvia. But its literature will be completely unknown to English readers. The quality of the poetry here, and of the translation by Jayde Will, will have many readers asking for more. Jayde Will has become a master of all the Baltic national languages, and now, living in Riga, he has made a start on the regional ones as well.

As for the poets, Ligija Purinaša is a poet whose debut collection Sīvīte (Woman) was shortlisted for the 2019 annual Latvian national LALIGABA literary awards. Raibīs (the nickname means ‘Spotty’) is the pseudonym of Oskars Orlovs, a writer, poet and musician with two short story collections and a poetry collection, Pistacejis (Pistachio) behind him. Ingrida Tārauda, based in Ireland, already has five collections of poetry under her belt. Thanks to this volume, Latgalian is taking a step away from being dismissed elsewhere in Europe as a mere dialect of Latvian, without a distinct voice of its own. Highly recommended.

Chris Moseley

5. Places to go on the Internet

The Canadian Language Museum

You can take a virtual tour of the Canadian Language Museum at www.languagemuseum.ca – which provides information about all of Canada’s indigenous, mixed and majority languages. The museum also goes on tour within Canada. For the present, though, the museum is closed as a physical entity due to the COVID pandemic. Ogmios plans a closer look at the Museum in a future issue.

The museum currently has a virtual special exhibit entitled ‘Cree: The People’s Language’, documenting one of Canada’s more robust surviving indigenous languages. Also available is a documentary: ‘Two Row Wampum: Preserving Indigenous Languages in Toronto’, which can be viewed on the Museum’s site.

The Museum is celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2021, and there are big plans afoot for it, Covid permitting.
Demonstration, Independence Square, Minsk, Belarus 22 August 2020 (Picture: Olga Shukaylo, TUT.BY)

Placards with statements from various branches of science, Minsk, Belarus: Historians: We Remember All; Ethnologists: We are a nation (nacyja), not “little folk” (narodziec, a term used by Lukashenka); ‘The head is needed for thinking, not to be beaten’