

1.3 Language Revitalization Benefits in Wilamowice¹³

Justyna Majerska-Sznajder

When we started our activities connected to the revitalization of Wymysiöeryś culture, we encountered three main difficulties, based on different attitudes among the inhabitants.

- The youngest generation was of the opinion that Wymysiöeryś is not a practical language so there's no point in learning it.
- The middle generation saw Wymysiöeryś culture as grounds for ridicule – as had been repeated since the 1950s by neighbours from the surrounding villages.
- The oldest generation, the one that was most hurt by their fate, the one that still remembered repression related to Wymysiöeryś, did not want to use Wymysiöeryś for fear that the persecutions would return.

¹³ The writing of this capsule has been supported by the Project 'Language as a cure: linguistic vitality as a tool for psychological well-being, health and economic sustainability' carried out within the Team programme of the Foundation for Polish Science and cofinanced by the European Union under the European Regional Development Fund.



Figure 1.3.1 Performance by the Wilamowianie Dance Group. Photo by Robert Jaworski, Polish Theatre in Warsaw

What did not help was the attitude of the local authorities, whose officials originated mostly from the surrounding villages, where the distinct Wymysiöeryś culture was derided. Their views were shaped by their upbringing, so discrimination from the 1950s translated into ongoing negativity on the part of the local authorities. The situation would probably have stayed the same until today if the Faculty of ‘Artes Liberales’ of the University of Warsaw had not engaged in revitalization activities. In 2014, the first international conference was organized in Wilamowice – and parts of it were in Wymysiöeryś. It raised the prestige and status of the language among the local inhabitants and authorities, who until then had considered our activities nothing but a flash in the pan. It also fell to us to change the attitude of the oldest generation – some of whom we invited to present on Wymysiöeryś culture and their histories during our various meetings and events. Thanks to this they became aware of the interest in their culture and realized that public use of Wymysiöeryś is not only unpunished, but even welcome. This helped them work through their trauma related to the persecutions.

Through various activities, e.g. theatre performances by the ‘Ufa fisa’ group, and song and dance by a local folk ensemble (see [Figure 1.3.1](#)) we have managed to make Wymysiöeryś trendy among our youth, who also started understanding our

actions as their contribution to the conservation of their cultural heritage. They derive joy and happiness from continuing the traditions and the heritage of their ancestors. The oldest inhabitants are visited by young people to talk together and it makes them feel needed. They not only get practical help from the young people but also feel appreciated and heard – they can count on people who will gladly listen to them. We have managed to awaken the Wymysiöeryś identity in both the youngest and oldest inhabitants – and this is one of the most important markers of Wymysiöeryś culture. Thanks to that people have gotten a better acceptance regarding their own feeling of belonging. The biggest remaining challenge is the middle generation, the one that was brought up in compulsory Polish. They are the parents who have the greatest influence on effective learning of Wymysiöeryś among the youth, because they can either forbid or allow them to attend the classes. Thanks to several meetings and psycho-linguistic lectures they no longer consider learning Wymysiöeryś a waste of time, and are more conscious of the benefits of multilingualism (this is rare in Poland). A different approach to being Wymysiöeryś was also helpful – we reclaimed those aspects that previously subjected us to ridicule, changing them into assets.

We have also taken it upon ourselves to disseminate the knowledge about the persecutions and the dire fates of inhabitants which have until now been taboo. This subject has been broached many times in the public sphere and recently work has been done to collect documents and memories of the inhabitants regarding this time period. Thanks to this we can hope that (at least to a certain extent) the sufferings of the people who survived the persecutions will be recompensed. We can also hope that others will be more aware of the history and will understand that it is not a reason for shame.

The actions of Wymysiöeryś organizations related to revitalization also have a significant effect on the well-being of Wymysiöeryś. They are very strongly mobilized and engaged in community activities – thus maybe conforming to the archetype of Wymysiöeryś mainly sticking together in a closed circle. These organizations are the only ones that meet the cultural needs of the inhabitants because the local authorities have little to offer in that regard. Taking part in these activities helps to create social bonds, but participants also feel happy because through their actions they are creating something for Wilamowice – and this is one of the markers of local ideas of well-being for Wymysiöeryś. Such actions also result in measurable benefits – like in the case of the Song and Dance Ensemble ‘Wilamowice’ whose members get the chance not only to participate in its performances and travel with the group (for many members this is their only chance to travel) but also to further their own personal development through visits to museums and places of interest. Membership of such organizations also allows elderly people to remain physically fit longer and becomes a way of distancing oneself from problems as well as a means of relaxation. We also know about cases where the help that the older generation provides in the revitalization process has stopped the progression of dementia and served as a kind of rehabilitation.

The last type of benefit is economic. The local authorities have finally noticed the opportunities for the development of the region on the basis of Wymysiöeryś culture, and thus more and more local initiatives are starting. Huge support was

provided by a project to promote the commercialization of findings from research on linguistic revitalization, and the related idea of the creation of a tourism cluster – all thanks to Bartłomiej Chromik, back then a doctoral student with a background in economics. Our activities have thus enabled the inhabitants to develop language-related tourism and, consequently, economic activity. Thanks to their participation in linguistic documentation, the youths who know Wymysiöeryś can be employed in tourism and so they begin to see knowledge of Wymysiöeryś as an economic asset.