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The Role of Collective Identity and Its Relation to Language in Ethnolinguistic Vitality: A Study of Collateral Language Communities in Poland

Abstract

Ethnolinguistic vitality (ELV) studies have long explored the functioning of minority communities, emphasizing the role of language and collective identity as key unifying factors. Since 2021, an ELV study in Poland has focused on collateral language communities – autochthonous groups linked to specific territories, whose languages are closely related to the dominant national language and often misclassified as dialects. These communities are typically unrecognized, and their group distinctiveness is frequently questioned. To assess their internal cohesion, a latent variable – Collective Identity – was developed within the ELV framework. This allows for evaluating whether such communities, often viewed as regional rather than ethnic groups, exhibit shared features and a sense of collective belonging. The findings indicate that collateral language communities form distinctive entities, characterized by shared language and cultural values, thus challenging assumptions about their peripheral or non-ethnic status.

Keywords

ethnolinguistic vitality, collateral languages, collective identity, latent variable, Poland

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, ethnolinguistic vitality (ELV) has been extensively explored, particularly from a social psychological perspective. Defined as the likelihood of an ethnolinguistic group to act as a distinct and active entity in intergroup situations (Giles et al. 1977), ELV was originally assessed through three objective criteria: status, demography, and institutional support. Subsequent developments in the model incorporated subjective perceptions of these factors (Bourhis et al. 1981; Smith et al. 2017). Nevertheless, research in this tradition has remained largely quantitative and reliant on questionnaires (Bourhis et al. 2019).

This quantitative focus has been critiqued by sociolinguists advocating for interdisciplinary, community-based approaches that combine quantitative and qualitative methods (Hinton 2001; Bucholtz & Hall 2008; Lewis & Simons 2016). These scholars call for a more nuanced understanding of vitality grounded in the lived experiences of speakers. Their work aligns with the principles of language ecology (Haugen 1972), which emphasizes how languages interact with each other and their environments, highlighting the need to preserve linguistic diversity and promote community agency.

As part of the effort to better assess language endangerment and guide revitalization, Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) (1991) introduced a practical framework centred on intergenerational transmission and language use within home and community domains. This marked a shift toward more applied, community-relevant research. UNESCO's Language Vitality Index (Brenzinger et al. 2003) further broadened the criteria by incorporating both objective and subjective factors and underscoring the need to evaluate these in combination. Lewis and Simons (2010) later expanded GIDS into a 12-level model assessing language vitality across domains of use and speaker demographics.

A significant reappraisal of ELV came with the European Language Diversity for All (ELDIA) project (2010–2013), which developed the European Language Vitality Barometer (EuLaViBar). This tool assessed vitality across four domains: legislation, education, media, and language practices. However, it notably excluded dimensions such as group identity and cohesion understood as ethnic identity of its members, and its purely quantitative approach limited the interpretability of results in terms of community impact.

More recently, Ó Giollagáin et al. (2025) introduced the Language Dynamics in Society framework, offering a more community-centred

model that considers processes such as language transmission and acquisition, socialisation and reinforced acquisition, civic expansion, and coherent ethnicization. This model emphasizes language vitality as a function of social dynamics rather than a set of isolated variables.

In this context, the Ethnolinguistic Vitality Model of Collateral Language Communities, developed within the Linguistic Diversity in Poland research project (Dołowy & Mętrak, in press), aims to further advance a sociolinguistic, context-sensitive understanding of ELV. Combining sociolinguistic theory with psychometric methodology, this model conceptualises ELV as a dynamic system of interrelated factors that shape how a group perceives itself and is perceived as a distinct entity with a common language and collective identity.

The communities under study are particularly distinctive due to the status of their languages. These collateral languages – autochthonous varieties tied to specific territories – are often considered dialects of dominant languages due to their close linguistic proximity. This often results in a diglossic relationship, despite instances of partial standardization (Eloy 2004). Usually perceived as regional rather than ethnic communities (Wicherkiewicz 2014), these groups have often had their claims to collective identity contested or dismissed. In recent years, however, they have increasingly asserted their linguistic and cultural distinctiveness. Local initiatives have sought to reclaim agency, elevate the value of their languages, and promote revitalization through standardization, expanded domains of use, and pursuit of formal recognition.

This article examines two dimensions of ELV within collateral language communities in Poland: collective identity and the relationship between language and identity. These are central to the ELV of the communities and are interrelated with its other aspects (see Dołowy & Mętrak, in press). Drawing on both quantitative survey data and qualitative ethnographic research, we argue that while ethnic boundaries may be blurred, the collective dimension of ELV remains strong. The role of language is important for the vitality of these communities; however, language practices vary significantly. Consequently, language serves as both a means of communication and a symbol of collective identity.

2. Field

Research on ELV has been conducted in five regions of Poland where collateral languages are spoken. Below, I outline the most significant characteristics of each community (for detailed information on every region, see Dołowy & Mętrak, in press).

Kashubia is a region in northern Poland, home to approximately 90,000 active speakers of Kashubian – the only collateral language in Poland officially recognized as a regional language. According to the 2021 census, nearly 180,000 individuals declared Kashubian identity, although the community itself lacks formal recognition as a national or ethnic minority. Historically, Kashubian was stigmatized as broken Polish and subjected to ridicule and discrimination, particularly before the political transition of 1989. However, strong regional mobilization in the 1990s, based on a regional rather than ethnic identity, led to the legal recognition of Kashubian as a regional language within the Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and on the Regional Language (2005). Today, Kashubia benefits from relatively strong institutional support, including state-funded education, bilingual signage, diverse local media, and numerous regional institutions and associations (Obracht-Prondzyński & Wicherkiewicz 2011).

Silesia is a large region in southwestern Poland, with nearly 470,000 speakers and over 596,000 individuals declaring Silesian identity (2021 census). Despite these numbers, Silesian has not been granted legal recognition as a regional language, and multiple attempts to amend the law have failed. The same lack of recognition applies to the Silesians as a distinct group. The region's history – including pre-WWII German governance and post-1945 persecution of inhabitants viewed as German – has contributed to deep historical trauma. Nevertheless, a strong emancipatory movement persists, drawing on the memory of Silesia's interwar autonomy within Poland. There is no state support for the protection of the Silesian language, though limited funding comes from local governments and cultural institutions. Civil society engagement is strong, with many active NGOs and local associations (Kamusella 2016).

Podhale is a mountainous region in the Tatra area. While there are no official data on speaker numbers, estimates suggest there may be up to 100,000 speakers of the local variety. The Podhalanian community is culturally vibrant but does not seek legal recognition for itself or its language, which is considered part of an ethnographic group rather than a distinct minority (Gaśienica-Giewont & Trebunia-Staszal 2022). This reluctance is partly linked to the historical trauma of alleged WWII collaboration, which continues to fuel resistance to emancipatory narratives. Nonetheless, some initiatives for language standardization and protection have emerged. Podhalanian culture, including its language, is heavily commodified by the tourism industry, a process supported by local authorities through various cultural associations and NGOs.

Masuria, once under German control before WWII, experienced massive depopulation in the 1940s–1950s due to the forced expulsion of Germans and Masurians. Those who remained have endured significant historical trauma and marginalization. Today, the number of Masurian speakers is estimated at only a few hundred, mainly among elderly “rememberers” (Wełpa-Siudek 2024). The 2021 census recorded 1,287 Masurian identity declarations. There are no state-level efforts for the legal recognition or protection of the Masurian language or community. However, despite minimal institutional support, some grassroots initiatives for cultural and linguistic revival have recently appeared.

Podlachia is an eastern Polish region bordering Belarus, inhabited by East Slavic-speaking communities whose languages are collateral to both the dominant Polish (West Slavic) and to Belarusian and Ukrainian – recognized national minorities in the area. Although literature in Podlachian does exist and there have been attempts to standardise the language (Maksymiuk 2024), the local varieties function mainly in spoken form and are often overlooked by both the Polish majority and the officially recognized minority communities. As a result, estimating the number of speakers is challenging. According to the 2021 census, nearly 19,000 people declared speaking an East Slavic variety (70% Belarusian), including about 4,000 speakers of locally named dialects. Additionally, there were 23,000 and 2,148 declarations of Belarusian and Ukrainian identity, respectively. Podlachians (*Podlaszuki*) are often affiliated with the Orthodox Christian minority. While state support exists for recognized minorities (Belarusian and Ukrainian), local East Slavic varieties receive limited support, mostly from NGOs and cultural associations (Barszczewska & Timoszuć 2016).

3. Methodology

3.1 Questionnaire

The research presented is part of a broader study on the ethnolinguistic vitality (ELV) of collateral language communities in Poland. Conducted within the project Linguistic Diversity in Poland: Collateral Languages, Language-Oriented Activities, and Conceptualization of Collective Identity, the study comprised several phases. The pilot phase, based on the first version of the Ethnolinguistic Vitality Questionnaire, took place in 2021 and included a pre-test survey and cognitive interviews. The final ELV study, which involved the distribution of questionnaires, took place between June 2022 and September 2023.

The questionnaire, available in five comparable versions corresponding to the five Polish regions studied, consisted of 61 questions (including only one open-ended question) and was mainly based on a 5-point Likert scale (for more on the questionnaire, see Dołowy-Rybińska & Mętrak 2022). We decided to distribute the questionnaires in printed form only, to avoid excluding older and digitally excluded people and to ensure broader demographic and geographical diversity. We collected the questionnaires mainly during our fieldwork, taking care not to collect too many from a single locality or homogeneous group. Sometimes we received support from local cultural institutions and activists.

To diminish doubts regarding the representativeness of the study, we conducted a reference study in which we selected one village from each region, chosen for its socio-demographic features representative of the region as a whole and for its central location, distant from major urban centres. We collected 50 questionnaires through door-to-door surveys, ideally obtaining one questionnaire per household. This enabled us to observe differences between the types of questionnaire distribution. Another challenge was that this type of survey is most likely to be completed by people involved in community and language activities. Therefore, we added a question in the metric part of the questionnaire concerning respondents' level of engagement in community and/or language activities. This enabled us to see how responses changed according to the level of engagement. We also verified other demographic factors: age, gender, place of residence, and education.

In total, we collected 420 completed questionnaires in Silesia, 389 in Kashubia, 322 in Podlachia, 246 in Podhale, and 208 in Masuria. All questionnaire versions and the raw data are accessible in the Repository for Open Data – RepOD (Dołowy-Rybińska et al. 2023).

3.2 Psychometric Approach

Based on the answers to the questionnaires, we identified two observable variables – Intergenerational Transmission and self-assessed Language Competence – and 11 latent variables constructed using a psychometric approach: Language Practices, Collective Identity, Identity and Language, Type of Identity, Ideology of Language Ownership, Ideology of Collaterality, Subordination/Affirmation, Emotions, Reluctance to Use Language in Public, Negative Experiences, and Profits. More information about the model and latent variables can be found in Dołowy and Mętrak (in press).

Latent variables were created using psychometric methods that allow general attitudes to be measured based on several observable

characteristics (Furr & Bacharach 2013). Based on the theoretical assumptions made, we assigned a number of observable variables to each latent variable. We then used item response theory analysis techniques to verify the accuracy of the measurement model and to calculate the latent variable value for each respondent.

Each latent variable was represented as a continuous (interval) variable, typically taking values between -3 and 3 across the study population, with an average close to 0. For each respondent, the value indicated the strength of a particular aspect of ELV: the higher the latent variable value, the stronger the collective identity. Conversely, these are abstract values, meaning it is not possible to identify which specific answers the respondents who have been assigned a particular latent variable value (e.g. -1 or 2) have given to specific questions in the questionnaire.

In this article, we analyze only two of the 13 ELV aspects that constitute the model we created, which can be grouped under the following five themes: (1) Identity, (2) Language transmission and practices, (3) Language ideologies, (4) Language attitudes, and (5) Perceived status. The aspect of collective identity is not more important or central to ELV in collateral communities than the others; rather, they are interrelated and mutually influential. However, questions of identity and its relationship to language as a symbol of identity are particularly interesting and therefore deserve closer examination.

3.2.1 Measurement of Collective Identity

For Collective Identity, the following empirically observable variables (questions) were used as items associated with this latent variable:

- Q4A – Attachment to town/village (values from 1 – completely unattached to 5 – completely attached);
- Q4B – Attachment to the region (same values as Q4A);
- Q5 – Local/regional self-identification (values from 0 – lack of regional identification, 1 – regional and other (state/Europe) identification; 2 – only regional identification);
- Q6A – “I have a lot in common with other Y [members of the language community]” (values from 1 – definitely not to 5 definitely yes);
- Q6B – “Being Y is an important part of who I am” (same values as Q6A);
- Q6C – “There are situations in which I feel more Y than Polish” (same values as Q6A);
- Q6D – “There are situations in which I feel more Polish than Y” (same values as Q6A).

Our model implies that Collective Identity is a general attitude that exists as a latent variable, manifested through several observable variables. Using the analytical technique of Item Response Theory (de Ayala 2009; van Schuur 2011), we empirically tested the measurement model with the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) to confirm that the empirical data supported the theoretically derived relationship between Collective Identity and its indicator variables. The result obtained implies that the answers given by respondents to questions Q4A–Q6D are sufficiently strongly correlated to have been generated by a single latent variable. The measurement model proved to be a good fit for the data. In summary, the empirical analyses confirmed our theoretical expectations regarding Collective Identity.

The latent variable Collective Identity thus reflects individuals' belief that they form a common group with others and that this group is distinct from another (in this case, the dominant one).

3.2.2 Measure of Identity and Language

The latent variable Identity and Language reveals the role that language plays in the collective identity of the group under study. Depending on various factors, a collateral language can have different meanings for collective identity. These include its role as a means of communication, the desire to preserve it for future generations as a symbol of the group, and its community-strengthening function (see Edwards 2009).

For Identity and Language, the questionnaire contained two questions:

Q1_E: How important is it to speak X (collateral language) to be a Y (member of the community)? Values range from 0 (not important at all) to 4 (very important).

Q2_2: Does the language differentiate Y from people living in other regions of Poland? Values range from 0 (no) to 4 (yes).

An additive index was created by summing the values of these individual variables. This additive index combines multiple data points into a single, interpretable index representing a broader concept or construct (Babbie 2012). The resulting latent variable therefore shows how strongly respondents feel about the relationship between collective identity and language.

3.3 Qualitative Research

The statistical research was supported by quantitative research performed using ethnographic methods, such as participant and non-participant observations and in-depth interviews with the region's inhabitants. In total, we recorded, transcribed and coded more than 300 interviews (with at least 25 community representatives from each region), encompassing participants of different ages, genders, and places of residence within the region, as well as varying levels of engagement in linguistic and cultural activities. Metadata for these interviews are available in the RepOD repository.

The interviews were then coded using the MAXQDA programme. The coding process combined inductive and deductive approaches (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006), focusing on diverse aspects of ELV. The interviews were recorded in Polish and/or collateral languages, and the excerpts used in this article have been translated into English.

In the analysis, emphasis is placed on the subjective dimensions of identity and language within the ELV of the five collateral language communities – specifically, individuals' perceptions of their sense of belonging to the community and its relationship to the language. The objective dimensions of ELV are considered here solely as contextual background.

4. Results of Statistical Research

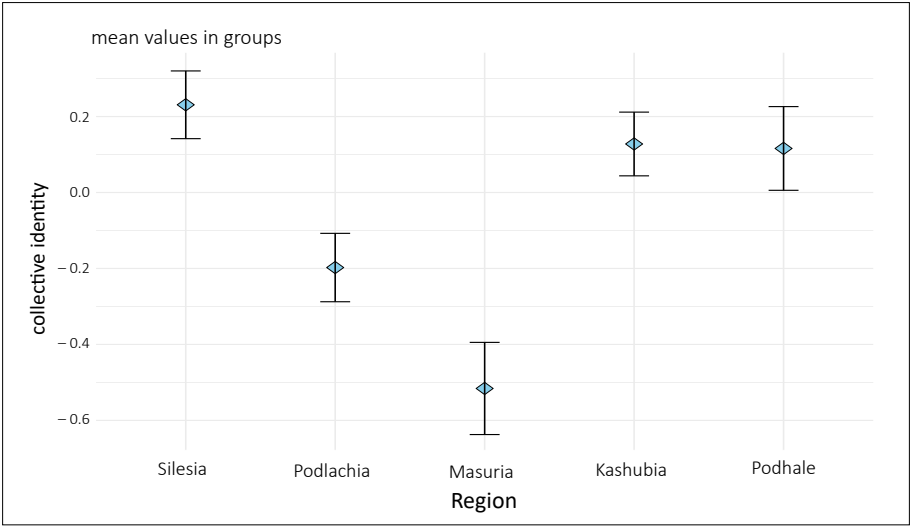
Chart 1 displays the values of the latent variable Collective Identity. The horizontal axis represents individual regions, while the vertical axis shows the synthetic scores of the variable for each region. Each diamond symbol indicates the mean value of collective identity within a region. The lines extending from each diamond represent the 95% confidence interval for that mean. This interval reflects the range within which the true population mean for that region is expected to fall, with 95% confidence. In other words, there is a 95% probability that the true average lies within this range and a 5% probability that it falls outside of it. Chart 2 was constructed using the same methodology.

The strongest expression of the latent variable Collective Identity is observed in Silesia, with an average score of 0.231. In Kashubia and Podhale, the average scores are 0.128 and 0.116, respectively; however, these differences are not statistically significant. Residents of these three regions tend to exhibit a strong attachment to their place of residence and regional identity. They are more likely to define themselves in terms of the local or regional group with which they identify, rather

than with Poland or Poles in general. In contrast, the level of collective identity is lower in Podlachia (average: -0.198) and lowest in Masuria (average: -0.516).

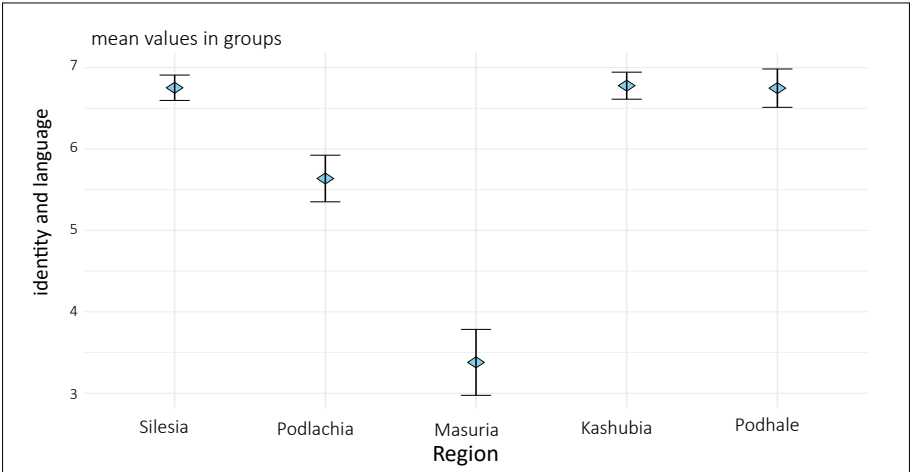
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Chart 1: Collective Identity – comparison across regions



Source: Dołowy-Rybińska et al. (2023).

Chart 2: Identity and Language – comparison across regions



Source: Dołowy-Rybińska et al. (2023).

In three regions – Silesia (average: 6.75), Kashubia (average: 6.78), and Podhale (average: 6.75) – there is an equally strong perceived connec-

tion between collective identity and language (latent variable Identity and Language). Language is regarded as a key bond among group members, with knowledge of the language seen as both an important marker of group membership and a distinguishing feature from other groups. The Identity and Language latent variable is slightly weaker in Podlachia (average: 5.64) and weakest in Masuria (average: 3.38).

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5. Analysis of Results Informed by Qualitative Research

5.1 Silesia

In the case of Silesia, the strength of local identity derives from a deep awareness of the region's complex history as a cultural borderland – particularly its role in 20th century territorial conflicts between Poland and Germany, and between Poland and Czechoslovakia (especially in the south). From the 14th century until the end of World War I, no part of Silesia belonged to the state entities regarded as predecessors of modern Poland. The memory of Silesia's political autonomy within the Second Polish Republic during the interwar period also plays a significant role, as does the policy pursued by the Polish authorities toward the region after World War II. This policy has often been critically interpreted as a form of colonization (see Szmeja 2000; Gerlich 2010).

These historical and political factors have all contributed to the development of a strong sense of distinctiveness among Silesians – both as a regional group and, in the view of many, as a nation in their own right. The hundreds of thousands of declarations of Silesian nationality in successive censuses, along with efforts over the past decade to have Silesian recognized not only as a regional language but also to gain recognition for Silesians as an ethnic minority, provide clear evidence of this identity.

Our qualitative research in Silesia confirms Silesians' strong attachment to their region and, in many cases, their sense of ethnic and national distinctiveness. As one interviewee remarked:

Nationality-wise, I feel Silesian. Never German, and not Polish either. We're neither Germans nor Poles, we're Silesians. I'd never say I'm Polish [...] but I'd never say I'm German either. In Germany we were called Poles – 'der Pole', and in Poland at school – 'you *szwabyl*!' [Krauts], 'you Germans!'. **Wherever you go, you are not one of them.** So I'm a Silesian, end of story (M37Sil).

In Silesia, language serves not only as a vital means of communication but also as a powerful symbol of Silesian identity. Speaking Silesian signifies a sense of belonging to the community. However, it is also possible to be considered part of the community without knowing the language, provided that other criteria valued by the group are met. As one interviewee explained:

It is **inextricably linked, it cannot be separated**. And you know that if I did not speak Silesian, I would probably also consider myself a Silesian. [...] But **I don't see any problem if someone feels that they are Silesian but doesn't speak Silesian**. That's quite possible. [...] If someone lives in Silesia, [...] has a certain attachment to all this, feels connected to Silesian history, I would not prevent them from saying that they are Silesian. [...] On the other hand, if someone speaks Silesian... **I have never met anyone who speaks Silesian and does not feel Silesian** (M25Sil).

5.2 Kashubia

The strong sense of collective identity in Kashubia is closely linked to the long-standing Kashubian movement and its struggle for recognition, which dates back to the 19th century. The activities of Kashubian organizations – such as the Kashubian-Pomeranian Association (founded in 1956) and the Association of People of Kashubian Nationality Kaszëbskô Jednota (active since 2011) – and the ideological disputes between them have brought the issue of ethnic distinctiveness into regional discourse.

However, both qualitative and quantitative research (Synak 1998; Porębska 2006) indicates that most Kashubians identify with a dual Polish–Kashubian identity. This duality is also reflected in other latent variables of ethnolinguistic vitality, including language-related practices and ideologies. Many research participants repeatedly emphasized their dual identity and expressed frustration at being pressured by some Kashubian activists to choose between being Polish or Kashubian.

Conversely, some interviewees strongly asserted that Kashubians constitute a distinct nation or ethnic group separate from Poles – primarily, though not exclusively, those involved in the Kashubian national movement. In this context, we quote a member of the older generation who is not active in language promotion efforts, even though Kashubian is his first language:

As an old Kashubian asked, **are you Germans? – What? Germans? – Are you Polish? – No. – Then who are you? Kashubians.** It is a deeply rooted consciousness. A Kashubian is a Kashubian. They are neither Poles nor Germans, we are Kashubians. Of course, for various reasons the Kashubians were more attracted to Poland. But in general, yes, we were Kashubians and we are still Kashubians. **It is different with young people. It is disappearing, it will not last, in my opinion** (M70Kash).

Two aspects of this statement are particularly noteworthy. First, like the Silesians (and other borderland groups studied), Kashubians have historically existed between two dominant nations – in this case, Poland and Germany – while maintaining a sense of distinctiveness from both. Second, the statement reflects a generational shift taking place in Kashubia. Our research confirmed that younger people tend to have a weaker sense of identity and are less familiar with the Kashubian language – or do not speak it at all – despite still attributing significant symbolic value to it.

Many members of the younger generation did not acquire the language through intergenerational transmission; instead, they had the opportunity to learn it at school. While few achieve fluency, the language continues to serve as a symbol of their collective identity, as illustrated by the following quote from a student:

[Kashubian] serves for a sense of identity, that you are so different from other Poles. It is always a sense of a certain pride, or a sense of belonging. This is quite important from the point of view of human nature (M17Kash).

5.3 Podhale

In Podhale, a positive image of Highlander culture – characterized by resourcefulness and deep attachment to tradition – emerged in the 19th century and persists to this day (Gąsienica-Giewont & Trebunia-Staszel 2022). The Podhale identity is framed almost exclusively within the broader national context, without claims to ethnic or linguistic autonomy. The local language variety, commonly referred to as a sub-dialect of Polish, reflects this status. While the Polish term *gwara* often carries pejorative connotations, Highlanders use it in a semantically neutral way, though it still implies a subordinate position in relation to the dominant language. Nonetheless, Highlanders take pride in the features distinguishing their group and culture. One of our interviewees from Podhale reflected on her identity as follows:

[...] I'm more... Highlander, Polish – rather equally... I don't want to sound like we're distancing ourselves somehow, ok? There are minorities that distance themselves, and we don't do that. [...] Well, I think we're proud to be Highlanders... I'm proud to be a Highlander, somewhere in my heart, it's always there. [...] This Highland culture has always been with us at home. [...] We are lucky to be born in a region that has its culture, a life of its own, a Highland way of life... (F37Pdh).

This paradox – whereby the group maintains a strong attachment to its region, language, and culture, perceiving them as distinctly different from those of other parts of Poland, yet simultaneously displays an almost exaggerated denial of ethnic distinctiveness and a clear rejection of any emancipatory aspirations (such as seeking minority or regional language status) – has its roots in historical experience. This dates back to World War II and the Highlanders' collaboration with the Germans under the banner of *Goralenvolk*, a concept promoted by Nazi ideologues that claimed the Highlanders constituted a separate Germanic nation. The history of *Goralenvolk* remains a taboo topic among the region's inhabitants, who are reluctant to confront it. Any notion of isolation, as the interviewee quoted above described it, evokes associations with this unwelcome historical legacy.

In Podhale, language and collective identity are seen as inseparable: Highlanders recognize one another by accent and manner of speaking. There is also a widespread belief that their language cannot be learned through study, but must be acquired from birth.

When someone speaks in a typical Highlander way... in Goral [language], it's not that they've learnt it somewhere or something, it's probably so noticeable in that speech, isn't it? When someone speaks Goral typically it seems to me that it's so... so... so... that it has a kind of, well, that it proves that you're a Highlander (F38Podh).

5.4 Podlachia

The collective identity of the group studied – referred to here as *Podlachians* (a term rarely used by the speakers themselves, much like Podlachian for the language) – is primarily based on religious affiliation, specifically membership in the Orthodox Church. The local language variety is not identified by a single name (Woolhiser 2018) and is most often regarded as a sub-dialect (*gwara*) of either Belarusian or Ukrainian. The perceived distance from these languages is often explained by their

gwarowość (sub-dialectal nature). Moreover, Podlachia is not only the name of the area inhabited by native speakers of Podlachian, but also refers to a broader geographic region. This dual significance of the term *Podlachia* was found to influence participants' responses.

A key factor influencing the level of identification, as revealed through qualitative research, is the dichotomy between self-identification and external identification. As Orthodox Christians speaking an East Slavic language variety, the local population is frequently (and often pejoratively) labeled as *Russkies* (pl. *ruskie*), a term that does not refer to a single nation but broadly encompasses all Eastern Slavs. Although they are born and raised in Poland and feel a strong connection to Polish culture, they also experience a sense of difference from what is perceived as typically Polish. One of our interviewees described it as follows:

I'm a Pole. A different one. And as for the fact that we've always been Polish... Yes. I'm a Pole. Whom else could I be? Well, **I was born in Poland, I grew up in Poland, Poland gave me an education, Poland gave me peace and a roof over my head.** I work here, I pay taxes here. You know. I am a Pole. But certainly not the kind of Pole from Kraków, Częstochowa or Poznań. [...] The Poles see us as *Russkies*, and the *Russkies* see us as Poles, but we are neither Polish nor *Russkie* (F51Pdl).

In Podlachia, the local language is primarily used for everyday communication within communities – particularly in villages with a significant Orthodox Christian population and among older generations. It is spoken at local gatherings, festivals, and church fairs, whereas official speeches and posters typically employ the literary languages of recognized minorities, Belarusian or Ukrainian. As a result, while Podlachian is highly valued as a community language, it has little prestige in the broader linguistic landscape. Despite the coexistence of multiple layers of identity, language remains one of the key markers of local identity, alongside land, tradition, and religion. As one Podlachia activist put it:

I identify first and foremost with the land, with this place. [...] With the history, with the tradition, with the language. [...] I mean, it's all about the language, isn't it? [...] So **language, language, language, but above all land, roots.** Like I said, my ancestors are from here, [...] my grandfather, great-grandfather, great-great-grandfather, are buried here in the cemetery [...]. The culture, well, and the language, [...] Well, it's also a bit connected with religion, right [...] (F55Podl).

5.5 Masuria

The weakest sense of collective identity among the studied communities is found in Masuria. This is largely due to pivotal events in the mid-20th century: the post-war displacement of the Masurian population, driven by their predominantly German identity before and during World War II, the resettlement of people from other regions of Poland, which blurred the remaining linguistic and ethnic distinctiveness, and the post-war persecution of Masurians. These processes contributed to the concealment of Masurian identity and, ultimately, the population's widespread assimilation (Sakson 2005). As a result, Masurian identity has, for the most part, been forgotten.

Nevertheless, a small but growing number of individuals are seeking to rediscover their local and ethnic roots. This is exemplified by one of our interviewees, who, through his work at the Masurian Museum, has reconnected with his heritage and begun to identify as Masurian:

There are a **handful of Masurians here at the moment. People who use some words or feel this Masurian spirit, yeah?** Well, my family is also a bit removed from that tradition. [...] **I discovered my Masurianness very late.** [...] I discovered it very late as an adult. Also, in a way, **through my work here in this museum, right?** It was then that I began to study the history of Masuria and its tradition. I started to put it all together and recall what I remembered from childhood (M58Mas).

In such cases, Masurian identity is experienced more as an individual pursuit than a shared collective phenomenon. It tends to emerge among those engaged in local cultural work or historical inquiry. Our interviewee, for instance, demonstrates a symbolic attachment to the Masurian language, occasionally using specific words associated with it. However, on a broader scale, the statistical relationship between identity and language in Masuria remains weak.

Interviewees often stress that this weakness is not only due to the break in intergenerational transmission or the erosion of community cohesion, but more significantly, to the historically low status of the Masurian language. It has never been widely recognized as a legitimate or prestigious language. Instead, it has traditionally been seen as merely a *gwara* – a sub-dialect – suitable only for informal, intra-community oral communication.

One interviewee articulated this perception clearly:

They [didn't] care too much about it either; we were just taught that you were either German or Polish, and it wasn't like that. We were **more interested in our customs, in our religion, and not in this language**, no. Well, yes, we Masurians are not some super-educated people who would cherish our mother tongue like that. For us, **home means something different than language**, no (F51Mas).

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6. Discussion and Conclusion

The role of latent variables such as Collective Identity and **Identity and Language** is important for understanding the ethnolinguistic vitality (ELV) of any language community. However, these dimensions are not more important than others – particularly those relating to language transmission and practices – and should be studied alongside all the other aspects of ELV (see Dołowy & Mętrak, in press). In the case of collateral language communities, whose internal cohesion and sense of supra-local belonging are often contested, it is equally important to analyze their dynamics in explicitly ethnic terms. However, the strength of collective identity in such communities is influenced by several inter-related factors.

First, it varies depending on the degree of cultural and linguistic assimilation to the dominant group. The communities studied here are all peripheral groups whose subjectivity has historically been denied by surrounding dominant cultures, particularly from the 19th century onward, with intensification before, during, and after World War II. In some cases – such as the Silesians and the Kashubians – these communities had developed an elite class and achieved a certain level of cultural and linguistic awareness. In others, such as Masuria and Podlachia, local representatives encouraged identification with dominant national cultures, thereby weakening the perception of their group as a distinct cultural and linguistic entity. In yet another case, such as Podhale, efforts to gain recognition sometimes resulted in collective stigma and deeper subordination to the dominant society. Nevertheless, language transmission and practices are not directly dependent on political circumstances. For example, they are notably stronger in Podhale and Silesia than in Kashubia, which is the only region where the language enjoys official recognition.

Second, the strength of collective identity is linked to processes of language and identity reclamation within these communities. This reclamation depends partly on institutional support, which in turn is influenced by local engagement and the legal or political rights granted to

the group. It also depends significantly on the activism of local leaders. Where language movements are strong and carry a political dimension – as in Silesia – community members tend to be more aware of their sociolinguistic situation and more involved in cultural and linguistic revitalization. Conversely, where group subjectivity has been historically denied (as in Podlachia) or identity has significantly eroded (as in Masuria), mobilizing community engagement is far more difficult, making it harder to strengthen the group's distinctiveness. Interestingly, a high level of collective identity may exist even when a group does not frame its identity in explicitly ethnic terms, as observed in Kashubia and Podhale.

The latent variable **Identity and Language** reveals a strong relationship between collective identity and language use. Like other latent variables, this relationship is complex. The distinctiveness of a collateral language from the dominant language is often questioned, reflected in the way speakers categorize their own speech – not as a separate language, but as a dialect or even a *gwara* (sub-dialect) of the dominant tongue. Nonetheless, the analysis of this latent variable allows us to explore how the relationship between identity and language is constructed and what determines it.

Identity and Language is closely linked with other core ELV variables – particularly **Intergenerational Transmission**, **Language Competence**, and **Language Practices** (Dołowy & Mętrak, in press). However, it also enables us to understand the collateral language not only as a practical tool of communication but as a multidimensional phenomenon – a symbol of collective belonging with which individuals identify in diverse ways. This latent variable may assume different meanings in different contexts – it may function as a means of both communication and representation (as in Silesia); a powerful, though increasingly symbolic, identifier (as in Kashubia); a key element of group cohesion (as in Podlachia); or a marker of authenticity and belonging (as in Podhale). In long-assimilated and dispersed communities, such as Masuria, it may be seen as only a minor or marginal factor.

There is also a notable relationship between a group's historical and present circumstances and the valorization of its language. Where the language enjoys greater prestige, legal recognition, or institutional support, the bond between collective identity and language tends to be stronger – even when intergenerational transmission and everyday language use are limited, as in the case of Kashubia.

Analyzing collective identity and its link to language using qualitative research frameworks provides a deeper understanding of the com-

plex interplay between these concepts – an interplay that cannot be fully captured using quantitative methods alone. The objective aspects of ELV, such as demographics, status, and minority-majority relations, provide essential context for analysis. Nevertheless, ELV demonstrates how people subjectively perceive these facts and circumstances. Fully grasping the complexity of ELV requires an in-depth exploration of the group's perception of historical experiences, its interactions with dominant cultures, and the personal narratives of its members.

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Vloga kolektivne identitete in njen odnos do jezika v etnolingvistični vitalnosti: študija sorodnih jezikovnih skupnosti na Poljskem

Izvleček

Delovanje manjšinskih skupnosti je že dolgo v središču raziskav etnolingvistične vitalnosti (ELV), ki med ključne povezovalne dejavnike uvršča predvsem vlogo jezika in kolektivne identitete. Poljska študija o ELV se od leta 2021 osredotoča na t. i. sorodne jezikovne skupnosti – avtohtone skupine v določenih delih države, katerih jeziki so tesno povezani z dominantnim nacionalnim jezikom in so pogosto zmotno obravnavani kot narečja. Te skupine večinoma ne uživajo uradnega priznanja, njihova skupnostna identiteta pa je pogosto predmet dvoma. Za oceno njihove notranje povezanosti je bila v okviru ELV razvita latentna spremenljivka – kolektivna identiteta –, s katero presojamo, ali takšne skupnosti, ki jih pogosto označujejo kot regionalne in ne etnične, izražajo skupne značilnosti ter občutek kolektivne pripadnosti. Ugotovitve kažejo, da sorodne jezikovne skupnosti tvorijo posebne entitete, za katere so značilni skupni jezik in kulturne vrednote, kar postavlja pod vprašaj prevladujoče predstave o njihovem perifernem oziroma neetničnem statusu.

Ključne besede

etnolingvistična vitalnost, sorodni jeziki, kolektivna identiteta, latentna spremenljivka, Poljska