

# Baltic Language Networking: A Personal View

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The term ‘serendipity’ describes an accidental combination of events which are not separately beneficial but when occurring together produce a good outcome. It has been said that successful research is about managing serendipity.

In many ways, this is what happened when, in 1999, I was invited to attend the 12th World Congress of the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA) in Tokyo as the representative of the British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL). There were around 5000 delegates gathered at Waseda University, engaging in an exchange on the theme ‘The role of languages in the 21st century: unity and diversity’. It was serendipity that allowed Meilutė and me to share the same dorm in a nearby youth hostel.

We had never met before and I was only dimly aware of the issues that surrounded Baltic language matters at that time. Soon we got chatting about the role of languages in our societies and our function as linguists. It was at different moments, over a breakfast of steamed rice and miso soup, or when relaxing in the pristine pool, that I was drawn into her story about her country and the changes, conflicts, and challenges that she and her compatriots were facing. Here was an opportunity for possible cooperation.

On returning to Bristol, I applied to the British Academy to fund a research project on Lithuania’s changing language situation. The following year, Meilutė and I started working on The Lithuanian Language Communities Project (LLCP), carrying out two surveys, on ‘Rytų ir Pietryčių Lietuvos gyventojų’ (600 participants), and on ‘Vilniaus gyventojų’ (1000 participants). As soon as I found out how urgent the language question was locally, I decided to learn Lithuanian. With Meilutė’s expert support and a stipend from the Lithuanian Ministry of Education, I attended language courses at Vilnius University,<sup>1</sup> eventually gaining a deeper understanding of the country’s sociocultural facets.

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<sup>1</sup> An account in PowerPoint of *My Lithuanian Journey* (entitled *Kalbos kelionė: A Linguanomics Perspective*) was presented on 25 January 2021 as part of the LITAKA seminar series. Online access: <https://litaka.lt/2022/02/23/asociacijos-seminaras-6/>.

From my initial research on the region's socio-political situation, it soon became evident that there was a strong case for widening our perspective on the changing role of languages in society. The idea was to learn lessons by sharing ways of dealing with similar language legacies across the Baltic states. With further support from the British Academy, the Baltic Language and Integration Network (BLaIN, 2002-2006)<sup>2</sup> was formed. This four-year cross-Baltic sociolinguistics forum served to facilitate a mutual exchange of experiences and to foster collaboration among scholars and practitioners from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

BLaIN attracted several western scholars to its annual workshops – in Vilnius (2003), Riga (2004), Tallinn (2005), and Kaunas (2006) – and led to numerous publications in international journals. Support for, and at times criticisms of, evolving language management practices across the Baltic states from diverse language and policy specialists had grown well before EU-accession in 2004. By then, individual Baltic applied linguistics associations<sup>3</sup> had been born and had become increasingly active around various sociolinguistics topics, including language policy and planning for education, and citizenship. It was my pleasure to support their application for nomination into the ranks of AILA, offering a permanent forum for scholarly exchange at the international level, as reflected in the annotated bibliography below.

More recent Baltic sociolinguistics work has focused on an expanding range of domains, utilising a diversity of methodologies to reveal changes, shifts and continuities in language practices, often but not solely from the framework of the nation state. The scholarship is diversifying, with comparative perspectives offered in some cross-Baltic collections.<sup>4</sup> This research also notes tendencies to overcome the 'language as a problem' obstacle and to perceive multilingualism as a resource.<sup>5</sup> Whilst the number of publications has increased, there is still space for further sociolinguistic research on language discourses and language policy, as well as inclusive

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<sup>2</sup> Details of BLaIN's overall aims, the annual workshops held (in Vilnius, Riga, Tallinn, Kaunas), the participants, relevant publications, and further links are now archived at [web.archive.org/web/20070627200346/http://www.blain-online.org/index.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20070627200346/http://www.blain-online.org/index.html).

<sup>3</sup> The *Estonian Association of Applied Linguistics (EAAL)*; The *Latvian Association of Applied Linguistics (LLVA)*; The *Lithuanian Association of Applied Linguistics (LITAKA)*.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. see *Multilingualism in the Baltic States*. S. Lazdina and H. Marten, eds. 2018. London: Springer. This publication, touring the region's multilingual landscapes, also critiques issues such as nation-building based on a common language and culture.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. *Linguanomics. What is the Market Potential of Multilingualism?* London: Bloomsbury Academic. (Hogan-Brun 2017). *Linguanomics* is a factual exploration on the benefits and costs of multilingualism and a journey into the potent emotional response this topic engenders.

approaches to multilingualism, linking with broader debates on language and nationalism at a time of both increased globalization and ethno-regionalism.

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I grew up in Switzerland, where I was accustomed to seeing languages as a positive force. Over the course of my work life in sociolinguistics, I have had the chance to observe concerns about growing multilingualism through rising rates of migration into and across Europe. Then, by way of insights gained from my involvement in language-related political debates across the Baltic region, I have also come to appreciate the social challenges brought on by legacies of language inversion. Therefore, in my engagement with language-related political matters Europe-wide, I have always sought to disseminate the idea that language management practices ought to be based on context-specific sociolinguistic analyses that take into account the socio-historic conditions of language ideologies in specific settings.<sup>6</sup>

During my Baltic work, I have observed how naturally multilingual individuals are in Eastern Europe. Clearly, language versatility is an important social and individual resource and builds societal resilience. To quote the Salzburg statement for a multilingual world, ‘the ability to speak multiple languages and communicate across linguistic divides is a critical skill.’<sup>7</sup> I shall never forget a conversation with a student at Vilnius University, who explained in perfect English that she was unsure as to which language (Russian, Polish or Lithuanian) was her main language. Embodying the region’s intensely multilingual environment, she had also absorbed English with the ease of a person who switches between several languages every day. Such language repertoires enabling cultural mediation between East and West will, I think, be key in our rapidly changing world.

Looking back, it is thanks to Meilutė’s openness and dedication that a chance meeting in Tokyo has led to substantial ongoing sociolinguistics work across the Baltic countries.

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Hogan-Brun, G. 2006. Are Models of Multilingualism Transferable from Western to Central/Eastern European Contexts? *Kalbotyra* 56, 66–74. This paper contrasts and compares Switzerland’s multilingual policy with approaches across the Baltic states.

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.salzburgglobal.org/multi-year-series/education/pageId/8543>. This international document (2018) calls for policies that value and support multilingualism and language rights.

## Bibliography

The following publications represent only a small fraction of the work done on Baltic sociolinguistics. Some articles are accompanied by commentary.

Handbook chapter:

Dabašinskienė, I., Hogan-Brun, G. 2023. Language Dynamics Research in the Baltic States. M. J. Ball, R. Mesthrie (eds.). *The Routledge Handbook of Sociolinguistics around the World*. Second edition. London: Routledge.

This sociolinguistics research overview chapter surveys the main directions of contemporary Baltic scholarship on languages in the region over the past decade. It highlights research on language policy and practices, on ideology perspectives, including minority issues, and on the status of the titular languages. It introduces emerging topics, methodological and theoretical approaches taken in Baltic research on intergroup communication, questions of identity, language attitudes, first and second language acquisition, youth language and the role of English (and Russian). Among the theoretical topics discussed are multilingualism, superdiversity (of languages), ‘translinguaging’, literacy of new speakers in various sociolinguistic domains, and language management theory with focus on various social actors’ attitudes, as well as metalinguistic activities regarding “language problems”.

Other, more practical matters tackled in this overview include issues of language use, views on languages and language-related topics, and multilingual and multimodal texts in cityscapes. This publication also includes a brief discussion of cross-Baltic sociolinguistic networking that promoted the exchange of information on language policy and practice from the start of this millennium. Comparing the region’s language situation from different angles, it extends information supplied in the chapter (by Ina Druviete) to the previous edition of this Handbook that contained an overview of Baltic sociolinguistics research up to around 2010.

There are also some Baltic-wide thematic collections:

Savickienė, I. (ed.). 2006. *Kalba, įvairovė ir integracija besiplečiančioje Europoje: iššūkiai ir galimybės (Language, diversity and integration in the enlarged EU: Challenges and opportunities)*. Kaunas: Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas.

This collection presents work reported on from across the Baltic republics in the final BLaIN conference, held at VDU Kaunas in 2006. It shows how use of the titular languages (Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian) has expanded into all social

domains, in education, employment, entertainment, and the arts. Against the background of ongoing debates of language practices at national levels, diverging sociolinguistic parameters are shown to make demands on different research directions in each republic.

Hogan-Brun, G. (guest ed.). 2010. Language and Education at the Margins of the European Union: Policies, Practices, Challenges. *Comparative Education*. Special issue 46 (1), 1.

This collection is a study of democratizing reforms across the Baltic states since the late 1980s. National legislative frameworks for restructured educational systems are examined. Challenges surrounding educational policymaking are discussed, as are diverse educational provisions chosen across the region. In addition, specific focus is on minority education, with comparative analyses of education policies and practices in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in response to emerging language needs in their multi-ethnic settings.

Idem. 2005. Baltic Sociolinguistic Review. *Journal of Baltic Studies*. Special Issue 36 (3), 253–253.

This review on the diverging sociolinguistic and sociocultural configurations across the Baltic states provides contextualised insights of the complexities determining post-Soviet language regimes chosen in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. A preface by Bernard Spolsky, on the field of sociolinguistics, is followed by a general overview of sociolinguistic issues across the Baltic states. Particular emphasis is given to language needs and practices among speakers and at the national level. Challenges in implementing policies that accommodate ethnic and linguistic diversity to foster integration are also discussed.

Idem. 2005. Language and Social Processes in the Baltic Republics Surrounding EU Accession. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. Special issue 26 (5), 273–282.

Marking EU-accession of the Baltic republics, this collection originates from the first two BLAIN workshops, on language and social processes in the Baltic states (Vilnius University, 2003), and on Baltic language policies in an enlarged EU (Riga University, 2004). Contributions discuss issues pertaining to language and ethnicity and study approaches to integration and the management of cultural and linguistic diversity. The overall focus is on the impact of EU accession negotiations on

national language ideological debates, particularly with respect to minority language rights internally, and to strengthen the position of Estonian, Latvia and Lithuanian externally, within the EU.

There is also a monograph:

Hogan-Brun, G., M. Ramonienė, M. Rannut, U. Ozolins (eds.). 2008. *Language Policies and Practices in the Baltic States*. Tallinn: Tallinn University Press.

This monograph provides an overview of the language situation in the three Baltic countries: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. It examines changes in language regimes brought about Baltic-wide since the restitution of independence, the nature of these changes, the opposition they have engendered and the linguistic, political, and social consequences of these policies, both locally and internationally. First, the historical background is reviewed to contextualise and present language policy issues in the Baltic states. Then, attempts to overturn major aspects of Soviet language policy and to re-institute the national languages are highlighted. Detailed attention is paid to language provision in the diverging educational settings, as well as to methods of assessment. This is followed by a discussion of attitudes to languages and language use, to standardisation, testing, and language variants. In conclusion the scholarly treatment of Baltic language policy issues is examined, concluding with an evaluation of the contribution of the Baltic States to our overall understandings of language policy and its complexities.

#### **Further selected references**

Papers and book chapters on language and social developments across the Baltic include:

Vihalemm, T., G. Hogan-Brun. 2013. Language policies and practices across the Baltic: processes, challenges, prospects. *European Journal of Applied Linguistics* 1, 55–82.

Hogan-Brun, G. 2011. Language constellations across the Baltic area – two decades on. *Estonian Human Development Report. The Baltic way(s): twenty years on*. Tallinn: Eesti Koostöö Kogu / Estonian Cooperation Assembly. 139–140. Online access: <https://hdr.undp.org/content/national-human-development-report-estonia-20102011>.

Idem. 2009. The Politics of Language and Citizenship in the Baltic Context. G. Extra, M. Spotti, P. Van Avermaet (eds.). *Testing regimes: Cross-National Perspectives on Language, Migration & Citizenship. Advances in Sociolinguistics*. London, New York: Continuum. 35–55.

Bulajeva, T., G. Hogan-Brun. 2010. Introducing early foreign language education in the Baltic context. *Comparative Education* 46 (1), 79–96.

Idem. 2008. Language and Education Orientations in Lithuania post-EU. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 11, 396–422.

Hogan-Brun, G., D. Hag, S. Kessler. 2011. Processes of Language Standardisation in Norway and Lithuania: A Comparative Analysis. K. Maier (ed.). *Nation und Sprache in Nordosteuropa im 19 Jahrhundert. Veröffentlichungen des Nordost-Instituts* 9. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag. 241–257.

Hogan-Brun, G., M. Ramonienė. 2004. Changing Levels of Bilingualism across the Baltic. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 7 (1), 62–77.

Idem. 2003. Emerging Language and Education Policies in Lithuania. *Language Policy* 2, 27–45.

Idem. 2002. Locating Lithuanian in the (Re-)Intellectualisation Debate. *Current Issues in Language Planning* 3 (1), 62–75.