



High Latvian Dialect: Development Trends in the Past and Present

Anna STAFECKA
University of Latvia

Key words: *High Latvian dialect, Latgallian written language.*

The process of globalization influences local regional culture, including local dialects. They have a tendency towards unification and losing their characteristic features. On the other hand, dialects tend to maintain themselves.

Some General Notes

The Latvian language, like Lithuanian, has maintained its historical dialects. Each dialect has a range of distinctions reflecting archaic features of the Baltic languages.

There are three dialects in Latvian: the Middle dialect, the Livonian dialect and the High Latvian dialect (L V D A 34, map No.1).

A long tradition in Latvian linguistics divides these dialects into two major groups: Low Latvian and High Latvian. Low Latvian is made up of the Central dialect and the Livonian dialect.

The Low and High Latvian dialect groups are quite similar, but each has a separate literary tradition: the Standard Latvian Language created in the 16th century on the basis of the Low Latvian dialect and German script and High Latvian or Latgallian Written Language as a written form of the High Latvian dialect located in the Eastern part of Latvia – the present-day Latgale.

This article deals with the High Latvian dialect which covers the eastern part of Latvia: Augšzeme, Latgale and North-Eastern Vidzeme. High Latvian has two subgroups or subdialects: Selonian and Latgallian. Both can be further subdivided into deep and non-deep subdialects. Besides, Selonian subdialects can be subdivided into Selonian subdialects of Augšzeme and Selonian subdialects of Vidzeme. Latgallian subdialects can also be subdivided into Latgallian dialects of Vidzeme and Latgallian subdialects of Latgale (Deep-Latgallian and North Latgallian). Latgallian subdialects of Latgale are the basis of High Latvian or Latgallian Written Language.

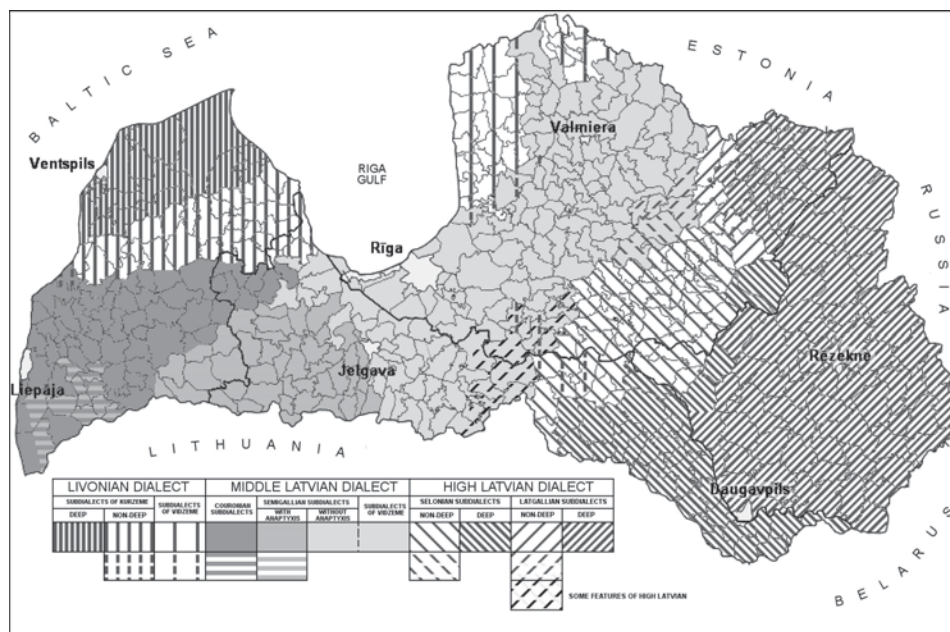


Figure 1. Dialects of Latvian

One part of High Latvian territory – Latgale – in comparison to other regions of Latvia has had quite different historical development. It should be pointed out that it was only in 1917 that this Eastern territory inhabited by Latvians was united with the rest of Latvia after almost 300 years of administrative isolation, and Standard Latvian became the official language for the whole Latvian nation, also for all the speakers of the High Latvian dialect. During this 300-year separation, the region developed its own distinct culture and customs regarding the written word based on Latgallian vernaculars of the High Latvian dialect (B r e i d a k s 1993, 124–129).

The ethnic territory of the Latvians has been split up and incorporated into other countries (Germany, Sweden, Poland and Russia) several times. Moreover, the separated regions inhabited by the Latvians were not only under authority of different countries, but they were also influenced by various religions.

After the Altmark Peace Agreement of 1629, the present-day Latgale still remained under the rule of Poland and was separated from the rest of the territory inhabited by the Latvians. Therefore, in the first half of 17th century the Latvian nation was split into two isolated parts: one part – Vidzeme, under Swedish control, and Kurzeme's Dukedom, both predominantly Lutheran, and the second part – Latgale or *Inflanty Polskie*, under the rule of Poland. Thus, Latvians had two roads towards European Culture – Kurzeme and Vidzeme's road through Lutheran Germany and, to some degree, through Sweden for Vidzeme, and Latgale's – through Catholic Poland and Rome.

As we can see, the territory of High Latvian (Selonian and Latgallian) speakers was also split up and their speakers belonged to different administrative units. Moreover, the territory of the Latgallian sub-dialect group was divided, too: Latgale's territory still remained under the rule of Poland, but Latgallian sub-dialects of Vidzeme were under Swedish control.

Latgallian written tradition

The first written fragments showing High Latvian dialect characteristics are found in entries in legal documents dating back from the beginning of the 18th century. We can really speak about the beginning of High Latvian (Latgallian) written tradition only in 1753 when the first Latgallian book preserved until now (the translations of Gospels *Evangelia Toto Anno* (Gospels for the whole year) was published in Vilnius in 1753 (see St a f e c k a 2004, 316–324). Thus, the middle of the 18th century, when Catholic priests began publishing books based on High Latvian dialects and Polish spelling, an independent Latgallian written tradition was established. The first books were of religious content – translations of Gospels, holy songs, prayer-books.

Prohibition of printing and hand-written books

In 1863, the so-called Polish revolt took place with the aim to recover the historical borders of Poland, including Byelorussia, Lithuania and today's Latgale that was at that time part of Vitebsk province. The prohibition of the use of the Roman alphabet in printed texts came two years after the suppression of this revolt since Latin was seen as a Polish idiom. The prohibition also required existing texts to be destroyed. For a period this included Russian language textbooks. Students were also prohibited from speaking Latvian. This period, above others, shows the importance of the printed Latgallian word at that time (for more about it see – B r e ž g o 1944).

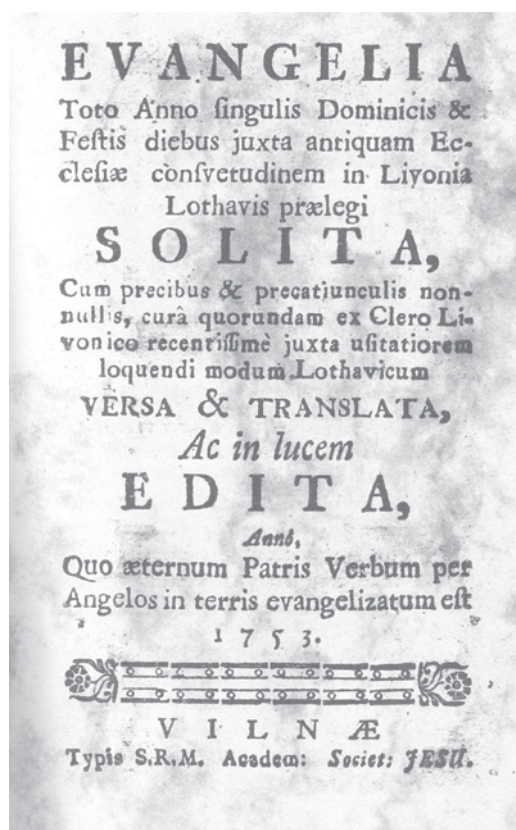


Figure 2. The title-page of the first Latgallian book

In 1865, a circular was published regarding the introduction of the Slavonic alphabet in printed texts. At the same time, an order was issued to destroy all existing texts using the Roman script. Also in 1865, the Russian government for Latvians of Vitebsk province (present-day Latgale) published a calendar in Low Latvian but using Slavonic letters. However, the Catholic prayer tradition was so strong at the time, that the common people ignored these and later publications. Their spiritual leaders, often seeing orthodox propaganda in these books, encouraged their flock not to use them. On the other hand, the Low Latvian written language remained somewhat foreign to Latgale's Latvians.

Whereas Lithuanian books could still be printed in Lithuania Minor, where the printing prohibition was not in effect, and then secretly brought into Lithuania, the situation was a lot more complicated for Latvians. Although the prohibition was also not in effect in other regions of Latvia (Kurzeme and Vidzeme), Latgallian books were not printed there, because Latvians from Latgale or the Vitebsk province, as it was called then, were separated from those regions by an administrative border. The dialects were quite different as well, and as a result, two traditions for written language had developed: the middle dialect as a base for Low Latvian written language and the High Latvian dialect as a base for High Latvian or Latgallian written language. This also meant a different way of writing in each tradition, i.e. the use of Gothic letters in Low Latvian orthography and the Roman alphabet in High Latvian orthography. These two traditions were, of course, influenced by the two religious orientations of the people, Catholicism in Latgale and Lutheranism in the rest of Latvia.

Some Latgallian books were printed outside the Latgale region, for instance in Holland, East Prussia, Sweden and Finland and then were smuggled into Latgale. These books were very expensive and the local peasants, who had just been set free through the abolition of serfdom, simply had no money to buy them. But prayer and song books were an absolute necessity for the peasants. One could not imagine spiritual life without them. Thus the old prayer books, which served as tools in the home (poetically called "mother's school at the spinning wheel") to teach prayers, the catechism and basic reading, were carefully looked after. Simple uneducated peasants copied by hand individual threadbare pages and eventually entire religious books, later volumes of folklore, books of practical advice, translations, and even books of fiction from Polish, Lithuanian and Low Latvian (R u p a i ņ s 1944, 190 – 204; S t a f e c k a 2000, 347–352). Such hand-written books were guarded as great treasures, passed from home to home thus replacing the loss caused by the printing prohibition.

The sheer volume of hand-written and hand-bound books during this period means that today we can look back and say that many manuscripts in the history of Latgallian written language and literature were actually created by Latgallian peasants, who typically lacked formal education. Hand-written books were produced and passed around mainly in the central part of Latgale – in the Rēzekne and

Ludza areas, encompassing the Barkava, Varakļāni, Gaigalava, Naurāni and Makašāni territories. It is interesting to note that the literacy rate was 76.5 percent in those towns where hand transcription of books was common, whereas in neighbouring towns, where it was not common, only 39.2 percent of the population were literate (A p ī n i s 1987, 198).

As of today, we know the names of 15 book transcribers, but their number was much greater. We are still discovering hand-written books from that period. The most outstanding among the known transcribers are Andrivs Jūrdžs, Pīters Miglinīks, Jōns Seiļs, Jōns Šķesters and Vincents Leika, Staņislavs Svilāns.

Only at the beginning of the 20th century a deliberate standardization of written form of High Latvian began, and at the beginning it was based on Southern dialects, too. (C i r š a 1999) In the 30ties of the 20th century, Latgallian normative grammars and a spelling dictionary were published (S t r o d s 1933). The tendency to bring together Standard Latgallian with Low Latvian in this period is observed in the use of grammatical forms, e. g., Low Latvian Possessive case flexions *-as*, *-es*. Low Latvian influence on the vocabulary is observed as well. Thus many dialectal words are disappearing from active use and Standard Latgallian differs from Low Latvian mainly phonetically.

When Latvia gained its independence in 1918, a lot was done to establish the Latgallian orthography norms (see Z e p s 1996). Religious and secular literature was published; however, the popularity of the Latgallian written language gradually became less important. At that time there was a tendency in literature and journalism to avoid dialectal words, by substituting them with those typical for Low Latvian transferred into Latgallian sound system, e. g.,

muoja (Standard Latvian *māja*), Latgallian *sāta* 'home'

kartupeļs (SL *kartupelis*, Latg. *buļve* 'potato')

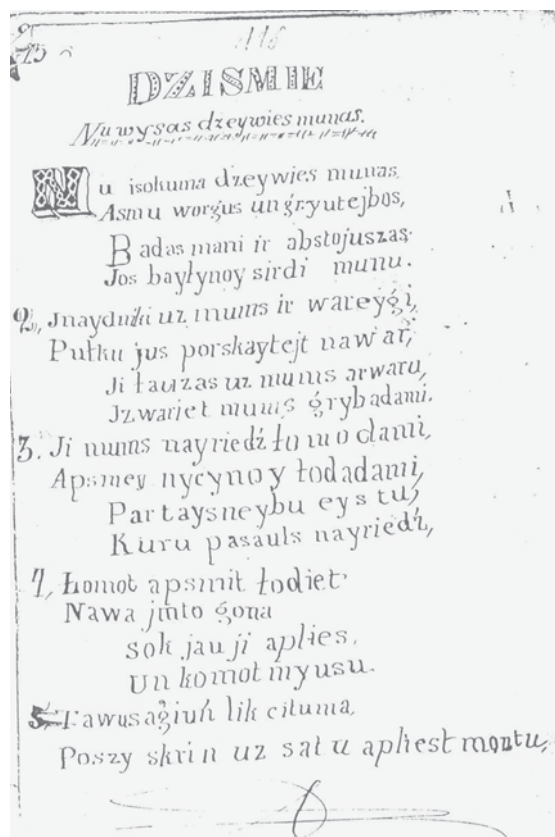


Figure 3. A page from hand-written book by Stanislaus Svilāns

skateitīs (SL *skatīties*), Latg. *vērtīs* ‘to look at’.

After World War II Latgallian books and periodicals appeared mainly in Western Europe and in the USA. Latgallian grammar and spelling dictionary also were published (B u k š s , P l a c i n s k i s 1973). In Latvia the usage of the Latgallian written language rapidly decreased and during the 60ies the Latgallian literary tradition was almost fully broken. It remained only in religious sphere (church services in the Catholic churches in Latgale were held only in the Latgallian language and some prayer books were published).

The situation in High Latvian dialect today

Today the situation on the territory of High Latvian in Vidzeme and Augšzeme differs from the language situation in Latgale.

One can find few native dialect speakers in Vidzeme and Augšzeme, usually they use Standard Latvian language in their everyday communication. Nevertheless, some phonetic features (especially accent, pronunciation of sounds *e*, *ē*) as well as some grammatical phenomena as far as syntax can be observed in their speech.

The situation in Latgale is more complicated. On the one hand, since 1988, the Latgallian culture and written language experienced another revival in Latvia. Although the revival of Latgallian press and literature started, the long period of interruption had left many negative consequences. During the Soviet period the majority of people have lost their interest in the Latgallian style of writing. On the other hand, Latgallian dialects during the post-war period have suffered a lot from the Slavic influence, especially the language of middle-aged and younger generation. However, the language of elderly people sounds more Latvian and their word-stock is much broader. It could be the result of an influence of the Latgallian written language.

The State Language Law of the Republic of Latvia provides the guarantees for the development of the Latgallian written language and there are a lot of enthusiasts trying to maintain the Latgallian literary language tradition. Books and calendars are being published periodically. The Orthography Commission of Latgallian Written Language has been established. Its task is to complete the orthography reform started in the 30ies, by bringing closer the style of writing to the spoken language. The Association of Teachers of the Latgallian Language, Literature and History of Culture has been established as well, promoting the Latgallian written language at schools. It is also possible to read in Latgallian on the internet; however, in the present situation it is difficult to foresee the development of the Latgallian written language.

Even today Latgale economically is much weaker in comparison with other regions of Latvia. Young people are intensively leaving Latgale; very often Latgallian identity is a disturbing element and they want to get rid of it. In the Latgallian dialects the sound articulation base differs a lot from those typical for the Low

Latvians. It is difficult to acquire the correct Latvian Standard language without special training; therefore very often parents speak with their children in Standard Latvian (although sometimes they don't recognize that their language is incorrect). Under the influence of mass media and as a result of migration of population the specific lexicon of Latgallian dialects is reducing.

However, the Latgallian language for the majority of Latvians of Latgale is the means of expression of their identity. Recently, when dealing with orthography matters, it is stated that sometimes even one letter *ō*, which is in the alphabet of Latgallian written language (but not in Standard Latvian) and stands for the diphthong *uo*, can be perceived as a sign of identity which should not be lost as a result of the orthography reform.

It has to be admitted that the Latgallian written language has had and still has an important role in the maintenance of Latvian identity in Latgale region. The written word helps maintaining local dialects and using them in everyday speech.

References

- L V D A 1999 – LVDA – *Latviešu valodas dialektu atlants*, Leksika. Autores: Bušmane, Brigita, Laumane Benita, Stafecka Anna, Rīga: Zinātne.
- A p ī n i s 1987 – Aleksejs Apinis, *Neprasot atļauju, Latviešu rokraksta literatūra 18. un 19. gadsimtā*, Rīga: Liesma.
- B r e i d a k s 1993 – Ontōns Breidaks, „Latgalīšu rokstu volūdas sūkūtnē un atteisteiba”, *Tāvu zemes kalendārs*, Rēzekne: LKC izdevniecība, 124–129.
- B r e ž g o 1944 – Boleslavs Brežgo, „Aizlīgums īspīst latgaļu grōmotas latīņu burtim un aizlīguma laiki Latgolā 1865.-1904” *Rokstu krōjums latgaļu drukas aizlīguma atceļšonas 40 godu atcerei*, Daugavpils: V. Lōča izdevnīceiba, 117–171.
- B u k š s, P l a c i n s k i s 1973 – Mikelis Bukšs, Juris Placinskis, Latgaļu volūdas gramatika un pareizraksteibas vōrdneica, Minchene,
- C i r š a 1999 – Līga Cirša, *Latgaliešu ortogrāfijas jautājumu risinājums no 1904. līdz 1929. gadam*, Rēzekne: Rēzeknes augstskola.
- K u r s ī t e, S t a f e c k a 2003 – Janīna Kursīte, Anna Stafecka, *Latgale: valoda, literatūra un folklorā*, Rēzekne: LKC izdevniecība.
- R u p a i ņ s 1944 – Ontōns Rupaiņš, „Tautas rakstnīki un grōmotu pōrraksteitōji drukas aizlīguma laikā”, *Rokstu krōjums latgaļu drukas aizlīguma atceļšonas 40 godu atcerei*, Daugavpils: V. Lōča izdevnīceiba, 190–204.
- S t a f e c k a 2000 – Anna Stafecka, „Hand-written Books in Eastern Latvia: a Sociolinguistic Review”, *Proceedings of 3rd International Congress of Dialectologists and Geolinguists*, vol. II, Lublin: UMCS.
- S t a f e c k a 2004 – Anna Stafecka, *Evangelia toto anno..(1753). Pirmā latgaliešu grāmata. Indeksa sastādītāja, apcerējuma autore un atbildīgā redaktore*, Rīga LU LaVI316–317.
- S t r o d s 1933 – Pēteris Strods, *Pareizraksteibas vōrdneica*, Rēzekne.
- Z e p s 1996 – Francis Zeps, „Napabeigta latgaļu ortografijas reforma”, *Tāvu zemes kalendārs 1996*, Rēzekne: LKC izdevniecība, 258–261.

Latvių aukštaičių tarmė: raidos tendencijos praeityje ir dabar

S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: *latvių aukštaičių tarmė, latgališkoji raštų kalba.*

Šių laikų globalizacijos procesai daro įtaką regionų kultūrai, įskaitant vietines šnektas, ilgainiui linkstančias niveluotis. Kita vertus, tarmėms būdinga ir ryški savisaugos tendencija.

Straipsnis skirtas aukštaičių tarmei, paplitusiai rytinėje Latvijos dalyje – Latgaloje ir Vidžemės šiaurės rytuose. Skiriamos dvi pagrindinės aukštaičių patarmės – latgališkoji ir sėliškoji. Šios savo ruožtu skirstomos į keletą pogrupių.

Istoriškai susiklostė, kad dabartinės Latgalos aukštaičių latgališkųjų šnektų teritoriją nuo likusios Latvijos ilgą laiką skyrė valstybinė siena. Tik 1917 m. po beveik 300 metų atskirties visa latvių etninė teritorija buvo suvienyta ir latvių literatūrinė kalba tapo visos latvių tautos oficialiąja kalba. Per šiuos atskirties šimtmečius susiformavo savita aukštaičių rašto tradicija ir kalba, kuri turėjo didelę reikšmę išsaugant šio regiono latviškąjį tapatumą. Latgaloje, kaip ir Lietuvoje, XIX a. antroje pusėje galiojo spaudos draudimas, ir tuo metu atsirado rankraštinė knygų leidyba, kuria rūpinosi valstiečiai, patys neretai neturėję mokyklinio išsilavinimo.

XX a. pradžioje prasidėjo latgališkosios raštų kalbos norminimas. Po II pasaulinio karo latgališkoji raštija buvo publikuojama tik užsienyje. Dėl to išaugo karta, kurią ši kalba menkai tedomina. Nors latgališkosios aukštaičių tarmės geriau išlaikytos Latgaloje nei Vidžemėje, ir čia jaunosios kartos atstovai vis dažniau bendrauja latvių literatūrine kalba.

A n n a S T A F E C K A
Latvian Language Institute
University of Latvia
Akademijas laukums 1
Riga
LV-1050 Latvia
[anna.stafecka@inbox.lv]