

The sociolinguistic evaluation and recording of the dying Kursenieku language¹

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Since the times of the Teutonic order until 1923, the Curonian Peninsula was a part of Prussia, and later – a part of Germany. Baltic tribes' migration processes of different intensity occurred here. In the 16th century the newcomers from Latvian speaking Courland started to dominate, moving to the spit in several waves up to the 18th century; at the same time, people from the continental part (the majority of them were Germanized Prussians), colonizers from other German lands, and Lithuanians from the Klaipėda area settled in the region. The *Kursenieku* language, also known as *New Curonian* (German *Nehrungskurisch*)² can be categorized as a mixture of Latvian Curonian dialects with Lithuanian, German, and elements of the now extinct Old Prussian. Since it had no written form, Kursenieku was roofed by Lithuanian and later by German, which had functioned as languages of religion and education for a long time. The community disintegrated at the end of World War II. After the Kursenieki community left their homeland and settled in different towns and villages of Germany, there was no practical use for the maintenance of Kursenieku. The chronological reconstruction of the Kursenieku is possible and useful for the Baltic studies; however, there is no motive for revitalization: nowadays, there is no community willing to use this language. This article briefly presents the development of the Kursenieku language in its ethno-cultural context. Moreover, it raises the discussion around its status (variety or language), provides its sociolinguistic characteristics, describes the work that has been done with the language, and presents urgent goals and research perspectives.

1. BRIEF INSIGHT INTO THE HISTORY OF THE REGION AND ITS COMMUNITY.

Since the times of the Teutonic order until 1923, the Curonian Spit³ was a part of Prussia, and later – a part of Germany. Baltic tribes' migration processes of different intensity occurred here. It provided the grounds for the formation of a multi-ethnic community, which lived primarily from fishing.

¹ I would like to thank my colleague Dr. Christiane Schiller for sharing ideas to improve this paper

² Term used by Schmid (1989).

³ Curonian Spit (German *Kurische Nehrung*, Lithuanian *Kuršių nerija*, Latvian *Kuršu kāpas*, Russian Куршская коса) – is a 98 km long, thin, curved sand-dune spit that separates the Curonian Lagoon from the Baltic Seacoast. Its southern part lies within Kaliningrad Oblast, Russia, and its northern part within southwestern Lithuania. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site shared by the two countries.

Besides the people from Baltic origin, the region continued to be inhabited by the colonists from further Prussian and other distant localities. As well as in other places, the German colonists had since the Middle Ages been living on the Curonian Spit, especially on its southern part, which had better routes of communication with the continent. In the 16th century, the newcomers from Latvian speaking Courland started to dominate, moving to the spit in several waves⁴ until the 18th century; at the same time, people from the continental part (the majority of them were Germanized Prussians), colonizers from other German lands, and Lithuanians from the Klaipeda area settled in the region.

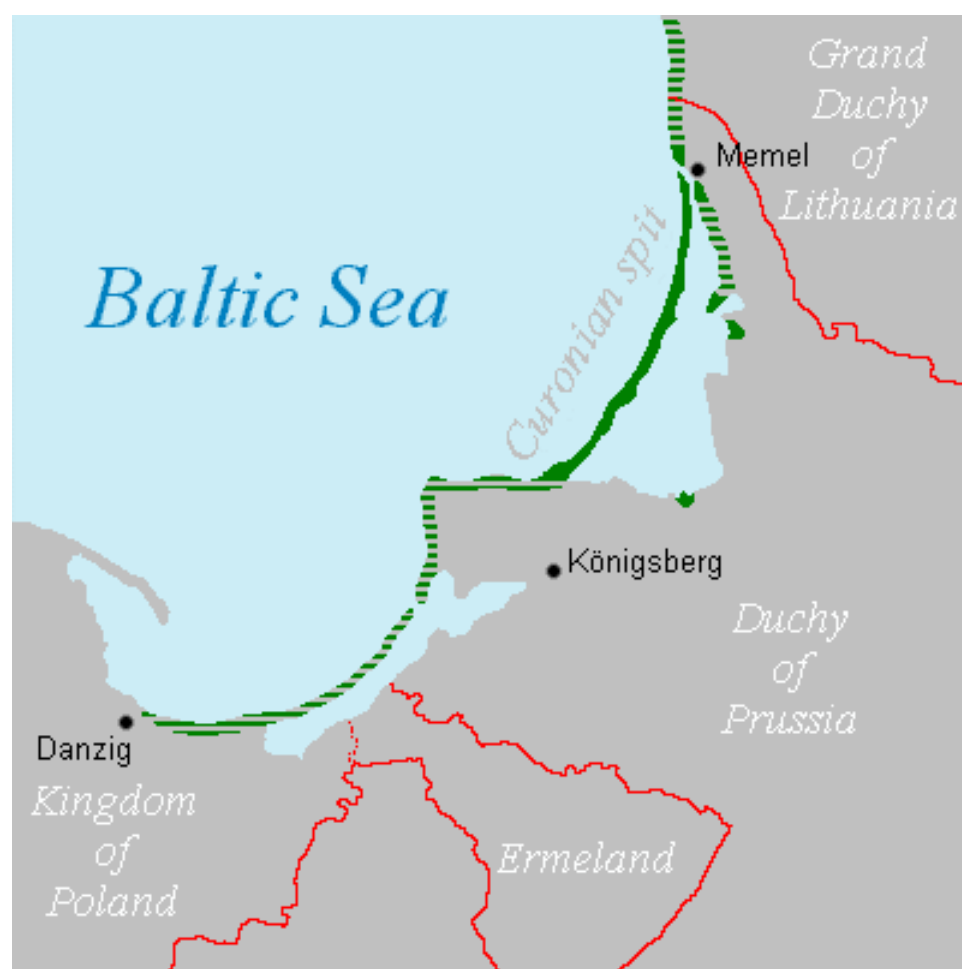


FIGURE 1: Maximum of the settlement of Kursenieku language speakers in Prussia (Einhorn 1649) (<http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuren>, 10 December, 2015)

Such migration trends on the Curonian Spit have been proved by numerous facts: archeological and historical sources, as well as toponyms and personal names (Einhorn 1649,

⁴ The first newcomers are recorded already at the end of the 14th century, but their number was not big (Forstreuter 1981: 286). Since the beginning of the 15th century, a few waves of newcomers from Courland had reached the spit, and this process continued during the 16th century (Bezenberger 1888: 271).

Rimantienė 1999, Bezenberger 1887, Forstreuter 1931, Kiseliūnaitė & Simutytė 2005, Kiseliūnaitė 2005). Thus, when considering the evolution of ethnic culture, not only the principles related to the island are to be applied on the spit, but also the ones of the ethnic margins and multicultural spaces are to be considered. The community of the Curonian Spit was united by trade predetermined by specific natural settings. For the most part, those were fishermen villages with their peculiar lifestyle, which can be distinguished from the continental part by the following features:

- There was no cultivable land on the Curonian Spit, except for a small lowland in *Rasite* (Germ. *Rositten*/ Lith. *Rasytė*). Thus, the inhabitants of the spit did not come to know the life of the farmers, or gradually distanced from it (if we bear in mind that a part came from the continent or were Courland countrymen) (Seraphim 1892).
- People did not live in farmsteads, but rather in street-type settlements, where the homesteads were located on the very coast of the lagoon, but not on the seashore; the current fact is important for the development of the ethnic culture and language, because we dealing with a community that was densely inhabiting a small area.
- The spit was ravaged by plague, and the woods were being cut during the seven-year war, which caused an ecological disaster that dwarfed the development of the region. Until the middle of the 19th century, it had been a poor land, in which public servants felt like the outcasts (Sembritzki 1918: 114).
- Although the spit is a peninsula, people lived there in the same conditions as on an island. The villages were frequently whelmed by sand and snow, becoming difficult to reach and, thus, forming a restricted lifestyle in the middle part of the spit, where the novelties would arrive late; in the 19th century, the travelers and researchers described the villagers as highly conservative (Zweck 1898, Negelein 1902).
- Due to restricted movement and reticence of the villagers, there was always a danger of incest. To prevent it, mixed families with the shore inhabitants had been created (Lithuanian women brought there not only the language, but also the customs); nevertheless, in most villages the majority consisted of a few large families (Strakauskaitė 2001: 91).
- Though the movement was restricted on the land, the fishermen of the spit always maintained the connections with the countrymen of the mainland. They sold fish, bought agricultural goods and household stuff. This exchange was the cause of a big influence of Lithuanian in the Kursenieku language. A lot of Lithuanian words are present in agricultural lexis, since the Kursenieki had to acquire hay and agricultural goods from the other shore. Thus, an amount of trade based linguistic changes occurred, for instance in the composition of the numerals.

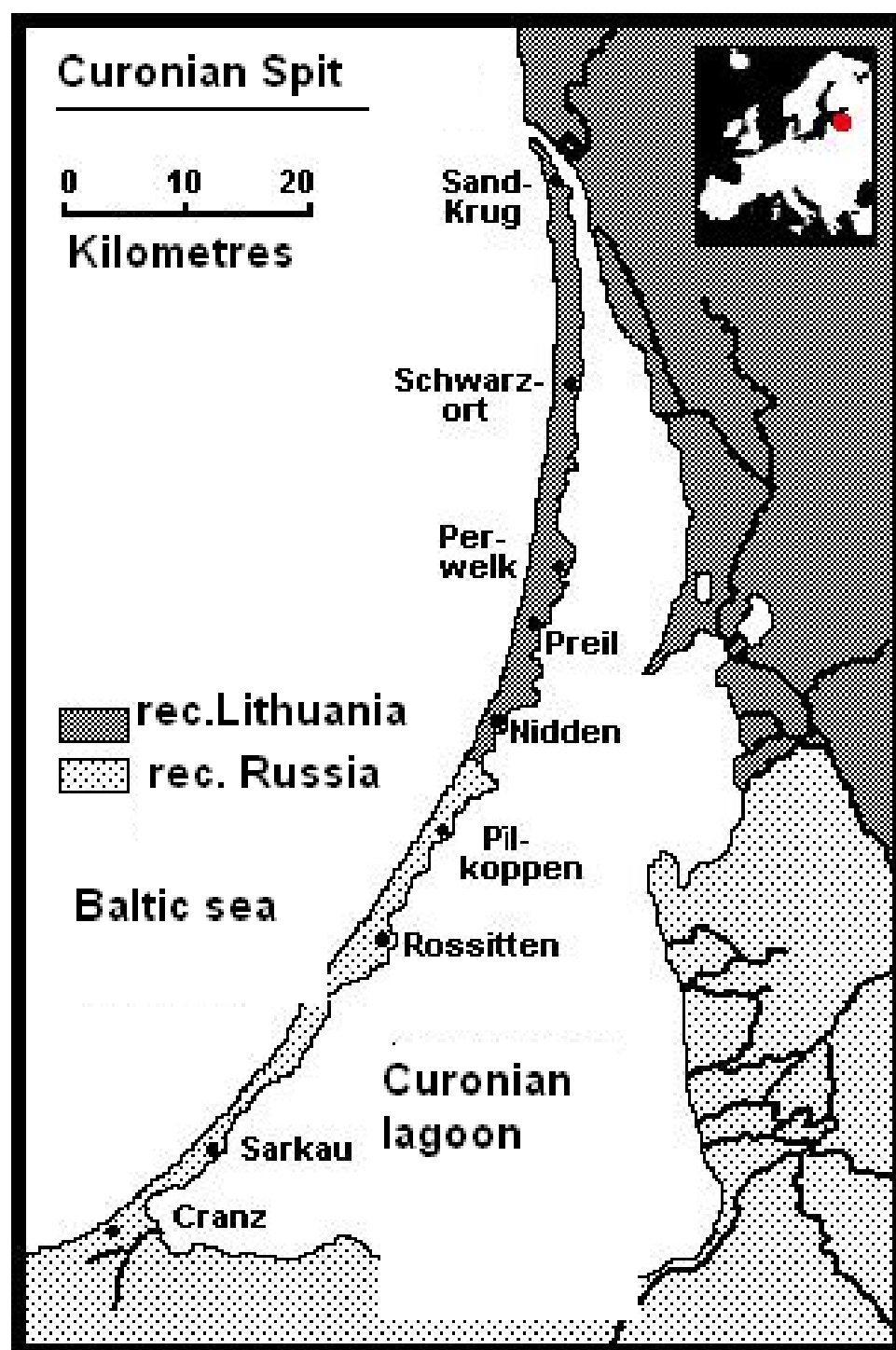


FIGURE 2: Places with Kursenieku speaking population (Bezenberger 1888)
(The place names are presented in their official forms)

2. KURSENIKU: LANGUAGE OR DIALECT? From the genealogical perspective, Kursenieku is the Courland variety of the Latvian language, attached to the middle dialect of the Curonian sub-dialect. This fact can be observed in following features:

1. Kursenieku is based on the western dialect of the Latvian language, which was formed in the 15th–16th century, containing elements of the old Curonian language substrate; however, Kursenieku is not considered an uninterrupted continuation of the Curonian language.⁵
 - 1.1. In the old Curonian language, the nasal diphthongs *an*, *en*, *in*, *un* were retained from the proto-language (relicts in Lithuanian and Latvian onomastics: *Alsunga*, *Palanga*, *Tenžė*, *Kretinga*); however, they are replaced in the Kursenieku variety by the Latvian *uo*, *ie*, *ī*, *ū* (*luogs* “window”, *piece* “five”, *tīkls* “net”, *sūtināt* (infinitiv) / *sūtina* (present) “send”).
 - 1.2. The major part of the lexis is Latvian; as for the grammar, there are slight differences. Thus, the language is understood by almost every Latvian.
 - 1.3. Several of its features, as supposed, could belong to the Curonian language substrate. The same features were found as well in the western Courland varieties not long ago, some of them were undertaken by the Latvian standard language.
 - 1.3.1. Phonetics
 - *uv* (*zuve* “fish”), standard Latvian *iv* (*zivs*)
 - *an*, *en*, and *in* in curonisms: *krants* “steep shore” (standard Latvian *kranta*), *banga* “wave” (standard Latvian *vilnis*), *lenķe* “valley”, *dzintars* “amber”
 - wide *ē* in verb infinitives (*gulēti* “to lie”, *sēdēti* “to sit”), slender *ē* in standard Latvian (*sēdēt*, *gulēt*)
 - 1.3.2. Lexis
 - *dzievuoti* “live”, “work”, standard Latvian *dzīvuot* “live”, but *strādāt* “work”
 - *plekste* “plaice”, standard Latvian *bute*
 - *dižs*, –*a* “big”, standard Latvian *liels*, –*a*
 - 1.3.3. Morphology
 - masculine instrumental plural –*is* (*ar vecis tīklis* “with old nets”), standard Latvian –*iem* (*ar veciem tīkliem*)
 - prefix *āz–* (*āzmirst* “forget”, *āzmaksāt* “pay”), standard Latvian *aiz–*
 - adjectival degrees: *juo tāli* “further”, standard Latvian *tālāk*
 - *ē–* stem form of the primary verb’s preterit: *vede* “take, lead”, *nese* “bring”, standard Latvian *veda*, *nesa*
2. The Kursenieku language has inherited an early layer of Germanisms and Slavisms, formed in Latvian at the beginning of Christianity: *baznīca* “church” < Russian божница, бозьница; *cilēks*, standard Latvian *cilvēks* < Russian

⁵ The problem arises due to the terminology, because users of the Kursenieku language call their language *kurse valoda*, their Lithuanians neighbors call it *kuršių kalba*; this term, in ethnographic rather than linguistic sense, is often used in the media, where the language of the inhabitants of Curonian Spit is often confused with the dead Baltic language (Eng. *Curonian* or *Old Curonian*, Lith. *kuršių kalba*), which is a way of making this linguistic reality more sensational, exotic, etc.

чъловекъ; *ūzes* “pants” (Curonian Latvian *ūzas* < Low German *hose*; standard Latvian *bikses*); *kungs* “Lord, king” < Old German *kunig*; as well as some fish names of German origin, widely known on the Courland’s seashore: *stuore* “Acipenser” < German *Stör*, *stinte* “osmerus eperlanus” < German *Stint* among other.

3. Kursenieku has inherited a Finnish layer, peculiar to Courland: *launags* “south, south wind, dinner”, *karša* (Latvian variety *karaša*) “bun”, *valgums* “wharf”, etc.

Some linguists consider Kursenieku a dialect of Latvian. However, from a sociolinguistic point of view, it is to be considered an independent Baltic language (in this sense, the author follows the opinion of Vanags 1999). The following arguments support the later categorization:

- After the separation from its parent language (Curonian Latvian), Kursenieku did not take further part in the process of Latvian language development, as a regional variant, i.e. it did not participate in the development of standard Latvian and in the formation of Latvian national identity. The Kursenieki of the Curonian Spit did not consider themselves part of the Latvian nation. This means that Kursenieku can only conditionally receive the status of Latvian dialect (only in a genealogical perspective).
- It became a common language as other non-German languages in Prussia.
- Its further development was affected by socially stronger languages – Lithuanian and German.⁶
- It served an expression of the group’s ethnic identity and contributed to its preservation.

Presently, with only a few speakers remaining, it can be included in the group of dying languages.

3. LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND LANGUAGE CONTACT. The Kursenieku language, being in other country, was isolated from the rest of Latvian-speaking community. Therefore, it did not undergo the development processes that were peculiar to the dialect of Latvian language in Courland. Due to the isolation, it remained archaic and retained many peculiarities of the 15–17th-century Western Latvian dialects, which disappeared in the course of time. On the other hand, there was a need for innovations in everyday usage and they occurred in two ways: by using old word formation strategies or by borrowing new words and syntactic constructions from the contact languages – Lithuanian and German. The least changes in Kursenieku occurred in the fishing and family domain.

Lithuanian (the western dialect of East Prussia Lithuanians) was used in mixed families, especially if the mother was Lithuanian. Written Lithuanian of Prussian Lithuanians reached the Kursenieki through schools and church. In the 17th century, there was the

⁶ Specific forms of numerals are an example thereof. Numbers from 1 to 9 are identical with the numbers in Latvian literary language, except for the Courland peculiar *dui* (standard Latvian *divi*, *divas* “two”); however, numbers from 10 to 19 are clear Lithuanianisms (*desimt* “ten”: Lithuanian *dešimt*, different from Latvian *desmit*; *vi(e)nālik*: Lithuanian *vienuolika* “eleven”, different from Latvian *vienpadsmit*, etc.).

aim to evangelize Prussian inhabitants. Thus, priests were trained to serve in non-German parishes, and religious literature was being published. Kursenieku did not obtain written language status, which probably can be explained through the small number of speakers and the possibly high costs for publishing and priests' support. The church language was Lithuanian, as it was the most popular language among non-German languages in East Prussia. Due to adverse natural conditions, churches and parish schools were located far away from each other – for example, Nida had no church and no school until the 17th century.

At the same time, services and education were conducted in German as well, and the inhabitants were gradually becoming trilingual.⁷ Lithuanian had a strong influence on Kursenieku. Being very religious, the Kursenieki adopted all the Lithuanian vocabulary related to religion and moral.

In the northern part of the spit, trilingual inhabitants were not rare. Probably, the use of Lithuanian retreated.

- The life on the spit began to change radically in the times of Bismarck, when German became the only official language in the Prussian part of Germany. This area was Germanized rapidly, because the children attended German schools; the mentality of Kaiser Monarchy was becoming stronger; after World War I only older people were attending Lithuanian services.
- Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, besides fishing business, resort settlements and infrastructure were developed (roads, piers, hotels; sand slides were prevented by afforesting of the dunes). Modern vacationers from big cities found the spit fishermen a kind of exotic tribe that spoke an unknown language and followed old traditions and superstitions.
- After Klaipėda area joined Lithuania in 1923, the spit was divided into two parts according to the district boundaries at that time; thus, the part north of Nida was under Lithuanian administration and in an intense Lithuanization process, while the southern territory remained German. The most fishery places of the lagoon were left to Germany, which caused dissatisfaction among Lithuanian fishermen. In general, there were not many people who agreed with Lithuanian administration, in contrast to the mainland, and at the same time, the Curonian legacy began to fade, while Germanization reaped its benefits (for more details, see Endzelīns 1931).

The community disintegrated at the end of World War II, when the residents of the Curonian Spit, as German citizens, were evacuated or scattered. Several repatriate families emigrated between 1958-1960. After the Kursenieki left their homeland and settled in different towns and villages of Germany, the maintenance of the Kursenieku language became threatened.

4. CURRENT SITUATION OF THE LANGUAGE. At the end of World War II, when the Soviet army was approaching, almost all Curonian Spit inhabitants were evacuated as German citizens. After a few years, several families came back to the homeland (mostly women

⁷ According to the facsimile of the lessons' schedule in Nida's school chronicle (*Chronik der Schule zu Nidden* edited by Nausėda & Gerulaitienė, page 129), religion lessons were taught in Lithuanian, and reading in German; in other part of the chronicle (Nausėda & Gerulaitienė 2013: 77), it is mentioned that in 1894, only 20 children from 112 had been speaking German at home, others spoke Kursenieku.

and children); however, they did not want to live in the Soviet-occupied territory and, on the basis of the agreement between Germany and the Soviet Union, the families moved west in 1958–1960. Only a few autochthons remained on the Curonian Spit, namely those who married Lithuanians or Russians and those who were not allowed to leave by the Soviet regime. New inhabitants came to the spit, and the autochthons remained an ethnic minority and were called Germans by the new inhabitants. Thus, there were no conditions for the Kursenieku language to be maintained. It was episodically used only in family circles on the initiative of repatriated elders. Today, there are barely a few speakers of Kursenieku left. According to their language knowledge, the speakers can be divided into three groups: 1. Passive speakers, i.e. speakers who, when being talked to or when having a conversation partner, fragmentally insert a few Kursenieku phrases in their discourse, but do not dare to speak more; 2. Speakers capable of keeping a conversation in Kursenieku (there are only few speakers remaining that belong to this group, a couple in Germany and one person in Sweden); 3. Active speakers, i.e., those speakers who are constantly communicating among themselves in Kursenieku and use the language almost every day (only two brothers, Sakuth, who live in Sweden, belong to this group).

4.1. RESEARCH ON THE KURSENIIEKU LANGUAGE. The research on Kursenieku has started at the end of the 18th century. The first written source was a short dictionary of 278 words in Peter Simon Pallas' dictionary *Linguarum totius orbis vocabularia comparative*.⁸ Since the 19th century several linguists have been working on the language (A. Bezenberger, J. Plakis, W.P. Schmid, F. Hinze, Chr. El Mogharbel). Except for a small study by J. Plakis, later researches on the Kursenieku language are fragmental, covering only separate aspects; moreover, they are based on a small amount of data. Diachronic changes in the dialect, from the beginning of the 20th century to the present, have hardly been explored. At the moment, Dalia Kiseliūnaitė conducts most of the research: Kiseliūnaitė collected several hours of audio recordings, on the basis of which research is being carried out and publications are being prepared.

4.2. WHAT HAVE BEEN ACCOMPLISHED? Documents written in the language were discovered. Although the language did not become an official written language, several speakers have attempted to write down their native language, using Lithuanian, Latvian, and German graphemes.⁹

At the moment, there are more than 70 hours of audio recordings but not all them are transcribed yet. However, some of the recordings are in private collections and are still not accessible for linguistic research. Several video recordings were also made during fieldwork stays. Other linguistically valuable documents of the region are in various archives with limited access; especially important are the lists of the inhabitants and place names in historical documents (church books, lists of tax-payers, etc.). Cartographic and iconographic data are being gathered and constantly complemented. In order to complement our corpus and to it interdisciplinary, we are also collecting data about Kursenieku from other

⁸ A small fragment of Kursenieku is registered in the Lithuanian grammar *Anfangsgründe einer Littauischen Grammatick* by Paul F. Ruhig (1747)).

⁹ Richard Pietsch, who comes from Nida, and Paul Kwauka, a teacher from Klaipėda, have published a Kursenieku–German dictionary (*Kurisches Wörterbuch*); later, Pietsch, with the support of the linguist F. Scholz, published a German–Kursenieku dictionary (*Deutsch-kurisches Wörterbuch*, as well as valuable ethnographic data in a book called *Fischerleben auf der Kurischen Nehrung* (1982). We could also found several fragments of small manuscripts by other authors.

disciplines, such history, regional studies, and ethnography. Considering the need and urgency of documentation (soon there will be no informants left), more fieldwork stays are being prepared for the near future.

4.3. LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION AND FURTHER RESEARCH. Why is the research on Kursenieku important from an interdisciplinary point of view?

- As a dying language, Kursenieku deserves as much attention as other endangered languages in the world.
- Due to their archaic linguistic structure, Baltic languages are often object of Indo-European researches; however, Kursenieku is normally left out because its data are still almost unknown to the linguistic community.
- There is a substrate of an archaic vanished Curonian language in Kursenieku, which has not been investigated yet. It is reasonable to suppose that Kursenieku, due to its early isolation from Latvian, has retained more relics from the extinct Old Curonian language than contemporary Latvian and Lithuanian dialects.
- Due to its isolation, Kursenieku, originally a linguistic variant of Latvian, retained archaic features of this language and can serve, therefore, as a powerful source of the whole Latvian language history.
- Due to its development and status, Kursenieku can be a valuable source for researches on language and cultural contact between different ethnic groups.
- Onomastic research of the Curonian Spit is of great interest for historians interested in migratory movements, because it shows evidences of many migration processes that are still not clarified.
- In general, Kursenieku documents have also a prominent informational value for researchers in the domains of history, ethnography, and natural sciences.
- Being almost only a fishermen language, Kursenieku represents an interesting research subject from the sociolinguistic and ethnolinguistic perspectives.

4.4. PROBLEMS. The main problem we face in the research on Kursenieku is the lack of more qualified researchers and financial resources. In order to work on Kursenieku, substantial skills in Baltistics, good knowledge of Lithuanian, Latvian, and German, as well as knowledge of Prussian history are required. On the other hand, decreasing attention to the humanities puts Baltic studies aside. As a consequence, only a small number of students enroll Baltic studies' programs. Thus, the amount of qualified researchers in the area is very limited. At present, the research on Kursenieku is basically in the hands of one person, and what is worst, the collected data also. Due to financial restrictions, there are no possibilities to involve and motivate other colleagues for the work on this language. In order to change the current situation, much more substantial financial resources are needed and more international projects have to be prepared and funded, especially by the interested states. Unfortunately, neither Lithuania, Latvia nor Germany have expressed such interest at the state's level so far. The work remains in the hands of separate enthusiasts. In Russia, on the other hand, there is no interest in this subject at all, not only at a state's level, but even in the academic sector.

5. CONCLUSIONS. Kursenieku is considered a separate Baltic language, due to its social status and functions. Its documentation and research is important not only for historic Baltistics and for the study of the region's history and culture. Their results are urgent for researchers in various fields and even for the economic development of the region, in that research results can be used to support and develop the tourism industry. The territory in which Kursenieku was once actively spoken is protected by UNESCO as a cultural landscape object. Language heritage and ethnic culture are two of the most important priorities of the national park. The research on Kursenieku is urgent for the scientists of at least three states: Latvia, Lithuania, and Germany. Unfortunately, there is no substantial interest on the subject on the part of Russian academia, although half of the territory of the Curonian Spit gets into the Kaliningrad district of the Russian Federation.

Currently, research on Kursenieku language and culture is mostly concentrated at the Klaipėda University. However, it represents only the beginning of a big enterprise. An important task that must be accomplished is the creation of a database, accessible for the scientific community. While evaluating both old and new sources of language data without separating them from historical-social context, it is possible to make a scientifically objective evaluation of the peculiarities of this Baltic language and to develop a consistent base for its reconstruction.

The chronological reconstruction of the Kursenieku language is possible and useful for Baltic studies; however, there is no reason for revitalization efforts, since nowadays there is no community willing to use this language.

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