

THE KASHUBIAN LANGUAGE THROUGH TIME:
THE HISTORY OF KASHUBIAN STUDIES IN RUSSIA

*M. S. Khmelevskii*¹, *O. V. Raina*¹, *A. V. Savchenko*²

¹ Saint Petersburg State University,
7—9 Universitetskaya Emb., Saint Petersburg, 199034, Russia

² National Chengchi University,
116, № 64, Section 2, Zhinan Rd., Wenshan District, Taipei City 11605, Taiwan

Submitted on 19.12.2024

Accepted on 15.10.2025

doi: 10.5922/2225-5346-2026-1-12

This article examines linguocultural and linguistic research on the Kashubian substratum, drawing on materials collected by Russian scholars, primarily those affiliated with Saint Petersburg academic institutions, from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. These materials, derived from recordings of native speakers' oral speech as well as from written, lexicographic, and ethnographic sources, constitute an invaluable empirical foundation for the study of Kashubian. The article offers an extensive review of the history of Kashubian studies within Slavic scholarship, situating this tradition within the broader development of Slavistics. In addition to linguistic data, the paper addresses cultural and extralinguistic issues related to contemporary Kashubia as a northern Polish (Baltic) Slavic periphery. Based on the authors' own fieldwork in the Kashubian region and a critical analysis of the contributions of Russian linguists, the study seeks to re-evaluate and update key issues concerning Kashubian as a Slavic microlanguage and the Kashubians as a microethnos. Particular attention is paid to the current state of Kashubian studies and to the present ethnolinguistic situation of the region. The findings presented in the article contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Kashubian linguistic and cultural dynamics and are intended as a substantive addition to Slavic studies in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: *Kashubia, Kashubian language, microethnos, Russian Slavistics studies, Slavic culturology, Slavic periphery*

1. Introduction

The Kashubians and the Kashubian language constitute a distinctive linguocultural phenomenon that remains insufficiently studied and described to this day. Despite the relatively small size of this Slavic ethnic group inhabiting northern Poland, Kashubia has long attracted and continues to attract sustained scholarly interest within Slavic studies.

This article offers a historical overview of research on the Kashubian language within Russian Slavic scholarship from the 19th century to the present. It seeks to chronologically systematise the principal stages of this research tradition, highlighting the contributions of Russian scholars and assessing their significance for Slavic studies as a whole. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of Saint Petersburg Slavists, whose work has played a decisive part in shaping Russian and international scholarly understanding of both



the historical and contemporary linguocultural context in Kashubia. The historical review also addresses the current state of the Slavic microethnic group under consideration and offers an analysis of Kashubian national self-identification. This analysis draws on the works of Russian scholars of the nineteenth century, the results of the authors' field expeditions to Kashubia conducted between 2005 and 2017, as well as the contributions and research findings of other foreign Slavists who have worked in the region (Mastalerz-Krystjańczuk 2019; Raina 2009, p. 137).

2. Material and theoretical research methods

The study draws on the works of leading Slavic scholars in Kashubian studies, supplemented by the results of the authors' field observations in the Kashubian region of Poland. The Kashubian is the general terminological name for the local dialects of a small West Slavic ethnos that has long lived and lives in the northern part of the modern territory of Poland, on the shore of the Baltic Sea (Polish Pomerania).

Throughout different historical periods, Kashubia belonged to Prussia, Germany, and Poland. Despite these political changes, the Kashubians have preserved their language and cultural identity (compared, for instance, with the Polabians). However, contemporary sociolinguistic developments indicate a growing prevalence of Polish–Kashubian bilingualism among younger generations (Lavrovsky 1879, p. 2; Treder 1999, p. 5).

Currently, the Kashubian ethnic group numbers from 10 to 50 or even more than 100 thousand people (Treder 1999, p. 5; Skorwid 2009, p. 417). Estimates of the Kashubian population vary considerably. For example, the Russian scholar Alexander Hilferding cited a figure of “200 thousand people, perhaps somewhat more”. On the one hand, such variation in population estimates may be explained by a decline in the number of Kashubians over the past century and a half and by their assimilation into the Polish macroethnos. On the other hand, according to the 2011 National Census, 228 thousand individuals stated their Kashubian national or ethnic affiliation. Of these, approximately 16 thousand identified Kashubian as their primary identity, while several thousand reported a dual identification, as the Census permitted the indication of two nationalities in combinations such as ‘Pole, Kashubian’ and ‘Pole, Goral’ (Raina 2009, p. 137; Semenova 2010).

Many representatives of this bilingual and bi-national population identify themselves both as Poles and Kashubians, particularly in areas located near major northern Polish cities such as Gdańsk, Gdynia, and Świnoujście. The linguistic factor remains important as a sign of ethnic self-identification, which is based on the language proficiency, i. e. ‘language property’. During our field research in Kashubia, we observed specific extralinguistic interactional patterns. In situations of first contact or initial acquaintance, Kashubians often address one another in Kashubian, thereby implicitly testing the interlocutor's degree of in-group affiliation or cultural familiarity. A switch from Kashubian to Polish typically follows the initial exchange. We also encountered comparable reactions among our informants, for example: “*Nie*



jestem Polakiem, jestem Kaszubiem ("I'm not a Pole, I'm a Kashubian") and ending with *"Polak, ale właśnie Kaszub"* ("I am a Pole, but more precisely a Kashubian"), *"Jestem Polakiem kaszubskiego pochodzenia"* ("I am a Pole of Kashubian origin"), *"Jestem Polką, ale mój tato jest rodowitym Kaszubem... tak i ja też jestem jeszcze i Kaszubką"* ("I am Polish, but my father was Kashubian... so, I am also a Kashubian"), etc.

Data obtained from our informants confirm the significance of what may be termed the "blood" factor—that is, ethnic self-identification rooted in ancestry, place of residence, or the residence of older family members and ancestors—in shaping decisions concerning national self-determination and identity choice. Moreover, informants' responses were influenced not only by individual self-identification, but also by the situational context of the interaction, the exact formulation of the question, its perceived appropriateness, and the extent to which the objectives of the survey were clearly communicated.

At the same time, it is important to note that, in most cases, the informants whom we interviewed about their national and ethnic affiliation during our field research in Kashubia articulated their views in descriptive terms framed by binary oppositions such as 'Kashubian—Pole', 'we—they', 'ours—theirs', and 'ours—someone else's'. In doing so, they emphasised their ethnicity as distinct and unique, while at the same time conceptualising it as a subethnicity situated within the dominant Polish macroethnicity and regarded as a natural and integral component of it in their national self-awareness. In this context, the following observation by the Polish ethnographer Aleksander Donek appears particularly noteworthy: *"Żyje jeszcze lud kaszubski, ten sam, który od wieków zamieszkuje Pomorze i tak samo jak dawniej, tak i dzisiaj uważa, że "co kaszubskie – to polskie"* (The Kashubian people are still alive, the same ones who have inhabited Pomerania for centuries and, just as before, believe that "what is Kashubian is Polish". At the same time, our informants – native speakers of the Kashubian language and bearers of the Kashubian traditions – often continued this saying in the following way: *"...ale co jest polskie nie zawsze jest kaszubskie"* (...but what is Polish is not always Kashubian), which is a free interpretation of the well-known and precedent-setting phrase by the Kashubian writer and linguist Florian Ceynowa: *"Každy Kaszub to Polak, ale nie každy Polak jest Kaszubem"* (Every Kashubian is Polish, but not every Pole is Kashubian.) However, despite the distinctiveness of the Kashubian people and their awareness of the inseparable, centuries-long spiritual and cultural interconnectedness of the two ethnic groups – Poles and Kashubians – the words of the Kashubian poet, writer, journalist, and author of the Kashubian national patriotic song "The Kashubian March", Hieronim Derdowski, have not lost their relevance: *"Nie ma Kaszub bez Polonii, a bez Kaszub Polski."* (There is no Kashubia without the Poland and no Poland without Kashubia". Most researchers note that relations between Kashubians and Poles are generally free from racial or other forms of discrimination; both groups tend to perceive themselves as representatives of a single nation (Borzyszkowski et al. 2020).

A marked shift towards the Polish language in everyday communication is most noticeable among the first and second generations of Kashubians



who have relocated to major regional urban centres for work or study, including Gdańsk, Gdynia, Sopot, and Świnoujście. At the same time, some speakers, mainly representatives of the older generation, continue to be Kashubian–Polish bilinguals and are able to switch freely between the two language codes depending on the communicative environment. This pattern is particularly evident in the contrast between urban and rural population (Mordawski 2005, p. 62; Ermola 2019, p. 247; Baudoin de Courtenay 1897), although at the same time, by switching to the literary Polish language, the original Kashubians still do not lose touch with their ethnic origin (Treder 1999, p. 5; Boryś, Popowska-Taborska 1994–2006).

Less optimistic were the “forecasts” regarding the future of the Kashubian ethnos made by Russian historians. In the 19th century, they predicted the complete disappearance of the Kashubian ethnic group. However, the fact that the Kashubians – who were historically situated within larger Germanic and Polish macro-ethnic formations and were subjected over the centuries to intense processes of Germanisation and Polonisation – have nevertheless managed to preserve their language and ethnic identity, despite their relatively small population size, suggests the opposite. According to the State Statistics Service, by 2005, the Kashubian language was studied by more than eight thousand students in approximately 130 secondary schools; the University of Gdańsk has a long-standing tradition of Kashubian studies and has a department of Kashubian ethnophilology. The Kashubian-language radio station “Kaszebe” is financed from the state budget (Mordawski 2005; Olbracht-Prondzyński 2007, p. 52; Semenova 2016, p. 183).

Slavists have long demonstrated a particular scholarly interest in small Slavic ethnic groups and their languages, as these often retain archaic Slavic language features no longer present in many central Slavic languages. Representative examples include the Gorals, Upper and Lower Sorbs, Carpathian and Serbian Rusyns, and the Gradiscan Croats (Raina 2009, p. 136).

Polish linguist Krzysztof Mrongoviusz was one of the first scholars in Slavic studies to draw attention to the identity of the Kashubians as an ethnic group, their folklore and ethnography. A lot of articles by the Polish linguist gave an inspiring impetus to the beginning of the study of Kashubians by Russian, in particular, Saint Petersburg linguists, and aroused a keen interest in subsequent studies of Slavic Pomerania. In this context, special attention should be paid to the significant contributions of Polish linguists to Kashubian studies, which represent a natural continuation of earlier scholarly traditions. Among these are the works of Maria Mazurek (Mazurek 2014) and those of contemporary Polish Slavists, including Nicole Dólowy-Rybińska, Michał Filip, and others.

This article places special emphasis on the role of Russian Slavists in the development of Kashubian studies since the mid-nineteenth century, highlighting in particular the scholarly legacy of the Saint Petersburg Slavic school and its continuation in contemporary research. Today, numerous educational courses aim to support the Kashubian language in Poland (at Gdańsk University, secondary schools, and kindergartens), while elective courses on the Kashubian language and culture are offered at Russian uni-



versities such as Moscow State University and Saint Petersburg State University. Although the similarities between Kashubian and Russian noted by Mrongoviusz – which initially drew Russian scholars to the Kashubia region – were not confirmed, Piotr Preis identified thirteen points based on materials collected during his expedition (Preis 1840, p. 12).

The renowned Russian philologist, Pan-Slavist, and collector of Slavic dialects, Izmail Sreznevsky, personally met and befriended Piotr Preis and Florian Ceynowa, who shared a common interest in the Kashubian language. Sreznevsky enriched their work with his linguistic commentary and notes, including examples of Kashubian previously collected and published by Ceynowa. Moreover, in his treatise “Thoughts on the Russian Language”, Izmail Sreznevsky repeatedly supplemented examples from various Slavic languages with material from Kashubian, highlighting the archaisms preserved therein.

The publications and commentaries of Izmail Sreznevsky, together with Florian Ceynowa’s ideas on the uniqueness of the Kashubian people, in turn stimulated a profound scholarly interest in the Kashubian language on the part of the eminent Russian philologist, Slavist, folklorist, and Corresponding Member of the Imperial Saint Petersburg Academy of Sciences, Alexander Hilferding. Hilferding had long intended to undertake a systematic scholarly description of the history, way of life, ethnography, and language of the Pomeranian Slavs (Hilferding 1855).

The scholar proposed an etymology for the self-designations of these Slavic groups, arguing that the Slavs retained their ancient folk ethnonym, just as they preserved many other archaic lexical units in their language. By contrast, the ethnonyms *Kabatki* and *Kashuby* were evidently derived from terms denoting items of clothing. *Kabatka* referred to a distinctive type of outer garment worn by the *Kabatki*, which set them apart from other Slavs of the Baltic coast and resembled a man’s caftan. The Kashubians, in turn, are believed to have derived their ethnonym from the same lexical root *ka-bôtk* – ‘caftan, fur coat’. It was a piece of clothing made from sheepskin. It was sleeveless, with the wool on the outside and worn over the head (cf. Czech *kabát* – ‘coat, cloak’) (Borzyszkowki et al. 2020; Boryś, Popowska-Taborska 1994–2006).

In 1897, Alexander Hilferding realised that geographically he had not chosen the best place for his field research, because, as he himself wrote, “... I soon became convinced that in Glowice there was little work for a researcher of the Kashubian language, since only two old women spoke Kashubian there... In the village of Kluken, all old people speak Kashubian, but young people, although they understand it, don’t speak the language anymore; they don’t even want to speak their native language. In addition, all older people have a complete command of Low German and High German” (Mikkola 1897).

In the mid-20th and early 21st centuries, the Slavic world has witnessed renewed scholarly attention to the Kashubian language, literature, folklore, and ethnology – a development greatly facilitated by the publication of Bernard Sychta’s seven-volume explanatory dictionary (Semenova 2016, p. 187).



Among contemporary Russian Slavists who have made significant contributions to the study of the Kashubian language, particular mention should be made of Alexander Dulichenko. In the second half of the 20th century, while continuing the scholarly traditions of his predecessors, he proposed an original and fundamentally new approach to the question of the language's status, as well as to its analysis and description, thereby casting the issue in a new light. It was largely owing to Dulichenko's work that the Kashubian language came to be situated within a qualitatively new scholarly framework – that of Slavic microlanguages. From a typological perspective, the Kashubian phenomenon has extended well beyond the scope of Polish studies. Moreover, classifying Kashubian as a Slavic microlanguage has opened new investigative avenues, prompting a reconfiguration of methodological approaches to its analysis and interpretation.

Of notable scientific and practical interest is the sociolinguistic and historical overview by Czech scholars Jiří Hajný and Jiří Doležal (Hajný, Doležal 2009). Equally noteworthy is the book by Polish Slavist Anna Koziczowska "Kaszubszczyzna. Pedagogicznie o języku i tożsamości" (Kashubian Region: A Pedagogical Approach to Language and Identity), which, among other topics, delineates two contrasting approaches provisionally termed 'Kashubocentrism'.

3. Results and discussion

The results of our work are a comprehensive and previously uncompiled overview of research on Kashubian studies within Russian Slavic scholarship from the 19th century to the present, alongside a linguistic and extralinguistic analysis of the authors' field research in Kashubia. The findings were presented at scientific conferences at the University of Lodz (Poland), Saint Petersburg State University, Moscow State University, Chuvash Pedagogical State University (Kuznetsova 2019; Merkulova 2014; 2020; Mokienko 2017), as well as at the Department of Slavic Philology of Saint Petersburg State University. Numerous dissertations have been defended on a wide range of topics within Polish studies in general and Kashubian studies in particular.

Continuing this line of inquiry, it should be emphasised that, alongside purely linguistic interest in the Kashubian language, contemporary Slavists have been increasingly drawn to the study of the phraseological dimension of this microethnic community situated on the periphery of the Slavic world. This focus is hardly accidental, as it is precisely in linguistic and ethnic borderlands – and particularly in phraseological units, proverbs, and folklore – that archaic worldviews and modes of conceptualising reality are often preserved, having largely disappeared from the cultural centres of modern Slavic macroethnic groups.

One cannot but mention Bolesław Kaizer's lexicographic study of Kashubian paremiology, presented in the form of a dictionary accompanied by a comparative analysis (Kaizer 2019). A significant contribution to the documentation of Kashubian phraseological richness in a broader Slavic context has also been made by contemporary Russian scholars, most notably by



Viktoria Ermola's Kashubian-Russian Phraseological Dictionary (Ermola 2011). Distinguished by the precision of its definitions, the breadth of its coverage, and the systematic nature of its presentation, this work has come to occupy a well-established place in Slavic studies. Its material offers valuable resources for comparative Slavic research and once again highlights the enduring role of Russian linguistics in the study of the Kashubian language (Semenova 2005; 2016; Kuznetsova 2005a; 2005b; Goncharova 2024).

4. Conclusions

As the foregoing discussion demonstrates, scholarly engagement with the Kashubian language has persisted for almost three centuries. Russian Slavists, especially representatives of the Saint Petersburg academic tradition, have played a pivotal role in the formation and advancement of Kashubian studies in Russia, as well as in fostering a broader scholarly understanding of the Slavic world. The uniqueness and distinctiveness of the Kashubian language within the Slavic linguistic landscape lie in its status as one of the few surviving Slavic microlanguages on the peripheries of *Slavia*. Although the language is now codified and officially recognised, the consolidation of its literary standard remains an ongoing process (Achterberg & Porębska 2005). In particular, sustained efforts continue to refine contemporary Kashubian norms, accompanied by interdisciplinary research in cultural studies, ethnology, and questions of identity and self-identification within this microethnic community at the margins of the Slavic world.

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The authors

Dr Mikhail S. Khmelevskii, Associate Professor, Saint Petersburg State University, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1980-5453

E-mail: chmelevskij@mail.ru

Dr Olga V. Raina, Associate Professor, Saint Petersburg State University, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6281-8148

E-mail: raolga80@mail.ru

Dr Alexander V. Savchenko, Associate Professor, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan.

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4337-9925

E-mail: savchenko75@mail.ru



To cite this article:

Khmelevskii, M. S., Raina, O. V., Savchenko, A. V., 2026, The Kashubian language through time: the history of Kashubian studies in Russia, *Slovo.ru: Baltic accent*, Vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 192–202. doi: 10.5922/2225-5346-2026-1-12.



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КАШУБСКИЙ ЯЗЫК СКВОЗЬ ВРЕМЯ: ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЙ ОБЗОР КАШУБИСТИКИ В РОССИИ

М. С. Хмелевский¹, О. В. Раина¹, А. В. Савченко²

¹ Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет,
199034, Россия, Санкт-Петербург, Университетская наб., 9/11

² Государственный университет Чжэнжи,
64, секция 2, ул. Чжинань, Тайбэй, Тайвань

Поступила в редакцию 19.12.2024 г.

Принята к публикации 15.10.2025 г.

doi: 10.5922/2225-5346-2026-1-12

Рассмотрены касающиеся кашубского этносустрата лингвокультурологические и лингвистические материалы, собранные российскими, прежде всего петербургскими, учеными, в том числе записи устной речи носителей этого языка из письменных, лексикографических и этнографических источников. Представленный материал является эмпирическим источником для славистики в целом и для изучения кашубского языка в рамках сравнительного славянского языкознания в частности. Приведены лингвистические, культурологические и экстралингвистические факты, характеризующие прошлое и современное состояние Кашубии и кашубского этноса, проживающего на северной (балтийской) периферии многомиллионной Славии. Статья опирается на результаты полевых исследований, проведенных авторами в регионах проживания кашубов, а также тщательный анализ работ отечественных лингвистов начиная с XIX века по настоящее время. Представлены и актуализированы вопросы, связанные с кашубским микроязыком и микроэтносом. Сделанные авторами выводы о современной кашубской языковой и этнолингвистической проблематике, несомненно, могут послужить определенным научным вкладом в дальнейшее развитие славяноведения XXI века.

Ключевые слова: Кашубия, кашубский язык, микроэтнос, российская славистика, славянская культурология, славянская периферия

Об авторах

Михаил Сергеевич Хмелевский, кандидат филологических наук, доцент, Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, Санкт-Петербург, Россия.

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1980-5453

SPIN-код РИНЦ: 7273-1065

E-mail: chmelevskij@mail.ru



Ольга Викторовна Раина, кандидат филологических наук, доцент, Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, Санкт-Петербург, Россия.

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6281-8148

SPIN-код РИНЦ: 7893-3258

E-mail: raolga80@mail.ru

Александр Викторович Савченко, кандидат филологических наук, доцент, Государственный университет Чжэнчжи, Тайбэй, Тайвань.

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4337-9925

SPIN-код РИНЦ: 9254-0618

E-mail: savchenko75@mail.ru

Для цитирования:

Khmelevskii M. S., Raina O. V., Savchenko A. V. The Kashubian language through time: the history of Kashubian studies in Russia // Слово.ру: балтийский акцент. 2026. Т. 17, №1. С. 192 – 202. doi: 10.5922/2225-5346-2026-1-12.

