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# Sorbian Studies from a Japanese Perspective

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This article explores Sorbian studies from a Japanese perspective, focusing on the Upper Sorbs, a minority ethnic group in Eastern Germany. It examines who conducts research on the Sorbs, the perspectives Japanese researchers bring, and the implications of their involvement. Japanese scholars offer unique insights due to their distinct linguistic and cultural background. Despite challenges like language barriers and geographic distance, Japanese interest enriches global discourse on minority cultures and linguistic revitalisation. This paper underscores the importance of international collaboration and proposes strategies to improve access to research findings in English, promoting broader engagement.

**Keywords:** Sorbian, Germany, Slavist, non-Slavist

## 1. Introduction

In this article, I discuss the state of the art of Sorbian studies from a Japanese perspective. Sorbian studies encompass research regarding the Sorbs. First and foremost, the following points will be addressed: (1) who is the subject of the study?; (2) who conducts research on the subject?; and (3) what perspective Japanese researchers bring to the field? Each point will be examined along with its pros and cons.

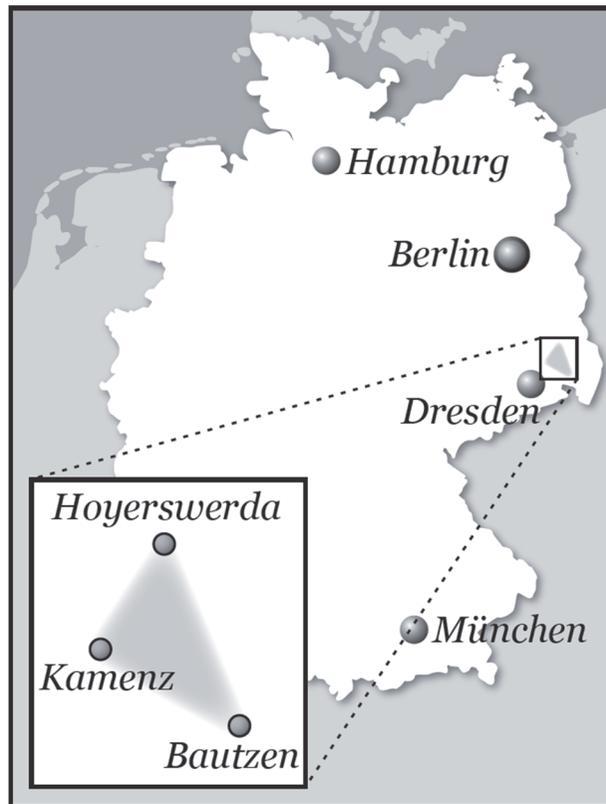
## 2. The Sorbs

The Sorbs are a minority ethnic group in Germany, specifically in Eastern Germany. They have never had their own country. The Sorbs are classified into two sub-groups: the Upper Sorbs, who reside in the eastern part of the Free State of Saxony; and the Lower Sorbs, who live in the Land of Brandenburg. This study

primarily focusses on the Upper Sorbs; therefore, the terms, ‘Sorbs’, ‘Sorbian’, etc., refer to them unless there is a need to distinguish them from the Lower Sorbs.

## 2.1 Population

Germany has a total population of 84,400,000 (as of 20 June, 2023), including approximately 12,590,000 non-Germans. Since 2022, Germany has accepted more than a million refugees from Ukraine. Under such circumstances, an estimated 40,000 Sorbs live in this country. The ratio of Sorbs to the overall population seems to be minuscule. In the area inside the triangle formed by Bautzen (Sorbian *Budyšin*), Hoyerswerda (Sorbian *Wojerecy*), and Kamenz (Sorbian *Kamjenc*), there are villages where Sorbs constitute the dominant group. This is the only area where Upper Sorbian is spoken as a daily language (see Map 1).



Map 1 The current residential area of the Upper Sorbs

Bautzen/Budyšin is the main town inhabited by the Sorbs. However, its approximately 40,000 population is majority German; the Sorbs are in minority. For the Sorbs, Bautzen/Budyšin is their cultural capital as most of all Sorbian (academic and non-academic) institutions are located there. What attracts visitors to this city is the bilingual signs in German and Sorbian; bilingual signs are legally accepted in this town (discussed below).

## 2.2 Sorbian Languages

The Sorbian languages belong to the Indo-European language family. They are members of the West Slavonic branch of the Slavonic language group, together with Czech, Polish, Slovak, and Kashubian. They are spoken in eastern Germany and classified into two languages: Upper Sorbian and Lower Sorbian. They are usually viewed as independent languages, not as two dialects or variants of one language.

The Upper Sorbs speak Upper Sorbian, and Lower Sorbs speak Lower Sorbian. A few scholars insist that there is a transitional language between Upper Sorbian and Lower Sorbian, which has characteristics of both languages; this viewpoint is widely accepted in the field. Upper Sorbian is distributed in the Free State of Saxony—around the upper Spree River—and Lower Sorbian, in the Land of Brandenburg—around the lower Spree River.

Upper Sorbian seems extremely similar to Czech and Lower Sorbian to Polish. During the 19th century, through the movement of ethnic awareness among the Slavonic people, the Sorbs attempted to establish the canonical Sorbian in terms of its grammar and orthography. The Upper Sorbs sought their model in Czech, and the Lower Sorbs preferred Polish. Consequently, the present-day Upper Sorbian and Lower Sorbian are similar but unique. The author has frequently observed that a Sorb and a Czech or a Pole can communicate in their respective languages because of an intimate relationship among the West Slavonic languages.

Regarding the number of speakers of Upper Sorbian—although no demographic statistics are available—it is estimated that there are, maximally, 15,000 speakers out of 40,000 Sorbs, and Lower Sorbian has a few thousand speakers. All Sorbian speakers are bilingual with German. Hereafter, I will use the term ‘Sorbian’ for Upper Sorbian, unless I need to distinguish the Upper from Lower Sorbs.

Since the era of the German Democratic Republic, both languages have been

legally protected by the local government. The rights of the Upper Sorbs are guaranteed by the *Gesetz über die Rechte der Sorben im Freistaat Sachsen* (Law on the rights of the Sorbs in the Free State of Saxony); those of the Lower Sorbs by the *Gesetz über die Ausgestaltung der Rechte der Sorben/Wenden im Land Brandenburg* (Law on the definition of the rights of Sorbs/Wends in the State of Brandenburg). These laws make the landscape of Sorbian territories bilingual—for example, street signs, name signs of municipal or public facilities, and shop signs (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 Bilingual street signs in Bautzen/Budyšin

In East Germany, Sorbian language rights for learning and usage were acknowledged, in addition to national subsidies and promotion efforts. However, concurrently, in Sorbian regions in the proximity of the newly established border (the Oder-Neisse Line) following World War II, there was significant immigration of German speakers from Central and Eastern Europe. In certain areas, the influx and settlement of refugees surpassed the native population, which was identified as a major factor contributing to the post-War decline of Sorbian. Industrialisation further exacerbated this decline. In the Lusatia region, extensive open-pit brown coal mining was practiced, driving industrial growth. The direct consequence of brown coal mining on the Sorbian population was mass migration, with numerous villages being demolished and residents relocating to urban centres. This process,

along with the dissolution of village communities and urban migration, undoubtedly accelerated the assimilation of Sorbian speakers into the German language and culture. However, a significant factor in the decline of Sorbian was the influx of non-Sorbian speakers due to industrialisation-driven population movements. The once-scattered rural areas inhabited by the Sorbs gradually underwent Germanisation alongside urban development.

The Sorbs who speak Sorbian are *de facto* bilingual with German. They speak Sorbian among each other; however, if a German comes to the group, they all speak in German, because local Germans cannot, in general, speak Sorbian. Thus, there exists an asymmetrical relation between the Sorbs and the Germans.

While the decline in the number of Sorbian language speakers has not ceased, there are efforts to counteract this trend. Particularly noteworthy is the WITAJ (Welcome) programme, where educators in kindergartens interact with children, whose mother tongue is German, in Sorbian. This initiative was inspired by the Diwan movement, which, since 1998, conducts immersion education in the Breton language in France. For children who graduate from the WITAJ programme, classes in both Sorbian and German are offered in primary schools. In Sorbian-speaking communities, classroom organisation was traditionally based on the mother tongue (German or Sorbian). However, bilingual classes, where children who speak Sorbian and those who speak German receive instruction in both languages, have been introduced. Addressing the dual challenge of enhancing the Sorbian language skills of German-speaking children while maintaining and developing the Sorbian language skills of Sorbian-speaking children will be a key factor in the future preservation of the Sorbian language.

### 3. Research Situation

Although very few researchers worldwide are engaged in Sorbian studies, the research area is, in fact, well established—by the Sorbs. To the best of my knowledge, most researchers of Sorbian studies are Sorbs, who research their own ethnic group. This is a sound situation but could lead to a difficult one.

Let us examine the current research status. For convenience, this section will introduce the research situation divided by geographical and linguistic areas: (1) Germany, (2) Outside Germany excluding Japan, and (3) Japan.

### 3.1 Germany

The most active centre for Sorbian studies is in Germany, where several institutions conduct Sorbian research. The foremost among them is the Sorbian Institute (*Serbski institut* in Sorbian), where various studies on the language, history, and culture of the Sorbian people, both present and past, are conducted. The institute's library and archives, which are open to the public, extensively collect materials related to the Sorbian people. The institute publishes the academic journal *Lětopis* twice a year. Currently, it is located in two places: Bautzen in Upper Lusatia and Cottbus in Lower Lusatia, serving as a hub for Sorbian studies. Additionally, the institute hosts an international summer course every two years, which has recently been over-subscribed owing to its popularity.



Figure 2 The covers of Faßke (1980) and Šewc-Schuster (1984) (left to right)

Sorbian studies are also conducted in institutions of higher education, such as the Faculty of Philology at Leipzig University (Universität Leipzig), which houses the only Sorbian studies department. This department also has the mission of training Sorbian educators. Furthermore, the department publishes the academic journal *Sorapis* in Sorbian.

In recent years, Sorbian research has been actively conducted in Slavonic studies departments at institutions such as the Dresden University of Technology (Technische Universität Dresden) and the University of Konstanz (Universität

Konstanz).

Traditionally, Sorbian scholars write their research results either in German or in Sorbian, which has low accessibility to scholars who do not understand either German or Sorbian but are interested in the Sorbs. In the linguistic field, for example, there are a few excellent grammar books by the Sorbs—Faßke (1980) and Šewc-Schuster (1984). The former is an 882-page, comprehensive reference grammar written in German, and the latter is a two-volume book in Upper Sorbian (Figure 2). Language(s) specialists refer to these works even today.

### 3.2 Outside of Germany (Except Japan)

Of course, there are non-Sorbian researchers. When looking beyond Germany, it could be said that research achievements in the Slavonic sphere, including language and literature, are generally abundant. Among them, Poland and the Czech Republic are relatively prominent as their citizens can easily read and understand Sorbian.

In the Czech Republic, the Sorbian Seminar (*Wendisches Seminar*) was established in Prague in 1724, where Sorbian intellectuals studied (the seminar closed in 1922). Owing to this influence, Prague was a centre for Sorbian studies at that time. In recent years, Poland has emerged as a centre for Sorbian studies outside of Germany, with Warsaw, Wrocław, and Opole serving as key locations. Academic journals specializing in Sorbian studies, such as *Zeszyty Łużyckie* in Warsaw and *Pro Lusatia* in Opole, are also published.

Compared to the German and Slavonic-speaking regions, there are considerably fewer researchers active in the field of Sorbian studies who come from English-speaking backgrounds or operate primarily in English.

### 3.3 Japan

There are also Japanese scholars who are engaged in Sorbian studies, although the number is very low (less than 10). In terms of linguistic research, following Sasahara and Kimura (2010), we can conveniently divide the development of Sorbian studies into three stages: the embryonic, budding, and development stages.

The embryonic stage is characterised by the absence of dedicated Sorbian studies but involves scholars using secondary sources related to the Sorbian language to develop their own arguments within their respective fields. An

example of the embryonic stage is Izui's (1968) early exploration of (Lower) Sorbian language materials, likely the first in Japan.

The budding stage involves sporadic Sorbian studies emerging as part of Slavonic studies, particularly as Slavonic scholars begin to engage with primary sources. However, there are few specialised Sorbian researchers. A representative of the budding stage is Eiichi Chino, who, during his time in Prague, learnt Sorbian and contributed to the section on Sorbian language in *Gengogaku daijiten* (Encyclopedic Dictionary of Linguistics) (Chino 1989), which was likely the sole source of linguistic information on Sorbian available in Japanese during the 1980s.

In the 1990s, specialised researchers focusing on Sorbian studies gradually emerged, marking a period of development for Japanese Sorbian studies. The first researcher to specialise in Sorbian studies was Keiko Mitani. In 1993, Mitani published "Sorubu-go ni tsuite" (On Sorbian) (Mitani 1993), marking the first comprehensive introduction to Sorbian linguistics in Japanese. Mitani continued to contribute to Sorbian language research. Her most significant achievement is the publication of the Upper Sorbian-Japanese dictionary, *Sorubu-go jiten* (Sorbian Dictionary) in 2003. She also published an introductory book on the Slavonic languages, *Suravu-go nyuumon* (The Slavonic Languages: A Primary Guide) (Mitani 2011), which guides readers through the history and classification of the Slavonic languages, the characteristics of each Slavonic language with descriptive and sociolinguistic information, as well as the letters and sounds of each language. Additionally, she reported on the revitalisation efforts in the Lower Sorbian region, where assimilation into the German language was rapidly progressing (Mitani 2001, 2009).

Following Mitani, in the mid-1990s, two more researchers began to engage in Sorbian studies. Goro Christoph Kimura focussed on the sociolinguistic aspects of Sorbian studies, while Ken Sasahara (the author of this article) pursued grammatical research within the framework of general linguistics. Both researchers conducted fieldwork to gather primary data for their studies. Their Sorbian research is intimately linked to the local Sorbian research trends, which will be discussed in the next section.

Regarding Japanese and non-Japanese researchers, interesting characteristics could be identified. Without intending to generalise, I would like to point out the tendency. Most Sorbian and non-Sorbian researchers, except from Japan, perform their research within the framework of Slavonic studies. Japanese researchers, on

the contrary, perform or begin their research within the framework of German studies (Sasahara and Kimura 2010, 2012 for details). In other words, the backgrounds of the studies differ from each other's. This suggests the merits of Japanese scholars engaged in Sorbian studies—the author would like to discuss this in the following chapter.

#### 4. Japanese Researchers in Sorbian Studies—Pros and Cons

Let us consider the merits and demerits of Japanese researchers engaged in Sorbian studies, and their contribution to the field of study.

##### 4.1 Pros

Let us examine the advantages of Japanese researchers in Sorbian studies. In the linguistic field, for instance, Japanese native speakers may identify aspects that individuals from Western backgrounds (such as Sorbs, Germans, and people from Slavonic countries) may overlook. Essentially, Japanese researchers might provide a third-party perspective on Sorbian matters.

Japanese is an agglutinative language, structurally distinct from European languages, most of which are inflected. Japanese scholars could fundamentally challenge what the Europeans take for granted. While Czechs or Poles, for example, may offer a different perspective on Sorbian studies compared to the Sorbs or Germans, the disparity in thinking between the Europeans and the Japanese is significant. Japanese researchers should leverage this divergence as an advantage.

##### 4.2 Cons

The Japanese may encounter challenges in Europe because of misunderstandings or ignorance caused by different lifestyles and culture. Most ordinary Japanese do not comprehend the mentality of the Europeans. Therefore, it is significant for Japanese researchers to understand the European way of life before—or as soon as—they commence their research projects to draw better conclusions.

Additionally, Japanese researchers—especially linguists—experience technical challenges in Sorbian studies. There seems to be, even in the short term, no Sorb residing in Japan. This implies that Japanese researchers have to travel to Lusatia in Germany, where the Sorbs live, to conduct their research. This could impose financial and temporal restrictions on them.

Thankfully, in the 21st century, this issue is largely resolved by the Internet. Correspondence via email or video chatting enables Japanese researchers to collect their research materials without having to fly to the land of the Sorbs. Nonetheless, the necessity of face-to-face communication remains; it is crucial for linguists, such as this author, who engage in descriptive linguistics to consider non-verbal factors such as gestures and eye contact.

## 5. Final Remarks

Research results from the perspective of the Sorbs themselves or neighbouring ethnic groups (e.g., Czechs or Poles) are significant. Their achievements are enormous—something all researchers must appreciate and respect. Including Japanese or Asian scholars in Sorbian studies would enrich the field. To achieve this, it is crucial to recognise the significance of accessibility to Sorbian studies for as many researchers as possible. One possible solution is to publish articles in English as well as in Sorbian or German. As mentioned above, most of the available literature on Sorbian studies is either in Sorbian or German—this accessibility issue should be addressed. Naturally, Japanese researchers would have to acquire Sorbian and/or German language skills.

A third-party research perspective is equally significant as it could be bias-free. The author wishes that Japanese scholars contribute to the further development of Sorbian studies.

Thus, based on active international collaborative research, Sorbian studies are expected to become more sophisticated. Sorbian is exposed to contact with German. Therefore, there is immense potential in collaboration between Western researchers with a background in Slavonic studies and Japanese researchers with a background in German studies.

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