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Department of Language Policy & Minority Studies

COOLING

# *Joys, Sorrows and Fears of the Latgalian Written Language*

Tomasz Wicherkiewicz



*Regional Languages in  
Education: from Literature  
towards Literacy*

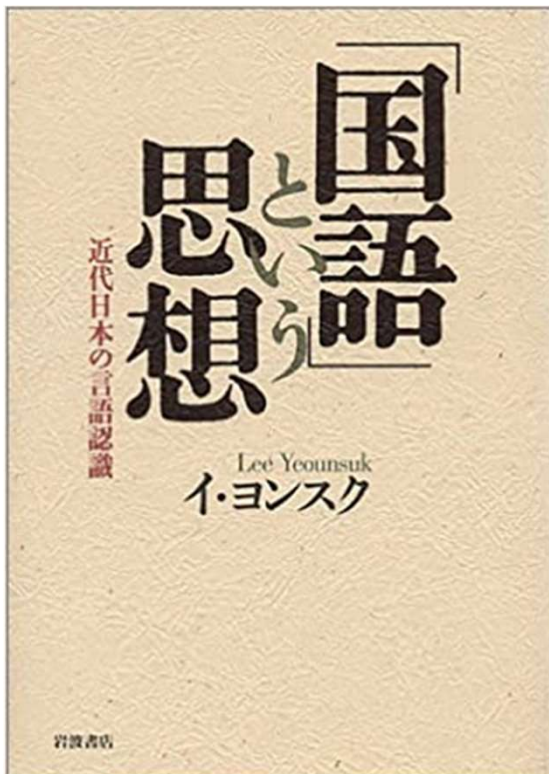


# Lee Yeounsuk

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From the viewpoint of modern linguistics, the substance of language consists of sound whereas script is the mere outer covering of language.

Just as cosmetics and clothing do not affect the human body itself, the choice of script is an external element irrelevant to the substance of language. Thus, the object of linguistics research has been sounds and the relationship among sounds at each level of phonology, morphology, and syntax.






**When it comes to script, people become so emotional that they form irrational but intense likes and dislikes.**

Why do people become so passionate about the choice of script?  
This is not because ordinary people are ignorant of linguistics.

In people's consciousness about the language that they speak, not solely in the professional field of linguistics, we find the genius of language. It was once a general premise held by linguists that the essential property of language lay in its "structure" or its "system."

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Watts, Richard 1999. «The ideology of dialect in Switzerland». In: J.Blommaert (ed.) *Language Ideological Debates*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 68

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## Language Ideology

a set of beliefs about the structure of language  
and/or the functional uses to which a language is  
put which are shared by the members of a  
community.

The beliefs have formed part of that community's  
overall set of beliefs and the life-styles that have  
evolved on the basis of those beliefs for so long  
that their origins seem to have been obscured or  
forgotten

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# Sociolinguistic approaches to writing systems research

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Mark Sebba

Department of Linguistics, Lancaster University

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The perception of a need for prescription thus seems to be a product of relatively recent, but fairly widespread, language ideologies.

(...) there is a whole continuum of norms; these are not randomly distributed, but reflect an ideological stance on the part of the user

(...) standardization remains contentious in the face of competing ideologies of language.

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## Letters of Freedom and Captivity: Scriptal Planning and Language Ideologies in Baltic Central-Eastern Europe

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Tomasz Wicherkiewicz

Wherever people are politically influenced by others, the more powerful polity typically tends to—and eventually does—impose their scriptal principles, including

**script,**

**writing system, orthography,**

or other graphic elements, such as **fonts, letters/graphemes, or diacritics**

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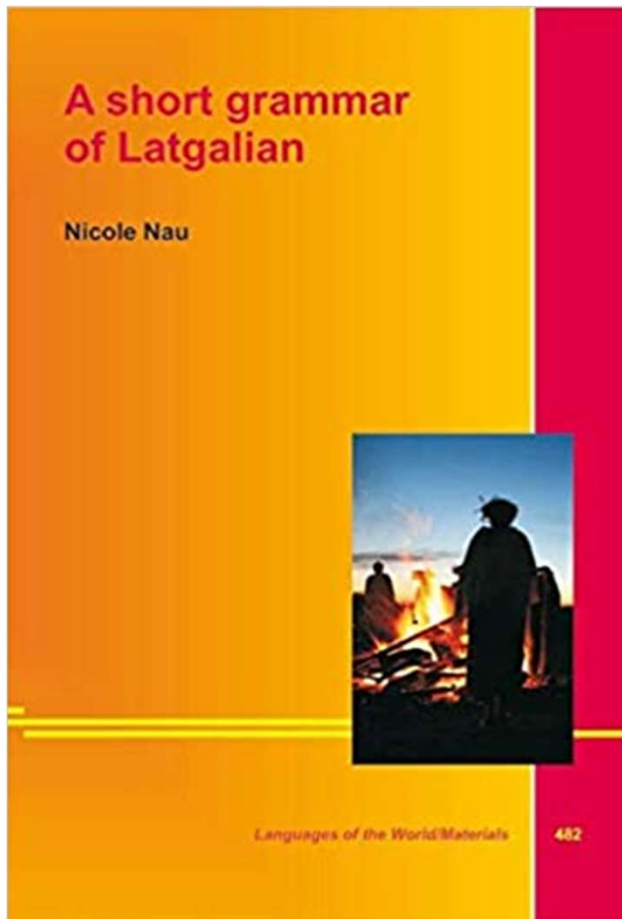
## Nau 2011: 6

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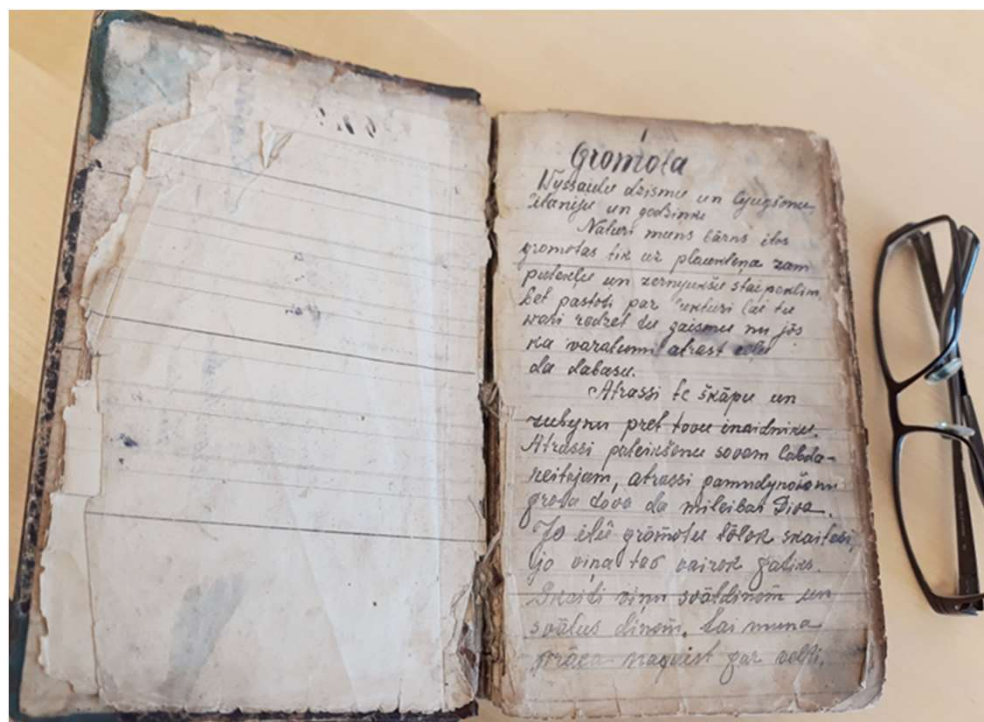
The first [Latgalian] primers stem from the 18th c., (...) Publications with secular content followed in the 19th c. [...]

The orthography used in these early texts is based on the Polish writing of the time, and the typeface used in print is Antiqua.

In contrast, from the 17th to the 19th centuries, Latvian books were printed using Blackletter (Gothic script), and the orthography was based on German. A consequence of these differences was that, although the spoken languages were mutually comprehensible and regarded as dialects of the same language, printed Latvian books seemed foreign to Latgalian readers (and vice versa), and the two literatures developed largely independently of each other.







In the 1830s some Latgalian authors began to follow the change in Polish orthography, e. g. to indicate the second component of the diphthongs [ai, ei] by the letter **j**.

In the second half of the 19th c., printing in the Latin alphabet was banned by the Tsarist authorities.

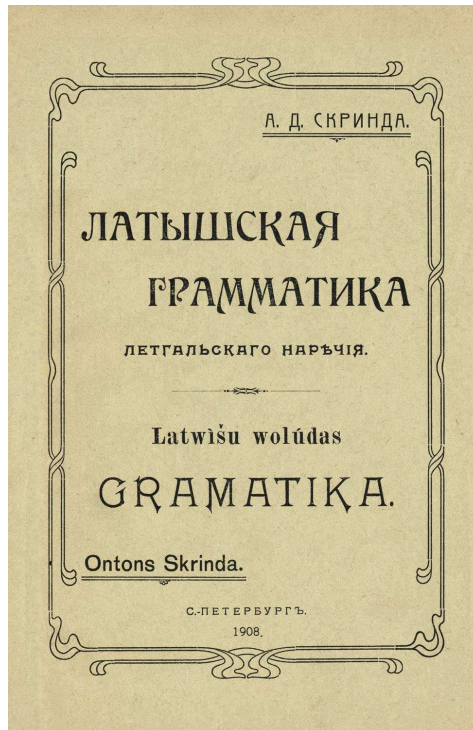
At that time handwritten books were quite widespread in Latgale. In the most cases the authors of these books followed the written tradition of the first Latgalian books.





## Nau 2011: 6

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In the second half of the 19th c. the Russian Empire pursued a severe policy of Russification, which greatly impeded the further development of written Latgalian. [...]

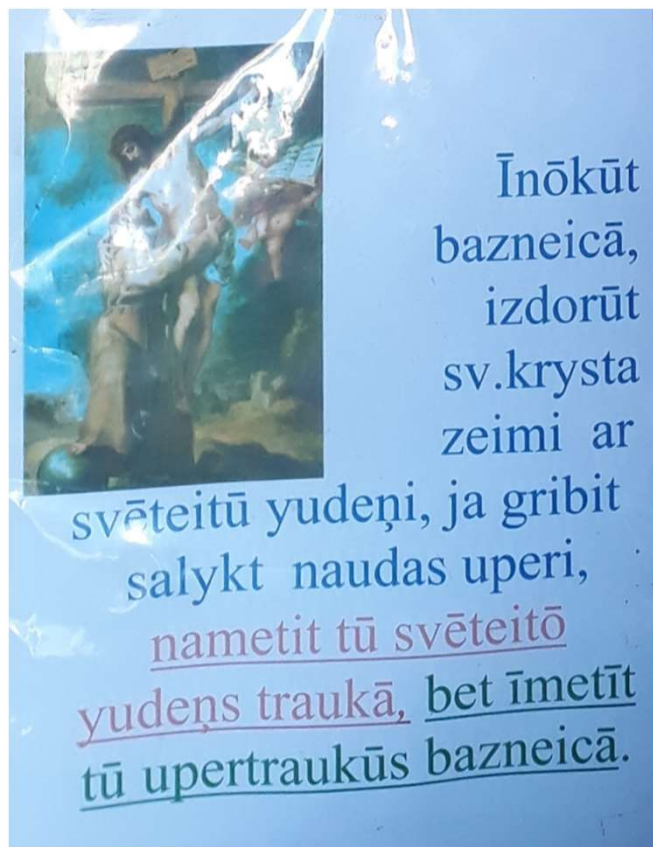
In 1865 a ban of printing in Latin alphabet was issued, which in fact meant the end of printing in Latgalian.



Jankowiak, Mirosław 2018.

*Latgalian language in Latvia: between politics, linguistics and law,*  
<https://www.icelds.org/2018/03/30/latgalian-language-in-latvia-between-politics-linguistics-and-law/>

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„the Latgalian language is regularly used in the Roman Catholic Church in the region. This is one of the domains where the use of this language has not been interrupted throughout history.”

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# Summer 2019

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semi-structured interviews in person

in Latvian

47 interlocutors (26 F, 21 M)

age 23-93

Rīga, Pierīga, Latgale

Methods of accessing interlocutors:

- social media (FB)

- gate-keepers

- snow-ball

+ 2 interlocutors (Latgalian diaspora in the USA) in Winter 2019/2020  
[interviews in English]

\* special thanks to Nicole Dołowy-Rybińska & Vineta Vilcāne

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Most interlocutors

- active users of Latgalian (82.3%)
- also in writing (79.6%)

Several language activists

PROBLEMS with ANONYMIZATION ☹

Many attitudes and linguistic biographies recognizable within the Latgalian community...

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therefore,

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in the current presentation, personal metadata  
have been hidden entirely in order to avoid a  
direct recognizability

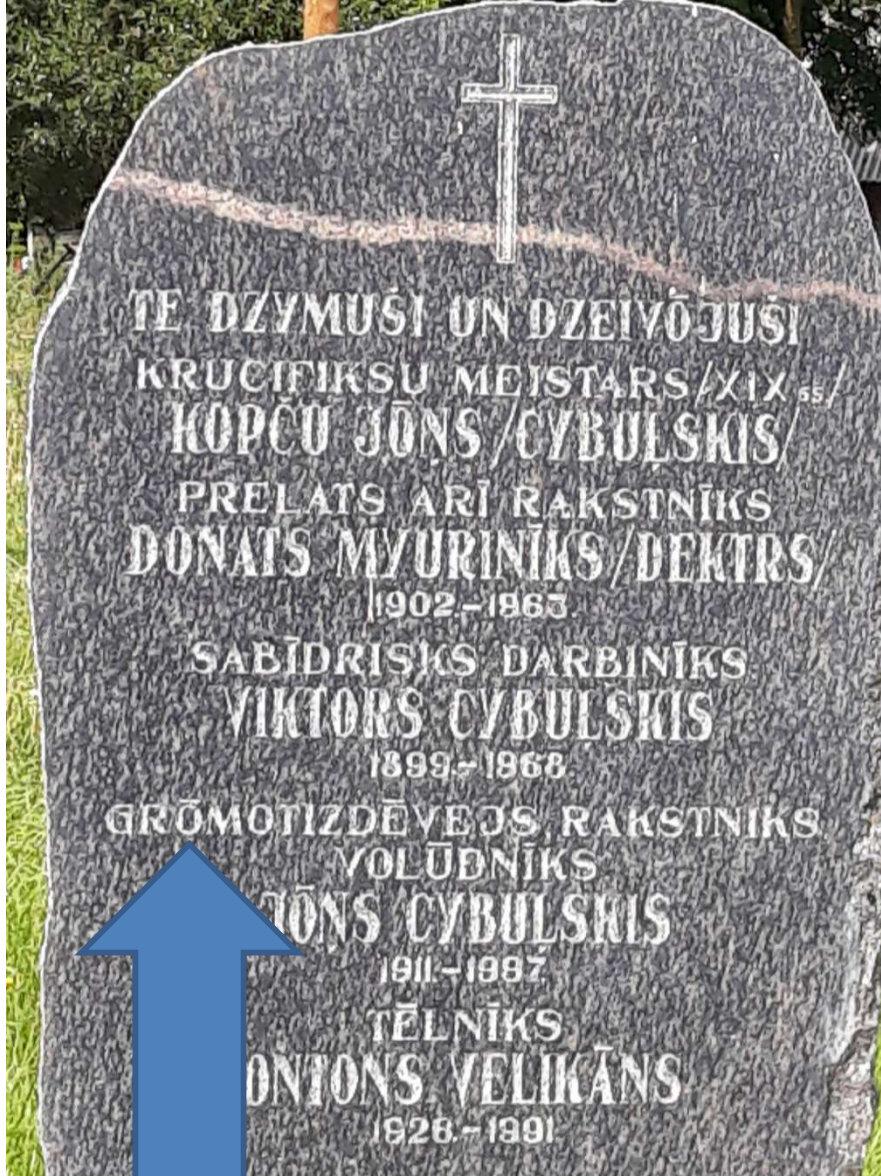
the questionnaire was to secure respondents of  
their anonymity

For the same sake, I am also excluding the two  
US questionnaires

For the purpose of this presentation, only the  
issues referring to the orthography of  
Latgalian written language shall be discussed

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Streičs, Jōņs 2017.  
“...KAI YUDIŅS OLŪTĀ”, *Rēzeknes Vestis*  
<http://www.rv.lv/kai-yudins-oluta>

I’ve been explaining this to specialists and now I can claim – there is no order decision – at least on how to write diphthongs: with the letter **ō** (*with macron*), or with two letters **uo** (...)

There are those »Spelling Rules« by the [State] Language Centre, which mention that both variants can be used, if only consistently.

Our language is strong with its spelling principles. Plus, a lot of good writings were already [made] both before the war and on exile. Plus, editions of the Catholic church.

On the other hand, what has already been written is of such a weight, that nobody can win (...)





<https://latgaleslaiks.lv/raksti/2019-04-20-stiprina-dzimtas-saknes-un-dzimtenes-milestiba>

„(...) the 91-year-old woman describes her life course, (...) her publications in the press, (where she has been defending) the **cultural-historical Latgalian spelling**

(kultūrvēsturiskā latgaļu rakstība)

Babre, Anna 2017.  
“VĒSTURISKAJAI LATGALĪŠU ROKSTU VOLŪDAI — 90”,  
*Rēzeknes Vestis*  
<http://www.rv.lv/vesturiskajai-latgalisu-rokstu-voludai-90/>

The so-called "hybrid" law, made the «historical» one unnecessary, when becoming a "legitimate" "sub-commission" of the State Language Center.

(...)

Probably, the resolutions have already been prepared in Riga

(...)

When will our new justice system work?

(...)

Let's hope the truth wins.



# Questionnaire

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Age:

Gender:

Place of residence:

Place of birth:

Who do you think you are?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Do you consider yourself a Latvian?

Do you consider yourself a Latgalian?

Do you consider yourself a Latvian from Latgale?

What languages do you speak?

What languages do you understand?

In what languages can you write?

What languages can you read?

What is/are your native language(s)?

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# ALL RESPONDENTS

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declared knowledge of Latgalian, Latvian, and Russian

other languages declared randomly (English, German)

Knowledge of Latgalian declared in speaking

understanding

reading

writing

although to varying degrees

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Do you like the Latgalian written language? **100% - yes**

Do you like to write in Latgalian?

**74.5% yes**

**25.5% - not anymore**

If yes, whom are you writing in Latgalian?

What kind of texts?

- friends, parents, other Latgalians

- letters, social media, SMS, press comments, poetry

Do you like to read in Latgalian? **97.9% - yes**

If yes, what do you read in Latgalian? What kind of texts?

- social media, press, religious texts

*Reading in Latgalian makes me think about my region*

*Thanks to reading in Latgalian I feel a member of our Latgalian community*

*When writing poetry in Latgalian I can express myself in a different way than when writing in Latvian*



25.5%

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*I used to read and write Latgalian regularly, but nowadays I am quite discouraged/frightened to write it myself.*

*I am afraid of being criticized or even 'expelled' or cursed for not using the 'right' spelling.*

*I feel totally disheartened to use Latgalian in writing, because I have a feeling that the combats around the correct spelling make average Latgalians to abandon writing and leave it solely to specialists.*

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What do you think orthography is? (*ortogrāfija*)

What do you think spelling is? (*pareizraktstība*)

**91.5% responses reveal:**

*Latvian (including Latgalian) understanding of both terms is much more focus of rigorous prescriptivism than rules of spelling in writing, and includes also e.g. speaking the state language (or Latgalian as its variety) in a correct way, accepted by the prescriptivist bodies and language specialists*

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When did you learn to write in Latvian? – **100% - in kindergarten or school**

When did you learn to write in Latgalian? – **34% as teenagers, 66% - as adults**

Did you learn to write according to the spelling norms of the Latgalian written language?  
- **100% yes**

Which varieties of Latgalian orthography do you know?

- **P. Strods' / 'Church' orthography**

- **modern orthography** (Leikuma's spelling, Commission or LaKuGa's spelling)

Do you know old versions of Latvian orthography?

Do you know how to write in Russian? -

When did you learn to write in Russian?

Do you write in other languages? How often do you do this?

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Evaluate your **Latvian** spelling skills on a scale of 1 to 10.

Do you think it is important to follow the spelling when writing in Latvian? Why?

Do you accept other people's spelling mistakes in Latvian?

Evaluate your **Latgalian** spelling skills on a scale from 1 to 10.

Do you think it is important to follow spelling rules when writing in Latgalian? Why?

Do you accept other people's spelling mistakes in Latgalian?

Average for Latvian – **8.8**

Average for Latgalian – **5.6**

slightly **less important** to obey spelling rules for **Latgalian** than **Latvian**  
spelling mistakes **more acceptable** in **Latgalian** than in **Latvian**

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*The 'old' spelling  
has been blessed by  
our Church. Those  
'modernizers' aim at  
destroying our  
[Latgalian] identity –  
in the same way the  
Muscovite  
Bolsheviks did...*

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What do you dis/like about Latvian spelling ?

Would you like to change something in the modern Latvian orthography?

What do you dis/like about the modern of Latgalian written language?

Would you like to change something in the modern Latgalian orthography?

What do you dis/like about the “old” (P.Strods’) orthography of Latgalian ?

**Orthography conflicts – referred to by 68.1%**

Inconsistency – 25.5%

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In your opinion, which letters of the  
Latgalian alphabet are the most  
Latgalian?

Which letters of the Latgalian alphabet do  
you like the most / dislike?

**Latgališu rokstu volūdys  
alfabets**



**A Ā B C Č D E Ē F G Ģ H I  
Y Ī J K Ķ L Ļ M N Ņ O Ō P  
R S Š T U Ū V Z Ž**

Which letters of the Latvian alphabet do you like the most  
/ dislike?

Do you like Fraktur (the Gothic typescript)?

Do you like Russian Cyrillic?

Do you like any other scripts/fonts?

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*Both languages are equally important – they should coexist*

In your opinion, what are the major differences between Latvian and Latgalian orthographies?



In your opinion, what are the major differences between the spoken Latvian and Latgalian languages?

In your opinion, what are the major differences between Latvians and Latgalians?



## 3 x YES

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Do you want Latgalian written language to be used in public?

*yes – 59.6%*

*yes, along Latvian – 40.4%*

Do you want Latgalian written language to be more visible in Latgale?

*yes - 100%*

Do you think it is possible to write in a dialect?

*yes (or 'yes, why not?') – 100%*

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## CONCLUSION

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Latgalian written language is vividly present in the current language debate and discourse in Latgale.

Language attitudes to the Latgalian written language are univocally positive; Latgalians are eager to use Latgalian in possibly all domains and modalities, including writing and reading.

Language ideology in Latgale – similarly to the all-Latvian scale – is dominated by prescriptivism and purism.

Latgalian scriptal ideologies do form part of the community's overall set of beliefs - and constitute an important factor of intra-Latgalian different identities and different life-styles

The conflictive discourse on Latgalian spelling varieties is both a base and emanation of internal subgrouping;

Apparently, it also constitutes an increasing DISCOURAGEMENT for language maintenance, potential revitalization and normalization

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Thank you!

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Dziękuję!

Cīši paļdis!

Liels paldies!

[wicher@amu.edu.pl](mailto:wicher@amu.edu.pl)

