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The Role of Unique Minority Language Media in Language Maintenance: A Comparative Study of Basque, Ladin, and Upper Sorbian Media

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Abstract

This article examines how unique minority language media perceive and approach their role in language maintenance, and how they try to contribute to it. Television, radio, and newspapers in the Basque, Ladin, and Upper Sorbian contexts were used as examples of unique minority language media. Through interviews with seven media professionals from these three language contexts, the article reveals different ways in which these media support their languages. The findings show that the media can contribute primarily by providing a framework for the use and development of their languages. However, when it comes to the direct and active promotion of their languages, the role of the media seems to be more limited, as their main target group is not new speakers, but rather the existing language community.

Keywords: *language maintenance; minority language media; Basque; Ladin; Upper Sorbian*

Introduction

Koldo Mitxelena Elissalt (1978, p. 19), a Basque linguist and author, said that the real secret of the Basque language is not its origin but its survival. The question of how minority languages survive is a constant topic in linguistic research and is also discussed in relation to the media and their potential role in language maintenance. The Explanatory Report to the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages of the Council of Europe (1992, p. 17) states that the media in those languages are “vital for their safeguard”. Crystal (2002, p. 130), for example, lists access to the media among his six factors that are important for language revitalisation. Indeed, Amezcaga et al. (2013, p. 95) speak of a general assumption that the media must play an important role in the survival and development of a minority language. But there is also disagreement within the research community. Among the critical voices is Fishman (1991, 2001), who did not give much importance to the media in his model of reversing language shift and continued to be sceptical about their role in his subsequent work. The rise of online communication renewed the question of where to place the media in terms of their importance for linguistic vitality (E. H. G. Jones, 2013).

Despite the different understandings, there seems to be a consensus on the difficulty of proving the effect of minority language media (MLM) on maintenance (Cormack, 2007). The problem of measurability, however, should not be a reason to abandon the issue altogether, as there are still angles to explore. First, as Cormack (2007, p. 62) suggests, research should shift its focus from measuring the language maintenance effect to exploring the various direct and indirect ways in which different media can interact with other aspects of language use to contribute to language maintenance in specific communities. Secondly, a general examination of the current literature on MLM reveals that the multidimensionality of the term *minority* is often not taken into account and therefore no distinction is made between the different categories of MLM. Yet, it is reasonable to assume that the media in unique minority languages – understood here as languages without a kin-state – may play a more nuanced role in language maintenance. Finally, the comparative perspective on MLM and language maintenance can be further strengthened, as much of the existing research concentrates on individual case studies.

Consequently, this article aims to contribute to the understanding of unique minority language media and their role in language maintenance, looking specifically at Basque, Ladin, and Upper Sorbian media. These languages have been chosen because their differences in the number of speakers, status of the language, or linguistic context can highlight the specific

functions of the media in their respective environments. The article focuses on how unique minority language media perceive and approach their role in language maintenance, and how they try to contribute to it. The objective is not to provide statistical evidence for the influence of the media on language maintenance, but to concentrate on their self-perception.

Six interviews were conducted with senior representatives of one newspaper and one television/radio station for each selected unique minority language. As this selection indicates, the focus of this article is on what is commonly referred to as traditional media. Although the role of new media (such as social media platforms and video games) in the maintenance of minority languages has been highlighted (Valijärvi & Kahn, 2023, p. 153), as this article shows, traditional media can still act as important leaders, not least because of their deep roots in the minority societies.

The analysis of the interviews indicates that the media studied can contribute to the maintenance of their respective languages in various ways, both directly and indirectly, although they do not consider this as their core function, and the possibilities depend strongly on the overall situation of the given linguistic context. In general, the media mainly see opportunities to contribute to what Cormack (2007, p. 60) describes as the first level of language maintenance; that is, to provide a general framework for the use and development of the languages (see the next section). However, direct and active language promotion is a challenging endeavour, as the media primarily target the existing community of speakers.

The rest of this article is organised as follows. First, the article provides a literature review of the research on MLM and language maintenance, starting with a brief definition of the concept itself. The next section presents the Basque, Ladin, and Upper Sorbian contexts and media selected for the interviews. This is followed by the methodological considerations, the presentation of the results, and the conclusions.

1. Minority language media and language maintenance

Pauwels (2004, p. 719) defines the concept of language maintenance as “a situation in which a speaker, a group of speakers, or a speech community continue to use their language in some or all spheres of life despite competition with the dominant or majority language to become the main/sole language in these spheres”. There are, of course, alternative definitions, illustrating the challenge of finding a universally accepted one. Edwards (2004, p. 458) argues that language maintenance is closely related to the notion of language revival. In fact, there may be some overlap in this article with the term language revitalisation, generally used to describe languages that are in some way endangered and where action might be taken to increase their

use (Pauwels, 2016, p. 21). Language shift, language attrition, language death, language obsolescence, for example, are mentioned by Fase et al. (1992, p. 3) as other related concepts. And this list could certainly be extended. In simpler terms, maintenance aims to keep the language alive, while revitalization seeks to increase the number of speakers. As this article draws on much of Cormack's (2007) work on MLM and language maintenance, the latter term will be used.

In MLM studies, the question of whether or how the media can have an impact on language maintenance is an inherent part of the discipline itself (Cormack, 2013, p. 255; Le & Uribe-Jongbloed, 2017, p. 363). Riggins (1992, p. 283) mentions the improvement of the language skills of imperfect speakers, the development of new terminology, the process of language standardisation, public validation, but also the role model function for young members of a minority group as possible contributions to the survival of minority languages. The study by Zabaleta et al. (2010) confirms that minority journalists themselves can identify with these goals: two-thirds of minority journalists from ten European minority contexts see language support as part of their job.

Although traditional media are facing existential challenges due to declining readership or new media usage patterns of the younger generations (E. H. G. Jones et al., 2019, pp. 17–18), the question of their effect on language maintenance is still relevant. Thus, new forms of communication are also being studied for their potential impact on language maintenance. Again, the picture is not entirely clear. Cunliffe (2019, pp. 473–474), for example, states that “social media are already having an influence on the maintenance of minority languages”, but he also adds that social media tend to increase the dominant position of majority languages, and that digital communication may pose a threat to languages that are not digitally prepared.

What remains rather undisputed is the fact that the influence of MLM on language maintenance is difficult to prove. This discussion is more broadly related to the question of media effects in general. Media consumption may influence social behaviour, but as Stuart-Smith et al. (2013, p. 507) note, “the nature, intensity, duration, and even the description and investigation of these effects is disputed”. The question of how MLM can contribute to language maintenance conflicts with the difficulty of measuring such an effect. Cormack (2007, pp. 63–64), for example, argues that the idea that there is a “straightforward media-language link” must be given up. Recognising the challenge of measuring the language maintenance effect, the research questions of this article focus on the self-perception of the media.

Looking at the literature, it is also clear that there is room for further research. First, as

briefly mentioned in the introduction, MLM research oftentimes does not consider the multiple dimensions of the term *minority* itself. Cormack (1998, p. 35) himself points out the importance of recognising the differences between minority languages and the implications “for questions of collective identity and for media use”. He refers to a classification proposed by Edwards (1995), who distinguishes ten different categories of minority languages. In relation to the role of the media in language maintenance, the distinction between local-only minority languages and unique minority languages appears to be of particular relevance. According to Marten et al. (2012, p. 6), unique minority languages are “languages which exist only as minority languages” (e.g., Basque, Sami or Frisian). On the other side, local-only minority languages are “languages which are majority languages in another state” (e.g., German in Belgium or Italy). A local-only minority language may be threatened in the minority context, but the language itself is not and is safeguarded by the existence of a kin-state (Gorter, 2008, p. 169). What does this mean for the media in these different contexts? Since unique minority languages do not have the support of a kin-state, it can be assumed that the responsibility of the media in terms of language maintenance is more evident in these contexts.

Secondly, according to the literature, the comparative angle of the research on MLM and language maintenance can be strengthened. Le (2015, p. 6) highlights – with reference to the overall body of research – that case studies are the most common way to study MLM. For instance, Pietikäinen (2008) used interviews and ethnographic data to examine how Sami journalists contribute to language revitalisation. The role of the journalists was also focused on in other case studies to explore their self-perceived impact on language maintenance. In this vein, Stenberg-Sirén (2023) surveyed Finnish-Swedish journalists working for Svenska Yle, the Swedish-language division of Finland’s national public broadcaster Yle, while Markelin et al. (2013) conducted interviews with Sami media professionals. Both studies showed that the professionals perceive themselves as active supporters who shape their respective languages. Moriarty’s (2009) study is notable for its use of both qualitative and quantitative data, as she investigated the effect of the Irish-language television channel TG4 on the language attitudes and practices of university students. R. J. Jones et al. (2013) can be cited as an example of social media research on Twitter and the maintenance of the Welsh language. All these case studies, in their different ways and contexts, show how the media can influence language maintenance.

An interesting example of a comprehensive comparative study is the research carried out as part of the ELDIA project (European Language Diversity for All). As part of the project, a tool was developed to measure the degree of language maintenance and vulnerability of

twelve Finno-Ugric minority communities in Europe, based mainly on a quantitative survey in the respective contexts (Laakso et al., 2016, p. 36). The minorities studied included, for example, Northern Sami in Norway, Meänkieli in Sweden, and Karelian in Finland (Laakso et al., 2016, p. 50). Among other things, the survey measured the status and influence of “traditional, electronic, social and interactive media” (Laakso et al., 2016, p. 39) – which turned out to be rather low. In fact, the results show a rather negative picture of the media use by the minorities, calling into question their role in language maintenance. However, due to a calculation problem, the figures are not necessarily comparable or significant, as Laakso et al. (2016, p. 155) themselves point out. What could be shown, though, is that in many minority communities there are hardly any media available in their own language, and this limited supply of media restricts the media’s role in language maintenance.

Overall, comparative research on the language maintenance function is rather scarce. Thus, Ramallo’s (2017, p. 457) claim is still true: “We need to carry out more systematic and comparative research to know if the media in the digital age actually contribute to minority language maintenance or not.”

A potential research approach to the topic of language maintenance in the context of MLM is outlined by Cormack’s (2007) book chapter titled ‘The Media and Language Maintenance’, which was used as a guideline for this article. The levels of language maintenance (see Table 1) distinguished by Cormack (2007, p. 60) are useful for refining the understanding of the concept. On the one hand, the media can contribute to language maintenance simply by providing a platform for the use of a minority language. But MLM can also go beyond this basic function by encouraging the use of the language. Cormack sees the third level of language maintenance – active promotion – as the most important, but also as the most difficult to achieve. His distinction also clarifies that language maintenance is not a yes or no question, as the impact of the media can be variable and gradual.

Table 1: Levels of language maintenance according to Cormack (2007, p. 60); own illustration.

First level	The media serve as general framework for the use and development of the language. Examples: Development of vocabulary, dissemination of news about the
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	language community.
Second level	The media offer opportunities for and motivate the use of the language. Examples: Development of materials for educational purposes, provision of materials to initiate discussion.
Third level	The media promote language use in an active and direct way.

While the conceptualisation of this study is based on these levels of language maintenance, the questions of the interview guide developed for this study are also inspired by the different research questions suggested by Cormack (2007, p. 65) in his chapter, such as: “What domains are used by the language in the media?”, “What differences are there in use of the language by different media?”, or “How do people participate in minority language media [...]?”. These questions are part of the “ecological approach” advocated by Cormack (2007, p. 64) and drawn from Haugen (2001). Therefore, they do not focus primarily on investigating the direct impact of the media on language. This fits very well with the purpose of this study, which looks at the self-perceived role of the media in language maintenance.

2. Basque, Ladin and Upper Sorbian: The minority language media in their contexts

The minority language contexts selected for this study are Basque, Ladin, and Upper Sorbian. All three can be classified as unique minority languages in the sense that they do not have a kin-state. While this is something that unites the three languages, there are differences between the three that make for an interesting comparison in terms of number of speakers, status, or linguistic context. Another reason for choosing them was the fact that they all have an established and institutionalised media system. Of course, these three languages are only three examples of unique minority languages in Europe, but the aim of the article to give an initial understanding of the special relevance of unique minority language media can be achieved. Starting with an overview of the main characteristics of the three languages (see Table 2), it will be easier to see the opportunities and challenges for the respective media in terms of their potential maintenance role.

Regarding the number of speakers, Basque is the biggest language among the ones selected. Thus, according to Ethnologue, the situation of the language is classified as institutional, which means that its status is quite secure (Eberhard et al., 2024). As it is spoken in Spain and France, it can be considered a cross-border language. This leads to different levels of protection in the two countries, which can be seen, for example, in the different educational

settings in Spain and France (Garcia-Azkoaga & Garcia-Ruiz, 2020; Lascano, 2023). Euskara Batua, the standard Basque, was established in 1968 and is now used in the administration, schools, media, and literature in general (Igartua & Zabaltza, 2021, p. 13).

Ladin, by contrast, is a much smaller language. It is only spoken in Italy, but it has close linguistic links with Romansh in Switzerland and Friulian in Italy. The Ladin-speaking areas in Italy are divided into three provinces, with the largest community in South Tyrol. The administrative separation of the Ladin community again leads to different standards of protection (Woelk, 2022). An important detail to bear in mind is that there is no standard Ladin language. In 1988, the development of a standardised Ladin language was commissioned, but the so-called Ladin Dolomitan could not be established as the proposal lacked political support (P. Videsott et al., 2020, p. 18). There are, however, several Ladin varieties that have a written standard.

Upper Sorbian is spoken mainly around Budyšin/Bautzen in Lusatia, which is part of the German state of Saxony. In terms of numbers, it is comparable to the Ladin language. Together with Lower Sorbian, these make up the Sorbian languages: Upper Sorbian is closer to Czech, while Lower Sorbian is closer to Polish. Both languages have a written standard. In addition to the ethnic-linguistic divide, political-historical developments and religious realities have also led to Upper and Lower Sorbian developing in different ways (Dołowy-Rybińska & Ratajczak, 2019, pp. 68-69).

Table 2: General characteristics of Basque, Ladin and Upper Sorbian (own elaboration)

	Basque (Euskara)	Ladin	Upper Sorbian (Hornjoserbšćina)
Language family	Language isolate	Western Romance/Gallo- Romance/Rhaeto- Romance	Slavic/West Slavic/Sorbian
Number of speakers	900,000 ¹	32,650 ²	25,000 ³
Official language area(s)	Spain: Gipuzkoa/ Guipúzcoa; Bizkaia/ Vizcaya; Araba/Álava, Nafarroa/Navarra France: Lapurdi/Labourd; Nafarroa Beherea/ Basse-Navarre; Zuberoa/Soule	Italy: Südtirol/Alto Adige; Trentin/Trentino; Belum/Belluno	Germany: Sakska/Sachsen
Standard language	Yes	Different written varieties	Yes
Ethnologue classification (Eberhard et al., 2024)	Institutional	Endangered	Endangered

The differences between the languages, particularly in terms of size, are reflected in the six media selected (see Table 3). As a result, Berria and Euskal Irrati Telebista (EITB) have a much higher circulation and a larger offer. While EITB was founded in 1982 as an independent station, its Ladin and Upper Sorbian counterparts are subdivisions of national broadcasters. MDR Serbski rozhłós, with its studio in Budyšin/Bautzen, is part of Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk, whereas Rai Ladinia is part of the national Rai structures and is based in Bulsan/Bozen/Bolzano. It should also be noted that, in addition to its Basque channels, EITB also offers television (telebista) and radio (irradi) channels in Spanish. Rai Ladinia and MDR Serbski rozhłós do not provide content in the majority languages. As for the newspapers, *Berria*, *La Usc di Ladins* and *Serbske Nowiny* are the largest newspapers in their respective language and, unlike their television/radio counterparts, are not classified as public service media but are privately owned.

Table 3: Overview of the interviewed media (own elaboration)

	Berria	Euskal Irrati Telebista (EITB)	La Usc di Ladins	Rai Ladinia	Serbske Nowiny	MDR Serbski rozhłós
Type	Newspaper	TV/radio	Newspaper	TV/radio	Newspaper	TV/radio
Language	Basque	Basque	Ladin	Ladin	Upper Sorbian	Upper Sorbian
Circulation	10,000 ⁴	NA	4,300 ⁵	NA	1,700 ⁶	NA
Availability	6 days per week	24/7	Weekly	100 hours of TV per year; 352 hours of radio per year ⁷	5 days per week	A 30- minute TV magazine per month; 27.5 hours of radio per week ⁸
Job title of the interviewees	Editor-in- chief	Director of Euskal Telebista (ETB)	Editor-in- chief	Editor-in- chief of the news department	Editor-in- chief	1) Studio director; 2) Editor (former editor-in- chief of <i>Serbske Nowiny</i>)

The Basque media landscape is generally well-researched, and the role of the media in language maintenance has been the subject of several studies. The study by Salces-Alcade and Amezcaga (2016, pp. 236-237) shows, among other things, that people consume Basque media to keep in touch with the language, to be able to use it regularly, and not to lose their knowledge of it. The project “Euskal Hedabideen Behatokia” (www.behategia.eus) also has a platform for the regular monitoring of the Basque media landscape, along with its own yearbook. Some of the topics of the interviews in this article, such as Euskal Telebista’s (ETB) new digital streaming platform “Primeran” or *Berria*’s “Ikasgela” project for schools, have already been discussed in these yearbooks, although not strictly from a language maintenance point of view (Iparragirre Torres, 2024; Peruarena Ansa & Oiartzabal Azketa, 2021).

The academic debate on Ladin or Upper Sorbian media is not nearly as extensive. As far as the Ladin media landscape is concerned, it is important to note that the lack of an official Ladin standard language means that the media offer is unable to cover all the written Ladin varieties (R. Videsott, 2020, p. 425). The conditions for the media as actors of language maintenance therefore seem to be more difficult. The same can be said for the Upper Sorbian

media landscape. Dołowy-Rybińska (2014, p. 137) acknowledges that although *Serbske Nowiny* provides a daily Upper Sorbian media offer, the very limited TV time means that there is “practically no presence on TV”.

3. Methodology

In order to answer the research questions presented in this article, senior representatives from the aforementioned media outlets were interviewed: *Berria*, Euskal Irrati Telebista, *La Usc di Ladins*, Rai Ladinia, *Serbske Nowiny*, MDR Serbski rozhłós. Table 3 shows the interviewees’ job titles at the time of the interviews. This information is also important for interpreting the interview statements. The interview with EITB was with the director of ETB and therefore focused more on the television channels than the radio. In the case of Rai Ladinia, the interviewee was the editor-in-chief of the news department, which focuses only on news formats for television and radio. This is important to keep in mind because Rai Ladinia also has a so-called programme department, which is responsible for all non-news programmes and does not fall under the remit of the editor-in-chief of the news department. In the interview with MDR Serbski rozhłós, the studio director was joined by a second interviewee who works as editor for MDR Serbski rozhłós and was previously editor-in-chief of *Serbske Nowiny*. Hence, that interview made it possible to draw direct comparisons between television/radio and newspaper.

The results of this study are therefore based on a total of six interviews with seven media professionals. A guide was developed for the interviews, with the questions drawn largely from Cormack’s (2007) reflections on MLM and language maintenance. However, the interview guide was adapted by spontaneous questions during the actual interviews, which can therefore be characterised as semi-structured interviews. The interviews took place in January and February 2023, of which five were conducted online and one in person. Four of the interviews were held in German and two in English. Written consent was obtained from each interviewee for the recording and scientific use of the interview. Data collection, storage, and protection followed the guidelines of the EU General Data Protection Regulation. The ethical procedures of Eurac Research for research projects were adhered to. As it would have been difficult to achieve complete anonymity by naming the newspaper or television/radio station, the interviewees were informed both orally and in the consent form that their job description would be used to refer to the interviews in this article and that it might therefore be possible to identify the interviewees. All participants gave their permission and signed the consent form.

The transcribed interviews were analysed via qualitative content analysis. In this study,

the respective publication by Gläser and Laudel (2010) served as a guideline for the analysis. The categorisation involved several steps, starting with an initial system of categories based on the interview guide and theoretical considerations, and was continually adapted throughout the process. The German interview statements quoted in the results section have been translated into English by the authors.

4. Analysis

The interviews with media professionals reveal a range of perspectives on the role of the Basque, Ladin, and Upper Sorbian media in language maintenance, highlighting both similarities and important differences. The differences arise mainly from the vitality, structural factors, and resources of each linguistic environment, and all these variables are to some extent interdependent. This section organises the findings into seven broad categories, starting with an overview of how the media define their own role in language maintenance. This is followed by a category that looks at the maintenance of language standards as a form of language maintenance. Subsequent categories focus on the role of the media in developing, promoting, and advocating their minority languages. One category also looks at how the media specifically target younger audiences, aware of their importance for the maintenance of their languages, but also for the survival of the media itself. Digitalisation, a cross-category issue, is addressed separately at the end.

4.1 Self-definition

This category includes responses to the general question of whether the media themselves consider language maintenance to be one of their tasks. All the interviewees acknowledge that it is an integral part of their media's purpose.

At EITB, language maintenance is considered a “key function”, as the maintenance and promotion of the Basque language was part of its founding idea. This aspiration is still reflected today in the latest EITB strategy papers. Similarly, the first edition of *La Usc di Ladins* in 1972 mentioned the preservation of the language as one of its objectives. It should also be noted that all the media interviewed are partly or fully financed by government funding, which often goes hand in hand with tasks aimed at supporting the language.

However, the media see language maintenance mostly as a by-product of their journalistic work. The primary task is seen as informing the population in the respective minority language and providing good journalism. This distinction is explained by *Berria's* editor-in-chief:

We are not here to save the Basque language. We are doing it, but it is not our main purpose. Our main purpose is to communicate, to give information, to give explanations and to analyse the situation and what's happening in the Basque Country, in the world. (Berria)

The tasks listed by the studio director of MDR Serbski rozhłós for her own outlet partly reflect the above statement, but language itself seems to be more in the foreground:

The first thing is that we are creating another language space with our media, an opportunity to use the mother tongue, to hear it. One is then also the information, another is language cultivation and the third – and this should not be underestimated – language development. [...] And of course to create an offer for all age groups. (MDR Serbski rozhłós)

The words of the editor-in-chief of the news department of Rai Ladinia sound very similar to that:

And of course we also feel that we are making a contribution to the further development of the language and also to the cultivation of the language. (Rai Ladinia)

In principle, these tasks are also recognised by the other media for their languages, although the priorities may differ. Overall, the media seem to have two souls in their chests, because on the one hand they want to be seen as any other media, and on the other hand they cannot – or do not – want to deny their special role in language maintenance.

4.2 Maintaining language standards

To ensure the correct use of the languages, all the media interviewed try to enforce consistency and standards through a variety of approaches. Part of maintaining language standards is also the use of the respective standard language, which is a matter of course in the case of Basque and Upper Sorbian. However, the situation is different for the Ladin media as there is no official Ladin standard language. Since this has a direct impact on the question of language maintenance in general and standard maintenance in particular, it is important to look first at how the Ladin media deal with this situation.

An edition of *La Usc di Ladins* may be published in the different varieties of the Ladin valleys (Val Badia, Gherdëna, Fascia, Fodom, Ampëz). The question of which spelling is used depends, for example, on the local reference of an article. Usually, Ladins can understand the different varieties. It is interesting to note that every issue of *La Usc di Ladins* contains at least

one article written in Ladin Dolomitan, the unofficial standard Ladin language, as the newspaper sees itself as a role model in this respect:

So, when someone says that the standard language is of no use, the counter-question is: Do you have the experience that you can say that? No, nobody has. It's only us who have been using the standard language for almost 30 years. (*La Usc di Ladins*)

Rai Ladinia faces the same questions as *La Usc di Ladins*. Hence, different Ladin varieties are also used in Rai Ladinia's television and radio programmes, as well as on the website and social media. The choice depends again on the local reference of the single television or radio report.

Apart from questions about the use of language in the media, the interview guide also focused on whether the media had internal guidelines to ensure that their journalists followed the same language standards.

Berria and EITB have their own style guides for journalistic writing in Basque. *Berria*'s style guide was first published in the 1990s, when the newspaper was still called *Euskaldunon Egunkaria*. It defined how to write journalistically in Basque, but also included sections about grammar and various definitions. This style guide has also been used by journalism education institutions in the past. It has now become a free online version that is constantly being updated (<https://www.berria.eus/estiloliburua/>).

The other media do not have their own journalistic style guides. MDR Serbski rozhłós adheres to the general MDR style guide when it comes to general journalistic standards. A separate style guide for Ladin would be difficult to produce because of the different written varieties. The use of certain words in Rai Ladinia tends to be regulated by oral agreements, sometimes in writing. At *La Usc di Ladins*, linguistic issues are discussed at a monthly editorial meeting. In the case of *Serbske Nowiny* the editorial system helps to see how specific terms have been used in the past and therefore ensures stylistic consistency.

Another important aspect of standard maintenance is proofreading. While all media outlets focus on the correct use of the languages, only *Berria* and EITB had dedicated proofreaders at the time of the interviews. EITB's proofreaders are responsible not only for proofreading all texts and scripts but also for providing feedback to journalists, presenters, or hosts. At *Berria*, the proofreaders are also involved in other tasks, such as updating their own style guide. Furthermore, they hold frequent one-on-one meetings with individual journalists to assist with language matters. Additionally, the proofreaders conduct short online sessions weekly for *Berria* staff to address linguistic or stylistic concerns.

Serbske Nowiny usually employs a proofreader; however, at the time of the interview,

this position was vacant. Despite advertisements, no suitable candidates could be found, so volunteers help with proofreading. In addition, staff from the Ludowe nakładnistwo Domowina (Domowina Publishing House) – of which *Serbske Nowiny* is a part – have occasionally stepped in to help with proofreading. *La Usc di Ladins* also depends on the help of volunteers. Normally, all the articles are checked by a volunteer from the Union Generela di Ladins dla Dolomites (Association of the Dolomite Ladins) – the publisher of the newspaper. A committee of the Union Generela di Ladins dla Dolomites, composed of representatives of all Ladin valleys, also looks at the PDF of the newspaper before it is printed. A complete check is not possible because it is difficult to master all the written Ladin varieties used in the newspaper. Nonetheless, hiring proofreaders is not a realistic option:

I understand, it's not really that professional. But we can't do otherwise. There is no other way. We don't have the capacity either, financially. (*La Usc di Ladins*)

The team at *La Usc di Ladins* follows the four-eyes principle as well, with colleagues checking each other's texts. This practice also reflects the approach adopted by Rai Ladinia, *Serbske Nowiny*, and MDR Serbski rozhłós, all of which currently lack dedicated proofreading teams. Another aspect of standard maintenance is mentioned by the editor-in-chief of the news department of Rai Ladinia. Not only do the journalists try to speak good Ladin themselves, but they also try to have Ladin interviewees in their programmes, if possible, and remind the interviewees to follow their example:

Of course, you can't keep interrupting the interviews. But if it's too German or the Ladin is not good, then we point it out. (Rai Ladinia)

Altogether, the interviews underline the common priority given to the maintenance of linguistic standards in the different media, but also significant differences in approaches. The difference is particularly marked between the Basque media on the one hand and the Ladin and Upper Sorbian media on the other. While the first have the capacity for dedicated proofreading teams and comprehensive style guides, the latter cannot compete with them, relying more on informal peer editing and therefore lacking this centralised guidance. The fact that there is no official Ladin standard language adds a layer of complexity that the Ladin media must face. Maintaining linguistic standards is therefore not only a question of will – because that is demonstrated by all media interviewed – but one of resources and the overall situation of the linguistic context.

4.3 Training and recruitment of journalists

Journalists are at the centre of the media's activities, including their role in language maintenance. The interviews reveal the strategies but also the difficulties that arise in the recruitment process.

Indeed, the recruitment of journalists is particularly difficult in the Ladin and Upper Sorbian context, where the pool of journalists is rather limited. The studio director of MDR Serbski rozhłós explains:

We cannot be choosy. Of course, it is difficult to find a young person now who is the best in everything. So, they must also have the chance to develop. (MDR Serbski rozhłós)

According to the editor-in-chief of *Serbske Nowiny*, in recent years the education system has failed to equip people with the necessary command of written Upper Sorbian to confidently pursue a career in newspaper journalism. To address the shortage of journalists, *Serbske Nowiny* is currently collaborating with the Serbski institut (Sorbian Institute) on a new project. This institute is a research facility dedicated to the study of Sorbian. As it is currently not possible to specialise in Sorbian journalism through the formal education system, the Serbski institut is in the process of finding potential lecturers to develop such a course. The editor-in-chief of *Serbske Nowiny* is very convinced of the project:

But for me it's a very exciting project because it's at the heart of language development. (*Serbske Nowiny*)

Internships offered by the media organisations are seen as a way of recruiting new journalists in the minority languages. Moreover, in the Ladin context, internships are particularly important as they are a requirement for journalism exams in Italy. With this in mind, *La Usc di Ladins* offers future journalists the opportunity to do this internship at the Ladin newspaper. As these internships are not offered by the national Rai, Rai Ladinia cannot offer this possibility.

When it comes to hiring new journalists, the requirement for language certificates is a way of ensuring certain standards, as seen in the cases of EITB and Rai Ladinia. Some of the other media organizations also include language tests as part of their hiring strategies. In the case of the Ladin media, the fact that there are different written Ladin varieties also influences the recruitment process. To represent the different Ladin varieties in the team, Rai Ladinia tries to distribute the jobs as evenly as possible among the applicants from the different Ladin valleys. However, it is not possible to make origin from a particular Ladin valley a criterion for

a job, as this would be seen as discrimination.

Berria shows that the training of journalists can go beyond internships and continue after the recruitment process. Newly recruited *Berria* journalists attend a one-week course on Basque language, style, and journalistic writing to further improve their skills.

The media are clearly involved in the formation of new journalists, which makes the media central actors in what could be called the maintenance of minority language journalism. The media's attention to language quality through their recruitment processes can be seen as closely linked to the maintenance of language standards (see category above). However, compared to the Basque media, the Ladin and Upper Sorbian media are in a completely different situation. Yet, the shortage of journalists makes them even more important actors in the process of becoming a journalist in these minority languages.

4.4 Developing the language

This category includes all the ways in which the media see themselves as actively contributing to the development of their languages, extending their boundaries and acting as language explainers.

Firstly, by utilising the languages for complex content, such as academic research, the media try to contribute to what the editor-in-chief of *Berria* calls “high-level use” of the languages. The editor-in-chief of *Serbske Nowiny* describes it this way:

You can't always do the entire newspaper in so-called easy language. There are simply objectively more complex issues and of course in doing so we ensure that people have a sufficient command of Sorbian in the long term. (*Serbske Nowiny*)

Berria's editor-in-chief also sees the translation of interviews with English-speaking experts on various topics into Basque as a constant test of the language. With a similar intention, Rai Ladinia also tries to cover international issues, although it has a very local focus compared to the Basque media. The aim is to show that the Ladin language can be used to report on more than just local issues.

Secondly, almost all the media see an important part to play in influencing and disseminating new words. This was particularly evident at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. When it came to deciding how to use pandemic-related words in Basque, *Berria* took the lead, as Euskaltzaindia, the Royal Academy of the Basque Language, did not have the ability to decide in time. *Berria* is therefore also seen as a reference point for new linguistic trends:

Because many thousands of people read it every day, so we know we are pathfinders, and we are opening the way in the middle of the snow. (*Berria*)

La Usc di Ladins claims to have helped to establish the administrative vocabulary in the Ladin language. According to its editor-in-chief, the councils in the Ladin valleys of South Tyrol, which have to communicate with their citizens in Ladin, refer to *La Usc di Ladins* for the necessary administrative terms. However, the newspapers are not always successful in their attempts to influence vocabulary use. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, *La Usc di Ladins* failed in establishing the term *mascherot* as a standard word for face mask.

The fact that language development is a difficult endeavour is also reflected in the statement by the editor-in-chief of *Serbske Nowiny*:

So, on the one hand I am in favour of developing a rich vocabulary, but on the other hand I have to write in a way that people understand [...]. So, in this respect it is a dialectic process. On the one side, we always have to hear a little bit about what the real existing Sorbian is like. Then to see that one contributes something to its further improvement, but not wilfully. (*Serbske Nowiny*)

Thirdly, through special formats, the media give discussions of linguistic issues a place of their own – sometimes obvious, sometimes hidden. On MDR Serbski rozhłós, words, translations or linguistic difficulties are discussed in a so-called “language corner” on the radio. ETB has a programme on the Basque TV channel called “Mihiluze”, in which they play with Basque words, but which also has a hidden educational purpose.

In addition to these specific formats, the media can also serve as a place where linguistic reforms can be made visible. When the written variety of Val Badia was reformed, *La Usc di Ladins* became the place where people were confronted with the changes, such as the abolition of diacritics:

That is why we have such a huge task in consolidating this, to bring these novelties across and to apply them. Because people stick to it and see how it is written. Then they adopt it. (*La Usc di Ladins*)

In the end, the media are not lone wolves when it comes to developing the languages. All the media are in contact with linguists, universities, and, above all, with the relevant Basque, Ladin, and Sorbian language institutes.

As shown, the media see themselves not only as users of the language, but also as passive and active shapers while at the same time being embedded in a wider network of

linguistic institutions. Although the interviews do not allow for a statistical answer to the question of how significant the influence of the media is, they do show that there is a clear potential for the media to contribute to the development of Basque, Ladin, and Upper Sorbian.

4.5 Promoting and advocating the language

To what extent do you promote the active use of the language through special activities or projects? This was one of the questions in the interview guide and the answers suggest that the media are taking a position as language promoters, albeit without becoming politically active and with a clear focus on their core audience, their linguistic community.

On the one hand, there is what the editor-in-chief of *Berria* calls “promotion support”. Three examples of this were given in the interviews. *Berria* provides free advertising for initiatives that aim to promote the Basque language. Similarly, EITB co-organises and promotes “Korrika”, a major running event aimed at supporting the Basque language. *Serbske Nowiny* is involved in campaigns to raise awareness of the Sorbian language, such as the campaign “Sorbisch? Na klar.” (Sorbian? Of course.) which seeks to encourage everyone to speak the language.

EITB also creates shows and formats around Basque language and culture with the aim of promoting the language through entertainment. The word game show “Mihiluze”, mentioned in the previous category, as well as the fact that Basque sport is only shown in Basque on ETB, can be linked to this objective. The director of ETB also refers to a feature on Kirmen Uribe, a well-known Basque writer, as an example of this strategy. It showed Kirmen Uribe in New York having to speak English in the supermarket or at the doctor’s, but using Basque to present his latest book in a famous museum and in front of American celebrities. According to the director of the ETB, these formats are designed to combat certain stereotypes that may be associated with the Basque language:

Small things, but I think that step by step we can sort of help show people that Basque is a really cool language, and fishermen speak it and farmers speak it as well. But executives speak it and it’s spoken everywhere in the world. It’s universal. (EITB)

The role that the media can play in raising the status of the language is also illustrated by a quote from the studio director of MDR Serbski rozhłós:

My nicest memory dates back to 20 years ago. There was our first programme in Sorbian, “Wuhlادko”. And for me the nicest compliment was that I could hear afterwards [...]: “Oh, you can report about everything in Sorbian. What a variety you had in the programme. We

were only expecting traditional costumes and Easter riders.” [...] Yes, we can report on everything in Sorbian, in our own way. And we give people self-confidence with that. We raise the image of the language immensely. (MDR Serbski rozhłós)

Another possible arena for promoting the language could be the political one. However, none of the media see themselves as political actors and therefore do not intervene in the political discourse through political position papers or other direct political interventions. Nevertheless, the media consider commentary and critical reporting as a way of expressing their views. Certain language policy issues might be raised to initiate public debate, but the intensity of coverage on certain issues can also be a sign of support. This could be the case, according to the editor-in-chief of *Berria*, when the court makes a decision against the Basque language or when the French government’s policy on Basque schools in the Northern Basque Country is discussed:

We don’t do cheap propaganda, but seriously, we write seriously saying it’s not possible. [...] So we try to compact the Basque society about very basic concepts of language. (*Berria*)

The fact that *Serbske Nowiny* advertises in Upper Sorbian in football stadiums can also be interpreted as a political act, as it is partly linked to the wider discussion in the Lusatian amateur leagues about whether or not Sorbs should be allowed to speak Sorbian among themselves on the football pitch. Some people see this as a problem because referees might not understand Sorbian. *Serbske Nowiny* therefore acts in a symbolic way, making Upper Sorbian visible in this public space.

The use of Ladin Dolomitan, the unofficial standard Ladin language, is mentioned as a form of language policy by the editor-in-chief of *La Usc di Ladins*. The discussion on whether or not to have a common standard language continues to be given space in the newspaper through comments by the editor-in-chief or by Ladin cultural activists, with *La Usc di Ladins* itself being in favour of it, as shown in the second category above.

However, it is important to note that the promotion and advocacy activities of the media are primarily focused on their own language communities. This is because, except for EITB, the media organizations interviewed are inherently oriented towards their minority communities rather than the majority population. EITB is the only media that also has its own service in the majority language, and as the director of ETB points out, the Spanish service plays an important role:

If we didn't have the Spanish channel [ETB 2], [...] they would watch content from the Spanish channels. So, they would be immersed in the Spanish way of thinking. And even if they don't speak Basque and they speak Spanish, we want them to be in the Basque way of thinking. (EITB)

The other media cannot compete with this ambition. *Serbske Nowiny* has a monthly German edition that summarises the most important topics, and MDR Serbski rozhłós offers its TV programme with German subtitles. However, the Upper Sorbian population remains the main customer for their programme, as the studio director of MDR Serbski rozhłós emphasises:

You know, we actually have our hands full making sure that the language is preserved and that those who speak Sorbian or understand Sorbian continue to maintain the language and pass it on to their children and grandchildren. To somehow encourage the German speakers now/ I wouldn't even know how to do that now. (MDR Serbski rozhłós)

In summary, the media support general promotion activities, but the effect may be limited to the minority population as these are the main target groups of the media. The aim is therefore to strengthen the existing community of speakers rather than to reach out to new speakers. But it is safe to say that all media act as a megaphone when it comes to language policy issues and the defence of language rights.

4.6 Focusing on the young generation of language speakers

While the overall focus of the media, as shown above, is on the own minority language community, special attention is given to the young generation. This is reflected in features such as children's and youth pages in the newspapers or the involvement of young people in the editorial teams. While this is not unusual in itself, the emphasis on the younger generation is intended not only to grow the audience but also to grow the language.

The motives behind the media's focus on younger audiences are illustrated by the director of ETB:

Because we think and we feel that the only way to help strengthening and helping the Basque society live their lives in Basque is through those two target audiences: the kids and the younger audiences. If we manage to bring them to the world of Basque, we think that maintaining and strengthening the usage of the Basque language will be easier. (EITB)

As a result, EITB has also changed its own content strategy, focusing more on shows aimed at younger audiences. Formats that are successful on the Spanish channel have been adapted for the Basque channel. In addition, there is a dedicated Basque channel for children, ETB 3. The digital strategy is also very much focused on the younger audience, as the next category on

digitalisation shows.

MDR Serbski rozhłós tries to reach young people through podcasts and the production of Upper Sorbian music. On the radio, they broadcast a so-called “children’s greeting” in the morning. This is broadcast shortly before half past eight. This time was deliberately chosen because children in kindergartens have their breakfast break at this time and can then listen to the programme.

In the case of Upper Sorbian, the focus on the younger generation is partly reflected in a linguistic adaptation. But this is not always without conflict, as the former editor-in-chief of *Serbske Nowiny* reports. A balance must be found between maintaining the language and adapting to the reality of young people and their language use:

That’s why I sometimes had problems with my proofreader who said: “I won’t correct that. I don’t understand that, it’s youth language.” Then I said: “Give it to me, I’ll do it myself. That’s it.” And the young people see themselves in it. If it’s too pompous, they close the newspaper, put it aside and say: “You don’t have to read that anymore.” And it will be the same with radio. If they say: “I don’t understand what you want from me, then I’ll switch off.” (MDR Serbski rozhłós)

Another potential way for the media to influence language maintenance and the younger generation could be through their involvement in the teaching of the language. Therefore, some questions in the interview guide were pointed in this direction. However, the editor-in-chief of *La Usc di Ladins* clearly does not see the Ladin newspaper as an active player in the field of education and thereby also summarises the point of view of the other media:

So, if the media also have this task on board, then it’s really a challenge. (*La Usc di Ladins*)

The only service specifically aimed at young people and learners comes from *Berria*. The open access platform “Berria Ikasgela” (Berria Classroom) presents articles previously published in the newspaper in a simplified version. Still, this service is aimed at people who already have an advanced level of Basque. EITB has not developed any specific materials for learning Basque, but a platform similar to the “BBC Learning English” platform could be developed in the future around the aforementioned word game show *Mihiluze*.

In conclusion, the media recognise the importance of younger audiences for language maintenance and, to some extent, for the survival of the MLM themselves. This understanding is reflected in the adaptation of formats. However, the media are not very active in developing specific didactic materials for language learning and their role in this respect is certainly limited, not least because they do not consider this to be their mission. But this does not mean

that the media's products are not used in educational contexts or by learners, as was also pointed out in the interviews.

4.7 Digitalisation

Although digitalisation can be seen as a cross-sectional issue of almost all the categories, it will be examined here as a separate category from the point of view of language maintenance. While all the media generally have a positive attitude towards digitalisation and see the opportunities, the resources and the progress vary.

One advantage recognised by all the media is that digital services, particularly websites, which all the media interviewed have, make it easier to reach members of the language community both in the home region and in the diaspora, as well as other interested audiences. *Berria's* editor-in-chief sees the own website, with its freely-accessible content, as an important contribution to language maintenance:

Because we think that we don't have to close gates to the Basque Country, to the Basque language. So, the best [way] you have to promote Basque language is not to make them pay. [...] Because closing that by payment or by wall would be to work against Basque. I don't mean against, but it puts difficulties in people's way. (*Berria*)

Furthermore, the digital space allows the media to expand their offer quantitatively. For example, although *La Usc di Ladins* is published only once a week, the website functions as its daily offer to the Ladin community. The integration of the content of MDR Serbski rozhłós into ARD's national audio and media library is an example of how it has been possible to make Upper Sorbian content available to a wider audience and potentially increase its reach.

Digitalisation is also changing the nature of the media, as the example of Rai Ladinia shows. With its own website, the television and radio broadcaster has moved from being a purely oral and visual medium to a written one, offering news in text form as well. However, the challenge is to cover the digital offer without additional financial or human resources.

The interviews also point to the fact that the media are at different stages of their digital development, as the examples of *Serbske Nowiny* and EITB and their divergent aspirations show. Although the Upper Sorbian newspaper has explored the idea of becoming an online-only newspaper, the main concerns seem to be of a different nature, as the editor-in-chief explains:

The most important thing for us at the moment is not the individual technology, but the content, producing enough content. (*Serbske Nowiny*)

Meanwhile, EITB is launching new projects. A survey showed that young Basques are increasingly consuming content on digital platforms, but due to the lack of digital content in Basque they tend to consume content in Spanish and English. For this reason, EITB's digital platform Primeran was launched in 2023, with all its content in Basque. And since ETB 3, the children's channel, has not been doing so well in terms of ratings, EITB has developed a similar platform like Primeran for children called "Makusi".

Irrespective of the digital stage in which the media find themselves, an important aspect of the media's role in language maintenance is their involvement in the current stage of digitalisation, in particular automatic translation. *Berria*, *La Usc di Ladins* and *Serbske Nowiny* have made their texts available for the development of such programmes. In the case of Sorbian, the result was the translation application "Sotra". The Ladin translation project is being developed by the University of Innsbruck.

In sum, the digital toolkit and space have given the media more opportunities to reach their audiences and expand the range of content available in their languages, thereby strengthening their potential role in language maintenance. However, digitalisation brings with it the pressure to constantly adapt as new digital formats continue to emerge. As we have seen, not all the three languages can keep up at the same pace. Particularly noteworthy is the involvement of the newspapers in projects focusing on automatic translation programmes in minority languages, as this demonstrates the media's ability to actively influence digital developments.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how unique minority language media perceive and approach their role in language maintenance, and what specific strategies they use to contribute to it. The interviews revealed that all the media consider language maintenance to be important and are very involved in language issues in their daily work. However, it should also be emphasised that the media themselves do not see language maintenance as their core business, focusing instead on their information function. Supporting the languages is often a by-product of their journalistic efforts.

On the one hand, the comparative approach showed that although all the media share a concern for their languages, their resources and methods for language maintenance vary with the linguistic context. Consequently, the disparities between the Basque media and the Ladin and Upper Sorbian media can be attributed primarily to the different sizes of the language

groups and the general status of the languages. The findings indicate that Ladin and Upper Sorbian media operate in a context of language revitalization, which influences the availability of resources and journalistic staff for these languages. On the other hand, the findings highlight that there are not necessarily differences between the types of media channels (television, radio, newspapers) and their language maintenance efforts. Instead, media within the same linguistic context share similar challenges and opportunities. In particular, the comparison has also revealed what it means for the Ladin media to operate in a context without an official standard language and with several written variants.

Using Cormack's (2007, p. 60) conceptual framework and its three levels of language maintenance (see section 2), the following conclusions can be drawn. At the first level, where the media provide a general framework for the use and development of the language, the six media examined have a substantial impact. Digitalisation has enabled the media to expand their content and, in turn, the use of their respective minority languages. Furthermore, the media contribute by addressing diverse and complex topics in their languages, referred to in the interviews as "high-level use" of the languages. Attention is also paid by the media to the correct language use and the maintenance of language standards, although here the different resources between linguistic contexts become apparent. Style guides and proofreaders were only available at *Berria* and EITB at the time of the interviews. In their own perceptions, the media claim to have an influence on the creation and dissemination of new vocabulary, although this is of course difficult to measure. Additionally, they act as language explainers and important reference points. Their integration into the linguistic network of linguists, language institutes, and universities is another sign of their special importance. The study also highlights the crucial role of the media in training new journalists, particularly in the Ladin and Upper Sorbian contexts, where journalism in these minority languages is almost exclusively conducted within the interviewed media, thus contributing to what could be called journalism maintenance. The fact that *La Usc di Ladins* continues to use and promote the unofficial standard language Ladin Dolomitan can be seen as a strong example of language development.

The possibilities to contribute to the second level, however, seem to be limited. Cormack (2007, p. 60) defines this level as providing opportunities and incentives for the use of the language, mentioning examples such as developing educational materials. Apart from a special online platform launched by the Basque daily newspaper *Berria*, which provides texts in simpler language for pupils, there are few specific offerings for language learning. The media do not see this as their task either. Nonetheless, all media outlets make efforts to engage younger generations through formats that are appropriate and appealing to them, which can be

seen as an example of language maintenance at the second level.

At Cormack's third level (2007, p. 60), which involves the direct and active promotion of the language, the media generally face challenges in reaching non-speakers. Except for the EITB's Spanish programme, the media focus primarily on their own community of speakers, making it difficult to promote the language beyond this group. However, they do support the promotional activities of other organizations. They also contribute to the development of automatic translation tools, which can be considered a part of the third level. Since translation tools are primarily intended for those who do not know or are learning the language, the media's involvement in their development can be viewed as a service to the majority community and to make their content accessible to a broader audience.

Overall, the findings suggest that the media can play a valuable role in language maintenance, although its impact remains difficult to quantify and is closely linked to wider sociolinguistic factors. Future research could investigate the audience's perspective on the media's role in language maintenance, which would provide a counterpoint to the media's self-perception. Including more minority language contexts could help identify broader patterns.

In conclusion, this article positions unique minority language media as a distinct type of MLM. Through comparison, common and different language maintenance strategies have been identified. The article demonstrates that the media interviewed contribute to language maintenance in various ways.

Notes

¹ Igartua & Zabaltza, 2021, p. 11.

² P. Videsott, 2023, p. 27.

³ Pohončowa, n.d.

⁴ The information is based on the interview with the editor-in-chief of *Berria*.

⁵ *La Usc di Ladins*, 2024, p. 2

⁶ The information is based on the interview with the editor-in-chief of *Serbske Nowiny*.

⁷ Presidente del Consiglio dei ministri, 2022, art. 1.

⁸ MDR Serbski rozhłós, 2020.

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