

Introducing Czech¹

Jiří Nekvapil, Charles University, Prague

Language and Society

Czech is spoken by more than 9.5 million inhabitants of the Czech Republic. These people declare their ethnicity to be either Czech or Moravian. Czech is the prevalent language also among tens of thousands of Slovaks and Roma in the Czech Republic. Czech is one of the West Slavic languages (along with Sorbian, Slovak, Polish and Kashubian). As far as its structure is concerned, it most of all resembles Slovak. The structural closeness of Czech and Slovak makes it possible for Czechs and Slovaks to use their own native languages in mutual conversation, i.e. the Czech speaks Czech while the Slovak speaks Slovak, and to understand one another relatively well in spite of that. The mutual comprehensibility of Czech and Slovak was developed systematically especially during the last two decades of the existence of Czechoslovakia.

Czech is attested in documents from the 11th century (isolated Czech words in Latin context), the earliest literary relics date back to the 12th century. In the 14th century we can already speak of a vigorous expansion of literary Czech. At that time its use was not limited only to monasteries and the clergy, but it had spread to the royal court, among nobility, and finally among townsmen. It was employed in religious and secular poetry, in prose and even in philosophy; it was used in law and administration. In the second half of the 14th century the translation of the Bible was completed, and a dictionary in verse was written (by Claretus), summing up Czech terminology of all the fields of study.

In the early 15th century literary Czech spread among broader strata of the population (together with the spread of the Bible). Due to the reformist Hussite movement it drew closer to the spoken language, e.g. in the sermons of John Huss, the ideological leader of the movement, himself (burnt at the stake in 1415); Huss is also considered the author of an important reform of Czech spelling (which will be dealt with below). Literary Czech reached its climax in the 16th and 17th centuries. The world-famous pedagogue J.A. Komenský (Comenius) wrote not only in Latin but also in Czech. However, from the late 17th century Czech was gradually being ousted from a number of communicative domains (e.g. from that of administration), developing mostly as a colloquial language spoken by common people.

Literary Czech became destabilised, and in the Czech Lands the influence of German was growing. Fortunately, the unfavourable conditions for the development of Czech were changed during the so-called National Revival in the first half of the 19th century. It was of major importance that the protagonists of this movement (especially the linguist J. Dobrovský, and the lexicographer J. Jungmann) considered the then colloquial language so neglected that they decided to draw on the tradition of the highly developed Czech of the 16th century. Literary Czech and spoken Czech (i.e. the Czech actually used in everyday life) were thus drawn further apart and this gave rise to Czech diglossia, i.e. the functioning of literary Czech (or Standard Czech - put in the current terminology) as a superior code which has no native speakers, and spoken common Czech (or Common Czech) as a lower code, a mother tongue of practically all speakers - today's speakers of Czech are still faced with certain aspects of diglossia (this will be discussed below).

Sound system of the language

Today's Standard Czech has 5 vowels: *a, e, i, o, u*, and 3 diphthongs: *-ou, -au, -eu*. Czech vowels are either short or long. It is important to note that difference in vowel length is used to distinguish between meanings in Czech: e.g. *dráha* (English: *track*) versus *drahá* (English: *dear, fem.*), *kupuji* (English: *I buy*) versus *kupují* (English: *they buy*) (the acute accent above the vowel marks it as long). The quality of vowels is stable - it is influenced neither by the position of the vowel in the word, nor by stress placement, nor by the type of the syllable and neighbouring sounds.

Today's Standard Czech has 25 consonants. They are classified as voiced or voiceless according to whether the vocal cords vibrate or not during articulation. Some consonants are distinguished only on the basis of this criterion. Thus e.g. *p* and *b* are both explosive and labial, but *p* is voiceless while *b* is voiced. It is important to note that the mere contrast between voiced and voiceless consonants is used to distinguish between meanings in Czech: e.g. *bodá* (English: *pricks, 3rd person, sg.*), versus *podá* (English: *passes, 3rd person, sg.*). Other pairs of consonants distinguished in Czech by their voiced or voiceless character are *f-v, t-d, t'-d', s-z, š-ž, k-g*. There are differences in tension between the consonants of the correlation pairs, however, these are marginal from the point of view of perception. Czech consonants are not aspirated in any position. Some consonants do not have a voiced, or voiceless, correlate - these include in the main the voiced consonants *m, n, ň, j, l, r*. The pronunciation of Czech sounds is relatively easy, possibly apart from the consonant *ř*, a

speciality of Czech, which is difficult not only for foreigners, but also for Czechs (*ř* is produced by the tip of the tongue which vibrates against the upper teeth, the vibrations being shorter and more energetic than those of *r*).

In pronunciation the sounds are grouped in syllables. It is characteristic of Czech that the stress falls on the first syllable of the word (irrespective of whether the first syllable contains or is followed by a short or long vowel).

Unlike in other languages, including e.g. English, the sound resources are very often the only means signalling different communicative functions. In the following example, the difference between a statement and a question is conveyed only by falling or rising intonation respectively (represented by a full stop or question mark at the end of the sentence in writing): *Už přijeli.* (English: literally "*Already arrived-3rd person pl.*", *They have already arrived.*) versus *Už přijeli?* (English: *Have they already arrived?*).

Spelling

Czech spelling is based primarily on the pronunciation of sounds, however, it records only those sound differences which are capable of distinguishing between meanings – this is why there are two letters *p* and *b* representing two sounds distinguished merely by voicing (see above) while the letter *ř* represents both the voiced and voiceless *ř* for the same reason. Czech spelling is thus based predominantly on phonological principles. It uses letters adopted from Latin in the Middle Ages. However, Latin did not have the full range of sounds present in Czech, and the Latin writing system had to be modified accordingly. This was mainly the question of recording the so-called soft consonants, and long vowels. For instance, the consonant corresponding to the first sound of the English word *she* was originally spelled as *sz*, i.e. as a digraph. In a similar way, a single sound was written using a combination of letters *cz* (i.e. the sound corresponding to the first sound of the English word *chain*), or *aa* (i.e. long *a*). Certain features of this Czech spelling spread into Polish orthography, where digraphs, e.g. *sz*, *cz*, *rz*, have been used up to the present. A radical reform of Czech orthography was carried out by John Huss in his work *De orthographia bohémica*. He suggested using diacritical marks to represent the sounds absent from the Latin alphabet: since his time vowel length has been marked by an acute accent above the vowel (e.g. *á*), and softness of a consonant by a hook (háček) (originally a dot) above the letter (e.g. *š*, *č*, *ř*). Diacritical spelling has spread from Czech to a number of other languages (to Slovak, Lower

and Upper Sorbian, Slovene, Croatian, and partly also to Polish as well as Lithuanian and Latvian). Today's Czech uses the Latin alphabet to which three diacritical marks have been added: an acute accent (as in the letter *á*), a hook (as in the letter *š*), and a circle above a letter (only in the letter *ů*, i.e. a long *u* in non-initial position in a word). The predominantly phonological character of Czech spelling makes it possible to decipher the spoken form of a written text quite easily. However, this correspondence is not without complications. Two different letters *i* and *y* represent the same sound, just like *ů* and *ú* do, and neither are *í* and *ý* distinguished in pronunciation. The matters are further complicated by the fact that a combination of two letters *c* and *h* (i.e. *ch*) represents a single sound (that occurring at the end of the German word *Bach*), while the letter *x* represents two sounds (i.e. *ks*). Alongside phonological principles, Czech spelling also employs morphemic principles, i.e. there is a tendency to record the same morpheme always in the same way regardless of the variation in its pronunciation - the Czech word for *oak* is pronounced *dup*, but it is spelt *dub* because in other case forms of the word this morpheme is pronounced as *dub* (cf. gen.sg. *dubu*, instr.sg. *dubem*, nom.pl. *duby*, etc.) Mastering orthography is considered a question of prestige in Czech society. It is worth mentioning that spelling systems, and moreover proposals to reform the orthography have aroused much public concern.

Morphology (word forms in the sentence, word formation)

Czech is an inflectional language. This is to say that in the main it uses word endings to express relationships within the sentence (unlike e.g. English, which uses fixed word order). In the Czech sentence *Václav miluje Boženu* (English: *Václav loves Božena*.) the word ending *-u* in the word *Boženu* expresses the fact that *Božena* is the object (patient) of the action; the word order is irrelevant - the fact that *Božena* is the object (patient) of the action is expressed also in the sentence *Boženu miluje Václav*. An analogous change in word order would result in expressing a different relation between the sentence elements in English (cf. the difference between *Peter loves Mary*, and *Mary loves Peter*).

It is characteristic of an inflectional type of language that on the one hand many words have an ending, and on the other, a single ending encompasses a number of grammatical meanings. For instance, the ending *-á* in the Czech adjective *pěkná* (English: *pretty*) expresses 1. nominative case, 2. singular number, 3. feminine gender. Different endings are added to words (or stems) of the so-called flexible word classes, i.e. nouns, adjectives, pronouns, numerals, and verbs. The words of the so-called non-flexible word classes - i.e. adverbs,

prepositions, conjunctions, particles, and interjections - have no endings added to them. Generally, there are two systems of endings in Czech whereby the forms of flexible words change - one is used for nouns, adjectives, pronouns, and numerals, i.e. the so-called declension, the other is used for verbs, i.e. the so-called conjugation. The declension system comprises 7 case forms in the singular and 7 cases in the plural. The noun endings change also according to gender; three gender classes are distinguished: masculine, feminine, and neuter gender, a further distinction being made between animate and inanimate within masculine gender - cf. e.g. the different endings of the genitive in singular of the nouns *muž-e* (masculine, English: *man*), *žen-y* (feminine, English: *woman*), *měst-a* (neuter, English: *town*). Unlike e.g. English, Czech nouns have no articles, in other words, Czech does not make a grammatical distinction between definite, unique, or known things and persons, and indefinite ones.

While the declension system comprises endings making it possible to express grammatical gender, number, and case of nouns, the conjugation system comprises endings used to express person and number in verbs. However, the particular form of the verb also provides information on the tense of the verb, its mood, voice, and aspect (e.g. the verb form *volám*, English: *I am calling*, expresses the 1st person, singular, present tense, indicative mood, active voice, and imperfective aspect). When expressing tense, mood, and voice language resources other than endings are also employed, namely auxiliary verbs (e.g. the future tense is expressed using two words: *budu volat*, English: *I will call*, just as the conditional mood: *volal bych*, English: *I would call*, and the passive voice *jsem volán*, English: *I am called*). This way of expressing grammatical relations is shared by Czech with predominantly isolating languages, such as e.g. English and French. The category of aspect makes use of prefixes and suffixes. This category marks the action denoted by the verb as viewed in progress or repeated (i.e. the imperfective aspect, e.g. *volal*, English: *he was calling*) or as rounded off, without repetition (i.e. the perfective aspect, e.g. *zavolal*, English: *he called (once)*).

The basic word formation process in Czech is derivation, adding prefixes and suffixes to a base (e.g. *poučit*, English: *to instruct*, was formed from the base *učit*, English: *to teach*, by adding the prefix *po-*; *rybník*, English: *pond*, was formed from the base *ryb-*, English: something related to *fish*, by adding the suffix *-ník*); compounds formed by combining several bases are less frequent (e.g. *velkoměsto*, English: *metropolis*; *okamžik*, English: *moment*). Czech shares the latter word formation process with polysynthetically oriented German,

characterised by compounds. As a matter of fact, the occurrence of a number of compounds in Czech was influenced by German (e.g. *chvályhodný*, i.e. *hodný chvály*, English: *praiseworthy*, *worthy of praise*, may be based on the German *lobenswert*).

Syntax

The core of the Czech sentence derives from syntactic and semantic properties of verbs, i.e. their valency. Verbs require complementation by a certain number of elements, and this fact predetermines the form of the particular sentence. Thus, for instance, the sentence with the verb *navštívit* (English: *to visit*) requires a specification of who was visiting (the so-called agent of the action), and who was visited (the object affected by the action, the patient). The function of the agent is performed by a noun in the nominative case, that of the patient by a noun in the accusative case. The above information can be summed up in the syntactic pattern $N_{\text{nom}} - VF - N_{\text{acc}}$. The pattern represents the structure of the sentence *Maminka navštívila babičku* (English: *Mother visited grandmother*) (the symbol VF stands for *verbum finitum*, i.e. a finite form of a verb, e.g. *navštívila*).

Let us note once more that it is not only a certain number of specific words that a verb requires, but also specific endings of these words - e.g. the endings of the nominative and accusative cases in the above example. Some verbs require fewer complements than the verb *navštívit*. The verb *pršet* (English: *to rain*) requires no complementation at all; the structure of the sentence *Prší* (English: *It is raining*) is therefore represented by the pattern VF. The verb *spát* (English: *to sleep*) requires only one complement, cf. *Petr spí* (English: *Peter is sleeping*), corresponding to the pattern $N_{\text{nom}} - VF$. On the other hand, some verbs, such as e.g. *dát* (English: *to give*), require more complements than the verb *navštívit*; cf. *Učitelka dala Pavlovi knihu* (English: *The teacher gave Paul a book*), and the respective pattern $N_{\text{nom}} - VF - N_{\text{dat}} - N_{\text{acc}}$. The core elements of the sentence may be further modified or expanded. For instance, the element *knihu* may be modified by the adjective *zajímavý* (English: *interesting*) and expanded by the noun *čokoláda* (English: *a bar of chocolate*). The resultant sentence is *Učitelka dala Pavlovi zajímavou knihu a čokoládu* (English: *The teacher gave Paul an interesting book and a bar of chocolate*).

The coherence of the Czech sentence is further enhanced by the concord in person and number (in the case of verbs), or also gender (in the past participle), or in number, case, and gender (in nouns) between words “belonging together”. This means that the coherence of the

Czech sentence is ensured notably also by specific endings. In the above sentence the words *učitelka* and *dala* belong together; this is shown by the verbal ending *-a*, as the expression *učitelka* is a feminine noun in the singular. If there were several givers, e.g. *učitelky* (*female teachers*), the verb *dát* would take the form *daly* - cf. the sentence *Učitelky daly Pavlovi ...* (*The female teachers gave Paul ...*). If the giver was *učitel* (*a male teacher*), i.e. a masculine gender noun, the form of the sentence would be *Učitel dal Pavlovi ...* (*The male teacher gave Paul ...*). Hence we can see that the verb endings change according to who the subject of the sentence is. In the above sentence similar "agreement" occurs between the expressions *zajímavou* and *knihu* – their belonging together is expressed by the word *zajímavý* taking the accusative singular ending of feminine gender, i.e. *-ou*, thereby expressing the same categories as the noun form *knihu* (in other words, the form *knihu* is also marked for the accusative of singular, feminine gender).

The important role word endings play in the structure of the Czech sentence gives rise to the fact that the word order is relatively free in comparison with other languages (yet not arbitrary), being used instead by the speaker to present certain parts of the sentence as new information. For example, in the sentence *Václav miluje Boženu* (English: *Václav loves Božena*) the new item of information is the fact that it is Božena who is the object of the action (not e.g. Jiřina), while in the sentence *Boženu miluje Václav* (English: again *Václav loves Božena*) the focus is on the fact that it is Václav (not e.g. Petr) who loves Božena.

Another consequence of the fact that syntactic relations in the Czech sentence are marked by the endings is that the subject is rarely expressed by a special word (i.e. a noun or a pronoun) in Czech - it may be identified directly with reference to the verb ending. In the sentence *Přijdu včas* (English: *I will come in time*) the ending *-u* indicates clearly that the subject is the speaker himself, which is why the pronoun *já* (English: *I*) (obligatorily present e.g. in English) is as a rule absent in such sentences.

Politeness (the use of TY and VY forms)

Czech uses certain grammatical resources to express either social proximity or distance between speakers. The same feature is found in a number of European languages, e.g. French (cf. *tu es* versus *vous êtes*). English uses resources other than personal pronouns and verb endings to express social closeness or distance, e.g. the use of first names - that is why the Czech verb *tykat* (i.e. using the pronominal and verbal system to indicate social closeness) is

translated into English as *be on first-name terms*, and *vykat* (i.e. using the pronominal and verbal system to indicate social distance) as *be on formal terms*. Social closeness is expressed in Czech using the verb forms of the 2nd person singular (e.g. *Máš čas?* English: *Are you free?*); social distance is expressed using the verb forms of the 2nd person plural (*Máte čas?*); let us note here that the plural forms are used even if there is only one addressee. Czech differs from other Slavic languages in using the singular form of the past participle in the past tense to indicate social distance (e.g. *Byl jste doma?* English: *Were you at home?*), while other Slavic languages, including Slovak, use the plural form here (cf. Slovak *Boli ste doma?* or Russian *Vy byli doma?* used as a question addressed to one person). Of course, social distance or proximity is not indicated merely by grammatical resources. These co-occur with other means, such as e.g. the combinations of names and titles in the forms of address (cf. the difference between the forms of address *pane Nováku* and *Pavle*, English: *Mr. Novák* and *Paul*) or the greetings. Only the TY forms combine with the typical Czech greeting *ahoj* (English: *hello / bye*), which either opens or ends a dialogue. In other words, those who are "on formal terms" greet one another with e.g. *dobrý den* (when meeting one another) and *nashledanou* (when parting), but never *ahoj*. Therefore the Czech conversation-terminating greeting *ahoj* is not functionally equivalent to the German *tschüss*, because the German greeting is not limited in its compatibility only to TY (or "du") forms in German.

The Varieties of Czech

The names of languages suggest that a language is something of a monolith. However, a language exists in reality as a system of many varieties, differentiated according to territorial, social, functional, temporal, and other factors. In Bohemia (the western part of the Czech Republic) dialects have all but disappeared, only some of their elements have been preserved. The situation is different in Moravia (the eastern part of the Republic) and Silesia (the northeastern part), where dialects are more alive. A feature peculiar to the language situation in the Czech Republic is the existence of a non-standard variety called *obecná čeština* (Common Czech). This variety is used actively in spoken discourse on the whole territory of Bohemia, spreading due to the migration of the population and due to mass media also to the territory of Moravia and Silesia. The spread of Common Czech is facilitated by the fact that Standard Czech has never been established too well in spoken discourse due to its rather archaic origin (cf. above). Standard Czech is used in a relatively limited set of formal situations, Common Czech in informal ones (the complementary functioning of the two varieties resembles the diglossia known e.g. from Switzerland, where a similar relation

obtains between Standard German and the so-called Swiss German). Common Czech is characterised particularly by declension endings; relatively large differences between Standard and Common Czech occur in the declension patterns of adjectives. Cf. the declension paradigm of the words *velké město* (English: *big city*):

	<u>Standard Czech</u>	<u>Common Czech</u>
Sg. Nom./Acc.	velké město	velký město
Gen.	velkého města	velkýho města
Dat.	velkému městu	velkýmu městu
Loc.	velkém městě, -u	velkym městě, -u
Instr.	velkým městem	velkym městem
Pl.Nom./Acc.	velká města	velký města
Gen.	velkých měst	velkejch měst
Dat.	velkým městům	velkejm městum
Loc.	velkých městech	velkejch městech
Instr.	velkými městy	velkejma městama

However, generally speaking, the difference between Standard and Common Czech is not excessive and furthermore the features of the two varieties often merge in actual speech. It is important to note that this merging often goes unnoticed by the speakers themselves.

Note

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