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## **Czech Literary Language v. Colloquial Czech ('obecná čeština') in Conjunction with Czech-Slovak Bilingualism.**

**An Essay on Human Understanding in Central Europe**

(pre-final form; to be completed by December 2009)

### **1. Briefly on Czechoslovakism (*českoslovakismus*)**

The end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century witnessed an ideological current known as *Czechoslovakism*. Its meaning is quite transparent: the creation of a Czechoslovak state, a state of two closely related nations, the Czechs and the Slovaks. This ideological trend had a tremendous success among the Czechs and Slovaks, and ultimately led to achieving this goal: on October 28th 1918 the Czechoslovakia was proclaimed as an independent republic in the wake of the fall of Austria-Hungary.

That ideological and political trend was based on clear cultural and linguistic links of the two nations: two closely related Slavic groups, with speakers of two closely related, mutually intelligible languages, sharing many common features and ideals; last but not least, especially for those times, both nations are of Roman-Catholic faith in an overwhelming majority.

Even if the literary Slovak language was quite young (created in 1850 by Ľudovít Štúr), the educated Slovaks also spoke Czech and many Czechs, even if not speaking Slovak, had a good grasp of Slovak cultural ideals. Otherwise put, Czechoslovak bilingualism—which automatically had its logical consequences—was a clear reality of the 19th and 20th century. So viewed, the creation of the Czechoslovak state was a logical consequence of this state of mind and of this state of facts. In those time, the creation of a common state of the two nations was understand as something natural. Without any intention to speculate on this detail, which may be

perhaps better analysed by historians, I would say that not only then, but for many decades onwards, until now, a Czech-Slovak specific bilingualism still lives to our days.

It is, I would say, a peculiar bilingualism. The number of Czech fluently speaking Slovak is limited and is perhaps surpassed by a higher number of Slovaks fluently speaking Czech. All in all though, this bilingualism rarely implies a sound grasp of a fluent, perfect knowledge of the other language, but mainly a passive bilingualism: the Czechs easily understand Slovak, even if not speaking it; and the Slovaks easily understand Czech, even if not speaking it fluently (and even more Slovaks speak Czech as compared to the Czechs speaking Slovak).

This state of facts, and state of mind, is reflected in scientific works as well. Linguistically speaking, Czech and Slovak belong to the West Slavic group (together with the so-called Lechitic group or Polish-type group). Moreover, Czech and Slovak form a Czech-Slovak linguistic areal, sharing very close features like tonic stress on the first syllable; the alternating long and short vowels; a similar—sometimes identical—vocabulary (with certain differences, which rarely impede an easy mutual understanding).

If we assume an official common state beginning with October 28th 1918 until the 1st January 1993, when Czechoslovakia divided into two independent states, Czech Republic (*Česká republika*, usually *Česko*, historically *Čechy*, i.e. 'Czech lands:') and Slovakia (*Slovensko*), and even considering the harsh times of the Second World War, but also considering the obviously related languages—a feature so obvious in the 19th century if not earlier—we may conclude that the Czecho-Slovak common space is a solid, long-lasting reality.

For decades, the media cultivated bilingualism. After WW 2, both radio and TV programmes cultivated bilingual, Czech and Slovak broadcasts, e.g. TV news were alternately presented by a person speaking Czech, immediately followed by a second person speaking Slovak. This behaviour led of course in creating a genuine Czecho-Slovak spirit, a specific approach to a specific reality. The official political split, which occurred between June 1992 and 1st January 1993, which I do not comment here, did not mean very much in preserving this spirit, not only because large parts of the population did not agree with this official separation, but because

politics went against reality: two closely related nations speaking two closely related languages.

The simple and formal split of Czechoslovakia did not mean the collapse of Czechoslovakism. I would venture say it consolidated, this time not imposed by political constructs, but by natural, human needs. Even if the bilingual media programmes are less in number, they continue to exist; Czechs and Slovaks continue to speak their mutually intelligible idioms in various circumstances, including radio and TV programmes, even if their number is limited. In the street and in various institutions, private or state-owned.

## **2. Also Briefly on Colloquial Czech or otherwise named '*obecná čeština*'**

Czech has a peculiar situation in Europe: as writing Czech was forbidden for a long period (approximately two centuries, with periods of relatively freer use), after the battle of Bílá hora on November 8th 1620, an essential military event, which determined the fate of the Czech lands for the coming 300 years or so. When Romanticism and Illuminism arrived and tried to consolidate the situation of modern literary language, there was indeed a difficult moment: colloquial language changed a lot, but abruptly adopting spoken language would have broken the links with the past; adopting the pure literary tradition would have meant an obsolete language already out of use. The result was a compromise and, as any compromise, may be termed unsatisfactory from the point of spoken, vivid language.

The consequence was inevitable: whereas the written language tries to preserve a long tradition, and consolidate its initial 'purity', spoken language brings new forms, and consolidated its vivacity. The current status is, first of all, uncomfortable for the foreigners studying Czech, as this spoken form, known as '*obecná čeština*', is not taught in the foreign universities and, for a very long time, ignored in any course of Czech language, presumably with the naïve assumption that the literary form was so strong that it would gradually correct the 'vulgar' speech. As expected, it was exactly vice-versa!

In contemporary times, a pure literary language is used in Academic documents and in most parts of literary creation; it is also used, to a large extent, in media. On the other hand, the powerful influence of spoken form has gradually gleaned into

literature (e.g. authors transcribing *obecná čeština* in their works, novels or plays), and various categories of people who, forgetting they speak in front of TV cameras, also use colloquial forms. The alternating literary language and *obecná čeština* make the charm of Czech in various circumstances, and is the most interesting social phenomenon analysed from a linguistic point of view. And not only linguistic—

*Obecná čeština* developed as a ‘koiné’ interdialect over centuries, with local variations, with Moravia preserving a ‘cleaner’ language and Prague the most innovative idiom. The problem is, on the one hand, with children learning writing; this is not our topic. The other problem—which is of major interest to us—is the impact of these two forms of the Czech language on the foreign students.

Traditionally, *obecná čeština* was a taboo subject in handbooks of the Czech language, and was rarely approached during the courses in Czech organised in former Czechoslovakia and even after the fall of the iron curtain. Tradition is still strong. Nevertheless, more and more handbooks published during the last decade begin to slip (this is perhaps the best word!) elements of spoken Czech in more and more handbooks of Czech, e.g. *Nebojte se češtiny* by Ana Adamovičová, 2005. Similar elements of *obecná čeština* are timidly present in other handbooks as well.

Truth is that *obecná čeština* has still rarely been a topic for a global approach, including from the point of teaching Czech to foreigners. Even if the goal is to achieve a high level of spoken competence, a coherent approach to the complex Czech linguistic reality—i.e. literary language v. *obecná čeština*—cannot be identified, even if its urgent character is obvious to me. And was obvious 30 years ago, when I had the first contact with spoken Czech.

Foreign students currently meet *obecná čeština* on their arrival in the Czech Republic. To their (entirely expected) astonishment, the language they hear is obviously different from the language they had learnt at the faculty of foreign languages (I assume in any similar faculty or college where Czech is being taught). This was also my case in the summer of 1978 when I first visited Czechoslovakia with a scholarship as being a student in Czech language and literature. It was clear to me that the first and urgent target is to get accustomed to THIS form of the language I was attempting to learn. Consequently I did my best: kept as close to native speakers, the students who were our guides. Fortunately, I got another scholarship next year, 1979, which led to consolidating that—then—audacious

target: achieving a good level of spoken Czech, *obecná čeština*, something completely absent in all the handbooks available at that time, and which continued to be absent for many decades on until now, with the situation changing during the last decade. I should note an exception of the 1980's: the handbook of colloquial Czech, *obecná čeština*, written and published by our former colleague at the University of Bucharest, Czech lecturer Jindřich Vacek (between 1984 and 1992, also a good speaker of Romanian, translator and admirable *homme de lettres*). I guess that handbook was unique in the world when published, the 2nd half of the 1980's.

The situation is of course better now, with—as mentioned—more and more elements of *obecná čeština* slipped into more and more handbooks. The situation is not yet entirely satisfactory, but the step forward is obvious. If my information is correct, there is no handbook of *obecná čeština* written and published in the Czech Republic, with the clear aim at solving this long-lasting problem. Until this problem may be entirely solved, Vacek's handbook may be successfully used.

This is why students should be warned that, upon their arrival in the Czech Republic, they will surely meet this language, even if the guides at the University where they would study Czech will carefully speak a 'pure' literary Czech, a language they do speak, in fact. This is, I dare say, a bad policy, still reflecting the traditionalist policy that foreign ears should not hear such 'vulgarity'. The consequence is obvious: foreign students will soon find that people in the street and people in various other places speak 'strangely', they do not use 'correct' case endings, and also make use of 'strange' forms.

As the first students learning Czech will probably reach Czech Republic during their first student vacation, they should be taught the basic principles of *obecná čeština*, i.e. towards the end of the 2nd semester of study, which means before the first summer vacation. Even if their level is not sufficient for such subtleties, it is anyway better to present them now, than to pick them after arriving in the Czech Republic. Some of them may get to level A2, and some—few, rarely— perhaps to level B1. This is a little bit premature for studying *obecná čeština*, but is sufficient for them to understand the situation and to make their own effort to achieve spoken Czech while being there.

The problem of *obecná čeština* will be again resumed towards the end of the 3rd year of studies and MUST continue during their Master degree studies. I think this is an essential condition for getting the status of ‘speaker of Czech’.

### **3. ‘Czechoslovakism’ and *obecná čeština*: two challenges for the foreign student in Czech and, of course, Slovak**

The data presented so far are hopefully clear enough for noting that students in Czech face two problems: colloquial Czech and, as some immediately notice as soon as they arrive in the Czech Republic, Slovak! If the elements of *obecná čeština* were briefly presented BEFORE they study Czech in the Czech Republic, teaching them the basic elements of Slovak seems useless. None of the kind. Beside noting the differences between literary Czech and *obecná čeština*, they will surely note that, from time to time, they hear a ‘strangely similar language’, which is close to both literary Czech and, of course, *obecná čeština*. It is Slovak.

As briefly—but hopefully sufficiently—described above, Czech and Slovak bilingualism, with its specific features (Czechs rarely speak Slovak or Slovaks speak Czech, but they ALWAYS understand the other language), makes part of the Central European realities. Ignoring this reality means another erroneous approach, not very much different from ignoring *obecná čeština*, and trying to make foreign students to not hear it. But they do hear it just as they hear Slovak.

When students in Czech ask me what second Slavic language they would study<sup>1</sup>—this happens during the first year—I always recommend them to NOT study Slovak, just because it is too close to Czech and this may easily confuse them. Any other Slavic language is welcome, I add.

In change, I ALWAYS recommend them to learn the basic rules of Czech-Slovak phonetic correspondences as soon as they feel their level of achieving Czech is good enough. In this case, studying Slovak does NOT mean speaking it fluently, but a

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1. The Department of Slavic Languages at the University of Bucharest still recommends that students studying a Slavic language should also learn a second Slavic language. I do hope this good tradition will be preserved, despite the current crisis and despite any clear policy in the field. Not quite rarely, some colleagues cultivate the joke that Slavic languages are *kolkhoznik* languages, and students should avoid studying them. Of course, the languages THEY teach are the good ones.

passive knowledge of Slovak, allowing them to easily understand that language too, and allowing them to behave, in fact, as the Czechs and Slovaks behave: the Czechs speak Czech and the Slovaks speak Slovak, with the result of a perfect or very good mutual understanding.

The basic (and passive) elements of Slovak should be achieved when the students are prepared enough for such a step, i.e. the 5th and/or 6th semester of basic studies and, those who will continue to currently use Czech, to do it until a good level is achieved.

The same, but in reverse order, is valid for the students in Slovak: they should learn the basic rules of Czech, both spoken (*obecná čeština*) and literary, as soon as they feel competent enough for that step, in principle during the 5th and 6th semester of studies, i.e. during their 3rd year of studentship.

### **Instead of Conclusions**

The situation presented above if first experimented and implemented during the Academic year 2009–2010, with a group of students in Czech and another group in Polish! Yes, Polish was not mentioned above, as the West Slavic reality would be too complex to depict in such a brief presentation. The reason is simple: the 3rd year of studies has now a group studying Czech and another studying Polish. Our colleague Kristina Vaverčáková<sup>2</sup>, the Slovak lecturer, admirably proved those two groups how Slovak may be quite easily intelligible to the students in Czech, and easily enough for the students in Polish.

This first test proves that the premises were correct, and the coming years will consolidate the suggested steps. This would make the Department of Slavic Languages at the University in Bucharest a pioneering institution, capable of presenting other colleagues how a Central-European Slavic area may be covered with a minimal effort within a minimal span of time.

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2. My warm thanks for her contribution to this fruitful experiment, to be regularly continued in the years to come.

## References

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