

THEORY OF LANGUAGE CULTURE AND THE CURRENT LANGUAGE SITUATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Eden od osnovnih prispevkov Praškega lingvističnega krožka na področju lingvistike je razvoj teorije o jezikovni kulturi. Ob tem izredno naprednem stališču pa so se ščasoma pokazale pomanjkljivosti celotne teorije, ki se je prednostno osredotočala na standardni jezik, in ne na jezik kot celoto. Na standardni jezik se ni gledalo kot na enega od mnogih funkcijskih stilov jezika, temveč kot na edino »pravilno« jezikovno različico, medtem kot so druge jezikovne različice, npr. pogovorna češčina, veljale za neustrezne in manjvredne. Dandanes je dejanska raba jezika dokumentirana na osnovi obsežnega jezikovnega korpusa kot je Češki nacionalni korpus. V prispevku so poudarjeni prevladujoči trendi v rabi sodobne češčine in splošni položaj jezika.

Praški lingvistični krožek, teorija kulture jezika, Češki nacionalni korpus, zborna češčina

One of the fundamental contributions of the Prague Linguistic Circle to linguistics was the development of the theory of language culture. However, over time this very progressive standpoint revealed weaknesses of the entire theory, in particular the focus on standard language rather than language in its entirety. The standard language was not understood as one of several functional language styles but rather as the only »correct« variety; other language varieties, such as Common Czech, were seen as inappropriate and less valuable. Nowadays, actual language use is documented on the basis of large language corpora, such as the Czech National Corpus. We outline major trends in contemporary Czech language use and discuss the general language situation.

Prague Linguistic Circle, theory of language culture, Czech National Corpus, Common Czech

1 The theory of language culture: a historical overview

One of the fundamental contributions of the Prague Linguistic Circle (PLC) to linguistics was the development of the theory of language culture, represented mainly by Bohuslav Havránek. This theme, together with other relevant points that were officially labelled as *Theses of the PLC*, was presented at the 1st congress of Slavists in 1929. »The term culture of literary language is understood mainly as a conscious theoretical maintenance of the literary variety, i.e. the effort and work carried out within language science and linguistics, both of whose goals is the improvement and promotion of the literary language.« (SČJK, 1932: 32.)

In the 1920s and 1930s, after the foundation of an independent Czechoslovakia, some major changes took place in the structure of Czechoslovak society. As a result, Czech started to be used in all possible linguistic-discursive functions. That provided scope for the expansion of additional stylistic areas, especially the cultivated variety of spoken Czech. Alongside this trend, new semantic fields emerged. These included administrative and legal language, military terminology and sports vocabulary, the language of modern music and even specific terms of science and technology. In this respect, the theory of the standard Literary Czech (LC) language as proposed by the PLC actually reflected the real demands of the cultural-social situation of the time.

Despite the high level of theoretical analysis within the overall production of the PLC, some noticeable weaknesses in the domain of language culture were clearly overlooked. These weak points became even more apparent during further language development. The next generation of Czech linguists that was interested in the theory of language culture merely followed the original PLC proposal. They also failed to rely on actual data in their linguistic analyses. We should acknowledge, though, that no corpus containing a reasonable amount of representative data was then available to researchers.

Traditionally, linguists in the 1920s and 1930s were occupied with the written language. Hence the theory of language culture was basically concerned with written language varieties. In general, the subsequent step in social development was more directed towards the spoken language variety. This has been applied to public language use such as radio or television, with the latter now dominating, although radio still has some impact on how spoken language is shaped. Because of this, it is essential to think about issues related to language culture not only from the perspective of written but also spoken language. This is especially true for Czech, where the written and the spoken varieties differ greatly.

The difficulty with the older theory of language culture is that written language is understood as a language variety capable of covering all language functions (Starý 1995). We now believe there is no reason to adopt a language norm based on written language: it is sufficient and in fact more accurate to see language as a system including not only written, but spoken language as well. As far as Czech is concerned, the written variety is considered to be very formal. On less formal or informal occasions, spoken Czech and its many varieties are used.

The PLC took the written production of »good« authors as a source for their definition of the norm for Literary Czech. To illustrate this, consider the following quote: »If no good standard Czech can be found in Czech literature, then there is none.« (SČJK, 1932: 24.) The members of the PLC thus confuse two forms of language. On the one hand, a type of language made use of in literature and on the other, the common use of language in general. Literature in any form – poetry, fiction, etc. – does not represent the actual language usage. On the contrary, the author of a novel usually uses language in a very particular way: in other words,

language in the context of literature is stylized. This point is apparent from a recent investigation (Bermel 2000) that focuses on the involvement of some common elements of Common Czech in three novels by contemporary Czech authors (Procházková, Klíma, and Kohout). It can be concluded from this study that literature, specifically fiction, cannot be seen as a reliable source for defining common language use. Moreover, as already noted, for a fair definition of a norm the overall language system must be taken into account. In this way, we disagree with the literature-based approach adopted by the original PLC.

A more appropriate source for defining a language norm are modern language corpora. The advantage of large database materials such as the corpus of synchronous language is that they mirror real language use and hence show patterns of language regularity. Observations based on such data can be accepted as language norms.

Up till now, the criteria for including texts into a corpus database were based on text production, i.e. on texts produced by »good authors«. The *Czech National Corpus* (CNC) operates with a different selection criterion. The text types for the CNC chosen are based on text reception, i.e. on books/texts popular with readers. In this manner, we largely select texts reflecting language use in all linguistic-discursive functions. The general goal of the CNC is to describe language in its entirety rather than aesthetically evaluate »the beauty of language«, or how the literary language is perceived by followers of language culture. One could say that the descriptive approach is a real democratic approach to language culture and language in general – at least in our country.

When the theory of language culture was coming into being, only those facts were considered that fitted the theoretical account. In other words, the theoreticians were aware of the existence of spoken Common Czech, but they ignored it for the sake of their theory. This kind of shortcut, however, did not pay off. This is illustrated in a quote from Havránek from 1963:

Regarding this development, the new literary variety of Czech in its current phonetic and formal shape was not founded in the beginning of the 19th century, but with the intention to continue the tradition of the past times. Therefore, major differences exist between Literary Czech and Common Czech with respect to lexical and also phonetic issues [...]; these differences are far more prominent than in any other Slavic language. (Havránek 1963:146.)

The hope sustained carried by the language culture enthusiasts was to develop a spoken form of Literary Czech which would then be actively used by Czech speakers. The literary variety was regarded as the cultivated language form designed for the social élite. Yet another quote from Havránek: »[L]iterary language is making the attempt to differ from folk language, from the ordinary language for internal reasons [...] and also because of a special social status (exclusivity) [...]« (SCJK, 1932: 35). This clearly shows that the literary language was seen as a tool for intellectual discourse. Still, even the intellectual and cultivated express, for

example, their emotions using a casual informal way of talking – the common variety – on a daily basis. Paradoxically, during the period called the First Republic,¹ the educated generation of intellectuals tried to employ the literary language in spoken informal situations. However, judging by linguistic studies published during that time and shortly after the 2nd World War, it can be seen that even then users alternated between the two varieties (Vey 1946, Kučera 1955).

2 Common Czech (CC)

Czech has been used as a spoken interface without historical discontinuation. This is certainly not the case with the literary, written form since there was a two-hundred-year interruption. The modern literary language approach (e.g. in Dobrovský 1809) did not consider either phonetic or morphological changes that took place in the spoken Czech language and that were part of common use (cf. Havránek 1963). These two areas are exactly those where Common and Literary Czech differ dramatically.

2.1 Phonetics

Vowel mutation: *é > í; ý/í > ej; ú > ou; prothetic v*. The use of these features is not random, but rather based on certain rules. For reasons of space I am unable to list and discuss these rules.

2.2 Morphology

Because of the vast amount of morphological forms in the literary language as well as Common Czech, I will focus only on two very commonly used forms.

2.2.1 The nominative case plural form with »hard adjectives« is differentiated in the literary variety according to gender marking (pronouns are also part of the domain declined paradigmatically by hard adjectives). In the common variety, only one ending is used for the same purpose (no distinctions based on gender marking). Consider:

	Literary Czech	Common Czech
Masculine	ty nové domy/ti velcí býci <i>these new houses/these big bulls</i>	ty nový domy/ty velký bejci
Feminine	ty hezké krávy <i>these pretty cows</i>	ty hezký krávy
Neutral	ta mladá telata <i>these young calves</i>	ty mladý telata

¹ From 1918 until the beginning of the 2nd World War.

2.2.2 The instrumental plural case for nouns as well as for any other nouns, following the declension paradigm of hard adjectives.

Literary Czech			Common Czech		
Masc.	Fem.	Neut.	Masc.	Fem.	Neut.
pány <i>gentlemen</i>	ženami <i>women</i>	městy <i>towns</i>	pánama	ženama	městama
hrady <i>castles</i>	nůšemi <i>baskets</i>	moři <i>seas</i>	hradama	nůšema	mořema
muži <i>men</i>	písněmi <i>songs</i>	kuřaty <i>chickens</i>	mužema	písněma	kuřatama
stroji <i>machines</i>	kostmi <i>bones</i>	stavením <i>buildings</i>	strojema	kost(i)ma	staveníma

The following example – an actual commercial offering advertising space in Prague – illustrates how both possible endings are used in order to create a pun: *před váma* (in front of you) is the form used in Common Czech while *před vámi* represents Literary Czech. The use of the colour red implies a normative correction attitude (i.e. »you can say it, but do not write it«).



2.3 Lexical domain

Common Czech has a rich lexical repertoire. With respect to learning the stylistic use of various words, users must pay attention to only one thing: words that have an informal character should be used in appropriate informal contexts. This is considered quite easy for speakers.

2.4 Syntax

The syntactical properties of Common Czech are not specific to this variety, but rather reflect the underlying syntax of the spoken Czech language.

3 Example

It is certainly interesting to study the use of Common Czech variety of a particular speaker. To illustrate this, I have chosen an interview with Václav Havel in which the former president displays a very specific idiolect, based on alternation between two codes (Literary vs. Common Czech). Furthermore, it also shows that the use of the common variety does not depend on the social, regional and/or educational background of the speaker. Mr. Havel makes use of some forms that are now considered out of date, even archaic. For example, the infinitival form combined with the suffix *-ti* as in, »pravda se ukázala *býti* na mé straně« (the truth has shown to be on my side); or words such as *pakliže* (if), *začasto* (very often), *že ano* (isn't it?). Based on his pronunciation, it can be inferred that his mother was born in Brno (south Moravia) because he pronounces the phonetic group *sh* in the Moravian way. That is, for example, in words like *good-bye – nashledanou* he says [nashledanou] while people from Bohemia would say [nasxledanou]. Mr. Havel uses Literary Czech most of the time, however, sometimes he switches to the common variety, using the forms described above. This trend is confirmed by spontaneous production data from many other educated speakers.

Texts that Mr. Havel produces in the relevant recordings:

1. [...] na Slovensko, no nebylo **to** zahraničí tehdy, má první zahraniční cesta, **sem** si říkal, nemůže **bejt** do Moskvy;²

[...] to Slovakia, this was not abroad then, my first trip abroad, I said to myself, cannot be to Moscow.

2. Olga byla můj celoživotní *souputník*, **s kterou jsem se znal vždycky a celý život to s ní táhl** a byl jsem na ní dost *závislý* a když zemřela, byla to **vopravdu** veliká rána pro mě a já měl vlastně jen dvě možnosti, pověsit se, nebo se znova **voženit**.

Olga was my life long buddy (anacoluton) who I have always known and we were together for life, and I was quite dependent on her, and when she died it was a really hard thing for me, and in fact I then had only two options: either hang myself or get married again.

3. trošku ji vnímali jako **přivdanej, přizněnej** *element* na **ten** hrad, **strašný, všelijaký** lži a kampaně proti ní vedly **ty různý** sdělovací prostředky ...

[...] they perceived her a little bit as having »married into« the castle, terrible, all kinds of lies and campaigns by different media were directing against her.

² **Bold** – Common Czech forms; *italics* – Literary Czech forms or parts where a change might take place in the common variety.

Mr. Havel uses a neutral Czech variety most of the time, however, sometimes he switches between Common and Literary Czech. This tendency is confirmed by spontaneous production data from many other educated speakers.

4 A proposition on how to solve the given situation

4.1 Attempt at an approximation of the spoken and written language

It is necessary to approach stratification of the Czech language from a new angle. That is to see it as one system in which several stylistic language layers exist, ranging from archaic, formal and elevated to expressive, vulgar and pejorative language. None of the available language forms should be ascribed a value. In other words, there is no better and/or worse language. All language means are functional and context-dependent.

4.2 Change in the educational environment

It would be desirable for educational institutions such as schools to base their language education on the mother tongue of their pupils/students. In most cases, the default will be Common Czech. Furthermore, it is of great importance to make students aware of the existence of functional varieties – formal and informal (see the paper *Can children speak Czech?*)

4.3 One example how to proceed

School exercises can be created on the basis of CNC:

Exercise 1: Substitution of endings

Issue: Nominative plural

Task: Substitute non-standard endings for standard endings.

Q1: In which case do you have to pay attention to the ending in a formal communication setting (situation where you will use standard Literary Czech)?

Q2: What endings exist for each gender in standard Literary Czech?

Task: Select a random hard adjective and for each gender category a noun. Observe if the ending of the adjective will change in the standard and in the non-standard variety. For the next class, write down three types of context where you have heard or read forms of the non-standard common variety in a formal situation. Note also the broader context of such a situation, the producer, and the date when you observed such an example.

Example from CNC:

hoši, ste <mladý>, koukněte stát a tu paní pustte
ty <mladý> manželství se většinou rozpadaj
někdo nafačkuje <mladý> holce, tak to je vyloženeš potupa
že teda se <mladý> manželé vzali
kliniky nechtěj <mladý> doktorky já osobně si myslim
byly to náký <mladý> holky, vobjížděj Evropu a říkaly
v nás dožívá i v tý <mladý> generaci určité
ten vzdor tý <mladý> generace existuje

jako pro ty <mladý> děti, mladý lidi
 přihlásí nějaký <mladý> holky, který si přinesou i učení
 bydlely prostě dvě <mladý> rodiny v jednom domku
 čím to je že se ty <mladý> manželství rozváděj?
 si na sebe stačili <mladý> manželé zvyknout, tak si myslím

Task: Substitute non-standard endings, words, and other forms for standard ones. Which word types in this exercise have the ending *-ama*, *-ěma*, *-ejma*, *-ýma*? Do you know in what words this ending – instrumental plural – is correct according to the standard variety?

protože mezi těma <chlapama> je na takovýdle věci
 ty pánové s těma <cigaretama> z reklamy
 s vyholenýma <hlavama> atakdále. já si myslím
 voperujou jako s <jednotkama> už dávno není škola
 mluvím s <kamarádkama> a poslouchám je
 vyrazil do kina za <klukama> do hospody
 já sem si zavalil byt <knihama> - tohleto sou knihy
 vyzdobil sem si ho <kytičkama> a snažím se tam mít
 zejtra teda s těma <meruňkama> ?
 vpodstatě takový <místama> srandovn
 se svejma pracovnima <podmínkama> vyhovuje
 malejma, malejma <problémama> těch nejmenších
 před takovýma třema <rokama> to je možný
 rozhodně mezi <řezníkama> najdeš vopravdu hyeny
 problémy s nákupem <službama> který sou katastrofální
 kluci americký s <tričkama> , voholen
 usíná s obrazem za <víčkama> si představuje

In any case, it is not right to re-teach Common Czech only by correcting word forms that are not congruent with forms from the standard variety.

4.4 Let language live without regulations and wait until the language situation has been refined.

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