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How cultural and linguistic considerations affect the learning of English in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

People worldwide are increasingly faced with a force that drives international communication and globalization. Whether they are directly impacted or more subtly affected they can weigh how the pervasive force of the English language is touching upon essential parts of their own languages and cultures. If you listen to the radio or watch TV in the Czech Republic, you can catch previously unheard words and phrases seeping in, such as "updatovat" or "door-to-door". This paper looks at ways the Czech Republic has reacted to the encroaching effects of English. It compares both languages and it also more specifically looks at some examples of English words and phrases that have become loanwords in Czech, and at issues of cultural relativity. It uses a series of questionnaires spaced over time to gauge how students at a technical university consider English in comparison to their own language. As a guiding point it looks at some of the findings of renowned sociologists such as Bourdieu, Hofstede, Trompenaars and E. Hall to use as reference points to generally examine how some cultural factors can influence the approach to learning a foreign language.

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1. Introduction

Since the time of the Ancient Greeks, instances of cultural hegemony have been cited. Referring to its latent effects, (Gramsci, 1999) warned about how dominant class views also occur culturally and can be eventually taken as common sense through constant exposure.

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Throughout its relatively sometimes turbulent history people, Czechs have had to be vigilant, like all those living in smaller geopolitical entities, to keep the essence of their cultural traditions. It was inevitable that due to its geographical position, this most Western of Slavic nations has been directly or indirectly politically, economically and militarily influenced by its more powerful neighbors. When it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Czech lands had to struggle against the more dominant Germanic cultural influences, and emerged largely intact, but nevertheless, to this day the Czech language still maintains its fair share of Germanisms. The second onslaught came after the Second World War with the Soviets and the much closer Slavic language of Russian, which became compulsory to learn. With the opening of Eastern Europe after 1989, and the expansion of emerging markets and digital communication, the Czech Republic, which is now 16th on the KOF Index of Globalization, (Statista, 2015), became also exposed to more permeating influences.

In educational statistics we can trace how English has surmounted all other languages worldwide, (Antimoon, 2009). In the EU 14 out of the 28 countries are forced to teach English at school as a compulsory language while the other countries do so by choice (EACEA, 2012). We can see how the study of English at VSB- Technical University of Ostrava over the last 25 years has displaced the study of once equally as popular German and compulsory Russian. (See Table 1).

Table 1. The Number of Students in Language Studies, 2013/2014 Winter Semester VSB-TUO Language Dept. Full-Time Bachelor Study

VSB-TUO		Overall number of students according to faculty						
Faculty	Year	English	German	Russian	French	Spanish	Czech	Total
Total	1-3	5399	527	656	89	203	0	6874
% Rate	-	78.5%	7.7%	9.5%	1.3%	3.0%	0%	100%

2. The questionnaires

To see how students are reacting to this a brief questionnaire (see Table 2) was distributed to 200 first and second year students studying at 5 technically-oriented faculties in the winter semester of 2015.

Table 2. The Questionnaire: A Comparison of the English and Czech Languages (2015).

How many years have you been studying English?
What are the advantages of the Czech language?
What are the advantages of the English language?
What are the disadvantages of the Czech language?
What are the disadvantages of English?
How much time do use spend on the net using Czech?
How much time do you spend on the net using English?

In it students were asked about their frequency and type of language usage and their feelings and perceptions about their own language and English. All students in it indicated that they use English on-line to various degrees, and quite expectedly more than double the number of students indicated that they mostly use Czech. Similarly as those who use on-line English more, the number of students using mostly Czech ran from 5% to 95% , with most students writing that it was about 60 - 70% of the time. According to the responses 140 students (that is 70%)

indicated that they mostly use Czech, 44 (22%) indicated that they mostly use English, and 16 wrote that they use both languages equally (see Figure 1).

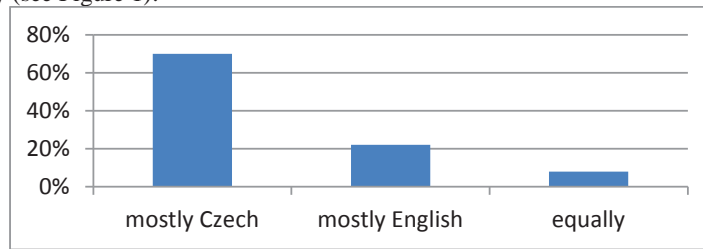


Fig. 1. Language comparison study

If we compare this questionnaire to a questionnaire on on-line gaming (see Table 3) given to students earlier in the year we can see that although most spend less time with English than Czech that a large number of students are in contact with the English language daily and on average are spending more than an hour exposed to it though chatting, watching films and series and using social networks.

Table 3: The Gaming Questionnaire

Activity in which English is used	Daily number of minutes on average
Chatting	90.6
Doing Schoolwork	75.7
Gaming	64.0
Watching Videos and Films	54.0
Shopping	13.8
Added up to an average of	228.1

3. The advantages and disadvantages of both languages

Students were also encouraged to write about what they considered the advantages and disadvantages of both languages. In regards to the advantages of English the most often response were comments like: "it's easy", "international", "global" and "it's everywhere". Repeated responses also were: "it's popular" and "simpler than Czech". More specifically some students focused on the building blocks of the language saying that "there is one word for many Czech expressions", "it has a strict SVOMPT" (Subject Verb Object Manner Place Time) and "it has a lot of shortcuts" (which probably means abbreviations). Although one student referred to it as "singable", most students focused on its practicality for travelling and getting a job. Social scientist Pierre Bourdieu has deemed this approach more specially as linguistic capital which can be sold on a linguistic market and valued, and that can benefit a speaker, (Bourdieu, 1993). In contrast the most common words used in describing the Czech language were "nice" and "beautiful", "poetic" and "melodic" and phrases more focused on the feeling it invokes. Students wrote about its flexibility (probably referring to its flexible word order), and how "it is possible to say things in many ways". Some students wrote that it is "fun", that "it could be used to understand other Slavic languages such as Polish or Slovak", and that "it has many more swear words". More specifically a few students wrote that it was easier phonetically, because "we read what we write". Also of interest were the answers of about a dozen students who wrote they see no advantage at all due to the relatively small number of people who speak the language.

Students were more specific when describing the disadvantages of both languages. In particular with English students pointed out that "you can't say things complexly" that words are "pronounced differently than they are spelt", and "have many meanings". They pointed out the problems they have with tenses and conditions, that "there is only one English word for many Czech words", and "there is so much vocabulary". Some students also mentioned that "some other countries don't like it (France, Russia)", that "British and American accents make understanding

difficult" and that "they were forced to learn it". Conversely, a few students wrote that English has no disadvantages. One even wrote it was a "perfect language". Most of the disadvantages of Czech were focused on the relatively small use outside the Czech Republic. In addition to comments about the "wild" and "difficult" grammar, they mentioned that there are problems with spelling, especially in distinguishing between "i" and "y" and between "s" and "z" and the pronunciation of the uniquely Czech letter "ř". Some expressed problems with the punctuation, its too many rules, cases and types of inflection. The most common words used were "hard", and "complicated".

4. Linguistic relativity

So how much does one's native language reflect one's worldview and conception of national identity? Or on a more philosophical level should we accept Wittenstein's premise that the limits of one's world are the limits of one's language? (Wittenstein, 2007). Despite the demise of the Whorfian proposition with the advent of cognitive science that language determines thought, they are still advocates, such as, (Boroditsky, 2011) of the premise of linguistic relativity and how it determines one's way of thinking and of processing information. Benjamin Lee Whorf himself liked to point out that Inuit have thirteen different words for white and some African tribes up to 90 words for green, (Berman, 1981). For our study, there is also the concept of time and Hall, (Jarjabka, 2014) generally deems Czech culture to be more past-oriented and polychronic, and languages spoken by East Europeans as more high context than English, meaning that people generally understand what is not said, in a more indirect and understated way, (Hall, 1977). While avoiding outright support for cultural relativity (Woolf & Holmes, 2010) have identified 7 categories which support the idea of some distinctions and that language can augment certain types of thinking. The question remains if there is more effective communication using one language over another?

One of the arguments of linguistic relativism is that some concepts and values of a culture cannot be fully understood in other languages, and only within a certain cultural context. In Spanish we can think of the example "manaña" or in German "Schadefreude", while in English there are the examples of "bromance" or the phrase "pimp my ride". Some Czechs cite their own feelings as examples such as the word "pohoda" to describe something between peace of mind and comfort, and Czech writer Milan Kundera gives us "litost", a feeling that should be translated as something more than just regret, (Kundera, 1999). From the opposite angle, there is the alternative to use English words directly without alterations in Czech, especially a lot of IT and communication terms such as hacker, hardware and joystick, and of course common email abbreviations such as LOL and BRB. They are sports terms such as outsider, sprint and doping, food terms such as muffin, toast and hotdog, and other words which include words like developer, dealer and billboard. There are also recognizable modified English words used in Czech, that is the transformation of foreign loan-words, which are adapted from their original forms and go beyond common Latin roots, such as *čet* (chat), *mejlovat* (to email) and *ajpod*. We can also look to sports for examples: *box* (boxing), *trenér* and *liga*, and to food for *sendvič* and *marmelada*, and to other areas such as *leasink*, *leginy* (leggings), and *džus*.

So what words officially enter the Czech language? Similar to the Academie Francais, there is an official cultural regulator - the Institute of the Czech Language, whose recommendations are prescriptive, and do not really affect how Czech is used on the streets or channeled through the media. Also regarded on a different level of importance for deeming what is culturally and linguistically valuable are international bodies such as the EU, which has determined that Czechs cannot use the term "rum" for their own similar, home-grown product. And UNESCO, whose intangible heritage list includes Czech folklore songs.

5. Cultural dimensions

All levels of communication, whether their concern word or language, are influenced by cultural dimensions. As a guide we can use Hofstede's cultural dimension theory, (Hofstede, 2011), to more specifically probe some present and etymologically-developed differences and partially see what English and Czech speakers could consider as important and how the cultures view the world through their languages. To put it in context we can use the framework of the modern world system theory of (Wallerstein, 1974) which classifies the Czech Republic as a non-periphery country of about 10 million speakers with a largely homogenous population, and little influence on the world. While the US, Canada, the UK and Australia with large heterogeneous populations of over 440 million

people are grouped as periphery countries, and major players in what is happening worldwide. Considering the much higher aggregate of English speakers and its extent we can look for shared ideas and values using Hofstede’s perspective. In Table 4 we can compare data to examine the common roots of these English-speaking countries and put aside their slight differences in use, dialect and spelling, and focus on the features of the languages themselves and other implications using each dimension (Hofstede, 2011).

Table 4 Hofstede’s Cultural Dimension Theory: A comparison of countries

Categories	US	Cda	UK	Aus	Czech Republic
Power Distance Index	4	39	35	36	57
Individualism versus Collectivism	91	80	89	90	58
Masculinity versus Femininity	62	52	66	61	57
Uncertainty Avoidance	46	48	35	51	74
Indulgence vs Restraint	68	68	69	71	29
Long-term versus Short-term Orientation	26	36	51	21	70

Looking at the value spread one is struck by how close the values of the English-speaking countries are, with the exception of the UK’s score for long-term orientation of 51 which still remains indeterminate how much decision-making is decided by traditions and the past. Although perceived similarly as a masculine work-oriented culture, and moderately individualistic compared to its counterparts, in all other categories the values of the Czech Republic are mostly found at opposite ends of the scale. To confirm these findings we can look at a depiction of world values on the Inglehart - Welzel Cultural Map, (Inglehart & Welzel, 2010), in Figure 2. It plots countries in regards to their views on authority and religion in comparison to science and bureaucracy and looks at the progression from industrial to post-industrial society. Using it we can verify how these English cultural neighbors relatively reflect similar ideals with regards to secular-rational and self-expression values, and can see how only the United States stands out a bit for its more conservative and traditional feelings in regard to religiosity and national pride.

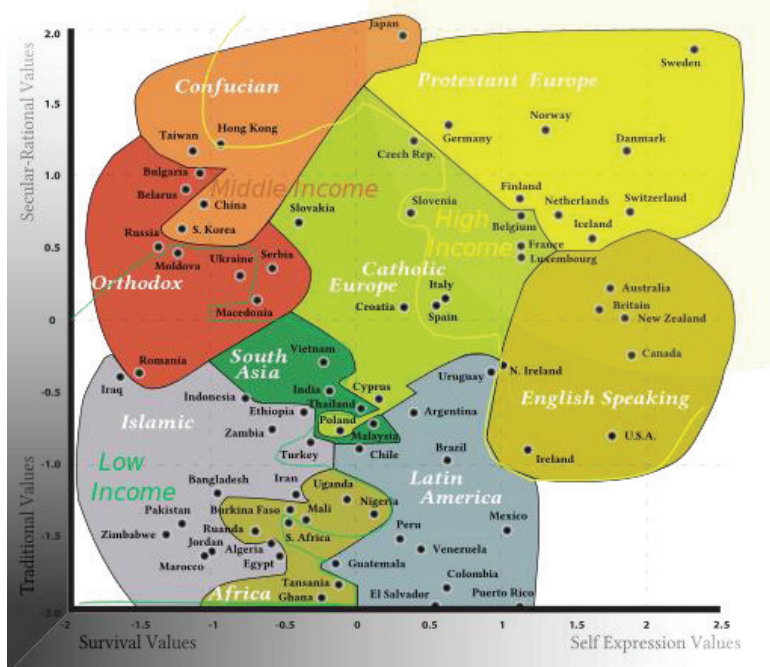


Fig. 2. The Inglehart- Welzel Cultural Map

According to Hofstede the USA (ranked as number one), UK and Australia are among the world's most individualistic countries, while the Czech Republic is just above the median range. Trompenaars charts its relative shift from a more collectivist position since becoming post-communist on his diversity scale, (Morrison, 2011). This also may reflect continental Europe's view of the more active role of the state in regards to taking care of the welfare of its citizens, and especially its central role while under the Soviet block. In regards to capitalization we can make some general observations about attitudes towards individuality and collectivity. Due to historic, orthographic reasons English is one of the few languages where "I" is used as a capital letter, which could draw attention to the importance of the first singular person (the individual). While like many other languages Czech capitalizes the "Y" in "You" or "Your" when writing formally. In a research study (Jayson, 2012) has pointed out that "me" is becoming increasingly used in American English. Although Czech has its own rules for capitalization, the encroaching effects of instant digital messages may affect both languages as spelling and punctuation could become less important.

On the masculinity/femininity scale the Czech Republic finds similar footing with the US, Canada, Australia and England, in how it is moderately driven by competition and success rather than on the quality of life. Less than English speakers Czechs are always directly/indirectly aware of whether it is a male or female referred to in conversation because the agent doing the action is usually known according to the word used. Also linguistically speaking, the vast majority of women's family names are declined with the genitive tag "ova", which literally indicates that they belong to some man. There have been various studies done about how designating nouns as male or female provides a feeling about an object, and (Boroditsky, 2011) compares how German and Spanish speakers often genderfy and have different feelings about inanimate objects. The attempted gender neutrality, which has affected English, has not been generally understood well by those using gender-inflected languages. It is curious that compared to some Western countries there are also few Czech women in top politics and management, despite their generally having a higher education level than men, (Englund, 2004). It is also of interest that our English-speaking countries ranked similarly between 19th to 26th position in the 2014 Global Gender Gap Ratings, while the Czech Republic ranked 96th, which would suggest there are other factors involved (World Economic Forum, 2014).

Similar to other regions in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Czech Republic ranks high on the Power Index in believing that there should be a natural hierarchy between people based on aspects like position, age and qualifications. Karlsson, in (Englund, 2004), believes that it partially comes from the Habsburg era when Czechs did whatever they could to not lag behind the similarly title-fixated Austrians. Conversely, according to Trompenaars, in (Reisinger, 2009), English speakers put more emphasis on achievement than on ascription, meaning that one's competence is valued more. Unlike English, Czech has a formal linguistic mechanism to use when addressing people formally or more familiarly, and a set of rules of etiquette about who can offer to be friendly to whom.

We can extrapolate a little in regards to the category of uncertainty avoidance and can see the widest score difference between the Czech Republic and the English-speaking countries. Skepticism about noble truths and ideas has been deemed a Czech national characteristic, (Englund, 2004). It can be traced through history from the great disappointments at the Battle of White Mountain and on to the promised reforms after 1989. Cautious of both radical change, the steps people generally took to communism in 1948 and back to democracy after the Velvet Revolution were gradual ones. On the scale of educational mobility, (Special Eurobarometer, 2012) many people will not aspire to attain an educational level beyond their parents'. As the middling self-expression rating on the Inglehart -Welzel cultural map indicates, (Inglehart & Welzel, 2010), people are sometimes reluctant to speak up in either language, which is also the influence of largely historically being under another foreign power's thumb.

There is less to find linguistically interesting in the last two categories, but maybe more to find in the approach to language learning. According to the scale in terms of indulgence the CR scores 20 which places it as tending to cynicism and pessimism with not too much emphasis on leisure time, such as on learning languages for fun. Not too long ago the country placed second in world pessimism, (Marchin, 2003). Positive psychologist Martin Seligman in his PERMA ratings model for well-being, finds a similar trend among all former Soviet-block countries, (Seligman, 1990). Based on surveys done between the early 1990s to 2014, Simon Djankov also finds Eastern Europeans to be less satisfied than others, (Djankov, 2015).

Hofstede was trying to distinguish the difference between Western and Eastern value systems by adding long-term and short term orientation to his scale. The Czech Republic's rank of 70 makes it pragmatic to a situation, without there being an ultimate truth but depending on the context and time. This can also be seen in the large percent of people who consider themselves as irreligious or atheist. The discontinuities of Czech history can again

be located in the Ingehart -Welzel Cultural Map, (Inglehart & Welzel, 2010), which shows that it does not very much look to traditional values. Trompenaars categorizes the Czechs as more particular than universal on his cultural value scale meaning that relationships are usually more important than rules, and Akos Jarjabka points out that this is also in doing business, (Jarjabka, 2014). Extreme emotions, (Nollen, 1997), are seen as unstable, and there is the proverbial golden mean, which may also account for not going too overboard about having another foreign language to learn.

6. Nationalistic considerations

To measure a country's level of nationalism is a difficult undertaking. As Czech literary icon Svejk has exemplified with his seemingly passive response to imposed foreign authority, the Czech nation has found ways to do things in its own way. As heavy industry is giving way to consumer-driven, transnational, information and knowledge-based services there is now the possibility of turning to "glocalization", (Robertson, 1992), which embodies the idea that you can somehow incorporate the local and national values you respect and want to maintain in consumer brands. Besides, multinational companies are well aware that you cannot go gung-ho when entering a new market. When fast food giants such as McDonald's first arrived the Czech Republic they introduced the "McBuček" (McPorkbelly), but at the same time kept the names it uses internationally like Big Mac and Happy Meal. Over time both domestic and international marketing strategies try to invoke national feelings as "Czech-made" products are sold with foreign products. However, as (Lajonc, 1968) has pointed out that on an individual psychological level familiarity breeds an affinity towards something. And perhaps as a result, resistance has been moderate compared to some other countries. In the 20th century's crisis of identity, people now are also finding new ways to identify themselves. (Miller, 2010) says that consumer goods provide a positive force and help people form and identify themselves beyond their national identity. And as Williams has pointed out a nation's culture is being increasingly expressed by material production and consumption, and is being less found in tradition, but is in ordinary life such as in food, fashion, ideas and languages, (Williams, 1958). Moreover, (Anderson, 1983) sees national identity, which replaced religion as giving a meaning to life, is an illusory concept which has served its purpose.

7. Conclusion

Although there is little danger today of the Czech language and culture going the way of the Etruscans or Olmecs in our interconnected world, it is already being altered by the English language and the cultural aspects associated with it. The Czechs have almost always lived in some sort of multinational state which has culturally and linguistically affected its relation and approach to other countries and languages. It contends with the rationality of being a member of the EU and NATO, and its more emotional feelings connected to national identity, which is still affected by many years of being largely isolated in the Eastern Block. It is unavoidable that English will continue to affect Czechs through the media, commerce and culture, as English words and expressions are being used by Czechs more and more. We can see how the Czech Republic have reacted by adopting some events celebrated abroad, but without any seemingly traditional links, in that marketers and retailers have been successful at invoking Valentine's Day and Boxing Day and basic schools are now hosting Halloween parties. Despite attempts to introduce Mrazik (Father Frost) from the Soviet Union and Santa Claus from the West, the Czechs know that the bearer of gifts at Christmas time is still their own Little Baby Jesus. It is just a question that if the traditional eating of carp at Christmas in the Czech Republic is considered as nationalistic as eating turkey in an increasingly globalized world.

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