

On a small mother tongue as a barrier to intercultural policies: the czech language

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Abstract

The essay will discuss the influence of a small language on intercultural policies in the Czech Republic. The Czech language as the only official language in the Czech Republic can definitely be ranked among small European languages since it numbers only over 11 million native speakers. There is no doubt that the fact must affect the way of thinking of the majority of Czech society. From any intercultural policy's point of view, the impact on the society might be considered as adverse. It will be argued that the Czech society might face an uphill struggle to become international more significantly than other societies that are historically connected with different cultures across the world. The language, needless to say, plays a key role here. Despite the fact, the Czech society has after all an advantage of all similarly small language groups, i.e. nearly everyone is motivated to become multilingual.

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You live a new life for every new language you speak (Czech proverb)

I

It has already been said many times that globalisation is a complex and controversial concept. There is little agreement in the literature on what it is, whether it is or is not taking place, whether it is new or old, and if it is good or bad. The process of intensification of interconnectedness, however, does not come about without certain underlying socioeconomic conditions and policy mechanisms. Globalisation, thus, needs to be understood not merely in terms of greater interconnectedness or of creating a single global economic space but also in terms of the underlying context that has made it possible, as well as the institutional arrangements and policy instruments that serve as mechanisms for promoting it.

Nonetheless, there is no doubt that it has just started and everyone must assume his

attitude towards the new international political and economic situation. No matter where we live, or what we do for a living, we all are influenced by this concept. That is each individual member of our civilisation including various cultures, ethnic as well as racial groups. A government is a group arrangement with a wide range of tools available to accommodate itself to the changing conditions. This accommodation largely depends on the mindset of its members. Their class, educational and cultural background is arguably of great significance for their attitude to globalisation. It remains for governments to make decisions on heading towards more internationalisation, or against it. In a multi-party democracy the authorities naturally need to gain general acceptance for their policies by the vast majority of citizens. For that reason, politicians often tend to manipulate public opinion.

In multilingual Europe, linguistic differences have always played a role. Languages typically were regarded as the core of national identity and therefore they were and are highly symbolic of developments in Europe. The impact of the development of the European Union on almost all aspects of language and thus language policy can hardly be overestimated.

II

One of the tools available to every government is the educational policy. The policy should prepare students of all ages for life in the 21st century world preparing them to live outside the borders of their state if need be. Historically, if a ruling class is not willing to enable lower classes to live anywhere they want, it usually closes the borders. If it is, however, not possible, the governing elite is forced to come up with another solution. One possible solution is to make use of a small native language unique to a country.

This is the deliberate intention of some parts of the Czech political and business elite which I believe to be scandalous. Czech is the official language of the Czech Republic (with over 10.2 million inhabitants), bordered by Austria, Germany, Poland, and Slovakia. As a West Slavic language (with Slovak, Sorbian, and Polish), the Czech language has a rich history and can be dated back to the Middle Ages (its written tradition goes back to the mid-13th century). In its medieval heyday, Czech was used not only in the Lands of the Czech Crown (Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, and Lusatia) but also in parts of Poland and Hungary. Nonetheless, “under the control of the Habsburg dynasty, particularly after the 1620 defeat at White Mountain, use of German was enforced at the expense of Czech. Czech endured decline and disuse before reasserting itself as a literary and official language in the early 19th century.” (Janda, 2009). Yet there were two main languages in the Czech lands (since 1918 Czechoslovakia) until 1945: German and Czech. Most Czech-speaking inhabitants also had a good command of German; French was taught as

a foreign language. Although the knowledge of Czech was poorer in the case of German-speaking citizens of Czechoslovakia, some of them were also able to use this language, to some extent. However, German inhabitants were transferred due to their behaviour in 1933-1945 from Czechoslovakia to Germany at the end of World War II, and that was the beginning of the end of Czech/German bilinguals. Older generations naturally kept their ability to speak German but younger ones were pressed to learn Russian as a new obligatory language in the all of Eastern Europe. Results soon followed. People started to hate the imposition of the Russian language and most people decided not to learn it. In fact, the knowledge of Russian was very poor. Having learnt no other foreign language, they were unable to speak any other language except Czech, or Slovak (the native language of some 5 million speakers). Nevertheless, citizens of Czechoslovakia understood each other very well since they were taught both languages in elementary schools and the languages are extremely similar. Moreover, they could hear both Czech and Slovak in the media every day, and the Slovaks commonly read Czech-language books and newspapers. However, their mutual intelligibility – once estimated at 90% – has decreased since the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993.

Considering the facts, the Czechs and Slovaks lived not only behind the Iron Curtain but also in total ignorance of any foreign language from 1948-1989: a classic example of geographical isolation. People of the Czech and Slovak Republic are still facing the consequences.

III

After the events of the Velvet revolution in November 1989, local conditions in Czechoslovakia started to change very quickly. After years of declining growth, economies slowly improved though Russia's remained stagnant, partly due to corruption and organised crime. From the outset, the Czech lands and Slovakia had as many differences as similarities, and tensions between the two halves of the state would resurface throughout its lifetime and eventually contribute to its demise of the union in 1992. Since 1993 there have been the Czech and Slovak Republics. Initially, the new Czech state tilted westward, whereas Slovakia leaned toward Moscow, in part because its economy was still oriented in that direction. As the 1990s unfolded, both countries maintained proper ties with Moscow, but also joined NATO: the Czech Republic in 1999, Slovakia in 2002. They also joined the European Union in 2004.

The Czech Republic got off to an auspicious start of teaching of foreign languages in the 1990s. Many young Czech teachers started to hone their language skills, some of them lived abroad for a couple of years, or, at least, they completed various training programmes, summer schools, and other scholarships. They were full of enthusiasm for

learning as well as later teaching new techniques. However, they often paid for their courses themselves because there was no broad state support in this respect. On the other hand, there were many incompetent teachers, mostly those of the Russian language, who were caught off-guard by new political and social conditions. Owing to a lack of specialists, the former Russian teachers were suddenly compelled to teach English, or German. The quality of teaching was hence very poor in many schools (Golgo, 2008). Still, hundreds of foreign teachers or would-be teachers from the English-, German-, or Spanish-speaking world came to help their Czech colleagues in improving the language skills of the Czech society. They were often paid by international organisations, or simply tried their luck in different circumstances from their home countries. The problem existed at universities where there were working scholars (notably in the case of English) who had had no practical experience of the everyday language which they had specialised in. Also published textbooks of foreign languages were often of variable quality; particularly those issued in the Czech Republic were frequently poor.

These problems, generally speaking, were successively resolved in the 1990s, and it seemed at that time that the Czechs were eager to learn foreign languages (Nekvapil, 2003). Unfortunately, many people mistakenly believed that learning a foreign language could be accomplished in a matter of several months. Naturally, that did not happen. Learning a foreign language takes time and dedication. Furthermore, they were unable to learn any language as fluently as they would have liked to. There was consequently widespread disillusionment among the young at the very end of the 1990s. And it should have been worrying for schools and teachers, but it was not. With the new millennium a different way of thinking should have come.

IV

The more the Czech Republic became a part of a unified Europe the more apparent it became that there was a lack of detailed knowledge of foreign languages within the Czech society. The quality of life in the country improved dramatically notwithstanding, that the improvement of foreign language standards never became a top priority for the Czechs. Czech views, then, were mostly based on many prejudices and misconceptions. The people commonly believed, for example, that Czech is one of the most beautiful, albeit toughest languages in the world, with a very extensive vocabulary. These and similar attitudes are thought to have originated at the time of the “national rebirth” or the Czech National Revival (early 19th century) as Czechs call the movement for Czech cultural and economic independence in which the demand for equality for the two main languages in the region took first place.

To the detriment of the Czechs, their leaders have ordinarily expressed the nationalistic

sentiments, thereby persuading the public of their “language exceptionality.” Almost all films viewed on TV were dubbed into Czech, the Czechs have not benefitted by the advantages offered by subtitles. On the contrary, many people admire Czech dubbing skills unaware that they are losing the opportunity to improve their language skills in a natural, even enjoyable way. Viewed against this background, any changes in the thinking of population illustrate its dependence on these views.

At the onset of the 21st century, the foreign teachers began to leave the country because the financial aid had been cut back. In addition, the Czech Republic ceased to be interesting for them as a source of adventure. The Czech government of that time including the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, which “is responsible for public administration in education, for developing educational, youth and sport policies and international cooperation in these fields,” as stated in its official website, did not recognise the need to take the problem seriously. Even though the government has repeatedly proclaimed education as a priority for the current and next administration, indeed, the opposite was often the case. The Czech educational system has suffered from perennial shortage of money. For that reason, many competent and ardent language teachers have left their jobs; a badly-paid profession is definitely not motivating. Nevertheless, money is not everything. The working conditions are surely more significant for most teachers. And that is the key problem. The state has not yet created optimum working conditions for (language) teachers who are not able to assure children a good schooling. The situation is so serious that the Ministry of Education had to openly acknowledge these troubles: but, bluntly speaking, it came too late. Besides, the authorities have not assumed responsibility; quite the contrary, they have blamed the teachers for the troubles. The Ministry of Education has repeatedly said that Czech teachers are deficient in modern teaching methods and need therefore to work under the guidance of supervisors. I cannot agree with these measures. The teachers should be better paid, since that would improve morale. Less lessons a week and less bureaucratic procedure would be more beneficial too.

Many experts have drawn authorities’ attention to the issue but to no avail. Sad to say, power in Czech education still rests with people having the Cold War mentality. Meanwhile, the students’ language literacy has steadily been declining.... It is related to dumbing down, in general (Liessmann, 2006). Yet the poor language literacy is obviously more serious in the nations using a small native tongue. That is also the case of the Czech Republic. According to available public research (December, 2010), just 54% of the Czechs are able to speak a foreign language including university students. What is even worse, 23% of Czech university students are unable to speak any foreign language. But the statistics are often misleading; the situation is much worse, in my view. As a university teacher I basically cannot assign texts of English or German (let alone French,

Italian, Spanish, Russian, or even Polish) literature to my students; only one, or maybe two of them would be able to cope with it. They have problems in understanding an English lecture, not to mention conversational English. I have also realised that many of them have never spoken to anyone of a different mother tongue. The patience, effort and negotiation inherent in this kind of communication is a kind of education in itself and is sadly not part of the experience of the vast majority of them. That is definitely not a characteristic of a new generation of people who would be keen on living in the unified Europe.

Nonetheless, there are even more alarming phenomena. Because of a generally low level of foreign language knowledge in the Czech society, students have not been forced to improve their language skills because their teachers often do not have command of languages as well. It is also true of university teachers in the humanities. The teachers have often resisted English (or other foreign languages) as the language of instruction at universities; have not supported any international exchange programmes for university students and lecturers; and some of them even set a target: a drastic reduction in the number of foreign language lessons at their academic institutions. I would go so far to say that they could not have taken a more misguided path. "To remain monolingual is to stunt your educational development, to restrict your communication and thinking abilities, and to deny yourself the ability to fully appreciate and understand the world in which you live. If that can be said in the context of the English-speaking world, then it should be even more urgent for small-language speakers. Learning another language opens up new opportunities and gives you perspectives that you might never have encountered otherwise. Personal, professional, social, and economic considerations all point to the advantages of learning foreign languages. Regardless of the fact, multilingual speakers outnumber monolingual speakers in the world's population nowadays (Tucker, 1999) since multilingualism is becoming a social phenomenon governed by the needs of globalisation and cultural openness.

All the facts are arguably well known to the teachers; they are just unable to cope with the problem, hence they simply close their eyes to it. I find it profoundly sad.

V

That is not just the case of English. For that matter, Graddol (2004) presents data on proficiency in English in the present EU showing that in Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands more than 75% of the people interviewed claim to be able to hold a conversation in English. In Luxembourg, Finland, Belgium, Germany, and Greece, 40 to 50% can hold a conversation in English, whereas fewer than 30% can do so in Italy, Portugal, and Spain. These figures show that the knowledge of English may not be as

widespread as is sometimes assumed, and that its dominant position might not be as overwhelming as previously thought.

As has already been mentioned, the majority of the Czechs, however, cannot speak any other language. The knowledge of the German language, the second most common foreign language in the Czech Republic, which is historically the most important language for the Czechs, is on the decline. And that has an adverse effect not only on the humanities— the study of Czech history without German is barely imaginable!—but also on the national economy. Germany is still the primary market for the Czech Republic (Prochazkova – Komarek, 2009). Needless to say, with approximately 100 million speakers, German ranks 10th among the languages of the world, and it is the most widely spoken language in the EU in terms of first-language speakers.

Unfortunately, several German academic institutions have already been compelled to cancel their long-term contracts with Czech counterparts as well as to cut their grants due to the lack of Czech applicants who would have been able to meet the German language requirements. That went for both students and tutors. Fortunately, there are still study-residencies of younger scholars and scientists abroad, which assist them in breaking through the relative language barrier of the Czech lands.

English and German are not the only languages being taught in the Czech Republic. Also French, which is the number-two second-language choice of students across the planet (Nadeau – Barlow, 2008), Russian, and lately trendy Spanish are widespread there. However, the public lose interest in them gradually. This in comparison to the Slovak Republic where English was installed as the only obligatory language for all pupils and students in 2010, there is not such a narrow conception of foreign language policy in the Czech Republic.

Naturally, it has been argued many times that a conception of a single, obligatory second language could cause irreparable damage to other foreign language learning (in the Czech Republic mainly German), or simply, that it is not right to choose the only one language. Although there is some truth to this, I am inwardly convinced that only one language must be chosen in the EU as a general or second language for as many people as possible. With the enlargement of the EU this problem has become even more pressing, not only because of the number of languages and, accordingly, the number of their possible combinations has grown dramatically but also because it is very difficult to find sufficient numbers of translators and interpreters for all language combinations. In short, Europe needs a principal language of commerce and language of instruction in prestigious universities and schools; scholarly publications should predominantly be published in a few languages, too. Such programmes as “English for Academic Purposes”—almost unknown at Czech universities!—should become obligatory subjects

in schools of all kinds. Failing that, (European) people will never come together which could presumably lead to the kinds of wars which history is littered with.

The language issue is a very sensitive one, because giving up a language as one of the official languages is seen as a serious devaluation of and threat to the position of a language nationally and internationally. However it is true that one mother tongue tends to fade into another and languages continue to evolve. This is the case in India where ordinary villagers are sensitive to nuances of dialect that differentiate nearby localities showing that a lingua franca does not present any obstacle to developing other languages.

VI

That brings us to the thought that people without any knowledge of a foreign language are much more manipulatable, and are often accused of being insular. Indeed, such people with language barriers can be insuperable obstacles in the path of a peace agreement, or any integration process. They tend to be fearful of everything they do not know having little self-confidence. The authoritative manner in which they speak usually conceals their ignorance. The citizens do not look with favour upon democracy as well as humanistic ideals. In addition, racism and xenophobia are not alien to such societies.

Moreover, in a 1998 meeting of the EU ministers of education, a long list of intentions was presented aimed at the development of multilingualism in the EU. These intentions aimed to enable “all Europeans to communicate with speakers of other mother tongues, thereby developing open-mindedness, facilitating free movement of people and exchange of information and improving international cooperation” (Recommendation R [98] 6 of the European Council). Among the recommendations listed are the learning of more than one foreign language by all citizens, the use of foreign languages in the teaching of non-linguistic subjects (for example, history or mathematics), an early start for the teaching of foreign languages, the promotion of lifelong learning of foreign languages, and a focus on learner autonomy. The Czech Republic—along with some other members of the EU—has not yet started to live up to the European Council’s proposal.

Even though every nation in the world has created its own distinctive culture according to its own rules of behaviour, only good citizens can make a worthwhile contribution to world culture. However innately good people may be, they cannot cope on their own; humanistic studies including languages are irreplaceable in that case.

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