9 Czech

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1 Introduction

Czech is the official language of the Czech Republic, the western two-thirds of former Czechoslovakia. In its two provinces of Bohemia and Moravia, and the part of southern Silesia included in Moravia, it is spoken by about 9.5 million people. It is also widely understood by speakers of Slovak. There are isolated Czech-speaking communities in several nearby countries and some quite large communities overseas, especially in the Americas. Of whatever antiquity, they have arisen from a long tradition of economic or political emigration. Some cohesive communities with continuity of evolution since before the First World War are linguistically relatively undamaged, though with distinctive dialect features; younger communities are both less cohesive and less resistant to the effect of the host environment.

The standard language is based on Josef Dobrovský's early nineteenth-century codification, modelled on sixteenth-century Czech, but with some recognition of later developments. To Dobrovský Czech owes the revival of certain obsolete features, for example, the gerunds, which occur chiefly in higher registers.

The main distinguishing features of Czech date from the thirteenth century or earlier, but its modern form owes much to certain far-reaching changes in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, most strikingly the uniauts. The written language came to be based on the variant spoken at the main cultural centre, Prague (where the university was founded in 1348).

Standard Czech (spisovná čeština) is then a semi-artificial creation, archaic in many respects, while the vernacular has continued to evolve since the norms (whether of the sixteenth or the nineteenth century) were set. There is a consequent tension between the modern literary language and the spoken Czech, usually known as Common Czech (obecná čeština), in which natural development has culminated. This has its own distinctive morphology, relatively impoverished syntactic variation, and a lexicon, and in part syntax, that reveals the influence of German. Between these two
poles there are transitional strata, notably Colloquial Czech (hovorová čeština, an informal spoken version of the standard language, whose existence is often denied) and Common Spoken Czech (běžné mušené čeština, basically the everyday speech of the big cities). For a discussion of this stratification see Townsend (1990). The transition forms are the channel by which ‘upwardly mobile’ features of Common Czech may penetrate the standard language. This century has seen, for instance, the acceptance of infinitives in -čí as colloquial alternatives to the traditional forms in -ti, then as free variants with those in -ti and finally as the neutral norm. Similarly, the status of infinitives in -ci has altered, with alternatives in -ci being admitted into the standard language as recently as the late 1970s. The codification of words or forms is not a matter of common consent, but part of the job description of the national Academy’s Institute for the Czech Language; once notoriously purist, it is increasingly tolerant of change. The tension between Standard and Common Czech and recent reductions in mother-tongue teaching in schools inform the perceived need for a body to weigh the changing norms in the balance and guide the standard accordingly. The Institute publishes, inter alia, the journals Naše řeč and Slovo a slovesnost.

2 Phonology

2.1 Segmental phoneme inventory

Czech has a simple vowel system: five vowels, /a/, /e/, /i/, /u/, /o/, also occur in long syllables, hence the set of matching long vowels, /aː/, /eː/, /iː/, /uː/, /oː/. Written ą, ě, í, ů, ů, and, in the 19th century, also ū; /i/ and /e/ are represented by both i, i (PIE ĭ, PIE ĭ) and e, e (PIE ě, PIE ě). There is one native diphthong /ou/ and two in loan-words, /eu/ and /au/. Length is phonemic, hence as: dobře ‘good’, gave’ and dal’ ‘further’, ‘come in!’; ryby ‘fish and ryby ‘fish’, ‘fish and egg’, ‘cathedral’ (GEN SG): děti ‘children’.

The main distribution of /i/ is only in loan-words of the Habsburg period into /i/ or in compound words;

There are twenty-five consonantal phonemes (table 9.1), and several important allophones.

Oclusives: labial /p/, /b/, /m/; dental /t/, /d/, /n/; palatal /ť/, /dť/, /ň/; velar: /k/, /g/.

Semi-occlusives: alveolar /ć/ (= [ts]); post-alveolar /ć/ (= [tš]).


The ‘missing’ velar nasal occlusive [ŋ] occurs as an allophone of /n/ before a velar (banka [banka] ‘bank’); the affricates [dz] and [dž] occur as positional variants of /d/ and /ʒ/ and voiced consonants that have voiceless counterparts in another part of the word, e.g. the pronounced [leďžba]. Homorganic renderings of /d/ and /ʒ/ to /ď/ and /ž/ in loan-words such as dusko ‘duck’, in different contexts to /ň/ and /ž/ as in /ňeršť/ (Old Czech běn, běř), and věřti and /žoděň/ for /ň eny ‘from a woman’, also as in /ňerní, /žerní ‘from the ground’. Similar homorganic renderings of the velar nasal to /ɾ/ and /ɾ/ and /ɾ/ and /ɾ/, Another non-phonemic development is /d/ changed regularly into voiced alveolar /ɾ/ in borrowings and non-standard words.