

State Language Policies and Language Behaviour of the Czechs in the 20th Century¹

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Introduction

The article deals with the mutual relationship between the official state language policies and the actual language behaviour of the Czechs. It aims particularly at the period starting in 1939 up to 1989, i.e. the period in which foreign languages were learnt by older and middle-aged generations of the contemporary Czech nation. The main hypothesis of this article is the assumption that the actual state policy of teaching foreign languages does not mean that it would be reflected in the foreign language skills of the state's citizens and the use thereof. The article specifically deals with two languages – German and Russian, which held the position of the main teaching languages during the monitored period of 1939 to 1989, albeit each language in a different part of this period. Each period (1939–1945 and 1948–1989) is subject to a preceding analysis of those historical events that determined the position of a given language before it became dominant within the following periods of the state language policies. Mentioned below is also the role of English language. Within the given historical period, the territory of the contemporary Czech Republic experienced two totalitarian regimes (in 1939 to 1945, and between 1948 and 1989), only shortly interrupted by a semi-democratic regime in 1945 to 1948. The article could also contribute to the issue as to whether or not the relationship between a state language policy of teaching foreign languages and the actual linguistic behaviour of citizens could depend on an overall nature of the political regime in a given period.

Historical Context - German Language

The state language policies applied within the period of 1939 and 1989 naturally reflected preceding historical experience of the Czechs with foreign languages. This was certainly the case of German language. When Slavic tribes penetrated the Czech lands in the second half of the 6th Century, they most likely came across some remains of a German settlement (the Lombards, the Thuringies). The first historical recorded ruler of the Slavs in the Czech lands was Samo who was of Franck origin. The existence of a settlement of German traders in Prague was documented already in the 11th Century (Cosmas' Chronicle). At the beginning of the 13th Century, the Czech king Ottokar I (*in Czech: Přemysl Otakar I*) invited German

¹ The paper was written as part of scientific research project of Metropolitan University Prague 2016: Communication in Multilingual Environment.

settlers to come to Bohemia. They then started to settle uninhabited or sparsely populated regions along nearly the entire borderline of today's Czech state. From that period up until 1946, approximately 30% of whole population was ethnic Germans, who lived permanently on the territory of the contemporary Czech Republic.² This community was so close to the Czech population that the word "Němec" (in Czech: a German) actually means a "silent man", i.e. someone who does not get involved in a conversation conducted in Czech language, which is not necessarily an indication of a foreigner from a specific country. Throughout this historical period, German language was one of the two main languages spoken within this territory, and in 1627–8 up to 1918 also one of the two official languages (in addition to the Czech language) spoken in Bohemia and Moravia, which are the two main historical regions of the Czech Republic today.³

For many centuries, the Czechs naturally perceived German language as the first foreign language. The thesis claiming a Germanization of the Czech lands after the battle of White Mountain is, however, more likely to be based on various clichés rather than on an actual analysis. During the 17th and 18th Century, the geographical expansion of the regions where German was mostly spoken concerned only a narrow area in the North-West Bohemia from Podbořany up to Litoměřice, and the regions in Podkrkonoší.⁴

The Germanization of aristocracy within this period was not also that clear. The Protestant aristocracy, which was forced to leave the country after the battle of White Mountain, was not speaking Czech only. Many spoke German too. Also, the new Catholic nobility who arrived in the Czech lands at that time also did not speak solely German; many of its members arrived from other Catholic parts of Europe (e.g. from Spain, Italy or Ireland). The majority of domestic Catholic aristocracy (including converts to Catholicism) spoke Czech. The reasons why the majority of the Czech aristocracy started to prefer German language at the end of the 17th Century were geopolitical and political. The defeat of the Turks near Vienna in 1683 and their consequent expelling from Hungary meant that the German speaking Vienna would remain the capital city of the Habsburg empire. That meant, along with the consolidation of absolutism, that an aristocrat from the Czech lands, seeking a position at the Emperor's court in Vienna, naturally tended to speak German. Yet, a considerable part of aristocracy maintained a firm patriotism towards the Czech lands. After 1918, a major part of aristocracy turned its patriotism into a loyalty to the newly established Czechoslovakia, which was significantly demonstrated during the Munich crisis in 1938. This aristocracy often showed its positive relation to Czechoslovakia also by means of language.

The real threat of Germanization of the Czech population arrived at the second half of the 18th Century. The reforms pursued by Marie Therese and Joseph II also concerned the centralization of state administration where a unified language of internal administration of authorities and courts played its role – and this language was German. At the same time, the reforms brought a significant progress into the entire Czech lands' society also by means of the introduction of a mandatory five-year school education in 1774. The language policy

2 SALNER, Peter: Ethnic Polarization in Ethnically Homogenous Town, in: *Czech Sociological Review*, 9, 2001, 2, 235–246.

3 FIALOVÁ, Ludmila et al.: *Dějiny obyvatelstva českých zemí*, Praha 1998, 88.

4 MAGOCZI, Paul Robert: *Historical Atlas of Central Europe*, Seattle 2002, 106.

designed for these primary schools (*in Czech: obecné školy*) was actually very liberal. It was possible to choose between a German speaking school and a Czech speaking school. At the end of the 18th Century, the first generation of Czech patriots around J. Dobrovský started to fear that many children of Czech parents would be sent *en mass* to German primary schools on the grounds of a prospective career in state administration. Therefore, the second generation of Czech patriots around J. Jungmann included the issue of active use of the Czech language into the elementary pillar of the Czech national identity. This policy succeeded and it was quite clear in the 1840s that in terms of demography, the Czech language did not face any threat in the Czech lands.⁵

Government Language Policies and Linguistic Behaviour of Czechs in the Period 1869–1939

In 1869, the Hausner Act extended the mandatory school education by another three years of Town schools of lower secondary education. Here, a graduate from this type of a Czech school had to learn the basics of German language. During the era of the First Republic in 1918–1938, this policy of teaching foreign languages did not change much, except for the establishment of several grammar schools, specialized in teaching French or English. During this period, the German language remained the first foreign language taught within the Czech education system. Therefore, in 1939 all Czechs had been in contact with at least the basics of the German language for the past seventy years.

Naturally, all high school graduates from specialized Czech high schools and grammar schools who lived in 1939 had a sound knowledge of German and for most of them it was their first foreign language.

Moreover, in 1939 many Czechs spoke German as their second language. Although the generation which studied at German high schools only was quickly diminishing (in terms of language, the Charles University was a university with German as only language of instruction between 1784 and 1882), German was used as the second language by many Czechs who lived in a dominantly German language environment. This concerned particularly the Czech borderline regions but it was possible to be in a regular contact with German language in big Czech cities with larger German language communities. Nearly fifty thousand of ethnic Germans lived in Brno, more than twenty-five thousand Germans lived in Prague and Ostrava, and around twelve thousand Germans lived in Olomouc and Jihlava. A significant German community was also present in České Budějovice.⁶ The German language was actually the second language of President Masaryk.

A prominent group which spoke German as the second language comprised the Jews living in the Czech language environment. In the 18th Century, the Jews in the Czech lands were probably the only community which openly adopted the idea of a centralized Austrian state, as opposed to not only the Czechs yearning for a special political position of the Czech Kingdom but also compared to a German-speaking population strongly influenced by the Greater Germany ideas. In doing so, the Jews in the Czech lands

5 FIALOVÁ, 95.

6 GABAL, Ivan: *Etnické menšiny ve střední Evropě*, Praha 1999, 123.

quickly abandoned Yiddish and adopted German as their first language.⁷ At the end of the 19th Century, influenced by the cultural and economic successes of the Czechs and also as a result of their negative experience with the response of an aggressive part of Czech nationalists (smashing windows of the shops with signs in German mostly in Jewish ownership in Prague-Josefov at the time of the disputes over Badeni's language directives in 1897), the Jewish community in the Czech language environment became basically bilingual.⁸ Soon after 1918, the Jewish community adopted the idea of the Czechoslovak state (probably also due to President Masaryk who enjoyed a good reputation within the Jewish community since the Hilsner's trial) and Czech became the first language for most of the Czech Jews. However, the Jewish community in the Czech language environment continued to consider German as its second language still in 1939.⁹ In the 1930s, a number of Czech film actors and actresses also took part in German language films. Many of them were of Jewish origin (e.g. Hugo Haas).

Government Language Policies and Language Behaviour of the Czechs in 1939–1945

In 1939, Czechoslovakia ceased to exist. Six months before that, most of the Czech borderline regions had become part of Nazi Germany. Majority of the Czech population left the borderline regions and those who stayed had to put up with German as the only official language of communication until the end of the war. On 15 March 1939, the remaining parts of Bohemia and Moravia became German Protectorate. This brought along a changed language policy, which became a practical expression of the political endeavour to Germanize the Czech lands. German became the first official language of German Protectorate, followed by Czech on the second place. The entire public language space (shop signboards, street signs, etc.) was bilingual, with the German title on the first place. The Protectorate radio broadcasting had its German programs, and Czech newsreels as well as movie pictures had to have German subtitles. The German language, which until then used to be a mandatory subject at elementary schools from the sixth grade on, became mandatory at primary schools already, and from February 1941 German language was mandatory as of the first grade of the primary school. At grammar schools, some subjects were even taught in German (e.g. history and geography).

This policy of clear assertion of German occurred in a situation where the language was generally known in the Czech language environment. The famous humorous scene from the 1939 movie called *Cesta do hlubin študákovy duše* (*The Journey into the Depth of the Student's Soul*), where a student facing final exams makes his teacher desperate by his utter ignorance of German language, may be a perfectly pointed humour, but it certainly did not correspond with the actual knowledge of German which even not so great grammar

7 PĚKNÝ, Tomáš, *Historie Židů v Čechách a na Moravě*, Praha 1993.

8 KIEVAL, H. J.: *The Making of Czech Jewry. National Conflict and Jewish Society in Bohemia 1870–1918*. Oxford 1988.

9 NESLÁDKOVÁ, Ludmila: The Professional and Social Characteristic of the Jewish Population in the First Republic, in: *Czech Demography*, 3, 2009, 89–103. (The Czech version of the article was published in *Demografie*, 50, 2008, 1, 1–14.)

school students had at that time. The political undertone of the scene was also obvious. The scene clearly expressed the reluctance of the Czechs to use German at the time of the Protectorate. Speaking German meant a public acknowledgement of collaboration. Such was the general public opinion regarding the Czech film actors who agreed to play in German movie pictures.

The uprising against the German occupation in May 1945 started with smudging German street signs and discontinuation of the German programs broadcasted by the Czech radio. With respect to the Protectorate experience, liberated Czechoslovakia, having a basically democratic regime, did not bring any principally liberal policy of teaching foreign languages. German language ceased to be taught almost immediately as a mandatory subject at schools of all types throughout the post-war Czechoslovakia. The attitude towards the German language was reflected even by such events when the Jews returning from concentration camps who spoke German as their first or second language would not have dare to use it anymore. The aversion towards the German language certainly affected the predominant consent of the Czech population with the evacuation (expulsion) of the vast majority of ethnic Germans from Czechoslovakia, regardless of whether or not they had demonstrably cooperated with the Nazi regime.

Even in other aspects, not just in its relationship towards the German language, the state policy of teaching foreign languages was not fully liberal within the short period of 1945 to 1948. Slavic languages were pursued, naturally the Russian language, and even Polish.¹⁰ At the same time, this period experienced an increased demand for English which was accepted by the state policy for teaching foreign languages. All that changed with the Communist putsch in February 1948, which started a new period in the state language policy clearly pursuing the teaching of Russian as the first foreign language.

Historical Context - Russian Language

Before 1948, the contacts of the Czechs with the Russian language were minimal compared to the German language. In the 19th Century, some figures of the Czech public life strongly asserted the use of Russian (e.g. V. Hanka) but the command of the language remained limited only to certain intellectual groups. At that time, groups of Czechs would move to the Tsarist Russia in the Volynian region. The first more massive acquaintance of the Czechs with Russian came during the WWI when the Czechs serving in the Austrian army would defect to the Russian side where they would create the so-called Czech legions. Their complicated and long sojourn in a country adrift by the agony of the Tsarist regime followed by the revolution and ultimately by the civil war ended in 1920. On return to Czechoslovakia, these legionaries would bring along a certain command of Russian. In the 1920s and 1930s, Czechoslovakia granted asylum to a quite extensive and active group of Russian speaking immigrants from the Soviet Union. During the WWII, a fraction of the Czechoslovak army was formed in the Soviet Union which then fought on the Eastern front. The fraction did not consist of soldiers only but also of many so-called Volynian Czechs who

¹⁰ GABAL, 132.

extended the number of the Russian speaking population of Czechoslovakia after 1945.¹¹ Immediately after the end of the war, Russian became one of the most frequently taught foreign languages at schools in Czechoslovakia.

State Language Policy and Language Behaviour of Czechs in 1948–1989

The next forty years following the Communist coup, the state language policy clearly asserted Russian within the entire system of teaching foreign languages. The Russian language was introduced as the first foreign language and became a mandatory subject from the fourth grade of the primary school, i.e. all nine-year old pupils in Czechoslovakia had to start learning Russian. Russian remained mandatory for all pupils until the end of the compulsory school attendance in fifteen years of age. Therefore, everyone had to learn Russian for at least six years, and this situation lasted for forty years. Russian remained a mandatory subject for all pupils who continued to study at high schools, which usually lasted three or four years. Throughout this period, the high school graduation exam also involved an exam in Russian as a mandatory subject, except for a short break in 1969 and 1970. All university students, regardless of their major, had to pass a mandatory exam from Russian language, including those enrolled in research fellow (Ph.D.) programmes.

Despite a forty-year long strict government language policy, Russian did not clearly obtain the position of the first foreign language. A 1999 survey shows that Russian was a language claimed as mastered by 57% of Czechs older than eighteen years. This would put Russian on the first place before German claimed as mastered by 51% of respondents.¹² This means that ten years before the survey was conducted, the knowledge of German within the population would have been at least equal to the knowledge of Russian, because in that decade most of those who had studied German rather than Russian passed away and those who started to learn German rather than Russian after 1989 could not be included in the survey as yet.

Regardless of whether or not the percentage of Russian speakers following from the survey is correct or overstated, the reasons why Russian did not obtain a clearly dominant position over a forty-year period of the state policy pursuit are more or less obvious. The generation who lived at that time but experienced the language education before 1948 would not stand much change to learn Russian anymore. Even those who learnt Russian as the first mandatory foreign language would not develop much fluency in the language. The reason was that Russian did not represent a language much needed for communication by the majority of the population living in the communist Czechoslovakia.

The Czechs did not keep in much contact with the Russians and Russian speakers during the period of 1948–1989. Tourism at that time was rather limited, in particular with respect to tourists arriving from the Soviet Union to Czechoslovakia. Even for tourists from Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union was not a destination of frequent choice. From

¹¹ GABAL, 145.

¹² NEUSTUPNÝ, J.V. – NEKVAPIL, Jiří: Language Management in the Czech Republic, in *Language Planning and Policy in Europe. Volume 2*, BALDAUF, Richard B. – KAPLAN, Robert B. (eds.), Toronto 2006, 125.

1968 on, the Soviet occupation army stayed at the Czechoslovak territory but the contacts with the local population were very scarce. To the vast majority of Czechs, such contacts would be unacceptable for political reasons, too. The Soviet invasion into Czechoslovakia in 1968 fundamentally contributed to a very negative approach by the majority of the Czech population towards Russian, which could be compared to the approach of the Czechs towards the German language during the German Protectorate from 1939–1945. Yet, the practical use of Russian language was limited during the years 1948–1989 to a very small group of Czechs, either university graduates who studied in the Soviet Union, or businessmen who often did business deals with Soviet partners, or those Czechs who served in diplomacy. While abroad, their children were forced to attend Russian schools for children of diplomats from the Soviet block.

Throughout the period of 1948–1989, the state foreign language policy remained basically unchanged. Except for the so-called language schools where a second foreign language was already taught to children in the sixth to ninth grade, another foreign language was offered as a mandatory subject only to high school students, i.e. in the age of fourteen/fifteen years up to eighteen/nineteen years of age. A student could usually choose among German, English, French and Spanish. Despite an equal position of these languages claimed by the state policy, the Czechs at that time clearly preferred German, which continued to hold the position of the first foreign language, especially from the 1960s when the antipathy towards Germany formed during the WWII started to diminish. This situation lasted until 1989, in spite of the government support of teaching Russian.

There were several reasons for the return of the German language into the position of the first foreign language. The first reason was a political one – the existence of Eastern Germany. The communist Czechoslovakia maintained very active commercial contacts with this country, and Eastern Germany along with the Soviet Union were the key business partners of Czechoslovakia at that time. As opposed to the Soviet Union, Eastern Germany also became a frequently chosen destination of Czech tourists, in particular from the 1960s and then at the beginning of the so-called normalization, also due to very restricted opportunities to travel abroad to the West after 1969. Eastern Germany also offered better opportunities to Czechs to buy goods in German stores which were scarcely available in Czechoslovakia. An expression of a certain government policy towards the German language was represented by German inscriptions (of course along with Czech and Russian ones) which occurred in the 1970s at some hub train stations in Prague or near the border with Eastern Germany. All presidents in office during the communist regime also had a very good command of German.

The second reason for the hands-on use of the German language by the Czechs in this period was the fact that Czech tourists at that time very much favoured Hungary which was an easily accessible destination. Hungary pursued German language as the first foreign language much strongly than Czechoslovakia during the communist regime. First, the Hungarians did not resent the German language after the end of the WWII as much as it was the case in Czechoslovakia, and second, the knowledge of Russian remained rather low due to its linguistic distance from the Hungarian language. If a Czech wanted to speak to a Hungarian, he would naturally choose to speak German.

The third reason, which supported the role of German among the Czechs, was a rather

liberal policy for travelling to the West in the second half of the 1960s. The neighbouring German speaking countries were frequently visited due to their geographical vicinity. Czech immigrants who abandoned the country after the Soviet military intervention in August 1968 were also bound to German speaking countries, as opposed to the preceding immigration waves after 1938 and 1948. These countries remained a popular destination for immigrants from Czechoslovakia until the fall of the communist regime. When Czechoslovakia ratified the treaties of Helsinki in 1976, the government had to allow the visits of the family members living abroad who did not have their relationship with the communist Czechoslovakia legalized. Many such families lived in the European German speaking countries. On the other hand, many of them had a so-called adjusted relationship to the communist Czechoslovakia upon which they could travel to their former home country.

The fourth reason for the application of the German language in the Czech part of the country in this period was the developing tourism. From mid 1960s until 1989, a vast majority of tourists came to this part of the country from both German states. A foreigner, regardless of his home country, would be always addressed in German language in hotels and restaurants. A person from West Germany became almost a synonym for a rich tourist from the West, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. Even the Czech crime stories and film comedies made in this period often showed a West German tourist character, which was almost never a good person but, in particular in comedies, it would not have to be always negative. However, such a character was always rich and had a good grasp of the Czech environment, despite the fact that it would often be cheated by various Czech conmen.

The importance of the German language in the 1970s and 1980s was also partly reflected by the state language policy. The Russian language was always naturally preferred as a foreign language but at some types of high schools, especially those focused on business, services, hospitality and tourism, the German language was clearly understood as the second language, much more important than English or French.

As per the government policies applied during the communist regime, it is necessary to point out the issue of the English language. It was not really a cutback in education system. Interest in learning English would be probably much higher but the official policy would put it on the same level as French or Spanish, as an optional language in grammar schools. More ideology issues were involved, in particular the fear of the government elite that an excessive permitting of everything coming from the English speaking world could threaten the adoption of ideological values adopted by the communist regime. The government policy for English, as it took shape after 1948, was quite similar to that existing during the Protectorate. Strong restriction of American movie production, as opposed to French and Italian movies, prohibition of jazz and swing as well as singing songs in English – these policies were all the same during Protectorate and the communist regime until the 1960s. Hardly anything describes the change in the mass culture atmosphere within the Czech society of the 1960s, perhaps besides the return of the traditional names of Czech soccer clubs, as much as showing the first Western movie in Czech movie theatres after 1948. The movie picture "High Noon" came to the movie theatres at the time when the Stalin's monument was taken down and the extraordinary public interest represented a clear statement of craving for changes in the entertainment policy. Since the word "hooligan",

which emerged in the communist vocabulary after the events in Hungary in 1956, and uttering the word "rock 'n' roll", almost constituted a crime, it was obvious that the regime is aware of the loss of its influence on the upcoming young generation. In fact, listening to the English programme of Radio Luxembourg became a mass event among the young generation in the second half of the 1950s.

The wake of the 1960s not only represented an overall liberalization of atmosphere in the Czech society but also a looser government policy with respect to the role of the English language in public life. At that time, the WWII soldiers who fought in the West and in the Middle East would return home from prisons. In addition to some intellectuals and professionals, they formed the sole significant group who spoke English. This period also saw the origin of a number of so-called "big beat" (rock) bands with English names and often English lyrics in their songs. The onset of the so-called normalization also brought along the prohibition to sing in English and the obligation to re-name all bands with English names. Despite, or perhaps because of that, the interest of the young generation in the English language would not vanish. From the early 1970s, some university graduates and professionals, in particular in the field of science and technology, realized the increasing significance of English in their disciplines, which eventually forced them to learn the language. However, the fluency in English among intellectuals was far from being a matter of course at that time. For example, Václav Havel started to learn English on a regular basis only after he became President.

The Changes in Language Policy after 1989 and the Language Behaviour of the Czechs

The impact of the language behaviour on language policy took a significant shape after 1989 when the fall of the totalitarian regime also brought along a change in the government language policy. This liberal policy, as opposed to the preceding period, suddenly found itself under a high pressure of the actual opinion of the population in the 1990s regarding the importance of the individual languages. The Russian language immediately lost its position of the first foreign language held throughout the Communist regime. When the independent Czech Republic was established, the Russian language nearly completely vanished from the curriculum, with certain exceptions in the later established region of Moravia-Silesia.¹³ On the other hand, the German language became the most frequently taught foreign language at Czech schools in the 1990s.¹⁴ The hunger for English was demonstrated by a high participation in various training programmes of English learning. In the 1990s, English clearly became the third most widespread language amongst the Czechs.¹⁵ At the same time, English immediately became the second most frequently taught language at grammar schools and it immediately took the first place in

13 HNÍZDO, Bořivoj: From Lingua Franca to Language of Trans-Border Communication: The Changing Role of German Language in the Czech Republic, in: *Instruments of European Integration*, HNÍZDO, Bořivoj – KOTÁBOVÁ, Věra – PLECHANOVÁ, Běla (eds.), Praha 2006, 51.

14 Ibidem, 49.

15 Lidové noviny, 1999, Year 12, No 22, 27 January.

Prague.¹⁶ Only in the 1990s the Czechs fully realized the actual global role of English as the key international language. At the same time, they recognized the limits of German as a very important language of broader communication, although only within the Central and Eastern Europe. This fact required an extension of English learning outside Prague, namely to elementary schools and other types of high schools, namely in grammar schools. This is why English, in the school year of 1997/98, eventually became the most frequently taught foreign language in the Czech Republic, thus shifting German to the second place.¹⁷ Yet, German maintained the first place in the foreign language education until the end of the 20th Century in all regions neighbouring with Germany and Austria.¹⁸

Conclusion

In the 20th Century, in particular in 1939–1945 and 1948–1989, the Czech Republic experienced some very strict language policies. Whereas in the first aforesaid period German was clearly preferred, the Russian language took over in the second period. The policy of pursuing German language somewhat followed up to 1918 and actually to the period of the First Republic. The pursuit of the Russian language was a complete novelty for this language had no significant tradition in foreign language education at Czech schools. Although this policy of enforcing Russian language lasted for forty years, it did not manage to obtain a clearly dominant position of the first foreign language within the Czech society. As opposed to German, Russian did not have a broader application at that time. This would lead to a situation where the older generations which had not learnt Russian at school saw no reason to learn it because they could get by with German when necessary. Even those who learnt Russian as the first language realized the advantage of speaking German. Both languages faced displeasure of the Czechs within the monitored periods, i.e. German during the Protectorate and Russian especially after 1968. It may be claimed that the underlying reluctance to learn this language, which was so unpopular for political reasons, persisted for approximately twenty years following the change of the regime. In the Czech environment, this applies to both German and Russian. German ceased to be a generally unpopular language in the mid 1960s, and after twenty years Russian, which almost disappeared from Czech schools at the beginning of the 1990s, took the third place in foreign language learning at elementary schools – although far behind German but ahead of French.¹⁹ The interest in learning English language grew within the Czech society particularly after the end of the 1930s, despite the fact that English was not supported whatsoever by any government policies in effect in 1939–1945 and 1948–1989. Yet, once the restrictive government policies ceased to exist, English clearly became the third most widespread foreign language in the Czech Republic of the 1990s.²⁰ This means that in a certain part of the society, particularly among university graduates, the government language

16 HNÍZDO, 48.

17 NEUSTUPNÝ, J.V. –NEKVAPIL, Jiří, 27.

18 HNÍZDO, 52.

19 DNES, 2009, Year 20, 3 March.

20 Lidové noviny, 1999, Year 12, No 22, 27 January.

policy was amended by self-learning, which well reflected the language behaviour of the Czechs. This of course did not apply only to English in the mid-20th Century but also to other languages, in particular German. Therefore, the language competence of the Czech society in the 1990s did not reflect the attempts of the government language policies applied before 1989 but it represented a certain compromise between the interests of these policies to assert certain languages, and the actual opinion of the Czechs regarding the importance of the individual languages. The consequence of that was the fact that German remained the main foreign language of the Czechs throughout the 20th Century.

Abstract

The article concentrates on state language policies and language behaviour of the Czech people in the 20th Century, particularly within the period of 1939–1989. In this period, we can speak about a restrictive, non-liberal state language policy, which was distinctively different in comparison to a previous historical period and a period which came later. The article tries to show that these policies are only partly successful, because equally important is a concrete language behaviour of the society. Reactions of Czech people to a restrictive language policy in 1939–1945 and 1948–1989 had some common aspects; mostly from political reasons a rejection of favourite language of state policy, in the first period of German and in the second period of Russian. But in general, the results of these interactions between the state language policy and language behaviour of Czech people were very different in roles and positions of both languages in the Czech society of the 20th Century. On the one side Russian, despite of forty years of a privileged position in an education system, never had been the first language of wider international communication for the Czechs, on the other side German had stayed in this position for the whole 20th Century. Reluctance to learn German lasted for clear political reasons among Czech people relatively a short period of time, from the end of 1930s till the beginning of 1960s. In other periods of the 20th Century, the Czech people were aware of the importance to learn German, even during a communist regime. Practical reasons for learning German were for the Czech people more important than an ideological aspects of the state language policy. The article shows that knowledge of foreign languages in society of a concrete historical period is not strictly only a mirror of a state language policy of the same historical period, but it has been influenced also by language behaviour of the society of that time.

Keywords

government language policy, linguistic behaviour, the Czechs, role of foreign languages

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