

## **Bohemian English**

Given the geographical location of the Czech Republic and its ten million inhabitants, knowledge of English as the lingua franca of the globalised world is essential. However, as a result of historical political circumstances, it has not always been so. In the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, our territory belonged to the AustroHungarian Empire and that is why fluency in German was required for the educated. Apart from German, grammar schools required their students to take classes in Latin, Greek, and French. That is not to say that there was no interest in English; however, English played only a minor role and, as a consequence, the number of quality books for learners of English was very limited. These used a grammarian approach which forced students to use word-byword translation from the mother tongue into the target language, and to memorise grammatical rules and vocabulary. It is no surprise that students were not motivated to study hard. This situation persisted until the Second World War. After the Nazis withdrew from Czechoslovakia, the situation changed as there was no longer any interest in studying German, which represented the language of the much-hated invaders. The focus shifted from German to French and to English, and, last but not least, to Russian. Thanks to the “Russian support action plan” which was requested by the Czechoslovak president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the government introduced Russian as a foreign language option at secondary schools with the argument that Russian, like Czech, belongs to Slavonic languages and, therefore, it would also be easier for Czech students to master it. However, the choice of foreign languages at secondary education institutions depended to a large extent on the attitude of the principal and on the availability of qualified teachers. As Czech universities were closed down during the Second World War, there was a total lack of young professional teachers, especially in the non-metropolitan areas.

A very fundamental change in the instruction of English in the Czech Republic came with the 1989 “Velvet Revolution” which was led by students. Although some political changes were rather radical and meant a transformation from a totalitarian system into democracy, the education system changed only gradually. It was very difficult to switch from a Soviet-oriented education system to a modern model which would provide instruction in accordance with Western standards and methods of teaching. There was a substantial problem with a lack of fully-qualified Czech teachers of English. Native speakers available in the Czech lands were beneficial but they were not trained in second language acquisition

and methodology. As a consequence, enthusiasm for being able to teach English often acted as a substitute for fully-fledged training as a teacher. Nevertheless, the 1990s and the turn of the millennium witnessed a massive interest in learning English as a second language. It was supported by modern technologies, the accessibility of teaching materials published abroad, and exchange programmes. In the early 1990s, Czech universities registered many applications for majors in English. Although the enthusiasm for studying English for a university degree has slightly decreased recently because students now prefer natural sciences due to the job market situation, some students still apply to major in foreign languages in specialisations such as translation and interpreting, hoping to work at European institutions. This trend is supported by the fact that there are hardly any white-collar job opportunities which do not require fluency in English. Consequently, the instruction of English in the Czech Republic starts very early, often as early as in nurseries and kindergartens, and accompanies Czech pupils through their elementary and secondary schools as there is a requirement of the Ministry of Education of the Czech Republic to pass the school-leaving exam (equivalent to British 'A' levels) in at least one foreign language, the choice most often being English. Therefore, secondary school graduates have a fairly good command of English and approximately ten percent of them even acquire Cambridge Certificates which enable them to apply to study abroad.

As regards the teaching of English at the tertiary level, due to the historical circumstances of the country, there have been three traditional centres: Charles University in Prague (established in 1347), Palacký University in Olomouc (established in 1573), and Masaryk University in Brno (established in 1919). These three universities are the most prestigious and oldest in the country, therefore, they recruit the most talented and motivated candidates. In addition, they are geographically distributed in the major urban areas: Prague being the capital of the country in the heart of central Europe, Olomouc being in the middle of the east region which is easily accessible from many parts of the country and Poland and Slovakia as well, and Brno serving the south-east part of the country and Slovakia, Hungary and Austria, making the universities international. Furthermore, the study of English as a degree programme has always rested on the individual prestigious professors. They have formed their linguistic and literary schools which have attracted many students based on the academic erudition of the professors at the given university. For example, at

Charles University in Prague, the founding father of English philology in Czechoslovakia was Vilém Mathesius. Although he originally studied German and French, in 1903 he was advised by his professors to concentrate on English.<sup>1</sup> His approach was rather unusual for the time as he viewed the language from a synchronic rather than diachronic perspective, which prefers to see language as a structure. Because of illness, he was unable either to read or write and, therefore, he had to lecture from the top of his head without any notes, which greatly impressed the students. Their number was at first very limited, approximately nine majors per academic year, which is rather surprising, given the fact that Charles University was the only tertiary institution in the country providing degree studies in English philology. Mathesius was a very strict but devoted teacher. He profoundly influenced two of his students, namely Josef Vachek and Ivan Poldauf, who later helped to establish English departments at the distinguished universities in Brno and Olomouc. Together with Roman Jakobson, Jan Mukařovský and René Wellek and others, Mathesius was one of the founding fathers of the Prague Linguistic Circle, which came to international prominence in the 1930s. Today, Prague English studies flourish under the leadership of Martin Hilský, who translated all Shakespeare's plays into Czech, has helped to establish the Summer Shakespeare festival at Prague Castle, and was awarded an MBE.

After Prague, in the 1920s Masaryk University in Brno became the only other English teaching institution in the country serving large parts of Czechoslovakia. The department there was in close contact with the Prague professors and Jan Firbas, a former student of Vachek, managed to publish his fundamental work *Functional Sentence Perspective in Written and Spoken Communication* through Cambridge University Press (1992), which was an achievement hardly heard of in the Czech Republic. The only native speaker familiar to all Czech students of English is Don Sparling, a Canadian lecturer who arrived in the late 1960s and stayed. He established the Canadian Studies centre and directed theatrical productions in English with the amateur company the Gypsywood Players. His book *English or Czenglish: How to Avoid Czech Idioms in English* is based on the many mistakes and 'false friends' produced by Czech learners of English and makes for amusing reading.

Historically speaking, my alma mater Palacký University in Olomouc is the second oldest university in the Czech Republic, having been founded in 1573, however, it was only

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<sup>1</sup> Josef Vachek, *Vzpomínky českého anglisty* (Jinočany: H&H, 1994), p. 5.

third among the tertiary institutions in the Czech Republic to establish a fully-fledged university English philology programme. After the Second World War, when Czech universities reopened in 1946, Palacký University responded to the necessity of opening an English programme in Olomouc as the country lacked professionals fluent in English who would stimulate international trade and the Czech economy. The rector invited graduates from Prague who were willing to come to Olomouc and lecture in linguistics. Literature and practical language were taught by teachers supported by the British Council and some classes were even taught by the wives of former Czech pilots who had served in the RAF and returned home after the war.<sup>2</sup> The teachers had to compile their own textbooks as there were no books available. Although the study of literature was based on memorisation of facts, discussions of the analysis of assigned texts provided the very few opportunities that there were to speak in English.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the number of staff members at the English department at Palacký slowly grew. The communist regime once again influenced university programmes in English. For example, Jaroslav Macháček's career was interrupted after the Russian occupation of 1968. With the help of friends he at least managed to obtain a job in a boiler house at the teaching hospital in Olomouc. In spite of his linguistic expertise, he had to accept a blue-collar job, otherwise he would have been imprisoned as it was required by law to be employed. The long and lonely hours spent at his work site were filled with reading the *Oxford Etymological Dictionary*, illegally teaching distinguished medical doctors English, and translating various texts for them. His immense knowledge of English diction and language continues to surprise new generations of students. My own first encounter with Macháček was as a first-year student of English and German philology on my first day at Palacký. It was eight o'clock on a gloomy September Monday morning, and the historical auditorium was packed with students. All were eager to start their studies at Palacký University as the entrance competition to win a place at this institution was very tough. Suddenly, a man with a beard walked in and swiftly ascended the few steps to the speaker's rostrum. He adjusted the microphone and began his lecture about English phonetics. The students were electrified by their expectations and at the same time they were surprised as

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<sup>2</sup> "History of the Department", Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Palacký University, Czech Republic <<http://anglistika.upol.cz>> [accessed 3 May 2019]

most of them had never listened to a Czech person who was so eloquent in English. Only a few students were able to follow the very demanding lecture and some did not believe that Macháček was not a native speaker.

As has been pointed out, English departments in the Czech Republic have always depended on key professional figures. Palacký University is lucky to have Jaroslav Peprník whose knowledge of Anglophone cultures and history is so deep that students over the generations have nicknamed him the “walking Encyclopaedia Britannica”. He connects the past and the present at the department, as, though still in his nineties, he continues his routine at the department, never using the lift to the third floor so as to remain fit. His profound and superb command of English derives from his habit of reading *The Times*, which he has practised for many years. He has been a strict but popular teacher for many generations of students. His lexicology lessons always started with a translation dictation. He would bring the latest issue of *The Times* and in perfect Czech fluently dictate what he was actually reading in English. As a second step, we were to compare our translation to the original. In this way, we learnt native English collocations and the British political, social and historical context, and became familiar with the latest events in the British Isles. Peprník strongly believes that “a good student must be conscientious and must have the patience to spend many hours learning a foreign language.” He also remembers a little episode: “Once I was approached by a student who came to thank me. He completed three of my English books and was accepted to a university, which he was very happy about. On the other hand, there were grammar school graduates who studied English for six years and failed the university entrance exams. It was a great honour for me to learn about the successful student.” This story proves Peprník’s belief that “it all depends on the student’s talent but, more importantly, on his eagerness to study hard ... to put it bluntly, the student must have a *Sitzfleisch* (i.e. have patience to sit for hours studying).”<sup>3</sup> I can testify to that as I spent a lot of time memorising endless vocabulary lists from his demanding two-volume *English for University English Philology Students*.

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<sup>3</sup> Vít Pohanka, „Anglista navzdory všem protivenstvím,“ Interview for Czech National Radio. <https://www.radio.cz/cz/rubrika/panorama/jaroslav-peprnik-anglista-navzdory-vsemprotivenstvím>, 14 January 2019.

After the revolution of 1989, the system of tertiary education in the Czech Republic changed significantly due to the democratic principles that were adopted by the government. The university was able to invite distinguished international scholars and students alike. In addition, students and staff of Palacký's spend at least a semester teaching or studying abroad. At home, teaching literature at university remains a challenge today. The level of English students bring to the university varies greatly. Since Czech can never aspire to become a lingua franca, young people in the Czech Republic understand that a knowledge of English is desirable. The speech of the young generation includes many English words that have fully penetrated into Czech corpora as a result of globalisation and the influence of the mass media. My students profit greatly from the easy availability of the texts they are to study. This was not the case when I was a student and we had to plan well in advance which courses we would take. We had to order books from abroad and it took literally weeks for them to arrive which was better than under communism when Czechs were prohibited by the regime to order foreign books. Today's students do not lack enthusiasm and they are not shy about sharing their ideas. Another benefit for students is annotated versions of literary texts which help non-native speakers to understand the text that is being analysed better and, most importantly, the explanatory footnotes point out intertextual connections that my students would not otherwise be able to detect. An ambiguous source of help for Czech students of English is the film versions of major works of Anglophone literature. On the one hand, they hear 'proper' English, while on the other hand, after having watched the film, the students are reluctant to read the original literary text. Interestingly, students prefer eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature to postmodern texts, which are difficult for them to understand and whose style they do not appreciate. In order to improve language skills, Palacký University encourages creative writing courses. Palacký University has had a number of champions in the national slam poetry competition and has published the first anthology of Czech slam poetry in English.

As this "View from Here" documents, the history of English teaching in the Czech lands is very much based on individual professors and their expertise. Had there not been strong leaders, English would not have become such a sought-after major at the university level. After twenty years of teaching, I enjoy the idea of seeing and meeting my former students in various professions and work positions. Wherever I go in the Czech Republic, there is always a graduate or two of the English programme, which gives me hope for the

future; in other words, English in the Czech Republic will survive no matter what the political regime is, as English is, after Czech, of course, the second best language in the world.

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