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CZECH DIGLOSSIA AND LANGUAGE MANAGEMENT

Some recent contributions to our understanding of the development of the Czech language in the 17th to 19th centuries are of general interest for language management. J. Marvan's comments in his book on Rosa (**Wenceslaus Johannis Rosa Čechořečnost**, ed. by J. Marvan, Munich : Otto Sagner, 1983) and a stimulating study by Alexandr Stich **On the Beginnings of Modern Standard Czech** (hidden in a publication entitled **Explizite Beschreibung der Sprache und Automatische Textbearbeitung**, Probleme und Perspektiven der Satz- und Textforschung Vol.XIV, Prague: Matematicko-fyzikální fakulta KU, 1987)[1], throw new light on the question.

Among the European languages the development of Czech has a special relevance for societies which are currently completing their modernization. Czech was one of the first Slavic languages to be committed to writing and in the 14th century was already a fully developed literary language, which served a wide range of communicative functions. In the 15th century it became the medium in which much of the thought of the religious reformer John Hus was communicated, and reached a highly refined form in the work of the educationalist Comenius (1592-1670). However, its functional range was strictly limited in the course of the 17th century. These limitations, which were the result of the loss of political independence of the Czech State in the period 1620-1918, led to the replacement of Czech by German in almost all domains, except for spoken communication of the masses and in literature - mostly of religious content - addressed to the less educated. The situation started changing by the end of the 18th century and the revival of Czech quickly proceeded in the course of the 19th century, when the functional range of the language was gradually restored. The process culminated in 1918 when, with the creation of Czechoslovkia. Czech and Slovak became the only official languages of the country. Throughout the 19th century, standardization, codification, development of modern vocabulary, stylistic development and many other processes, common in contemporary Third World languages, took place. The need for directed language development was much stronger than in most other established European languages of the period, and the language management measures taken were much more radical.

It is important to realize that in the course of the Czech "language revival" the new Standard was codified on the basis of the literary language of the end of the 16th century. Since the spoken language had changed, a clear diglossia resulted and has persisted until the present: the high variety is Standard Czech (spisovná čeština), while the position of the low variety is occupied by Common Czech (obecná čeština), a supra-dialectal variety commonly spoken in Bohemia and more recently also in Moravia. Common and Standard Czech differ to a considerable extent in morphology as well as in lexicon. Broadly speaking, Common Czech is used in informal conversation, while Standard Czech is used in writing and in formal speaking[2].

The 18th century, in particular, has traditionally been referred to by Czech hitorians as the Period of Darkness (doba temna), in which the language was supposed to be in decay and the literary tradition practically interrupted. This thesis has commonly been used in Czech language management to legitimize the selection of the 16th century language as the base of the Standard. According to this view the decay was so profound that no way remained for the new Standard to be based on the language of the end of the 18th century.

In the above-mentioned paper Stich points to the fact that the so-called decay of the written Czech of the 18th century has never been documented or proved. It is true that certain changes occurred,

but such changes, rather than representing a destabilising intrusion of dialectal norms, consisted in the rapprochement between the written language and the spoken language of the period and can therefore be considered a case of normal language development.

It is interesting to note that a similar position was taken by Marvan in his call for the rehabilitation of the Czech grammarian and author of the second half of the 17th century, Václav Rosa. Marvan reminds us that in his grammar of Czech, published in 1672, Rosa accepted without hesitation some of the features of the contemporary spoken language as standard, for example, the new adjectival endings novej (m), nová (f), nový (n) "new" for the older/Standard nový (m), nová (f), nové (n)).

Stich claims that the return at the end of the 18th century to the morphology and lexical base of the 16th century Czech was not the only possible solution and was motivated purely by "social, cultural, etc., circumstances". A course towards a Modern Standard based on a less archaic variety of language was linguistically feasible, should the personnel involved have followed the progressive trends already existing in the written language of the 18th century.

The phenomenon of diglossia was treated descriptively by Bohuslav Havránek in 1936 (in **Československá vlastivěda**, 2nd series). However, it has never become a target of any extensive discussion in language management within the Prague School. When in 1960 Petr Sgall (in **Voprosy jazykoznanija**, 1960, No.2, pp.11-20) suggested that diglossia presented a serious problem to a large part of the speech community, Havránek and others rallied to the "defense of the Standard Language"[3]. The problem is still there: even though new revisions of the codified norms normally make small concessions towards the Common Language (as, for example, the new Academic grammar of Czech), the gap is still enormous and renders active use of the written language and of formal spoken language very difficult for those with limited education and little opportunity to practice. The situation was worse before World War II, and presumably still much worse in the 19th century. The elites/middle classes who had the advantage of higher education - and this included the personnel in language management, such as members of the Prague School - were of course unaffected by the problem.

Let me summarize this brief note in three points. Firstly, diglossia developed in Bohemia over the last 200 years and, on the whole, remained unchallenged. Secondly, this not only did not slow down because of modernization, but developed in the course of its process. Thirdly, although unchallenged by grammarians and language treatment personnel, diglossia did continue to present itself as a major social problem, limiting in fact the access by the lower classes in society to written and formal spoken communication.

It would seem that the retention of diglossia in present day Third World countries does not necessarily run against the requirements of economic and social development. However, it would also seem that its effects are hardly beneficial from the point of view of the democratization of society.

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Notes

1. It also contains an interesting paper on graphemic purism by Josef Vachek and an English translation of an older paper on code switching by Pavel Trost, to whom the volume is dedicated.
2. Understandably, a considerable degree of mixing takes place in semi-formal situations, such as academic discourse.
3. For a bibliography see Sgall's paper and Havránek's "concluding remarks" in the journal **Slovo a slovesnost**, 24/4, (1963).