

Chapter 14

Markets, know-how, flexibility and language management: The case of the Vietnamese migrant community in the Czech Republic

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1 Introductory remarks

Our research of emerging multilingualism in the Vietnamese migrant community in the Czech Republic presented several challenges. For one thing, the community is socially and demographically strongly diversified and so are the situations in which members of the community interact linguistically (“language situations”). Most adult members, however, are essentially monolingual, speaking a very different language amidst a monolingual host country. On the other hand, as most of them are people involved in private small businesses, we worked with the assumption that economic factors played an important role in all aspects of their lives. Therefore, we paid special attention to economic factors underlying and co-framing this variety of language situations that generated a number of different language management responses and strategies.

With such a research perspective, we were (1) particularly sensitive to the ongoing discourses on Bourdieu’s concept of “linguistic capital” or “cultural capital” (to the extent it is concerned with language) and (2) very careful about our ways of using economic terminology in dealing with language problems. As a matter of fact, we wanted to make sure that our economics-related terms were used in their truly economic rather than some metaphoric sense (see Grin 2000, referring to Bourdieu 1982).

Trying to make sense of the complicated picture of language situations at hand and the intricacies of current terminology, we ended up rethinking some basic concepts in the Language and Economy field.

Whatever the legitimate reasons for Bourdieu to have developed his concepts of “cultural capital”, “symbolic capital” and “linguistic capital” and

shown the ways they can relate to “economic capital”, one thing has become clear: what Bourdieu had in mind, were linguistically coherent societies where language varieties were conditioned only by class or region within a nation state (Thompson 1992). However, the case of Vietnamese migrants in Czech society is very different, and, therefore, it is difficult to employ Bourdieu’s concept of “linguistic capital”, with all its implications and functions, as a useful analytical tool.

As a matter of fact, the competence of individual migrant speakers in the language of the host country and their ensuing communicating performance was in most cases more or less severely limited. Most benefits associated with “linguistic capital” as described by P. Bourdieu were out of those speakers’ reach. Yet, irrespective of this, many of them were economically successful in the market niche they were able to cut out for themselves in Central Europe, and we have found little evidence that economic success is directly linked to language competence or vice versa.

This being so, we prefer to strictly distinguish a successful acquisition of another language from a successful business performance in the market place where that language is dominant. The concept of linguistic capital in such a language situation loses its explanatory force.

On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence that competence in the language of the host country or in other important Western languages is highly valued by members of the Vietnamese migrant community. In many cases, though not always, there is a significant demand for products that can enhance language competence. This suggests that language competence and communicative competence or skills, however limited, should be seen as having economic value.

The appropriate economic category that includes all kinds of skills is labour. It is in the nature of skills that they have to be acquired or learned and that they can vary in degree of possession. The practical value of language skills, unlike many other practical skills, consists in that they increase the flexibility of their bearer.

In the case of monolingual individuals in their own monolingual country better language skills bring about higher flexibility in terms of class and profession or job. We would call this “vertical flexibility”. Competence in a foreign language can also add to a person’s vertical flexibility within the society of his or her own country, but in the case of actual or potential migrants or expatriates it brings about larger territorial (may be even global) flexibility that we would call “horizontal” (see also Deprez et al.

2004)¹. At the same time, it is clear that neither vertical nor horizontal flexibility is the sole result of language competence. Many other skills are required to successfully move on any of the two scales. Some of those skills are being acquired through language some are not. But seeing language as part of the skills field is of advantage in analyzing complicated language situations brought about by the arrival of migrants from distant languages and cultures.

As far as the relationship of these skills to economic capital is concerned, there is no direct link. However, skills recognized as valuable in the market can be sold and bought for their respective market value, thus becoming goods exchangeable for money. Any monetary income can, of course, be converted into investment, or economic capital. This process, however, requires special skills that have little to do with language.

The association of language skills with social mobility, rather than with immediate economic success, does not imply that language is less important in the lives of economic migrants. On the contrary: Economic success (decent and sustainable income) is in most cases seen as but the first step on the ladder of social mobility, stretched over decades and often two or three generations. The bigger the difference of the migrants' own language and that of the host country, the more difficult it is for the migrant to acquire language skills permitting to climb the social ladder. This social endeavour is almost by definition a matter of individual planning and management. Because language is central to its success, language planning and language management take a very important place in the lives of individual migrants and families, as it will be demonstrated in the section on language management.

Another source of inspiration underlying our approach has been the concept of Knowledge Economy and its close association with the process of globalization. On the one hand we were constantly confronted with observations and analyses of language situations brought about by the global movement of capital in the form of investment to many regions of the Czech Republic, thus giving opportunity to local people to engage with the Knowledge Economy (Nekvapil and Sherman 2009a). On the other hand, we directly observed other language situations in the same territory that were clearly created by flows of people due to the workings of some

1 When analyzing the language autobiography of a young Philippine girl, Deprez et al. (2004: 32) bring to attention “cette association entre la mobilité géographique et mobilité (ascension) sociale”.

other aspects of the globalization process. These language situations seemed to occur beyond the fringes of the Knowledge Economy. However, discovering various language strategies used or designed by Vietnamese migrant families in order to acquire higher flexibility in both directions, horizontal and vertical, we came to understand that due to global movements of both capital and labour, the Knowledge Economy is bound to have not only a high-tech core but also a low end periphery.

One can put it the other way around, claiming that major language situations are brought about or substantially shaped by economic factors or processes. The point is that this can be seen not only on the global scale, as mentioned above, but on all levels down to the family and the individual speaker, as will be documented below. However, the lower the level on the vertical scale of language situations, the higher participation of various social – not purely economic – and even psychological factors can be observed in the workings of such situations.

Another strain of thought, inspired by F. Grin (2000), made us think of demand and supply of language-related products and services as part of particular language situations (Vasiljev 2008) and understand that supply of language-acquisition and communication-facilitation services may not be exclusively or always directly market-bound as it may depend on broader general- or language-policy considerations.

2 Data sources and methodology

One of us has been in quasi constant contact and interaction with Vietnamese citizens in former Czechoslovakia and in the present Czech Republic for fifty years (since 1959) and is well known to many members of the Vietnamese community as a fluent speaker of Vietnamese, a scholar familiar with Vietnamese language, history and culture and a rather frequent visitor to their country. Due to these circumstances, frequent contacts, often very informal, with a number of members of the community and on various occasions have been possible. Such occasions included casual meetings with shop owners in shops, unplanned encounters on bus or train stations and on trains, family gatherings with relatives and friends on death anniversaries of an ancestor, community Lunar New Year or the Children's Festival of the mid-Autumn Full Moon celebrations, negotiations with Czech owners of shops or apartments, up to participation in formal meetings of the Association of Vietnamese citizens in Czech Republic with visiting Vietnamese state dignitaries.

Having in mind that the main purpose of our research is to understand the various economic and other factors bringing about the existence of certain language situations that call for certain language management responses on the one hand, and to explain how certain levels of language competences make it possible or not to take part in various economic processes on the other hand, we found ethnographic methods to be the most efficient way to elicit data relevant to our subject.

The method most used was either simple observation including listening to interactions in Vietnamese or in Czech, or participant observation in which the researcher became himself a partner in interactions, while observing the circumstances in which the interactions occurred.² Taking notes as soon as possible after the participation in interactions was crucial. Notes have been kept in a field diary written in Czech, sometimes with relevant quotes in Vietnamese.

Voice recording was rarely possible, but it was occasionally used in more formal settings, as in a focus group discussion with Vietnamese high school students in Cheb.

Semi-structured interviews were used to establish language biographies in order to understand the evolution of language competences in individuals as well as a means of reconstructing language situations that existed only in the past.

Data were analysed mainly to elicit relevant content. Where necessary and technically possible, additional information and clarifications were gathered through follow-up interviews or further participant observations.

Some data (statistics, descriptions of events, documents, comments) were gathered through desk research of publications and web sites in Czech as well as in Vietnamese.

3 The foundations of the Vietnamese migrants' economic success

The presence of Vietnamese citizens in the Czech Republic and former Czechoslovakia has a history of over fifty years. Based on various co-operation agreements between the governments of the two countries, it eventually comprised undergraduate and post-graduate students, vocational students and last but not least, since 1980, thousands of guest workers. Groups of Vietnamese vocational students doing their three years practical

² An example of our participant observation, as recorded in our field diary, can be seen in Note 12.

training as qualified labour along with organized groups of guest workers spread throughout the country. “Wherever there is a factory chimney, there is a group of Vietnamese workers” ran a contemporary saying much repeated in Vietnamese circles in Czechoslovakia.

The various classes of Vietnamese students had acquired rather good Czech communication skills at the Czech schools. Unlike them, the guest workers had almost no formal Czech language acquisition courses, relying solely on the services of Czech speaking Vietnamese organizers and translators, in most cases former vocational students, and their own communication efforts amidst Czech co-workers. The presence of Vietnamese citizens was strictly managed by governments of both countries, nobody was allowed to overstay their four-year or seven-year contracts (of guest workers and vocational students, respectively), and no interethnic marriages were encouraged or supported. Fifty percent of their earnings were allowed to be sent back to their families in form of goods bought in the Czech market.

Most Vietnamese workers were known as very hardworking people, ready to work long hours to earn higher wages or to tailor jeans trousers for sale to their Czech co-workers. There was no stable Vietnamese community in the usual sense of the word, but there was a considerable amount of bridging social capital (Sirovátka and Mareš 2008 with reference to Woolcock 1998.) accumulated on both, Vietnamese and Czech, sides. The Vietnamese were also a highly visible minority, as they moved around the country on weekends to visit their relatives, former co-students or co-workers, co-members of military units or same-area compatriots. Although their number was estimated at about 30 thousand throughout the 1980s, the rumour spread that they were half a million.

Then, together with the change of the political system and the transformation of the Czechoslovak economy at the end of 1989, this system collapsed. Most of the guest workers and vocational students returned, at least for some time, back to Vietnam during the next three years. There are no reliable statistical data, however, about how many stayed behind. At the same time some also came over from neighbouring countries, as from Germany. Those who stayed lost their original jobs. They quickly decided to turn to a completely different type of activity: private business. Many of them spoke Czech well enough to be able to join efforts with managers or co-workers of Czech factories who felt that they also may soon lose their jobs and started to look for new avenues. While their Czech partners had the advantage of having a solid legal existence as Czech nationals, their Vietnamese counterparts brought in important business skills, money and goods that could be sold in the Czech market.

In fact, Vietnam had a head start in market economy of at least five years, officially since the Communist Party of Vietnam introduced their new market-oriented economic policies in 1986, but practically even several years before that. And most importantly, many urban families in North Vietnam had a century old experience that private business is the only way for a family to make a fortune. Vietnamese guest workers and former vocational students were deeply aware of this sentiment and took practical part in their family endeavours by sending back goods that their family in Vietnam would use to sell. On the other hand, even skilled workers had little chance to get a good job in Vietnamese state-owned factories struggling with lack of financial resources. And with the change of the official policies, factories in Vietnam were allowed to export goods on their own. They started to look for agents abroad, very often their former employees, to sell their production, mostly garments. A Vietnamese factory hand from a small town in Central Bohemia told us proudly in 1991, amazed at seeing that many Vietnamese officials in charge of guest workers were starting their own companies: "I have been doing foreign trade for the last three years!" His use of the official term "ngoại thương" (foreign trade) for his activities that could not have been legal by any standards of the time is highly significant.

In Vietnam at that times the currency of all real estate transactions was gold and that of private business operations the US dollar. Vietnamese workers who could not convert all their earnings into goods to be officially shipped back to their families bought US dollars on the Czech black market. "The single biggest mistake of Vietnam's government in the 1980s was," a successful Vietnamese businessman and former guest worker told us recently "that they had not negotiated with the Czech government for us to be payed in US dollars, the same way as the Cubans were. We would have been much better off."³

With the movement of goods back and forth an unofficial system of clearing operations by telephone developed between Vietnamese citizens in the Czech Republic (and, no doubt, elsewhere) and their families in Vietnam, whereby a family would pay the agreed amount to another family in Vietnam, while their respective members abroad would exchange goods upon the reception of telephone confirmation that the mutually agreed transaction between their families in Vietnam has, indeed, been performed. The key elements in these operations were family bonds and trust. Other important

3 Interviewed in Vietnamese on May 19, 2008.

skills and attitudes were also at hand: knowledge how to calculate margins, understanding the market forces, ability to bargain, to press business associates and clients to pay whatever they failed to pay, and above all, to work hard in adverse weather or under other difficult conditions and to develop business by careful steps. This can be considered their “transcultural capital” as conceived by Meinhof and Triandafyllidou (2006).

A necessary and very essential element was, of course, the very liberal policy of the Czechoslovak (in 1991 – 1992) and Czech (since 1993) governments encouraging foreign nationals to do private business in the Czech market.

So the Vietnamese succeeded to cut out for themselves a niche in the market: sale of inexpensive garments to the low end Czech customer in open-air markets at a time of rising unemployment and income insecurity of many elderly people. But the most lucrative markets developed at border transition points between the Czech Republic and Germany or Austria, where the bulk of the customers were coming over from those two countries. A former guest worker who built a romantic wooden restaurant on stilts on a river side in Central Vietnam and a two-storey brick family house that could fully compare to family houses in Czech towns, told one of us in his home town in 2000: “I and my Czech friend near Domažlice are so grateful to president Havel who allowed us to get that prosperous.”

Some language skills were, indeed, needed in establishing this business network, but they were by far not the most essential. In fact, some fortunes were made by people who understood very little Czech, but had money to invest and business skills as described. In the open-air markets themselves goods could be sold with a very rudimentary knowledge of language, Czech or German, often heavily mispronounced. So when family members were brought over in the process of re-uniting families, or more importantly, with business permits of their own, they could easily find work and earn their living alongside their long established families and friends, even when they did not have any formal Czech language training.

In matters of language acquisition Czech authorities were no less *laissez-faire* than they were liberal in their attitude towards private enterprise. No government-initiated Czech language courses were organized. Moreover, contact with Czech customers in open-air markets and supermarket style shops, where goods are displayed for the customer freely to choose without any need to ask for additional information, gives only a limited opportunity to learn the local language (basic greetings, basic cardinal numerals, words for sizes, colours, some few foods, etc.).

Most, if not all Vietnamese private businesses in the Czech Republic are family based. On the one hand, family members can best be trusted and, on the other, they are the least expensive and most useful work force, too, because they can help out not only in business facilities, but also with household chores and they can stay with the family in the same apartment.⁴ There is also often pressure from the larger family back in Vietnam to create opportunities for some of their off-spring to get exposure to foreign cultures by staying and working with their relatives abroad. When the businesses expand, such additional help is not unwelcome. However, this can create a vicious circle: the need to keep or create jobs for relatives who already came over.

To conclude this section: A fairly large part of the Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic is Vietnamese monolinguals. However, each family business has at least one core member who speaks enough Czech to be able to organize their business. These people are usually former students and vocational students. As for more sophisticated contacts with Czech authorities many of them have to rely on the assistance of professional translators, most often former students or vocational students who had served as interpreters responsible for guest worker groups in the 1980s. Both these groups can be seen as Vietnamese and Czech bilingual speakers. Some family members speak a little Czech, which they were able to learn over many years of dealing with Czech customers. Many family members who arrived later speak very little Czech just to be able to oversee their goods and customers at garment stalls or shops. The same goes for their ability to communicate in German in language situations that require them to communicate with German-speaking customers. Therefore, young people of the next generation sometimes combine their studies in high school with afternoon and weekend work as shop assistants in their family business. Czech customers then appreciate their good Czech.⁵

4 Observations in a Vietnamese shopkeeper family in České Budejovice during September 2007 – June 2008.

5 Several participant observations of Miss H. in charge of her mother's shop in the afternoon hours in České Budějovice, while she was student at a local grammar school, and during weekends after she started her university studies in another city, over spring 2006 and during 2007.

4 Demographic data: General

At present, the Vietnamese are the third largest immigrant community in the Czech Republic and the largest from outside Europe. Their numbers have been steadily growing from 9633 in 1994 to 34170 in 2004 (Kocourek and Pechová 2006: 104) and up to 55991 persons as at May 31, 2008,⁶ thus easily surpassing the peak of Vietnamese presence (some 30 thousand persons) in former communist Czechoslovakia.⁷

This growth can be explained by the fact that on the basis of commercial success a new stable Vietnamese resident community came into being in the Czech Republic. This community consists mostly of small business people and a limited number of rich entrepreneurs. The community has been steadily rising due to a process of reuniting families by bringing over family members from Vietnam and to a process of natural growth by giving birth to children in the new homeland. Since 2006 some impoverished business people turned to working as factory hands. Czech industry rediscovered the Vietnamese as a useful work force and also exporters of labour in Vietnam started to show interest in the Czech labour market.⁸

6 Czech Statistics Office: *Foreigners in the Czech Republic*. The corresponding numbers shown at the official website of the Ministry of Labour and Social Issues are, for 1997: 20950, 2000: 23556, 2005: 36832 and 2006: 40779. This data does not include ethnic Vietnamese who have become Czech nationals. According to a recent estimate by a senior Vietnamese community organizer, there may be, at present, up to 6000 Czech nationals of Vietnamese origin who are allowed to quit the Vietnamese and to acquire the Czech citizenship at their request. Such data is, however, not officially available. Children born from mixed Czech and Vietnamese parents cannot be statistically accounted for. The latest estimates put the number of Vietnamese citizens currently staying in the Czech Republic at about 60 thousand. Thus, their number almost tripled over the last 8 years. With slightly over 60% permanent residency, the Vietnamese are currently the second most stable foreign community (only surpassed by the Chinese with ca 65%. However, the number of the latter is only about 8% of the former).

7 It should be noted that Czechoslovakia was a country with some 15,5 million inhabitants, while the Czech Republic has a population of no more than 10 million.

8 According to data quoted by the Czech-Vietnam Society, more than 14 thousand Vietnamese citizens arrived to Czech Republic during 2007–2008. Bringing guest workers from Vietnam became suddenly a lucrative business for mediators in Vietnam and in the Czech Republic where profit of the mediators seems to

5 Demographic data: Second generation

The most notable development was the steady rise of a Vietnamese second generation. The second generation came into being from two groups of young children:

- a) Children who had lived in Vietnam and were brought to the Czech Republic in pre- school or early school age in the process of re-uniting families (sometimes referred to as the first-and-a-half generation), and
- b) Infants born in the Czech Republic.

According to the data of the (Czech) Institute for Information in Education, there were 4036 Vietnamese children at Czech elementary schools in the school year 2003/2004; while in the year 2005/2006 there were 3473 students at elementary schools and 1031 students at high schools with 1167 children going to kindergartens. It is difficult to say, how many of these children belong to the first-and-a-half generation, the second generation or even the first generation.

The authors tend to class as first generation immigrants all youth arriving in the Czech Republic as advanced teenagers though they may still start going to a Czech elementary school. The reason for us to do so is that the likelihood of being able to acquire flawless competence in Czech decreases with every year of age. As far as the first-and-a-half generation is concerned, they may be safely classed as second-generation immigrants as far as their competence in Czech is concerned, but they would have fewer problems with maintenance of their mother tongue. Statistically, however, these two subgroups are indistinguishable, unless individual language biographies are established.

The dynamics of development of the student population at a grammar school in Cheb (Eger), a town with the highest ratio of Vietnamese residents, is, nevertheless, rather revealing. According to data drawn from

have become the primary driving force. Most guest workers have been coming on a business visa without any intention or means to do business. In many cases they discovered upon their arrival how difficult it was to find a job. The situation was exacerbated in late 2008 with the beginning of the worldwide economic depression and drastic cuts in workforce, especially foreign. The presence of thousands of Vietnamese workers who do not speak any Czech and who, being heavily indebted as they often had to pay up to 12000 USD for the visa and journey, are unable and unwilling to go back to Vietnam suddenly became a serious social problem.

the statistics of the school⁹ the number of their Vietnamese students is growing as is shown in the following table:

Table 1. Statistics of Vietnamese students at Cheb grammar school

School year	Vietnamese students	School year	Vietnamese students
1999/2000	3	2003/2004	35
2000/2001	6	2004/2005	63
2001/2002	13	2005/2006	96
2002/2003	21	2006/2007	130

Because grammar schools receive students after their 5th grade at elementary school, the earliest students must have started their elementary education at the age of 6 in 1994–1995, thus being part of the first-and-a-half generation. Therefore, it is safe to expect that the earliest students born in the Czech Republic would have started their elementary education perhaps in 1999/ 2000 and come to grammar school five years later, in about 2004/2005. Since then there would be a mix of both groups.

This corresponds well with the data we have gathered at an elementary school in České Budějovice. All their Vietnamese children, 11 in 2005/ 2006, were born in the Czech Republic, the earliest two in 1993, eight in 1996 or later. The total number of students at the school was 1035 with only few individuals from ethnic backgrounds other than Czech (or Vietnamese as mentioned). There are over a dozen elementary schools in České Budějovice with one, two or three Vietnamese students each.

6 Language situations

6.1 Scattered settlements

The main demographic feature of the Vietnamese migrant community in the Czech Republic is still the fact that Vietnamese citizens are scattered all around the country. Up-to-date statistical data about the number of foreigners per region and nationality not being available, we can only base our conclusion on our own calculation from older data already quoted above.

⁹ Our field research at the Cheb grammar school was done in May 2007.

The distribution per county¹⁰ of the 4036 elementary school students in the school year of 2003/2004 (equivalent to 100%) was the following:

Pardubice 20.9%, Prague 15.1%, Karlovy Vary 14.8%; Ústí nad Labem 12.3%; Plzeň 8.0%; South Moravia 6.5%; Moravia-and-Silesia 5.7%, Central Bohemia 3.8%; South Bohemia 3.7%; Olomouc 2.2%; Liberec 2.2%, Hradec Králové 2.1%; Vysočina 1.4% and Zlín 1.3%.¹¹ These data can no doubt be associated with the number of Vietnamese families in each region. Before the recent surge in immigrants who have been coming as guest labour, most individual immigrants newly arriving from Vietnam depended on their family members and had to join them. Therefore, we can hypothesize that the influx of new immigrants tended to be evenly distributed between the existing families in each region. So the percentage of immigrant families per county should stay more or less the same.¹²

10 The Czech Republic consists of 13 counties and Prague, the capital.

11 Calculation based on data of the Institute for Information in Education quoted by Jan Černík (2006: 172).

12 One of us witnessed such an arrival of two new immigrants from Vietnam. We will quote from his field notes: „Sitting in a coffee bar at the Plzeň main train station on April 21, 2008, at about 7 p.m. I saw a slender Asian man, aged about 30, entering the bar and showing the young bar tender a small piece of paper. The girl shook her head as if she did not know or refused to answer. At this moment, I approached the man immediately and greeted him in Vietnamese. The man turned out to be Vietnamese, indeed. He showed me the piece of paper, a used train ticket from Prague to Plzeň with a lot of hand-written notes on it. There was a series of separate syllables written at the top part of the ticket in Vietnamese spelling: *de ne đơ đả đũ đả*. It couldn't make any sense to anybody not familiar with Vietnamese spelling rules and phonetics. It was obviously something noted from the sound of it. Thinking furiously, I concluded that it must be a name of a town or train station and guessed that it may mean *Železná Ruda*, a Czech town near the border with Bavaria, Germany (*Eisenstein* in German). I noted the right spelling on the man's ticket.... After explaining that I had learned Vietnamese at university in Czechoslovakia and have been to Vietnam, he took his mobile phone, dialled a number and talked in Vietnamese to a woman, saying: "I met a *Tây* (Westman, colloquial for European) who speaks Vietnamese", and then passed the phone to me. I greeted the woman in Vietnamese and asked her in Czech whether she spoke Czech. "Yes, a little," she answered in Czech. Then I asked if she was in *Železná Ruda*. Indeed, she was. I told her in Vietnamese that we were now in Plzeň and I will show the man how to get there ... I invited the man to the ticket counter and asked the clerk which was the right train for *Železná Ruda*. She answered, go to Klatovy and change

The dispersal of the Vietnamese community and its spread over many places in the country has not only its historical roots, but also its present economic background. Up to 2000, most Vietnamese families used to sell in open-air markets, where Vietnamese stalls were located in clusters. When the Czech local authorities intensified their crack down on open-air markets, citing hygiene and respect for the traditional municipal environment as the main reasons, many families started to rent separate premises in town and moved their shops into “stone houses”. Such Vietnamese shops are now found in every large or small town. The economic reason behind this is the inability of many Czech shopkeepers to pay the high rents at a time when cheaper goods sold by supranational competitors such as Ahold, Billa, Tesco, Delvita, Spar, Kaufland and other chains undermine their income, the ability of many Vietnamese families to do so and the natural desire of house owners in lucrative high street locations to have reliable tenants.

The particular mix of inexpensive but often good quality garments, cigarettes, spirits, footwear and various other consumer goods made in China is so characteristic that the first shop signs read just “Vietnamese shop”. We can see these shop signs up to the present in many places, such as Tábor or the suburbs of České Budějovice, though most shops now carry more sophisticated signs focused on such notions as “inexpensive” or “fashionable”. All the sign boards, except those of the “nails studios”, the concept

the train there ... You have just four minutes left to catch the last train today, platform 2. North. The man bought two tickets to Železná Ruda. I wanted to take the shortest way to the trains via a subway but the man pointed to the other hall on top of the large stairs. So I rushed there with him to discover another Vietnamese, a short, plump man with three large handbags at his feet. The first man took two pieces and we rushed to platform 2. I verified the train with the flagman who showed us the right train and said: ‘Change trains in Klatovy’ which I translated into Vietnamese. (Participant observation by Ivo Vasiljev on April 21, 2008). It was obvious that the two men, not speaking a word of Czech or any other language apart from Vietnamese, must have arrived in Prague by air or train, then connected by phone with their relative or friend in Železná Ruda, noted down the name of the target town, having no idea of its spelling in Czech, and managed to buy the ticket for Plzeň, the right direction to go on. We have seen more of such travellers at Czech railway stations during 2008, though in most cases family members would rather come to the airport to meet their relatives.

and hardware of which were brought in 2007 and 2008 by Vietnamese business people from the USA, carry inscriptions in Czech.¹³

On top of the traditional shops with inexpensive garments and other consumer goods, Vietnamese business people also started a number of East Asian fast food outlets, even a chain called “Panda”, regular restaurants, fruit and vegetables stalls; the latter being especially appreciated by Czech customers. Even a chain of large sports wear and sports inventory shops named Sportisimo is owned by a rich Vietnamese entrepreneur, who also owns a fashionable East Asian restaurant in Prague. The on-the-floor employees seem to be only Czech, the style of the outlets having nothing to do with traditional Vietnamese garment shops. Some families operate groceries (dubbed “bôt” in local Vietnamese after the Czech word “potraviny” = food), especially those working long into the evening hours, called according to local Czech custom “Večerka” (Evening shop). One shop owner in Cheb showed even ingenious creativity in Czech language calling his shop “Zapomněnka” (What-you-may-have-forgotten shop).

While having their shops in town centres, many Vietnamese people stay in rented houses in the suburbs or in the adjacent villages. A local Vietnamese interpreter who used to be responsible for a group of guest workers in a local factory explained this behaviour: “When Vietnamese people live in apartments, they often encounter criticism and reproaches that their apartment has a bad smell. The Czech people cannot stand the smell of fish-sauce, seafood in general, etc. That’s why they prefer to rent separate country houses, where no such annoyance happens.”¹⁴ The Czech landlords whose grown up children have already moved out of their parents’ houses are only too happy to get an additional income. And the Vietnamese tenants are known for honouring their rental obligations and for keeping the premises in order.¹⁵

13 As will be mentioned below, the situation in Cheb and in the markets near the border crossings to Germany and Austria, the situation is different. Most customers being German, the presence of German inscriptions on the shop signs and show-windows is very prominent.

14 Participant observation on May 21, 2008. Explanation given to a Vietnamese visitor from Vietnam.

15 Interview with a Czech elementary school teacher in České Budějovice on April 21, 2006, interview with a Czech house owner in České Budějovice on April 20, 2009 who described the regularity and exactitude his new Vietnamese tenant shop keeper paid her monthly rent as “fantastic”.

This behaviour of Vietnamese families means that their offsprings go to local kindergartens and, for five years, to suburban or country elementary schools with ideal conditions for total immersion at school, and in their free time, they play with their Czech schoolmates and friends.

In addition, these scattered Vietnamese families pay great attention to all weekend markets in nearby districts, organized in villages that have their own church, on and around the name day of the Catholic patron saint of the local church. Local fairs are traditionally held on those days with thousands of visitors coming mainly for amusement attractions and shopping. These fairs, called “pouť” (originally: “pilgrimage”) invariably attract dozens of Vietnamese families who sell their traditional goods in rented stalls. The importance of this activity is shown by the fact that the Czech word “pouť”, mispronounced as “bâu”, has become part of the Czech variety of Vietnamese.

6.2 Trade centres – foci of high immigrant concentration

The SAPA Trading Centre (Trung tâm Thương mại SAPA) in Prague 4 – Lhotka that we are familiar with is situated in a space that previously belonged to a Czech meat-producing factory and is now owned by a consortium of rich Vietnamese shareholders. It is divided into many stalls rented out to individual Vietnamese (and some Chinese) companies and families who sell wholesale to Vietnamese shop and stall owners who come on each Saturday or Sunday from many places all over the country to replenish their stock for the coming week. Occasional customers may be Czech, Russian, Ukrainian or other business licence owners. The area is closed and guarded by Czech guards employed by the Vietnamese management so that access is accorded only to business customers (free access is, of course, guaranteed to Czech police, customs and business control officers). The area also includes a number of Vietnamese restaurants and offices of a number of Vietnamese and some Chinese companies as well as translation and IT centres, publishers of five weekly magazines in Vietnamese¹⁶, beauticians, travel agencies, a nursery, at least four private Vietnamese language teaching

16 They are: *Tuần tin mới* (Weekly news), *EU Vạn Xuân* (Ten Thousand Springs, the name of a Vietnamese independent state in 7th Century, the acronym EU was added to the name some time after the Czech Republic joined the EU in May 2004 to show that the weekly’s target readership included members of the Diaspora in the EU countries), *Tuổi trẻ* (Youth), *Xa xứ* (Far from Homeland) and, since September 2008, *Sức sống* (Strength of Life).

centres and classes helping Vietnamese students of Czech schools prepare for examinations in Czech language, mathematics and other subjects.

Offices of the Association of Vietnamese Citizens in the Czech Republic, the Association of Vietnamese Entrepreneurs in the Czech Republic, the Association of Vietnamese Buddhists and other organizations within the Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic are located here. This was the place of an official meeting of Prime Minister Nguyen Tien Dung with the Vietnamese community in September 2007 and of the Speaker of the Vietnamese National Assembly in April 2009. A small Buddhist shrine was consecrated here in August 2008 and a large plot of land purchased in the immediate vicinity of the area in order to build a proper Buddhist temple in the foreseeable future.

The predominant language in dealing with customers here and the working language of most residing companies and institutions is Vietnamese. Most inscriptions in public places inside the area or facing the outside street are in Vietnamese or in Vietnamese and Czech. People who work here, except for managers and people in translation services, rarely need to speak Czech. Therefore, this environment is not conducive to the acquisition of Czech language skills.

There are two large trade centres of this kind in Prague. Outside Prague, the best-known centre is the Dragoun Market in Cheb. However, people do not live in these centres, their homes are scattered over the city and nearby villages.

There is, nevertheless, a concentration of Vietnamese school children in a Czech elementary school near SAPA (Meteorologická 181, Praha 4), with almost 50 Vietnamese students, i. e. more than 10 percent of the total student population, who are otherwise, with few exceptions, Czech. Additional Czech classes are organized for Vietnamese children and youth who recently arrived from Vietnam, thanks to a grant by the Czech Ministry of Education, the only case of such an official grant in the Czech Republic (Šumský 2004: 1). This concentration of Vietnamese students in one school is due to the fact that children are brought along by parents who come to work at the SAPA Trading Centre.

6.3 Vietnamese markets at border crossing points

There are a number of Vietnamese open-air markets at border crossing points into Germany, Austria or Poland, such as Svatý Kříž near Cheb or Potůčky near Nejdek in the same region, Dubí near Teplice in the North

and Strážný near Prachatice in the Southwest, all on the border with Germany, Varnsdorf near the border with both Germany and Poland, Znojmo in South Moravia and Ostrava in Northeast Moravia near the border with Austria and Poland, respectively.¹⁷ These markets have been the focus of negative media attention for years due to regular crackdowns of Czech customs and police forces on various forms of illicit trade (with non-licensed cigarettes or alcohol and fabricated designer garments).

According to an estimate by a Vietnamese businessman the amount of Vietnamese trade done in those markets surpasses fifty percent of their total trade in the Czech Republic.¹⁸ The bulk of their customers there are German-speaking. All advertisements of goods being offered at the stalls are written in German. This environment offers the same basic communication opportunities as mentioned above, this time in German. According to our observation, some Vietnamese families, who do business at the border markets also operate shops and live in regional centres. Strážný is thus connected to Strakonice, České Budějovice etc.

6.4 Czech schools

Czech schools of all types should also be regarded as oases of a special type of language situations in which Vietnamese young students interact with their teachers and schoolmates, and more often than not, even with each other only in Czech in a highly stimulating learning environment. These

17 A new Czech study of one of those markets (Martínková 2009: 37) listed 26 of such markets along border crossings to Germany (markets on borders with Austria and Poland not being included).

18 A Vietnamese businessman interviewed in České Budejovice on May 19, 2008. There are, however, serious efforts by the Czech customs and other authorities to stop these traders from selling unauthorised wares. According to the Czech media, raids by customs officers and police are carried out on at least a weekly basis in one market or another. More stringent measures by the Czech authorities against selling of pirated goods at these Vietnamese markets were promised by the Czech Prime Minister, Mr. Topolánek, to the visiting trade minister of Bavaria, Ms. Emilia Müller in January 2008 (*Nordbayerischer Kurier*, January 19–20, 2008 – for this information we are indebted to Dr. Gudrun Ludwar-Ene). This may account for the increasing number of bankrupt Vietnamese business people who look for jobs in Czech factories (as confirmed by a Vietnamese business woman interviewed in České Budějovice on July 25, 2008).

micro-societies can rightly be considered a true example of what has been called Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) or Learning Communities (Deirdre 2005) where formal as well as implicit knowledge and skills are being transmitted and exchanged in both formal and informal ways. These are also environments where Vietnamese students of all ages acquire knowledge of foreign languages, especially English, followed by German and, at high school, by French and Spanish.

6.5 The town of Cheb

This town (known as Eger in German), with about 33 500 inhabitants, is very special in the Czech Republic due to the highest concentration of Vietnamese migrants. Their number is officially estimated at between 2,000 and 5,000.¹⁹ This extraordinary discrepancy in estimates must be due to the fact that there are Vietnamese citizens in many towns and villages in the region between Cheb and the adjacent markets at border crossings, so that there is a constant movement of people between all those places. In fact, many owners of “stone house” shops in Cheb seem to be registered in other townships in the region.²⁰ The township is also well known for its historical monuments and attracts the attention of many visitors from Germany. The Vietnamese markets and street shops are said to enhance the arrival of tourists from Germany. Some Vietnamese as well as Czech shops in the centre of the town advertise their goods in Czech as well as in German. Some of the local Vietnamese business people here are trilingual, though their knowledge of both Czech and German is rather limited.

7 Language management²¹

The language and communication problems of Vietnamese migrants are exacerbated by the fact that Vietnamese and Czech (or, to a lesser extent,

19 Our interview with the mayor of Cheb, Dr Svoboda on October 9, 2007.

20 Our observation on October 8, 2007.

21 This section draws on the language management framework as elaborated by Jiří V. Neustupný, Björn H. Jernudd and others (see e.g. Neustupný and Nekvapil 2003; Nekvapil and Sherman 2009b).

German) are typologically, phonetically, lexically and culturally as different as any two languages can be. Therefore, the speakers of Vietnamese encounter severe difficulties in pronouncing Czech words and sentences, in encoding and decoding utterances, in understanding the speech of native speakers, in identifying Czech words and phrases and understanding them, in crossing language-specific cultural barriers. Due to the structural differences it is often very difficult to match functionally equivalent words and phrases of the two languages. The only existing advantage is that both languages use the Latin alphabet, though they differ in spelling rules.

It must be obvious that under the existing circumstances, simple management processes enter the picture in almost every single interaction between a Vietnamese migrant of the first generation and his or her Czech-speaking counterpart, if such interaction transgresses the limits of very basic daily routine. However, too much simple management in interactions is a double-edged sword. A Vietnamese girl student who arrived to the Czech Republic in September 2005 often complained that her female school mates tried to avoid speaking with her, because she did not understand what they said and would repeatedly ask questions about so many words and mispronounce the words so much.

Management of language, communicative and socio-cultural (including socio-economic) problems is a daily matter of concern of most if not all members of the community. Most have been or are, at present, formally trained just in one language: the first generation of immigrants in Vietnamese, during their elementary school attendance and high school or even university studies in Vietnam, the second generation, in Czech at all levels of the Czech education system. Notable exceptions are the now ageing former university and vocational school students, who had some substantial formal training in Czech, and some members of the second-and-a-half generation, who spent the first years of their compulsory education at their elementary schools in Vietnam.

The hard fact of their life in the immigration country is that knowledge and skills are, in the long run, required in both languages, while all formal education has been, or is being provided only in one language and none in the other. Thus, all linguistic, communicative and socio-cultural problems regarding the other language and culture have been left to the family or, in some cases, to the individual to manage. This is true even at present when the Czech government decided that starting in January 2009 all migrants except those from EU member countries will be required to pass a

compulsory Czech language examination as one additional condition for being granted permanent residency.²²

One of the most, if not the most important strategy of organized language management at the family level is the decision to bring over young children and to send them to Czech schools. The process of reuniting families is, of course, an important social process, but it has a substantial language management side, too. Vietnamese families soon became aware of the fact that young children brought over from Vietnam could master the Czech language in one or two years time so that they could soon communicate like Czech native speakers and could follow classes at Czech schools as well as their Czech class mates.

Speaking a very different language amongst the essentially monolingual population of the host country, growing steadily in numbers and being not pressured, nor given the opportunity, to acquire better competence in Czech, the Vietnamese migrants, often rather well educated, were trapped in their menial jobs in a social environment deeply polarized around the question: do they represent a blessing or a threat? – (most of the media being, until recently, more inclined to assume the latter).

The only window of opportunity for integration and social ascension open to them has been the Czech education system, compulsory and free even for children of parents with temporary resident status. So they combined their emotional needs (family reunion) with expectations that their children, going to Czech schools, would learn the difficult language, so obviously impossible to be mastered by their parents, and invested all their efforts and resources into bringing their children over and sending them to Czech schools. With the emotional backing and traditional upbringing by their families, with a clear target to eventually enter high school and university, most Vietnamese students are among the best achievers in their schools, not only in science, but also even in Czech and all the foreign languages offered by the Czech high school curricula (English and German followed by French or Spanish).

This was again made possible by the education policies of the Czech Republic, which require all foreign nationals, even those with temporary residence (one year, renewable), to send their children to school in a system that is both compulsory and free of charge.

22 No free language courses are offered to applicants. The examinations being compulsory, only the first try is exempt of fee, any next try must be paid for by the applicant.

To quote just one example, Mr. F. and Mr. T., former guest worker group interpreters brought over their wives and five-year old daughters H. and L. from Vietnam in early 1992. After 14 years at kindergarten, elementary school and high school they passed their A-levels with flying colours and are, at present, fourth year undergraduates of Law and Business Administration, respectively.²³

Investing into the education of their children became the overall goal of Vietnamese families. As one father put it: “We undergo all this hardship only for our children’s sake.”²⁴ Such statements by Vietnamese parents in the Czech Republic can be heard frequently.

The Czech language became the main tool for the 2nd generation to achieve vertical flexibility that has been out of reach of their parent’s generation. As for their endeavours towards more horizontal flexibility we can observe two strategies:

One of these strategies consists of the effort to maintain and develop the mother tongue competence of the second generation. This is being done not only for emotional or symbolic reasons. The position of the immigrants not being very secure, socially as well as economically, ties with their families in Vietnam and with their country in general are very important. Losing their mother tongue would cut off the second and third generation immigrants from those vital links, at a time when business in the Czech Republic is gradually becoming more difficult and some of the local Vietnamese businessmen look back to their country for investment opportunities. Vietnamese is also important as a vehicular language enabling to maintain and develop links to other parts of the worldwide Vietnamese Diaspora. The strategy is being carried out through various forms: a daily family gathering at supper with Vietnamese food and talk, watching the Vietnamese TV4 channel on a TV set available in most families, socializing with friends who can speak little Czech, inviting grandparents from Vietnam to stay with the family for some time, and/or sending their children to visit their grandparents in Vietnam from time to time.

Recently, maintenance and development of the mother tongue competence of the second generation has been advocated by various social institutions representing the Vietnamese community. In October 2003 the Second National Congress of Vietnamese Citizens in the Czech Republic made

23 Miss H. and Mr. T. were interviewed in České Budejovice on August 30, 2006 and January 8, 2006, respectively.

24 Interviewed on August 26, 2008.

enhancement of mother tongue education one of their priorities, making the first attempt at organized language management. The first mother tongue classes were opened in 2004 at the SAPA Trade Centre in Prague mentioned above. Since the summer of 2006 the Association of Vietnamese Citizens in the Czech Republic started to call for the recognition of the Vietnamese community as an official national minority, the status of which would give them access to seven different language rights (Nekvapil 2007: 42). In September, 2007 the Association presented this claim to the visiting Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung who, in turn, approached the Czech Prime, Minister M. Topolánek, on this matter during his March, 2008 visit to Vietnam. However, the proposal is seen as controversial by some people in the Czech administration and, therefore, it is not likely to be officially handled any time soon.

As a very recent development, on April 7, 2009 a Czech and Vietnamese private company acquired the licence to launch a satellite transmitted Ethnic TV covering the whole territory of the Czech Republic. The broadcasts in Vietnamese with Czech subtitles were effectively started on May 14, 2009, 12 hours a day, 7 days a week. Czech subtitles are said to be inserted to facilitate learning of the Czech language that is expected to enhance the integration process into the Czech Society.²⁵

The other strategy consists of trying to use all opportunities offered by the curricula within the Czech education system as well as extracurricular activities organized by their schools to start learning English or German as early as possible, often at the age of six, adding another one or two foreign languages, usually French and/or Spanish, available in high school. In fact, many high school students have the intention to continue their studies at foreign universities.

Nevertheless, whatever their future careers and countries of residence will eventually be, the uncontested first language of the second generation of Vietnamese migrants is Czech²⁶, a consequence of their parents'

25 Participant observation at the launching ceremony in Prague on May 11, 2009.

26 This was confirmed by explicit statements of some of the students taking part in a focus group discussion with Vietnamese high school students on June 12, 2007 in Cheb. Spectacular examples of this language competence manifested "out of the blue" by a handful of Vietnamese bloggers caught the attention of thousands of readers of the on-line edition of one of the big national dailies, iDnes. The very first essay (Vietnamese girls) by a first-time blogger, a female high school student Do Thi Phuong Thuy, published on March 6, 2008 at <http://dothi.blog.idnes.cz/> was read by an unprecedented number of 23859 readers.

generation's decision to make a living in the Czech Republic and of the language situation this essentially economic decision has brought about.

8 Concluding remarks

The Vietnamese in the Czech Republic are usually portrayed by the Czech media as a very closed and isolated community on the brink of social exclusion. We have been trying to show that, quite to the contrary, their successful implantation in the Czech Republic was the result of their ability to rapidly adjust to the radical socio-economic change that occurred there in the early 1990s and to combine their financial and other material resources with the remarkable good will and bridging social capital they possessed in many quarters of the Czech society as well as with their transcultural capital.

They were thus able to cut out a niche in the Czech and central European markets that provided jobs for numerous family members, even though they had very limited or no knowledge of the local language. Equipped with business licences issued in line with the liberal business enhancement policies of the Czech government and working as family teams, they did not need any work permits that would have meant more restrictions on their immigration flow at a time when the Czech economy went through a process of restructuring, causing high rates of unemployment. On the contrary, importing and selling inexpensive garments to the suddenly inflating market segment of poor pensioners, unemployed workers and struggling small entrepreneurs, they answered exactly the needs generated by the flow of events.

We have defined the general framework of these developments as global trends representing a peripheral, though important part of the workings of the global Knowledge Economy. The centre of the globally operating knowledge-based economy and its periphery are closely interrelated. While its central mechanisms induce global movements of capital, goods and highly sophisticated experts, its peripheral wake brings about massive migrations from continent to continent and country to country to fill in gaps

This blogger and two other Vietnamese girl students in different parts of the Czech Republic, who opened their blogs for the first time during the same week, prompted a special article by the iDnes editorial board under the heading "A Vietnamese girl charmed the readers of iDnes" at <http://mfdnes.blog.idnes.cz> on March 13, 2008 accessed by more than 40000 readers.

in the respective labour markets. These movements, though not uncontroversial, are in the best interest of both sides: if inexpensive labour does not move in, the capital is likely to move out in search of cheaper labour markets. In any case, however, these trends have important implications for language management both by the migrants themselves as well as by their host countries. This is all the more true, because menial jobs, as observed amongst Vietnamese and other migrants, regardless of their kind, do not require quality knowledge of the host country's language, nor do they motivate the migrants to strive for better language acquisition or even enable it to happen.

However, under the *laissez faire* policies of the Czech government, the Vietnamese migrants had to fully rely on their own efforts and resources, without getting any institutional socio-cultural support (e. g. Czech language courses) by the host country.

The case of Vietnamese migrants in the Czech Republic demonstrates that the participation of social actors in the knowledge-based economy cannot be taken for granted. Our research supports the conjecture that some groups of people living in Europe are excluded from participation in the knowledge-based economy because of their socioeconomic status associated with their competence, or the lack of it, in certain languages.

Having demonstrated the controversial nature of economic factors, which can either stimulate or discourage language acquisition, we suggested a more realistic view of the role of language in the global market place as skill enabling both vertical and horizontal flexibility of individuals. This understanding of language seems to be a more useful analytical tool in the capital driven market place of the migrant communities than the concept of "linguistic capital".

Unlike language situations generated by traditional territorial ethnic minorities, the language situations described in this paper have been developing spontaneously without any regulation or assistance through any existing national language policies or planning. The language problems that arise in these situations are being felt and managed by the participants themselves in ways that can be understood through the language management framework.

We have shown that socio-economic management can work, to a fairly high degree, independently of language management, while communication management, as a mediating link between the socio-economic and language managements, can be done by various professional or voluntary go-betweens, proficient in both languages (certain adult family members, interpreters or children).

Our research has proven that organized language management comes to exist because there exist problems in individual interactions, and its main point is to remove these problems. These problems, however, are not only language problems (e.g. the absence of linguistic competence), but also communication and socio-cultural (including socio-economic) problems, the three dimensions being, moreover, interrelated.

Socio-cultural or socio-economic management is, of course, not primarily an issue for linguists, but our research has demonstrated that the awareness of these interrelated aspects allows us to get a deeper insight into the issues under investigation as well as giving a more realistic view of the linguistically oriented work.

If the situation and behaviour of the Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic can be considered as typical of certain migrant communities, it can be taken as a reference point for studies of similar Vietnamese migrant communities in some other new EU member countries (like Poland or Hungary) or in such EU neighbour countries like the Ukraine or Russia. Another useful target for comparison would be, e.g., the Turkish community in Germany.

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Author Queries

Chapter 3

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Chapter 5

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Chapter 8

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