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**Demarcating the space for multilingualism:  
on the workings of ethnic interests in a ‘civic nation’**

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## **Demarcating the space for multilingualism: on the workings of ethnic interests in a ‘civic nation’**

Marián Sloboda

### **Introduction**

Social modernization with nationalism as a prominent ideology has had a monolingualizing transformative effect on Europe, however postmodernist trends such as increased respect for linguistic minorities and multilingualism have been changing Europe since the 1960s already (Neustupný 2006, Wright 2016). Still, we can observe that many of the languages spoken in the territories of European countries are hardly visible in the public space.

This chapter investigates this phenomenon in the context of the Czech Republic (Czechia), East-Central Europe, which displays important prerequisites for openness towards multilingualism in the public space. Firstly, its Constitution has designed the country as a civic nation, in which no ethnic group assumes a privileged position. Secondly, the country has no legal act that would promote the ethnic majority’s language as national or as official explicitly. Thirdly, due to a later onset of social modernization as compared to Western Europe (Hroch 2000), the country has had a rather long history of quotidian multilingualism; and in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it also experienced official bilingualism. Finally, the Czech people view themselves as a rather tolerant nation. On the other hand, however, vociferous demonstrations of xenophobic attitudes that surfaced during the Refugee Crisis in Europe (e.g. Berntzen and Weisskircher 2016) had a substantial grass root component in Czechia (cf. Muhič Dizdarevič 2016, 2017). They have pointed out that, in addition to legislation, official policies or public statements, it is equally important to focus one’s attention on ordinary people’s behaviour towards the languages of others.

The aim in this study is to focus on such behaviour and to scrutinize the ways in which people react to, and particularly restrict, language choice. Since empowerment involves the development of critical understanding of sociopolitical environments in order for people to gain greater control over their lives (Christens 2011), or as Perkins (2010: 207) notes, raising awareness about the influence of powerful political and economic structures and interests is important for empowerment, the aim of this study is also to reveal people’s orientations to higher-scale interests and social order categories in their behaviour towards language choice.

### **Theoretical perspective**

This study can be categorized as pertaining to Linguistic Landscape studies which show a ‘phenomenological orientation’ (cf. Zabrodska and Milani 2014). In studying behaviour

towards languages in the public space, I assume a praxeological and mobile stance on space which focuses on living and engaging with language displays in signage (Stroud and Jegels 2014).

The engagement with language displays that is responsive in nature is a type of what Jernudd and Neustupný (1987) describe as ‘language management’. In their conceptualization (for recent articulations, see He and Dai 2016, Nekvapil 2016), language management is any metalinguistic or metapragmatic practice triggered by social actors’ noting of a phenomenon, such as a language choice in a sign, which deviates from their expectation. From the stage of deviation noting, the process usually proceeds to evaluation and sometimes further to adjustment design and its implementation. Empowerment within this framework is such an adjustment in this process through which power is achieved (Neustupný 2004: 5). Some processes of language management in this praxeological sense take the form of simple acts of individual behaviour, but some become highly organized – involving more social actors, resources, deliberation and ideologies across multiple settings (Nekvapil 2009). *Language* management also clusters with other types of management behaviour, as illustrated by Neustupný (1993) in his analysis of language management for the disadvantaged Romani speakers in Czechoslovakia. Elaborating on his study, Neustupný and Nekvapil (2003) have identified *communicative* management which, in addition to language, concerns non-linguistic components of communication, e.g., after Hymes (1974), the management of participation (i.e. inclusion/exclusion which is particularly relevant to empowerment) and the management of setting (relevant to spatiality). The other types are *socioeconomic* management and *sociocultural* management (Nekvapil 2016). These are driven by non-linguistic interests, but as Jernudd and Neustupný (1987) have pointed out, these are frequently of major significance in language management and, therefore, the identification of language-to-interest relationships must become an important part of the analysis of language choice management.

Given this book’s focus on empowerment in relation to the public space, the central concern here can further be specified as the question of how social actors’ management of language choice contributes to the (dis)empowerment of speaker groups by structuring the space along the public/private distinction. Bailey (2002) argues that there is ‘no essential “private” or intrinsic “public,” no obvious psychological or anthropological constant underlying these concepts’ (p. 15), but despite the concepts’ shifting and sliding character, ‘the distinction itself [...] is pervasive, durable, persistent, and deeply rooted’ (ibid.). This applies at least to Western societies, in which, as Gal (2005) notes, the public/private distinction has developed a categorial nature, since people bind multiple characterizations to publicness/privateness. Publicness is usually associated with accessibility, openness, rationality, objectivity, officiality, eminence, national relevance and formality, while the opposing characteristics – i.e. inaccessibility, closeness, emotionality, subjectivity, ordinariness, local relevance and informality – are bound to the category of privateness (Gal 2005). As Schegloff (2007) shows in interactional detail, an important feature of categories in contrast to simple ‘labels’ is that categories can be inferred indirectly in social practice. Therefore, this study does not limit itself to explicit labelling of a space as ‘public’ or ‘private’, but also considers differentiations based on social actors’ observable orientations to any characteristic bound to that pair of categories.

The issue is further complicated by the fact that the public/private distinction not only applies to spaces, but also to other types of social facts: types of people, moralities, themes, activities, social practices and relations. Gal (2005: 26–27) elaborates that the distinction can be applied recursively, to differentiate within multiple types of social facts at once. Social actors may recursively project the distinction onto a different social fact, although its primary anchoring is in one type of social facts depending on culture, e.g. in space in the USA but in persons in the former socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe (ibid.). Such recursivity is typical of ideologies of differentiation, another property of which is the ‘erasure’ (forgetting, denying, ignoring or eliminating) of some features of the social fact when the distinction is recursively applied to it (Gal 2005: 27). For multilingualism management this means that social actors may treat languages differentially as a result of a recursive projection of the public/private distinction from another social fact onto them. For example, the occurrence of some languages is taken as legitimate in public *spaces*, while others are to occur in private ones only; public *persons* legitimately use some languages, while only private ones use some others; some languages are legitimate in public *activities*, while others only in private ones, etc. And all these recursive projections may again be spatialized. This is how a space for a particular language or language class can be demarcated.<sup>1</sup> When projected onto a linguistically defined social group, such language differentiation impacts on the group’s recognition, legitimation or participation in the public space. Thus, language choice management contributes to the reproduction of social divisions and to power inequality between groups.

Some theoretical inspiration for this study stems from ethnomethodology: its understanding of situated ‘micro’ level social practices as instantiations of the ‘macro’ social order that reproduce this same social order (Coulter 2001). This entails the understanding of publicness/privateness of a space as a practical accomplishment of differentiation by social actors in their practices. Accordingly, their own, ‘emic’, views and ordinariness of their practices are of interest here, and the analytical preference is for non-elicited naturally-occurring data (ten Have 2004), with reliance on the researcher’s in-group knowledge of the collectivity researched (ten Have 2002).

## **Methodology**

Following the ethnomethodological inspiration, I utilized my own experience of the places I have lived in and moved through, also including my observations of others’ interaction with the LL, as a starting point. I have not employed the walking-based methods used in similarly focused studies (Garvin 2010, Laitinen 2014, Stroud and Jegels 2014, Szabó and Troyer 2017), because according to these, researchers *instruct* themselves or informants to move through certain places and make comments or take notes (see also Opsahl, this volume). Instead, I have decided to work with ‘key incidents’ – as Emerson (2007) explains:

‘Key incidents are not necessarily dramatic matters, significant or noteworthy for those involved. Rather a key incident attracts a particular field researcher’s immediate interest, even if what occurred was mundane and ordinary to participants. This “interest” is not a full-blown, clearly articulated theoretical claim, but a more intuitive, theoretically sensitive conviction that something intriguing has just taken place.’ (p. 469)

The data generation for this study was thus not motivated by a particular research agenda, but rather a certain overall and varying theoretical sensitivity. Various key incidents were recorded over an extended period of time. Some of them have been selected for this study, not as representative or illustrative of a claim, but in so far as they contribute to theory development. The cases are also not necessarily representative or typical of the situation in Czechia as a whole, but there are taken-for-granted elements in them, as well as a presence/absence of a breach response, which point to some fundamentals of the social order in the polity.

A characteristic feature of key incidents is that they open up new lines of enquiry and analysis (Emerson 2007: 430). I have followed the lines suggested by the language management approach as sketched above: after having noted down and photo-documented an incident, I sought evidence of whether the phenomenon in question was also noted, evaluated and adjusted by other members of society, or was the result of such management. The data thus comprises my notes from observations and photographs, but also related official documents, news media reports and internet discussion posts. With two key incidents that do not seem to have provoked public response, an interview and an e-mail enquiry were used.

### **The Czech context**

A few notes on the Czech context are pertinent in order to facilitate the understanding of the cases analyzed below and to expose similarities to, or differences from, other national contexts.

The historical Czech lands used to be part of the multilingual, yet German-dominated, Austrian Empire. The Czech national movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century basically aimed at emancipation from German supremacy. Established in 1918 after the empire's disintegration, Czechoslovakia remained a multi-ethnic country due to the presence of three million German-speakers and significant Polish, Roma and Rusyn (Ukrainian) minorities. During and following the Second World War, the Czech lands gradually homogenized – as a result of Nazi extermination of Jews and the Roma, the Czechoslovaks' post-war expulsion of Germans and the assimilation of other ethnic groups encapsulated behind the Iron Curtain. Russian was the main foreign language taught in schools during the socialist period. Officially it was the language of an ally but following the military suppression of the 1968 Prague Spring, it unofficially also became the language of 'the occupiers'. Meanwhile, and as an exception, the population of Slovaks increased due to in-migration from the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia. The bi-national Czech-Slovak federation disintegrated along ethnonational lines in 1993, but the Constitution of Czechia defined the newly established state as a civic one. Although ethnic homogenization continued in the 1990s, Czechia soon became a destination country for international migration (Sloboda 2016). Today, foreign residents make up five per cent of its 10.6 million population. In the last census, 89 per cent of residents declared Czech as their mother tongue, 2.5 per cent both Czech and a minority language and 4 per cent a minority language only (the remaining 4.5 per cent refrained from disclosing their mother tongue). Speakers of Slovak, Ukrainian, Russian, Vietnamese and Polish are the most numerous minorities (for details, see Sloboda 2016).

During the past few decades, Czechs have developed the self-image of a tolerant nation, as evidenced in a survey by Public Opinion Research Centre (2008) as well as in public discourse, sometimes despite contradictory evidence (cf. Radio Praha 2000, Raduševič 2011). This public discourse shifted during anti-Roma demonstrations following the Great Recession and especially during the 2014–2016 Refugee Crisis in Europe. The nation's positive self-image has been challenged and debated; even those media maintaining the image expressed limitations in its validity (see e.g. Hovorková 2014, Pisingerová 2018, Polák 2018). Ethnic intolerance has increased not only in discourse, but also in practical action, as manifested in the anti-Roma demonstrations and the demonstrations and other acts of hate targeting migrants and Muslims. Since similar trends could have been observed in other countries around the world (Park 2019: 405), it is pertinent to examine, using this specific but non-unique Czech case, the ways in which restrictive language management at the 'micro level' of practical action and the involvement of 'macro-level' interests can be identified and analyzed.

### **Differentiations along public/private lines**




The key incident I would like to start with is an event that I first noted in media and later studied in a research project (Sloboda et al. 2012, Szabó Gilinger et al. 2012). The incident comprised the defacing of Polish names in place-name and street-name signs in the Těšín borderland region, soon after the Polish names were added to the Czech names on signs in 2006. Czech and Polish had been in written use in that region for several centuries. In 1920, the region was divided between the newly independent Czechoslovakia and Poland after an armed struggle, leaving a significant Polish population on the Czechoslovak side of the border. In 2006, the installation of Polish signs following an amendment to the Minority Act began in the town of Český Těšín, but a great number of signs were damaged or stolen soon after. Akin to reactions to minority language signs in other parts of Europe, this incident features a number of interesting aspects (see Sloboda et al. 2012). Two arguments raised in public debate against the use of Polish are relevant here. Firstly, bilingual street signs containing Polish were acceptable in the town centre, but not in the town's peripheral residential areas.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, putting up *commercial* bilingual signs was not a problem in contrast to the installation of municipal bilingual signs (Szabó Gilinger et al. 2012: 273). Commercial as well as tourist signs also remained intact in practice. To sum up, Czech-Polish bilingualism was generally acceptable (1) in a particular section of the urban landscape, i.e. the town centre, (2) on commercial signs and (3) on visitor-oriented signs.

The three differentiations can be understood as public/private. Concerning the first one: Europeans usually consider streets as public spaces and the interior of houses as private spaces, but rescaled to the whole town level, the distinction was applied here recursively in the sense that the centre was 'public' and peripheral areas 'private'. The second differentiation can also be interpreted as public/private: Polish was not acceptable on signs viewed as 'public' in terms of public law, i.e. signs installed by the government or government-sponsored subjects (Sloboda et al. 2012: 64–65). Instead, the Polish minority language was acceptable on 'private' signs, i.e. those set up by private-law subjects, such as shop owners, and addressing other private-law subjects.<sup>3</sup> In the third differentiation, Polish was acceptable for 'public' communication in terms



of outward communication with visitors, while unacceptable for the ‘private’ marking of the local residential space. Thus, in their management of Czech-Polish bilingualism in public space, locals oriented to the public/private distinction understood in terms of the difference between (1) central vs. peripheral urban spaces, (2) public-law vs. private-law signs and (3) visitors vs. residents.

It has not become clear from this incident whether the attempts at exclusion concerned Polish only or minority languages more generally. Several cases in other parts of the country suggest that the preference for Czech monolingualism in public-law signage is more widespread. Although the official bilingualization policy has not materialized in regions other than the Těšín area, the policy has nevertheless been problematized on a national scale. One key incident here is a TV news report on new traffic sign regulations, broadcast by a popular private television station and presented in the extract below.

**Extract:** A news report on road-sign regulation changes, TV Prima, October 2001 (transl. from Czech)

Video captures	Sound
	<p>NARRATOR: Since the end of April, signs with city names should look like this: Český Těšín could be named this way.</p>
	<p>The sign ‘Filipov’ would be accompanied by a name in German,</p>
	<p>‘Rostěnice’ similarly.</p>



	<p>TRANSPORT MINISTRY SPOKESMAN: The Czech name would come first there, of course, and below there would be a sign, with the same background colour, that is white, and of the same size as the original Czech one.</p>
<p>[four establishing shots zooming in groups of persons recognizable as Roma, shabby houses in the background]</p>	<p>NARRATOR: A directive of the Ministry provides national minorities with the option of applying to the municipal authorities for names to be displayed on signs in their languages. It is sufficient for the minority to make up at least ten per cent of the population.</p>
	<p>REPORTER: Well, for example, here in Litvínov, the city could rewrite the signs as ‘Litvínovos’ due to the Roma of Janov [a neighbourhood in Litvínov].</p>
<p>[medium close-up of a person]</p>	<p>CZECH-LOOKING CITIZEN: They understand, don’t they? Litvínov as Litvínov.</p>
<p>[medium close-up of a person]</p>	<p>ROMA-LOOKING CITIZEN: Perhaps even as it is now, even without the signs they include us, don’t they?</p>
<p>[medium close-up of a person]</p>	<p>CZECH-LOOKING CITIZEN: I think that we are in Czechia, so the names should be Czech, shouldn’t they?</p>

Rather than being a survey of just three responses, this news report is better understood as a media product or the TV station’s message to its audience. The conclusion of the report suggested that place names in Czechia should be in Czech only. Three preceding discursive moves contributed to this conclusion. First, the narrator’s formulation that the town of Český Těšín ‘could be named this [Polish] way’ suggested that the Polish name of the town was new. This was underscored by a studio graphic simulation of the bilingualization, while a real sign could have already been photographed in the town, the Polish name of which had existed from time immemorial. The news report thus provided the audience with the possible interpretation that a new Polish name was being introduced to supplement the ‘original’ Czech sign. Secondly, the selection of the town of Litvínov and its ‘infamous’ Roma community in Janov reveals significant ideological work in the news production. Namely, the number of the Roma in Litvínov did not reach the ten-percent threshold, mentioned by the ministry spokesman, so signage in Romani was not an option in Litvínov. Despite this, the producers of the news report decided to focus on this town. The Roma are a significantly marginalized minority in Czechia, and a majority of the Czech population holds rather negative attitudes to the group (Lyons and

Kindlerová 2016: 394–405), so by exemplifying the bilingual signage policy with Romani, the producers of the report extended the negative evaluation to the policy as such. On top of this, the reporter overlaid the Czech name ‘Litvínov’ with a Romani sign, saying that the Romani sign would ‘rewrite’ the Czech one, which was in contradiction even to the ministry spokesman’s description several seconds earlier. From this point of view, the news report suggested a reading of the situation as minority languages creating competition for Czech in the public space and promoted the idea that this kind of multilingualism would endanger the majority language (this trope operates more widely in Europe, see Blommaert et al. 2012).

The extent of the desire to prevent the visibility of minority languages in Czech public space can better be exemplified with Slovak which finds itself on the opposite end of the attitudinal scale to Romani. The Slovaks have long been the most positively viewed minority by Czechs (Public Opinion Research Centre 2019); the Slovak language receives positive evaluations, such as ‘beautiful’ (*krásná*), ‘soft’ (*měkká*), ‘euphonious’ (*libozvučná*), and if spoken by women, ‘sexy’ (*sexy*), on various occasions (Sloboda, forthcoming). Slovak is also mutually intelligible with Czech to such an extent that speakers of the two languages are routinely able to make themselves understood when each is speaking in their own language without interpreting. The habitual nature of such communicative practice empowers Slovak speakers to take up a variety of social roles and positions in the Czech context (cf. below). Despite all this, there is substantial evidence that Slovak is tacitly avoided or eliminated from Czechia’s public space. Slovak is virtually absent from the LL of Czechia, but this is most likely due to the intelligibility of Czech to Slovaks and the perceived social and cultural closeness (Dolník et al. 2015: 81–114), which do not motivate Slovak speakers to express themselves in Slovak in Czechia’s LL. However, as far as online space is concerned, Czech internet users sometimes contest the mere presence of internet articles (unlike discussion posts) in Slovak in the .cz domain, the argument being that the articles were published on the ‘Czech web’ (Sloboda and Nábělková 2013). Nábělková (2008) noted that, in the online debate on this issue, Czech users did not take into account that Slovak is a language of a sizeable national minority at home in Czechia, but wrote about it only as of a language of Slovaks from Slovakia (p. 139). That is, the Slovak national minority was semiotically erased from the discourse and the resulting image of Czech ethnolinguistic hegemony in the physical space was projected into the online space, in particular the ‘public’ genre of the article in contrast to ‘private’ discussion posts.

Restrictions on Slovak have also occurred in spoken communication. Key incidents include a complaint submitted by a Slovak-speaking director of a home for people with disabilities to the Czech ombudsman. The complainant asked the ombudsman for his opinion on the request by her superior who ‘would welcome her using Czech, the official language [of the country]’ (Varvařovský 2011). The complainant’s superior argued the alleged status of Czech as the official (*úřední*) language despite the fact that no official language is specified for most types of communication in the healthcare organization and that Czech law does not use the term. Such contradictions reveal the ideological nature of the request. In a related area of psychiatric care, Satinská (2008) noted similar argumentation with an imaginary legal regulation.<sup>4</sup> Some of the interviewed Slovak psychiatrists reported that their superiors asked them to communicate in Czech at work. Satinská (2008) adds:

‘Those of my respondents who encountered this request [to speak Czech] have adapted, except for one. The person who did not was not given the job she applied for but opened a private ambulance where she still speaks Slovak’ (own translation).

Satinská (2008) illustrates that not only Czechs but also Slovaks themselves restrict their public use of Slovak. When choosing between the two languages for communication, her informants oriented to the work/private-life distinction (*ibid.*).

Several incidents testify that the use of Slovak is even normatively inappropriate with public figures such as political representatives. Former mayor of Prague Adriana Krnáčová comes from Slovakia but consistently speaks Czech in public. For another example, current prime minister Andrej Babiš spoke a mixture of Czech and Slovak prior to the 2013 election, when his political movement ran for the parliament for the first time. He has lived in Czechia for a long time, but it was as late as the election campaign that he shifted to Czech, despite his obvious difficulty in staying in a monolingual mode. Both he and the former mayor of Prague took private Czech lessons around the time of taking up their political functions, which testifies to the desirability to opt for Czech when communicating as a political representative. Similar behaviour can also be observed with other types of public personae, for instance, the Slovak-born spokesman of flag carrier Czech Airlines and some other cases (Sloboda, forthcoming).

What all these cases show is that even a language as intelligible and positively rated as Slovak does not have its place in public, official and professional communication, at least in some areas, such as politics, healthcare and certain media roles and genres. The mutual intelligibility of Slovak and Czech empowers Slovaks to adopt various roles in Czech society, but the pressure to use Czech in public indicates how extensive the orientation to Czech language hegemony is in the public space.

### **Issues with ‘foreign’ language dominance**

Some cases point out that the acceptance of languages other than Czech also has its limits in communication between clearly private-law subjects. One such case included the reaction of municipal authorities of Karlovy Vary and Mariánské Lázně to Russian. The two spa towns are located in the western region bordering Germany. They have become very popular with Russian speakers, who not only come to visit these towns as tourists, but many of whom have also settled there, bought properties and run businesses from there. The provision of services to Russian-speaking residents and visitors manifests itself in the remarkable presence of Russian in the landscape of the town centres, often without accompanying parallel text in Czech or any other language (Shánělová 2005/2006, Zedník 2009). The local authorities tried to manage the visual dominance of Russian several times in the period from 2009 to 2016. Initially, there were attempts at a municipal regulation (Zedník 2009, Houdek 2013), later the local governments coordinated their efforts with a liberal-conservative party in the Parliament to submit amendments to the Consumer Protection Act and the Advertisement Regulation Act (Kopecký 2014, 2016; Toman 2016). The rationale according to one of the MPs was that ‘people are angry that they live in the Czech Republic, but do not feel at home here because of the flood of foreign-language ads. They feel totally overwhelmed and they are angry that we don’t do anything about

it' (Špačková 2011, own translation). This effort at the obligatory use of Czech in private-law signage suggests that, if a 'foreign' language starts to dominate a landscape overall, the public-law/private-law distinction may become irrelevant and the town's landscape becomes a 'private' space of the ethnic majority.

The following incident suggests that this general conclusion may be limited to certain languages. A news report by Czech Television put forward an analogy between the present domination of Russian and the former, pre-war, domination of German in the two urban landscapes (Czech Television 2013). From the native Czech perspective, such a link makes sense: both Russian and German are languages of nations that are perceived as being oppressive in the Czech national narrative, hence the efforts to suppress their local dominance in the Czech public space.

The following four incidents suggest that historical sociocultural symbolism may indeed limit the use of German as well, although the language is otherwise widely used and promoted especially in the Czech-German/Austrian borderlands for its economic significance. Firstly, the above-mentioned policy on national minority languages in signage is *de jure* applicable to German in some municipalities with a German minority population, but according to a representative of the minority, after the incidents in the Těšín region, the municipal authorities 'have not expressed any interest, among other things owing to concerns around the rise of national chauvinism' (Government Council for National Minorities 2009: 6, own translation). Secondly, at a German multinational company operating in Czechia, English was preferred for internal communication, *inter alia*, to manage recollections of the historical German domination over the Czechs that the asymmetric status of German managers vs. Czech subordinates could have evoked (Nekvapil and Sherman 2009).<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, Prague had a substantial German-speaking population up until the Second World War and several German-Czech bilingual street signs have been preserved until today. The photo in Figure 1 shows one and a newer standardized monolingual Czech sign above, although the Czech street name (*Křižovnická*) has remained the same, and so it appears twice there. This is superfluous from a purely communicative point of view: the Czech name in the older sign is sufficient for one's localization. But from a sociocultural viewpoint, the contemporary Czech sign says that the bilingual sign underneath no longer has an informative function as a street sign, but is a historical artefact that can be appreciated by tourists and history lovers (and sociolinguists for that matter). This also means that the German name has been deactivated as a street name; the sign no longer categorizes that street as a *Czech-German* location. Neither does a similar sign in Figure 2 after the German street name was damaged during the founding of Czechoslovakia in 1918, but it has been preserved 'as an imprint of that historical event' (Heritage Department of the Office of the President of the Czech Republic, e-mail from May 2019).



**Figure 1.** A historical German-Czech street sign (below) and its present-day Czech equivalent (above), Prague city centre (50°5'11.5"N 14°24'53"E), August 2018



**Figure 2.** A damaged historical German-Czech street sign, Prague Castle (50°5'27.5"N 14°24'8.5"E), July 2016

Finally, Bermel and Knittl (2018) researched language management at a small castle in northern Czechia, close to the former Czech-German ethnic border. Staff working at the castle justified their practice of restricted use of German in orientation signage by citing practical problems and a socioeconomically motivated claim that Czechs constitute the vast majority of their visitors. Nevertheless, incomplete replies in interviews gave one of the researchers ‘a feeling that there is another reason [i.e. the historical symbolism] explaining German’s absence there’ (Bermel 2019). At the same time, staff generally reported their ability and willingness to use German (and Polish) rather than English in *spoken* interactions (Bermel and Knittl 2017). They thus differentiated between the spoken and the written modes of public communication: more languages were acceptable in spoken communication, while their use was restricted in written communication. We can understand this differentiation as public/private: written signs in public space are more permanent and accessible, whereas spoken utterances disappear from the space immediately and may only remain as private memories of the individual participants.

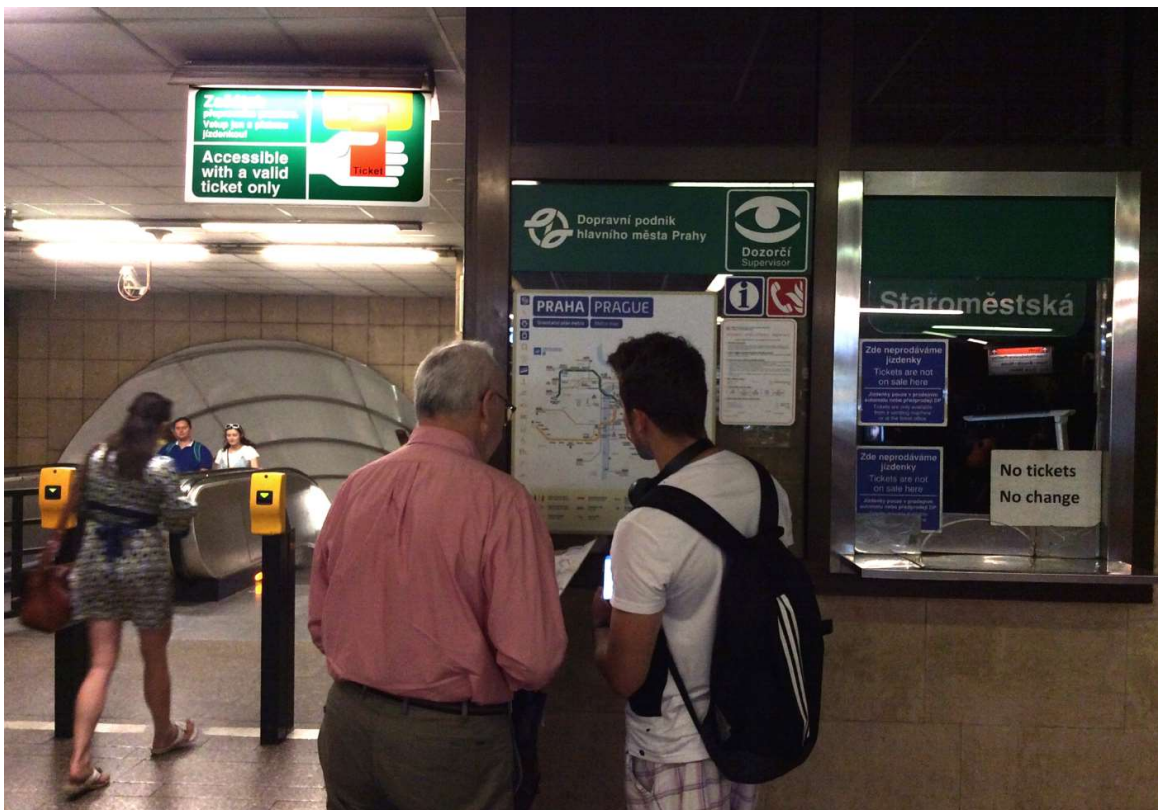
All these cases highlight the difficult acceptance of German and of Russian in Czechia’s public space even in private-law relations, especially if the language starts dominating a particular space or is unaccompanied by parallel Czech discourse.

If German and Russian form a special category, what about other ‘foreign’ languages? One key incident here concerns English in the bilingual design of the Prague metro signage. Orientation and informative signs – e.g. network maps, the marking of tracks and lift locations – usually have English text in plain letters, while the Czech text is in boldface (Figure 3). This asymmetry is more widespread among public service providers, for example, at the Main Railway Station and the National Library. The poor visibility of the English text presents a deviation from the expectation that such signs are also there for foreign visitors. This is evidenced in Figure 4 (right): a non-standard and individually produced paper sign displaying ‘No tickets / No change’ in English was added to two identical standardized and industrially-produced bilingual signs conveying approximately the same information (‘Tickets are not on sale here’). The communicative failure of the standardized signs’s design was apparently managed by emplacing the paper sign next to them. Variations of this duplicating strategy have been observed at three more metro stations in the city centre, where foreign visitors are concentrated. This management behaviour thus documents a recurring conflict between the communicative norm of informing foreigners and the sociocultural norm of marking public transport premises as Czech.





**Figure 3.** Asymmetrical bilingual design in the Prague metro, Muzeum Station (50°4'46"N 14°25'54"E underground), July 2018



**Figure 4.** Entrance sign (left), metro network map (middle) and informative signs (right), Staroměstská Station (50°5'18.5"N 14°24'59"E underground), July 2019

As for private-law signage, similarly to Russian, English in Prague has become an object of legislative efforts at the national level. Several bills have attempted to promote Czech as the

‘national’ and ‘official’ language of the country. Representatives of the Communist Party, who submitted most of the bills, explicitly referred to the older generation’s inability to understand signs in foreign languages, especially English (Czech Television 2017: broadcast time 20:33). However, Parliament has not passed the respective bills. Other management acts against English have not been reported to my knowledge, so the language’s acceptance on private-law signage seems to be relatively high. Although English has an image of a world language, I will show in the following section that even the dominance of other languages can be locally unproblematic under certain conditions.

### **Conditions for ‘foreign’ language dominance**

So far, I have talked about restrictions on the use of languages other than Czech, but it is still possible to observe multilingualism and sometimes even the dominance of ‘foreign’ languages in public places. Many of these occurrences are not removed, and some do not provoke any public response. What then are the conditions under which multilingualism and ‘foreign’ language dominance is tolerated?

In the Prague metro case discussed above, there are two exceptions to the dominance of Czech. English text is more prominent (1) on ‘emergency exit’ signs, in which an interest in health and safety is evident, and (2) in the signs marking entrances to the paid zone of the metro stations (see the illuminated sign in Figure 4). The entrance sign warns that only that with a valid ticket may enter the zone and the graphic (in English only) suggests that validation involves using the machines placed under the sign (there are no turnstiles on the entrances, tickets are occasionally checked by inspectors). My observation as a frequent passenger is that inspectors seem to select apparent foreigners (i.e. carry out ethnic profiling) for ticket checks, despite their evident limited foreign language skills. Foreign visitors have also been reported as frequent ‘fare dodgers’ (Czech Television 2019), although these statistics might be the result of inspectors’ possible ethnic profiling. Considering these circumstances, the prominence of English on the paid-zone entrance sign manifests that the socioeconomic interest in having foreign visitors purchase and mark their ticket before they enter the paid zone has overridden the otherwise applied sociocultural interest in marking the public transport space as Czech which, in turn, has overridden the communicative interest in informing foreigners on non-economic matters (such as navigating their way around). In other words, English may be visually prominent even in public-law signage if certain health/safety or socioeconomic interests prevail over sociocultural and communicative ones.

Visual domination accepted on socioeconomic grounds has also occurred with ‘foreign’ languages other than English. For instance, Vietnamese on advertising billboards sometimes dominates locations where higher numbers of Vietnamese speakers live or work. The billboard in Figure 5 advertised software for a newly-introduced national EET sales register. These billboards appear to have gone unnoticed in the media. Earlier advertisements in Vietnamese by the largest Czech bank (Sloboda 2016: 157–158) attracted some media attention, but the journalists presented an understanding for the economic and demographic grounds for the signs’ placement and their evaluation was neutral (Moniová et al. 2014). Another socioeconomic interest – the freedom to engage in enterprise and/or the free movement of goods – was most



likely the reason for the failure of the above-mentioned legislative proposals aimed against the local dominance of Russian in private-law signage (cf. Kopecký 2016, and the documents referred-to therein). Finally, in her study on the use of traditional German place names in the formerly German-speaking borderlands, Klemensová (2017) found that it was *business* people, rather than residents, who revitalized these names. That is, socioeconomic management has the capacity to override sociocultural interests in displaying ‘Czechness’ and to locally produce parallel or even exclusive ‘foreign’ language use in the Czech public space.



**Figure 5.** A commercial advertisement in Vietnamese, Prague Krč district (50°1'44"N 14°27'13"E), January 2017

As hinted at above in connection with the Prague metro case, a similar effect can also be observed when health or safety are at stake: several Czech hospitals have introduced some of their communications in Vietnamese in view of a ‘language barrier’ (*jazyková bariéra*, a term used on hospital forms) (Sloboda 2016: 165) and, on the national scale, the Ministry of Healthcare issues multilingual cards for communicating with non-Czech speaking patients as part of the national policy on integrating foreigners. Thus, some public institutions, as well as private businesses, communicate multilingually if socioeconomic interests or health/safety interests receive priority over the other interests involved.

### **Negative evaluation of the public authorities’ non-use of English**

Public administration has been an exception to the above-mentioned hierarchy of interests so far, but one incident involving a requirement to use Czech stirred controversy. The requirement was formulated on a sign in English put up in a counter window at the Prague Drivers Register

by staff working there (Figure 6). The sign was noticed, photographed and went viral in the online media. A journalist summarized the controversy as follows:

‘While some commenters agreed with the employees [of the office] and argued that Czechs also cannot make themselves understood in their mother tongue in Great Britain, others – these comprised a majority – pointed out that English is a world language and employees of administrative bodies should have at least a basic command of the language.’ (Sattler 2017, own translation)



**Figure 6.** The criticized request to use Czech at the Prague Drivers Register office (source: Facebook)

Despite the referred-to provision for Czech in the Administrative Code and the widespread practice of marking Czechia’s public spaces as Czech, such explicit insistence on using Czech in front of a Czech administrative body because it is a ‘Czech office’ was received negatively by the public. This may seem strange at first sight, but the negative evaluations also commented on the ungrammatical use of English (see Fig. 6) and were thus apparently driven by a language ideology according to which ‘knowing languages’ (*umět jazyky*) is a sign of being intelligent or well-educated. The operation of this language ideology in this case was made explicit, for example, in the Prague mayor’s comment: ‘It [the putting up of that sign] is embarrassing and it tells us a lot about the intelligence of the given person’ (‘Je to trapné a hodně to vypovídá o inteligenci konkrétního člověka,’ Sattler 2017). This language ideology seems to echo the acute shortage of foreign language skills during the country’s post-socialist transition, when the Czech economy became suddenly more internationalized (Sherman 2020: 73).

Similar public condemnation of a lack of foreign language skills among public authority personnel was reported in a Czech Television’s news story which exemplified how Czech police officers were unable to communicate in any foreign language with refugees who, in contrast, spoke languages, such as English (Czech Television 2015). Even during a time of heightened anti-refugee sentiments, the message of this news report entitled ‘Language barrier between police and refugees’ sounded like a criticism of the former.

These two incidents do two things. First of all, they categorize knowledge of English as an attribute of basic education. Secondly, they are key for identifying a split made by social actors within sociocultural management. In other words, not all sociocultural interests bring about a preference for the dominance of Czech. The split can be formulated in terms of the public/private distinction: when the Czech character of a public space is perceived as endangered, (exclusive) use of Czech is desired (i.e. language management aims at 'privatization' or closure); however, when the image of Czechs' degree of 'educatedness' or openness to the world is at stake, insistence on Czech monolingualism even by public institutions receives negative feedback (i.e. language management aims at openness).

## **Discussion**

Having accumulated seemingly unrelated, but substantively similar and theoretically relevant, key incidents, this study has pointed to rather interrelated, systematic and interested acts by an ethnic majority to compartmentalize the space in order to restrict others' language use in Czech public spaces.

Various social actors treated Czech and various categories of 'foreign' languages, including also traditional minority languages, differentially, by restricting or preventing their occurrence. These differentiating language management activities have taken place despite the country's conceptualization as a 'civic nation' in the Constitution and legal provisions for national minorities, testifying thus to a dissonance between the national identity as conceived officially and as practiced in social life. Some of the language management activities were carried out consciously as part of explicit public debate, while others in more commonplace or habitual ways, reminiscent of 'banal nationalism' (Billig 1995).

In their overview of language management in Czechia, Neustupný and Nekvapil (2003) concluded that it was assimilative towards ethnic minorities (p. 221). The present analysis has shown the continuation of this trend and has identified some nuances within this behaviour. In some cases, social actors demarcated a space for 'foreign' languages based on the public/private distinction which worked as an ideology of differentiation as described by Gal (2005). The understanding of this distinction as potentially being valid has enabled four analytical steps: (1) to free oneself from the explicit labelling of social facts as 'public' or 'private' and to also consider those bound to these categories but named otherwise; (2) to take non-spatial (but spatializable) social facts, such as persons and activities, into account; (3) to observe the differentiation at various scales of the same social fact, e.g. in smaller spaces within larger spaces; and (4) to observe how various types of social facts cluster together. To summarize the cases analyzed above, the public/private distinction was applied to differentiate between the following social facts:

1. peripheral vs. central urban areas
2. public-law vs. private-law signage
3. public figures vs. ordinary individuals
4. written vs. spoken communication in public spaces

5. residents vs. foreign visitors
6. Czech-speaking residents vs. residents not speaking Czech sufficiently well

The social facts in the first position on the list – i.e. peripheral urban areas, public-law signage, public figures, written communication, residents and especially Czech-speaking residents – were less open to languages other than Czech. The social facts listed in the second position – i.e. central urban areas, private-law signage, ordinary individuals, spoken communication and communication with foreign visitors and with residents not speaking Czech well enough – displayed more openness to multilingualism. It is interesting to note that social facts that we would consider public in some sense, such as public-law signage, displayed a higher level of closure to ‘foreign’ languages and so are less public in this sense. In other words, ethnic majority members’ behaviour made public-law signage private in the sense of something belonging to Czech residents and thus closed to ‘foreign’ languages. Such behaviour was visible in the conflict over the presence of traditional minority languages – Polish and potentially German and Romani – in place-name and street signs. This conflict has also testified that the public/private distinction is no longer anchored in persons in this East-Central European context as in the socialist period (Gal 2005): by opposing the State’s bilingualization policy, Czech residents manifested the ‘privacy’ of their living *space* (town, neighbourhood or street). This is related to the post-communist transition to democracy, during which citizens have acquired from the State not only some of its property, as shown in Ferencík’s (2015) study of ‘private land’ signs in Slovakia, but also some responsibility for, and influence on, the public-law spaces they inhabit.

The demarcation outlined above may shift depending on the situated hierarchization of interests involved. The incidents discussed have highlighted that when the sociocultural interest in marking a space as Czech prevails, Czech is preferred. However, there are exceptions to this preference which are also socioculturally motivated, namely cases when outward self-presentation to foreign visitors and the presentation of one’s openness or level of ‘educatedness’ are at stake. In managing their lack of foreign language skills, administrative employees (of the Prague Drivers Register here, but also of the Foreigner Police as documented in Sloboda 2016: 167) demonstrated their exclusive position of authority, when they insisted on Czech monolingualism despite the actual communication needs of the clients they serve. The Czech public disapproved of such behaviour when it became a matter of a public debate reframed in terms of national self-presentation.

The interest in marking Czechness is also often overridden by socioeconomic management and health or safety management, which locally generate ‘foreign’ language use. For example, the Prague public transport company’s signs marking paid zones and emergency exits have shown that an object type otherwise closed to ‘foreign’ languages (e.g. a public-law sign) may be materialized as multilingual, provided this is supported by the prevalence of socioeconomic interests or health/safety interests (for the situation in safety signs in other parts of the world, see Kasanga 2015, Tan and Ben Said 2015).

The relationship between language choice management and empowerment is not always straightforward. Neustupný (2004: 5–6) pointed out that some language management acts may

be both empowering and disempowering at the same time and Saruhashi (2018) has shown that not only situational but also long-term perspectives need to be taken into account in assessing the level of empowerment of those involved. In the case of Vietnamese commercial billboards (Figure 5), for example, communication in Vietnamese enabled the Vietnamese entrepreneurs to continue their businesses under the new tax registering system. On the other hand, the availability of Vietnamese-speaking cash register providers did not present entrepreneurs with incentives to acquire Czech or other language skills which would pay off in the long run. Instead, they have remained dependant on these providers, who could charge more for their services in the likely constellation of ‘high demand – low offer’ in Vietnamese-language services. The relationship of language choice management to empowerment needs to be determined for each case, or type of cases, individually.

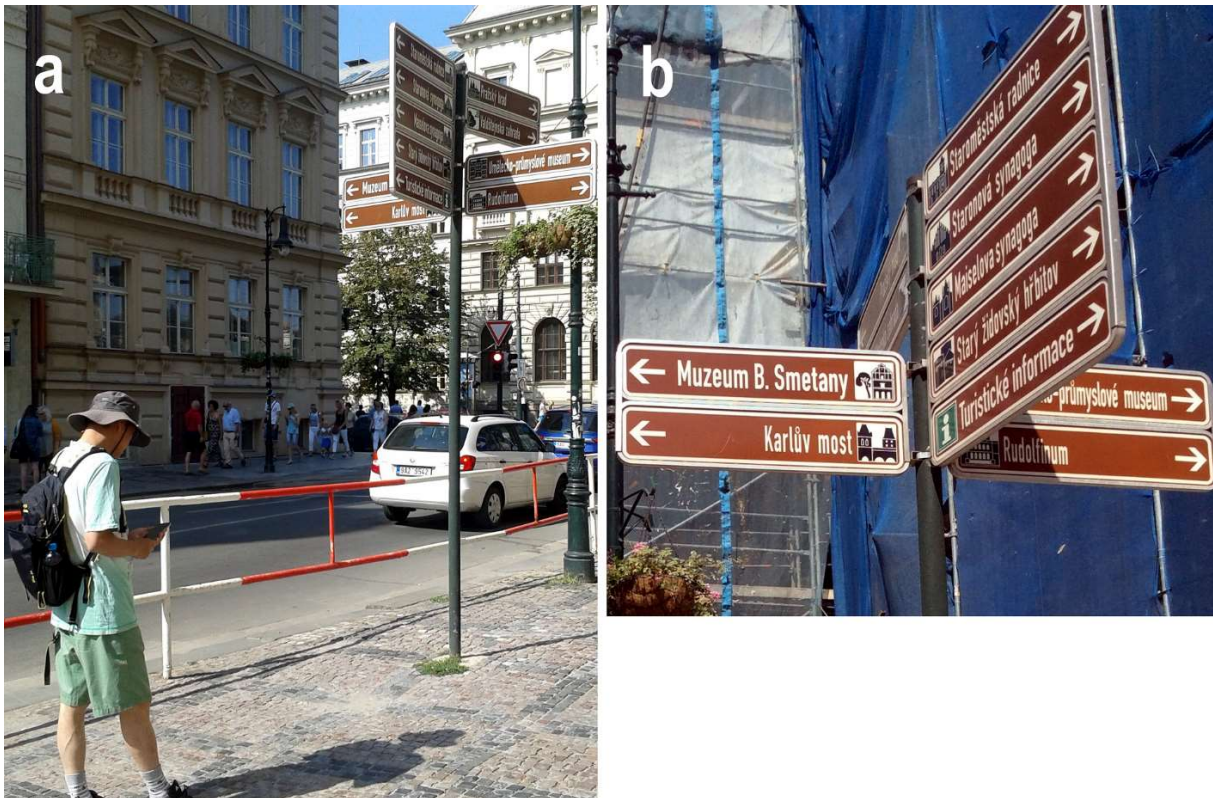
### **A methodological note**

As noted above, public-law signs are usually monolingual in Czech, marking the institutional framework of the country as Czech in the ethnolinguistic sense. Direction signage in Prague (Figure 7b), which fits into this category of signs, is monolingual in Czech, which invites similar interpretation, namely that the *sociocultural* interest in national identity marking has also prevailed here. However, in the northern Czech town of Turnov (Bermel and Knittl 2018) and in the southern Czech town of Písek, direction signs are bilingual Czech-English, which indicates that the norm operating there is the *communicative* norm of informing foreign visitors who are generally not expected to know Czech. The Czech monolingualism of direction signs in Prague, which attracts millions of foreign visitors every year (Sloboda 2016: 144), thus presents a deviation from this communicative norm and has indeed been noted and mediatized as such. Kupec (2009) reported that Prague authorities’ intended to change the language choice, but he identified an obstacle in the status of this signage as ‘traffic signs’. Being subject to national rather than municipal regulation, traffic signs should allegedly be in Czech only and any change to their design difficult to do (ibid.). In a later news report on the same topic, the director of the Prague Information Service presented as relevant a different norm of communication with foreign visitors that, in contrast, would lead to the exclusive use of Czech: ‘the text must be in Czech, because it is in Czech on maps. If the map stated “hrad” and the English sign read “castle”, tourists would not understand’ (Frouzová 2016, own translation). While maps distributed by the Prague Information Service indeed feature only Czech place-names, the sign *Turistické informace* ‘tourist information’ in Figure 7b points to what is labelled in English as ‘Czechtourism IC’ or ‘Prague City Tourism – Visitor Centre’ on Google Maps, and the maps distributed in the former information centre feature *Karlův most* in English as ‘Charles Bridge’. Therefore, the sociocultural interest in marking Prague as a Czech space might indeed be at play here, but the social actors who commented on the signage presented communicative interests as the relevant ones. The kind of management that produced and maintained the Prague direction signage monolingual over the years thus remains unclear.

This case obviously requires further investigation; here I have only intended to highlight that when analyzing language choice in the LL, it is usually not enough to rely solely on photographs and researcher’s own member competencies. One solution is that the analytical



work would also include an effort at revealing the ‘story behind’ the LL (Hult 2009). Since interviews (which would provide such a story) cannot be considered as more valid than other types of data but are situated accomplishments by the researcher and the interviewee in interaction (ten Have 2004), instead of relying on such responses, I have suggested looking for the ‘stories around’ the LL. These consist of the discourse and interactions that people and institutions have already realized in relation to LL objects in their mundane lives for their socially relevant purposes. The collecting of such evidence focused on observable or reconstructable parts of the language management acts which unfolded around the objects suggested for analysis by key incidents.



**Figure 7.** A visitor checking the data on his smartphone against monolingual orientation signs (left) and the signs from his perspective (right), Prague city centre (50°05'19"N 14°24'58"E), August 2018

## Conclusion

This study has documented that the Czech population manages language choice in favour of Czech, thereby delegitimizing other language groups’ representation or participation, contradicting on different occasions purely communicative needs, the self-image of a tolerant nation and the officially civic conceptualization of the country. In general terms, the study has shown that, whatever the multilingual potential of a country’s population and official support for minority languages, the population may restrict language choice extensively. And it may do so not necessarily by means of legal provisions and overt or covert policies, but quite effectively in rather banal ways – in line with or even against the law and policies – depending on various interests which, in a democratic society, need to be disclosed and accounted for.

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## Notes

1 Blommaert (2013) uses the term *demarcation* in a different sense of signs (inscriptions) cutting up a larger space into smaller ones with their own regimes of communication. Here, inspired by Gal (2005), *demarcation* is understood as social actors’ differentiation between spaces, or other spatializable social facts, according to whether the occurrence of particular languages is legitimate in them or not.

2 An online discussion participant nicknamed ‘helenka’ formulated the distinction as follows: ‘A year ago [i.e. in 2007] when bilingual signs were installed in the town centre, there was no problem, now [when they are installed outside the town centre] the “local residents are surprised”’ (‘Před rokem, když se zaváděly dvojjazyčné nápisy v centru města, tak byl klid, nyní se "obyvatelé diví"’) (<http://www.ihorizont.cz>, 08.09.2008 at 18:30).

3 Some scholars use a similar ‘top–down’/‘bottom–up’ terminology, but there are reasonable doubts about the suitability of these terms (Coupland 2010). In any case, here the public-law/private-law distinction proved to be an ‘emic’ phenomenon, albeit it was not labelled as such.

4 The conviction that Czech is declared ‘the official language’ of Czechia by law is so strong that, in an overview of language legislation, even an MC of a public-service broadcaster claimed that there is an ‘Act on the state language of the Czech Republic’ (Czech Television 2017: broadcast time 20:15), while in fact no such Act exists.

5 The authors do not formulate it precisely this way, but in his personal communications one of them offered such an interpretation based on his experience of interviews with respondents.

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