



inflections

A newsletter devoted to diversity and opportunity in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, published by the Duke-UNC Center for Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies

Volume 2, Number 3

February 1998

Ebonics and the Czech Linguistic Situation: A Lecture for the UNC Program in Humanities and Human Values

[Preparatory exercise: Name a country where schoolteachers tell millions of children that they don't know how to speak their own language correctly]

I never expected to speak to a lay audience about the difference between spoken and literary Czech. Not only did I do this, but my talk was well-received, and I appreciated the chance to think again about the linguistic and social dynamics of a community that uses multiple registers for communication.

I needed my audience to appreciate the subtlety and complexity of the Czech situation. I asked them to compare parallel English translations of a bible passage and to imagine living in a society where all official communication -- newspapers, books, radio and TV, and education -- took place in the language of King James, but, all spoken discourse, regardless of the participants' age, education, or social status, took place in a language further removed from the King James than the Good News translation. We performed a guided analysis of the differences between these two texts and transferred that experience to the examples I provided of literary and spoken Czech.

I wanted to demonstrate that we were looking at systematic differences, and that the spoken register was not "lazy" or "degenerate," but a variant of the literary one, with just as much internal logic and integrity. I then guided my audience through a thumbnail sketch of the historical factors contributing to the rift between the two registers of Czech. Prominent European events and personalities (Saints Cyril and Methodius, Jan Hus, the Reformations, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire) lent my story the

credibility of Old World tradition. I hoped to prepare my audience to consider that nonstandard varieties of American English are likewise linguistically legitimate vehicles of communication, despite their lack of a prestigious foreign pedigree. I also let my audience in on a little trade secret: as linguists we do not have any tidy "scientific" definition separating language and dialect. We are excellent with minutiae such as phoneme inventories, paradigms, syntactic constructions, even individual isoglosses, but we cannot decide whether a group of speakers is or is not part of the community which speaks language X. Membership is usually determined by the social and political imagination of the people involved. Consider that numerous, mutually incomprehensible codes are all "Chinese"; yet two fairly similar codes are separately named "Czech" and "Slovak."

Unfortunately, faulty concepts of language often serve as rallying points for a range of political agendas from exclusivist to genocidal. The current fracturing of Yugoslavia is fueled by mostly insignificant linguistic factors. Fortunately, the Czech situation is far more benign, more appropriately the target of cynical humor than of real strife, but it is no less benighted by linguistic misconceptions. Even professional linguists infrequently buy into such misconceptions and/or shun such issues.

There are many right answers to the exercise at the beginning of this essay, among them the USA and the Czech Republic. The myth perpetuated in both of our educational systems, that language has "right" and "wrong" instead of just "different" versions, is demeaning to young children found deficient upon entering school. Many Czech children, required to use literary Czech in school, will simply not speak for much of first grade. The situation in the United States, where variations commonly correlate with race, has pernicious overtones of discrimination. Young people in both societies need to manipulate more

than one language register to pursue higher education and career interests. Yet both systems fail to provide a curriculum directly addressing this need. The Oakland School Board's decision in December 1996 to officially recognize "Ebonics" as a variety of English was a step toward just such a curriculum. On the face of it a fairly straightforward, educational goal, it exploded into a furious debate overwhelmed by misplaced fears and accusations.

Linguistic awareness should be a part of the K- 12 educational experience for all American children. Everyone should have a chance to master standard English so that society might benefit from the talents of all of its members. Linguists can use this venue to contribute to the equity and humanism in our society. Although there is no corresponding equity issue in the Czech Republic, a strong utilitarian argument could be made for a linguistic component in the curriculum that would build directly on what children already know about their native language (spoken Czech) and what they could be taught about its relation to literary Czech. The Czech example further demonstrates that a society can function with more than one language code, and can do so with grace and humor.

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Master of Arts in Russian/East European Studies at UNC

The changes in Eastern Europe have created a wide range of employment opportunities in non-academic fields. The Center for Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies at the University of North Carolina is in the preliminary stages of planning a degree program focused on equipping professionals with area and language expertise. The Masters of Arts in Russian and East European Studies is being designed to provide advanced training to professionals pursuing careers in the international arena and Eastern Europe. These specialists will be poised to undertake careers in international trade and multinational corporations, government and international agencies, educational and non-profit initiatives, and trans-national NGOs. Some may combine this specialization with further professional training in international law or business.

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Calendar

The next **Piedmont Slavic Colloquium** will be on **Monday, February 23**, at 5:30 p.m. in the Breedlove Room, Perkins Library, Duke University. Professor **Barbara Clements**, author of books on Alexandra Kollontai and Bolshevik women, will be speaking on women in the Soviet Union. Dr. Clements received her Ph.D. from Duke University and is currently a Professor of History at the University of Akron.

The year's final colloquium will be on **Tuesday, April 7**, in the conference room at 223 E. Franklin Street, Chapel Hill.

Laura Engelstein, Professor of History at Princeton University, will present a lecture, "Personal Testimony and the Defense of Faith: Sectarian Tales in Tsarist and Soviet Russia" on **Tuesday, February 24**, at 4:00 in the conference room at 223 E. Franklin Street, Chapel Hill.

John Bushnell, Professor of History at Northwestern University, will present a lecture, "Russia in a World of Popular Culture," on **Thursday, March 5**, at 3:00 pm. Check the UNC Center's webpage for location information.

The **Carolina Chapter of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages (AATSEEL)** will hold its annual conference on **Saturday, April 4**, from 9:45 am to 12:00 p.m. in Room 226 of the UNC-CH Student Union. For more information, or to submit a paper proposal, please contact Carla Stec at (919) 962-4416 or cstec@email.unc.edu.

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Announcements

Clifford Gaddy, (Duke Ph.D., Economics, 1991) received the prestigious Best Book Award from the American Association of Slavic Studies for his book, The Price of the Past: Russia's Struggle with the Legacy of a Militarized Economy (Washington: Brookings Institute, 1996).

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Don't forget to check the new Duke Center website at <http://www.duke.edu/web/CSEES/>.

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