

## Hovorová čeština meets Ebonics

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

"Tell me, you seem to know what's going on here. What's that strange thing on the program that we're supposed to hear tomorrow morning? Something about Slavic?" asked the woman seated to my left. I chuckled and said "Me." A hundred representatives of various walks of life - teachers, students, professionals, but mostly retirees - had gathered for a two-day symposium on "How We Talk: Language, Identity, and Power." Connie Eble, author of a recent book entitled *Slang and Sociability*, offered examples of English shaped to be insulting, outrageous, or just plain fun. Walt Wolfram, a leading specialist on American dialectology and African American Vernacular English (aka "Ebonics") played audio and video tapes gleaned from his research on Carolina's Outer Banks and in Philadelphia's inner city. And I was to serve as the foil. Because Connie's and Walt's material was emotionally challenging (and deliberately so), suggesting that slang, dialects and vernaculars are linguistically as viable as the standard English officially sanctioned by schools and media, it was my job to defuse the situation by providing a parallel from an exotic neutral context so that the participants could engage dispassionately with the issues, undistracted by deep-seated feelings. And what could be more exotic than Czech diglossia?

If anyone had told me a year ago that I might be asked to get up in front of a lay audience consisting mainly of Carolina alumni and talk about the difference between spoken and literary Czech, I never would have believed it. Not only did it happen, though, but it was well-received, and it actually worked. It also gave me a chance to think more about the dynamics of linguistic and social factors in a community that uses multiple registers for communication, and about the responsibility of linguists to separate fact and reason from fantasy and emotion.

My most obvious challenge was to get my audience to appreciate the subtlety and complexity

of the Czech linguistic situation. To achieve this I asked them to compare parallel translations of a bible passage and to imagine what it would be like to live in a society where all official communication - newspapers, books, radio and TV, education - took place in the language of King James (or better yet, Chaucer), but all spoken discourse, regardless of age, education, and social status, took place in a language even further removed from King James English than the Good News translation, something rather along the lines of Scots English. I expected them to perform a guided analysis of the differences between these two texts and to transfer that experience to the parallels I described for literary and spoken Czech.

The point was to show that we are looking at systematic differences, and that the spoken register is not "lazy" or "degenerate," but just a variant of the literary one, with just as much internal logic and integrity. I also gave them parallel Czech translations of the same excerpt and took them through a thumbnail sketch of the historical factors that have contributed to the present-day rift between the two registers of Czech. Of course the fact that these are biblical examples exaggerated the differences seen in the varieties of English and Czech, but literary Czech, if it can be dated at all, does represent a language contemporary to King James.

The prominence of famous European events and leaders in this tale (SS. Cyril and Methodius, Jan Hus, the Reformations, the Hapsburgs and the Austro-Hungarian Empire) lent all the credibility of venerable Old World traditions to my story. I hoped to prepare my interlocutors to consider Walt Wolfram's thesis that nonstandard varieties of American English are likewise linguistically legitimate vehicles of communication, despite the lack of a prestigious foreign pedigree.

While acknowledging the universal allegiance to language as a marker of identity (literally "you are what you speak", a source of both nationalistic pride and its flip side, xenophobia), I also let my audience in on a trade secret of ours: as linguists we do not have any tidy "scientific" operational

*King James*

Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon. And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coast and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil. But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us. But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me. But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs. And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table. Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.

*Good News*

Jesus left that place and went off to the territory near the cities of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman who lived in that region came to him. "Son of David!" she cried out. "Have mercy on me, sir! My daughter has a demon and is in a terrible condition!" But Jesus did not say a word to her. His disciples came to him and begged him, "Send her away! She is following us and making all this noise!" The Jesus replied, "I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel." At this the woman came and fell at his feet. "Help me, sir!" she said. Jesus answered, "It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." "That is true, sir," she answered; "but even the dogs eat the leftovers that fall from their masters' table." So Jesus answered her, "You are a woman of great faith! What you want will be done for you." And at that very moment her daughter was healed.

*Scots English*

Jesus nou left Gennesaret an socht quaitness i the kintra o Tyre an Sidon. But what suid happen but at a Caunaanite wuman noolins come out o thae pairts came sraichin efter him: "Oh, sir," cried she, "hae pitie on's, thou Son o Dauvit; my dachter is sair pleggit wi an ill spírit." But the ne'er a wurd spak he. Syne the disciples cam an priggitt wi him, sayin, "Gíe the wuman her will, afore we'r deived wi her skelloch-skellochín ahent's!" But he answert, "I wisna sent but tae the wandert sheep o the Houss o Israel." Than the wuman cam forrit an fell at his feet an said til him, "Oh, help me, sir!" "It isna weill dune," qo he, "tae tak the bairns' breid an cast it tae the dowgs." "Na, weill-a-wyte, is it, sir: but een the dowgs gets aitin the murlins at faas aff o their maisters' buird." Syne Jesus said til her, "Gryte is your faith, wuman: ye will een hae your will." An i that same maument her dachter cowered her ill.

*Králická Biblí Svátá - Literary Czech*

A vyšel odtud Ježíš, bral se do krajín Tyrských a Sidonských. A aj, žena Kananejská, z končin těch vyšedši, volala, řkuci jemu: Smiluj se nade mnou, Pane, synu Davidův. Dceru mou hrozně trápi ďábelství. On pak neodpověděl jí slova. I přistoupivše učedníci jeho, prosili ho, řkouce: Odbud' ji, neboť volá za námi. On pak opověděl, řekl: Nejsem poslán než k ovcem zahynulým z domu Izraelského. Ale ona přistoupivši, klaněla se jemu, řkuci: Pane, pomoz mi. On pak odpověděl, řekl: Není slušné vzítí chléb dětem a vrci štěňatům. A ona řekla: Takt' jest, Pane. A však štěňátka jedí drobtý, kteříž padají z stolů pánů jejich. Tedy odpovídaje Ježíš, řekl jí: Ó ženo, veliká jest víra tvá. Staniz se tobě, jakž chceš. I uzdravena jest dcera její v tu hodinu.

*Spoken Prague Czech*

A Ježíš vyšel vodtamtud směrem k městům Tyr a Sidon. A najednou ňáká Kananejská ženská, kerá pocházela z těchto končin, zavolala a řekla mu: Smiluj se nade mnou, Pane, synu Davida. Moje dcera je posedlá a strašně trpí. Von jí ale nic neřek. Přišli jeho učedníci a prosili ho: Pošli jí pryč. Vona nás pořád votravuje. Von ale vodpověděl: jsem poslán jenom k ztracenejm ovcem Izraelskýho lidu. Vona pak přišla, poklonila se mu a řekla: Pane, pomoz mi. Von na to vodpověděl: Není slušný vzítí dětem chleba a hodit ho psům. A vona řekla: To máte pravdu, Pane. Ale psi žerou drobtý, co padaj ze stolů jejich pánů. Tedy Ježíš jí odpověděl: Ženo, to máte velkou víru. At' se to stane tak, jak chcete. A akorát v tuto hodinu se její dcera uzdravila.

## Outline of Guided Analysis

King James to Scots English

Literary Czech to Spoken Czech

## PHONOLOGY

loss of final consonants:

*and* > *an*; *of* > *o*; *have* > *hae*; *with* > *wi*

diphthongization:

*to* > *tae*; *parts* > *pairts*; *dogs* > *dowgs*; *eating* > *aitin**é* > *í*; *ý* > *ej*; *o* > *vo*

## MORPHOLOGY

verb endings: *saying* > *sayin*;*the dogs get* > *the dowgs gets*

endings are different for nouns, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, numerals, conjugated verb forms; gerunds and participles are absent in the spoken language

## SYNTAX

*be it unto thee even as thou wilt* > *ye will een hae your will**her daughter was made whole* > *her dachter cowered her ill*relative clauses are formed differently  
pronouns and cases are used differently

## LEXICON

*children's* > *bairns'* *table* > *buird*

hundreds of common words are different, such as words for 'father', 'house', 'money', 'mouth', 'few', 'much, many'

definition to determine what is a language as opposed to a dialect. We are excellent with minutiae such as phoneme inventories, paradigms, syntactic constructions, even individual isoglosses, but it is not our job to resolve issues of whether a given group of speakers is or is not part of the community of language X. The latter is often more a matter of the social and political imagination of the people involved than of linguistics; any attempt to objectively reconcile the fact that numerous highly distinct and mutually incomprehensible codes are all "Chinese", yet two fairly similar and mutually comprehensible codes are "Czech" and "Slovak" is doomed to fail. Unfortunately, however, the imaginative process connected with national identity is often morally too narrow-minded to embrace all components of our increasingly pluralistic societies. And worse yet, faulty concepts of language and linguistics too often serve as rallying points for political agendas that range from exclusivist to genocidal. The current fracturing of Yugoslavia is driven in part by (mostly insignificant) linguistic factors. Waving language as a strategic flag, various groups claim that they are linguistically and therefore ethnically distinct and entitled to a distinct territory as well,

with disastrous consequences. Fortunately the Czech situation is far more benign, more appropriately the target of characteristic "black humor" than of real strife, but no less benighted by linguistic misconceptions. Like so many other social issues, the approach of choice is to simply deny its existence. My favorite example of this is a sentence uttered by a Czech who, while trying to defend himself from my insistence that no one really uses pure literary Czech in spoken communication, produced the following utterance: "*Já mluvím úplně spisovně. Ty to ale slyšíš nespisovnejma ušima.*" Unfortunately even professional linguists buy into such misconceptions and/or shun such issues. At a conference in Olomouc in 1993 František Čermák (FFUK) suggested that a corpus of spoken Czech be compiled and analyzed so that we would have a factual basis for discussions of the Czech diglossia issue, but his comment was met with obvious discontent. Fortunately for all of us, however, Čermák has not given up on this project.

There are probably many right answers to the question at the beginning of this essay, among them the USA and the Czech Republic. The myth that language has "right" and "wrong" versions (instead of just "different" versions) is perpetuated

in both our educational systems, and must be demeaning to young children who are found to be deficient upon entering school. At the same conference in Olomouc it was reported that it is not uncommon for Czech children, faced with the requirement that they use literary Czech in school, to simply not speak for much of first grade. In the USA where register variation commonly correlates with race, this situation is tainted with the pernicious overtones of discrimination. Young people of both societies need to learn to manipulate more than one register of their language in order to pursue higher education and careers, yet both societies fail to provide a curriculum to directly address that need. The December 1996 decision of the Oakland School Board to officially recognize "Ebonics" as a variety of English was a step toward providing just such a curriculum, on the face of it a fairly straightforward, reasonable educational goal, but it

exploded into a furious debate overwhelmed by misplaced fears and accusations.

Walt Wolfram suggests that linguistic awareness be made a part of the K-12 educational experience for all children, so that everyone will have a chance to master standard English and society will benefit from the talents of all of its members. This is a venue for linguists to contribute to the goals of 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 how it relates 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.

### **National Capital Language Resource Center**

The National Capital Language Resource Center, based out of Georgetown University and funded by a grant from the United States Department of Education, offers a variety of programs and projects to help teach foreign languages. One of these projects is the Teacher Research in Secondary and College Foreign Language Instruction, which assists teachers in developing and implementing effective teaching strategies, assessments and the use of new technologies.

The Center is also dedicated to the dissemination of timely information. Updated information can be obtained from its webpage at <[www.cal.org/nclrc](http://www.cal.org/nclrc)>. Other plans for the web include: initiating on-line access via the NCLRC's Web page to the Center's database on Materials for the Study of Less Commonly Taught Languages, a database housed at CAL (Center for Applied Linguistics) containing 12,000 entries on 900 languages, by putting portions of it online and updating and maintaining the NCLRC's Foreign Language Test Database, containing over 280 entries on 70 languages. This database can be accessed at <<http://www.cal.org/cal/db/flt/flt-dir.htm>>.

For the less commonly taught languages and the foreign language test databases, contact Dora Johnson, Center for Applied Linguistics, 1118 22<sup>nd</sup> St. NW, Washington, DC, 20037-1214; voicemail (202)429-9292 ext.249; e-mail: [dora@cal.org](mailto:dora@cal.org)

For more information about the workshops and projects, contact Anna Uhl Charmot, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, The George Washington University, 2134 G St. NW, Washington, DC, 20052; voicemail (202)994-0331; e-mail: [auchamot@gwis2.circ.gwu.edu](mailto:auchamot@gwis2.circ.gwu.edu)

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