

## *“The development and drilling of phonological features of Czech”*

—by Laura A. Janda, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

I have identified a set of segments and phonological features of Czech that present particular difficulty to the English-speaking learner. I present these common pitfalls, along with some exercises I have developed to overcome them. My intent is not to produce a set of exercises that will ensure proper pronunciation of Czech, or that will cure faulty pronunciation — it is improbable that any exercises could achieve such goals. My intent is, instead, to provide students with exercises that can be used repetitively and at any level of study.

The segments that give my students the most trouble are:

**h**

**ř**

**ř, ě, and ň**

vocalic **r** and **l**

long and short **o** and **u**, as opposed to the diphthong **ou**

The phenomena that give my students the most difficulty are:

length (as independent of stress)

progressive devoicing in clusters such as **př-**,

**(s)tř-**, **(s)kř-**, **chř-**, and occasionally **sh-**

insertion of palatal glide and palatal nasal in **pě**, **bě**, **vě**, **mě**

placement of glottal stop and resultant devoicing

My strategy with consonants is to exercise all the possible environments in terms of following vowels, initial position, intervocalic position, and position in clusters, and also to contrast the target consonant with other consonants that are similar in sound or articulation. The exercises show sample lists of words used in drilling **h**, **ř**, **ř**, **ě**, and **ň**. I add common phrases to exercise pronunciation in context. A phrase like *nic není k máni* is a great opportunity to drill the production and recognition of palatalodentals vs. dentals.

The only really problematic vowel is **o**, which English speakers tend to diphthongize, thus confusing it with **ou**, but to be complete, it is important to compare this vowel also with long **o** and long and short **u**. Most of these examples are adapted from Palková's book (*Fonetika a fonologie češtiny*. Prague: Karolinum, 1994). Here the folk song *Kočka leze dřinou...* enshrined in Smetana's monumental composition, is an appropriate contextualized example.

*continued on next page*

Continued from page 9

Now for problematic phenomena in Czech phonology. The most troublesome of all is phonemic length functioning independently of stress and of the voicing of following consonants. Here I present the students with every possible combination of long and short syllables and then give them examples that instantiate every theoretically possible structure. I first present each possible combination like a musical structure devoid of most phonological features. In other words, I hum the pattern and then have them hum the pattern and then we try to fill in the sounds of specific words that fit the pattern. In this exercise it is very important to present phrases with proclitics and enclitics so that the student will understand that these also function as single words and will get used to the appropriate patterns of stress and length for these collocations. It is also important to present the diphthongs **ou** and **au**, which create long syllables.

The progressive devoicing of **ř** after voiceless consonants and the occasional parallel in the devoicing of **h** after **s** in some words is not particularly difficult in terms of production, but it is likely to go unnoticed if not brought to the students' attention. The presence of the palatal glide and palatal nasal after labials as in **pě, bě, vě, mě** is really more a problem of orthography than phonology, but it is certainly relevant to mastering Czech pronunciation.

The last item is the glottal stop (*ráz*) and the devoicing it occasions. I start this exercise by having the students cough, and then cough progressively more quietly, until we begin to approach the glottal stop. Then we attempt the pronunciation. I tell them that the glottal stop should be very quiet, and that in some positions many Czechs do not really pronounce it, but the effects are important, and in some contexts (*doopravdy, poučit*) it is used by most speakers. My aim is to achieve at least *fokně*, if not *f?okně*, and to avoid things like *vokně* and *dópravdy*.

This set of exercises is aimed only at some of the most common and most correctable problems that could, if uncorrected, lead to misunderstanding. English speaking learners of Czech have many other problems, for example with aspiration, or rather the lack thereof, of voiceless stops (I have this problem myself), but I haven't yet come up with a satisfactory way of combating this and aspiration isn't usually a barrier to understanding. When Czechs come across a person with aspiration or with alveolar, as opposed to true dental articulation of dentals, they usually understand all of what is being said to them and correctly identify their

interlocutor as a foreigner. I don't believe that as instructors we can really expect our students to master native or native-like pronunciation. Our primary aim has to be to help our students master an acceptable pronunciation that does not interfere with communication.