

Heritage Voices: Language - Czech

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My name is Simone Hrouda and I am a Czech heritage speaker born and raised in Portland, Oregon. My parents immigrated into the United States from the Czech Republic in the early 1980s. Outside of summer trips to the Czech Republic and the small Czech community of Portland, there was little opportunity for the maintenance of my Czech language skills. As a child, I attended a public elementary school and the development of my English reading and writing skills took precedence over the Czech language. I was fortunate to travel back to the Czech Republic during summer vacations, experiencing brief glimpses of the culture and language. During these times, Czechs mislabeled me as “Američanka.” I considered myself as both Czech and American and felt wrongly categorized by the title. In the United States, I identified with my Czech heritage because my parents continued to use the language at home. Unfortunately by middle school they slowly transitioned out of using Czech, and the main language spoken at home became English.

As a Czech heritage speaker, the language symbolizes a special connection with my family and ancestry. The language contains a deep cultural significance that takes me back to my mother’s hometown of Černilov and the mountains of Krkonoše, where my father’s family resides.

I cannot separate the subtleties of the language from memories and cultural experiences in the Czech Republic in the summers. For example, my cousin and I would fight over the English and Czech alphabet as children. She tried to convince me that Czech was more difficult because the alphabet had 42 letters. In the evenings we would listen to České pohádky (Czech fairytales) on TV about princesses, the Vodník that lived in the pond outside, or the cute little čert (devil) who was really a good guy. I remember practicing Czech tongue twisters with neighborhood children to see who was the fastest. The hardest was “Třístatřicettři stříbrných stříkaček stříkalo přes třístatřicettři stříbrných střech” (333 silver sprinklers were spraying over 333 silver roofs) because of the repetition of the letter “ř,” which was so hard to pronounce (refer to phonology section). One summer I told my cousin I was going to go lie in the sun. She laughed at me and said I would burn myself. Apparently, the correct preposition should be “on,” as in “na slunce” (on the sun) instead of “ve slunce” (in the sun). I complained, saying the Czech language made no sense. These memories and experiences are how I relate to the Czech language and the reason why I feel so close to my Czech heritage today.

About the Czech Language

Czech is the national language of the Czech Republic and is spoken by 12 million people worldwide (Lewis, 2009). The west Slavonic language is very similar to other Slavic languages such as Slovak, Polish, and Sorbian (Ager, n.d.). Spoken dialect variations within the Czech Republic include Central Bohemian, Czecho-Moravian, Hanak, Lach, Northeast Bohemian, Southwest Bohemian (Lewis, 2009). The Czech Republic experienced heavy emigration around the years of World War One, World War Two, and between 1948-1968, which spread the Czech language to countries such as Austria, Poland, Germany, Ukraine, Croatia, Australia, Canada, and a large population in the United States (Kučera, 2001). In the year 2000, 1,262,527 Americans identified with a Czech heritage, and 441,403 identified as Czechoslovakian ([U.S. Census Bureau](#), 2000).

The Czech language is spoken all over the Czech Republic, in regions known as Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia (Lewis, 2009). The earliest forms of the language date back to the Boii tribe, existing in Bohemia since 1st century AD (Ager, n.d.). The Czech language was first recorded in 862, when St. Cyril and St. Methodius, Byzantine saints, arrived in Moravia to translate religious texts into the Slavic language (Janda & Townsend, 2002). Their progress was halted when the land was under Frankish rule, and the use of the Latin alphabet was established (Janda & Townsend, 2002). By the 13th century the use of Czech texts began to emerge again (Kučera, 2001), and by the 16th century significant grammatical shifts had taken place from the Slavic language and spoken Czech. Certain past tenses had disappeared from use, while declensions had increased (Kučera, 2001). In the 15th century, theologian Jan Hus reformed the spelling system, making every letter equivalent to one phoneme (Ager, n.d.). The Latin alphabet had no graphemes comparable to Czech sounds, and they were therefore written as digraphs (Kučera, 2001). Hus added diacritics to the language, such as a "háček" (an upside down "v") added to palatal consonants (č, ň, ř, š, ž), while a line indicated long vowels (á, é, í, ó, ú, ý) (Kučera, 2001). This system triumphed (Kučera, 2001) and is known today as the standard Czech alphabet. The literary accomplishments of St. Cyril, St. Methodius, and Jan Hus are celebrated yearly as consecutive public holidays on July fifth and sixth ("Travel advice: Holidays," 2009).

Throughout history, political struggles threatened the survival of the Czech language over time, allowing foreign words to seep into the Czech lexicon. Between the 16th and 19th century, use of the Czech language declined with the country under Austrian rule (Janda & Townsend, 2002). National revival of the language began at the end of the 19th century, when Czech was once again reinstated as the national language (Janda & Townsend, 2002). After World War Two, the soviet rule brought the Russian language into Czech schools (Janda & Townsend, 2002). Furthermore the Czech language has also been influenced by old Slavic, German, Latin, Russian, and English. Colloquial Czech has evolved considerably from literary Czech, with morphological and phonological changes, creating a large disparity between the two forms (Janda & Townsend, 2002).

Czech in the US

Czech heritage societies across the United States promote the maintenance and development of the Czech language and culture. Wilber Nebraska is the Czech capital of the United States, and is home of the national Czech festival that draws up to 50,000 citizens with Czech ancestry to celebrate their heritage culture every year (Czech festival, 1998). To preserve the language, community Czech schools and classes are offered across the country in a number of states (e.g. Maryland, Illinois, Wisconsin, Texas, Nebraska, New York), and beginner Czech classes are offered at over 17 different universities (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, 2009). Besides classes, several Czech meet up groups have been established across the US by heritage speakers, native speakers, and non-heritage speakers. These groups provide an opportunity for individuals to further develop Czech speaking skills. Heritage speakers are motivated to learn Czech because it is part of their cultural identity. Others want to learn the language to travel abroad, or to communicate with relatives. Czech classes and schools exist today thanks in large part to efforts being made by Czech heritage speakers and Czech heritage societies.

Phonology and Orthography (Výslovnost a Pravopis)

Jan Hus' influence on language is visible by looking at the graphemes in the Czech alphabet. Every phoneme can be written as one letter except for "ch," which is the only leftover example of Latin digraphs used prior to the fifteenth century (Kučera, 2001). The chart below contains all 42 characters of the Czech alphabet and their pronunciation in IPA. The vowels include: a, á, e, é, ě, i, í, o, ó, ú, ů, y, ý.

Table 1. Czech Alphabet (Source: Ager, S. (n.d.)

A a	Á á	B b	C c	Č č	D d	Ď ě	E e	É é	Ě ě	F f
á	dlouhé á	bé	cé	čé	dé	ďé	é	dlouhé é	ije	ef
[a]	[a:]	[b]	[t͡s]	[t͡ʃ]	[d]	[ɟ]	[ɛ]	[ɛ:]	[e, je]	[f]
G g	H h	Ch ch	I i	Í í	J j	K k	L l	M m	N n	Ň ň
gé	há	chá	í	dlouhé í	jé	ká	el	em	en	eň
[g]	[ɦ]	[x]	[i]	[i:]	[j]	[k]	[l]	[m]	[n]	[ɲ]
O o	Ó ó	P p	Q q	R r	Ř ř	S s	Š š	T t	Ť ť	
ó	dlouhé ó	pé	kvé	er	eř	es	eš	té	té	
[ɔ]	[o:]	[p]	[kv]	[r]	[r̝]	[s]	[ʃ]	[t]	[c]	
U u	Ú ú	Ů ů	V v	W w	X x	Y y	Ý ý	Z z	Ž ž	
ú	dlouhé ú	u s kroužkem	vé	dvojitě vé	iks	ypsilon	dlouhé ypsilon	zet	žet	
[ʊ]	[u:]	[u:]	[v]	[v]	[ks]	[i]	[i:]	[z]	[ʒ]	

In Czech, words are almost always spelled phonetically, and the first syllable of every word is stressed (Burilkovová, 2003). One of the frequent spelling patterns is consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel (e.g. *táta* (dad), *ruka* (hand), *hodiny* (time), *žába* (frog)) (Naughton, 2005). Occasional, "l" and "r" can be used as vowels, allowing for certain words to be formed with only consonants, like "krk," meaning "neck", and "prst," meaning "finger" (Naughton, 2005).

A letter special to the Czech language is "ř," and is pronounced by almost trilling the letter "r" and bringing your tongue to the front roof of your mouth. This letter is very challenging for non-Czech speakers to pronounce and is similar to the "g" in "genre." Another difficulty in the Czech language is knowing when to use, *i/í* or *y/ý*, which commonly represent plurality and are frequently used to the end of words. The letter *y/ý* always comes after hard consonants (h, g, ch, k, r, d, t, n), while *i/í* always comes after soft consonants (*ž, š, č, c, ř, d',t', ň, j*) (Burilkovová, 2003). Since the letters sound so similar, even natives get confused.

Czech Grammar

All Czech nouns are denoted by one of three genders, masculine, feminine, and neuter (Harkins, 1953). Masculine nouns are divided into two categories, animate and inanimate (Burilkovová, 2003). Masculine words usually end in a consonant, feminine nouns usually end in an "a" "e" or "oust," while neuter nouns usually end in "í" or "o" (Naughton, 2005).

Nouns have no articles (Burilkovová, 2003), meaning "a" "the" and "an" are absent from the Czech language. Instead, the most common demonstrative adjective used is "ten," which means, "this," "that," "those," and also the indefinite pronoun "it" (Harkins, 1953). The spelling of "ten" is modified to correspond with the gender of nouns (Harkins, 1953). "That cat" is feminine, "ta kočka," while "that dog" is masculine, "ten pes."

There are seven different cases in the Czech language, these include nominative, accusative, genitive, dative, locative, instrumental, and vocative (Naughton, 2005). The ending of every noun is declined depending on its case, number, and animacy (Janda & Townsend, 2002).

Table 2. Noun Declension (Source: "Balon," 2007)

Balon (Ball)

	Singular	Plural
Nominative	balon	balony
Genitive	balonu	balonů
Dative	balonu	balonům
Accusative	balon	Balony
Vocative	balone	balony
Locational	Balonu, baloně	balonech
Instrumental	balonem	balony

The chart above shows the various possible endings depending on which case and number the noun "balon" is used. The ending patterns are contingent on the gender and classification of the noun (Janda & Townsend, 2002). This declension pattern is typical for nouns characterized as inanimate masculine with a hard stem (Janda & Townsend, 2002).

In Czech, declension is used on nouns, pronouns, and adjectives to show the function of any word in a sentence (Burilkovová, 2003). These cases distinguish the spelling of the object from the subject, allowing for greater flexibility in word order (Burilkovová, 2003). The most important word in the sentence tends to come first in a sentence (Harkins).

The endings of verbs are conjugated denoting singular or plural, first person, second person, and third person. Subject pronouns are usually absent in sentences, unless intended attention is needed (Janda & Townsend, 2002).

"Tykat" or "Vykat?"

Many foreigners become confused with what grammatical form should be used when talking to different people. "Ty" is the second person singular pronoun, while "vy" is second person plural. The verbs "tykat" and "vykat" mean to "say you (ty) to each other" and to "say you guys (vy) to each other," respectively (Janda & Townsend, 2002). The second person singular conjugation of verbs should be used among friends, family, animals and children, while second person plural is regarded as the formal form, and is used with strangers and seniors (Harkins, 1953). If you are not sure which form to use, the safe bet is to use second person plural.

Diminutives

The Czech language uses diminutives by adding a "k" and shortening or lengthening a vowel (Janda & Townsend, 2002). Diminutives can also be used with names; for example, my name "Simona," becomes "Simonko," which would be used by someone addressing me with endearment. Another example is the diminutive of "kočička" (meaning little cat or kitten) from the word "kočka" (cat). This fun grammatical function allows Czechs to create new words indicating miniature size of something or simply expressing kindness.

Some Interesting Czech Resources

The Czech language is a beautiful Slavic language with a vibrant, broad vocabulary. Highly recommended Czech authors include Milan Kundera, Karel Čapek, Bohumil Hrabal, Ota Pavel, Josef Škvorecký, and Vladislav Vančura. To hear the language and experience Czech humor, try out some of these Czech films: *The Firemen's Ball* (Hoří, má panenko) directed by Miloš Forman; *I Served the King of England* (*Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále*) based on a book by Hrabal; *Kolya* (Kolja); *Divided We Fall* (*Musíme si pomáhat*); and *Cosy Dens* (*Pelíšky*), a Czech classic. Czech literature and films provide native, foreign, and heritage speakers with the opportunity to experience the Czech language and culture outside of the Czech Republic.

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