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How cultural and linguistic considerations affect the learning of English in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

People worldwide are increasingly faced with a force that drives international communication and globalization. Whether they are directed impacted or more subtly affected they can weigh how the pervasive force of the English language is touching upon essential parts of their own languages and cultures. If you listen to the radio or watch TV in the Czech Republic, you can catch previously unheard words and phrases seeping in, such as "updatovat" or "door-to-door". This paper looks at ways the Czech Republic has reacted to the encroaching effects of English. It compares both languages and it also more specifically looks at some examples of English words and phrases that have become loanwords in Czech, and at issues of cultural relativity. It uses a series of questionnaires spaced over time to gauge how students at a technical university consider English in comparison to their own language. As a guiding point it looks at some of the findings of renowned sociologists such as Bourdieu, Hofstede, Trompeenaars and E. Hall to use as reference points to generally examine how some cultural factors can influence the approach to learning a foreign language.

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1. Introduction

Since the time of the Ancient Greeks, instances of cultural hegemony have been cited. Referring to its latent effects, (Gramsci, 1999) warned about how dominant class views also occur culturally and can be eventually taken as common sense through constant exposure.

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Throughout its relatively sometimes turbulent history people, Czechs have had to be vigilant, like all those living in smaller geopolitical entities, to keep the essence of their cultural traditions. It was inevitable that due to its geographical position, this most Western of Slavic nations has been directly or indirectly politically, economically and militarily influenced by its more powerful neighbors. When it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Czech lands had to struggle against the more dominant Germanic cultural influences, and emerged largely intact, but nevertheless, to this day the Czech language still maintains its fair share of Germanisms. The second onslaught came after the Second World War with the Soviets and the much closer Slavic language of Russian, which became compulsory to learn. With the opening of Eastern Europe after 1989, and the expansion of emerging markets and digital communication, the Czech Republic, which is now 16th on the KOF Index of Globalization, (Statista, 2015), became also exposed to more permeating influences.

In educational statistics we can trace how English has surmounted all other languages worldwide, (Antimoon, 2009). In the EU 14 out of the 28 countries are forced to teach English at school as a compulsory language while the other countries do so by choice (EACEA, 2012). We can see how the study of English at VSB- Technical University of Ostrava over the last 25 years has displaced the study of once equally as popular German and compulsory Russian. (See Table 1).

Table 1. The Number of Students in Language Studies, 2013/2014 Winter Semester VSB-TUO Language Dept. Full-Time Bachelor Study

VSB-TUO		Overall number of students according to faculty						
Faculty	Year	English	German	Russian	French	Spanish	Czech	Total
Total	1-3	5399	527	656	89	203	0	6874
% Rate	-	78.5%	7.7%	9.5%	1.3%	3.0%	0%	100%

2. The questionnaires

To see how students are reacting to this a brief questionnaire (see Table 2) was distributed to 200 first and second year students studying at 5 technically-oriented faculties in the winter semester of 2015.

Table 2. The Questionnaire: A Comparison of the English and Czech Languages (2015).

How many years have you been studying English?
What are the advantages of the Czech language?
What are the advantages of the English language?
What are the disadvantages of the Czech language?
What are the disadvantages of English?
How much time do use spend on the net using Czech?
How much time do you spend on the net using English?

In it students were asked about their frequency and type of language usage and their feelings and perceptions about their own language and English. All students in it indicated that they use English on-line to various degrees, and quite expectedly more than double the number of students indicated that they mostly use Czech. Similarly as those who use on-line English more, the number of students using mostly Czech ran from 5% to 95% , with most students writing that it was about 60 - 70% of the time. According to the responses 140 students (that is 70%)

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