

# English and the Czechs

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The beginnings of this relation are in the dark. We shall never know what impression English made on princess Anne when she landed in England to become the wife of King Richard II and how much English she learned during the eight years of her marriage – old English chronicles only comment and praise her knowledge of Latin. Latin must have been the language of communication for the Czech students who arrived in England to obtain Wycliff's writings. Half a century later (1465), in the delegation of Lev of Rožmitál, the brother-of-law to King George of Poděbrady, the diarist Šašek of Bříkrov noticed that England abounded in beautiful women, but the language they spoke was not worth mentioning. In the official negotiations in London, the delegation must have used Latin. Nor do we know how much English Mrs Kelly picked up from her husband – the astrologer Edward Kelly lived in Bohemia under Emperor Rudolph II for many years, until his death. Perhaps things turned out in the same way in his household as I found them in one home in Brno, soon after the war. The Czech husband, a former R.A.F. man, spoke Czech to his English wife and she answered in English. It was a harmonious marriage.

In the late 16th century, two Englishmen taught at the Jesuit College in Olomouc—Edmund Campion and John Ogilvie—again, their knowledge of Latin must have been sufficient for communication with their Czech colleagues. And when they did return to the use of English—that was of course in England—they were executed as traitors. At the beginning of the 17th century, Captain John Smith of Virginia passed through Olomouc, on his return journey from Transylvania to Flanders. Surprisingly he might have met in the town two other Englishmen, the professor of logics and the professor of mathematics teaching at the Jesuit College. In general it holds that an Englishman in any Czech town except Prague was a phenomenon unknown for the next two centuries. At the end of the 19th century, an English traveller came to Kutná Hora and went to a pub there. The guests remembered a friend of theirs with some knowledge of English and they sent a boy to his home to fetch him. The message about an Englishman present in the pub was, however, taken by the Kutná Hora citizen as an ingenious and funny attempt to get him back to the card table, and he refused to come. You can read about this incident in the Englishman's memoirs.

Prague of course from as early as the beginning of the 17th century was occasionally visited by diplomatic missions from England; the delegates aimed at establishing contacts with Protestant nobility in Bohemia, in particular with Václav Budovec of Budov. In the diary of Adam the younger of Valdštejn you can read that on three different occasions he dined with a messenger of the King of England (in 17th-century Czech called 'král encklický'). He also wrote about the gift of two English hounds, but not a word is said about the English language. The visitor to Shakespeare's theatre Globe in 1903, Zdeněk Brtnický of Valdštejn, did not note down in his Latin diary what impression the language used on the stage had made on him. A greater impression for him and therefore registered in the diary was the fact that the spectators could see equally well from any seat. Last but not least, nothing is known about

how Elizabeth the Winter Queen of Bohemia (1620), communicated with her maids and other servants.

In short, until the middle of the 19th century English was a non-subject for the Czechs. While in books of popular reading published by Kramerius the reader could learn something about England because of the then war waged with Napoleon, e.g. *18. června 1815 bubny a polní trouby Wellingtonových zástupů k sražení se volaly* (On June 18, 1815 the drums and trumpets summoned Wellington troops for battle) or that *pan Prášilík velikou náklonnost k Angličanům měl a v pevnosti Gibraltar jim velkou službu prokázal* (Mr Prášilík was very much fond of the English and did a great service to them in the fortress of Gibraltar), English began to be acknowledged only from the middle of the 19th century, and this was done more in connection with emigration to America than as a language of communication with English people. By that time, the Czech opinions of England became polarized and besides the neutral views (e.g. in the diary of the peasant Josef Dlask), critical voices could be heard (e.g. Jakub Malý, a journalist, literary critic and translator of Shakespeare), who saw the English as a big nation suppressing a small nation: the anti-Austrian Czechs saw themselves as a parallel to the Irish, also demanding a greater independence.

Perception and knowledge of English in our country developed from the mid-19th century along three lines. The necessity of speaking English arose first among the immigrants to the USA; none of them had prepared for the emigration before, by learning some English. Anyway, in the immigration centre on Ellis Island, interpreters were available. And in the USA the Czechs settled at first either in a Czech city district or in a far-away, lonely place in the prairies of the Midwest or Texas, where there was hardly an opportunity for English conversation. Second, learning of English was inspired by an opportunity for the study of Protestant theology in Scotland (an entertaining account of this is found in Karafiát's memoirs, *Paměti spisovatele Broučků*). And third, some Czech intellectuals were brought to English by the attractions of English literature; e.g. for Josef Jungmann it became *nade všechny ostatní milejší a vzácnější* (dear and precious above any other literature). Otakar Březina regarded English lyric poetry as the greatest poetry in the world. English-language literature was admired also by Jakub Arbes – he had his son baptized Edgar, in honour of Edgar Allan Poe. In addition to the belles lettres, admiration was felt for historical writings: Palacký during his stay in Bratislava attended lessons of English given to him by an Englishman from the consulate. He was then able to read the historians Hume, Robertson and Gibbon.

Around the middle of the 19th century, however, not even the name of England was standardized yet in Czech. The country was called either 'Angličany'—this name was used by Tyl, Havlíček, Erben: *přes moře do Angličan* (across the sea to England), *kabát byl z Angličan* (the coat was from England)—or 'Anglicko' (L. Zápotocký, Sládek). An Englishman was sometimes called an 'Anglik' (Svatopluk Čech: *Královédvorský rukopis překládá jistý Anglik do angličtiny* (the manuscript of Králové Dvůrec is being translated into English by an Englishman). The language itself was often called in Czech 'angličina' (instead of 'angličtina').

The earliest authentic record of English learning comes from Josef Václav Frič. He came to England for the first time when he was seventeen. Later, in his memoirs he described the first moments in London, how he used English words for the first time, and how he pronounced the name Brown [bru:n], so that the porter understood 'room' and took him to an inn. On the other hand, when Frič's junior brother Antonín, as a promising young Czech naturalist travelled to England for the first time to see a world exhibition (1857) in London, he

was able to converse in English on board the ship with the English captain (see *Dvě cesty do Londýna*, 1864).

In 1847 J. V. Frič was obliged to look up English vocables in a German textbook and dictionary. Though a lectureship in English is known to have been in existence in 1826 at the Prague university (taught by a German, named Langerhaus), none of the Czechs is known to have attended the course.

The stays and visits in England were rare: after Frič e.g. a Prague university professor of history, Dr Anton Springer, came to England in 1849 to study the society there (in his article in the *Časopis českého musea* he said, among other things, that excellent social reforms had been made in England (*v Anglicku se provedly znamenité sociální opravy*) and that ‘every true Englishman finds refuge in personal freedom like in a fortress’. After 1848, English freedom could be tasted by the first Czech exiles, e.g. Adolf Straka, who finally mastered the English language so well that he had an English grammar published in Prague in 1863.

The early teachers of English are to be divided into two branches: (1) the Czech Americans in the USA, who somehow (mostly we do not know how exactly) had mastered English in America so well that they could produce its textbooks and dictionaries (Karel Jonáš, Antonín Zdrůbek) and (2) the Czechs in the Czech lands, who learned English from German textbooks and later published Czech textbooks of English.

In the 1870s, two of them came out: Jakub Malý’s *Rukověť anglického jazyka* (1870, for secondary schools). English was introduced in the curriculum of commercial academies in 1872, whereas English had been introduced to German secondary schools (with much larger student population than that of commercial schools) two years before. The *Rukověť* by Malý is interesting in one respect: there are no exercises. The author wrote in the preface: *péči učitelově jest zůstaveno dávání žákům cvičebních úloh* (the teacher is to set assignments). The training in oral communication is contained in the ‘Additions’, with three sections: *Idiotismy, přísloví a pořekadla*, which is about one hundred of idioms and 16 sayings and proverbs. The idioms range from ‘O dear no!’ to ‘Old England for ever!’. The discussion of everyday topics contains a great many English interjections, with a translation into Czech: Woe is me! – *Běda mně!*, Cheerup! – *Chutě!*, Alack – *pohříchu*, Zounds! – *Kýho šlaka!*, Zooks! – *Kakraperte!*

Sládek’s *Průpravná mluvnice anglického jazyka* (1872, revised edition 1875) strikes us as strange by something else: in its texts there is not a single reference to Sládek’s three years spent in the USA. Instead, there are many educational and philosophizing sentences, such as *It is excellent to have a giant’s strength, but tyrannous to use it like a giant*. Language terminology often differs from the terms used now: the author explains ‘*souminulý a dávnominulý čas*’, ‘*genitiv saksonový statného jména*’ a ‘*navracovací náměstka*’ (past and past perfect; Saxon genitive of nouns; reflexive pronoun). Sládek’s *Anglická čítanka* (English Reader, 1875) contains texts from poetry and nonfiction.

The 1880s brought a bulky volume (748 pages), *Učebné listy jazyka anglického pro samouky* (English Self-Taught, 1886-89). The author, Vilém Mourek, Professor of Germanic Studies at the Prague University, in the preface stressed the importance of English as a world language and predicted that ‘America may have an ever greater future than the good old England’. He also pointed out that one of the greatest literatures in the world is in English. Motivation for the dissemination of English may have been provided in this case by Mourek’s Scottish wife. By the way, with such a family background one would expect a fairly frequent contact with Britain but Mourek only made three trips to Britain. As a university student he was sent to Oxford to make a copy of an Old Czech manuscript (Dalimil’s chronicle) and as a university professor he was sent as a delegate to attend the anniversary celebration of the universities in Glasgow, and five years later in Aberdeen. He was accompanied by his wife on the last trip only.

In the period between 1890 and the First World War, handbooks of English were published by Václav A. Jung (he had a ten-year-long experience of the USA), Jan Váňa (he taught Russian and English, but wore a Scottish costume in Prague), and Ludvík Lošťák (a musician, with three years in London). Jung's *Učebnice jazyka anglického* of 1909 continues to be a grammar book rather than a language textbook; it contains no articles or dialogues, only exemplification sentences. For each point of grammar there are 20 to 50 isolated model sentences and afterwards 20 or more Czech sentences to be translated into English. The sentences are now found rather entertaining, although they were not meant so: *My intimate friend Henry is an extremely bashful young man whom, as you may have noticed, is in love with you, and he therefore has authorized me to ask you if you would have him for your husband.*

And here are two sentences to be translated: *Ten slabý úsměv na Vašich rtech je znamením, že buď máte za lubem nějakou šelmovinu nebo že se právě chystáte pověděti nám nějakou směšnou anekdotu.* (That faint smile on your lips suggests that you are going either to tease me or to tell me a funny joke.) *Pravíte, že jejich syn je v žaláři pro penězokazectví? Čeho se ubozí jeho rodiče ještě dočkají!* (You are saying that their son is in jail for forgery? Poor parents, what else will they live to see!)

In contrast to the preceding textbooks, Jung does give here and there some facts from English life and civilization, e.g. *Některé Angličanky mají dlouhé úzké zuby.* (Some Englishwomen have long narrow teeth.)

In addition to the textbooks there were various informal ways of learning English. E.g. young well-educated people were hired as tutors in families of nobility, and they generally accompanied the young noblemen on their trips to the West – although usually they did not reach England. In this way were serving e.g. Jan Erazim Vocel, a later historian, and Josef Štolba, later a theatre critic, who was in the service with the Count Kounic family. It is possible that their knowledge of English was passive rather than active – as a matter of fact, reading knowledge is found in Tyl and Čelakovský as well.

In the second half of the 19th century, England already tempted Czechs to visit the country, even though France, Italy, Russia, and the Middle East were a much greater attraction. Thus England was visited and some English may be was picked up there by people of so varied interests as the politician František Ladislav Rieger, a distinguished physician Josef Thomayer, the founder of the Sokol gymnastics movement Miroslav Tyrš, and the music composer Antonín Dvořák. – The first anglophiles, or rather English language fanciers, made their appearance, e.g. the writer Julius Zeyer liked English so much that he inserted English sentences into the Czech letters written to his friend Marie Kalašová.

There is some occasional evidence what English sounded like to a Czech. E.g. Karafiát wrote: *'originally I felt a strange distaste for English and never wished to understand it, whereas French had an extraordinary fascination for me.'* And in a volume of poems by Josef Rubeš, *Deklamovánky* (1844), you can read: *Angličtina, ta se temně s prsou vine, / česká řeč však z srdce v srdce plyne.* (The sounds of English come out dark from my chest, whereas Czech goes from heart to heart.)

When Sládek returned from the USA, he applied for the position of the university lecturer in English. At first, he had to travel to Vienna to have himself examined at the university – there was no competent person in Prague to do so. Simultaneously, he taught at the commercial academy and tutored friends, e.g. the young Antonín Klášterský, but later the translating of the complete works of William Shakespeare completely absorbed him.

That is another interesting aspect. In contemporary translators from English it is more or less assumed that they are graduates in English Philology. One should bear in mind, however, that full-time university study of English in Prague only began with the appointment

of Vilém Mathesius in 1916, and in Brno three years after the foundation of the university in 1919. Each English Department (called Seminar) was a handful of teachers. In Brno the earliest Seminar had three teachers: professor of English literature František Chudoba, the lector Samuel Kostomlatský, and the British lector Laurence Hyde. In the 1930s Mr Hyde was replaced by Simeon Potter.

When I arrived in London to attend the university Summer School (I was 21), on the next day I got up early, in the Czech way, and strolled in the deserted streets of Kensington. I noticed an Anglican church and as a keen student of English 'realia' I immediately went in – a service was going on there. Later in the morning, during a break in the course, an elderly Englishman addressed me: 'I saw you in church in the morning. Where are you from?' I replied 'From Czechoslovakia' and expected the question 'Where did you say from?' Instead I heard 'From where in Czechoslovakia?' I answered 'From near Brno', and he asked: 'Where exactly from near Brno?' I told him, 'Professor you will not know that little town, its name is Ivančice.' He was silent for a moment and then said: 'Once I walked from Ivančice as far as Moravský Krumlov.' In that way I came to know Professor Simeon Potter, the author of *Our Language* and other books on English.

But I have strayed from the training of translators from English. The fact is that up to the Second World War, the majority of them were not graduates in English or they were drop-outs. E.g. Staša Jílovská (1898-1955) spent only five semesters in the English Department in Prague and yet she translated 70 works of English prose and 18 plays for the National Theatre. To Czech readers she introduced modern authors – D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, but also G. K. Chesterton, R. L. Stevenson, etc. Jarmila Fastrová is another woman translator of scores of English books, although her qualification was that of a chemistry engineer. Earlier, there had been e.g. František Doucha, the translator of 9 of Shakespeare's plays, who was a Catholic chaplain and later a priest in families of nobility. The two more translators of Shakespeare were an actor, Josef Jiří Kolár, and Josef Čejka, a physician. The first translator of Charles Dickens, Moric Fialka, was an army officer.

The study of English may also be classified into a practical stream and an academic stream. In the former, there are Czech Americans (authors of English textbooks and dictionaries published in the USA) and those Czechs who had improved their English in the USA to such a degree that after their return to Bohemia they were able to teach the language at the university and at commercial academies (in succession, Sládek, Jung, Osička).

In the second, academic stream, a certain incentive for learning English was derived from the Protestant faith and its contact with the churches in the English-speaking world. Vilém Mathesius from the age of 11 took lessons from the Protestant clergyman Čestmír Dušek in Kolín. The thirty years of the university career of Mathesius were filled with teaching linguistics as well as literature (though he never went beyond the 17th century) and with the supervision of postgraduate studies of six talented young men, to become docents (Bohumil Trnka, René Wellek, Zdeněk Vančura, Otakar Vočadlo, Josef Vachek, Ivan Poldauf) and of several distinguished translators (Alois Skoumal, Frank Tetauer). On the staff of the Brno English Department there were several men with Protestant, especially Moravian Brethren, backgrounds – before the war František Chudoba, after the war Samuel Kostomlatský and Jan Fírbas.

In the first republic, intensive study of English went on at commercial academies (in Prague the teachers were Vančura, Vachek, Osička, Poldauf, in Mladá Boleslav Ladislav Cejp; both Cejp and Vančura later moved to the School of Economics). There were also very efficiently run language schools, in particular in Prague and Brno (Vymětal's four slim textbooks trained one whole generation of Czechs in English). The English Gymnasium secondary school in Prague was closed by the Nazis in 1938 and again by Communists in

1952. After 42 years and under a new name, the English College started tuition again; the patronage was accepted by President Havel and Prince Charles. The Association of Christian Youth, YMCA and YWCA, originally in operation in the USA only, held courses of English in their institutions in this country as well. Daily press could be imported: before the war the more ambitious teachers of English bought the *Observer*, with four of them sharing the subscription. Books were imported on a large scale (e.g. the *Everyman Library* – I remember the large-scale import still going on between 1945 and 1948 in Brno, in Píša's bookshop on Česká Street). The interest in English among secondary school teachers was fostered by the *Časopis pro moderní filologii*, a journal which in those days catered to scholars as well as ordinary teachers. A great opportunity for several talented individuals was the stay at King's College in London, where they taught Czech courses (the Celtic scholar Baudiš, from 1920 Chudoba, in 1922-29 Vočadlo, etc.). Professor Vachek before the war could travel to England only once, in 1934, to attend a linguistic conference, but was able to spend five weeks in the country. From peak anglicists, an extended, that is a one-to-two-year-long stay, was only offered to Vočadlo and Vančura in the USA and to Poldauf in England.

After the war, linguistics in Britain developed with extraordinary speed and intensity. Before the war, study of English on historical principles absolutely prevailed there. The more one should appreciate the approach of Professor Mourek, the predecessor of Mathesius, who analysed English from the aspect of general linguistics and studied the writings of the then linguistic avant-garde – Otto Jespersen, Henry Sweet, Wilhelm Viëtor.

As late as 1946, Professor Poldauf chose as the theme for his habilitation thesis, which he wrote in Oxford, a critical survey of English grammars of the 16th to 18th century. – For a long time there was no other monolingual dictionary of English than the grand *Oxford English Dictionary* and its shorter editions. Now one can choose from the products of publishing houses Oxford, Cambridge, Longman, Collins, Macmillan. Professor Firth, the founder of prewar anglicistics in Britain, would be watching with astonishment the present-day crowds of English scholars and the scores of the volumes with analyses of English. Forty years ago, at another summer school at London University that I attended, I noticed that Randolph Quirk had chosen the young David Crystal, now a white-haired authority and author of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (1987), as a tutor in conversation groups and as a piano player in the practise of English songs.

I believe that Czechs are also won for English by the confrontational approach, the comparison of the two languages, as it was introduced by the Prague School of Linguistics. In this way a number of interesting items come out about our mother tongue, which otherwise we would never think of because in Czech we are like a fish in water. I remember the Trávníčkian grammar of Czech, full of rules and secondary rules, etc., and in contrast to it, the fresh waft of freedom which I sensed in the first semester after being told in the *Linguistická charakteristika současné angličtiny* that the use of the preterite and the pre-present is sometimes decided by the personal evaluation of the situation.

I could go on for a long time about the perception of English by Czech writers and the characters in their novels and stories, the books of travel and the memoirs of visitors to the English-speaking world but that topic is too wide and, besides, it has been treated in detail in one chapter of my book *Anglie očima české literatury od středověku po rok 2000* (England through the Eyes of Czech Literature from the Middle Ages to the year 2000; Olomouc, 2001).

English, to sum it up, gained ground in this country in a rather slow way, slower than for instance in Germany, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia. It came to be accepted as a language that should be known in foreign trade, and as a language that opens two distinguished cultures and traditions – British and American. Since WWII it has become a

world language, a sort of lingua franca, useful for communication between an Icelander and an Armenian, as well as between the various peoples in the Indian subcontinent and tribes in Africa. It has also become an instrument of entertainment – the world consumes American films, British and American pop music.

While before the war only a few phrases and concepts from English had entered the Czech language, e.g. *anglická sobota / zahrada / slanina / náplast / nemoc* (= rachitis or gout) *anglický klid / kostým / park / roh*, plus various sporting or technical terms, in the last few decades Czech has been enriched by hundreds of English loanwords – and these anglicisms come from all fields of activity. The prestige of English has risen because it makes accessible the achievements of science from the whole world and brings to the readers literature written in English by writers in five continents. In addition to Queen's English and American Standard there are other standards, which developed over centuries e.g. in Scotland and northern England, and over the past one hundred years in e.g. New Zealand, the Caribbean, West Africa. All of these are recognized variants of English, the so-called Englishes. There are, however, variants not recognized but tolerated (and easy to identify), such as German English, Czech English, Italian English, etc.

Let us not live with the illusion that we are able to master English in pronunciation and intonation, in various styles, etc. Years ago I asked a London phonetician, O'Connor, how many foreigners he had met whose oral English was in no way different from a native speaker. His answer was 'Two. Perhaps three.' – I was considerably saddened when at an American airport counter, while booking a flight, I was approached by a young American man, who, brimming with pleasure, said to me, 'You speak just like my mother – you must be Czech!' Later, however, I remembered the foreign accent of Kissinger and Brzezinski, who had spent much more time in America than I did, with seven months from my three trips, and I became calm again.

In short, English brings to us both the pleasure of having mastered it fairly well and the frustration of not being like the native speakers. You may have a ten times larger vocabulary than an English man-in-the-street, you may know a hundred times more details about the nuances in English grammar (the position of the indirect object, the competition between the infinitive and the gerund, etc.) and yet you will not sound native. Even a too large vocabulary may betray you.

In order that these thoughts of mine should not have a bitter ending, here is a quotation from Karafiát, the author of the children's classic book, *The Fireflies* (By the way, do you notice the unavoidable loss of emotion in the English translation of the Czech 'broučci'?) This is what the young Karafiát, on a visit to a Scottish home, was told by an old Scottish lady, listening with obvious pleasure to his imperfect English: *Paní Thomsonová mě nechala povídat, majíc patrnou zálibu v mém cizím přízvuku i způsobu vyjadřování, a jen časem prohodila své stereotypní: 'You curious foreigners!'*