

The semantics of food in Czech and English

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Let's start with the essential activity – eating. A comparison of the Czech *JÍST* and the English *EAT* reveals two sound differences only, the presence of an extra 's' and an extra 'j' in Czech. This 'j' is a prothetic sound, like the prothetic 'v' – *okno* – *vokno*. The extra 's' is absent in *JED-LÝ*, which makes the identity of the two verbs more clear. *Eat* is derived from OE *etan*, ME *eten*, ultimately from the IE root *ed-*, see Latin *edere*. This Latin verb is found in the English adjective *edible*. The negative Czech adjective *NEJEDLÝ* has actually two distinct meanings: (1) *inedible* i.e. not fit for consumption, and (2) *uneatable*, i.e. of inferior quality, so that we would rather go hungry than eat it, although other people may be less choosy.

The nouns, however, are different: *JÍDLO* versus *FOOD*, OE *foda*. In Czech and English they are both uncountable and countable (*junk food* – *tinned foods*, *Italian foods* – *dobrá jídla*). A change in the stem vowel will produce the verb *FEED*, the Czech equivalent of which is derived from a different base: *KRMIT*. *Feed* can turn into a noun, so that *krmivo* (for cattle) is either *feed* or *food*.

The type of food served in a restaurant may be called *FARE*, though the word is somewhat dated. E.g. *This pub serves traditional British fare. Porridge is the staple fare here.* This word is akin to OE *faran*, 'go', probably via supply of food, which involved a passage, a journey.

The English dialectal word for 'food', *CHUCK*, (originally a cut of beef) survives in American English, in the Southwest, esp. Texas: A *CHUCK WAGGON* was originally a wagon carrying a stove and provisions for cooking, esp. on a ranch. Now it is colloquial for a cafeteria or an inexpensive restaurant.

The formal noun *VIAND* can be translated as *jídlo*, but usually it has a special connotation – 'choice or tasty dishes', e.g. in a description of a party: *then viands were handed round.* The noun *viand* is derived from L. *vivenda*, a gerund of the verb *vivere* – 'live'. Thus it is a case of the narrowing of the meaning – delicacies are not necessarily essential for life.

This brings us to another phenomenon, namely that in Czech, unlike in English, there are usually different words for the physical activities of humans and animals: e.g. *zemřít* versus *pojít*, *jíst* versus *žrát*. In English, animals 'eat', domestic animals (cattle, horses, sheep) are given *food* or *FODDER* – 'krmivo', OE *fodor*.

The etymology of the Czech verb *ŽRÁTI* is interesting. Its original meaning was 'swallow, gulp – polykat', i.e. it applied to both food and drink. *Žrání* is derived from the IE root *žer-/ger-*, and in Lithuanian the verb *geru* means 'I drink'. In one context even among humans the vulgar Czech "žrát" has as an English equivalent the neutral 'eat': 'Co tě žere? – What's eating you?' – The old Slavonic form was not *žrání* but *žrěti*. How did the change of -ě- into -á- take place? Believe or not, the -á- was adopted on analogy (producing a rhyme) with the verb for the opposite bodily activity, excretion, that is the verb *srátí*. British informal *SCOFF* is defined as 'devour greedily, eat hastily or without regard to manners'. Thus it is an

exact equivalent to the Czech 'žrát'. It is derived from English dialectal *scaff*, of unknown origin.

An English dated slang equivalent to the Czech *žrádlo* is *CHOW*. In Chinese cuisine it was a meat dumpling, but as a loanword in English it acquired a wider meaning – food: *It was ten o'clock before we finally got our chow.* – The informal *GRUB* – *You can get really good grub in that pub; Grub's up.* (= The food is ready.) – has a rather curious etymology – it is derived from the verb *grave*: OE *grafan* = 'dig in the ground (for sth.)'. A great improvement in meaning, indeed.

In Czech *BAŠTA* is without the vulgar connotation of 'žrádlo', and besides, it only refers to tasty food, one cannot say '*bašta byla odporná*'. Its ultimate origin is the Italian *pasto*, i.e. food.

TUCK, British dated for food, is used especially by and to children at school. There is also a compound, *TUCKSHOP*, which sells sweets and cakes. The meaning is derived from the verb *tuck*—'put something into a safe and convenient place'—a pocket, a bed (*be tucked up in bed*) but also the stomach: *There's plenty of food to tuck in. Judging by the way they tucked into their dinner, they must have been very hungry.*

There is another general Czech word for what we eat – *POTRAVA*, derived from *trávit* – *digest*. In English, the word *food* serves in this role, whereas for *POTRAVINY* three English options are available: *victuals*, *groceries*, *foodstuffs*. *Victuals* (< L. *victualia* 'provisions') implies both food and drink, *groceries* (< L. *grossarius* – one who sells wholesale, < L. *grossus* = thick) imply shopping, whereas *foodstuffs* is closest to *food*.

Let's now proceed to the food served at different times of the day, that is the meals.

MEAL is an example of the widening of the meaning. Originally it was 'edible grain', a sense surviving e.g. in *oatmeal*. It comes from the IE base *mel-* 'grind', see *mlíti* in Czech. Meal in English, however, may be also linked with OE *mael* "measure" (see German *-mal*, e.g. *einmal*), fixed time, time for taking food.

SNÍDANĚ versus *BREAKFAST*. The original meaning of the Czech verb was 'eat', whereas the English verb is more specific – in the morning we break the fast, i.e. the period at night when we did not eat.

OBĚD versus *LUNCH*. In 'oběd' you can hear the base 'jed' – i.e. 'jíst'. Oběd was originally a 'desátka', 'eating something little' – like in the modern English lunch. How did the initial 'o' get there, however? The prefix 'o' is short for 'ob' and it implied eating together (see *obecný*), in a circle. Old Czech *obědati se* meant 'overeat'. – *Lunch* is explained in etymological dictionaries as being probably derived from *lump* – 'piece', which would support the interpretation that originally it was just a little something only.

On restaurant windows you may find advertisements saying *Luncheons*. This is just a formal synonym to *lunch*. Employees may be given *luncheon vouchers* by their employer. In the dialect, however, *luncheon* means a large piece, a large lump (see above).

VEČEŘE versus *DINNER*. In Czech the meaning is linked with the time of the day, like the Slovak *RAŇAJKA* instead of our *snídaně*.

Dinner has a strange origin – I do not mean its derivation from the verb *DINE*, but the original meaning of 'dine'. Its ultimate origin is in the Latin *DISJEJUNARE* – 'break the fast'. In modern French *déjeuner* is still 'breakfast'.

The verb *dine* is not much used, and the same applies for the verbs *breakfast* and *lunch*. There is e.g. *we dined by candlelight; he once dined with the President; dine out* – i.e. it always refers to a formal meal; *dine out* means 'go out to a restaurant'. A cartoon showed a homeless man eating on a bench in the park; a passing vagabond friend turns to him: *Are you*

dining out tonight, Charlie? – On the other hand, the verb *lunch* has no such formal connotations: *We lunched on sandwiches and beer. Are you lunching today?*

Dine unlike *breakfast* and *lunch* may be used as a transitive verb: *They will dine you and wine you* – i.e. give you a big dinner and serve a lot of wine.

In compounds and derivatives of *dine*, one or two British and American differences should be noted: a *dining car* is also a *restaurant car* in British English. The British *dining hall* (in a school) is the *lunch room* in the USA. And *diner* in Britain is a person eating a meal, whereas in America it is also a small restaurant at the side of the road, where meals are served at a long table, and the seats are fixed.

SVÁČINA is to be translated in two ways: as *SNACK*, which may be specified as *MORNING / AFTERNOON SNACK*, or as *TEA*, named after the beverage prevailing in England at 5 o'clock or so (*have tea = svačit*). Since classes in Britain start one hour later than in Czech schools, the corresponding English word to *DESÁTKA* is *ELEVENSES*. This British informal word is always found in the plural. It implies a little something to eat and (unlike in Czech) a drink as well, e.g. a cup of tea and biscuits. The context differs from Czech, it is not said: *He did not eat his elevenses – nesnědl svou desátku*. The usual context is: *have a cup of coffee and a cake for (one's) elevenses; put on the kettle for elevenses*.

The English word *SNACK* was originally an imitation of the sound of jaws snapping together, and could thus mean both the bite of a dog (this meaning is still found in English dialects) or the 'bite', a morsel of food: *Let's have a bite – dejme si něco na zakousnutí*; see also *zákusek*. *SVÁČINA*, in Klaret's 14th-century Czech dictionary *SVÁČNĚ*, is derived from 'svak', originally a meeting, a get-together of our ('svůj, svoji') people, that is friends and acquaintances. It is coined like *HOSTINA*, originally a meeting of guests. A digression: the Slavic possessive pronoun 'svůj' also forms the basis of 'svak' and 'svačstvo'. *Svak* was the husband of father's or mother's sister (i.e. an uncle) but later came to be used as address of any elder relative. It derived from 'svoják', a relative. In Czech *svak* in one meaning was replaced by 'švagr', for the husband of the wife's sister. 'Svačiti se' meant 'zešvagřit se', become brothers-in-law.

A note on *VÝŽIVA, VÝŽIVNÝ, VYŽIVOVAT*: In Czech there is a clear link with 'život'. In English, *NOURISHMENT, NOURISHING, NOURISH* go back to Latin *nutrire*, originally 'suckle'. *NOURISHMENT* in addition to the general equivalent of "food" (*jídlo*, also figuratively: *intellectual nourishment – duševní strava*) can have a more specific meaning, namely 'food necessary for healthy life and growth': *refuse all nourishment – odmítnat potravu*. – *NUTRITION* is another word for 'výživa', but unlike *nourishment* it has scientific associations: *improvements in nutrition; professor of nutrition* (i.e. scientific study of taking and using food).

Let us now spend some time with *STOLOVÁNÍ* – 'serving food'. The verb *table* has a very special meaning in British English – see *table a motion*, that is 'suggest for discussion' at a formal meeting, usually in Parliament, 'make a proposal for a bill'. In American English it means, however, 'leave discussion until later time', 'put off sth for an indefinite time', informally 'shelve something'.

The Slavonic word *STŮL* is, surprisingly, the same word as English *STOOL*, with the difference that among Slavs it serves for eating and among the Anglo-Saxons for sitting. The 'seating' function is only present in the ancient Czech word *STOLEC*, i.e. throne, a high seat. The IE base, however, did not mean 'sit' but 'stand'. A complicated development, indeed. A note should be made about one basic difference ignored in Czech. Both *table* and *desk* are 'stůl', though the latter may be specified as *pracovní stůl*. *TABLE* is derived from Latin *tabula* – 'plank, board', *DESK* from Latin *discus* – 'disk', which gave Czech the words *deska* and

disk, and enriched English with *dish* (in two senses, a container and food prepared in a particular way) and *discus*.

The eating habits in the late Middle Ages must have been less strict than now. A 14th century Czech book gives the following warning to boarders – *STOLOVNÍKY*, what they should not do at the table: ‘*sůl nabírat prsty, v hlavě se pošklubávati, blechy na ten čas lapati, na obrus krmě kydati*’. (take salt with one’s fingers, tear at one’s hair, catch fleas, stain the tablecloth with dropped food).

While the Czech *stolovník* is now dated, in English the *boarder* survives in contemporary use.

The equivalent to the Czech *BYT A STRAVA* is *BOARD AND LODGING*. ‘Board’ is the food provided when one stays somewhere. The English phrase implies (wrongly, though) that for the English people food comes first, before accommodation. The more recent synonyms, however, refute it: see the British phrase *bed and board* and the American *room and board*. The polysyllabic “lodging” comes second in the phrase for reasons of rhythm only. The *BOARDER* is a lodger in a boarding house (*strávník*) or, in the British system of education, a pupil who lives at the school, whereas the *DAY BOARDER* sleeps at home. *Board* itself is a very general word, the basic meaning being a “plank”, which can serve various purposes and functions and turn into a blackboard, a chessboard, a committee, a ship’s top cover (‘paluba’), etc.

What is laid on the table? The Czech words are mostly of foreign origin: *MÍSA* from Latin *MENSA*, *TALÍŘ* from Italian *TAGLIERE*, *KOFLÍK* from German *KOPF*, *ŠÁLEK* from German *SCHAALE*, *KONEV* and *KONVICE* from German *KANNE*. In English, *PLATE* and *CUP* also go back to Latin (*plattus* ‘flat’, *cuppa*), but they are earlier borrowings, maybe from the days when the Germanic tribes still dwelt on the Continent and there came into contact with Roman civilization.

SAUCER, a small shallow plate on which a cup is set, has a motivated Czech equivalent – *PODŠÁLEK*. The English word has a curious development behind it, originally, in the 14th century, it was a plate containing sauce (‘omáčník’). By early 17th century the connection with sauce disappeared, so that sauce was a small round deep plate: The poet Dryden in 1663 describes ‘*an ugly devil with eyes like saucers*’. The modern sense—part of a cup—is recorded as late as in the mid-18th century; its emergence is probably due to the development of the habit of tea drinking and the manufacture of the tea service, with cups and matching saucers.

The English *CAN* is equivalent to *KONEV* only as the *WATERING CAN*, whereas for ‘konvice’ the same word as for ‘hrnec’ is used in English – *POT: TEAPOT, COFFEEPOT*. In English a difference is made between the vessel used for boiling water and the vessel put on the table: *KETTLE* vs. *TEA / COFFEEPOT*. In Czech, *KONVICE* is used in either case.

English lacks an equivalent for the Czech *PŘÍBOR* – you must say *FORKS AND KNIVES*, which of course leaves out the spoons. The term *CUTLERY* is merely a commercial term. *NUŽ* and *LŽÍCE* date back to Old Slavonic. For *NUŽ* (OE *cnif*, probably < ON *knifr*) there are more related words in IE than for ‘lžíce’, which demonstrates the ancient origin of the knife, primarily a weapon. In English, *SPOON* developed from the primitive meaning of ‘chip of wood’, used for bringing a liquid to the mouth. The fork (< L. *furca*) only appeared in Europe in the 16th century, and was first used at the tables of the nobility, later spread downward the social scale. In the 12th century, a wedding took place in Venice between the duke and a Byzantine princess, who in her dowry brought from her home silver forks – they were watched with astonishment.

A well-known difference in eating habits between the USA and Britain is the placing of the knife on the plate, once you have cut off a morsel. I can find no better explanation for

the origin of this habit than that in the pioneering days the knife used was more a weapon than an eating tool, and therefore was put aside when not needed.

There is no time for a comparison of the food served at meals. In general it holds that whenever people could afford it, they were eating more than necessary – see the descriptions of the eating habits of Tudor nobility. The Czechs were no better. An ancient Czech author wrote: *Řeč lékařská jest, že více lidí hynú od neřádného jídla a pitie nežli od ostrého meče*. (The physicians say that more people die of overeating and too much drinking than are killed by the sword.)

Let me finish by saying that this account of the semantics of ‘food’ was not meant to stir up your appetite and make you rush to the buffet room. It was meant as food for thought.