Between Language Play and Language Game

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In the present paper I would like to have a look at some aspects of language play, and especially its relation to what deserves the name 'language games', i.e. games based on language. I will point out the fact that such games are much more frequent in English than in Czech, and that they are firmly interlaced with literature and culture in general. Special attention will be paid to cryptic crossword puzzles as a special instance of a language-based game.

I would like to begin by challenging a widespread prejudice about speakers of English: it is a view common to many Czech learners—as well as teachers—of English that native speakers of English do not reflect and ponder over their language. This view may be true in one respect: the notion of grammatical categories of an average English speaker is probably poorer than that of an average speaker of Czech, and Czech learners often complain about the nature of modern English textbooks that do not offer grammar in a systematic form we are used to when learning about Czech. What is often left unnoticed, however, is the keen interest of English speakers in the other plans of language, especially semantics, the capacity of language for shifts and shortcuts in meaning, and eventually its qualities as material for play. In that respect, speakers of English show much more invention, patience and love for their language than we do.

In Czech, considerable use of word play can be found in literature (often under the influence of English, as will be suggested below) but it is much less frequent in other areas, such as newspaper headlines and other public products. When trying to think of language games that we can play in Czech, we will probably recall 'word football'[1] and 'hangman' (guessing a word letter by letter), and maybe a few riddles based on a simple pun.[2] Sometimes we encounter a witty naming unit in slang or common usage, e.g. 'Slinták' for Náměstí I. P. Pavlova,[3] and that may be all we can think of. A TV game based on guessing words from witty definitions, which was launched by the TV station Nova this year ('Pálí vám to?'), is a welcome innovation—other TV competitions are prevailingly based on knowledge.

On the other hand, English offers abundance of sophisticated games and other language activities, including Scrabble, 'hangman', riddles of all sorts, or the whole realm of rhyming slang. And, last but not least, crossword puzzles.

Crossword Puzzles

I would like to stop here for a while because I think crossword puzzles illustrate the point very well. Speakers of Czech and of many other languages are, of course, familiar with crossword puzzles. Crossword puzzles originated in English, the first crossword puzzle appearing in a supplement to *The New York Sunday World* in 1913. Most attention to crossword puzzles has always been paid in Britain, where a new variation of the crossword puzzle developed in the 1930s, bringing a completely new element into the game.

In Czech, only one crossword puzzle type is commonly used, with only one type of clues: a synonymic clause, a definition. Crossword puzzles can vary slightly in difficulty but there is no deeper stratification based on the sophistication of the paper in which the crossword puzzle is published.

In Britain and the US, on the other hand, such stratification is very complex: crossword puzzles vary according to the standard of the newspaper, but also in space (the most difficult type, which will be discussed later, only appears in Britain) and in time (in The New York Times, for instance, crossword puzzles are relatively simple on Mondays and get more and more difficult over the week so the readers can choose the appropriate level before they try their wit).

The types of clues are also much more varied in the English-speaking world. They may include:[4]

(1) synonymic clues (definitions), asking either for a general noun:

Dishonor	→ SHAME
Charged particle	→ ION
Feds	→ GMEN

or a piece of cultural knowledge:

Comic Martha	→ RAYE
City at the mouth of the Yangtze	→ SHANGHAI
Barbra's 'Funny Girl' co-star	→ OMAR (note the use of first name in the clue, suggesting the same for the solution)

(2) 'cloze' clues

— Royale	→ ISLE
Amo, —,	→ AMAS (knowledge of Latin conjugation is required!)

(3) clues based on play on words, often including metalanguage

State turns into a bird?	→ MONTANAGER (Montana + tanager)
State turns into rattles?	→ ILLINOISEMAKERS (Illinois + noisemakers)

Often the authors of the crossword puzzles intentionally mislead the reader. Let us have a look at two different clues for 'LENT'.[5] The first one,

Fast time?	→ LENT

is a typical example of a misleading clue. The question mark indicates that the solver should expect a play on words, use of homonymy or some other trap; here, 'fast' is used with the meaning 'fasting', and 'Lent' means 'a period of fasting'.

Made an advance?	→ LENT

Here again, the question mark warns the solver not to rely on the most obvious meaning of the words: 'advance' also means 'advance payment', or 'loan'.

There are other methods used to increase the sophistication of crossword puzzles. Sometimes they are published with two sets of clues, easier and more difficult. Sometimes, the clues are rhymed, as will be demonstrated below. But the highest level of sophistication is known as Cryptic Clues.

Cryptic Clues

Cryptic clues, or cryptic crossword puzzles, have rules of their own, and if we approach them without special knowledge, we would be flabbergasted—the puzzle would make no sense at all. The main difference lies in the clues themselves. They do not define the word in the usual way. Instead, they consist of two parts:

(a) a (more or less) straightforward (synonymic) definition (given at the beginning or end of the clue)
(b) additional information, often—but not necessarily—metalingual (i.e., hints about how the word is built). As an alternative, a second synonymic definition can be given, or some other specification.

Solving these clues is very difficult, as can be seen from the following examples;[6] the numbers in parentheses give the numbers of letters in the sought words:

Table 1
Examples of cryptic clues

Clue	Solution	Explanation
Rest is ordered for woman in hospital (6)	sister	Anagram of (*ordered*) 'REST IS' to give (*for*) … Definition: *woman in hospital*
Recollect her aunt—outwardly lovely but could be weird (9)	unearthly	Anagram of (*recollect*) 'HER AUNT' + *outward* 'LY' Definition: *lovely but could* [also] *be weird*
It turns, recording on tape our religious leaders (5)	rotor	Definition: *It turns* first letters (*leaders*) in <u>R</u>ecording <u>O</u>n <u>T</u>ape <u>O</u>ur <u>R</u>eligious
Vessel turning back about nothing (5)	liner	Definition: *vessel* RE: NIL (='about nothing') backwards (*turning back*)
Heading north, something warm for the shoulders is taken (6)	stolen	STOLE ('something warm for the shoulders') before (*heading*) <u>N</u>(orth)[7] Definition: *(is) taken*
Sort out the back row (9)	rearrange	Double definition: (a) sort out, (b) rear range
Given to soldiers but taken by clergymen (6)	orders	Double definition: (a) given to soldiers, (b) taken by clergymen

In five of the seven examples, the metalingual element is present, stating instructions that have to be applied to the given (or suggested) material so as to reveal the desired word. The solver, however, does not know which part of the clue presents the definition, which is the material, and which contains the metalingual information. And the authors do their best to lead us away from the correct reading: they build sentences that sound as natural as possible, but that have to be read in a completely unexpected way.

In a cryptic crossword puzzle, every single word is described by a cryptic clue. The puzzle thus becomes a set of isolated, often very ingenious riddles. Indeed, clues have become so emancipated that they can exist separately—i.e. without the crossword puzzle itself. The publisher of *The Sunday Times* even organizes a regular 'Clue Writing Contest' in which the readers are given one word a week to 'define', and the best clue is rewarded. I cannot resist reproducing at least one winner of the contest (of July 28, 2002):

Table 2
A 'stand-alone' cryptic clue

So nuclear development out East may be concerning agents abroad (8)	consular	Anagram (*development*) of 'SO NUCLEAR' without 'E' (*out East*) Definition: *concerning agents abroad*

Scholarly articles and papers dealing with cryptic crossword puzzles are not numerous, and they concentrate on the linguistic aspects of the subject. I will therefore not go into the detailed categorisation of the clues and description of all the tricks the composers use; these can be found in the articles given in the Works Cited. For those interested in practical aspects of solving these puzzles, a number of handbooks are available in Britain.

Rather, I want to point out that in the English culture, punning and playing with words is so common that it has become ritualized in this unique game where you have to violate words, their etymology and morphology, to be successful. Thousands of people take part in the game every week, thousands play Scrabble and numerous other games of a similar nature. The rules of language are broken, but they are replaced by new rules—the rules of the game—to prevent chaos.

In Literature

Language play is not only part of the everyday life of the speakers of English, it has also become part of their literature. Puns and word play influence the way authors and readers perceive their language, and encourage readers to think of it in terms of deconstruction, twisting and rebuilding. I will focus on instances in which real games (i.e. games that underlie strict rules) enter a literary work. Needless to say, they often represent a challenge to the translator.

A simple instance appears in Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*: Alice plays a game that was popular among girls in her time:

> "I love my love with an H," Alice couldn't help beginning, "because he is Happy. I hate him with an H, because he is Hideous. I fed him with—with—with Ham-sandwiches and Hay. His name is Haigha, and he lives—"
> "He lives on the Hill," the King remarked simply, without the least idea that he was joining in the game, while Alice was still hesitating for the name of a town beginning with H. (Carroll 1970: 279-280)

> „Miluji svého hocha s B,"—Alenka neodolala, aby nezačala odříkávat hříčku, které se naučila od sestry a *jejíž vtip byl v tom, dovést rychle za sebou nalézti vhodná slova počínající se stejnou písmenou*—„protože je Bujný a Bledý. Nenávidím ho s B, protože je Bláznivý. Nakrmím ho—nakrmím ho Bramborovými plackami a Bodláčím. Jmenuje se Břežan a bydlí——"
> „Bydlí v Brambořišti," poznamenal Král prostě, nemaje nejmenší potuchy, že se připojuje ke hře, když Alenka zaváhala nad jménem města začínajícím se na B. (Carroll 1931; translated by Jaroslav Císař; *my italics*)

> Alenka spustila, ani nevěděla jak: „Já mám ráda chlapce s Š, protože je Šťastný. Nemám ráda chlapce s Š, protože je Špatný. K jídlu mívá—mívá—mívá Šunku, taky Škubánky. Jmenuje se Švejda a žije ve—"

„Žije ve Švédsku,“ vpadl jí zčistajasna do hry Král, zatímco ona ještě vymýšlela nějakou zemi na Š. (Carroll 1961; translated by Aloys and Hana Skoumal)

The rules can be easily reconstructed from the English text, and the passage should not present a serious problem to a translator. Still, slight shifts can be noticed: Jaroslav Císař adds explicit description of the rules (given in italics), the Skoumals reduce it to the words 'vpadl jí do hry' and leave out the idea that the King did not realize there was a game at all. It should also be said that in Czech, a change of preposition would be desirable—the standard wording is 'začíná *na* Š' rather than 'začíná *s* Š'.

Another example of the use of a sophisticated language game in fiction occurs in the short story *Uncle Meleager's Will* by Dorothy L. Sayers (1986: 33-52). A rich man leaves a testament in the form of a crossword puzzle, and lord Peter has to solve it in order to learn its message. The crossword puzzle looks like this:

V	I	R	G	O			S			M	I	D	A	S
E	N	D	I	V	E		S	C	V	A	N	I	T	A
R	S		T	E	S	T	A	M	E	N	T		H	I
S	E	C	A	N	T		R		L	E	A	V	E	N
T	R	A	N	S			L		S	C	E	N	T	
	T	N	A		S	E	G		T	R	E			
	T		I	C	T	U	S		R	S				
S	P	I	N	O	Z	A		A	U	C	T	I	O	N
	C		E	L	A	N	D		C					
	A	L	T		A	D	O		F	L	U			
P	L	E	A	S		M		A	R	E	N	A		
L	I	S	T	E	N		E		T	W	I	S	T	S
A	E		T	H	I	R	T	Y	O	N	E		E	T
U	N	H	O	O	D		U		B	E	Z	O	A	R
D	A	M	O	N			S		D	E	R	M	A	

Although real cryptic clues are not used, the difficulty is still extreme, and unknown to Czech readers. Even the prodigious Lord Peter spends the whole night on it, and Sayers comments: '[T]he attentive Mr Bunter hurried to and fro between the atrium and the library, and the dictionaries piled up [...]' (Sayers 1986: 44).

Here are two examples of the clues:

(1)
Any loud cry would do as well,
Or so the poet's verses tell.

Solution: 'HI'. To find it, we must know *The Hunting of the Snark* by Lewis Carroll, where one of the characters is so described: He would answer to 'Hi!' or to any loud cry… (Carroll 1995: 50)[8]

(2)
Dusty though my fellows be,
We are a kingly company

Solution: 'RS' = royal society; 'kingly company' is a fair enough definition, supported by the fact that Royal Society members are called 'fellows'.

No wonder that the story has never been translated into Czech, though the author offers the solution at the end of the book, together with explanations to some of the clues.

Among language games that the reader can play with the author and his characters, the following works could also be named:

- Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'The Gold Bug' with its detailed description of deciphering a secret message; the method used is based on the frequency of letters in English, and the Czech translator left the message in English (Poe 1959).
- The short story 'The Thumb Mark of St. Peter' by Agatha Christie (1986) in which Miss Marple uses a list of poisons to reinterpret the alleged last words of a victim 'Pile of carp' as 'Pilocarpin', a chemical used against atropine poisoning.
- Another short story by the same author (Christie 1986), 'The Tuesday Night Club', where the solution is based on the polysemy of the words 'hundreds and thousands'.

It is only natural that many examples are to be found in detective stories, a genre that is in itself a game with strict rules.[9] In such context, a simple pun, homonymy or homophony—normally used only to amuse or offer unexpected association—can serve the needs of the plot, and so be elevated to become an element in a game proper.

In Czech literature, such instances are less frequent but some can be found: Jan Zábrana and Josef Škvorecký wrote a detective novel (Zábrana 1967) which includes poems with a series of sophisticated acrostics essential for the development of the plot. In addition, the authors created the famous secret acrostic that consisted of the first letters of all chapters and confirmed their joint authorship because the book had to be published only under the name of Jan Zábrana. This made the readers participants in another game, fully rooted in reality.[10]

It seems that word games have been often developed by authors who also worked as translators. In the mystery novel *Kočka* (1982), a dying Englishman repeats 'check' … 'stop the check' ('několikrát po sobě opakuje „šek, šek" a pak něco jako „zastavte ten šek"'). Only at the end of the novel the reader learns that he was in fact saying 'Stop the Czech', meaning a Czech national. The author of this novel is the outstanding Czech translator from English, Břetislav Hodek.

Other names of writers-translators could be added: Karel Čapek, who lets a fairy tale character abuse his opponent with a series of epithets that are carefully alphabetically listed (Čapek 1946), Josef Hiršal and others. There is no doubt that this is one of the many ways in which translation enriches the target culture and language.

Endnotes

[1] *Slovní kopaná* in Czech; the game is not very inventive, consisting in fact in mere recollecting of words, and the rules do not work very well from the linguistic point of view.

[2] 'V Brně stojí houska 30 halířů. Co stojí v Praze na Václavském náměstí? — Socha svatého Václava', to quote a rather stale one.

[3] 'Slinták' is derived from the Czech *slintat* 'to drivel'. The expression is commonly used in Prague for *Náměstí I. P. Pavlova*—the square as well as the underground station—in allusion to the notorious experiment in which Pavlov conditioned dogs to salivate to the sound of a bell.

[4] The examples are taken from *the Boston Globe* crossword puzzle, May 3, 1999.

[5] Both were published in *the Boston Globe*, one in the crossword analysed above, the other on June 15, 1999. They were composed by two different authors.

[6] All examples are taken from *The Sunday Times* Crossword, the Style supplement, March 31, 2002.

[7] Using the cardinal points and some other expressions to represent their first letters is an accepted convention in cryptic clues.

[8] Interestingly, this line is misquoted in the Harper and Row 1986 edition of Sayers; in the explanation to the crossword puzzle, they appear as "He would *never* answer to Hi! / or to any loud cry…' (Sayers 1986: 280).

[9] Josef Škvorecký pointed this out to Czech readers by popularizing the ten rules composed by Reverend Knox. He did so both in theory (*Nápady čtenáře detektivek*, Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1965) and in fiction (*Hříchy pro pátera Knoxe*, first published by '68 Publishers, Toronto 1973)—this was in itself a great example of literary game, well preserved also in the popular TV series.

[10] However, no one noticed this hidden message until it was disclosed by Josef Škvorecký himself in a short article 'Už to mohu říct!' (Now I Can Say It) in *Svobodné slovo*, 6 February 1990, Prague edition: 5.

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