

## COMMUNICATION AND IDENTITY OF CZECH IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

### KOMUNIKACIJA I IDENTITET ČEŠKIH IMIGRANATA U SJEDINJENIM AMERIČKIM DRŽAVAMA

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#### *Abstract*

Large numbers of Czech immigrants started to arrive in the USA at the beginning of the second half of the 19th century. The new foreign-language environment made their situation very difficult. As they did not speak English, they tried to integrate and retain the original Czech cultural traditions and values: they set up municipal communities, Czech clubs, libraries, schools, they started to publish periodicals in the Czech language. However, the economic dependence of the immigrants conditioned their assimilation, and this fact considerably influenced the language of the Czech immigrant press. From the beginning of the existence of immigrant periodicals, the Czech-American communication in the media developed in three main stages. In the course of these three periods it was gradually transformed from purely Czech communication focused on Czech topics to current communication conducted mainly in English or (with an aim to demonstrate the original ethnic roots) in Czech, but with the use of numerous lexical as well as grammatical Americanisms. The Czech immigrants were fully assimilated during the third stage and finally became Czech-Americans, whose life is completely determined by American culture.

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

At the beginning of the second half of the 19th century, the Czech lands were confronted with mass emigration. Before the World War I about 1.2 million people left the country, out of which 1 million people were

#### *Sažetak*

Veliki broj čeških imigranata počelo je stizati u SAD na početku druge polovice 19. stoljeća. Nova okolina sa stranim jezikom činila je njihovu situaciju vrlo teškom. Budući da nisu govorili engleski, oni su se pokušali integrirati i zadržati izvorne češke kulturne tradicije i vrijednosti: osnovali su općinske zajednice, češke klubove, knjižnice, škole, počeli su objavljivati časopise na češkom jeziku. Međutim, ekonomska ovisnost imigranata uvjetovala je njihovu asimilaciju, a ta je činjenica znatno utjecala na jezik češkog iseljeničkog tiska. Od samog početka postojanja imigrantske periodike, češko-američka komunikacija u medijima razvija se u tri glavne faze. Tijekom ova tri razdoblja postupno se transformirala od čisto češke komunikacije usmjerene na češke teme prema suvremenim temama uglavnom na engleskom ili (s ciljem da pokaže izvorne etničke korijene) na češkom, ali uz korištenje brojnih leksičkih, kao i kao gramatičkih amerikanizama. Češki doseljenici su se u potpunosti asimilirali u trećoj fazi i na kraju su postali češki Amerikanci, čiji se život u potpunosti određen američkom kulturom.

Czechs. People headed for Lower Austria, Germany, less often they travelled to Hungaria, Russia and the Balkans. Many emigrants also set off for the USA. Emigration to the USA was motivated by the discovery of gold in California, and in the 1850s it represented thousands of people each year /1/.

The Czech emigrants headed for the USA mainly during the period of mass emigration, i.e. in the years 1848 – 1914. Such transoceanic emigration is unique in Czech history, considering both the numbers of emigrants (the total number of the Czechs who left the country for the USA before the 1990s is about half a million people) and the fact that this emigration conditioned the origin and development of a new ethnic community.

## 2. CZECH IMMIGRANTS IN THE USA

Czech immigrants of the 1850s, being newcomers from distant Central Europe, were absolute strangers to native American citizens /2/. Their situation in the new multiethnic environment was difficult. Their personalities were rooted in the culture of the old world, they neither spoke nor understood English and yet they had to have daily contacts with many people of different ethnic origin. To respond to this situation and to preserve their existing lifestyle, the immigrants started establishing compatriotic communities in towns and pioneer settlements in the country. These communities and settlements indicated certain social and communication handicap of the immigrants – since they did not speak English, they were excluded from social communication, and having no social contacts impacted the immigrants economically. After the arrival in the USA, the Czech immigrants cut off the economic-social and cultural connections with their homeland and started to create a new life under the conditions of a different environment. From the psychological point of view such a change is seen as traumatic because it includes numerous changes of the external conditions, and thus it negatively affects a person's inner life /3/. The immigrants bring to the new country their ethnic specificities – the language, economic conventions, their material and spiritual culture. The Czech emigrants coming to the USA were mainly factory workers and farmers. In spite of this fact the absence of educated middle class had no adverse effect on the cultural life of the Czech-American community. It was because the Czech immigrants were literate and they highly surpassed the newcomers from other coun-

tries in respect of education. Also remarkable was the effort of their elites to maintain ethnic specifics and national identity within the multinational and intercultural American environment, even in the early period of the beginning of the second half of the 19th century when the assimilation pressure exerted on the immigrants was very strong. The reason was probably their strong national feeling as well as certain persistence of thought because they left the homeland at the time when the problems of national identity and Czech nationality were of great importance.

### 1.1 Forms and resources supporting the ethnic identity of the Czech immigrants

The immigrants were aware of the danger of fast assimilation and denationalization in America, whose attitude to immigrants was based exclusively on Anglo-conformity, and thus they strived for averting this danger. Their effort to accentuate their identity and seek integration had many forms. Firstly it was the existence of compatriotic communities, which supported the Czech awareness, maintained the language, original values and cultural traditions, and also served as a defensive mechanism functioning in a strange, multinational environment. In the 19th century the most noticeable and widespread form of the national life of the Czech minority enclave in the USA was establishing various clubs and associations. The national associations, so called *Slovanské lípy* (*The Slavonic Lime Trees*), were established from the 1860s with an aim to integrate the national communities of the Czech immigrants. The *Slovanské lípy* associations subsequently set up Czech libraries, Czech schools, organized lectures, theatre performances and balls. Together with the Czech language schools, the first periodicals published in Czech emerged in America at the beginning of the 1860s. The very first was *Slowan americký* (*The American Slavonian*), which was published in Racine, Wisconsin, in 1860, and then *Národní noviny* (*The National Newspaper*), published in St. Louis in the same year. In summer 1861 both the weekly periodicals merged and gave rise to a new periodical, also a weekly, which was named *Slávie* (*The*

*Slavia*). This newspaper represented a challenge, an achievement to be followed by the other Czech-American journals. The compatriotic press was a medium of communication which existed in many variants and which fulfilled, besides the main function of ethnic integration and identification, numerous other functions. The journals provided social communication, information, education and influenced the readers culturally and in terms of the language use, offered participation in the public discourse. Nonetheless, the immigrant newspapers and journals had yet another function, on no account less important than the previous ones – as they were written in Czech and informed about the news from the Czech lands, they represented a bridge between the original homeland and the life in emigration.

### 3. CZECH AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION IN THE FOREIGN-LANGUAGE AMERICAN SOCIETY

On the one hand, the question of language and speech is connected with the national and cultural identity of the immigrants, on the other hand with their chance to integrate, both socially and economically, with the new society. Speaking no English was a serious obstacle preventing the immigrants from finding work, especially with respect to the fact that most jobs in the USA were permanently occupied due to the surplus of workforce, and that craftsmanship started to evolve into large-scale factory production at that time. Without proper knowledge of English it was impossible to set up a business or open a shop. Despite the fact that the Czech immigrants in the USA displayed great effort to maintain their national as well as cultural identity including its integral part, the mother tongue, from the very beginning of the life in a foreign-language environment they had to adapt themselves to the new language. Generally, the economic dependence of the immigrants definitely conditions their social, cultural and linguistic assimilation. The assimilation process has different length as it apparently depends on numerous factors, and its course affects different ethnic groups and different components of the immigrant culture in a way which

is not proportional. However, the component which is affected very early and very substantially is the language. In the American multilingual society, Czech as a means of communication was used mainly in the Czech communities. One of the specificities of the Czech emigration is the fact that this important step was taken by the whole families pursuing one aim - to settle abroad for ever /4/. It is this factor of „family“ emigration that influenced the life of the Czech immigrants in the USA in many respects; among others it also affected their spiritual culture, social life and usage of the mother tongue. The Czech language was changing and evolving within the environment of the Czech communities. This process afflicted different generations within particular families in a specific way, which was characterized by T. Čapek /5/ and illustrated by a number of examples of which the following one is perhaps the best known:

*„ The grandmother, the daughter and the granddaughter are walking along a sidewalk in New York. The grandmother, by origin from somewhere near Písek, speaks Czech. She can speak no other language. The daughter, born in New York, answers in a mixed way, half and half, i. e., in good English and bad Czech. And the granddaughter? Her mouth is dumb. She understands Czech but cannot speak that language. When the granddaughter grows up and has her own children, who will teach them to speak Czech?“*

The situation described above illustrates the common three-generation language pattern functioning in the USA: the immigrants are monolingual and use only their native language; their descendants, or the second generation, are bilingual whereas the third generation again uses one language only, i.e. English (compare Thomason, 2001).

### 4. CZECH-AMERICAN PERIODICALS, THEIR LANGUAGE AND TOPICS

The history of the Czech emigration to the United States of America is largely documented by the Czech-American periodicals, mainly due to the fact that they reflected the gradual Americanisation of the immigrants from the national, cultural, social-economic as well as linguistic point of view. All the early

Czech-American journals were published exclusively in Czech. They were focused on the first generation of immigrants and aimed at helping them to gain general orientation in an ethnically different environment. They were also intended to integrate them and enforce their national identity. This first stage of the immigration in the USA, which could be confined within the 1860s and largely also the 1870s, is characterised by the prevalence of Czech culture, which dominated among the Czech immigrants in spite of the strongly Anglo-conformal American environment of that time.

#### *4.1 The 1860s and the 1870s*

In the 1860s and the 1870s the Czechs in the USA published about fifty periodicals. They were specific in terms of reflecting the spiritual world of the immigrants, which seems to have been rather complicated and ambivalent. On the one hand the texts of the journals reinforced the relationship of the immigrants to their Czech homeland, on the other hand they already expressed loyalty to America and confirmed the immigrants' choice to become American citizens. The Czech language in which the first periodicals were written was more conservative than the comparable language of the press in the homeland. It adopted the ideal style of the language of humanism, including the expressions and forms which were already out of use in the journalistic texts published in the homeland at that time (for more details see Jaklová, 2006). The awareness of language standards, still feeble in the homeland alone, was even weaker in the foreign-language environment; there was no support based on spoken language, and ensuing uncertainty led to the use of contemporaneous spoken language components in compatriotic journalistic Czech and thus invariably to an increased number of irregularities, variations and mistakes. As regards the first immigrants, Czech was still the dominant language and the life in the Czech communities provided for its functional limitlessness. The expressive means used in particular language structures had not been so far influenced by English. However, the life in a foreign-

language society, where the absence of the knowledge of English hindered the assertion in different social as well as communication situations, led to gradual development of a complementary bilingualism (compare V.M.Henzlová, 1995). It is possible to observe the beginnings of this phenomenon already in the first Czech-American periodicals published in the 1860s, when some Czech expressions were replaced by American ones, i.e., by lexical Americanisms, mainly in an effort to give a more precise description of American reality. The above-mentioned facts indicate that during the 1860s and 1870s the Czechs in America retained their ethnical culture, strived for keeping Czech national identity and communicated mainly in Czech. Later, at the end of the century, the situation was completely different.

#### *4.2 From the 1890s to the 1940s*

The 1890s meant the beginning of the period which could be designated as the second stage of gradual assimilation of the Czech immigrants in the USA. Their lifestyle became intercultural, which manifested itself in the communication in the media. This stage, which lasted roughly from the 1890s till the end of the World War II, is the most interesting and most changeable as well. Its possible dimensions depend on the degree of the adaptation of the Czechs to the living conditions in the USA. The rapid development of Czech immigrant journalism as one of the forms of Czech culture in the USA lasted till the end of the 1920s. At the end of the 19th century, 105 Czech periodicals were newly established in the USA; they were added to 21 periodicals which had already been published before. The Czech language was still the main factor of the ethnical integration but, being also the most important means of communication, it already informed mainly about the American reality. The newspapers and journals also underwent some other changes at that time; their form as well as the content were getting similar to the American press format. The Czech press had no longer been a tribune of patriotic and national awareness of the immigrants. It gained a different function and meaning, which consisted mainly

in retaining and protecting the Czech language as an ethnic symbol of the Czechs in a multinational state. As a communicative code, journalistic Czech, though conservative and influenced by English, became one of the last codes of high cultural importance. The form of the Czech language of the period in question was determined by the fact that it was isolated from the development of the language in the national territory. While the Czech national language was developing very fast in the homeland in the second part of the 19th c., at the beginning of the 20th c. American Czech still copied the humanistic ideal which the domestic press scene pursued during the first half of the previous century. Even in the periodicals, the linguistic norms were loosened owing to the use of nonstandard elements in the morphological, partly also lexical sphere. The most apparent trend was the frequent use of Americanisms, which started to occur in the lexical as well as grammatical structures. Here it represented a change of verbal regimen. It is possible to notice a frequent use of the calques, i.e. literal Czech translations of constructions occurring in English, such as:

„Nemocná prasata učinit zdravými jest zúplna lehké“ ( due to the frequent use of the causative verb *make* in English : make the pigs healthy) [Slávie, 23. 10. 1914, p. 8].

An important signal of the progressing assimilation of Czech journalists was the use of the American sentence structure as it is shown in the following sentence:

„Veškeré podrobnější informace budou tam podány bratrem Fraňou Klepalem, který jest ředitelem úřadovny.“ [Slávie, 23. 10. 1914, p. 4].

At the end of the second stage, after the World War II, the situation among the Czech-Americans was already so changed that this period could be considered the very end of ethnic isolation and relative compactness of the Czech urban communities, and even of the closed ethnic life of the American Czechs. The Czech-American society recorded a decrease in the number of the first generation representatives, who spoke the Czech language and were interested in their ethnic origin as well as the traditions; the „old“ Czech-American world,

based upon supporting the national awareness, mother tongue and Czech cultural traditions, ceased to exist.

#### 4.3 From the 1950s to the present

During the third stage, which started approximately in the 1950s and lasts to the present, the number of the Czech-American periodicals has been invariably decreasing. A few new compatriotic and exile periodicals were established but a large number of the older ones disappeared. Many of them were important in the history of the Czech enclave in the USA and had a long tradition. For example, the oldest weekly newspaper *Slávie* (established in 1861) was last published in 1946; the oldest Catholic newspaper, *Hlas* (established in 1872), ceased to be published in April 1950, after seventy eight years. The periodical *Cedar Rapidské listy* (established in 1908) disappeared in 1951, the newspaper *Americké dělnické listy* (established in 1908) ceased to exist two years later. The year 1957 was the last year of the existence of *Svornost* (established in 1875), a daily newspaper published in Czech over the longest period ever in the whole world. This situation was caused mainly by a high degree of the assimilation of the Czech emigrants in the USA. At present it is the American culture that determines the life of American Czechs. The former Czech immigrants are already Americans, they communicate in English. Though some of them still publicly declare their Czech roots (the Czech origin of their ancestors), it is difficult to talk about their interculturality. In the life of the contemporary Czech-Americans the ethnic culture is represented only in the form of ritual fragments; being of Czech origin is manifested by various customs like traditional Czech festivals, fairs with the service in church conducted in Czech (mainly in Texas), performances of Czech choirs or brass bands etc.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Considering the contemporary communication of the Czech-Americans in the media, the most noticeable feature (provided the Czech language is still used in published periodicals) is the strong impact of English.

Compared to the beginnings of the Czech immigrant press, the current language displays both lexical and grammatical Americanisms. The syntactic and word-order Americanisms are among the most frequent (see Jaklová, 2010). In some periodicals the accumulation of Americanisms even prevents the Czech reader from understanding the texts. All the Czech-American newspapers and journals published in Czech also include texts in English. Moreover, there are numerous periodicals published entirely in English. Thus the journalistic Czech language has lost its communicative function and became just a symbol of the original ethnic identity of the contemporary Czech-Americans.

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