

The Historical Evolution and Manifestations of Czech Language Policy

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Abstract: In recent years, with the continuous advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative and China-CEEC “17+1” cooperation, exchanges between China and the Czech Republic have grown increasingly close across trade, diplomacy, culture, and other fields. Analyzing the historical development of the Czech Republic’s language policy contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of its national identity, cultural context, and social development, thereby further promoting the overall construction and deepening of the China-Czech strategic partnership. This paper takes the developmental history of the Czech language as a starting point, sorting out and analyzing language policies across different historical stages in the Czech Republic before 1989, summarizing the main approaches to its language planning, and providing a historical foundation for future research on contemporary language planning in the Czech Republic.

Keywords: Czech Republic; National culture; City shaping; Language policy

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1. Introduction

Language is a tool of communication created by humans to fulfill the need for interaction, representing the culture and value systems of specific social groups. In recent years, with the continuous deepening of area studies, research on language policy and planning has shown a positive developmental trend, becoming an important pathway for understanding and analyzing the national culture and fundamental context of specific countries. Furthermore, language policy is not an isolated set of rules; it also provides a crucial strategic platform for cities to shape their identity, promote economic development, and foster social integration, making it a significant field in urban studies.

The Czech Republic, located in Central Europe, is a key pivot country in the Belt and Road Initiative and plays a vital role in the China-CEEC “17+1” cooperation. Research on the Czech Republic’s language policy and planning is conducive to comprehensively grasping its national cultural development strategy and promoting the overall construction of a platform for China-Czech cultural exchange. To better understand the practical planning of the Czech Republic’s national language policy, it is necessary to analyze the historical development of its language policies. The present-day Czech Republic was formed following the dissolution of Czechoslovakia after the 1989 “Velvet Revolution”. Therefore, the historical basis for the country’s current language planning must be sought in Czech history prior to 1989.

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2. Historical Evolution of Czech Language Policy

(1) The formation of written slavic language

The Czech language developed from Old Slavic. In 863 AD, the missionaries Cyril and Methodius, from the Byzantine Empire, arrived in Moravia. They created Old Slavonic and initiated the history of written Slavic languages by inventing the Glagolitic alphabet. Old Slavonic served as the official language of the Great Moravian Empire (833–907), the first Slavic state in the Czech lands. Following the empire's collapse, the Slavic inhabitants within its territory began to divide into two groups: the Czechs and the Slovaks. The Czechs established the Kingdom of Bohemia in the 10th century, embarking on a period of fluctuating development in Central Europe. Around the 11th century, the Holy Roman Empire began intervening in the Kingdom of Bohemia. Latin culture gradually threatened the dominant position of Slavic culture, and Latin replaced Old Slavonic as the ritual and official language around 1027, under the decree of Břetislav II.

(2) The Formation and development of written Czech

During the 11th to 13th centuries, Czech ritual texts began to appear gradually. However, due to the absence of an orthographic standard, Czech was transcribed directly using the Latin alphabet. In the 13th and 14th centuries, the Kingdom of Bohemia experienced prosperity in feudal agriculture, handicrafts, and urban development, accompanied by a relatively centralized power structure. Economic and political prosperity also drove the continuous refinement of the Czech language across various domains of social life and literature. By the mid-13th century, as German influence over Bohemia strengthened, efforts to Germanize the nobility and cities intensified. This led to the establishment of a Czech-German bilingual system in major Czech cities, with German becoming the language of the court and aristocracy. During this period, Czech was jointly influenced by Old Slavonic, Latin, and German.

The peak of Czech language development occurred during the mid-to-late 14th century under the reign of Charles IV. Standard Czech subsequently emerged as a literary and official language. The *Bible* was translated into Czech for the first time—marking the first Slavic language translation—and the “digraphic” orthographic method appeared. In 1411, the reformer Jan Hus authored *De orthographia bohémica (On Czech Orthography)*, the first purely linguistic study of Czech, written in Latin. Through the Hussite movement, Czech was endowed with the social functions of a national language and a language for ritual activities. It rapidly gained popularity and became widely used in administration, humanities, sciences, and other fields.

(3) The Czech language under habsburg rule

Following the Hussite Wars, the Kingdom of Bohemia entered a period of decline. In 1526, the kingdom was incorporated into the Holy Roman Empire, yet Czech remained the national language during this period. During the mid-to-late 16th century, comprehensive dictionaries and grammatical works on the Czech language were published. The *Kralice Bible*, a Czech translation produced by the Unity of the Brethren, became an important reference for standardizing the language.

In 1620, the Czech army suffered a decisive defeat by the Catholic League at the Battle of White Mountain. Bohemia was reduced to a province of the Habsburg Monarchy, marking the beginning of the nearly three-century-long “Dark Age”. The vast majority of property and land in Bohemia was expropriated by Germans, and the population was either expelled or forcibly Germanized. German was elevated to the status of official language, while Czech was marginalized from administrative and scientific spheres, surviving only with difficulty in folk literature.

The endangerment of the language ignited a defensive consciousness among the Czech people. Numerous books aimed primarily at language preservation began to appear. From the late 17th century, scholars promoted linguistic purism in Baroque grammatical works, which held positive significance in the struggle against Germanization.

By the end of the 18th century, industrial development led to the abolition of serfdom. Expelled Czechs returned to the cities, forming a strong working-class and artisan population. The Czech lower classes, intelligentsia, and bourgeoisie, harboring strong aspirations to resist autocratic rule, launched the National Revival movement to fight for freedom and independence. Language was viewed as a crucial symbol of national sovereignty, seen as the foundation for a nation's cultural and political development. Proponents advocated discarding Latin and German and striving to restore Czech as an official and national language.

During this period, as Czech gradually permeated political, literary, and various emerging fields, colloquial speech from social life was incorporated into the standard language, and literary language moved closer to everyday usage. To better meet societal needs, Czech underwent further simplification and enrichment. The historian and Slavist Josef Dobrovský, in his German-written *Ausführliches Lehrgebäude der böhmischen Sprache* (1809), replaced the "Brethren Orthography" with the "New Czech Orthography", standardized dialects, and helped form the basis of modern spoken and written Czech. Similarly, the linguist Josef Jungmann significantly enriched Czech vocabulary and terminology across various fields through his five-volume *Česko-německý slovník (Czech-German Dictionary)*, published between 1835 and 1839. Finally, in 1880, Czech regained status co-equal with German as an official language.

(4) Language policy in the Czechoslovak period

Following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after World War I, the Republic of Czechoslovakia was established in 1918. The country was home to numerous ethnic groups (including Czechs, Slovaks, Germans, Hungarians, Ruthenians/Russians, Jews, Poles, etc.) and multiple minority languages (such as German, Hungarian, Ruthenian/Russian, Polish, etc.).

In 1920, the concept of "Czechoslovakism" was written into the constitution. This cultural and political ideology, which gained prominence in the late 19th century, emphasized that Czechs and Slovaks were a single nation. This approach solved the demographic issue of Germans outnumbering Slovaks within the state's borders and supported the trend of defining national minorities while consolidating a dominant state nationality.

Simultaneously, the *Language Law (Jazykový zákon č. 122/1920 Sb.)* stipulated that "Czechoslovak" was the national and official language, making it a compulsory subject in school education. Furthermore, if speakers of a minority language constituted over 20% of the total population in an administrative region, that language could be used for legal, administrative, and educational purposes.

It is worth noting that the Prague Linguistic Circle was established in October 1926. Centered around this circle, the "Prague Linguistic School" emphasized the communicative function of language and championed modern concepts of linguistic culture. Amidst the tensions between the Prague School and the purist movement, a distinction was made between spoken and written forms, both of which were incorporated into the framework of Standard Czech. Standard Czech gradually became mastered by the general populace and, by the 1930s, began to take on the linguistic form recognized today.

Throughout the early 19th century, German remained a compulsory subject in foreign language teaching across various types of Czech secondary schools. The German occupation from 1939 to 1945 severely threatened the development of the Czech language, restricting its use in schools, government offices, and publications.

In the late stages of World War II (1945–1948), the status of Czech improved. National language policy was once again based on the 1920 Constitution and the Language Law. The establishment of the Czech Language Institute (Ústav pro jazyk český) in 1946 advanced the ontological planning of the language at the governmental level.

The *May Ninth Constitution* of 1948 abolished the concept of a "Czechoslovak nation", replacing it with the "Czechoslovak people" and stipulating that Czechs and Slovaks were two equal brotherly nations. The *Education Act (Školský zákon č. 95/1948)* designated Russian as a compulsory foreign language in Czech primary, lower secondary,

and upper secondary schools, while also allowing upper secondary schools to offer a second foreign language such as English, German, or French.

Subsequently, no language law explicitly specified an official language until the 1960 Constitution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. This constitution stipulated that Czech and Slovak, as official languages of equal status, were to be used in legal drafting and government negotiations. The state guaranteed national minorities (Polish, Hungarian, German, Ukrainian) the right to use their mother tongues in official matters, education, and publishing within their respective residential areas.

During the period of socialist construction, Czechoslovakia implemented the Soviet model in political and economic fields. Soviet culture also significantly influenced Czechoslovak politics, journalism, television, and value system. The status of Russian as a compulsory foreign language continued until 1989.

At the end of 1989, the Velvet Revolution concluded, leading to the dissolution of the Czechoslovak Republic into two independent states: the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. As an independent and newly emergent nation, the Czech Republic embarked on a modern development trajectory. Alongside continuous economic, social, and political progress, the country's language planning has also evolved in a more comprehensive and systematic direction, guided by historical experiences.

3. Conclusion

The historical development of Czech language policy reveals that the official language in the Czech lands underwent an evolution from Old Slavonic to Latin, and then to Czech. However, Czech's status as the national language was replaced by German for nearly 300 years following the Battle of White Mountain in 1620, and during the period of socialist construction, it faced significant threat from Russian. Repeated periods of foreign domination and oppression made the Czech people realize that language is a vital carrier of national culture, and the protection of one's native language plays a pivotal role in defending national identity.

Before the 1990s, Czech efforts to protect their native language primarily focused on status planning and corpus planning, manifested concretely in the following ways: legally mandating the use of the language in important settings and for official purposes; perfecting orthography, and compiling grammatical and lexical works; establishing language research institutes to promote standardized usage; and fostering national literature to resist foreign cultural aggression. These measures objectively reflect the evolution of Czech language policy during specific historical periods and provide a crucial foundation for modern language planning in the Czech Republic.

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