

Translating Esotericism: Czech*

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The Czech language, historically known as Bohemian, belongs to the Slavic language family's Western sub-branch (Czech-Slovak) and has roots in proto-Slavic. The emergence of Czech dates to the end of the tenth century, when it seceded from the Proto-Slavic language in the geographical area known as Bohemia or the Kingdom of Bohemia.¹ The earliest written records of Czech (short notes, names, etc.) date to the twelfth century. The Czech language fully developed during the fourteenth century and became the Kingdom's official language. A century later, Bohemian Church reformer and rector of the Prague University Jan Hus suggested a new, diacritical orthography for recording consonants. Hus strived to reform the Catholic Church, but was convicted as a heretic and burned at the stake in 1415 at the Council of Constance. His orthographical reform was later developed by the Unity of the Czech Brethren (also known as the Moravian Church, one of the oldest Protestant Churches). Members of this community translated the Bible from its original languages to Czech and published it between 1579 and 1593. This translation, known as the Bible of Kralice (*Bible kralická*), has set a standard for the Czech language since then.

1. Pleskalová, *Stará čeština pro nefilology*, 9.

* The author would like to thank Dr Jiří Dynda (Slavic Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences) and Dr Františka Schormová (Institute of Czech Literature of the Czech Academy of Sciences), whose comments helped to improve a previous version of this article. This research was funded with the "Support for the Long-Term Conceptual Development of the Research Organization RVO: 68378076, Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences."

In the early seventeenth century, the Czech Protestants organised a revolt against the House of Habsburg, but their attempts failed in a lost battle in 1620. Many Protestant intellectuals left the country. One of them was Jan Amos Komenský (John Amos Comenius, 1592–1670), the last bishop of the Unity of the Czech Brethren, who carried on developing the Czech language. He authored the first Latin textbook (originally in Latin, then translated into Czech), *The Door of the Languages Unlocked*, and his most well-known Czech book is *Labyrint světa a ráj srdce* (Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart, originally in Latin). Due to geopolitical developments linked to the loss of the Czech Protestants in 1620, the House of Habsburg proposed new laws and launched a campaign to Catholicize the Czech lands. As a part of this development, German became equal to Czech in official documents as well as in higher and university education, and Czech was gradually reduced to a language of the countrymen.

A “rebirth” of the Czech language commenced in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. In the national historical narrative, this period is called the “National Awakening,” as its representatives strived to promote Czech from a “peasant” language to a language for the intellectual and cultural elites. As a substantial part of this process, Czech intellectuals had to create a new Czech culture next to the German one.² The key person in this process was a historian and founder of Slavonic philology, Josef Dobrovský (1753–1829), who authored the first Czech grammar textbook (in German). Dobrovský’s student Josef Jungmann (1773–1847) was a translator and philologist who later became a rector of Prague’s University. He authored the first Czech–German dictionary, in five volumes (1834–1839, comprising 120,000 words), which became the basic foundation of Czech vocabulary. He also invented many new words, by borrowing from other Slavic languages or reviving them from historical documents. Some were calques (words or phrases translated word-

2. Macura, *Znamení zrodu a české sny*.

to-word / root-to-root) from German. Jungmann and his collaborators played a crucial role in developing the Czech language. As they wanted Czech to be a modern European language, they translated literary works of, for instance, Goethe, Schiller or Milton to prove that the Czech language was suitable for world-class poetry.

There are several substantial differences between Czech and English. Regarding vocabulary and morphology, English belongs to the analytical morphology type and is an isolating language, while Czech belongs to the synthetic morphological type and is a fusional language. The difference between isolating and fusional languages lies in the number of morphemes per word. Generally, words in synthetical languages bear several morphemes in a single word (for instance, “witchcraft” consists of two morphemes [witch, craft] and is, in this respect, the same in English and Czech). Also, isolating languages manage grammatical functions by adding new words as prepositions. Fusional languages, on the contrary, manage grammatical functions by use of declensions, conjugations, and adding prefixes or suffixes (also declined), and this is also the case with borrowed words from other languages. In terms of syntax, English has a fixed word order, allowing for just a few variations, whereas the word order in Czech is looser and differs depending on emphasis, meaning etc. For instance, in the sentence “John loves Mary,” it is clear who is the subject and who is the object. Czech allows variations: “*Honza* miluje Marii” (John loves Mary) or, for instance, “*Honzu* miluje Marie” (John is loved by Mary). The verb in the latter sentence is active and cannot be translated in this form into English in the same sense; hence, I had to use the passive form. I could also choose “Mary loves John,” but then the syntax would have to change. Note the slight difference in declensions (italicized) in the last two Czech sentences and the different meanings it produces. Lastly, borrowed words and calques are often taken over not as examples of a generic category but as a peculiar representative of a subgroup within a given category. Consider, for instance, the English word

“vehicle,” which refers to a means of transport in both a literal and a wider sense: it can be a car, or it can refer to a carrier or medium. In Czech, the word *vehikel* refers solely to an obsolete and poor-quality car.

Proto-Slavic and Old-Czech Words

The Czech translations relevant to this overview can be divided into two categories.³ The first category considers words derived from Old Czech or (more often) Proto-Slavic language. These words have generic Slavic roots, and their usage goes back to the medieval or older period. The word *náboženství* (religion) has roots in Slavic *bogъ* (god). *Náboženství* (from *ná-bož-ný*) literary means “to think about God.” The word *bogъ* (god) was misleadingly considered the same as wealth or wealthy. However, it seems more plausible that common Slavic *bogъ* has its root in Indo-European *bhag-* referring to “divide / distribute,” “grant” [something to somebody], “divider” [lord the divider]. Religion (*náboženství*) refers to religiousness (*zbožnost*) = “devotion to God.” Note that there is no special difference between the noun God and the adjective divine (*božský / boží*) in Czech.⁴ Religion is also connected to revelation, which translates as *zjevení* and is probably derived from Old-Slavonic *javljati / javiti* (for a translation of Greek *apokalyptein* or *phainēsthai*).

Another group of words refers to spirit and soul. Spirit is translated as *duch*, which is derived from old-Czech *dech* = “breath” / “to breathe” = an expression of life, similar to other Slavic languages.⁵ Soul is translated as *duše*, which comes from common Slavic *duša*. It is derived from *duch* (spirit)⁶ and it is likely that both *duša* and *duch* have roots in Indo-European *dhous-ia*.⁷ In Old-Czech, “breath” (*dech*) also referred to “soul” (*duše*), and this is also the case when it comes to the ghosts

3. To uncover deeper meanings and roots, I used the etymological dictionaries by Rejzek, *Český etymologický slovník* and Machek, *Etymologický slovník jazyka českého*.

4. Rejzek, *Český etymologický slovník*, 96.

5. Rejzek, *Český etymologický slovník*, 148.

6. Note that adj. *spirituální* is taken from modern European languages (English, French, German) in the nineteenth century and comes from Lat. *spiritus*, see below, Rejzek, *Český etymologický slovník*, 594.

7. Rejzek, *Český etymologický slovník*, 150.

(*duchové*) — both referring to dead peoples’ souls and various boogies (as the latter seemingly emerged out of the dead peoples’ souls).⁸ Spirit world is translated as *duchovní svět* (“other world,” literally *jiný svět*, which has no special meaning aside from a spiritual world) and it refers to a world of spirits (pl. *duchové*). It is sometimes considered to be “supernatural,” which literally translates as *nadpřirozený* (“above nature”). This is the only exception from the Old-Slavic category, since the word emerged during the Czech language revival in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries by resurrecting it from Russian *priroda* (nature). *Priroda* in Russian refers to *priroditi se* in Czech; *rodit se, rozmnožovat se* = to be born, to procreate or reproduce. Originally, the word solely referred to animated nature.⁹

A penultimate word group covers knowledge, wisdom, and thought. “Mind” (*mysl*) comes from the generic Slavic *mysl* = “to think.” It links to “consciousness” (*vědomí*) as it comes from generic Proto-Slavic *vědě* = “to know” which is also connected to “to see” (*vidět*) and originally equated what one saw (*vědět*) with what one knew (*vidět*).¹⁰ The compendium of knowledge is called *věda* (science, from an ancient Slavic root *vědě* = “to know”), overlapping with the former. Also, common Slavic *věd / vědma* refers to a cunning man / woman (sorcerer) and a knowledge connected to divination or other techniques of gaining knowledge.¹¹ Knowledge might be sometimes considered secret (Czech adj. *tajné*, noun *tajemství / secrecy*), which has a generic Slavic root referring to “(keeping) secret.”¹²

The last group considers sorcery and enchanting (“magic” has been taken over from Greek as calque *magie*). Sorcery translates as *čarodějnictví* and refers to a craft of making / drawing “lines” (*čáry*). This is connected to the verb *čarovat*, which means “to enchant.” There is no known source or refence. It is probably pan-Slavic with possible roots close to Avesta *čārā* “auxiliary mean” or Lithuanian *kerėti* “to

8. Machek, *Etymologický slovník jazyka českého*, 135.

9. Rejzek, *Český etymologický slovník*, 514

10. Rejzek, *Český etymologický slovník*, 702.

11. Rejzek, *Český etymologický slovník*, 702; Machek, *Etymologický slovník jazyka českého*, 680.

12. Rejzek, *Český etymologický slovník*, 649.

enchant” or “to bewitch someone by the evil eye.”¹³ It may come from the old Indian *krnoti*, “to act” / “to make” (Proto-Indo-European root *kn̥er-*). Czech *čára* means “line,” which delineates space. Most probably it refers to a (magical) circle or (magical) books, which were full of various “lines.” The verb *čarovat* literally means to “make / draw lines” (like a magical circle).¹⁴ The English “enchantment” is translated as *okouzlení*, derived from the old Czech noun *kužlō*, which has an unclear meaning (maybe from *kužlō* = “blacksmith,” which refers also to Proto-Slavic *kovь*, “bad decision, plot against somebody.” *Kovь* bears solely a negative meaning in Proto-Slavic, however the precise meaning is unclear).¹⁵

Words Borrowed from Other Languages

The second category consists of words taken over from other languages, mostly during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. A group of calques like *alchymie* (alchemy), *gnóze* (gnosis), *esoterismus* / *esoterika* (esotericism), *astrologie* (astrology), *okultismus*, adj. *okultní* (occult), *mystika* (mysticism) *imaginace* (imagination), *démoni* (demons, also as *dáblové* / devils), *magie* (magic) come from Greek or Latin.¹⁶ This is also the case of *spirituální* (spiritual), which, however, is equivalent to Czech *duchovní* (see spirit above).¹⁷

Another group involves borrowing from either German or English. For instance, *vizje* (vision) means “to see to the future” and comes from German *Vision* (from Latin *visio*, “seeing, image / imagination”).¹⁸ *Tranz* (trance) or *změněné stavy* [*Vědomí*] (“Hypnotic / altered / ecstatic state” [of consciousness]) are from English and German “trance” / *die Trance*, both derived from Latin *transire* “to cross to the other side.” *Změněné stavy* [*vědomí*] (altered states) bear the same meaning as in English, and the same counts for *teosofie* (theosophy).¹⁹

13. Rejzek, *Český etymologický slovník*, 112; Machek, *Etymologický slovník jazyka českého*, 95.

14. Machek, *Etymologický slovník jazyka českého*, 95.

15. Rejzek, *Český etymologický slovník*, 319.

16. Rejzek, *Český etymologický slovník*, 159, 186, 234, 398, 427.

17. Rejzek, *Český etymologický slovník*, 594.

18. Rejzek, *Český etymologický slovník*, 714.

19. Rejzek, *Český etymologický slovník*, 669.

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