

# LINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: CZECH AND ENGLISH COMPARED

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*The article explores the difficulties that may arise in communication between native speakers of different languages (namely English and Czech), although they may be using English as the common language of communication. The aim is to show that the different systems of the respective native languages force the communicators to employ strategies of expression which are characteristic of one of the languages but not readily transferable into the other language. Moreover, the language systems often reflect even broadly conceived cultural differences, and affect the ways in which native speakers perceive and understand reality.*

## **1 Introduction**

The relatively simple concept of communication between speakers of different languages as we have known it for years has been changing rapidly over the last decade or so. While until relatively recently it was believed that mastering the system of a foreign language at all linguistic levels was in itself a sufficient guarantee of successful communication, everyday reality seems to provide ample evidence for the contrary.

With the world getting smaller owing to a boom in information and communication technologies, and with travelling being easier than ever before, we become involved in interaction with speakers of sharply different native backgrounds, and although both parts might be using English (or any other shared language) as their means of communication, we encounter difficulties which do not arise strictly from poor knowledge of the language, but rather from the fact that each participant brings into the communication a different set of expectations, beliefs, attitudes, as well as social and communicative rituals. Put simply, conversations between two speakers of English about the same topic and following the same goals will vastly differ depending on whether the speakers are both English, or whether only one is a native speaker of English, and there will be huge differences even between pairs of non-native speakers of various nationalities.

These cultural differences may lead to miscommunication, or at least embarrassment, and often present problems which are hard to tackle. Whereas the description of a language as a system, however complicated, is something linguists have been trying to do for centuries, and the tools developed in the process have been refined to a high degree, there is no easy way of describing how exactly culture is reflected in language and communication. The reason lies in the fact that cultural phenomena penetrate all levels of language in a rather unsystematic manner, and it may seem that they are just a haphazard collection of idiosyncrasies and oddities. Yet there are, fortunately, enthusiasts who have embarked on the narrow and risky path of the study of these phenomena, and thus created a new field of research, which has come to be known as 'intercultural communication'.

This is not to say that the awareness of culture-based conditioning of language is completely new: obviously, one has never expected a native Japanese or Chinese to use English in the same way as a native Englishman, Welshman or perhaps even a German. Cultural differences between Europe and Asia are known to be enormous, and communication differences are therefore a

logical implication; the trouble, of course, is that their concrete form remains unpredictable. What is much more surprising about intercultural communication is the discovery that these cultural differences come into play even in situations where the two respective cultures are relatively close (e.g. Great Britain and Germany), with the additional risk that the speakers might not even be aware of them precisely because of their subtlety.

It may be argued that any communication in which at least one of the speakers is using a language other than their own is an instance of intercultural communication. Such communications probably share certain features that are universal for all possible combinations of native languages, but the level of abstraction is inevitably too high as to be of any practical use for anybody apart from communication theoreticians. From a practitioner's point of view, it is much more important to examine concrete individual combinations of languages, and, possibly, draw conclusions that can be used in language learning and teaching.

The purpose of this article is to examine the relatively simplest question, namely how similarities or differences in the systems of two languages make communication easier or more difficult.<sup>1</sup> The languages in question are English and Czech, the point of view is that of a native speaker of Czech communicating in English with a native speaker of English. Where appropriate, references to other languages will be made.

## 2 English and Czech in contact

Let us start by considering the role of historical and geographical contacts of languages. It is probably safe to assume that nations living in close proximity have a better chance of influencing one another's lifestyles through contact and, possibly, intermarriage. It is even possible that in border regions the process of cultural amalgamation results in a common socio-cultural setting, where the native languages are preserved, but heavily influenced by one another, and where at least part of the population is bilingual. The situation in the area on the border of Bohemia, Bavaria and Upper Austria until World War II may serve as an example. Whether you call it *Šumava* or *Böhmerwald*, in many ways it was a true Euro-region – centuries before the term was coined.

On the other hand, World War II represents a point in history when contacts between the Czech and English started. Before then, such contacts had been extremely sparse for obvious geographical and political reasons (Czechoslovakia was traditionally France-oriented), and virtually restricted to linguistics, literature, film or personal encounters of a very limited number of speakers.<sup>2</sup> The boom of English, which was gaining ground after 1945 not only as a national language, but newly also as a means of international communication, was terminated abruptly in 1948, after the communist take-over. Although English remained one of the foreign languages taught in secondary schools, the number of learners of English was very limited, and the chances

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<sup>1</sup> It has to be noted that different areas of comparison of the language systems pose problems of different magnitude and manifest different levels of predictability. While it is relatively easy to draw conclusions from differences in phonology, the differences in phraseology and idioms are virtually resistant to logical reasoning.

<sup>2</sup> Some notable exceptions must be mentioned here: owing to the growing popularity of sports like football, tennis, and some others, English sports terminology found its way into the vocabulary of Czech; the same is true about modern music.

to use the language in authentic face-to-face communication with native speakers were next to none. For this reason, from the 1950s almost till the end of the 1980s English in Czechoslovakia had an exotic air. It could be anything from a personal manifestation of resistance to the communist regime to mental exercise, but one thing it was definitely not is an instrument of natural communication. It is therefore not surprising that the natural gap between the two languages grew even wider.

This situation changed dramatically after 1989 with the opening of the country to the world, increased opportunity of travelling abroad, and last but not least, with the influx of young British and American people, many of whom started working as teachers of English and became, consciously or unconsciously, disseminators of their culture. The swing from East to West could not have been more complete, and initially it was welcomed by the population, tired of years of forced Russian influence. Using English expressions became a fashionable trend, especially among leading politicians and in the media, and under this influence even people who do not know any English use them liberally, often not knowing what they really mean. This is however probably a result of the current globalisation of the world, with English at the forefront as the language of global communication, rather than a purely American or British influence. Although this trend is not restricted to the Czech Republic alone, it is probably more prominent in the post-communist countries than in Western Europe. It may be concluded that the opportunity of encountering English in the Czech context has never been better than it is now.

### 3 Origin and typology

Both English and Czech are Indo-European languages, but English, although historically a cross-breed of Germanic and Romance languages, is considered a West Germanic language, while Czech is a West Slavic language.

The two are typologically as diverse as two Indo-European languages can be. English is a typical representative of analytical languages, whereas Czech is a synthetic language with extremely rich inflections. This has far-reaching implications for the structure of sentences in the two respective languages and for the status of words within sentences. In Czech, the role of words in the sentence can only be revealed from affixes attached to their roots or stems. The system of affixes is rather complicated, irregular, and each affix may be multifunctional, i.e. a single verbal ending may simultaneously convey the categories of person, number, gender, tense, aspect and mode, which stretches the learner's memory to the limit, and often beyond.

From the learner's point of view, English is initially much easier to learn than Czech: sentences are composed of words in the form of ready-made blocks that do not need to be shaped further. However, the initial feeling of ease will soon be replaced with the discovery that conveying the same meaning through English and Czech often requires completely different grammatical structures, and, in a way, a different way of thinking in and about the language. Thus, Czech learners of English experience different problems at different stages of learning, and it might be argued that the relative difficulty of English grows in direct proportion with growing levels of proficiency and the need to express fine subtleties of meaning.

This begs the question of whether relative similarity or dissimilarity of two languages is necessarily a facilitating or an aggravating factor respectively. Although the conclusion seems superficially logical, empirical evidence suggests a much more complicated picture. If we accept

that the learners' initial awareness of substantial differences between the two language systems can alert their attention and boost their motivation because of the increased challenge, then such learners may eventually be more successful than their colleagues learning a relatively similar language and therefore lacking the challenge. The dissimilarity of the two languages also limits the amount of transfer from the mother tongue into the foreign language and unwanted interference. On the other hand, while it is infinitely easier to communicate in a language similar to the speaker's mother tongue, achieving mastery may still be rather hard because many of the difficult points go unnoticed. Czech and Slovak provide a perfect example of this: although, strictly speaking, they are two different languages, they are probably closer to each other than some dialects of German. Consequently, everyday communication poses no problem, but translation from one language into the other, for example, is a rather treacherous task. Sadly, after the split of Czechoslovakia Slovak almost disappeared from the media in the Czech Republic and vice versa, which has considerably affected the youngest generation's capacity to understand the other language.

To make the picture even more complex, it has to be admitted that the absence of a particular category in one of the languages is usually an obstacle. If a particular category does not exist in the foreign language, the situation is usually easier because the speakers may just ignore it. However, there are instances where speakers may feel that there is something missing in what they say. If, on the other hand, there is a superfluous category in the foreign language, the learners usually do not have sufficient sensitivity to that particular feature. They are well aware of the problem but often unable to solve it. To illustrate what I have in mind, let me mention the absence of articles in Czech and the difficulty Czech learners of English have with the category of noun determination. I will refer to other examples in the following parts of this article.

#### **4 Orthography and phonology**

Spelling, or more precisely the very loose relationship between spelling and pronunciation, has traditionally been considered one of the most difficult aspects of English, especially for beginners. For historical reasons, English in its written form is very different from the spoken form, and the correspondences of graphemes and phonemes are only partly systematic, with frequent exceptions. A single grapheme or cluster of graphemes may have a number of different pronunciations and vice versa: different graphemes or clusters of graphemes may share the same pronunciation. This is especially true for vowel graphemes. A native speaker of Czech, where spelling is largely phonological with a few elements of morphological conditioning, and where the grapheme-phoneme relationship is therefore almost one-to-one, gets the impression that the spelling of English is a huge maze in which separate words must be learnt mechanically, one by one. In the more advanced stages of learning, the learner may feel encouraged by discovering certain regular correspondences, only to be disappointed on finding exceptions even to these. However, because of its complexity, training in spelling used to get (and to some extent still does) a lot of attention in teaching English in the Czech Republic and therefore, paradoxically, Czech learners of English often know its spelling better than native speakers. On the other hand, the massive use of word processing programs, complete with spell-checkers, has reduced the importance of knowing the spelling of each word. Whether this is a positive development still remains to be seen.

The sound of spoken English represents a difficult obstacle for a Czech learner in terms of both reception and production. The most easily noticeable difference is that the sets of phonemes of Czech and English only partly overlap. The most notoriously difficult English phonemes are probably [θ] and [ð], the most difficult Czech sound is the post-alveolar vibrant [r̥] (e.g. in the word *čtyři* ‘four’), although it is in fact closer to English [r] than the Czech alveolar [ř].

Other differences in the quality of phonemes superficially identical in both languages are less noticeable to a Czech ear, yet pronouncing them in the Czech way imparts distinct foreignness to the speaker. To state a few examples: there are just five simple short vowel sounds in Czech and the same number of long vowels of identical timbre, whereas in English the system is much more complicated, and the short and long vowels show differences in quality, rather than just in length. The length of Czech vowels is constant (either short or long) regardless of the neighbouring phonemes, presence or absence of stress, etc., while the length of English vowels is variable. Every final voiced consonant in Czech is automatically assimilated towards its voiceless counterpart, while in English a final voiced consonant is preserved and results in the lengthening of the preceding vowel. The English velar nasal [ŋ] is a common allophone in Czech, but only in the medial position, and Czech speakers have difficulty in pronouncing it finally. There is no aspiration of [p], [t] and [k] in Czech, but once learners master it, they are sure to use it even where inappropriate, such as after [s].

I have interesting experience proving how Czechs encountering unfamiliar English phonemes seek analogies in the Czech phonemic set. For example, a native speaker of Czech who had never learnt any English, in trying to produce a phonetic transcription of an English song, marked every initial [ð] as [v]. This shows differences in what could be called the phonological sieve, i.e. an instrument sifting the numerous distinctive features of phonemes and letting through only those of the hearer’s native language. It is not surprising that this sieve is set differently in different languages. In the example above, the features common to the two phonemes were their voicing and friction, while the different place of articulation was ignored as irrelevant. Indeed, if you were to grossly exaggerate the fricative character of Czech [v], you get something reminiscent of the English [ð].

English is a stress-timed language, whereas Czech is a syllable-timed language, where syllables have constant length and there is no compression of unstressed syllables. It is therefore not much of a surprise that Czech learners often complain that native speakers of English do not pronounce words ‘properly’, by which they mean the naturally reduced pronunciation of unstressed grammatical forms.

Unlike in English, in Czech the stress falls on the initial syllable and is not very prominent. The possibility of placing stress on virtually any English syllable, together with the practice of linking words into larger units and blurring word boundaries, makes decoding the message rather complicated even in situations where the listener knows all the individual words. Compared with, for example, German, where separate words stand out more distinctly, spoken English is much harder to understand.

Intonation patterns of Czech and English share certain common features, but there are also marked differences. Firstly, English exhibits a much wider range of intonation than Czech. Consequently, Czechs speaking English sound unemotional and disinterested; English speakers, on the other hand, especially female, sound unpleasantly over-emotional to the Czech ear. Secondly, while the falling intonation is common both in Czech and English, the rising tone is much more frequent in English, and the fall-rise and especially rise-fall are very rare in Czech. So from the English point of view, Czechs overuse the falling tone and employ it in situations where it is totally inappropriate in English (cf. the section on pragmatics below).

## 5 Morphology

It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse every single difference in morphology, and so only representative samples are treated. Interestingly but quite understandably, the meaning of the term ‘morphology’ itself varies enormously in Czech and English linguistics. In Czech, morphology is a substantial part of the description of the language owing to the diversity and number of paradigms. In English, where inflections are rare, morphology plays a much less important part, sometimes almost being reduced to word-formation. When linguists jokingly remark that there is nothing like morphology in English, this is actually not far from the truth. For these reasons, the limits of morphology in English are hard to specify; it largely depends on the point of view employed, and the borderline between morphology and syntax, or morphology and lexicology is by no means a rigid one.

The problem of noun determination has already been mentioned. Another, probably even more complex issue is that of English verbal tenses and aspect in relation to Czech. In Czech there are in fact only three grammatical tenses used, broadly speaking, for reference to past, present and future events. This relatively poor range of tenses is complemented with an elaborate system of verbal aspect<sup>3</sup>, together providing a very fine tool for shaping the exact meaning of the verb. So verbs derived from a single Czech verbal root can express through affixation or alterations of the stem not only a single event vs. state, limited or unlimited action, but also beginning or termination, completion or incompleteness of verbal action, repetition, frequency, as well as e.g. direction and some other modifications of meaning. The possibilities are virtually endless, the alterations are, however, morphologically rather irregular, and therefore almost impossible to master for a non-native speaker of Czech. Besides, the complex meaning is inherently present in the particular verb form and cannot be divorced from it. This means that Czech speakers of English feel the need to impart all these fine shades of meaning to English verbs, which is usually impossible, despite the wider range of verbal tenses in English and the simple/progressive, as well as perfective/non-perfective forms. Although the semantic character of certain verbs in English supports a particular interpretation (e.g. *kick* as a momentary verb, *change* as a process verb, etc.), generally speaking, the English verb is by nature more neutral in terms of its exact aspectual meaning, and sometimes these meanings are only made clear by syntactic devices, i.e. complementation of the verb by adverbials, singular or plural objects, etc. Here the two languages use very different tools to achieve the same communicative goals. A Czech learner of English struggling with English verbal tenses finds little consolation in the indisputable fact that an English person learning Czech faces even more acute complications, sometimes bordering on the impossible.<sup>4</sup>

## 6 Syntax

Syntax is the part of the language system where the differences between an inflected and non-inflected language are particularly salient. I shall focus my attention on three areas: the nominal

<sup>3</sup> It has to be stressed that the term *aspect* in Czech is not synonymous with *aspect* in English; to make this difference clear, the German term *Aktionsart* is sometimes used in Czech linguistics.

<sup>4</sup> Just to point out some other areas of difficulty, let me mention the system of modal verbs, prepositional phrases (which have to be learnt more or less by rote), or the phenomenon of conversion – something unheard of in Czech.

character of English, non-finite clauses, and word order, together with the related issue of information structuring, or topic-focus articulation.

It is a well-known fact that Czech resorts to more distinctly verbal ways of expression than English with its frequent nominal forms. To illustrate this, we can use a model structure of the *have a smoke*-type. Here the lexical meaning is carried by the noun, which is dynamic and therefore capable of expressing an action. The verb has lost its original lexical meaning and merely conveys the verbal categories of person, tense, etc., reminding of a copular verb in a transitive structure. Examples with other verbs could be *take a walk*, *give a call*, and others. The corresponding Czech structures are purely verbal.

Infinitive, participial and gerundial clauses as other examples of the largely nominal character of English are common structural means and standard alternatives to finite subordinate clauses, and sometimes they even represent the unmarked alternative (especially in the case of the gerund). Although these forms do exist in Czech, they are, with the exception of the infinitive, much rarer and stylistically different (the transgressive and the deverbal noun). This logically implies that it is advisable to translate English non-finite clauses into Czech as finite subordinate clauses. Yet, even very advanced learners of English apparently cannot resist the temptation to translate at least a few participial clauses as transgressives, which are on the point of extinction in modern Czech. It is amusing that more often than not they do not know the correct endings (singular masculine, feminine/neuter, or plural) of these forms and get them wrong. This is a good illustration of a situation when two languages formally possess the same means, which, however, occupy very different positions within the systems of these languages: one in the centre and the other on the periphery.

It is quite legitimate to claim that Czech has a free word order. The role of each word is signalled through the inflections regardless of its position within the sentence. With just a bit of exaggeration, we can argue that in short sentences of three to five words there are as many possible word order sequences as there are mathematical combinations, and each particular instance of word order has a context in which it is natural. The reason is that in Czech word order is the chief instrument enabling a linear distribution of communicative dynamism, i.e. sequencing the constituents of a sentence in such a way that the least important is in the initial position and the most important in the final position. Native speakers of Czech therefore have a highly developed sense of assessing the relative importance of each word/clause element simply because they have been doing this unconsciously all their lives.<sup>5</sup> Quite logically, they initially try to sequence constituents of English sentences along the same principles, which is impossible. In a non-inflected language the primary function of word order is to signal syntactic functions of sentence constituents, and so it has to be bound to some extent. Consequently, learners often go full circle and start to believe what they are told by the teacher: that the word order of English is absolutely rigid, following the notorious pattern of subject-verb-object-adverbial of manner-place-time. This is of course a gross simplification, although perhaps methodologically sound in the initial stages of learning, and overly rigid adherence to this principle produces sentences equally unacceptable, or at least unnatural, as those imitating the free word order of Czech. It usually takes years before Czech learners of English arrive at a reasonable point of compromise between the two extremes, and even then they cannot be absolutely sure.

Of course, English possesses tools compensating for the lack of freedom of word order, namely the intonation and indicators of contextual boundness or unboundness (articles *a/the*, pronouns *some/this, that, these, those*, etc.), but it takes practice to be able to notice and interpret these signals correctly. Since in Czech the intonation merely accompanies the linear distribution

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<sup>5</sup> It is no wonder that the Brno school of functional sentence perspective, represented by Prof. Firbas, or the Prague group centred around Prof. Sgall and Prof. Hajičová have produced some of the most penetrating studies on the subject.

of communicative dynamism, the final intonation nucleus need not be very prominent. In English, on the other hand, it may be the only reliable indicator of the focus of information.<sup>6</sup>

## 7 Lexis

The comparison of the vocabularies of two languages is a risky business. Although the differences in the lexical units are probably the most apparent feature (many people still believe that the study of a foreign language is largely the study of its stock of words), it is at the same time the least systematic of all linguistic levels of analysis. The problems encountered by Czech learners of English will be unique in concrete individual instances, but at a higher level of abstraction they will be comparable to those experienced by speakers of other languages.

It may be argued that, owing to the nature of the language, the meaning of lexical units in Czech is more independent and more rigidly preserved than in English, where the meaning of a unit standing on its own is often less sharply contoured, and only becomes more precise in combination with another unit. This is well illustrated in the example of phrasal verbs.

Even though it is to be expected that the stocks of words of any two languages are by nature different, certain common grounds of most of the languages in Europe, and e.g. the influence of internationalisms from Latin or Greek, seem to offer welcome help in deciphering the meaning of at least some words. Similarities in the lexis are of course specifically related to a particular combination of languages. Superficial similarity, however, can often be misleading as in the case of so-called false friends, i.e. words of similar form, yet different in meaning. As the surface similarity of English and Czech vocabulary is rather low, these instances are not very numerous: *eventually* ('in the end') vs. *eventuálně* ('possibly, as another possibility'). Another problem is that there are words in English that have no satisfactory equivalents in Czech, e.g. *challenge*. Semantic fields of many seemingly corresponding lexical units only partly overlap, although in dictionaries they are treated as equivalents. There are unique historically and culturally conditioned expressions that virtually cannot be translated and have to be just approximated: consider the equivalents of *county*, *shire* and others in Czech or in other languages.

Additionally, there are substantial differences in the collocability of lexical units. A Czech speaker trying to transfer native patterns into English is bound to fail. More than in the case of e.g. Czech and German, it is absolutely necessary to learn words not in isolation, but rather in the form of complete short sequences, clusters, or phrases. If we find such considerable differences at the level of collocability, the differences in phraseology and idioms go even deeper. This is probably caused by lack of unifying factors and lack of contact of the two languages in the past. After a few failed attempts, a Czech learner of English usually gives up trying to translate phrases and idioms into English literally. Of course, there are collocations or idioms more or less identical in both these languages (some of them might be allusions to the Bible, which has been a unifying force in the past). But while a Czech learner of German is surprised at the relatively infrequent points of dissimilarity (despite the obvious differences we find striking analogies e.g. in verbal prefixes modifying the lexical meaning), an experienced Czech learner of English is shocked at discovering identical structures. I remember being surprised on coming across the phrase *it has dawned on me*, which is equivalent in meaning and motivation to its Czech

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<sup>6</sup> Another example of compensation strategies in English is playing around with syntactic and semantic function of sentence constituents: e.g. instead of a thematic adverbial of place in the final position, it is possible to transform it into a locative subject, and so put it in the initial position (*It was hot in the room.* vs. *The room was hot.*).



counterpart. In most cases, however, phrases and idioms cannot be predicted or even accounted for. There is no reason why in English we say *fit as a fiddle*, and in Czech *fit as a fish*.

Another difficult area is that of the register and the stylistic value of lexical units. It must be amusing for native speakers of English to listen to foreigners who, unaware of the problem, in a single sentence mix expressions ranging from the archaic to the latest slang.

## 8 Pragmatics

Pragmatics is the area most proper for the study of intercultural communication. Although it is possible to create hypotheses based on the comparison of the two languages (as I have been trying to do in the present article), pragmatics represents a confrontation of the language and its users with concrete communicative situations in real-life settings. The more we study communicative situations, the more we discover the profound influence on meaning exerted by factors like the background knowledge, the expectations and social roles of the participants, as well as many others. Whole libraries have been written on the subject, and so all I can hope to do here is give a few representative examples.

I shall first go back to intonation, one of whose important functions is to convey attitudinal meaning and so provide a kind of paralinguistic commentary on how the listener should interpret what is being communicated through words and sentences. Unlike the simple account of the four basic tones in English, we are faced here with a virtually endless set of possible realisations, and we have to take into account intonation in the broad sense of the word, i.e. not just changes in pitch, but also tempo, pauses, loudness, key, quality of voice, and, in addition, paralinguistic means, such as gestures, facial expressions and body language in general (as long as there is a visual contact between the speaker and the hearer). It is quite obvious that a non-native speaker will often miss some of these important signals and so will not understand a joke, or trace elements of irony or contempt. And it is even more obvious that there cannot be any definitive textbook of these features of communication and therefore they have to be learnt the hard way – through personal experience.

Another function of intonation is that of marking the focus of information. Consider the following sequence:

A: *I'm going to buy a 'paper.*

B: (1) *You can have 'mine.* (2) *You can have 'my paper.* (3) *You can have my 'paper.*

A Czech speaker B, aware of the fixed order of English but unaware of the possibility to move the intonation nucleus from the final position usual in Czech (as described earlier), instead of using (1) or (2), is quite likely to end up with (3), totally puzzling the native speaker of English A.

Intonation is also a very powerful tool for governing the flow of discourse as it provides a particular kind of turnover and feedback signals. Czech speakers of English under-use it for these purposes or use it incorrectly. Let us consider the following utterances:

(1) *Ex↑cuse me.*

(2) *Ex↓cuse me.*

(1) is an attempt to initiate communication, whereas (2) is more likely to be an apology. Still, Czech speakers will probably employ (2) in both situations.

To make the picture complete, we shall reverse the situation and look at the possible responses a Czech speaker might give to (1):

(3) ↑*Yes*.

(4) ↓*Yes*.

While (3) is quite proper and indicates willingness to co-operate, (4) is misleading because of the mismatch of meanings conveyed through words and intonation. Yet, I dare say that (4) will be the Czech speaker's preferred choice.

To conclude the section on pragmatics, I shall present examples of the relationship between the linguistic form and its communicative function at the level of sentence-utterance. There are many instances of similarity. So *Have you got a cigarette?* will be correctly interpreted as a request, and *Will you have some more whisky?* as an offer. On the other hand, *Why don't you come round for a chat tonight?* is likely to be misinterpreted as a true question because this form of expressing invitation is not common in Czech. Of course, the listener will wonder why the speaker is asking in this manner; considering the topic of the visit has not been touched upon yet such a question is completely inappropriate.

The same problem is reflected in the difference in social rituals, e.g. greetings. A native speaker of English considers the question *How are you?* as no more than just a greeting, and knows that the response must invariably be something like *I'm fine, thanks*, regardless of the real feelings, and he or she also knows that it is a necessity to ask back for the sake of politeness. An inexperienced Czech speaker of English often interprets the same sequence as a true question motivated by the speaker's real interest in the other participant's well-being, and, consequently, provides an extensive account of all the illnesses, misfortunes and disasters he or she has gone through over the last decade or so.

It is quite clear that cultural differences do not only affect verbal communication, but also paralinguistic devices (just consider the range of language-specific interjections conveying emotional meaning, or the differences in imitating animal sounds in different languages), as well as strictly non-linguistic means of communication, such as gestures and body language in general, whose account could be almost endless. As one example for all, let me state just the gesture used when you wish somebody good luck, known in English as *crossing one's fingers*, which is a fitting description of what it looks like. In Czech (and in German) the same function is expressed through *holding one's thumbs for somebody*, which again is an accurate description of thumbs bent down towards palms and held firmly in clenched fists.

## 9 Conclusion

To end this article, I would like to pose a question whether even the concept itself of 'knowing' a foreign language is culturally bound or strictly individual. I have seen a number of Czech people communicate more or less successfully in a foreign language, while claiming all the time that their knowledge is extremely poor. On the other hand, I remember an American colleague of mine, who kept boasting about his excellent German. When I finally heard him speak what was supposed to be German, I confess I would not have recognised it as German

without being told so. I should add here that I am quite familiar with the sound of German, although I am not a very proficient speaker. This is not to hint that Czechs are inherently more modest whereas Americans tend to be more confident. Perhaps it is related to the situation of Czech, spoken by just over 10 million speakers in the Czech Republic and a few hundred thousand elsewhere as compared to English, spoken by hundreds of millions of people all over the world. The implication here is that speakers of languages like Czech have much more practice in learning foreign languages out of necessity, whereas for native speakers of English the motivation to learn another language is much less strong.

With all due respect for the findings of research into intercultural communication, which provided a penetrating insight into ways in which groups of people communicate, we should avoid the pitfall of over-generalisation and the dangerous tendency to prescribe rather than describe, and have to allow for individual differences. While trying to provide better understanding of the language, linguistic study should not result in levelling out the different possible ways of expression and, consequently, in uniformity of expression. Rather it should show users of the language limits within which they can safely operate, and for the bold ones provide opportunities to challenge even these limits.

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