

ELŻBIETA SZCZEPAŃSKA  
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AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE**Keywords:** spisovná čeština, obecná čeština, profesjonalizmus, umělecký text

## Abstract

The present paper concerns the status of the literary variety of the Czech language (the so called *spisovná čeština*) with the system of the Czech language, with a particular focus on spoken language and literature. As a result of the constant eradication of Czech literary language (*spisovná čeština*) from the spoken language of Czech users, the process of its becoming stylistically marked has been noticeable for some time. It is, therefore, no longer a neutral variety of language in literary texts – this function is being taken over (as much as in the spoken language) by the colloquial variety of the language, i.e. *obecná čeština*.

In one of her papers Jana Hoffmanová (1993: 112) analyses the spoken language of the Czech intelligentsia to discover if the language of that social group is really representative of the Czech literary language (the so-called *spisovná čeština*), simplified in speech and described by the term *hovorová čeština*.

On the basis of her research the author of the article concludes that the representatives of the Czech intelligentsia freely and repeatedly mix elements of literary language (*spisovná čeština*) with varieties which do not belong to the literary language, i.e. *obecná čeština*,<sup>1</sup> slang, and, even dialects. This concerns both informal

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<sup>1</sup> In Czech language stratification the variety described as *obecná čeština* serves an unusual function. Despite the fact that it appears in colloquial language in the majority of Bohemia proper (the exception is western Moravia), it in fact competes against literary Czech (*spisovná čeština*) and in this way contributes to creating an original diglossic situation in the Czech language system. As there is not an exact equivalent of the colloquial variety in the English language (in terms of its phonetic features, its scope of use), we leave its name in its original form.

communicative situations, semi-formal as well as formal exchanges in the strict sense of the word (cf. Hoffmanová 1993: 112).

The material used by Hoffmanova comes mainly from dialogues reflecting various domains, among others, the media, as well as the occupational, academic, administrative and social contexts (e.g. interactions between university students). In fact, they constitute the principal part of a larger publication entitled *Mluvená čeština v autentických textech* (O. Müllerová, J. Hoffmanová, J. Schneiderová 1992).

In circles where an occupational register is used, the border marking formal or semi-formal situations undergoes a constant shifting and narrowing. Therefore, there are ever more frequent opportunities allowing for informal language behaviours as well as expressions in which elements of literary language (*spisovná č.*), colloquial language (*obecná č.*) or occupational register coexist with one another, without their users' even realising it. This often concerns highly prestigious institutions, for example the environments of institutions of higher education or cultural establishments (e.g. academics or theatre experts). In the case of the theatre the author quotes a set of vocabulary items obtained through an analysis of recorded dialogues which represent the area of terminology, e.g. *scénář, dramaturgie, inscenace, dialog, struktura, komponent*, etc., and which could demonstrate the process of intellectualising speech. On the other hand, she identifies a group of words characteristic of theatre occupational register, cf. *štace, šmirák, šmirárna, nazkoušet, dělat hru, vystavět figuru* etc., which demonstrate quite the opposite phenomenon. Similar processes appear in the language of an ophthalmologist who uses words which are basic for his profession, i.e. *oko, brýle*, in their colloquial form, i.e. *voko* and *brejle*.

The administrative sphere was up to a certain period representative of communicative situations of a formal character, where one could expect the use of a frozen official style and official vocabulary. This was still the case not so long ago, however, more recently certain far-reaching changes have also been taking place in this domain. Workers in offices and various other institutions, concerned about their own positions and under pressure from the transformed socio-political situation after 1989, have been changing their attitude towards their customers. Due to the common democratisation tendency, they are attempting to fulfill expectations of citizens, often by trying to assume familiar, jovial tone in order not to dominate their conversational partner. In effect the linguistic means characteristic of colloquial Czech (*obecná č.*) are incorporated into a dialogue whose principal element is formality. Hoffmanová (1993: 114) writes that as a result of this tendency at times an intellectually minded official tries to endear themselves to their interlocutor in an exaggerated manner and, wanting to avoid suspicions generated by the formal style, attempts to use highly expressive, even vulgar words.<sup>2</sup>

An additional problem, especially with regard to occupational vocabulary is the mechanical acceptance of terms from English which, on the one hand, facilitate communicative processes at an international level, but which on the other, form

<sup>2</sup> Cf. "Někdy se tu intelektuál (pokud jím úředník skutečně je) přizpůsobuje partnerovi až přehnaně a nevhodně – ve snaze o neformálnost a nebyrokratičnost se utíká až k výrazům siláckým a vulgárním".

a specific Czech-English jargon where there are no longer rules concerning the aesthetics and purity of the language. It is particularly visible in areas connected with computer technology, where specific jargon has developed in an uncontrolled and unrestrained way (Hoffmanová 1993:115). As a result of these processes bizarre forms of language frequently appear, as: *v helpu se dozvíte podrobnou informaci* or *stisknutím toho kontrol houm* (*houm* = home) or *nahradit jedním hrtem* (*hrt* = hard return), etc. And thus, as can be seen, the borrowings do not reflect the phenomenon of intellectualising the language in this case, on the contrary – as a result of the mutual English-Czech language interference they enhance the relaxation of the rules underlying the Czech language system, and this at the moment constitutes a considerable problem (indeed, not only in the Czech language).

The representatives of the Czech intellectuals also do not hesitate to use highly expressive words, especially when subjectively valuing particular phenomena. Such language is full of colloquialisms (sometimes on the verge of good taste), cf.: *vodfláknout, sajrajt, bláboly nějakýho kreténa*, etc., and it is not infrequently used in the context of public speeches (e.g. in the media). Instead of neutral terms expressing the degree of intensity of a certain feature, such as *velmi, velice, příliš*, there appear such forms as *děsně, strašně, strašlivě, neskutečně*, moreover, the latter are used in a text representative of the colloquial style, i.e. in combination with phonetic features characteristic of the variety called *obecná čeština*.

The last group of features characterising the speech of the Czech intellectuals studied by Hoffmanová are the above-mentioned phonetic features which *obecná čeština* demonstrates. And thus common here are words with the prothetic *v-* before the onset *o-*: *vo, vod, vobchod, vobrazovka, vovlivňovat trh, zavokrouhlený, nevybyčejně*, etc. Due to sloppy pronunciation, even in formal situations, such forms as *eště, méno, kerý, ňáký*, etc., which are characteristic of the colloquial style can be heard in the language of the respondents. As Hoffmanová (1993:117) states, such pronunciation is clearly a symptom of the language users more or less consciously “moving away” from the literary variety of the Czech language.

Thus, in view of the above facts a question arises as to where, if anywhere, the so-called “spisovné vyjadřování” resides in the language of the Czech intelligentsia. The author of the above research claims that it does appear – though quite seldom, and, moreover, in situations in which it almost becomes an element of an unusual stylisation. According to Hoffmanová, the reason for using literary language (*spisovná č.*) in the speech of the users of Czech may be:

- a) irony, possibly self-mockery (when, in order to achieve their aim the sender quotes “spisovný jazyk”)
- b) the meta-linguistic function, i.e. reflection on the language
- c) an exaggerated politeness, e.g. in the speech of politicians or journalists in the media, indicated by such expressions as *dovolte, promiňte, prosím vás*, which often only mask an aggressive attitude towards a rival or camouflage provocation, criticism, demagoguery, derision, etc.
- d) the ever growing dependence of speech on written texts, the mutual interpenetration of written and spoken texts, especially in the group with which the above

investigation was concerned. There the Czech intellectuals fairly often make use of quotes from written texts in speeches, reproduce passages from written texts (in which they subconsciously imitate their formal character) or alternatively when they intend to create a written equivalent of a given speech in the future (e.g. a conference at the design office or a session of academic board members of a higher education institution, etc.).

On the basis of her analysis Hoffmanová concludes that the representatives of contemporary Czech intelligentsia know and are able to use Czech literary language, however, in a similarly independent manner they make use of the linguistic means belonging to other varieties of the Czech language (mainly *obecná č.* as well as slang). As the research carried out demonstrates, they most frequently mix vocabulary items belonging to different varieties without hesitation and irrespective of what communicative situation they find themselves in. It can be seen that they do not perceive literary language as a guarantee of the effectiveness of any given utterance or an indispensable condition of it. What is more, it seems that its use is becoming more and more limited – it appears only in clearly formal situations. As a result of this limited frequency *spisovná čeština* is a more and more stylistically marked language variety in comparison with other varieties of Czech.

From this perspective, written texts, the most representative of which are particular literary works, demonstrate a certain analogy to speech. Their analysis in this respect (*spisovná vs. obecná č.*) constituted one of the subjects of an academic conference entitled “Spisovnost a nespisovnost dnes”, which took place in Brno on January 17–19, 1995.

In the paper by Komárek entitled “Charakterizační funkce spisovného jazyka v uměleckých textech” the author writes that at present one can notice a change in the position of *spisovná čeština* in literature as compared with other varieties of Czech (Komárek 1996: 169). This position is still very important, but it is no longer dominant (as it used to be) because the Czech literary language differs very distinctly from the contemporary spoken language. Currently, literary texts cannot be a reliable exponent of the norm of Czech literary language because literary Czech (*spisovná č.*) occupies a significant, but not dominant position among the other language varieties. It does not yet mean that *spisovná č.* should be eradicated from literature because it significantly differs from the spoken language. One has to note, however, that the Czech literary language has practically no chance of being used in a literary text without the use (in the same text) of elements of colloquial language, and in this respect *obecná č.* is particularly prevalent.

Language as a means of characterising literary characters was first used mainly in dialogues (in reported speech) but later gradually also in narration, in the author’s language (Szczepańska 2004) and then it seemed natural that the stylistically marked varieties of the Czech language were used for that purpose. At first dialects (e.g. works by Mršтик), later more and more often *obecná č.*, and finally also slang or even argot were in evidence. However, as Komárek (1996:169) writes, the use of *obecná čeština* to this end is complicated by the fact that it takes the position of the

most important code of the “běžné mluvy”, i.e. the colloquial variety. As a result, it appears more and more often in literary texts and it no longer surprises us there, especially when it appears in the language of many characters, both in dialogues and in the language of the narrator.<sup>3</sup> In connection with this there might therefore arise a situation in which the originally neutral elements of Czech literary language, i.e. *spisovná č.*, will become stylistically marked (and thus suitable for the characteristics of literary characters).

*Spisovná č.* could also earlier – exceptionally – have become an element employed to describe characters, often with the intention of parody, as was the case in, e.g. *The Good Soldier Švejk* by J. Hašek. In such a case lexical means in a slightly archaic form were mainly used, as e.g. the infinitive ending in *-ti*, etc. Relatively recently, i.e. before the “Velvet Revolution”, Czech literary language could also serve the purpose of stylising the language of the representatives of the Communist regime, where it marked the official and, at the same time, formal tone of speech.

The question, however, arises as to whether at present the stylising function may be expressed in the form of literary Czech, i.e. in a situation when the means that this language variety at present makes use of appear against a background of other elements of language, e.g. the colloquial variety (*obecná č.*). Contemporary Czech literature proves that such a situation does occur.

While analysing the text of a play by V. Havel entitled “Audience”, which is fairly well known in Poland, we notice some important stylistic differences connected with the main protagonists appearing in the drama: Sládek and Vaňek. Sládek uses colloquial language (*obecná č.*), at times mixed with vulgarisms, and this language does not in principle differ from the spoken language. Vaniek, on the other hand, consistently speaks literary Czech (*spisovná č.*), occasionally even utilising some rare nominal constructions as *jsem vám velice zavázán* or *jsem vám velice vděčen*. Such phonetic features as e.g. *ý > ej* or *é > í*, which *obecná č.* demonstrates also do not appear in his speech. In fact, it is only due to the syntactic features that the language of this protagonist does not lose its colloquial character. After some time the audience becomes accustomed to the language which the protagonists make use of, i.e. Sládek is associated with colloquial Czech, expressive and to some extent imbued with vulgarisms, whereas Vaniek with literary Czech, very correct and even excessively polite. The contrast is particularly noticeable at the moment when in adjacent parts of the dialogue both interlocutors use the same words, but in a different form, cf. Sládek: “Nebuďte *smutnej!*”<sup>4</sup> – Vaňek: “Já nejsem *smutný*”.

When we ask ourselves the question which of the two varieties of the language used in “Audience” to a greater degree serves as a means of characterising the protagonist, we will conclude that it is hardly surprising that *obecná č.* is used by people who, in this play, are represented by Sládek, contrary to *spisovná č.*, when spoken

<sup>3</sup> Cf. “Užití obecné češtiny k tomuto účelu je komplikováno faktem, že obecná čeština zaujala místo nejdůležitějšího reprezentanta běžné mluvy, je v literatuře stále více frekventována a následkem toho přestává v textech působit nápadně, zvláště když proniká do mluvy více postav bez rozlišení nebo i do autorské řeči”.

<sup>4</sup> The diphthongisation of *ý > ej* is one of the phonetic features of *obecná čeština*.

by Vaniek, is perceived as a much more characteristic and “conspicuous” variety (Komárek, 1996:170). The latter language is used by an intellectual with impeccable manners and correct expressions, features which are not particularly compatible with the prison environment, where he at present finds himself. Hence the impression that Vaniek’s final lines: *A nebuďte smutnej* makes is so strong. He addresses this comment to Sládek, who is broken-hearted when his plans fail and – wanting to console him – Vaniek adopts his way of speaking. What is more, he will also force himself to use a vulgarism in the lines which follow.

Thus, as far as the language of V. Havel’s play is concerned, it fits in with its dramaturgic construction. In the prison environment, full of absurdities, denying the principles of law and order (even among the guardians of law), a “normal” man attracts attention with his “strange” behaviour. Similarly, his correct language is also original and unusual. When juxtaposed with the common use of *obecná č.*, it loses its neutral character, and becomes stylistically marked. Such language construction in “Audience” is in some measure a logical consequence of its dramaturgic structure, where among the deluge of absurd situations and dialogues some “islets” of normal behaviour occasionally appear.

When analysing the language of the novel by Jáchym Topol “Sestra” (*Sister*) Mareš (1996: 177) concludes that this text is dominated by elements which do not belong to literary Czech, i.e. *obecná č.*, slang, vulgarisms, argot – this, as Mareš claims, demonstrates a clear domination of “nepsisovnost”. *Spisovná č.* appears in this text much less frequently and fulfils a particular function there:

- a) it may signal the quoting of somebody else’s text or somebody else’s expression, language, or utterance – thus *spisovná č.* often indicates a certain distance from the quoted utterances (which, for instance, have a character of racist declarations),
- b) it may be linked with the age of the people who use literary Czech in speech, or with their origin (e.g. they are often foreigners),
- c) it may also concern the character of the utterance (e.g. emphatic, pompous, etc.), or else the peculiar role of a given passage (e.g. fictitiousness).

And thus here also one may observe the particular function of Czech literary language (*spisovná č.*), which is used in various types of language stylisation.

It is unclear whether this indicates another step on the way to the elimination of this variety of Czech from the language, and limiting it only to certain formal utterances, and even these in writing only. This phenomenon was observable even earlier in some communicative situations in the system of the Czech language. Confirmation may be found in the opinion of Schmiedtova (1995: 85), who writes that using literary Czech (*spisovná čeština*) in spoken language is often perceived as unnatural or insincere, as a game of deception or even hypercorrectness. In the Czech environment this is not an entirely neutral, unmarked situation. And thus a consequence of this phenomenon is the use of Czech literary language (*spisovná č.*) as an element of stylisation in literary texts. This process, no longer a new occurrence, will progress as the variety of Czech literary language is increasingly eliminated from spoken language.

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