

- **Research in Language 2007, vol. 5** •
  - DOI: 10.2478/v10015-007-0006-2**
- 
- 

**Kevin Hannan\***

University of Łódź

## **UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE DEATH IN CZECH-MORAVIAN TEXAS<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract:**

Based on several decades of personal interaction with Texas speakers of Czech, the author's article attempts to correlate social change with some specific stages of language obsolescence and language death. Many instances of language change in that community, as well as cultural and social change, may be explained by the linguistic model known as the wave theory. One hundred and fifty years passed between the introduction of Czech and the death of that language in Texas. From the mid-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century, the Czech-Moravians represented a closed community in which individuals defined their identity primarily by the Czech language, ethnicity, and culture. In the final five decades of the twentieth century, as the social template representing Texas speakers of Czech disintegrated, spoken Czech ceased to function as a living language, and much of the ancestral culture connected with the language was lost. Today some among the elderly, described as semi-speakers, terminal speakers, or "rememberers" of language, retain a limited knowledge, but the ancestral language now has only a symbolic function.

**Keywords:** language change, language death, language obsolescence, sociolinguistics, Czech.

### **1. Introduction**

Despite the intense and systematic study of language change since the nineteenth century, the "logic" of language change remains poorly understood. Even in comparing certain languages which have similar structures, the results of language change experienced in one linguistic community often differ radically from the reflexes observed in another. The explanation for such an "unscientific" modus operandi may be sought in the social nature of human speech, which also typically has a spatial (geographic) reference. While conditioned to some degree by the existing structure and grammar

---

\* Author's address: Department of English Language, University of Łódź, Al. Kościuszki 65, 90-514 Łódź; e-mail: [slatay@wp.pl](mailto:slatay@wp.pl)

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations to English are by the author.

of a language, language change is a product of social influences and social borders.

In a study of dying languages and dialects of Europe, Denison observes both that “languages die, not from loss of rules, but from the loss of speakers” (1977: 21) and that “the direct cause of *language death* is seen to be social and psychological: parents cease transmitting the language in question to their offspring” (1977: 22, emphasis in original). In seeking to explain the direction of language change, we observe a primary correlation between social borders and varieties of speech. In other words, language change originates within specific social contexts and communities and then is transmitted across (or perhaps has no effect upon) successive, intersecting social communities.

That we might contribute in some way towards a broader understanding of the processes of language change in non-endangered and “safe” languages, we will attempt here to track some specific social processes in Czech-Moravian Texas that correlate with language obsolescence and language death. For a period of one hundred and fifty years, an immigrant variety of Czech was spoken in the rural Czech-Moravian community.<sup>2</sup> Introduced in Texas in the mid-nineteenth century, the language of the Czech-Moravians survived as a vital, if reduced, immigrant variety of Czech until the mid-twentieth century. During the five decades that followed, i.e. until the end of the twentieth century, spoken Czech gradually ceased to function as a living language (as simultaneously the Czech-Moravians lost much of their ancestral culture connected so closely with that language). Given the development of other immigrant languages in the United States and the social influences that shaped those languages, one is not surprised that the language of the Texas Czech-Moravians has not survived; what is remarkable within the context of immigrant languages in America is that the language survived for so long.

A few comments on theory and methodology are in order. Language obsolescence has both a spatial and a temporal dimension. A significant concept for understanding the spread of language change is the wave hypothesis, which proposes that language change originates at a specific place and time and then through a temporal process spreads both across space and through the strata of society. Social, cultural, and linguistic innovations, which themselves sometimes originate along a periphery before adoption as the norm, are diffused outwardly from a cultural or political center, much like waves arising when a pebble is dropped into a pool of water. In accord with the wave hypothesis, social borders act as a template for

---

<sup>2</sup> On the language of Czech-Moravian Texas, see Dutkova (1999), Dutkova-Cope (2001a, 2001b, 2001c), Eckert (1993, 2003), Hannan (2003, 2004), and Smith (1991).

change, with change spreading from the core of a social community; outlying areas are affected later, although parts of the periphery may not be affected at all. While innovations often originate along the spatial periphery of a linguistic territory before being adopted as a norm, it is also along the periphery that linguists and dialectologists mine or “salvage” archaic elements of a language. The structure of a dying language differs from speaker to speaker, each of whom represents a specific coordinate along various continua defined by the individual’s language competence (in relation to the competence of the community of speakers as a whole), age, interaction within social communities, and spatial location (e.g., rural/urban or core/periphery).

Significant field research on language obsolescence and death, especially for Native North American and Celtic languages, has been conducted during the past century.<sup>3</sup> Much of that research has provided a synchronic description of various “moribund”, endangered, or dying languages. A synchronic field study of a language may indeed produce valuable data, although the correlation between a language variety and related social factors may be less evident for the researcher whose perspective is strictly synchronic. This study differs from most analyses of language death, in that it is based upon the observations of the author over a period of more than four decades, including interaction with bilingual family members and with other monolingual speakers of the ancestral language born and raised in Texas. A panchronic study of language death, more readily than a strictly synchronic approach, may offer insight into the different sociolinguistic continua along which speakers both communicate and participate socially.

## 2. Ethnolinguistic Background

The Texas Czech-Moravians illustrate the phenomenon of chain migration, in which the immigration process is repeated over time among relations, acquaintances, and neighbors. Some eighty percent of Czech-Moravian immigrants in Texas were natives of the highlands of northeastern Moravia adjacent to Slovak and Polish territory, a fact reflected in the dialectal features of the language spoken in Texas. Bohemia and Austrian Silesia with Moravia form the historical lands of the Czech Kingdom, which during the centuries preceding the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918 were under the rule of Hapsburg Austria. The traditional culture, religious traditions, and spoken language distinguished the highlands of northeastern Moravia from the other

---

<sup>3</sup> Weber (1986) provides an annotated bibliography.

Czech Lands to the west. The homeland ethnicity has been described in Texas in various ways: Czech, Czecho-Slavic, Czecho-Slovak, Czech-Moravian, Moravian, Bohemian, and Slavic. Each of those names relates to a specific historical period and to distinct political, cultural, and social influences.

The immigration to Texas began in the mid-nineteenth-century and increased steadily throughout that century, before tapering off with the First World War. The Czech-Moravians settled some of the state's most fertile farmland, and they are concentrated today along belts of blackland in the central portion of the state, though since the Second World War many from the younger generations have migrated to the cities and also beyond Texas. Up through the 1940s, the predominately rural community maintained a series of insular social networks that reinforced ethnic identity and helped to preserve the Czech-Moravian culture and language. The final five decades of the twentieth century were characterized by language degeneration, ethnic fade, assimilation, and the popularization of a new concept of Texas Czech heritage transmitted in English only.<sup>4</sup>

Described in English as Czech, Texas Czech, Moravian, Czech-Moravian, Bohemian, or Slavic, the language in Texas differs from the varieties spoken in the contemporary Czech Republic. The spoken language of the immigrants and their descendants represents a continuum of styles which may also be viewed as a type of diglossia.<sup>5</sup> Eckert and Hannan (2006) distinguish the diglossic varieties as Texas Czech Vernacular (TCV) and Texas Czech Standard (TCS). TCV exhibited many dialectal features from northeastern Moravia (even in the speech of the second and third generations descended from immigrants from Bohemia and Silesia) and varied from community to community, sometimes from one family to another, or even from family member to family member. The idiolect of the individual comprised a specific blend of Moravian dialectal forms, elements of literary Czech, German borrowings, and increasingly with time, borrowings from English. While TCS, which was based on the literary standard of the homeland, could be heard during religious services and theatrical productions, no speaker actually employed literary Czech as a spoken vernacular. During the first decades in Texas, TCV and TCS represented two distinct varieties (or as suggested above, two extremes of a continuum, flanked on one extreme by literary Czech, and on the other by archaic traditional Lachian and East Moravian dia-

---

<sup>4</sup> The 2000 U.S. census reported a population of 187,729 with single or multiple Czech or "Czechoslovakian" ancestry in Texas (U. S. Census 2000 Summary File 3).

<sup>5</sup> While the language of the community as a whole may be described as diglossia, that description does not necessarily apply to the language of each individual speaker.

lects).<sup>6</sup> During the early decades, both TCV and TCS exhibited a relatively rich stylistic variation, though by the interwar period the language had become stylistically compressed and monotonous. The syntax and lexicon of Texas Czech with time increasingly were borrowed from English.

Before the Second World War, certain Czech-Moravians on isolated farms had only limited exposure to English. Monolingualism, which was more common among females than males, was observed among the second and third generations. Yet from the time of the first settlers, the influence of English was evident in the varieties of Czech spoken in Texas, most obviously in the lexicon. All the various technical and cultural innovations that shaped the immigrant community throughout its history have been associated with and described by a vocabulary borrowed from English. It was impractical to create a new lexicon for technology, financial transactions, and other spheres of everyday life that was lacking in Czech; the immigrants simply borrowed words from English and adapted these to their language. Agriculture, the chief occupation of the Czech-Moravians throughout their first century in Texas, evolved as a domain of English. Little of the agricultural vocabulary from northeastern Moravia was applicable in Texas, where the climate, landscape, crops, and implements were foreign to the new immigrants. English became the language of the farmer's business transactions. Military service promoted the spread of English among males.

We are concerned here primarily with the spoken language, although there is a venerable tradition of literary Czech in Texas, including a local Czech language press. While it differed in various features from the spoken language of Texas and from the traditional dialects of northeastern Moravia, TCS played a crucial role in the perpetuation of the ancestral culture in Texas. As the role of the Czech language press expanded in Texas in the early twentieth century and when contacts with and immigration from the European homeland came to a halt during the interwar period, literary Czech, based upon a mixture of elements from the speech of central Bohemia and western Moravia, increasingly exerted influence on the language in Texas, even though, as noted above, no pure form of the literary Czech of the homeland was used colloquially.

A major influence on TCV was the traditional Lachian and East Moravian dialects, which are more archaic than the other varieties of Czech. Of all the Czech dialects, the northeastern Moravian dialects are farthest removed, both spatially and typologically, from the standard dialect of contemporary Czech, which is based on the speech of Prague and central Bohemia. Lachian

---

<sup>6</sup> On the traditional Lachian and East Moravian dialects, see Bělič (1972).

and East Moravian share certain features, respectively, with Polish and with Slovak.<sup>7</sup> Yet there is great variety among the individual varieties of Lachian and East Moravian. The traditional dialect of Frenštát, spoken in southern Lachia but quite near the border of neighboring East Moravian dialects, became the basis for TCv. The influence of the traditional Lachian and East Moravian dialects was evident in the ethnic press, as illustrated in the following example<sup>8</sup> from *Svoboda* of LaGrange, Texas (with non-standard forms underlined and glossed):

Dubina, 26. ledna  
Pane redaktore!

Od tej<sup>9</sup> doby co stě<sup>10</sup> uveřejnili dopisy ve vašich novinách o slúpkách,<sup>11</sup> keré<sup>12</sup> hdosi<sup>13</sup> ukrad,<sup>14</sup> neviděl sem<sup>15</sup> od nás žádného dopisu.<sup>16</sup> Tož<sup>17</sup> já vám posílám tych paru řadkúv<sup>18</sup> a prosím vas, abystě<sup>19</sup> jich uveřejnili. Čtívám vaše noviny hned od začátku a příznavám, že

<sup>7</sup> Some Polish and Slovak linguists in the past disputed the genetic classification of Lachian and East Moravian as dialects of Czech.

<sup>8</sup> The language of this letter represents the traditional Lachian dialect of the Frenštát area, although before publication it was edited to incorporate certain elements of the literary language, e.g. distinctive vowel length (represented by the letter *ů* and by the acute accent above other vowels) – although distinctive vowel length is absent in Lachian. Neither dialectal elements, such as palatal *d'*, *t'*, or *n'* following front vowels, e.g. *vyňchajtě*, nor elements of the literary language, such as vowel length, appear consistently throughout the letter. Some specific Lachian features are: (1) absence of prehláska, e.g. fem. acc. *hodnu, vášu*; (2) tautosyllabic *-aj* in imperative forms, superlatives, and certain adverbs (as in Slovak and Polish), e.g. *vyňchajtě*; (3) masc. pl. genitive desinenence *-ův*, e.g. *přes pět rokův*; (4) the genitive of negation, e.g. *neviděl sem od nás žádného dopisu*; and (5) Lachian lexical items *chot'*, *telko*. In the ordering of preterite and conditional auxiliaries and non-emphatic pronouns, the Czech pattern predominates, with accusative reflexive *se* preceding dative forms, e.g. *ale ešče by se mi lepší podobaly*; *Druhá věc co se mi nělibí od Vás*, though there are also examples here of the pattern found in Polish (dative precedes accusative), e.g. *esli naša Slobada tam tym norským se líbí alebo ni*; *Bud'te jisti, že nám se libí*. Some forms represent a compromise between the literary language and dialect, e.g. *nělibí* (*nělubi* was common in TCv). Deictic and expressive *tož* is common throughout most of Moravia.

<sup>9</sup> *tej* = *té*

<sup>10</sup> *stě* = *jste*

<sup>11</sup> *o slúpkách* = *o slepicích*

<sup>12</sup> *keré* = *které*

<sup>13</sup> *hdosi* = *někdo*

<sup>14</sup> *ukrad* = *ukradl*

<sup>15</sup> *sem* = *jsem*

<sup>16</sup> *neviděl... žádného dopisu* illustrates the genitive of negation, not found in contemporary Czech, which has *neviděl... žádný dopis*.

<sup>17</sup> *Tož* = proclitic with meaning of 'well', 'so', 'then'; characteristic of Moravian speech.

<sup>18</sup> *tych paru řadkúv* = *těch pár řádků*

<sup>19</sup> *abystě* = *abyste*

se mi podobaju,<sup>20</sup> ale ešče by se mi lepší podobaly,<sup>21</sup> dyby stě<sup>22</sup> v nich neměli tolik ohlášek. Ty ohlášky<sup>23</sup> něrad<sup>24</sup> čítám. Něni<sup>25</sup> v nich nic poučného. Druhá věc co se mi nělibí<sup>26</sup> od Vás, musíť<sup>27</sup> mi ale nězazlit',<sup>28</sup> že vám to vytýkám, je, že sobě všimátě<sup>29</sup> druhých novin. Já by jich sobě něpovšimnul,<sup>30</sup> lebo<sup>31</sup> ty noviny to nězasluhujú.<sup>32</sup> Co je nám po tym,<sup>33</sup> esli naša Sloboda tam tym norským se líbí alebo ni.<sup>34</sup> Bud'te jisti, že nám se líbí,<sup>35</sup> ež<sup>36</sup> na ty ohlášky, a to vám može postačit'.<sup>37</sup> Edem tych ohlášek trochu vyněchajť.<sup>38</sup> Esli musíť měť ty ohlášky,<sup>39</sup> abystě ty noviny udrželi, tož já by vám poradil, abystě rači<sup>40</sup> noviny zdražili. Já myslím, že by vám každý odbíratel o ten tolar věc<sup>41</sup> zaplatil, edem dyby tych ohlášek telko něbylo.<sup>42</sup> Nového u nás nic nění. Měli smy<sup>43</sup> tu letos hodnu<sup>44</sup> zimu, moc věči ež<sup>45</sup> já pamatuju v Americe, chot' sem<sup>46</sup> tu už přes pět rokúv.<sup>47</sup> Minulý týděn nám hodně zapršelo. Přec<sup>48</sup> už nám domohlo.<sup>49</sup> Pozdravuju vás aji vašu familiju<sup>50</sup> a zostavám<sup>51</sup> váš přítel ež do t'mavého<sup>52</sup> hrobu.

(Svoboda, 9 II 1888, p. 1)

<sup>20</sup> *že se mi podobaju* = *že se mi líbí* (cf. Polish *podobać się*)

<sup>21</sup> *ešče by se mi lepší•u podobaly* = *ještě by se mi víc mi líbilo*

<sup>22</sup> *dyby stě* = *kdybste*

<sup>23</sup> The writer uses *ohlášky* in the sense of 'advertisements'; in contemporary Czech, that word is *inzerce* or *inzeráty*, while *ohlášky* refers to wedding banns announced in church.

<sup>24</sup> *něrad* = *nerad*

<sup>25</sup> *něni* = *není*

<sup>26</sup> *co se mi nělibí* = *co se mi nelíbí*; *nělibí* in the text represents a blend of the dialectal form *nělubí* and literary *nelíbí*; many speakers of TCV used *nělubí*.

<sup>27</sup> *musiť* = *musíte*

<sup>28</sup> *nězazlit'* = *nezazlit*

<sup>29</sup> *všimátě* = *všimáte*

<sup>30</sup> *něpovšimnul sobě* = *nepovšiml si*

<sup>31</sup> *lebo* = *nebo*, cf. Slovak *lebo* 'for', 'because'

<sup>32</sup> *nězasluhujú* = *nezaslouží*

<sup>33</sup> *tym* = *tom*

<sup>34</sup> *esli naša Sloboda tam tym norským se líbí alebo ni* = *jestli naše Svoboda těm seveřanům se líbí anebo ne* (the writer employs the adjective *norský*, from German and English, to designate the population of the northern United States, cf. Czech *seveřan* 'northerner'), cf. Slovak *sloboda* 'freedom'.

<sup>35</sup> *že nám se líbí* represents a different pattern for ordering clitics than appears elsewhere in the letter; here dative *nám* precedes accusative *se*, according to the pattern of Polish clitics, not Czech.

<sup>36</sup> *ež* = *až*

<sup>37</sup> *može postačit'* = *může stačit*

<sup>38</sup> *edem tych... vyněchajť* = *jenom těch... vynechejte*

<sup>39</sup> *Esli musíť měť ty ohlášky* = *jestli musíte mít ty inzeráty*

<sup>40</sup> *abystě rači* = *abyste raději/radši*

<sup>41</sup> *tolar věc* = *dolar víc*, cf. Slovak *viac* and Polish *więcej*

<sup>42</sup> *edem dyby tych ohlášek telko něbylo* = *jen kdyby těch inzeratů tolik nebylo*

<sup>43</sup> *smy* = *jsme*

<sup>44</sup> *hodnu* = *hodnou*

<sup>45</sup> *věči ež* = *větší než*

<sup>46</sup> *chot' sem* = *ačkoli(v)í když jsem* (cf. Polish *choć, chociaż*).

<sup>47</sup> *pět rokúv* = *pět let/roků*

<sup>48</sup> *přec* = *přece*

<sup>49</sup> *domohlo* = *prospělo*

<sup>50</sup> *aji vašu familiju* = *i vaši rodinu*

<sup>51</sup> *zostavám* = *zůstávám*

<sup>52</sup> *ež do t'mavého* = *až do tmavého*

Dubina [Texas], 26 January [1888]

Dear Editor!

Ever since you published the letters in your paper about the rabbits that someone stole, I haven't seen any letter from us. So I'm sending you these few lines, and I ask that you publish them. I've been reading your newspaper right from the beginning, and I admit that I like it, but I'd like it even more if you didn't have so many advertisements. I don't like to read those advertisements. There's nothing instructive in them. Another thing I don't like – but don't get angry with me – is that you pay attention to other newspapers. I wouldn't notice them, because they don't deserve it. What does it matter to us if those northerners like *Svoboda* or not? Be assured that we like [*Svoboda*], except for those advertisements, and that should be enough for you. Just leave out some of the advertisements. If you have to have the advertisements in order to keep the newspaper going, then I advise you to make the newspaper more expensive. I think that each subscriber would pay a dollar more if there weren't so many advertisements. There's nothing new with us. This year we had a fierce winter, much stronger than I remember in America, though I'm here five years now. Last week we had a lot of rain. That helped us. I send greetings to you and your family, and I'll remain your friend to the dark grave.

The community and its language were influenced by two external phenomena: (1) interaction with the more numerous German immigrant community in Texas;<sup>53</sup> and (2) Anglo-American disapproval of bi- and multilingualism. Until 1918 German was the predominate language of government, higher culture, and technology in the Old Country. Some Texas immigrants spoke only their native dialect, while others knew both that language and German, although the latter were not typically bi-cultural. While the Czech-Moravians had more in common with their German neighbors than with Anglo-Americans, the Czech-Moravian and German communities of Texas were distinguished by certain cultural and religious differences. Language was a barrier for Germans, for it was very rare that a Texas German would know the Czech-Moravians' language. In the years following the Second World War, after many from the more numerous Texas community of speakers of German had abandoned their ancestral language, it was claimed sometimes that Czech was the third most widely spoken language in Texas, after English and Spanish, although Czech by that time was undergoing drastic decline and stagnation. The Anglo-Americans in Texas traditionally frowned on multilingualism and considered it the civic duty of all immigrants to abandon their native language for English.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Some rural settlements were populated solely by German and Czech-Moravian settlers.

<sup>54</sup> Anglo-Americans in the twentieth century observed with approval that many Texas Germans abandoned their ancestral language, in response to the political conflicts between the United States and Germany.



### 3. A Chronology of Obsolescence

By the final decades of the twentieth century, Texas Czech-Moravians displayed some difficulty understanding the contemporary language of Bohemia and the capital city of Prague. The variety spoken by Texas Czech-Moravians has been considered substandard, both by Czechs in Europe and by many Texas speakers. The two speech communities in Europe and Texas, separated by thousands of miles and by dissimilar paths of social and political development, had diverged since the nineteenth century.

The gradual obsolescence of TCS and TCV is illustrated in the language policy of the S.P.J.S.T. (Slavonic Benevolent Order of the State of Texas), which had been established in 1896 to provide the immigrants with affordable life insurance. The S.P.J.S.T. remains the largest of the Czech-Moravian fraternal organizations. Even towards the end of the twentieth century, when none of the surviving officers could converse in Czech, the by-laws of the oldest Texas organizations still recognized Czech as the official language. During the first decades, language was not an issue within those organizations. The officers and members spoke Czech; written communications, including publications and insurance policies, were issued in Czech. Only as English made deep inroads into the community were those organizations forced to proscribe the domains of the ancestral language. The eighth state convention of the S.P.J.S.T., held in Schulenburg in 1920, added this clause to its by-laws: "Only that person can become a member (man or woman) who speaks the Slavic language or is of Slavic extraction, except in cases where only one of the couple is of Slavic extraction, both will be admitted as members" (Morris 1994: 45).<sup>55</sup> At the thirteenth convention held in Taylor in August 1940, members approved four pages of English-language material to appear in each issue of the *Věstník* ('Herald').<sup>56</sup> The convention minutes note: „There was a lively and lengthy debate about the inclusion of English language pages in the *Věstník*.” It was also noted at that time that „...the future for securing competent Czech linotype operators was very bleak” (Morris 1994: 65).<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Quotes from Morris are translated by that writer from Czech.

<sup>56</sup> Correspondence in English began to appear sporadically in *Věstník* in the 1930s. Conzen et al. (1992: 25) note in „The invention of ethnicity,” 25, that by the 1930s, about one-fifth of America's ethnic newspapers included an „English page.”

<sup>57</sup> Sensitive to the processes of language change that touched their community from its very beginning, the Czech-Moravians often recruited their schoolteachers, editors, and journalists from among recent arrivals from Europe, though by the interwar period those positions typically and necessarily were filled by natives of the Texas community.

Throughout the community's history few, if any, Czech-Moravians ever achieved a balanced bilingualism, such that the individual was equally proficient in both languages in all spheres of thought and endeavor. By the 1940s the bilingualism of Texas speakers was skewed towards greater proficiency in English. Members of the fraternal organizations had a practical view of language, especially as the number of spheres from which Czech was restricted spread. Most in the 1940s and 1950s wanted Czech to retain a symbolic function, yet linguistic purism had little attraction if it somehow disadvantaged individuals or the community. At the fourteenth S.P.J.S.T. convention in Corpus Christi in July 1944, it was agreed that "... [a]ll deliberations, in conventions, in meetings of the Supreme Lodge, and in local lodge meetings are to be conducted in the Czech language, but in the case of need, such deliberations are to be translated into the English language, orally and in writing" (Morris 1994: 72). During the sixteenth convention held in Houston in June 1952, the publication committee recommended that the *Věstník* editor have mastery of both Czech and English and that he edit both the Czech- and English-language sections of the newspaper. At the eighteenth convention in San Antonio in June 1960, a motion was passed reaffirming the role of Czech as the language of the state conventions. The twenty-first convention in Houston in 1972 was formally convened by S.P.J.S.T. president Nick A. Morris in both Czech and English (Morris 1994: 94). Yet by the 1970s few members were able to converse in Czech. From the interwar period until 1992, the S.P.J.S.T. by-laws included this requirement for the office of state president: "He must have knowledge of both Czech and English languages." That clause was struck from the by-laws in 1992 (*Věstník SPJST Herald*, 13 May 1992: 7).

The development of the language of Czech-Moravian Texas may be summarized in the following manner (Eckert and Hannan 2006):

- A. During the initial period from the 1850s to approximately the 1890s, the vernacular in Texas was heavily influenced by the traditional dialect of the homeland. The spoken and written languages may be viewed as two distinct varieties (or as suggested above, two extremes of a continuum, flanked on one extreme by literary Czech and on the other by archaic traditional dialects).
- B. From the very beginning, contact with English was evident in lexical borrowings linked to the new Texas environment. The influence of English and the coexistence of Moravian dialects gave birth to TCV, characterized

by the collapse of Moravian dialectal boundaries and the emergence of a neutral “Texas Frenštát” dialect enriched by English borrowings and convergence patterns, as documented in the press from the 1890s. During the early decades, both TCV and TCS exhibited a relatively rich stylistic variation.

- C. In the interwar period, the heterogeneous codes of TCV and TCS were for most speakers condensed into single style variants. Distinctive vernacular and literary styles and the domains associated with the standard and dialect gradually began to merge, as speakers were less and less capable of shifting styles and using the standard, for instance, while taking minutes or speaking at meetings.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, TCS began to import cultural frames of the administrative language and specific grammatical frames from English. English calquing and code-switching became a common strategy for bridging the gaps in a speaker’s Czech competence. As language change progressed, code-switching and borrowing became commonplace in the language of the press.
- D. During the 1940s and the 1950s, TCS lost its domains of application and survived chiefly among professionals and those who had received an education in Czech. Yet TCV survived (chiefly in rural areas), tied to individuals (rather than to the entire community) who had both a positive attitude toward the homeland language and opportunities to practice Czech.<sup>59</sup> In contributing to the local press, correspondents continued to use elements of dialect with which they had emigrated or which they had learned at home; the editors published that correspondence in a language which approximated TCS. Only in the 1940s did the social boundaries of the Czech-Moravian community, many of which had been reinforced by language, begin to disintegrate on a wide scale.
- E. The Texas community entered a final stage of language obsolescence and ethnic assimilation after the Second World War. The range of domains associated with Czech and English was redistributed, and Czech was excluded from areas in which it formerly predominated. TCS and TCV increasingly resembled English in grammatical patterns, syntax, and lexicon.

---

<sup>58</sup> Stylistic shrinkage as characteristic of specific stages in language attrition is described in Dorian (1989).

<sup>59</sup> Myers-Scotton (1993: 225) calls attention to the likelihood of certain speakers in a community having quite different speech patterns.

#### 4. Shifting Social Borders

The trends in language change outlined above can be tied to some specific social influences within the community. From the arrival of the first Czech-Moravians in Texas up until the Second World War, language represented a primary border of ethnicity, which simultaneously defined the community and distinguished it from neighboring populations which did not know the language. Traditionally anyone, regardless of background, who learned and spoke the language was accepted within the community, just as those who lost the language (typically through exogamous marriage patterns) drifted apart from the community.

Education was a high priority, even for the early immigrants. Literacy rates for immigrants from the Czech Lands were among the highest in America. The first Czech-language schools were established in Texas by the 1860s. Although a Texas law of 1871 required that public school teachers pass a proficiency exam in English, the law was not enforced for more than a decade. In some parochial schools, religion and other subjects were taught in Czech into the twentieth century. Many of the youth left school with knowledge of literary Czech. The Texas Czech-Moravians subscribed to Czech newspapers published in other states, and after the first Czech newspaper in Texas was established in 1879, they supported a diverse Czech press in Texas. Czech language books and almanacs were readily available in Texas, as was sheet music (and later recordings) of Czech popular music. In numerous communities, religious services were held in Czech. Traditional entertainments, theatrical performances, and dances also contributed towards language maintenance. According to the view of the Czech-Moravians, their culture was in no way inferior to that of the Anglo-Americans. They had little incentive to abandon their culture, all of which was closely connected with spoken and written forms of Czech.

The Texas community's support for organized religion has distinguished it from most Czech communities in other states. Czech-Moravians whose religious practices were closely linked to the ancestral language and culture were more successful than their non-religious fellow ethnics in resisting assimilation. Literary Czech had great symbolic value both for the Catholic majority and the Protestant minority. One of the defining characteristics of the Brethren Church, the largest Czech-Moravian Protestant denomination in Texas, was its ties to the Czech religious reformers who, already before Martin Luther, had championed Czech vernacular as the language of worship and religious instruction. For Protestants from the Czech Lands, the Czech-language Bible had both religious and historical significance; the modern Czech literary language owes much to the Czech Protestant translation of the

Bible. Whether in Catholic or Protestant congregations, scripture readings were delivered in literary Czech and homilies in the idiolect of the homilists, many of whom had been born in Moravia. While Latin was the language of much of the Catholic liturgy until the 1960s, scripture readings, hymns, and many Catholic devotions until mid-century could be heard regularly in literary Czech. By the final decades of the twentieth century, Czech-language religious services were rare.

For generations, community life revolved around the churches and the fraternal organizations, such as S.P.J.S.T. and K.J.T. (Catholic Union of Texas). Local societies of those organizations erected community halls, used for wedding celebrations, meetings, and other gatherings. Maintained through the communal, voluntary efforts of members, the local lodges of those organizations remain today in many rural communities both a community gathering place and a visible marker of Czech-Moravian ethnicity.

The isolation of the community and its language was reflected, with time, in the stagnation and decline of TCV and TCS, while such isolation contributed to the facilitated maintenance of the language as a reduced immigrant variety. As contacts with the European homeland weakened, there was less exposure to the contemporaneous language of the homeland. The stream of immigration to Texas, which had exploded after the Civil War, nearly ceased with the First World War and the creation of the new state of Czechoslovakia in 1918.

The mid-twentieth century represents a watershed in the process of assimilation for the Texas Czech-Moravians. During the five decades that followed, spoken Czech ceased to function as a living language, and much of the ancestral culture connected so closely with the language was finally lost. A major impetus for assimilation was the switch to English as the dominant language of the household. So long as Czech in the press, in the churches, on radio broadcasts, and in amateur plays could effectively compete with English, the former was spoken at home and passed on to succeeding generations. Yet by the time most Texas families owned a television in the 1950s, Czech was no longer able to compete on an equal footing. Still in the 1960s one encountered elderly Czech-Moravians born in Texas who spoke no English, though by the late 1940s and the 1950s English had become the first language of most schoolchildren in the community.

In previous decades, parents had felt an obligation to pass on the ancestral language to their children. Throughout the twentieth century correspondents in the Texas press urged readers to preserve and promote the language. Vertical social networks linking the generations of a family, along with

horizontal networks that linked neighbors and co-religionists, reinforced the significance of Czech and offered opportunities for its use. By mid-century, however, few parents saw any practical advantage in passing on the ancestral language. Social intercourse in previous generations had dictated the use of the ancestral language; speaking English then in certain social environments was considered rude, snobbish, or otherwise socially inappropriate. During the interwar period, many families and individuals developed horizontal social networks that extended beyond the Czech-speaking community, and the maintenance of those networks dictated the use of English. Thus, speakers of Czech increasingly found themselves in social environments where use of their ancestral language was considered inappropriate. The social template representing the speakers of TCV was in the process of disintegrating.

Once immigration from Europe ceased, Czech-Moravian Texas could not recover or replace the lost speakers of the ancestral language, and could never replenish the language skills of the living speakers that were deteriorating with the passage of time. As commonly has been observed in other ethnic communities, the content of the Czech-language press in Texas with time no longer reflected the contemporaneous language of the homeland, but was often mere word-for-word translation from English. Isolation from Czechoslovakia was nearly complete during the communist period. By the 1950s, those in Texas who spoke and read Czech had little or no contact with the contemporaneous spoken and written Czech language of Europe, a circumstance heightened by the political circumstance of communist rule in Czechoslovakia.

Forms of popular entertainment such as radio and the early sound movies did not have great linguistic influence on the Texas Czech-Moravians who, throughout the interwar period, continued to view American popular culture as essentially alien. Local Czech-language theatrical productions were popular in Texas long after English-language movies were introduced, and Czech plays could be viewed irregularly even in the 1980s, though most of the audience by that time was forced to rely on past memories or on context to understand the performance, just as many of the performers then had memorized Czech dialogue they did not understand. Television was a different matter from radio and film, however. Once a family owned a television, English was heard regularly throughout the household. Typically, the entire family gathered together around the television to view and listen to the English-language telecasts. Television, along with air conditioning, impacted the traditional social customs observed in Texas, such as the *beseda* ('visit' or 'chat'), an unannounced, semi-formal Sunday afternoon visit to relatives and friends. Before central air conditioning became prevalent, families during summer spent hours outside the home, on porches or beneath trees. Evening

meals were often taken outside. Fewer opportunities for social intercourse were evident, certainly during warm weather, after the introduction of air conditioning.

Along with the introduction of television and air conditioning, war-time military service and the mobility of the younger generations that accompanied and followed the Second World War symbolize the death of the Czech language in Texas. Increasing numbers of the young people left the farms at mid-century, though agriculture has remained an important Czech-Moravian occupation. By that time endogamous marriage patterns were no longer the norm in multi-ethnic towns (although that phenomenon often still was observed in insular rural settlements where the majority of the population was Czech-Moravian). Organized religion, in the case of Catholic and Brethren Czech-Moravians, continued in some communities to reinforce the former ethnically-based patterns of social contact and marriage. Exogamous marriage patterns brought changes in the old social networks, and from the mid-century, the Czech-Moravians of Texas no longer represented a closed community in which individuals defined their identity primarily by Czech-Moravian ethnicity and language.

The displacement of the spoken language proceeded hand-in-hand with the loss of elements of the ancestral culture, as those were supplanted by elements from the contemporary American culture. Popular culture represented a steady, advancing stimulation for the younger generations in the rural settlements. The cultural innovations that affected American society in the late 1960s, evident for example in music and hair styles, were first felt in the urban and industrialized metropolitan areas, and those innovations reached rural areas such as Czech-Moravian Texas only later; their arrival there was delayed, although inevitable. By the 1970s the rural towns represented a backwater. There were few economic opportunities for the young, many of whom left those towns for the cities.

After the Second World War, ethnicity in the rural areas was seldom expressed publicly. Czech was relegated to a few symbolic domains associated with ethnic identity and with the ancestral homeland, namely religion and the gatherings of the local ethnic organizations. Much talk and energy was devoted during the second half of the twentieth century to the revival of the language, and at times it appeared that Czech was undergoing some degree of revitalization. Yet by the 1970s Czech-Moravian Texas had had no contact with the European homeland for half a century and more. The language then was associated with the elderly. The elements of the ancestral culture that survived in Texas were relics; these appeared to many of the youth within the community as archaic and lifeless. Community rites, such as wedding traditions and the annual Maypole festivity held on May 1<sup>st</sup> and accompanied by dancing and feasting, were discarded as they lost all traditional cultural

reference. The old ethnic culture was juxtaposed, especially in the minds of the young, against the American cultural innovations that eventually penetrated to areas that formerly had been isolated, rural ethnic enclaves.

## 5. Conclusion

This study attempts to outline social factors which influenced language change and language obsolescence in Czech-Moravian Texas over a period of one hundred and fifty years. Still encountered in conversation just a few years ago, the language of Czech-Moravian Texas today has purely a symbolic function. English monolingualism is preponderant today, though some among the elderly, who may be described as semi-speakers, terminal speakers, or “rememberers” of language, retain a limited knowledge of the ancestral language.<sup>60</sup> The postwar generations have now witnessed the assimilation of the Texas Czech-Moravians, a process that had been resisted, consciously or unconsciously, in previous generations. Not only have they lost their ancestors’ native language, but in most cases today, Texas descendants of Czech-Moravian immigrants lack the “foreign” accent which characterized the English speech of the previous generations born in Texas. Texans of Czech-Moravian ancestry now resemble their Anglo-American neighbors in speech and customs.

The Czech-Moravians today no longer represent a closed community in which individuals define their identity primarily by the Czech-Moravian language, ethnicity, and culture. They have entered what Richard Alba (1985) calls the “twilight of ethnicity,” such that ethnicity for them is symbolic, peripheral, and only episodically articulated, no longer the framework around which the important areas of life are organized.

---

<sup>60</sup> Dorian (1981: 107) presents the following definition of a semi-speaker of East Sutherland Gaelic: „They speak [East Sutherland Gaelic] with varying degrees of less than full fluency, and their grammar (and usually also their phonology) is markedly aberrant in terms of the fluent-speaker norm. Semi-speakers may be distinguished from fully fluent speakers of any age by the presence of deviations in their Gaelic which are explicitly labeled as ‘mistakes’ by fully fluent speakers. That is, the speech community is aware of many (though not all) of the deficiencies in semi-speaker speech performance. Most semi-speakers are also relatively halting in delivery... but it is not the manner of delivery that distinguishes them, since semi-speakers of comparable grammatical ability may speak with very different degrees of confidence and ‘fluency’. At the lower end of speaker skill, semi-speakers are distinguished from near passive bilinguals by their ability to manipulate words in sentences. Near-passive bilinguals often know a good many words or phrases, but cannot build sentences with them or alter them productively. Semi-speakers can, although the resultant sentences may be morphologically or syntactically askew to a greater or lesser extent”. „Rememberers” may be defined as individuals who, during an earlier stage in life, were native or fluent speakers of the language and who by now have lost most of their earlier linguistic ability (Craig 1997: 259).



## References

- Alba, R. 1985. "The twilight of ethnicity among Americans of European ancestry: The case of Italians". *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 8: 134–158.
- Bělič, J. 1972. *Nástin české dialektologie*. Praha: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství.
- Chambers, J. K. 1995. *Sociolinguistic Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Conzen, K. N., D. A. Gerber, E. Morawska, G. E. Pozzetta, and R. J. Vecoli. 1992. „The invention of ethnicity: A perspective from the U.S.A.”. *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12: 3–41.
- Coulmas, F. (ed.). 1997. *The Handbook of Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers.
- Craig, C. G. 1997. "Language contact and language degeneration". In: Coulmas, F. (ed.), *The Handbook of Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 257–270.
- Denison, N. 1977. "Language death or language suicide?". *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 12: 13–22.
- Dorian, N. 1981. *Language Death: The Life Cycle of a Scottish Gaelic Dialect*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Dorian, N. (ed.). 1989. *Investigating Obsolescence: Studies in Language Contraction and Death*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Dutkova, L. 1999. "Texas Czech of Texas Czechs: An ethnolinguistic perspective on language use in a dying language community". *Brown Slavic Contributions*. Vol. XI: *Modern Czech Studies*, 2–10.
- Dutkova-Cope, L. 2001a. "The language of Czech Moravians in Texas: Do you know what 'Párkuu káru u hauza' means?". *Southwest Journal of Linguistics* 20: 51–84.
- Dutkova-Cope, L. 2001b. "Texas Czech: The language of Texans who say they speak 'a different type of Czech' ". *Southwest Journal of Linguistics* 20, 29–69.
- Dutkova-Cope, L. 2001c. "The future of Czech in Texas: 'How can you learn something if it's not offered to you?' ". *Kosmas: Czechoslovak and Central European Journal* 14: 80–104.
- Eckert, E. 1993. "Language change: Testimony of tombstone inscriptions at the cemetery of Praha, Texas". In: Eckert, E. (ed.), *Varieties of Czech: Studies in Czech Sociolinguistics*. Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi Editions, 189–215.
- Eckert, E. 2003. *Kameny na prerii: Čestí vystěhovalci v Texasu* (Stones on the prairie: Czech immigrants in Texas). Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny.
- Eckert, E. and K. Hannan. Forthcoming, 2006. "Vernacular writing and sociolinguistic change in the Texas Czech community". *Journal of Slavic Linguistics*.
- Eva, E. (ed.). 1993. *Varieties of Czech: Studies in Czech Sociolinguistics*. Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi Editions.
- Hannan, K. 2003. "Reflections on assimilation and language death in Czech-Moravian Texas". *Kosmas. Czechoslovak and Central European Journal* 16.2: 110–132.
- Hannan, K. 2004. "From one monolingualism to another: Ethnic assimilation as a product of language displacement in Czech-Moravian Texas". *Český lid* 91: 235–252.
- Morris, N. 1994. *A History of the S.P.J.S.T. A Texas Chronicle 1897–1980*. Temple, TX: SPIST.
- Myers-Scotton, C. 1993. *Duelling Languages: Grammatical Structure in Codeswitching*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Smith, C. S. 2001. "Texas Czech: A study in language death," *Kosmas: Czechoslovak and Central European Journal* 14: 65–79.
- Weber, R. L. 1986. "Partially annotated bibliography of language death". *Notes on Linguistics* 34: 5–24.

