THE CZECH LANGUAGE

(a brief introduction)

Eva Ondráčková

efa@ucw.cz
The purpose of this talk is not to . . .

- bore you to death with any linguistic analysis
- teach you Czech
- frighten you
The purpose of this talk is to …

- give you the basic overview and the feel of Czech
- show you that the foreign languages you study are actually easy
- hopefully, be fun!
Basic facts about Czech

- Indo-European language
- Slavic language (western type)
- Similar to: Slovak, Polish
- Less similar to: Russian, Serbian
- More than 1000 years old, but still developing.
Vocabulary

- Parts of speech (nouns, verbs, ... ) like English
- It's an **inflective** language
- Not only word suffixes change, but sometimes also parts of the stem
- A lot of flexion types and irregularities
- Seven cases of nouns, expressed by word form, not only by prepositions: **ty** (you), **bez tebe** (without you), **k tobě** (towards you), **s tebou** (with you), ...
- Every noun has it's gender: male, female or neutral (like German der, die, das)
Verbs

- Subject to flexion, like, for example, in Spanish, German, French, ...
- Gender changes the verb form – on měl, ona měla, ono mělo (he had, she had, it had)
- Past, present and future tense, present conditional
- Past perfect and past conditional – more or less historical, not widely used
- No continuous tense, compleetive and imperfective verbs instead – skočit (jump) and skákat (be jumping)
Some devilish examples of richness of Czech

No phrasal verbs, prefixes instead:

- jít (go)
- najít (find)
- předejít (precede)
- předejít (anticipate)
- pojít (die)
- vzejít (arise)
- sejít (meet)
- vyjít (come true)
- dojít (run short)
- ...
Some devilish examples of richness of Czech

This can happen not only to verbs:

- **národ** (nation)
- **porod** (childbirth)
- **příroda** (nature)
- **zárodek** (germ)
- **rodina** (family)
- **úroda** (crop)
- **urozený** (noble)
- **přirozené číslo** (integer)
Symbols

- Orthography is phonetic (write as you speak, unlike English)
- Uses Latin alphabet, but with accents:
  A Ā B C Ć D Ď E Ė É Ê F G H I Į J K L M N Ė Ń O Ė P Q R Ř S Š T Ť U Ů Ū V W X Y Ŷ Ž Ž
- Q and Č used only for foreign words
- Beware, accents can make a difference: plast (plastic) ≠ plást (honeycomb) ≠ plášť (cloak)
- ... but usually not written on computers
- Digraph ‘ch’, ordered between H and I (!) hod < chod < iont
- But not always: “na-nic-hod-ný”!
- Unsortable by computer due to semantical rules... but no one really cares :-)

Pronunciation (1)

- Almost never contextual
- Word stress at first syllable
- Vowels usually make syllables...not always
- A = dumb I = lit U = cuckoo
  E = men O = pot
- Other vowels: Y Â É Î Ò Ù Y Õ Ê
- Û=Û (historic)
- Ê is quite tricky: DÊ[DE], TÊ[TE], NÊ[NE],
  but VÊ[VJE] (everywhere else)
- I=Y, exploited by nasty teachers
- but sometimes make a difference:
  typ (type) ≠ tip (bet)
### Pronunciation (2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B</th>
<th>bit</th>
<th>J</th>
<th>yard</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>set</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Ritz</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>kid</td>
<td>Š</td>
<td>shoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Č</td>
<td>chair</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>tea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>dot</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>move</td>
<td>Ť</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Đ</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>not</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>very</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>fair</td>
<td>Ñ</td>
<td>Spanish ň</td>
<td>Ž</td>
<td>zone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>globe</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>pick</td>
<td>Ž</td>
<td>treasure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>hard</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>(as in rip, but harder)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ch</td>
<td>loch</td>
<td>Č</td>
<td>? (a nightmare)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Jawbreakers – “jazykolamy”

- Nenaolejú-li je já, naolejuje je Julia.
- Bratře Petře, nepřepepři toho vepře!
- Strč prst skrz krk.
- Přd krt skrz drn, prv zhlí hrst zrn.
- Smrž pln skvrn zvlhl z mlh.
Other interesting things

- čtvrtírst (a quarter handful),
  scvrnkls (you flipped off)
- nejneobhospodařovávatelnější
  (the least cultivatable)
- nejvykrystalizovávanější (the most crystalizing)

Palindromes:
- nepotopen (unsunken), nezasazen (not hit)
- Do chladu si mísu dal Chod.
  (A Chod put his bowl into a cool place).
- Kdy mohou splatiti ti ti tiší hoší dluh?
  (When can those quiet boys pay you the debt?)
English words of Czech origin

- **pistol**
  from 15th century, a handgun píšťala (pipe, whistle)

- **robot**
  1920, Karel Čapek's play “R.U.R.”
  (Rossum’s Universal Robots)
  derived from robota (slavery work)

- and, maybe surprisingly... **dollar!**
  16th century, coins originally made in silver mines
  in Joachimsthal in Bohemia, later spread to Austria-
  Hungary, Prussia, brought to America by the Spanish
  Joachimthaler → thaler → tolar → dollar
Special thanks to...

- Martin Mareš  
  (for most stuff, previous version of slides)
- Tom and Vítek (for inspiration and help)
- all of you (for listening)
Links

These slides:
http://dimax.rutgers.edu/~eondrack/czech.ps

Other resources:

• http://www.czech-language.cz/
• http://www.bohemica.com/
• http://www.slavic.ohio-state.edu/people/holdman/czech/main.htm
• http://www.localingo.com/
• Just ask Google for “Czech language”