

# THE CZECH LANGUAGE

(a brief introduction)

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## **The purpose of this talk is not to ...**

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- bore you to death with any linguistic analysis
- teach you Czech
- frighten you

## **The purpose of this talk is to ...**

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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 its gender: male, female or neutral (like German der, die, das)

## Verbs

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- 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, completive and imperfective verbs instead – **skočit** (jump) and **skákat** (be jumping)

## Some devilish examples of richness of Czech

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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

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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

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- Orthography is phonetic (write as you speak, unlike English)
- Uses Latin alphabet, but with accents:  
A Á B C Č D Ď E É Ě F G H I Í J K L M N Ň  
O Ō P Q R Ř S Š T Ť U Ů Ű V W X Y Ý Z Ž
- Q and X 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)

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- 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 Á Ě Í Ō Ū Ý Ů Ě
- Ů=Ū (historic)
- Ě is quite tricky: DĚ [ĎE], TĚ [ŤE], NĚ [ŇE],  
but VĚ [VJE] (everywhere else)
- I=Y, exploited by nasty teachers
- but sometimes make a difference:  
**typ** (type) ≠ **tip** (bet)

## Pronunciation (2)

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B	<b>bit</b>	J	<b>yard</b>	S	<b>set</b>
C	<b>Ritz</b>	K	<b>kid</b>	Š	<b>shoe</b>
Č	<b>chair</b>	L	<b>low</b>	T	<b>tea</b>
D	<b>dot</b>	M	<b>move</b>	Ť	<b>?</b>
Ď	<b>?</b>	N	<b>not</b>	V	<b>very</b>
F	<b>fair</b>	Ñ	Spanish <b>ñ</b>	Z	<b>zone</b>
G	<b>globe</b>	P	<b>pick</b>	Ž	<b>treasure</b>
H	<b>hard</b>	R	(as in <b>rip</b> , but harder)		
Ch	<b>loch</b>	Ř	<b>?</b> (a nightmare)		

## Jawbreakers – “jazykolamy”

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- Nenaolejuju-li je já, naolejuje je Julia.
- Bratře Petře, nepřepři toho vepře!
- Strč prst skrz krk.
- Prd krt skrz drn, prv zhlt hrst zrn.
- Smrž pln skvrn zvlhl z mlh.

## Other interesting things

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- **čtvrthrst** (a quarter handful),  
**scvrnkls** (you flipped off)
- **nejneobhospodařovatelnější**  
(the least cultivatable)
- **nejvykryštalizovanější** (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 hoši dluh?**  
(When can those quiet boys pay you the debt?)

## English words of Czech origin

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- **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...

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

## Links

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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.locallingo.com/>
- Just ask Google for “Czech language”