

What did the totalitarian language in the former socialistic Czechoslovakia look like?

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This paper focuses on a particular language type that speakers encountered and used during the communistic period, lasting from approximately 1948 until 1989 in the former Czechoslovakia. Using a working title, we shall label this language as the *totalitarian language*. George Orwell made a belletristic attempt to describe this language in his novel „1984“. He called it *newspeak*. In the Czech context, it was the dramatist Václav Havel who invented the language *ptydepe* in his play „Vyrozumění“ (Notification) to capture the same phenomenon. In both cases, the authors came up with an artificial word denoting an artificial language that expresses absurdity and unintelligibility.

"You haven't a real appreciation of Newspeak, Winston," he said almost sadly. „Even when you write it you're still thinking in Oldspeak.... In your heart you'd prefer to stick to Oldspeak, with all its vagueness and its useless shades of meaning. You don't grasp the beauty of the destruction of words. Do you know that Newspeak is the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year?“¹ (Orwell, 1984, p.45)

¹ Orwell George Nineteen eighty-four, Penguin Books England 1964.

According to the SYN2000² corpus, the concepts *ptydepe* and *newspeak* occur with very similar words in Czech. For example, with the adjectives **unintelligible, absurd, surrealistic, artificial, military, political, official, managerial, scientific, bureaucratic, machine-like, ideological, totalitarian, communistic, political, computer**. Both expressions refer to language as one of the primary vehicles of the totalitarian regime fitted for manipulation. We can see that both words include not only the feature of being artificial, but also completely incomprehensible.

When we take a closer look at the totalitarian³ language used in the former Czechoslovakia we can see that, as opposed to *newspeak* and *ptydepe*, this language is not completely artificial, but in fact rooted in the semantics of Czech. It shares some common features with *ptydepe* and *newspeak* such as **absurdity, untruthfulness, pugnaciousness**, and constant **repetition**. Despite its relative intelligibility this language is by no means creative. It uses lexicalized meanings that belong to the core of the Czech vocabulary and it gains from automatized components of the language system. The totalitarian language is “the language of propaganda“. „(It) amounts to a strange, not accredited code. It is „they“ who speak this code (Macura 1992, p.7), says one of the leading literature specialists of that time. The common user of the Czech language neither accepted nor used this code. Along these lines, it would be interesting to pursue the language variety that was used by speakers that were not part of the totalitarian regime: the so-called “our” language.

In this paper, we concentrate mainly on the language of propaganda, but we also show some expressions used by the opposition. Since this paper represents the first attempt to describe the totalitarian language, we address and discuss only some of its characteristics. These are all connected by ideological themes that were promoted by the communistic system including progressivity, novelty, and usefulness of the then newly established regime. The function of

² The Czech National Corpus is a name of a project that also includes, apart from several other components, the SYN2000. This corpus is the 100 million representative corpus of the current written Czech. The representativeness of the SYN2000 (and thus also of the Czech National Corpus) is based on empirical sociolinguistic data. It contains 15% artistic texts, 60% journalistic texts, and 25% specialized texts. The SYN2000 was made accessible to the public in 2000. All texts are put together in such a manner that one can work with them using the “content management tool”. The texts are annotated. That is, every text embodies a header with the following information: the name of the author (and the translator), the name of the publisher, publishing year and location, genre, text type, medium, gender of the author (and the translator), language of the source text. The SYN2000 has internal tagging and has been lemmatized. The recently published Frequency dictionary of the Czech language was based on the SYN2000. It has served as a valuable source for many research projects. More information can be gathered from the website of the Czech National Corpus: ucnk.ff.cuni.cz.

³ The linguistic material for this article was collected manually by excerpting current texts dealing with this language and by examining many historical documents from that period. The historical documents are currently being prepared for digitalization so they can be published electronically in the form of a thematic corpus.

carrying the optimism and enthusiasm for the new approach was allocated to the younger generation. The ideology was based on the supposedly scientific grounds of the Marxist Leninist doctrine. From a linguistic point of view, the driving force was the frequent use of antonyms when promoting the communistic ideas. They were used in a range of negative as well as positive evaluations. This type of antonym utilization affected the speakers' perception in such a way that they perceived language monotonously, as a string of repetitive components; in other words as brainwashing. Typical in this scenario is a high collocability of words.

At the other end is the so-called "our" language. That is, language employed by common users where content is denoted directly without involving manipulative tendencies inherent to the language of propaganda. In this language variety, we can often observe linguistic phenomena such as irony, play on words, subtle humor, and the overall distance towards the totalitarian language. In order to understand the historical and sociological context in which all this is deeply embedded, it will be necessary to include a fair amount of encyclopedic information in the future dictionary.

In our contribution, we pose the following questions: What is the character of the totalitarian language? What does it contain? Can this special type of language be described to a full extent with common lexicographic tools?

We have to keep in mind that the totalitarian language has been changing its character over the course of time. In this sense, three main historical periods can be established:

The fifties: big ideological pressures dominate Czech society. The focus is on building a new (socialistic, communistic) society and the conflict formation between the system and its real and putative opponents. The perspective is directed towards the future and enthusiasm should prevail. As already mentioned, young people and children are designated to represent these values. In some speakers, unification of their identity and the ideology of the system - and thus its language - can be observed.

The sixties: This period is the period of sobering up. Language is reflecting two main themes: (1) the attempt to escape from the communistic regime (socialism with a human face), (2) the end of all hope after the *Prague Spring* and the beginning of the Russian occupation of the former Czechoslovakia on August 21, 1968.

The seventies and the eighties: The time of disillusion and the so-called *normalization*. Typical for speakers is not to identify with their language.

When examining only some parts of the totalitarian language, the common denominator seems to be its aggressiveness. As we can see further down in the text, words borrowed from the military sector are very common. Because of the scope of this study, we can only include some of the relevant semantic areas. These will serve as representative examples for other areas that could also be included in this investigation.

I. The language of propaganda can be examined at the following levels:

1. Word meaning – expansion of polysemy;
2. Semantic areas, in our case - language taken from the military sector;
3. The use of antonyms - semantic strings, aggressiveness and monotonicity;
4. The use of euphemisms - disconnection between *signifiant* and *signifié*;
5. Pragmatics of addressing persons.

II. Reaction of the common language to the language of propaganda.

PART I

1. Let us first focus on the shift in the meaning of some words. For example, the words **Západ** (*West*) a **západní** (*western*). What is of interest to our analysis, is the political rather than the geographical meaning of these words. This is because these expressions refer not only to countries located to the west of the former Czechoslovakia, but also include Austria, Italy, Norway, or even the USA and Japan. The word *capitalistic* can be used as a synonym for this particular concept. An example from SYN2000:

Pro zajímavost, Pepsi-Cola byla vůbec prvním " západním " výrobkem prodávaným na trhu bývalého SSSR.

(An interesting fact is that Pepsi-Cola was the first "western" product in the world to be sold on the market in the former USSR.)

This meaning reflects the separation of the world: the Western and the Eastern part. It is interesting to note that no similar semantic shift occurred with respect to the words *East* and *eastern*. These observations suggest that speakers' focus was placed either on the side of the opponent (valid for the language of the propaganda) or on the side of admired countries (valid for the so-called „our“ language).

2. First, we examine the semantic area of the word **boj** (*struggle, fight*). The totalitarian language overuses this word. We often find connections such as *boj za mír* (*struggle for peace*), *boj o každé zrno* (*struggle for every grain*), *třídní boj* (*class struggle*). This entry can be also substituted

with the following synonyms: **ofenzíva** (*offensive*), **bitva** (*battle*), **zteč** (*attack*), *imperialistická agrese* (*imperialistic aggression*), *být na stejné (správné) straně barikády* (*to be on the same (the right) side of the barricade*), *kdo nejde s námi, jde proti nám* (*those, who are not with us, are against us* – the motto of that time). This entire period has been labeled the *cold war* (**studená válka**); the main effort is put into establishing *the dictatorship of the proletariat* (**diktatura proletariátu**). Another very frequent entry is the word **bojovník** (*crusader, fighter*). The antonym to the word **boj** (*struggle, fight*) is the word **mír** (*peace*) [A common ending of an official letter from that time would be **Světů mír** (*peace on earth*)] and/or **vítězství** (*victory*) (e.g., **Vítězný únor** (*victorious February*) – the moment of the communist coup in 1948, i.e. the new victory of the party). The antonym for the word **bojovník** (*crusader, fighter*) is the word **nepřítel** (*enemy*) as in **nepřítel lidu nikdy nespí** (*the enemy of the people never rests*).

Apart from the word **bojovník** (*crusader, fighter*) that was seen in a clearly positive way there were other positively evaluated entries such as **lid** (*people*), **masy** (*masses*) (e.g. as in a frequently used motto *čelem k masám* – *facing the masses*), **dělník** (*worker*) (as in *dělník je smrtelný, práce je živá* – *the worker is mortal, labor is alive* – a popular quotation taken from a poem by the famous left-wing poet J. Wolker), *nomenklaturní⁴ kádry* (*nomenclature core groups*), *dělnická třída* (*working class*), **práce** (*labor*) (e.g. *prací posílíš mír* – *through labor you empower peace*). Another interesting observation concerns the forming of phrases such as **pracující inteligence** (*the working intelligentsia*) and **pracující rolníci** (*the working farmers*). The need to use the attribute **pracující** (*working*) clearly shows that the connotation of *doing work* did not exist within the totalitarian conception of the words *intelligentsia* or *farmer*.

3. The following adjectives were evaluated negatively. **válečný** (*war, warlike*) (e.g. *váleční štváči* – *war instigator*), **západní** (*western*), **západoněmečtí** (*West German*), **reakční** (*reactionary*) (e.g., *the most reactionary forces of the imperialists*), **kapitalistický** (*capitalistic*) (in connection with: *stát* (*country, nation*), *system* (*system*), or *prohnilý kapitalismus* (*rotten capitalism*)), **americký** (*American*) (e.g., *agent, imperialismus* (*imperialism*), *brouk* (*bug*)⁵), **buržoazní** (*bourgeois*) (e.g.,

⁴ The so-called **nomenclature core groups** constituted the ruling social class of that time. These were employees in charge of different establishments at a middle or higher management level. These included leading political officials of local or district national committees (linked to the government), university officials, representatives from the medical sector and from larger research facilities, members of different boards of directors of bigger state owned factories, officials from any central organs of the communist system, etc.

⁵ This expression goes back to the 1950th when the potato beetle attacked the former Czechoslovakia. The communistic propaganda blamed the Western countries for the emergence of this plague. The propaganda claimed that the

historici (historians), *přežitek* (anachronism)), **sionistický** (Zionistic) (e.g. *špión* (spy)⁶), **kontrarevoluční** (counter-revolutionary) (as in *síly* (forces)), **protistátní** (subversive) (e.g., *spiknutí* (conspiration)), **oportunistický** (opportunistic) (e.g. *názor* (opinion)), **imperialistický** (imperialistic) (e.g. *propaganda*, *agrese* (aggression)), **třídní** (adjective: class) (as in, *nepřítel* (enemy), *boj* (struggle), *rozdíly* (differences)).

Another group of adjectives was seen as unambiguously positive: **dělnický** (related to the working class) (e.g., *třída* (class), *kádry* (core groups), *prezident* (president)), **lidový** (Peoples') (*lidová demokracie* (Peoples' democracy⁷, *Lidová milice*⁸ (Peoples' militia), **demokratický** (democratic) (e.g., *centralismus*⁹ (centralism)), **lidově-demokratická** (Peoples'-democratic) (e.g., *republika* (republic)), **pracující** (adjective: working) (e.g., *lid* (people)), **proletářský** (proletarian) (e.g., *internacionalismus* (internationalism)), **mírový** (adjective: peace) (e.g., *síly* (forces), *slavnost* (festival), *spolupráce* (cooperation), *soužití* (coexistence)), **socialistický** (socialistic) (e.g., *morálka* (ethics), *vlastnictví* (ownership), *výstavba* (construction), *způsob života* (way of living)), **sovětský** (soviet) (*Sovětský svaz*, *náš vzor – Soviet Union, our model*; *člověk* (human)), **komunistický** (communistic) (*morálka* (ethics)), **pokrokový** (progressive) (*síly* (forces)), **soudružský** (comradely) (*pomoc* (help), *návštěva* (visit), *prostředí* (atmosphere)).

Verbs that are also employed with a high frequency in the totalitarian language relate to the concept of fight, war, and struggle. These are, for example, the verbs **uhájit** (defend), **vybojovat** (gain, fight to the end), **zaštitit** (shield, protect). All these observations support our earlier claim that the totalitarian language is aggressive and militant at its core.

4. The fourth area of our analysis concerns the use of euphemisms. Those discussed below belong to the second time span defined above – the end of the 1960's. The cooperation between the former Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union was guaranteed by the *Contract of mutual friendship, cooperation, and assistance* (*Smlouva o přátelství, spolupráci a pomoci*). Facing the reality of that time, all the nouns included in the title of the contract were a taunting irony: friendship was in fact hostility, cooperation was actually exploitation of the Czechoslovakian Republic by the Soviet

imperialists planted the insects out artificially using airplanes and diversionists in order to sabotage the agricultural progress on the Czechoslovak territory (completely ignoring the fact that at the time this natural calamity had spread out throughout Europe). Because of this the potato beetle was then called the *imperialistic or American bug*.

⁶ The entry is from the 1950th when many trials were conducted against Jewish communists.

⁷ Reduplication of the same linguistic meaning.

⁸ An armed organization of voluntary workpeople (in the former ČSSR 1948-1989).

⁹ An example of an oxymoron.

Union, and finally the term *assistance* meant the aggression and the following occupation in 1968 that was officially referred to as *bratrská pomoc* (*brotherly assistance*), *internacionální pomoc* (*international assistance*), or *přátelská návštěva* (*friendly visit*).

5. The pragmatics of addressing persons changed in the totalitarian language several times. It is well known that members of the communistic party addressed each other using the term *soudruh/soudružka* (*comrade-male/comrade-female*) - the informal way of addressing people (i.e., being on first name terms). In a more neutral context where two persons were not in any kind of a relationship, the more formal way of addressing each other was common: the use of the polite form and the title *pane/paní* (*mister/sir/madam*), for a young girl *slečna* (*miss*) would be appropriate. It happened very often during the totalitarian period that leaders (and thus members of the party) addressed subordinate colleagues who were non-members using the title *comrade*. This was especially awkward in situations where they were supposed to use the polite form in accordance with the pragmatics, but instead used the party-like informal address. For many years, it was forbidden to address teachers with the common title *mister/misses teacher* for primary schools, and *mister professor/misses professor* for high schools. As a replacement, it was strictly ordered to use the titles *comrade teacher/comrade professor*. In fact, a clear pragmatic differentiation was developed: the combination of the form *comrade* with the family name (e.g. *comrade Smith*) followed by the informal way (the use of a informal form) leads to a pragmatic mismatch and, thus, has a highlighting effect. That is, something marked is being expressed (for example, *Soudruhu Smithe, kdes byl?* - *Comrade Smith, where were you* (informal wording)? is implying that the addressee is in trouble with the person asking the question). On the other hand, using the combination of the title *mister* and the family name followed by formal way (the polite form is used) does not represent any mismatch and is neutral (for example, *Pane Smithe, kdeste byl?* - *Mister Smith, where were you* (formal wording)? In other words, there is no pragmatic mismatch in this case. Finally in the utterance *Smithe (Franto), kdes byl?* – *Smith (Frank), where were you* (informal wording), all expressions are informal; hence, there is no incongruence.

Those who were pushing for the totalitarian language were attempting to substitute old titles *pane/paní* (*mister/sir/madam*) by the Russian expression *občan/občanka* (*citizen-male/citizen-female*). These efforts, however, were not successful.

PART II

There was another language variety that developed parallel to the language of the official political system that was aggressive and untruthful. Speakers used this language in reaction to the political situation. We called this variety “our” language. It included garbled expressions and some terms taken from the language of the propaganda. Many of them are rooted in puns and language humor. For example, words such as – **aparátčik**¹⁰ (e.g. communistic “aparátčik”), **absurdistán**¹¹ (e.g. *předchozí čtyřicetiletý absurdistán* - the “absurdistán” of the previous forty years), **Dederon**¹² (e.g., *Přes noc se z těch Dederonů stali boháči . Jezdili v trabantu , teď mají západní auták. – Dederons got rich over night. They used to drive trabants and now they have western cars*), **papaláš**¹³ (*Ochranka stranických papalášů se často vydávala za číšníky , uvaděče – The guards of the papaláš (plural) often pretended to be waiters, ushers*), **rychlokvaška**¹⁴ (*V tom čase se vyhazovalo z práce na běžícím pásu a do redakcí vpochoďovaly "rychlokvašky" – At that time people were getting fired and editorial offices were filled with "rychlokvašky"*), **vokovická Sorbona**¹⁵ (e.g., *graduate from the “vokovic” Sorbonne*).

According to the types of entries we have discussed in this paper, it is apparent that the common lexicographic procedure will not be sufficient for describing the totalitarian language to its full extent. It will be necessary to add word pragmatics from the relevant time period and enrich linguistic explanations with encyclopedical information. In addition, the totalitarian language shows a full range of collocations. Thus, the planned dictionary of the totalitarian language will be a specialized dictionary most likely with added historical essays and other documents. Nevertheless, the core of such a dictionary will consist of lexicographic exposition.

III.

¹⁰ The combination of the Czech word *aparát* (apparatus) +the Russian suffix *-čik* -> *aparátčik*. The new word is referring to a person deeply involved with the apparatus of the Communistic regime

¹¹ Some country names are formed in Czech with the suffix– *stán* (e.g. *Afganistán, Kazachstán, Pakistán*). In case of *Absurdistán* the appellative *absurdní* (absurd) and the suffix *-stán* are combined. The new entry denotes a country where everything is absurd.

¹² The word came from the abbreviation for Eastern Germany - DDR. The Czech pronunciation of this word is [de:de:er] -> *deder*+ suffix *-on* ->*dederon* = the citizen of the DDR.

¹³ The meaning of this word is a political (party member) official.

¹⁴ Fast-fermenting cucumbers – literary, small cucumbers that are for short period marinated in vinegar and then ready for consumption. In a metaphorical way, graduates from political schools run by the party that undeservedly obtained a diploma or a title in a very short time not following any proper education program.

¹⁵ The building of the official college of the communistic party was located in part of Prague called *Vokovice*.

The examples are taken from SYN2000.

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