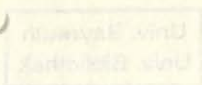


# Orthographies in Early Modern Europe

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Czech

## **Religion and diacritics: The case of Czech orthography**

*Tilman Berger*

### **0. Introduction**

Modern Czech orthography is characterized by an elaborate system of diacritics which has served as a model for several other Slavonic languages (Croatian, Slovenian, both Sorabian languages and, of course, Slovakian), for some non-Slavonic languages (such as Latvian and Lithuanian), and for the most common system of Cyrillic transliteration. Since this system of diacritics goes back to proposals attributed to the Czech religious reformer and reformer of orthography Jan Hus at the beginning of the 15th century, and became so influential afterwards, pre-existing orthographic systems have tended to be neglected in the linguistic literature, and the evolution of Czech orthography is usually described and presented in a teleological way, stressing the shortcomings of the older systems and praising the ingenious invention of Jan Hus (cf. Sedláček 1993; for a more neutral general overview cf. Pleskalová and Šefčík 2007). In this article, I would like to show that the pathway to the modern orthographic system has been more complicated than most descriptions assume, and that alternative evolutions were at some points possible.

### **1. The Czech phonological system**

To begin with, I would like to summarize the peculiarities of the Czech phonological system which posed a problem to anybody trying to write Czech names or words using the letters of the Latin alphabet. First of all, I should point out that several sibilants exist in the phonological system which are not accounted for in the Latin alphabet, i.e., [ʃ], [ʒ], [ʧ], and the



peculiar sound [ř], a Czech “shibboleth”, which is rendered by <ř> in the modern orthographical system. Secondly, there existed palatalized consonants, and thirdly, (distinctive) vowel length. These three main features are characteristic of Old Czech as well as Modern Czech. Other features which are relevant only for Old Czech will not be discussed here, such as the additional vowels [i̇] and [i̇<sup>o</sup>] or the distinction between syllabic and non-syllabic *r* between consonants.

## 2. “Primitive orthography” (10th century)

When efforts were first made in the 10th century to write Czech proper names with Latin letters, copyists simply used Latin letters that were close to the Czech sound and were not concerned about the possible ambiguity of such writing. Consider the following names from the chronicle of Cosmas of Prague, which was written in the 12th century, and their equivalents in modern orthography:

- (1) Kladzco – Kladsko, Crocco – Krok, Bracizlau – Břecislav,  
Crinin – Černín, Satc – Žatec, Wissegrad – Vyšehrad  
(all examples from Bretholz 1955)

Thus, the letter <c> could be used to render [k] as well as [t͡s] and [t͡ʃ], <s> and <ʃ> were used to render [s] as well as [ʃ], and <z> was used to render [z] as well as [ʒ], and sometimes even [s]. Other distinctions, such as palatalization or vowel length, were simply ignored. This system, which is known as “primitive orthography” (*primitivní pravopis*) in Czech linguistics, continued to be used until the 13th century, and was applied in the first written Czech texts too. The following examples (n<sup>o</sup>s 2 and 3) illustrate this primitive orthography (with its equivalent in modern orthography):

- (2) *Wlah dal gest dolaf zemu bogu i fuiatemu scepanu*  
Vlach dal jest Dolás zeřnu bogu i svátému Ščepánu (Porák 1979a: 31)  
‘Vlach gave land in Dolany to God and to Saint Stephen’
- (3) *[Z]lovo do zveta tworene v bořtu zhowano*  
Slovo do světa stvořenie v bořství schováno (Porák 1979a: 32)  
‘The word was till the creation of the world hidden in divinity’

Even in these early texts, some effort was made to write sounds that were characteristic of the Czech language in a more precise way. Palatalization

was sometimes rendered by the vowel <i> (cf. *fuiatemu*), and digraphs like <ŋ> or <cz> were used instead of sibilants (in this case, [ʃ] and [tʃ]). However, this strategy was used in a rather unsystematic way.

### 3. "Older Digraph Orthography" (14th century)

The first systematic attempt to define a precise orthographic system for Czech appears in a group of verse legends written at the end of the 13th and at the beginning of the 14th century (cf. Havránek 1936: 22–23). We do not know who invented this system, nor do we know whether it was a single person or a group of authors. He (or they) introduced digraphs and even one trigraph to represent sibilants, consistently marked palatalization by <i>, and sporadically even rendered vowel length by doubling the vowel letter or by adding a diacritical sign. This system was used in a number of manuscripts (mainly legends in verse), but was not successful in the long run. The failure of this "Older Digraph Orthography" (*spřezkový pravopis staršího typu*) is not surprising if we take a closer look at the rather awkward system of digraphs which quite often uses simple letters for complex sounds and vice versa, consider the following equivalents (4) and a short example in (5) (cf. Cejnar 1964: 168–169):

- (4) [s] = <zz>, [z] = <z>, [ʃ] = <ŋ>, [ʒ] = <s>, [ts] = <cz>, [tʃ] = <zh>, [rʒ] = <rs>
- (5) *kak ho zzyn, kak wnuk na male zzie ýzzů zzbýli na zzem zzwietýe*  
*kak ho syn, kak vnuk na mále sě jsú sbyli na sem svěče*  
 'As well his son as his grandson shortly afterwards stayed behind in this world'

The artificial character of the "Older Digraph Orthography" may be explained by the fact that it was not the result of a gradual evolution, but was the conscious creation of an individual (or a group of individuals). This correlates with the fact that the first Czech texts were produced by a small intellectual elite linked to the royal court in Prague, whereas legal documents and administrative texts were still written in Latin.

#### 4. "Newer Digraph Orthography"

In the first half of the 14th century more and more Czech texts were produced, mainly literary texts, but from the middle of the century onwards, Czech also came to be used in administrative texts. Instead of the "Older Digraph Orthography" a new system was used which was much closer to the "primitive" system. It distinguished voiced and unvoiced sibilants and affricates, but did not take the distinction between alveolar and postalveolar sibilants into account. For example, the letter <c> and the digraph <cz> were used for both [ts] and [tʃ], occasionally the trigraph <czl> was used in the same function as well. Palatalization was marked regularly by <i> or <y>; vowel length was marked (although very rarely) by the doubling of vowels or by the use of digraphs such as <ij>. Apparently, no satisfactory solution was found for the rendering of sibilants, which is not surprising if one bears in mind that the two other languages with a longer literary tradition in Bohemia, i.e., Latin and German, had a much simpler system of sibilants (for example, they lacked [ʒ]). The "Newer Digraph Orthography" seems to have fulfilled the needs of language users quite well – this system was commonly used until the beginning of the 15th century. To illustrate this system, let us look at the first words of a famous old Czech love song called *Závišová píseň* 'Song of Záviš', written at the end of the 14th century (Porák 1979a, 115):

- (6) *Gyzt mne wffe radoft ostawa / gyz me wffe vtiechi stanu.*  
 Jižť mě všě radost ostává / již mě všě útěchy stánu.  
 'Already all pleasure has left me / already all my comfort has become...'

#### 5. The reform proposals of Jan Hus

The most important and influential proposal to reform Czech orthography is contained in a Latin treatise from the early 15th century which František Palacký discovered in a library in Southern Bohemia in 1827. This treatise which is known under the name *De orthographia bohémica* proposes a system of diacritic signs which marked the length of vowels (e.g., <á> vs. <a>) and distinguished between consonants that did not exist in Latin and their Latin counterparts, e.g., the distinction of <č>, <ř>, <ň> vs. <c>, <r>, <n> (the author uses a diacritical dot, i.e., *č̣*, *ṛ̌*, *ṇ̌*). The proposal was based on a detailed analysis of Old Czech pronunciation and the phonetic



differences which were not taken into account in the contemporary system. The following quotation shows the way of argumentation of the treatise:

Ecce qui vis Bohemice scribere habes diferencias literarum positas et noli ponere duplex zz cum vocalibus quia si centum z pones non facient plus in sono vel aliter quam z. Sed pone ž. (Schröpfer 1968: 86)

[Now, if you want to write in Czech, you will have marked differences of letters. And don't write double zz with vowels, since even if you write a hundred z, they will not sound differently from z. Instead write ž.]

The treatise is traditionally attributed to the priest and religious reformer Jan Hus (born ca. 1370). He was a professor of Charles University in Prague from 1400 and one of the instigators of the Decree of Kutná Hora (1409) which gave the majority of votes at the university to the "Bohemian nation". As a result students and professors of other "nations" left Prague and founded the University of Leipzig. At the same time Hus became more and more critical of the official teachings of the Catholic Church, partly under the influence of Wycliffe. In 1410 he was excommunicated, but continued to preach at the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague. In 1412 he had to go into hiding and lived in South Bohemia under the protection of local gentry. In 1414 he returned to Prague and was summoned to the Council of Constance where he was imprisoned and sentenced to death for heresy. He was burned in Constance on 6th of July 1415.

Although his main theological works were written in Latin, Hus used to preach in Czech and also wrote some minor theological texts in this language. On several occasions he commented the language use of his contemporaries and condemned German influence on Czech. The attribution of the treatise to him relies mainly on the similarity of opinions of the author of the *De orthographia bohémica* and also on the fact that the author of the treatise evidently was a highly educated intellectual with good knowledge of ancient languages.

There has been a lot of discussion as to how far the author of *De orthographia bohémica* was influenced by other orthographical systems (cf. Schröpfer 1968: 23–30), and it has been pointed out that most elements of his system sporadically occur in older texts (e.g., the dot marking palatalization). Nevertheless the treatise is an ingenious original work which is far ahead of its time. Exaggerating slightly, Schröpfer (1968: 31) has called Hus's treatise "the first phonetic description of a Slavonic language".

However, Hus's orthography was not accepted at once. It is not certain whether or not he used it himself in his few Czech writings, and there are only a few manuscripts from the first half of the 15th century that use the "diacritical orthography". We even cannot cite an example of his orthography which is longer than one word, since the preserved manuscripts use his system only inconsequently. For example, the beginning of the Lord's Prayer, an example given in Hus's *orthographia*, is written as follows (instead of the original dot in Hus's we use the modern diacritic <ˇ>):

(7a) Otče naš, gêz gfî naêbiefieh ofwief'fie gmie twé (Schröpfer 1968: 88),

although we would expect the following form:

(7b) Otče náš, gež gfî na nebiefieh ofwief' fie gmie twé.

Some elements were soon changed, since they proved to be rather impractical. Consequently, the use of a hook (*háček*) replaced the dot Hus had introduced, and the diacritical sign was moved from letters with ascenders such as <d> and <t> to the neighbouring vowel (<dě>, <tě> instead of <d'e>, <t'e>). The same was true for the use of the *háček* on the long <ř>, so [ř] continued to be written <ṛ̌>.

All in all it is not possible to decide whether Hus as the author of *De orthographia bohémica* really planned to introduce a new orthography. His genuine interest for the vernacular goes hand in hand with the religious movement supporting sermons in Czech, but the treatise itself is more of an academic text, written for a small group of people. This would change with the introduction of printing about seventy years later.

## 6. The introduction of printing

The technology which was invented by Johannes Gutenberg in the middle of the 15th century soon found its way to neighbouring countries. According to traditional views, the first book which was printed in the Czech lands was the "Chronicle of Troy" (*Kronika trojanská*), issued in Plzeň. It is dated to 1468 by a handwritten notice, but could in fact have been written some years later. Other scholars assume that the first book was the "Statute of Arnošt z Pardubic" (*Statuta Arnošta z Pardubic*) from 1476, also issued in Plzeň. In both cases the name of the printer is not known, but we have to take into account the fact that Plzeň was a predominantly Czech

(and Catholic) town with close relations to Germany. The next most important books were the New Testament, published in Prague in 1479, and the so-called Prague Bible from 1488.

The printers began to use diacritical signs right from the beginning, though at first in a rather unsystematic way. For example, the *Spis o nových zemích* [On the new lands and the new world] (a translation of Vespucci), printed in 1502/1503 by Mikuláš Bakalář in Plzeň, consistently uses <ž> and sometimes <č> and <ě>, but vowel length is marked only rarely by digraphs such as <ij>; [rʒ] is rendered by <rz>; and <ŋ> is the main means to render [ŋ] (<š> was used only at the end of words). Cf. the title of the book (Porák 1979a, 241):

- (8a) *Spis o nowych zemiech a o nowem fwietie, o niemžto gfme prwe žadne znamofti neměli ani kdy czo fychali.*  
[Treatise about the new lands and the new world, about which we did not have any news earlier nor did we hear anything about it.]

In modern orthography this text would look as follows:

- (8b) *Spis o nových zemích a o novém světě, o němžto jsme prve žádné známosti neměli ani kdy co slýchali.*

Similar systems can be found in other printed books dating from this time, but the whole of the 16th century was characterised by extensive variation of orthography in printed books. Two major types of variation can be distinguished: competing systems, and language change.

The digraph and the diacritical system compete, resulting in various mixed systems which have been described in detail by Porák (1979b). Cf. the following quotation from the book "Rules of Human Life" (*Pravidla lidského života*), written and edited by the humanist Mikuláš Konáč z Hodiškova in 1528:

Prawij, že byl gede[n] welikomocný král králúo w Indij gmenem Sedráš, kterýž měl kniježe některakee[h]o gmenem Beled. ... Měl g[el]t také libú rzeč a krotkoft iazyku. (Porák 1979a, 250)

[They say that there was a mighty king of kings in India, called Sedráš, who had a certain knight called Beled. ... He also had a pleasant speech and a blandness of language.]

Here we see that vowel quantity is sometimes marked by diacritics (*král*, *Sedráš*,  *kterýž*) and sometimes by digraphs (*prawij*, *některakeeho*); some-

times it is not marked at all (*gmenem* instead of *gménem*). The diacritic is used regularly in <ž>, sporadically in <č> and <ř>.

In the second half of the 16th century the diacritical system achieved success, but several characteristics of Hus's proposal were lost. Only <ž>, <č>, <ř> and <ň>, and the long vowels <á> and <é> were used along the lines of the original proposal. Instead of <š>, the digraph <fl> dominates; digraphs were also used instead of diacritics on capital letters, except for <Ž>; Č and Ř were rendered by <Cž> and <Rž>. The letters <ň>, <d'> and <ř'> were used only at the end of a syllable. The long vowel [i:] was not rendered by <í>, but by <j> – resulting from the older digraph <ij>. The character <ě>, which was not part of Hus's proposal, was used to mark palatalization before *e*. Many printers also used the letter <l>, today still in use in Polish orthography, to render a "hard" *l*. This phoneme was lost in the West in the 15th century, but continued to exist in Eastern dialects till modern times.

Another type of variation was caused by phonological changes which had occurred since the 15th century (cf. Lamprecht, Šlosar, and Bauer 1986: 107–111): in the first place, monophthongization of the diphthongs [ie] and [uo] (resulting in [i:] and [u:]), and the diphthongization of the long vowels [i:] and [u:] (resulting in [ɛɪ] and [ɔʊ]). While these vowel shifts began to take place in the western part and slowly migrated eastwards (though never reaching Slovakia or parts of Moravia), the result of this gradual development was not uniform, and different printers used different strategies to deal with it. In view of the fact that books from the West were also used in the East, the conservative position that one should continue to write as in former times tended to dominate. In the end, only in two of the four cases was orthography adapted to pronunciation (<í> or <j> instead of the older <ie>, <au>/<ou> instead of the older <ú>). In one case, a special convention helped to maintain a visual reminder of the older state (<û>, i.e., <u> with a superscripted <o>, instead of the older graphy <uo>); and in one case the historical notation was preserved (<ý> not <ej>). We may compare the following examples:

- (9) (monophthongization): *miera* 'measure' > *mjra*  
*buoh* 'God' > *bůh*
- (diphthongization): *pýcha* 'pride' > *pejcha* (written *pýcha*)  
*kút* 'corner' > *kout* (written *kaut*)

## 7. Standardization of orthography

From the 1530s onwards, a process of standardization of orthography took place. As opposed to what happened in other Slavonic countries (such as Poland and Russia), printers did not play the main role here. The first proposals for a unified orthography were made by three Protestant priests: Beneš Optát, Petr Gzel and Václav Filomates, who published the first Czech grammar in 1533, known as the "Grammar of Náměšť" (*Náměšťská mluvnice*), cf. Optát, Gzel and Philomates (1974). These priests had edited a new translation of the New Testament on the basis of Erasmus' Latin New Testament and stressed the necessity of a uniform and consistent orthography for their language. The authors advocated the use of diacritics with the modifications mentioned in section 6, but they had rather conservative views on other linguistic questions: for example, they propagated synthetic verb forms, which had disappeared about a hundred years earlier. Therefore, the main critic of their grammar, Jan Blahoslav, who wrote a long text entitled "Czech grammar" (*Gramatica česká*), receives much more attention in modern linguistic literature, even though his text was published only in the 19th century, whereas the Grammar of Náměšť was reprinted several times in the 16th and 17th centuries. Jan Blahoslav (1523–1571) was a bishop of the Czech Brethren and a member of a group of translators who decided to prepare a new translation of the Bible. This translation, the "Králice Bible" (*Králická Bible*), was printed in the small village of Králice close to Náměšť between 1579 and 1593 and was widely distributed by the Czech Brethren. Because of his death at an early age, Blahoslav himself participated only in the translation of the New Testament; nevertheless, he was evidently one of the people who had advocated and realized the unified orthography found in the Bible translation. Cf. the following quotation from another of his texts, a book on music, published between 1558 and 1569:

Poněwadž o Muzyce napřati nětco vložil sem, Neyprw ale Co by muzyka byla necht' se powj. (Porák 1979a, 269)

[Since I decided to write something about music, yet first of all it should be explained what music is.]

The Králice Bible enjoyed a high esteem till the 20th century and is considered as the main text of the Golden period of the Czech language. The orthographic system which was consistently used in the Králice Bible is usually called "The Brethren's Orthography" (*bratrský pravopis*). It was



to serve as a model for printed books throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, even after the expulsion of Protestants from the Czech lands in 1627 after the Catholic party had prevailed in the first phases of the Thirty Years' War.

It is very interesting that Catholic authors explicitly mentioned the Bible in grammars and orthographic treatises, although it was forbidden to possess and read this Bible in the Czech lands. Cf. the following quote from the title page of the well-known treatise *Žáček* 'The Pupil', published by Matěj Václav Štejer in 1668 (and reprinted in 1730 and 1781):

An excellent way to write and print well in Czech, extracted from the Czech Bible, which is divided into several parts and is explained by comments in the margin and is in high esteem among non-Catholics. However, because of its heretical errors, it should not be read nor possessed by Catholics. Nevertheless, since it was above other Czech books, printed in a more proper, better and a more diligent way than other Czech books, its way of writing must be praised beyond all measure.

## 8. Manuscript usage

At the same time as this unified system of orthography came into use in most books, manuscripts continued to employ a much simpler system reminiscent of the "Newer Digraph Orthography". It borrowed only one letter from the diacritical system, namely the <ž>, and used it as the second element of digraphs not only in capital letters (as in the Brethren's orthography), but also in lower case letters: [tj̃] was rendered by <cž> (as opposed to [ts] which was written by the digraph <cz>); [rj̃] was rendered by <rž>. Vowel length was not marked at all; palatalization was marked by <i> (in the same way as in the Newer Digraph Orthography).

This system, which Čejka (1999) calls "orthography *pro foro interno*", was used in virtually all personal writings and in manuscripts until the end of the 18th century. Although it neglected the important phonological opposition between short and long vowels, it proved to be very practical for the writer, and it was flexible, since it allowed the writer to note dialectal words as well. The fact that it was not so comfortable for the reader apparently was not a major problem: the distinction between an orthography for the writer and a different one for the reader was introduced by Sgall into the discussion on Czech orthography, and has been quantified in an interesting study by Karel Kučera in 1998.

Both systems existed side by side for quite a long time. Grammars from the late 17th and the early 18th centuries simply mention their existence as a given fact. Cf. the following quotation from Rosa's *Grammatica linguae Bohemicae* (1672: 10):

Consonans c/č/ř in impressis libris, moderno tempora scribitur absq; additione literae z, sed Scribae & Cancellistae semper solent ad c/č/ř/ addere z/ in scriptis, sic cz/cž/rž.

[The consonants c, č, ř are written (sic) without addition of the letter z in printed books in modern times, but scribes and clerks always use to add z to c/č/ř in handwritten texts, thus cz, cž, rž.]

At that time, orthographic treatises such as the *Žáček* were intended for printers, who had to learn the art of applying all the rules of orthography to any manuscript which had been given to them.

Unfortunately, the *pro foro interno* orthography has not been studied in detail, so far. This is due to the fact that Czech editors tend to transcribe books and manuscripts into modern orthography, and only in recent years has the awareness that one might possibly overlook phonological distinctions by doing so been growing. A thorough analysis of the *pro foro interno* orthography will probably show broad sociolinguistic variations and even the existence of additional orthographic systems, based on a mixture of both orthographies. One example is the orthography of the East Bohemian painter Josef Ceregetti (1722–1797), whose chronicle of the town of Chrudim I edited in 2005. Ceregetti used only the dot as diacritic and combined it with the vowels *a* and *e* and with the consonants *c*, *z*, *r*, *n*; contrary to contemporary use he also wrote *ou* instead of *au*. See the title page of the chronicle (Berger and Malý 2005):

Historya Chrudimska, w niź se wipifuge počátek Města Chrudimě, gakož take lkáza, a zafe poznaw wiřtawenj, a wřelikych wěcy w něm zběhlych.

[History of Chrudim, in which the beginning of the town of Chrudim is described, as well as its corruption and its reconstruction and all things which happened in it.]

From the middle of the 18th century onwards, grammarians began to recommend that one should write in the same way as books are printed (cf. Schamschula 1973: 160; Berger 2008: 43–44); after 1800 the *pro foro interno* orthography became obsolete. Since then, only diacritical orthography has been used for writing and printing Czech.

## 9. Conclusion

The diacritical orthography was – in all likelihood – designed by a religious reformer who used to preach in the vernacular and who supported the cultivation of the vernacular as a literary language. Though manuscripts used the Older Digraph Orthography till the end of the 18th century and printed books adopted the diacritical system rather slowly, translators of the Bible played a crucial role in propagating a uniform orthography based on Hus's proposals. And the first translation of the whole Bible by the Czech Brethren served as the main example of good Czech for several centuries, even among the Catholics.

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