

## **Czech Language Programs and Czech as a Heritage Language in the United States**

Simone J. Hrouda, Portland State University, Oregon

### **Introduction**

Czech language schools and Czech classes exist across the United States because of the efforts of Czech heritage language speakers to preserve the language spoken by their ancestors. These programs provide heritage speakers with the opportunity to further develop and maintain their Czech oral and written skills. Even though the language and culture are vital to the identity of individuals in states such as Nebraska, Texas, and Wisconsin, the importance of sustaining the language is not recognized on a national level. Czech is not considered a critical foreign language, and limited opportunities are available for language courses and scholarship programs. It is up to Czech heritage societies to keep Czech classes alive. Czech is a less commonly taught language (LCTL) in the United States, and locating Czech classes is difficult. However, these challenges and many others do not hinder Czech speakers from learning the Czech language. Though small, there is a Czech-speaking population made up of heritage, non-heritage, and native speakers who are making efforts to keep the Czech language alive.



### **History of the Czech Language in the United States**

The largest immigration of Czechs to the United States took place between the years 1848 and 1914, when over 350,000 Czechs fled their homeland and established Czech communities across the United States (Thernstorm, 1981). Over time, language attrition and acculturation have led to loss of the Czech language within these communities (Dutkova-Cope, 2006; Eckert, 1987; Hannan, 2003; Vasek, 1996). However, there are still heritage speakers and societies in many Midwestern states and major cities, who take part in preserving their heritage and maintaining the culture and language of their ancestors.



Earliest accounts of Czech immigration to the United States date back to the seventeenth century, when Frederick Philips, a Bohemian merchant, settled in what is now New York City, and Augustine Herman, from Bohemia, came to work for the West India Company (Kovtun, 2009). During the eighteenth century, around 700 Moravians settled in colonies in Pennsylvania (Capek, 1920). By 1776, 2,000 Moravians lived in the colonies (Kovtun, 2009).

During the mid-nineteenth century, Czech farmers settled in rural areas with rich soil, in Iowa, Nebraska, Texas, and Wisconsin, while other Czech communities populated major cities such as Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, New York, Omaha, and St. Louis (Miller, 1922). This wave of immigrants brought Czech doctors, writers, political refugees, and other settlers (Kovtun, 2009). The gold rush increased immigration rates dramatically in 1853-1859, when an estimated 25,000 Czechs came to the United States in search of gold (Capek, 1920).

As Czech communities grew in urban and rural regions, so did use of the Czech language. Czech newspapers were published, and Czech schools opened all over the country. In 1860, Frantisek published the first Czech newspaper, *Slowan Amerikansky* (later called *Slavie*) in Racine, Wisconsin, with 450 subscribers (Kovtun, 2009). Other Czech publications include *Bohemian Voice*, *Svornost*, *New Yorkske Listy*, and *Pokrok* (Kovtun, 2009). In the late nineteenth century, 326 Czech newspapers were published (Hewitt, 1973). Many did not survive, leaving only 51 active by 1920 (Hewitt, 1973). The first Czech school was opened in New York in 1856, followed shortly by a Czech school in Chicago (Kovtun, 2009). More Czech language schools opened all over the United States in cities with high Czech populations such as Nebraska, Texas, and Wisconsin, and a Czech library was established in Wisconsin (Capek, 1920).

According to Miller (1922), the 1920 U.S. Census underestimated the Czech population. He estimates that a total of 808,988 Czechs lived in the United States, almost double the number reported. At the time, the states most populated by Czechs included Illinois (124,225), Nebraska (50,680), Ohio (50,004), New York (47,400), and Wisconsin (45,336). Besides Chicago and New York, most Czechs immigrated into the Midwestern states in rural areas (Miller, 1922). Due to political struggles and other factors, individuals continued to flee from Czechoslovakia around World War One, World War Two, and between the years 1948-1968 (Kučera, 2001).

The first sign of decline of Czech language schools came in 1871, when the Texas legislature required that all teachers carry out instruction only in English (Dutkova-Cope, 2006; Hewitt, 1973). Prominent Czechs advocated learning English in addition to Czech, without realizing the impact that this would have on the Czech community in Texas (Cope, 2006). In 1920, the U.S. Census reported that 228,738 foreign-born citizens spoke Czech as their first language; by 1970, that number decreased to 70,564 people ([U.S. Census Bureau](#), 2006).

Today, Czechs continue to visit the United States for a variety of reasons. Many come to study abroad, visit relatives, or tour the country. As of November 2008, Czechs are no longer required to have a visa to travel to the United States for pleasure or business stays shorter than 90 days (Beam, 2010). This change has allowed thousands of Czech citizens to travel to the United States for short periods.

### **Czech in the United States Today**

The Bohemians and Moravians who came to the United States to start new lives have left a rich legacy. As of 2007, an estimated 1,947,000 U.S. citizens have claimed Czech or Czechoslovakian ancestry (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The states with the highest populations include Texas (155,855), Illinois (123,708), Wisconsin (97,220), Minnesota (85,056), Nebraska (83,462), California (77,673), Ohio (61,640), and Iowa (51,508) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Most of these numbers reflect immigration trends during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Czech ancestors left the traces of the Czech language and culture all over the United States. Today, though most of the original schools and publications have closed down, some Czech heritage societies are attempting to pass on the Czech language and culture to future generations. Furthermore, modern technology has changed communication methods, allowing Czech speakers to form online communities and advertise events around the country. A desire to learn and maintain the Czech language is shown by the offering of Czech language classes and the formation of informal meet-up groups, which allow people to get together and speak Czech.

In 2002, David Bíróczy surveyed 290 Czech Americans in the United States about their connection to the Czech Republic and Czech heritage. He found that the majority believe that it is important to preserve the Czech language and keep the Czech culture alive (Bíróczy, 2008). The majority of participants in his study knew at least some Czech vocabulary, indicating that the Czech language is still used in the United States. The question is whether it can be sustained. The remainder of this article focuses on Czech language learning and Czech classes and programs.

### **Motivation for Learning Czech**

A number of reasons motivate individuals of Czech heritage to develop their language skills and to continue to use the language. Some believe it is important to learn the language of their ancestors because it is a part of their identity. Others want to communicate with family members abroad and in this country. Interethnic marriages draw couples to learn the language of their partners in order to communicate with in-laws and better understand the culture and language. Some students learn the language to study abroad, travel, work in the Czech Republic, or carry out research in Czech.

## **Czech Classes and Programs**

The following information on Czech classes and language learning opportunities is based on information provided by a sample of representatives of Czech classes and schools. It is not an exhaustive list of Czech language learning opportunities available nationwide, but rather is provided to highlight work being done in the United States to maintain the Czech language.

### ***Community-based Classes***

The presence of Czech heritage speakers in a community is the reason that many Czech classes are offered. A variety of community-based Czech classes are held in Midwestern states (Iowa, Nebraska, Texas, and Wisconsin) and in states with large Czech heritage populations (Illinois and New York). Heritage Czech classes are usually offered by Czech heritage societies with the goal of preserving the culture and language. Many of these classes were started after 1980.

In other parts of the country, Czech classes are offered at universities or in language programs for students interested in gaining language skills because of their own heritage, their interest in Slavic languages, or for travel or business purposes. These classes are usually not tailored to heritage speakers and focus on standard Czech. In addition, native Czech speakers teach private lessons across the country to anyone interested in learning the language. These lessons tend to be more expensive than group classes, but they provide the opportunity to learn Czech in communities with small Czech heritage populations.

In 1989, the Czech and Slovak Heritage Society in Baltimore, Maryland, opened a Czech and Slovak school for anyone interested in further developing their Czech or Slovak language skills. The classes are made possible because of the desire of members of the society to maintain the language. Classes are designed to teach basic grammar and conversation skills to beginning-level speakers. Classes draw about 40 students, with the majority of students being adults ranging in age from 20 to 90.

Most students are Czech heritage speakers who want to learn the language to communicate with relatives or to preserve their heritage. Other students have married into a Czech family and want to learn the basics of the language. The classes are two hours long and take place on Saturdays. The average proficiency reached by students is advanced beginner. In addition to oral and written language skills taught, the classes incorporate Czech history, music, politics and cultural aspects.

Texas is known for its large Czech heritage community. Between 1850 and 1920, Moravians and Bohemians immigrated into the state through the port of Galveston (Hewitt, 1973). Today, thousands of Czech heritage speakers live in Texas. In 1982, the [Czech Heritage Society of Texas](#) was formed, comprised of 15 chapters. Members strive to promote and maintain different aspects of Czech culture and language throughout the state (Czech Heritage Society of Texas, 2009).

Some of these chapters organize Czech classes and provide other opportunities to learn about the Czech culture and language. In 2008, the [Texas Czech Heritage and Cultural Center](#) was opened in La Grange, Texas, with Czech meeting rooms, a museum, archives, and a gift shop (*The Texas Czech Heritage and Cultural Center*, 2010).

The [Czech Education Foundation of Texas](#) was formed to promote Czech language and culture in Texas through the support of higher education, Czech language classes, and Czech studies programs, and has granted scholarships to students in those programs. Through this program, William Hlavinka Fellows go to Texas A&M to pursue a master's degree and teach community language classes.

One community-based Czech class is offered in Bexar County, Texas. The class began in 1991, and has continued with an average of 10 students who meet for two hours once a week. The majority of the students are second-generation Czech heritage speakers, ages 55-75, who want to further develop their Czech conversational skills. Their Czech proficiency, with a foundation in Moravian dialects, ranges from advanced beginner to intermediate. New members are always welcome and usually join because of their connection to the language and culture. (For more detail about the potential of the Web in promoting the heritage language development efforts in Texas, [view the PowerPoint presentation](#) by Lida Cope at the 2010 American Association for Applied Linguistics [AAAL] entitled: *The Web can hardly save a language, but it can help: The case of Texas Czech.*)

In Illinois, Czech classes have been offered at separate Czech schools including T.G. Masaryk Czech School, Jan Neruda Czech School, and Sokol Spirit in Brookfield. A Czech summer school program is offered by the Czech Heritage Foundation in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The Czech and Slovak Sokol in Saint Paul, Minnesota, offers evening Czech and Slovak language classes.

In Queens, New York, a Friday Czech class is offered for children at Bohemian Hall. Recently, an all-Czech preschool was started in Portland, Oregon, for children up to the age of 6. Communities of Czech native and heritage speakers across the United States are seeing the need for maintenance and development of Czech language skills.

### ***University Classes***

In 2009, 17 universities offered Czech classes for college students (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, 2009). These are usually beginner-level classes and are part of Slavic language departments. In addition to heritage speakers attending these classes, many students want to learn basic language skills to travel abroad, interact with Czech friends, or for research purposes. These classes most frequently teach standard Czech.

One such university is the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, which is home to a large Czech heritage population. Lincoln is one of the only universities in the United States to offer classes in beginner, intermediate, and advanced Czech. The classes teach reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills, while also incorporating aspects of Czech culture, history, and literature. An average of 25 students enroll in beginning Czech 101 every year, 9 students complete 2 years of Czech, and 4 minor in Czech. Some students who complete the entire program reach an advanced level of language proficiency. About half of the students are heritage Czech speakers. After completing their studies, a few students every year go on to work or do research in the Czech Republic.

Through the years, the university has struggled to continue offering classes, but strong support and pressure from Czech ethnic groups have enabled the classes to continue. In 1993, the Czech Language Foundation in Nebraska was established to support and ensure the survival of the Czech classes. The foundation provides 20 student scholarships every year to support students interested in learning Czech.

### ***Classes Offered by Individuals***

In addition to classes offered by Czech heritage societies and universities, native Czech speakers also offer Czech classes. For example, in Seattle, Washington, Silvie Opatrná from Prague, Czech Republic, has been teaching Czech classes at a number of institutions since 2006. Her classes draw students from a variety of backgrounds, with about 90 percent being Czech heritage speakers. Opatrná faces the constant challenge of low enrollment, with an average of fewer than 10 students per class. All of the courses are beginner-level, and students who complete the course reach advanced beginner language proficiency. Opatrná also offers private lessons for those who are interested.

### **Challenges in Czech Language Education**

Czech language programs face a number of challenges. One is finding qualified Czech instructors with adequate language skills. Many heritage schools hire native Czech speakers who, while proficient in the Czech language, have never taught Czech before. These teachers often struggle with teaching diverse student groups, some of whom are heritage Czech speakers and others whose first language is English. Another challenge is limited enrollment. Classes cannot be sustained when student enrollment is small. Additional challenges include limited visibility in the community and lack of adequate venues for classes, time for teachers to prepare for instruction, and volunteers to work in programs. Also, high levels of proficiency in Czech are not generally reached. The average level of proficiency reached by students in Czech classes is advanced beginner.

Since the population of Czech heritage speakers is small in comparison to other heritage groups, most Czech classes offered at universities do not offer Czech for heritage speakers. Some Czech schools and programs take this population into consideration, but it is unknown to what degree instructors adjust their curriculum to benefit heritage speakers.

One issue that arises is the different home dialects with which heritage Czech speakers are familiar. In Texas, most Czech heritage speakers are of Moravian descent, and their Texas Czech speech blends English with the ancestral Lachian, Valachian, or Haná dialects of this region. Czech classes offered in Texas that do not incorporate the Moravian dialect fail to further the language development of students of Moravian descent (Cope, forthcoming; Hannan, 2003).

## **Czech Communities**

Czech organizations and societies in the United States contribute to the maintenance of the Czech language and culture. These organizations arrange festive celebrations, monthly meetings, Czech classes, and seasonal picnics and pageants where individuals can join together, speak Czech, and celebrate Czech heritage. The annual Czech festival, held in Wilber, Nebraska, draws over 50,000 people from across the country (Czech festival, 1998). In addition, Czech organizations offer student scholarships, publish books, write newsletters, manage Czech historical museums, fund language programs, and form Czech genealogy groups. Their powerful presence in communities allows Czech schools to sustain themselves year after year and provides Czech speakers with opportunities to speak the language.

In addition to formal organizations, there are a number of Czech “meetup” groups, where Czech heritage speakers, native speakers, and non-heritage speakers come together to share their love of the Czech language. These groups are formed by people who want the opportunity to practice Czech to maintain or further develop their oral language skills. The groups take place coast to coast in cities such as Washington DC, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and New York. Most of them were founded after 2000 ([Czech Language Meetup Groups](#), 2010).

One example is a monthly Czech meet-up group in Virginia, organized by Ed Jakovich. The group consists of 10-15 adults and children, ages 5-48, who are native speakers, first-generation heritage speakers, their children, and non-heritage speakers. Anyone interested in the Czech language is welcome. The group provides the opportunity for families and friends, adults and children to get together and socialize in the Czech or Slovak languages.



## Conclusion

The United States has a long history of immigration from Bohemia and Moravia. Citizens across the country want to learn more about their ancestors and connect with their heritage by learning about the culture and the country. Heritage, non-heritage, and native Czech speakers are making efforts to keep the language alive through language schools and classes, meet-up groups, cultural events, and Czech organizations and societies. Technology has allowed for the creation of online Czech communities, blogs, and newsletters. Most beginner courses on college campuses or at existing Czech schools allow students to learn basic Czech, reaching advanced beginner proficiency.

In order to successfully develop professional proficiency in languages such as Czech, at least 10 months of intensive study is necessary, totalling about 1,100 hours of study with an average of 28 hours per week (Jackson & Malone, 2009). Even though the available opportunities do not lead to fluent proficiency in the Czech language, there is still a desire for people to learn it, and there are Czech heritage speakers who continue to make an effort to sustain and further develop their heritage language across the generations, because it plays an important role in their cultural identity.

### Online resources at the Heritage Languages in America website:

[Read](#) the Heritage Voice: Language – Czech.

[Search for Czech language programs](#) in the Heritage Language Programs Database.

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This Heritage Brief was prepared by Simone Hrouda for the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages, Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), Washington DC, and was peer reviewed.

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