Some remarks on the pronunciation of foreign proper names in Czech

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the pronunciation of foreign proper names in contemporary Czech. The data discussed are based especially on the information received from the Language Consulting Centre of the Institute of the Czech Language, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic. The pronunciation of many foreign proper names is not stabilised in Czech. Anyone who needs to use a problematic foreign proper name even in its written form should know how it is pronounced, as the declension of proper names is influenced especially by pronunciation. The paper also provides an analysis of names whose usual pronunciation in contemporary spoken discourse (for example, in the Czech media) differs from the officially codified form.

Keywords: Czech language, pronunciation, proper names, Language Consulting Centre, variation.

This paper[1] focuses on the pronunciation of proper names in contemporary Czech. The analysed material is based especially on the questions and inquiries addressed to the Language Consulting Centre (hereafter, LCC) of the Institute of the Czech Language of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague. Communication with the public provides a valuable source of remarkable information for linguists. It allows us, for example, to identify which proper names are phonetically problematic for the individual speakers, whether the available pronunciation guides are able to solve these doubts, etc. At the LCC, we can often encounter various interesting, or even bizarre questions, whose occurrence may be immensely surprising for a linguist.

Besides questions concerning the pronunciation of proper names originating from "more familiar" foreign languages such as English, German, French, Spanish, Polish, the phonetic rules of which can usually be identified without any serious problems, the LCC also receives questions concerning the pronunciation of various names from more distant and less-known languages, for example, from African languages. Sometimes the origin of a particular name is unclear (and the linguist looking into the inquiry must first detect the language in which it originated). In such cases it is often necessary to consult an expert in the given language.

In Czech, non-integrated lexical items of foreign origin keep their original spelling, while their pronunciation is most frequently adapted to Czech phonology in one of the following ways:

(i) by replacing foreign speech sounds by their nearest counterparts and applying Czech prosodic, phonotactic and morphological rules; for example, the surname *Smith* is pronounced [ˈsmɪθ] in English but [ˈsmɪs] or [ˈsmɪt] in Czech; this principle is fundamental for Standard Czech and is recommended in orthoepic manuals of Standard Czech (see *Výslovnost spisovné češtiny II* 1976);

(ii) by applying Czech pronunciation rules to the foreign spelling form: for example, the name *Utah* is pronounced [ˈjuːt] or [ˈjuːtɑː] in English, while it is realised [ˈʔutax] in Czech;

(iii) by applying Czech phonemes without respecting either of the first two principles, or combining them: for example the common pronunciation of the English first name *Robert* [ˈr bət] as [ˈroʃubr̩t] in Czech – this form reflects Czech speakers' false assumption about the English pronunciation;

(iv) by respecting the phonological and phonetic rules of the source language; this option leads to code mixing.

Therefore, the situation is complicated in that the foreign proper names are assimilated into Czech to different degrees and some traditional forms of pronunciation of certain names do not correspond to Czech orthoepic rules: that is, the pronunciation prevalent in actual language use does not correspond to the codified form (i.e. the form listed in dictionaries of Standard Czech such as *Slovník spisovného jazyka českého* 1960–1971; *Pravidla českého pravopisu* 1999; *Slovník spisovné češtiny* 2003). Moreover, the pronunciation of many foreign proper names is not stabilised in Czech, and there is a lack of up-to-date works devoted to the pronunciation of foreign proper names.

As it seems, the situation is not much better in other languages. Take, for example, the following quote by Max Mangold (1995: 409): "In Etymologie, Lexikographie und Namenkunde wird die Aussprache wenig beachtet." It is evident that the pronunciation of proper names cannot be solved only by a set of general rules, because – for example – a certain group of graphemes is not read in the same way in all languages.[2] It is also necessary to take account of whether a name with a single written form referring to more different objects is not distinguished just at the phonetic level; cf. M. Mangold (1995: 409): "Bestimmte gleichgeschriebene Namen können verschieden ausgesprochen werden, wenn sie unterschiedliche Namensorten bezeichnen." It is most necessary to compile a dictionary recording as many proper names as possible.

The lack of manuals is evident not only to those working at the LCC, but more so to professional speakers, especially those employed in the media. Moreover, pronunciation is also important for using the individual proper names in their written forms, given that the declension of proper names in Czech is influenced especially by their pronunciation. For example, a speaker needs to know how to pronounce the Romanian given personal name

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[2]　As N. Kadmon (2006: 100) states, one of the greatest problems concerning toponyms results from the fact that they originate from various languages. This statement can be, of course, applied to all proper names. Kadmon follows that onomasticians should solve the graphical form of names, as well as their pronunciation; he remarks that the sound level is primary.

Mircea [ˈmɪrtsʃa] to be able to decline it correctly. If we tried to determine the declension of this name on the basis of its written form alone, the spelling-based pronunciation of which would be [ˈmɪrtssɛa] in Czech, then this name would be assigned to a different declension class.

Another problem is that different printed sources do not always recommend the same pronunciation. For example, in the case of names of Romanian origin, the two most widely used manuals (Strahl 1999 and Honzáková et al. 2004) offer different recommendations with regard to the pronunciation of the combination *ce+a*. The recommended pronunciation of names like *Ceauşescu* is either [ˈt͡ʃʃa͡ʃuʃɛsku] or [ˈt͡ʃʃja͡ʃuʃɛsku].

Although some names whose pronunciation is problematic are included in geographic or onomastic handbooks (e.g. *Geografický místopisný slovník světa* 1999; *Index českých exonym* 2011; Lutterer et al. 1976), their pronunciation is often not specified or a transcription that is given does not, in my opinion, correspond to the contemporary pronunciation norm.

On some occasions the LCC receives queries from people who know the pronunciation of a particular name in the source language and who comment that the Czech pronunciation does not correspond to the original form. This, for example, is the case of a well-known street in Prague: *Legerova*. This street was named after *Louis Léger*, a French writer and Slavist. The Czech pronunciation of the given surname, based on French, is [ˈleʒe] (see Honzáková et al. 2004). However, the spelling-based pronunciation [ˈlɛgɛr] prevailed in this Czech street-name.

Similarly, [ˈʔajfɛlova] has become the established Czech pronunciation of the name of the famous Eiffel tower in Paris. However, the Czech pronunciation of the name of the architect *A. G. Eiffel* should be almost the same in Czech as in French, that is [ˈɛfɛl] (cf. e.g. Honzáková et al. 2004). The origin of the usual Czech pronunciation [ˈʔajfɛl] was caused by the ignorance of the French pronunciation in the period of the adaptation of this name into Czech, and probably also due to the influence of German. The combination *ei* is pronounced [aɟI9] in German; the name of the German mountains *Eifel* is pronounced [ˈa͡ʃɪfl̩] and the common noun *eifel* became a geological term.

Some uninformed speakers influenced by their knowledge of English tend to pronounce all foreign proper names as if they came from an English language background. For example, the name of the firm *Carrefour*, which is of a French origin (the French common noun *carrefour* means 'crossing') should be read [ˈkarfuːr] in Czech, while in everyday use, and even in media, the forms [ˈkɛrfuːr] or [ˈkɛːrfuːr] are also heard. Speakers probably assume that this name is of English origin and associate it with the common noun *care* [ˈkeə].

The influence of English on the pronunciation of foreign proper names is also observed in proper names of Slavic origin. The pronunciation of names of Croatian summer resorts frequently visited by Czech tourists is a typical example in this respect. For instance, there is a strong tendency to pronounce the initial consonant in the name of the island of *Cres* as [k] instead of [t͡ʃs], i.e. [kres]; the name of the summer resort *Rabac* is often pronounced incorrectly as [rabak].

The LCC has also received an inquiry concerning the pronunciation of the Prague street called *Hackerova*. The street was named after Karel Hacker, a Czech teacher and

actor. The proper Czech pronunciation of the street name derived from the surname of German origin is [ˈɦakɛrova] or [ˈɦakrova]. Similarity between this surname and the English common noun *hacker* [ˈhækə] is purely accidental; therefore the pronunciation form [ˈɦɛkrova] cannot be recommended.

There is much uncertainty regarding the pronunciation of the combinations written as *di*, *ti*, *ni*. In the words of Czech origin they are usually pronounced with a palatal consonant: that is, as [ɟɪ, cɪ, ɲɪ], while in words of foreign origin they are uttered with an alveolar consonant: [dɪ, tɪ, nɪ]. However, the origin of some proper names is unknown to speakers. The origin of many names is no longer obvious; these names have been naturalised to such an extent that the palatal pronunciation influenced by Czech principles is prevalent. The LCC encountered doubts concerning the pronunciation of the toponyms *Apeniny* 'Apennines' and *Maledivy* 'Maldives'. Czech manuals (cf. e.g. *Pravidla českého pravopisu* 1999; *Slovník spisovné češtiny* 2003) record only the non-palatal forms [ˈʔapɛnɪnɪ, ˈmalɛɲɪvɪ], though in practice we often encounter the palatal pronunciation [ˈʔapɛɲɪnɪ, ˈmalɛɟɪvɪ]. A similar case is noted for Serbian names like *Vojvodina* and *Priština* and the river name *Tisa*. The last name resembles the Czech common noun *tis* 'yew-tree', but it was formed through the shortening of the antique river name *Pathissus* (see Lutterer et al. 1976).

There is a lack of detailed up-to-date manuals that reflect the contemporary pronunciation norm, and this is evident not only when solving the questions connected with the pronunciation of (especially foreign) proper names. Research into the use and norms of pronunciation of foreign proper names is, in my opinion, an important issue, whose investigation should not be postponed. A major problem is the lack of sources in which the everyday and normative pronunciation forms can be traced. Unfortunately, no sufficiently extensive corpora of spoken language suitable for phonetic research are so far available for the Czech language. Potential sources could be compiled, for example, from the multimedia corpus Dialogue,[3] which contains records of Czech TV programmes, and the corpus Monologue[4], made up of monologues of professional speakers of the Czech Public Radio. However, due to the limited size of these corpora it is necessary to look both for more sources and for new research methods.

The cooperation between onomasticians and phoneticians would prove very useful in this respect. For example, the founding of the working group of UNGEGN (United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names), which focuses on the pronunciation of toponyms, offers important inspiration in this field.[5]

Phonologically non-integrated proper names constitute a peripheral, yet dynamic and remarkable area of the lexicon. They are characterised by a number of specific features including formal markedness, less transparent relationship between pronunciation and spelling, variable usage, as well as sociolinguistic implications like prestige and stigmatisation or socioprofessional stratification.

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[3] Cf. http://ujc.dialogy.cz/ (accessed May 30, 2013).
[4] Cf. http://monolog.dialogy.org/ (accessed May 30, 2013).
[5] Cf. http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/wg9.html (accessed May 30, 2013).

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