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# "I CAN'T SPEAK GERMAN SO I CAN'T COMMUNICATE WITH THEM": LANGUAGE USE IN INTERGROUP CONTACT BETWEEN CZECHS AND GERMANS

MAGDA PETRJÁNOŠOVÁ

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to present empirical findings about language use and attitudes in intergroup contact from one of the European borderlands along the former Iron Curtain more than twenty years after it fell. The data was collected as part of an international research project *Intergroup attitudes and intergroup contact in five Central European countries*, which concentrates on the interplay of intergroup contact and perceptions between members of neighbouring nations in the border regions of the Czech Republic and each of the neighbouring states—Slovakia, Poland, Austria and Germany. The main data collection method used is an online questionnaire with different attitude and evaluation scales, as well as a feeling thermometer of emotional relations and open statements (N=2900). In this text I use thematic and basic critical discursive analysis only on the open statements from the Czech (N=210) and German (N=152) borderlands about the situations of contact and the following evaluation of *the Others*. I show how the linguistic competence and also the interest in the language of the *Other* are distributed very unevenly; the implicit norm almost always being that the Czechs should speak German. Of course, this situation has in some cases strong emotional consequences.

**Keywords:** Czechs, Germans, intergroup contact, language use, attitudes

## Introduction

When two (or several) people from different national groups interact, the contact is often influenced by existing knowledge as well as stereotypes and prejudices about the other group—the interpersonal contact is in a way understood as being part of and is made part of the intergroup contact as well. If the two national groups have been neighbours for centuries, a significant proportion of these (often negative) stereotypes accumulates, usually including some conflicting themes and historical quarrels.

Moreover, as a person's identity is partly defined through difference in comparison to others (e.g. Keupp et al. 1999), *the Others* consequently have to be construed (understood and/or spoken about) as being different and thus people often tend to overstress differences over similarities.

Of course, real contact—often more positive than the stereotypes (e.g. Brown et al. 2007)—can retrospectively influence the stereotypes and change them (Allport 1954). The

*Intergroup Contact Hypothesis* (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998; for an overview of recent developments see Dovidio et al. 2003) has been based on this assumption; sometimes it is even seen as an effective strategy for improving intergroup relations. However, Allport (1954) declared that positively evaluated contacts improve intergroup relations only under several conditions, one of which is equal status of the groups. As I explain and document later in the text, the status of Czechs and Germans can be considered unequal in several ways.

Perhaps these three dimensions form the main frame in which we can understand the rather sobering statements about the contact between these two national groups, as analyzed below.

The aim of this text is to present empirical findings on language use and attitudes in intergroup contact from one of the European borderlands and the paper is mainly data-driven. Nonetheless, I begin by briefly commenting on the theoretical framework for our analysis concerning the connections between identity, difference and language.

## Language, identity and difference

What is most often and most easily observed and evaluated in *Others* is their behaviour, the language they speak and their *mentality*; the last being quite a broad concept, most often explained in primordial terms, as being something unchangeable and acquired through birth, upbringing or education (for more details on *primordialism* see Geertz 1973). The status of language is thereby special in several ways. Above all, being *Other* in an ethnical sense is often marked by use of another language and also the individual's identity is co-construed through language use as well as through ideas on languages in general, e.g. defining the status of a language as that of a language or just a dialect. Language and linguistic competence are thus key factors in ethnolinguistic identity construction (Carli et al. 2003). Furthermore, different languages (even when given official language status and not considered dialects) can have different levels of prestige and social scientists can observe several related socio-psychological phenomena connected to linguistic power issues such as the evaluation of the language and positive or negative language attitudes (including a willingness to learn it), etc. (Phillipson 1992 in Carli et al. 2003).

In general, border communities provide good opportunities for studying the relationships between language and identity as they are experienced in everyday life. Sometimes the borders between national states and between linguistic groups do not overlap completely; nonetheless, the border between Germany and the Czech Republic is also a linguistic border—the members of both groups use mainly their own language and for them it is a self-evident marker of their own and the Others' identity. The Czechs and Germans are a good example of typical central European neighbours trying to establish a new frame of coexistence in the unifying European Union. After forty years of their respective living spaces being divided by the Iron Curtain, in recent times, with the Czech Republic's EU accession in 2004 and its accession to the Schengen area[1] in 2007, the borders "dissolve"

[1] The Schengen area covers most of the EU states which have signed and implemented the Schengen Treaty. There are border controls only when entering or leaving the whole territory, but not between the member states.

where many pragmatic questions are concerned and the states are coming closer together. But as they do, old and new inequalities show through.

The Czech Republic and Germany are in many terms unequal neighbours—Germany is objectively much bigger and more economically developed. But as Holly et al. (2003) mention, in addition there are always less objective and less obvious asymmetries which show up in the qualitative empirical material—asymmetries concerning semantic constructions and mental maps of both territories. These are connected to stereotypes about *Us* and *the Others* in a broader sense, including emotional and evaluative elements and these are often resistant to counter-examples. But people rarely address sensitive topics directly. Thus, perceived asymmetries can be spoken about openly as is the case with explicit comparisons, but more often the participants compare things covertly, voicing their thoughts about one side, and referring implicitly to the other. At the same time, most people do not speak about these things in neutral terms but rather in contextual terms—being members either of the advantaged or the disadvantaged group, expressing feelings of superiority or inferiority and coping with such perceived asymmetries in different ways—they ignore them, explain them away, use compensatory explanations or reinterpret them in a non-conflictual way (see more details in Holly et al. 2003).

**Empirical findings and methodology**

In this paper I present a qualitative analysis of specific empirical findings from the international project *Intergroup attitudes and intergroup contact in five Central European countries.* The project concentrates on the interplay of intergroup contact and perception between the members of neighbouring nations in the border regions of the Czech Republic and each of the neighbouring states—Austria, Germany, Poland and Slovakia.

The main data collection method was an online questionnaire with attitude and evaluation scales, as well as a feeling thermometer of emotional relations and open statements about the situations of contact and the following evaluation of *the Others* (N=2900). In this text I shall concentrate only on the analysis of open statements[2] from the Czech (N=210) and German (N=152) borderlands.

Our team is composed of a variety of nationalities with different experiences. There are five women—three Czech citizens, one Polish and one Slovak. Four of us have been living in one of the other countries for several years and speak our neighbour's language fluently and understand the culture as well. We hope that in some way this will help us to discover the implicit meanings as well and to really understand the way our participants construe *the Others*. Using both thematic and basic critical discursive analysis, we concentrate on perceptions of the other national group including the emotional component, ascribed characteristics, thematized differences and similarities, references to any broadly shared stereotypes, as well as the language of contact and the consequences of this choice—all these

[2] The exact phrasing of the question was (here for the Czech participants): "*Before we begin, think of an experience with a German person, either when you were abroad or here in the Czech Republic. How did the German person behave in this specific situation? How did you behave? Please describe this situation in the space below."*

topics came out of the empirical findings themselves. In this paper I shall focus on language use in its broader context with a very short introductory comment on economic asymmetry as the biggest perceived difference between the Czechs and the Germans.

When using the original statements of our participants in the cited extracts, I translate them into English and give the number of the statement in our database at the end of the quotation.

## Results: Czechs and Germans in everyday interactions

*A short introductory comment on economic inequality and its consequences*

In relation to the subjectively perceived differences between the national groups, both sides frequently refer to the sphere of economics. When talking about the more advanced German economy, the participants from both sides of the border use general and rather benign terms such as a *different* or *higher standard of living*, a *different economic background*, etc, but quite often they simply speak about a *difference* and apparently do not feel the need to elaborate further, probably because they are sure that they are referring to such a generally known truth that everybody will understand what they mean.

Of course, this asymmetry of wealth between the two states also manifests itself in all kinds of everyday practices where people try to exploit the difference, such as shopping tourism (and its excesses), work migration, etc. It seems that our participants understand these practices as being entirely normal and do not think twice about their one-sidedness—the Germans come to the Czech Republic to eat in restaurants, to stay in hotels or simply to shop cheaply, whereas the Czechs go to Germany mainly to work or to study, or (rarely) to shop for goods of higher quality. The participants mostly do not comment on that; they just describe who was doing what on the other side of the border as a framework for the stories they tell us about specific encounters with the *Others*, as we will show below.

*Language of contact*[3]

An interesting asymmetry shows up systematically in the language chosen for communication in situations where there is contact between the members of the national groups and in their attitudes to this choice. Almost universally everybody supposes that the Czechs should speak or at least understand German. On this implicit norm there is broad consensus from both sides (see ext. 1 by a Czech participant and ext. 2 by a German) and in the overwhelming majority of cases the supposition is automatic, the asymmetry is not commented upon and the language of contact is mentioned only when speaking about something else, often about the good (ext. 2) or poor (ext. 1) ability to communicate:

[3] Czech and German are quite different languages: Czech is a Slavic language and German belongs to the Germanic language group. The grammar of both is fairly complicated—the nouns decline, the verbs conjugate differently for each person and there are seven and four cases respectively.

**Ext. 1: I can't speak German very well so I can't communicate with them**
*I don't have a lot of experience with Germans, but they are not very likeable, in my opinion. In the Czech Republic I find that they are too loud and behave in an ill-mannered way (especially the young ones). I can't speak German very well so I can't communicate with them.* (1271)

**Ext. 2: Because the members of my family speak German, understanding the language was not a problem**
*Because I have family in the Czech Republic, the contact with Czechs was always nice and interesting. Because the members of my family speak German, I had no problems understanding.* (1800)

The same imbalance is also to be found in a large international project conducted along the former Iron Curtain almost in its entirety (Meinhof et al. 2003)—the language spoken on the western side of the border was always the more prestigious one and the participants from the western side always explained how *over there* (on the other side) the people spoke their language. They judged bilingualism positively but it was always *the Others* who had to learn the western language. People from the western side did not know the other language and did not want to learn it, except for those in mixed marriages, those who had relatives on the other side, etc. (Carli et al. 2003).

Almost reiterating this, our empirical research shows that the possibility that they might speak Czech together is not really taken into account in most cases. There are only a few exceptions and only one of them among the German open statements:

**Ext. 3: I did not speak Czech and they spoke only broken English**
*I only know Czechs through a student exchange. There were a lot of communication problems, because I didn't speak Czech and they spoke only broken English. That's why I didn't get to know them properly. But my impression is that they are very much like the Germans.* (1842)

Also in the following extracts, two Czech participants, who when describing a situation where minor communication problems occurred, consider it the norm to speak German and do not view the fact that they are Czechs speaking to Germans in their native language (German) as a positive. On the contrary, in the first case (ext. 4), it is the Germans they judge positively for being *considerate* of them and *for speaking in a simple way*:

**Ext. 4: They were very considerate of me; they spoke in a simple way**
*During the holidays I met two German men and a woman. They were very friendly and invited me to do a lot of things with them. At the beginning I was reserved and was not sure whether to go. But after a few days I saw that they were really nice. It also took a while for me to get used to the German, which I don´t speak as well as I would like, so we sometimes had problems understanding each other at all, but they were very considerate of me; they spoke in a simple way. After the holiday we began writing to each other for a while but then communication ground to a halt from my side, mainly because of the language barrier.* (1258)

In the second case (ext. 5), the person viewed positively is the German woman, who was *willing to communicate,* ignoring the grammatical mistakes rather than the Czech participant herself, who was giving the German woman the directions she needed and moreover, was able to do so in the native language of the tourist:

**Ext. 5: She was willing to communicate with me regardless of my non-grammatical German**
*The German behaved in a very friendly way, she was willing to communicate with me regardless of my non-grammatical German. I was behaving in a friendly way, the lady wanted to know which route to take to get to Pravcicka brana* [a rock doorway] *and how many kilometres she would have to go. I gave her the wrong answer and the lady understood that I meant 60 and not 6 kilometres, so we have a good laugh together, too.* (1284)

Only in a few other statements is this unequal situation referred to in an explicit way. In general, it is the Czechs who discuss the inequality since they are the group with the inferior status language and have to do more to engage in a (satisfying) contact situation with the other national group. Thus, some of their statements are very critical—they describe Germans as having *an inability to learn Czech, as demanding the use of their language* [German]*, as being unwilling to use another language* [English, etc]*, as being unwilling to understand imperfect German*, etc. In this context, the theme of the language of contact is brought up along with the themes of *immoderate self-esteem, arrogance and the subjective superiority* of Germans:

**Ext. 6: I've seen arrogance and an unwillingness to use any language other than their own**
*Unfortunately, I confess that as far as Germans are concerned, my experience is not a positive one, because I've seen arrogance and an unwillingness to use any language other than their own, when trying to communicate in their native language, which, I confess, I am not good at all and I've also experienced an unwillingness to understand me when I´ve made mistakes. This bad experience makes me a little unwilling to communicate with Germans again. But I have to confess that I've also met a few really wonderful Germans with whom I have a friendly relationship, so I try not to "judge them all in the same way", as the saying goes, and to believe that there will be more of the positive situations.* (1176)

In extract no. 6 it can be seen how *the unwillingness to use another language* and *the unwillingness to understand non-native German* are construed in a relationship with *arrogance* and with a clear consequence—the participant explains in this way her unwillingness to communicate with Germans again. But the strong statement is weakened in several instances. First, at the very beginning, she starts with the word *unfortunately* and goes on to describe what she does when summing up her negative experience using the verb *I confess*, as if doing something bad. We can interpret this as a sign that the participant understands very well that it would be more appropriate and socially acceptable to speak positively about the other group, but decides to break this implicit social norm because she really wants to convey how much it upset her. Later, after the generalized negative judgement, she relativizes it, when she mentions another, clearly smaller group—*a few wonderful Germans*—with whom she has a friendly relationship. The conclusion of the statement thus favours an individualized approach towards (and judgement of) the members of the other national group, even if the statement started by negatively judging *the Germans*.

In all these statements there were no clear signs as to whether some Germans have in fact demanded all these things of the Czechs in relation to their use of German during the contact—theoretically, this could simply have been a subjective impression from the Czech side. But I have found also a few Czech open statements where such demands were reported as being direct quotations of what specific German individuals had said, see e.g. extract no. 7:

**Ext. 7: Germans have been coming to the Czech Republic for long enough, so we should speak German**

*When I had a summer job in a supermarket, an older German couple came up to me and my colleague and asked us to show them where they could find "something". Unfortunately, neither me nor my colleague could understand what the word meant, so we did not know what item they were looking for. We politely asked them to describe what it was they were looking for. We offered to speak English, Russian or French, but they said no to everything. In the end they told us that they thought that Germans had been coming to the Czech Republic for long enough so we should speak German.* (1254)

The participant ends her narrative abruptly with the punch line; she apparently does not feel any need to describe her feelings, possibly because she is counting on the fact that her attitude will be generally shared and that the alleged request of the German couple will be understood as being completely inappropriate and excessive also by the researchers to whom the answer in the questionnaire is directed. This effect of the narrative is also achieved when the narrator describes how she and her colleague suggested that they could speak in another world language, but the German couple declined and explicitly demanded that German be the language of contact.

Similar behaviour was described by another Czech participant who reports *to have been angrily told not to answer* [in German] *at all, if she did not know the grammar* (1323), but she describes the incident more as a funny anecdote than a negative experience compared to a lot of positive ones. Another Czech participant summed the situation up laconically by saying: "*The language barrier poses a problem, but the Germans think the other person is to be blamed not them*" (1196). In other open statements where the participants refer to similar experiences where they are explicitly requested to communicate in German they also clearly state their emotional response—they report *not liking* such behaviour, that *they are annoyed* by it, *infuriated*. Apparently little stories like these are easily understood by all as a way of expressing negative attitudes towards the other national group, yet at the same time achieving the goal of making them sound bad—arrogant or at least ridiculous.

On the contrary, attempts by Germans to speak Czech, even if they consist of only a few words, are evaluated very positively. In some statements, it was enough for the Germans *to greet the person in Czech* or *to use a few basic phrases,* for them to be viewed positively but nevertheless, such cases appear to be very sporadic because this situation is referred to in only 3 out of the 210 Czech open statements. Carli et al. (2003) talk in such cases about an *ethnic stylisation* adopted when someone speaking the more prestigious language shows a small interest in and curiosity about the less prestigious language, not comparable with serious study of the language.

But there still remains a striking asymmetry between the demand for more or less fluent German on the Czech side and the enthusiasm caused by a few Czech words on the German side. I interpret this distinction in terms of a substantial asymmetry in the importance of one national group for the other, which can be shown systematically in the empirical findings from both sides of the border concerning many facets of the contact situations.

An appeal to apply some principle of justice was found in only two statements, both of which were from Czech participants, which suggested that the choice of language to be used in communication should be that of the country where the participants are physically

located at the time. Interestingly, even if their statements seem quite radical in their appeal for justice, in both of them the demand that Germans should communicate in Czech in the Czech Republic was discursively weakened: in extract no. 8 through the adjective *a little bit* and the use of the verb *to make an effort to communicate* instead of simply *to communicate*, in the extract no. 9 through the verb *to make an effort:*

**Ext. 8: So they should make a little bit of an effort to communicate in Czech**
*…The only thing about them that perhaps annoys me is their noisiness, expansionism and last but not least the fact that if they want to come here then they should make a little bit of an effort to communicate in Czech; we also make an effort to speak German in Germany. But I also know them to be decent and obliging people.* (1274)

In extract no. 8 the whole statement is constructed in an interesting way. First, the participant says, *perhaps* there is *only one thing* about Germans that annoys her. She appears to be trying to discuss things in a socially acceptable way, describing her opinion about the other national group rather positively, introducing only a slight criticism and using several weakening discursive mechanisms to make it sound small and unimportant. But after this introduction follows a whole list of German wrongdoings: *noisiness, expansionism* and a lack of *effort to communicate in Czech.* It seems the harmless introduction is used only so that she can express negative attitudes. Once she expresses them, we might have the impression that the speaker checks herself and realizes how badly she has spoken of *the Others* and tries to rectify this by her last rather incongruent sentence about also knowing the Germans *to be decent and obliging people.*

Extract no. 9 also tackles the subject of justice in using Czech as the language of contact when in the Czech Republic, but it also includes an alternative solution as if the speaker were very well aware that the demand is quite unrealistic—the Germans need not learn Czech, but instead of their arrogance they should show some *appreciation* of those who communicate with them in German:

**Ext. 9: Or they should show some appreciation**
*I don't like the way they are very offended if I don't want to speak German in the Czech Republic, if I go to Germany nobody speaks to me in any language other than German so they should at least make an effort to speak Czech in the Czech Republic or at least show some appreciation of the fact that I'm trying to help them.* (1270)

## Conclusions

The aim of this mainly data-driven article was to present some empirical findings on language use and attitudes in intergroup contact from one of the European borderlands along the former Iron Curtain more than twenty years after it fell. As I have concentrated only on the subject of language use in the intergroup contact between Czechs and Germans and the related topics, I did not elaborate on other interesting themes found in the open statements, concerning e.g. the issue of subjective comparisons between the two national groups; references to the existence of broadly shared stereotypes and whether they are relevant or irrelevant; passing references to taboo themes (connected mainly with difficult episodes in their shared history) in conversations with *the Others*, etc. But to sum up the findings

presented here in one sentence, I could say that I have found that the inequality between the two national groups is substantial in many areas—an inequality both sides are very familiar with.

I have shown how linguistic competence and also interest in the language of the *Other* are distributed very unevenly; the implicit norm almost always being that the Czechs should speak German. As I mentioned above, a large research project conducted along the former Iron Curtain (Meinhof 2003) showed similar findings—it was always the people from the eastern (and former socialist) country who had to learn the more prestigious western language for practical purposes and this corresponded to expectations from both sides. The same was also found concerning interactions between Slovaks and Austrians and their attitudes towards each other (Lášticová, Petrjánošová, in press).

Across the other borderlands in our large research project the findings on language use in intergroup contact were different because the languages involved were also very different, but the situation is exactly the same in the Czech-Austrian borderland (just the language is different—Austrian German). In the Czech-Slovak and Czech-Polish borderlands it is more complicated because the two languages are quite similar; in fact they are mutually intelligible to the extent that there is no need to study the other language for basic understanding. But even in these areas it is the case that the more western language (Czech) is seen as having a somewhat higher status. At this point I dare not hypothesize why that should be so.

Coming back to the Czechs and Germans, our empirical findings suggest that knowledge about the other group also seems to be unevenly distributed: German statements about the Czechs were shorter, sketchier and more often stated that the participant had not thus far any contact with members of the other national group (N=12 out of 152). On the contrary, on the Czech side we had only four such answers in total out of 210. The majority of participants could immediately offer substantial experience of their German neighbours and had opinions about them that they could justify. We interpret this in the sense that it is just another sign of a more general asymmetry in the extent to which people from one side of the border pay attention to the people from the other side—how interested one side is in the other and the extent to which the others are important and relevant as a referencing group.[4]

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Institute for Research in Social Communication,
Slovak Academy of Sciences,
Dubravska cesta,
Klemensova 19
813 64 Bratislava
Slovakia
E-mail: magda.petrjanosova@savba.sk