

Language Ferments

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Other Terms, Other Conditions: A *NatureCulture* Blog Series

How do concepts move between languages and get stuck? How are they molded, folded, and digested in the hands and mouths of foreign speakers? The notes in this post reflect on and arise from encounters between three languages, Czech, German and English and involve two voices: Tereza, who is a Czech native speaker, sociologist and STS scholar based in Prague for most of her life, and Robin, who has edited most of Tereza's academic texts in English over the past decade or more - including this one. With more than 20 years of professional experience, Robin, a native Canadian living in Prague since early 1992, has translated, edited, and in some ways enabled a huge volume of Czech social science production, yet she is mostly an invisible mediator in the wider transmission of Czech social science.

The main text—by Tereza, with many invisible interferences (save one) by Robin— suggests that traffic(king) concepts across (“imperial” and minor) languages can be productively approached with the help of the imaginary of microbial fermentation. In contrast to the risk of the oppression of a minor language, it highlights the impure, collective, multidirectional, and uncontrollable aspects of language circulation processes. The main text is accompanied by a boxed (not black-boxed this time!) [conversation](#) in which the voice and logics of a professional language editor comes to the forefront.

The fermentation of “imperial” languages in(to) Czech

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Robert Dunn and his colleagues carried out an experiment with bread bakers and bacteria. They asked eighteen bakers from fourteen countries to use a standardized recipe and ingredients to make starters, from which the bakers then baked bread. With the help of genome sequencing the fungi and bacteria associated with the starters, the bakers' hands, and the ingredients, they concluded that

“Even when the recipe and ingredients for starter and bread are identical, different bakers around the globe produce highly diverse starters which then alter bread acidity and flavor. Much of the starter microbial community comes from bread flour, but the diversity is also associated with differences in the microbial community on the hands of bakers. These results indicate that bakers may be a source for yeast and bacteria in their breads and/or that bakers' jobs are reflected in their skin microbiome.” (Reese et al. 2020)

This experiment is a lovely example of global circulation, where the same ingredients result in somewhat different products due to the localized fermentation process. It also highlights how nothing that moves or is transported from one location to be placed or to settle in another does so in isolation. Matter moves and settles in untamable multitudes—even if they are formed by invisible microbes. Our professional (and other) histories leave traces of microbes in and on us.

In this paper I suggest that the imaginary of multispecies flows and transactions offers an interesting way in which to consider how words and concepts from “imperial” languages, specifically German and English, make it into the Czech language. How they may inhabit it in more or less visible ways, and how they contribute to a variety of its tastes. I suggest they can be conceived as having been *fermented in(to)* Czech.

Wait a minute, the language editor alerts the author: “The way the word fermentation or related words is used doesn't always work in the text, by which I mean it is being used to signify this movement into the Czech language, where one might normally talk about a

word percolating or filtering into the language. There's no problem with the idea of fermentation, but there's a need to get around the lexical limitations of the word by phrasing the process in some other way."

The author ventures to resist in this particular case: "I know a native English speaker might not wish to 'torture' the English reader in this way, but my not being an English speaker allows me to do so. Percolating or filtering sound too mechanical to me. They suggest a slightly different process to fermentation—one that cannot be completely governed or engineered. Perhaps unusual usage of the word will spark some productive conceptual reflection among native English speakers. Moreover, as Annemarie Mol (2020: 392-393) notes, native users of English (or Czech for that matter—see below), may sometimes disagree on what their language can do and what it articulates."

The following text offers a few empirical vignettes to, rather unsystematically, illustrate the different ways in which "imperial languages" ferment in(to) Czech. I deliberately want to highlight the productive, collective, and somewhat uncontrollable nature of this process and argue that even if the over the centuries the Czech lands have been a part of different successive empires and have been implicated in different geopolitical struggles and shifting warzones, language traffic(ing) cannot be reduced simply to imperial oppression.

The German borderlands

When the Czech lands were part of the Habsburg Monarchy, German was the dominant language, especially in urban centers, while various forms of vernacular Czech were spoken across the countryside. Even after the Czech language was consolidated and became one of the official languages of the new independent state established in 1918, the traces of German influence could still be found in the Czech language—and they still can now.

Some words that were originally German have become a standard part of the Czech language, their roots in German invisible to most

people—for example, *knedlík*, the Czech word for dumpling, comes from the German *Knödel*. The Czech *knedlík* and the German *Knödel* may look slightly different and be served in combination with somewhat different companion foods, but the concept of a dumpling is denoted by both and the word *knedlík* is completely natural and unmarked in Czech, with any sense of its German roots largely forgotten.

This is not, however, the case of many other Czech words of German origin. For example, *fotr* in Czech comes from the German *Vater* but has a rather different connotation and expresses a different feeling than *otec*, which is the standard Czech word for “father.” In most contexts, use of the word *fotr* sounds crude and offensive. Similarly, it may be acceptable to use the word *ksicht* (from the German *Gesicht*) to talk about one’s own face, but you had better use the standard word *tvář* to refer to someone else’s face—if you want to avoid offending the other person or play a special language game with her. In these cases where two (or more) variants of a concept coexist, it is the difference between them that creates the nuance in meaning (the specific acidity and taste) of each variant. Usually, the German variant sounds less polite, which perhaps reflects some uneasy aspects of and frictions in the history of Czech-German coexistence.

The origin of some words in Czech and German and the direction of the traffic remain unclear. For example, some scholars claim that the term *bouda* came to Czech from the German *Baude* (chalet in English); others have hypothesized that it was the other way round. It is probably no coincidence that you mostly find these chalets in the Sudetenland, a mountainous area in what is now the Czech Republic’s border region, where Germans and Czechs lived side by side for centuries. Fermentation processes are hardly ever clear and fully traceable.

The geopolitics of English

English started to “ferment” into Czech after 1989 following the change in political regime. This fermentation process occurred in connection with the political reorientation of the country, the acceleration of economic globalization, and the rise of the digital technologies and social media that have become a part of everyday life. When you “like”

a post on social media, in Czech you *lajkuješ* [like-oo-yesh] it. There is no Czech alternative to describe this act. *Smart cities* is a fancy concept trumpeted in the Czech Republic using the English term but often then proving to be nothing more than an empty slogan (and an easy way to get EU funding for different projects). I prefer to see it translated into Czech—*chytré město*—as to me this is a sign that at least some effort (though there is no guarantee!) has been made to *translate* the notion into meaningful, localized usage in the Czech city to which it is being applied, instead of lazily relying on an English buzzword with a supposedly universal meaning and associated set of standardized urban material practices.



Figure 1: Czech *miso* peaso (source: <https://www.odsmoliku.cz/miso-2>)

During my fieldwork on microbiopolitical citizenship in Czechia, I encountered a local vinegar and miso manufacturer who produces

“peaSo”. Inspired by Japanese *kōji* production and culinary traditions, the manufacturer insists strongly on localizing miso for ecological, logistic, and culinary reasons. It uses the *kōji* mold *Aspergillus Oryzae*, the spores of which it imports from Japan, and combines the mold with European ingredients - Czech peas and barley, and Italian rice - to avoid having to ship any products from East Asia. The manufacturer localizes recipes to make the product accessible to a wider culinary public in the country, and to people who may have little experience and a less developed taste for traditional strong *misos*. Its *misos* are “lighter” and less salty – but they are still salty enough to be durable as an unpasteurized food as this allows to preserve the food’s nutritional value by ecological, low-energy means – as opposed, for instance, to the method of freezing. Along with the strong emphasis on ecological and culinary localization, the manufacturer uses an English-language brand name and the hashtag “peaSo”, thereby linking their product to wider, international, English-speaking contexts and communities of people, who translate the original Japanese concept of miso as a paste made from soy into one made from peas. For ecological reasons, the Czech manufacturer is not interested in exporting its products; on the contrary, the company dreams of having most of its customers in regional proximity to the company’s base. The use of English helps to make the manufacturer’s deliberately local product cosmopolitan.

There are, however, some English words that have not been easily digested and accepted by many Czech-language speakers. One of them is *gender*. Since the 1990s, when gender studies entered the local academic and public discourse, this word has never become fully and comfortably at home in the Czech language. After initial debates about the possible translation of the English term into Czech (the alternative suggestion was to use the Czech word *rod*, which denotes the grammatical category of gender and also means “family lineage”), the English word *gender* was adopted as the lexical vehicle for speaking about and researching “social” constructions and expectations relating to women and men, which are deemed largely contingent (unlike *pohlaví*, the term used to indicate *sex*, for example, on ID cards and in public opinion polls, which denotes the mainstream understanding of *sex* as a biological and naturalized bodily reality). The concept of *gender*

was used by some to legitimize new research streams and agendas in the social sciences and humanities after the regime change in 1989. The use of an English term and the access Czech gender studies scholars thereby gained to foreign funding and to publishing opportunities in established international journals and with prestigious book publishers helped to weaken resistance to this concept among the more conservative segments of local academia.

On the other hand, this may also have contributed to the lack of a more sustained attempt to establish the concept's local relevance, as Nyklová (2018) argues. Moreover, the English term has at times been used as a trick to sidestep the political loadedness of the issues being addressed. As a result, instead of politicizing and denaturalizing *pohlaví* and challenging the strict divide between the biological and the social, using the English term gender allowed the allegedly pure biological meaning of *pohlaví* to be left largely untouched in the understanding of both academia and the public. The fermentation process this English term has undergone in the Czech language and in the political environment has resulted in rather diverse outcomes, which is to say, in diverse conceptions and practical uses of the term in different domestic spaces and different work- and public places (Nyklová, Fárová 2018).

For an organic language economy

In “Living Sámi Lands,” Joks, Østmo and Law (2020: 13) dismiss words with some *other* origin as “loanwords” and contrast them with existing Sami words. I tend to be more open to these “other” words, even if they have come to Czech from an “imperial” language, which means they could have an oppressive or silencing effect on the Czech. If we think about their global circulation in the sense of microbial fermentation, a more nuanced picture emerges. Without underestimating the asymmetries at play (I discuss them in Stöckelová 2012, 2016), I wanted to foreground the lively and multifaceted ways in which languages are intra-acted.

Loanwords get nuanced flavors as they exist and express meaning in the context and company of domestic terms. Oftentimes the word's origins and journey through the language are fuzzy. The economy of these loans is not mechanical but rather organic and largely

ungovernable. No standard record-keeping system would ever be able to easily track the trajectories of these loans, because even if these imperial linguistic objects were well-packaged and labelled and traveled in isolation (which they don't anyway) the fermentation process would result in their being quickly absorbed and then converted into various new "objects" in the new language environment. And if the loanwords were to return to where they came from, they would be returned *altered*.

As we can see, a receiving language community is not homogeneous and may be structured, for example, by and along the lines of professional activities. As Dunn and colleagues (2020) suggest in their study, "microorganisms on our hands may record not just who we are but also how we have lived, with bakers' bodies specifically documenting their intimate relationships with bread." The following conversation with the language editor is an attempt to "sequence" professional hands that are "contaminated" in and by an everyday engagement with the fermentation of social science concepts in(to) Czech and back in(to) English. As undecided Dunn and colleagues are about all the multidirectional microbial flows between the raw ingredients, starters and bakers' skin microbiome shall we probably stay about the actual agency of a particular language editor with regard to localized scientific discourse. But agency there is!

Instead of offering readers a Czech concept to appropriate, I suggest this idea of a fermentation process, which they can use to experimentally consider ways of relating to other languages. I believe there is nothing specifically Czech about this process. The resulting *linguistic ferments* will, however, always be localized. But if you wonder what "fermentation" is in Czech, it's *kvašení*. The most emblematic local examples of a fermented food are lactic acid pickled cabbage (or the German "sauerkraut"), gherkins, and *syrečky* (or Quargel in German), a small, round, smelly, ripened cheese.

And, of course, another highly popular mode of *kvašení* is bottom fermentation (using brewers' yeasts) employed to produce lager beer. Interestingly, many Czechs will tell you they become more fluent in foreign languages after having a beer or two.

Invisible mediators: Conversation with an English language editor

Robin Cassling came to the Czech Republic in 1992. She works as an editor and translator in the fields of art, architecture, sociology, history, and the humanities generally. She studied history and French at the University of Toronto before moving to Europe.

Tereza: You started working as a language editor in the late 1990s. What have been the most significant changes during the past 20 years?

Robin: I get a lot more requests for editing now, or what people call proofreading, but it's really editing. There is still plenty of translation work, but there are many more people writing in English now than 20 years ago. I think it's a little more common. Maybe I'm wrong, but my feeling is there is more writing being done generally now than there used to be. But I don't have any data to back that up.

T: Yeah, I think especially in English, the greater proportion of output is in English rather than Czech. What would be the other main changes you could observe over the years?

R: I think it's related to the fact that people have to write a lot more. What was a little different in the past was that sometimes people didn't know—I shouldn't say "they didn't know," that's not right—that in international or English publishing there is a certain format that you have to more or less stick to, and that wasn't entirely familiar. Say, sometimes a paper had no introduction, or the introduction was almost word for word identical to the paragraph in the next section or to the conclusion, or there was no conclusion, the format was different. There's no reason to say that this is the only way you are supposed to write a paper, I don't want to say that. But it is something that everybody does now. People know what's expected when they're writing a paper for an international journal. I don't think you encounter this difference anymore. I'm not judging, it's just an adaptation to something.

T: How would you describe the English format? What are the features constituting the right format of a paper?

R: All I can say is what I remember being told as an undergraduate from the very beginning: you have to have an introduction, you have to have

a conclusion, and all your references must be in order. Not having your references in order was a really big deal. And that is actually something that could be a problem. Maybe it is or was a problem generally, I don't know. Sometimes the references could be a real mess. It's been surprising how bad they could be.

T: Have you noticed any changes in the way people reference other texts in their papers? Not in terms of the alphabetical order but the types of texts and how they refer to them?

R: I can't say that I have. I don't think that means they haven't. Maybe things are a little more careful now. Sometimes in the past I found that some things were a little too word for word, a little too close to the original ... You could find things where—and this actually happened not that long ago—someone translated something into Czech, a quote or a sentence, pretty much word for word. Then it's written like that in the person's paper in Czech, and when you translate the text back into English you find that it's a Czech translation word for word of what was in the original. Honestly, I don't know if that's wrong, if the words are in another language and you cite the source of the idea, but it feels wrong—I've just never found any guidelines on this. The words are in another language, no one is presenting the idea as their own, and the author is properly cited, but when you translate it into English there's a risk of it sounding almost like a quote, but without quotation marks. And as the translator you would have no way of knowing this ... And if you do discover it, while doing research for the translation, then you say: 'I can't actually translate it like that because it would sound like plagiarism.' I mean, the author's name is there, but it is almost a quote.

T: What are the most difficult issues you have encountered when working with texts by Czech authors?

R: Terminology is a bit difficult. I don't think it's as big a problem anymore, but it can be. I've usually been more inclined to move away from using too much terminology in a text. First of all because I may not know all the terms. But second of all because I sometimes feel the writing needs to be a bit more 'plain English', that communicating the idea clearly to as many people as possible is, to me, more important than sticking to terms, or at least there should be a balance. I feel sometimes that the terminology is a little more important in Czech,

that there's a little more emphasis on terminology in academic writing. Maybe you can get away with a little bit less terminology in English. At least you can if you are writing as a native-English speaker. I know that one Czech academic said to me that I need to keep lots of these terms and difficult words in her paper because without them, when she submits it, they think it's not 'scholarly' enough, the language isn't sophisticated enough, which I understand. But that might not be expected from a native English speaker.

I think the difficulty is finding that balance. The author may be worried that when they submit the paper if it doesn't sound, you know, fancy enough, for lack of a better way of putting it, sophisticated enough, that's a real concern. Peer review is an anonymous process, but maybe there is an unconsciousness bias among some reviewers in Western journals that Eastern European authors are writing in English as a second language and their English isn't good enough yet or something like that. Since you can tell from the content of the paper sometimes where it's been written, and sometimes I've read reviews, when I've edited an author's responses to a reviewer, and I've seen a comment like 'needs to be proofread' or 'language editing required'—and more often than not the comment has clearly been written by someone whose first language isn't English—I've wondered whether the reviewer isn't being too critical. But this, too, seems less and less common—except in art history. I have no direct experience but from my second-hand experience, through authors, art history journals sometimes feel like impenetrable fortresses. Some really good writing and hard work can then get rejected. I can see why people are concerned. You have to adopt the right register so that it not only *is* a good paper but *sounds* like a good academic paper. It feels a little unfair to expect people to communicate their academic work in English and then reject them if they can't communicate like someone who has been writing in English all their life.

T: Can you give me some examples of a term that gets overused from your experience?

R: Back in the early 90s, I remember hearing about one English academic who complained that he never wanted to hear the word *transition* again, because it was just everywhere. Which wasn't a fault of

any academics, local or otherwise, it was really just the discussion of the time that everything was in *transition*. So, I think that it happens in periods, when there's just too much of something.

Sometimes this issue is that people say, 'Oh, it's *terminus technicus*. Everybody knows the word, everybody in my field knows it.' I think, okay, maybe. But I still think people need to explain things, or maybe it's a good idea not to overestimate or assume what people know. An issue now, and it's not an academic term, but one issue is the name *Czechia*, for instance. Geographers insist on *Czechia* instead of the Czech Republic, and they say it's widely known in the literature and everybody uses it. I'm not convinced that's true, but they say they have to use it, so in it goes. But my view is that if somebody isn't familiar with the name *Czechia*, okay, they can look it up, but why make things more difficult to them, since they're more likely to already be familiar with the Czech Republic as the country's name.

T: Are there some Czech terms that are especially difficult to translate into English and when you translate it much gets lost? What are the concepts where the two languages do not map onto each other well?

R: There are always lots of examples of this in translation. For instance, I think something like *kutilství*, which came up a long time ago in sociology when I was working on a sociological paper, where the author talked about *kutilství*, but it's not enough just to translate this as DIY or home improvements, because *české kutilství* is more than that, it's like a whole approach to solving problems or doing things (especially before 1989, I think), it connotes more than just home improvements or hobbies, I think. Translating this isn't straightforward. But there are lots of words like that. There are specific things in art and architecture that don't translate easily. Things that exist here and have come from German are sometimes very hard to translate because you can't reproduce them very well in English, and I think in English they often just use German terms for them.

T: Such as?

R: Things like *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, I think they just use the German terms in English when they talk about these things. And that's not an exception. There's a lot in philosophy. When you come across

something and you try to produce it in English, it doesn't work, but the German and the Czech seem to line up much better. And everybody will say: "You can't say that in English, you can only say it in German or Czech."

There are a lot of things in Czech history where it doesn't seem there are any long-established equivalents in English. And I wonder if it is because of the long gap in communication that existed between languages. You can find terms or concepts that have been discussed between more widely spoken languages—such as German, English, French—concepts have moved one way or the other between them a lot more, I think. And then there are languages that are "not world languages", where these things don't seem to have been dealt with as much and people aren't familiar with the concepts. So, for a simple example, outside academia, you can come across the French term *crème fraiche* in an English-language cookbook (spellcheck even fixes it for you), and that's well-established, but if you were translating a Czech recipe, you couldn't use the roughly Czech equivalent of *tvaroh* in English, no one knows what that is, so you'd have to use "cream cheese" or *crème fraiche*. And that happens with far more complicated terms as well, in academic or theoretical terminology. You'll find that various terms and concepts may have been translated between the Czech and German, as neighboring languages, but then there's no equivalent in English.

T: So, if you arrive in those difficulties, what are the tricks to make it happen anyway?

R: There are different things. I remember one problem word, which was *civilní*, which doesn't translate easily. It's different things in different contexts. Sometimes you can find an equivalent, sometimes you can use a few words, sometimes you have to explain it. Or you can leave it in the original. One editor asked me to leave the original Czech. It depends on your audience. The most important thing is not to look for a single word that approximates the meaning at all costs, because then you might lose some of the meaning. The main thing is to make sure that the concept gets across. So, if you need to use multiple words or to explain it somehow, you can do that, or you can leave the original, and then just expand on it, explain what it signifies. In the social sciences

you usually try to find an equivalent as well as explaining it. That can be true in art and architecture or history, too, but there you're also more like to find some concrete thing that you are referring to and you can't approximate it conceptually, it's something in the real world and you have to denote it or describe it more concretely or even physically. *Pavlače* (a long balcony that tends to run the length of one floor of originally a lower-quality and now older tenement building and from which individual flats are accessed), for example, these long exterior balconies, often in the interior courtyard of a building. I've looked for a term, and I've seen other translators discuss it, to distinguish this from just any kind of balcony on the exterior of a building. A term may exist, but I don't know anyone who has found the right term. Probably an architect would know, but that means the term in English would still be different from the Czech one, because the Czech word is familiar to Czech speakers, but the English term, if there is one, won't be. There doesn't seem to be anything that is as instantly, automatically recognizable to the English reader as to the Czech reader, for whom it's an ordinary word. So, in English you'd have to use something like exterior or courtyard balcony, and maybe explain it, but that's still a less precise term than the Czech.

T: That's actually an interesting example. Because on the one hand, yes, it's a piece of material architecture but there's also much more to it. There's *pavlačová kultura*.

R: That would be really hard to translate.

T: It refers to the social life and interactions that occur on courtyard balconies and it has a much deeper and complex meaning.

R: That is interesting, I didn't know that. That would be an example of something that would be difficult to translate, and I think you would have to include the original. You know, if you were writing about it, you'd have to include the original and then explain it, maybe in a footnote. I'd probably have to ask the author, in that case, and maybe even ask "How do you want me to explain this?" Because it might even not be clear to the translator, like me, who hasn't experienced *pavlačová kultura*, what it means exactly. It would be a difficult or tricky thing to

translate because to just use a phrase like “balcony culture” for it, that’s not it.

T: And also, there’s the gendered connotation of this. Because *pavlačová kultura* is a sort of mode for women to create and to be part of the public space or a semi-public space, making up a neighborhood.

R: You’d have to explain all that, because it would be lost.

T: Is there something interesting for you in the way Czech language is gendered or using gender?

R: Not so much because I encountered this before in French and Spanish a long time ago, so it’s nothing unusual. But not long after I first came here, I was speaking English with a Czech friend and I was describing something that happened, and I would say “a friend of mine,” “me and my friend did this.” And the person I was talking to would stop me and say—“Friend who’s a boy or friend who’s a girl?” And I said: “What does it matter?” But he said: “It’s very important!” Because he used *kamarád* (male friend) or *kamarádka* (female friend) and that information is already embedded in the Czech language. You almost always know if you’re talking about a man or a woman in Czech, but in English you don’t. And I remember it because I wondered why it mattered, and now I wonder how that affects your perception in any way. All the actors in a certain situation have their gender articulated in Czech, whereas in English that’s often not the case.

T: When you’re trying to solve some tricky issues do you learn something new about English language and what that would be?

R: I can’t say what exactly, but I know that you always learn more about your own language when you’re trying to express something in it that you’ve encountered in another language. You understand it, but you don’t see how it exists in your language. You realize that maybe there’s something missing, some area that isn’t focused on or discussed as much. You think, how do we say certain things and why do we say them like that, why do we talk about them like that. I don’t think the process of understanding or learning from a language is ever finished, even if it’s your first language.

One thing generally that you see the more you work with language generally, is that you might think that your understanding, your

interpretation, of what words, sentences, concepts, or whatever you're reading is shared, that those meanings and understandings are more less generally shared with everyone else in the language community—which is of course to some degree true and necessary if we're going to communicate with each other, we have to have some sort of shared understanding, shared meanings. But when you start to break it down and discuss what a word means with other people around you, you find that people don't always agree, they can have very different interpretations of what something means, or how to define it. Not even just abstract words but something very similar. And I see that in Czech as well. Someone explains what a word means, and someone somewhere else says, "It doesn't mean that at all. We don't say it or use it like that at all." Or someone says: "We never say that." And someone else says: "Yes, we do." And suddenly you discover that actually there are obviously shared meanings, but perhaps not everything is as universally shared as we think.

T: Thanks for sharing your reflections.

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