

Political Communication, Media and Society

The language of the media in Czechoslovakia before the Velvet revolution and its study

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Abstract: The text deals with the usage of language for the aims of political propaganda, focusing on the print media in Czechoslovakia before 1989. It analyses the lexical means used in the Czechoslovak press in the context of communist propropaganda and manipulation. It also presents some projects for access to the texts from the communist era.

Key words: totalitarian language, public speech, media in Czechoslovakia

Introduction

In the recent decades there have been many linguistic studies that chose to explore the connection between language and totalitarianism. The study of the totalitarian language in all its aspects gives us a lot of material to explore the effects of a certain political situation and the ideologization of public discourse on language (especially on the language of the media) and its lexical means. In this work, I would like to focus on finding links between language as a tool of communication and power maintenance and totalitarianism as a political system, to show language abuse and its usage as a tool of propaganda. My aim is also to present some projects on accessibility of contemporary study of the totalitarian language from the Czech Academy of Science and the Czech National Corpus.

Totalitarian language

The language of the totalitarian period has some specific features, and these characteristics are common to any totalitarian discourse, no matter what ideology they serve (Schmiedtová 2014) [1]. Totalitarianism is considered to be a political regime that, through a single center of power, seeks to use one accepted ideology to have absolute rule over individuals. It is definitely not easy to point out all the characteristic features of totalitarianism, as there are many definitions that complement each other and overlap. The presence of ideology is a basic characteristic of totalitarianism.

The study of the totalitarian language in all its aspects gives us a lot of material to explore the effects of a certain political situation and the ideologization of public discourse on language (especially on the language of the media) and its lexical means. One of the most interesting areas of exploration of these totalitarian regimes are the power tools that allow to hold on to power, one of the phenomena brought by totalitarian regimes was the specific language they used to control society. It is the communication and linguistic point of view that casts an inspiring perspective on governance. It offers a possible answer to the question of how totalitarian regimes could have succeeded.

Totalitarian regimes use language to create a united mass society that is easier to control than individuals. Therefore, in totalitarian regimes, language regulation, censorship, its transformation and abuse for the purposes of political establishment often occur. Totalitarian regimes often create a new language, whether it is by creating new terms or changing the established semantic meanings of words (Váňa 2012). [2] That is why language research should be one of the basic aspects of research of totalitarian regimes. An American political scientist of Czech origin Karl Wolfgang Deutsch (Deutsch 1971) [3] considered communication to be the key element of state rule and power in society. According to him, communication is a key tool for maintaining political power and political governance. As language is an essential part of communication, the access and the control of the language of communication is the key to political power in society. While communication in a democratic system accepts reciprocal exchange of information, it does not seek primarily to dominate society and thus obtains the necessary information about what needs to be changed in order to remain in power. The totalitarian system does not. We can call totalitarian communication one-way communication – a totalitarian system is always based on ideology, whose application is absolute and unmistakable. A totalitarian regime does not accept subsystems and alternative information, it owns ideology, which promotes every necessary information and the ideology doesn't change, deviation is unacceptable (Váňa 2012). [4]

If we concentrate on the public language in Czechoslovakia in the totalitarian period before the Velvet revolution in 1989, we can mention the increasing interest of Czech linguists on the study of all aspects of the language of that period (Váňa 2012 [5], Schmiedtová 2007, Schmiedtová 2008, Schmiedtová 2011 [6]). Some linguists presented profound studies of the linguistic means of totalitarian language concentrating for example on agenda-setting, advocating ideology, forming the image of an external enemy, based on text analysis of newspapers published before 1989, mainly using selected copies of *Rudé právo* (Red Law),

the central press body of the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia in 1948–1989. All of them point out that in totalitarian systems language becomes a tool to dominate society, but above all a tool to create a united society and that this is mainly done by creating a unified way of thinking, which makes it possible to create new truths only by creating a new language. In all the media of that period this language does not reflect the truth, it seeks a goal other than a communication goal, namely power. Such a language no longer communicates and, in connection with the above mentioned Deutsch's theory of communication (Deutsch 1971) [7], no longer fulfills its communication function [8], but the blocking of independent thinking, which is a prerequisite for independent action, and the desire to eliminate individual consciousness by freezing thinking is, however, an element that any totalitarian regime must attempt to succeed. We must say that every single totalitarian regime creates its own language individually and it is difficult to generalize its functioning and manifestations.

Yet there are several characteristics that can be observed in every totalitarian language. The totalitarian language and system apply censorship and strive for permanent ideological indoctrination. It is complicated. It creates unambiguous slogans that usually encourage action and need not be considered. The unity of thought it seeks to create makes totalitarian language simple, austere, and offers a clear, immediate solution and answers to all questions. It clearly defines the categories of good and evil, friend and enemy. The black and white vision of reality is typical. To the totalitarian propaganda, nothing is as important as suggesting that you can only choose from two options. Words are either positive or negative, they have this evaluation element, and the interpretation of reality thus moves within well-defined, ideological and inflexible value schemes (Čermák et al. 2010). [9] Totalitarian language has a monopoly on the interpretation of reality. It is full of ideologized words, ie. expressions that carry an ideological message and judgment. The reality shown by the means of this language is simple, unambiguous and contrasting. A dichotomous distinction between *us* and *them* is typical. As far as the lexemes of that language are concerned, as Váňa and Schmiedtová point out in their studies, we see that the words are given new meanings in totalitarian language, new words and old words acquire a new special meaning or new compounds and collocations are formed that quickly turn into a stereotype. Such a language creates a fictitious world thus affecting the thinking of individuals and the whole of society. Totalitarian language is not about the will of the masses, that is to be understood and realized, but it is about communicating to the masses to express the positions of the the ruling party and manipulate the masses. Another typical feature of that language is the usage of ideological stereotypes, often tak-

ing forms of clichés – the speech is full of schemes and phrases that do not fulfill a communication function.

The media in Czechoslovakia before the Velvet revolution

The media system in Czechoslovakia before 1989 was characterized by a simple ownership structure (state property) and was closely connected to the authoritarian social order. It served to promote and strengthen the ideological program of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. The exclusively power-based Communist Party (KSCĚ), through its Central Committee (Ústřední výbor KSCĚ), controlled all printed periodicals, including the regional and local press. During the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, the Main Press Supervisor (Hlavní správa tiskového dohledu) was in charge of censorship in the period 1953–1966. It managed censors who were responsible for the preliminary censorship in each issue of the official periodical. An interesting fact is that one-third of all censors had only completed primary education. Then this organ was renamed to Central Publications Administration (1966–1968) and finally, in the period of the so called normalization [10] it was renamed to Press and Information Office (Český úřad pro tisk a informace), which was in charge of strict control of media content until 1988. [11] In addition to printed periodicals, radio, television broadcasts and postal items were also censored. In 1950 a press law No. 184/1950 Coll. was issued, which said that the press should educate towards socialism. Another important thing was the system of ex-post control itself, which caused strict self-censorship at all levels in the editors. The top of Czechoslovak daily journalism before 1989 was mainly the party and federal press. Tabloid periodicals did not correspond to the media-promoted educational role promoted by the communist party, so they didn't exist. We have to mention that thematic periodicals (hobbies, sports, etc.) and magazines focused on various target groups were also published in Czechoslovakia. In the print media environment of pre-revolutionary Czechoslovakia, each media product had its unique position, as there was no direct competitor to it. Moreover, the scope of the individual media was limited by bureaucratic measures of central planning that influenced printing costs (using limited paper supplies), range of prints, their periodicity, but also the final price. The media served as a unique tool in shaping the communist society and until the fall of the regime, any criticism of the ruling of the state was not allowed or tolerated. The range of this restriction varied with regard to the specific political development in the country as well as over time.

The language of the media in Czechoslovakia before 1989

The language of the media of that period has many interesting aspects, we will briefly mention only a few of them. As Váňa (2012) [12] analyzes in his study, the evaluating elements were frequent part of the language, especially in the form of adjectives and adverbs, which provided guidance on preferred reading by the addressees of the communication. Thus, anything related to American, bourgeois, or western (*americký, buržoazní* or *západní*) was decoded as negative. The positively tuned lexemes included Lenin, socialist or people's (*leninský, socialistický* nebo *lidový*). Collocations are also an interesting subject of study – the most striking feature of totalitarian Czech was undoubtedly the fixed combinations of words. Characteristically communist collocations include the working class, in Czechoslovak context the so called “Triumphant February” [13], working people (*dělnická třída, Vítězný únor* or *pracující lid*). Three-part word combinations were very common as well (struggle for peace, holder of the Labor Medal or the Democratic People's Republic – *boj za mír, nositel Řádu práce* nebo *lidově demokratická republika*).

A useful tool for exploring totalitarian language is also analyzing the frequency of the words used (Váňa (2012) [14], Schmiedtová (2014). [15] These are the most often used words and word combinations: working class, continuous progress, revolutionary change, dictatorship of the proletariat, class differences, exploitative class, human exploitation, socialist / capitalist order, powerful weapon, working peasantry, historical inevitability, mutual comradeship, communist building, eve of socialist revolution, concentration of production and capital, bright tomorrows, parasitic and rotting capitalism, dying capitalism, revolutionary class, historic mission, oppressed people, ruling class, collectivization of agriculture, striker, international proletariat, fraternal friendship, Marxism–Leninism, capitalist ownership, peaceful prosperity of society (*dělnická třída, neustálý pokrok, revoluční změna, diktatura proletariátu, třídní rozdíly, vykořisťovatelská třída, vykořisťování člověka člověkem, socialistický/kapitalistický řád, mocná zbraň, pracující rolnictvo, historická nevyhnutelnost, vzájemná soudružská pomoc, budování komunismu, předvečer socialistické revoluce, koncentrace výroby a kapitálu, světlé zítřky, parazitický a zahnívajícím kapitalismus, umírající kapitalismus, revoluční třída, historické poslání, utlačený lid, vládnoucí třída, kolektivizace zemědělství, úderník, mezinárodní proletariát, bratrské přátelství, marxismus–leninismus, kapitalistické vlastnictví, mírový rozkvět společnosti*).

The totalitarian language also operated with a large number of clear, simple and striking slogans, designed to create one society by creating the impression of mass will. Usually these were general mottos, clearly opposing something or

being for something. They are often and abundantly used, for example some of them sound like a poem in verses: With the Soviet Union for ever and never in another way! Proletarians of all countries, unite! Build your country, strengthen peace! Each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs. Walk with us in one line and don't stand on the sidewalk! More work for the Republic – this is our agitation! (*Se Sovětským svazem na věčné časy a nikdy jinak! Proletáři všech zemí, spojte se! Buduj vlast, posilíš mír! Každý podle svých schopností, každému podle jeho potřeb! Pojd'te s námi v jednom šiku a nestůjte na chodníku! Republice více práce, to je naše agitace!*).

The way language is used in the press of this period proves that its primary role is not to inform, but to influence. As shown in the above-mentioned linguistic studies, that is why it is a frequent topic of opening articles of the whole newspaper report on the working success of a particular factory, profession, or group. They mention overruns, the unity of workers, increases in production and constant development. Often these articles also point out that similar achievements can be seen across the country, which connects the unity of all workers and their joint efforts to move the whole of society towards a better and clearer tomorrow [16]: Favorable development of the national economy (*Příznivý vývoj národního hospodářství*), We expect significant growth in production (*Počítáme se značným růstem výroby*), New work success towards XV. Congress of the Communist Party (*Novými pracovními úspěchy vstříc XV. sjezdu KSČ*).

In addition to the work that is mentioned in some form in the vast majority of articles, and the fulfillment of the plan, or its exceeding, a very frequent topic is the pursuit of peace. The constant emphasis on brotherhood, unity, cooperation and friendship, especially with the Soviet Union and the surrounding socialist countries, is a frequent theme and element in many articles. Moreover, these elements are often contrasted with the enemy countries that are depicted negatively: We are connected with the people of the USSR by solid brotherly bonds (*S lidem SSSR nás pojí pevné bratrské svazky*), Lasting friendship between the Bulgarian communist party and the Communist party of USSR (*Trvá družba mezi BKS a KSSS*), Socialist Vietnam – our close friend (*Socialistický Vietnam – náš blízký přítel*).

In many articles, the emphasis is on unity in a variety of ways. It emphasizes the need for unity of the Communist Party and its members, the Socialist block and friendly countries, workers and collectives, youth, leadership and many other subsystems of society. This emphasis on unity can be put on the same level as the emphasis on work: United under the red flags (*Jednotně pod rudými prapory*), Comrade collaboration (*Soudružská spolupráce*).

The constant looking ahead, the future, the increase in production, the rising quality, and other similar motives have this common denominator. Progress is related to another aspect that is constantly present in the press, which is optimism. As mentioned in the analysis itself, the reports are written in an optimistic, positive, joyful, even carefree and naive spirit, which gives the preferred impression that everything is working and everything is going well: We will achieve rapid improvement (*Dosáhneme rychlého zlepšení*), Stream of power, joy and optimism (*Proud síly, radosti a optimismu*).

Fighting is also a frequent topic in various variations. It can be a fight against something, such as right-wing forces, imperialism or the enemy, or it can be a fight for something, such as spreading Marxism–Leninism, purifying the party, building socialism and more. In the context of the fight another aspect is also interesting, namely the frequent use of dichotomies and opposition, especially “we” and “they”, where “we” may represent, for example, a party, supporters of Marxism–Leninism or socialist block; “they”, for example – imperialists, right-wing forces or reactionaries: We still must fight for the Leninist character of the party (*Za leninský charakter strany je třeba stále bojovat*), A victory that does not stop fighting (*Vítězství, kterým boj nekončí*). War and peace are also a constant opposition: For peace and a happy childhood (*Za mír a šťastné dětství*), There is peace and progress in solid unity (*V pevné jednotě je mír a pokrok*), *For peace and progress* (*Za mír a pokrok*).

Sources for study of the totalitarian language before the Velvet revolution

Here we would like to present some of the sources of language material for the study of totalitarian language. The first of them is the Digitalized archive of newspapers made by the Institute of Czech Literature of the Czech Academy of Science, where we can find all the issues of *Rudé právo* [16], which was founded in 1920 as a press organ of the Communist Party. Since 1948 it is considered to be a follow-up to the People’s Right newspaper issued by the then Social Democracy, which was merged with the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in the same year. Between 1948 and 1989, *Rudé právo* was the most important newspaper serving as an instrument of controlled public manipulation and socialist propaganda. In the early 1950s it was published daily (4 pages), including Saturdays (4 pages) and Sundays (6 pages). An interesting fact is that in 1995 it was renamed to *Právo*. It is still published today Under the same name and is not burdened with any ideology.

The next important source is the Totality corpus [17] (as a part of the Czech

national corpus – Český národní korpus (ČNK), which is a collection of language corpora, variously selected and arranged collections of electronically recorded texts in Czech. It serves as a data base for scientific study of written and spoken Czech, for the creation of language dictionaries, computer translators and proofreaders, and so on. ČNK was built and administered by the Institute of the Czech National Corpus at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague. The Totality corpus includes texts mainly from 1952, 1969 and 1977, representing the three essential stages of the communist period in Czechoslovakia. The corpus consists of two sets of texts: the first contains part of the volumes of the daily newspaper Rudé právo (the central newspaper of the Communist Party as mentioned above) from these three years (two-thirds of the corpus), the second contains books and printed materials titles (one third of the corpus) – 1952 (23 titles), 1969 (10 titles) and 1977 (58 titles) (Schmiedtová 2014). [18]

Based on the Totality corpus, in 2010 the Dictionary of communist totalitarianism (Slovník komunistické totality) was published and it is a unique attempt to objectively capture the specific nature of political discourse in the period 1948–1989 (Čermák et al. 2010). [19] The Small dictionary of the facts of communist totalitarianism (Malý slovník reálií komunistické totality) completes the puzzle in the study of the Czech context before 1989 (Schmiedtová 2013). [20]

Conclusion

Censorship in Czechoslovakia was abolished in March 1990 by the Act No 86/1990 Coll. (Act amending and supplementing Act No. 81/1966 Coll., On Periodical Press and on Other Mass Media). [21] An interesting fact is that the print media were not regulated by a new law for many years after 1989. Freedom of expression and the right to information were enshrined soon after the Velvet revolution in Article 17 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms. The Press Act was amended in March 1990 and censorship was declared inadmissible. However, the new Press Act, which would regulate the rights and obligations relating to publishing the press, came into force only in February 2000 as the Press Act 46/2000 Coll. The communist language of Czechoslovakia is now only an object of analysis. Yet it would be a mistake to resign from the study of totalitarian languages, because the danger of new forms of totalitarianism is definitely not excluded even nowadays. The language misuse and abuse and its use as a tool of manipulation is not the sole domain of totalitarian regimes. It is common to see this phenomenon also in free and democratic societies. A comprehensive analysis of totalitarian language can thus be a useful tool in detecting language manipulations in contemporary liberal democratic regimes.

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Referances and Notes

- [1] Schmiedtová, V. (2014). Srovnání kolokací totalitního jazyka v bývalém Československu s jazykem současným, *Časopis pro moderní filologii* 96, č. 2: 165.
- [2] Váňa, T. (2012). *Jazyk a totalitarismus*. Rigorózní práce. Univerzita Karlova, Fakulta sociálních věd, Institut politologických studií. Katedra politologie. Vedoucí rigorózní práce PhDr. Josef Mlejnek, Ph.D., Praha, 58.
- [3] Deutsch, K.W. (1971). *Nervy vlády*. Praha, nakladatelství Svoboda. Schmiedtová, V. (2014). Srovnání kolokací totalitního jazyka v bývalém Československu s jazykem současným, *Časopis pro moderní filologii* 96, č. 2: 165–179.
- [4] Váňa, T. (2012). *Jazyk a totalitarismus*. Rigorózní práce. Univerzita Karlova, Fakulta sociálních věd, Institut politologických studií. Katedra politologie. Vedoucí rigorózní práce PhDr. Josef Mlejnek, Ph.D., Praha: 68–70.
- [5] Váňa, T. (2012). *Jazyk a totalitarismus*. Rigorózní práce. Univerzita Karlova, Fakulta sociálních věd, Institut politologických studií. Katedra politologie. Vedoucí rigorózní práce PhDr. Josef Mlejnek, Ph.D., Praha, 68–70.
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- [8] As Váňa (2012) points, probably the most clear example of the possibility of language misuse and abuse was given by British essayist and writer George Orwell. Although he has never worked out a theoretical treatise on language, his predominantly essayistic depiction of totalitarian linguistic tendencies has surpassed a number of scholarly linguistic works.
- [9] Čermák, F., Cvrček, V., Schmiedtová, V. (eds). (2010). *Slovník komunistické totality, Praha: NLN – Nakladatelství Lidové noviny* 2010: 19.
- [10] „Normalization” in Czechoslovak history is the period from the violent suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968 by the Warsaw Pact armies to the Velvet Revolution at the end of 1989. The need for “normalization” was originally the official justification for repressive measures at the beginning of this era, renewing censorship, abolishing many interest and political associations and organizations,

and more. The name ‘normalization’ then passed on to the whole era during which these measures remained in force.

- [11] See also http://www.totalita.cz/vysvetlivky/cenzura_04.php
- [12] Váňa, T. (2012). *Jazyk a totalitarismus*. Rigorózní práce. Univerzita Karlova, Fakulta sociálních věd, Institut politologických studií. Katedra politologie. Vedoucí rigorózní práce PhDr. Josef Mlejnek, Ph.D., Praha.
- [13] In the communist era also called “Victorious February” – in Czech: *Vítězný únor*, in Slovak: *Vit'azný február*, which was an event in late February 1948, in which the Communist party of Czechoslovakia, with Soviet backing, assumed undisputed control over the government of Czechoslovakia, marking the onset of four decades of communist rule in the country.
- [14] Váňa, T. (2012). *Jazyk a totalitarismus*. Rigorózní práce. Univerzita Karlova, Fakulta sociálních věd, Institut politologických studií. Katedra politologie. Vedoucí rigorózní práce PhDr. Josef Mlejnek, Ph.D., Praha, 72.
- [15] Schmiedtová, V. (2014). Srovnání kolokací totalitního jazyka v bývalém Československu s jazykem současným, *Časopis pro moderní filologii* 96, č. 2: 167.
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- [20] Schmiedtová, V. (2013). *Malý slovník reálií komunistické totality*: Praha: NLN – Nakladatelství Lidové noviny.
- [21] Act No 86/1990 Coll. (Act amending and supplementing Act No. 81/1966 Coll., On Periodical Press and on Other Mass Media.

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