

Phraseological Competence in Second-Generation Heritage Speakers: The Case of Czech with German as the Dominant Language

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ABSTRACT

The topic of this article is the phraseological competence of second-generation heritage speakers of Czech with German as their dominant language. The respondents of the survey are university students. The phraseological material analyzed in this study consists primarily of Czech strongly idiomatic phraseological comparisons, weakly idiomatic collocations, phrasemes with numbers, proverbs, and iconic movie quotes. Using data obtained from cloze tests, a translation task, exercises on phraseology meaning, and interviews, the study examined which types of Czech phrasemes heritage speakers retain in their mental lexicon and, where applicable, how firmly. A central question was which strategies they employ when their phraseological competence in the heritage language is required for the reception or production of phrasemes. The initial results showed, among other things, that the dominant language (German) plays a significant role and that the strategies used are individual, but also differ for the same person when the experiment is repeated later.

Keywords: Czech; German; heritage language and speakers; language ideology; phraseology.

1. Introduction

With globalization and the increasing migration, the number of bilingual and multilingual speakers is also growing. This is accompanied by a rising interest of linguists in language contact phenomena (Riehl 2018) and other aspects related to bilingualism (cf. Grosjean and Li 2019). So-called *heritage speakers* are also increasingly becoming the focus of linguistic, didactics and cultural research (Bergmann and Brüggemann 2021; Brehmer and Mehlhorn 2018; Cope 2021; Mertins and Delucchi 2022; Polinsky 2015).

However, research into bilingual speakers and speakers of heritage languages has so far been neglected from a phraseological perspective (cf. Keller 2014; Krumbholz 2012). There is hardly any phraseological research on heritage speakers with the language-pair German and Czech (cf. Šichová 2021, 2024).

Against this background, the present study investigates how heritage speakers mentally store and process phrasemes. Drawing on data from adult heritage speakers of Czech whose dominant language is German, it illustrates the phraseological competence of second-generation bilinguals. A central question concerns the mental representation of phraseological units in heritage speakers; here, both the form and the meaning of such units are examined in a differentiated manner. The study further seeks to identify the strategies heritage speakers employ when their phraseological competence in the heritage language is called upon. In doing so, it summarizes findings from my earlier research alongside new empirical data.

2. Heritage speakers

The terms *heritage language* and *heritage speakers* are defined differently in the literature (for our purposes cf. Polinsky 2015, 7; Brehmer and Mehlhorn 2018, 17). When talking about heritage speakers, it is important to specify which generation is being referred to. The experiences and data presented here come from second-generation immigrants (approx. 40 in total) who have lived in Germany since birth or early childhood in bilingual/multilingual families. Born between 1993 and 2001 in Bavaria, they were studying at university at the time of data collection (2006–2024). They have acquired Czech as the language of their ancestors (one or both of their parents left for Germany before 1989 or in the early 1990s) from birth in the family, (more or less) simultaneously with German. They were educated and socialized in Germany, and German, as the majority and official language of the country, has become their dominant, unmarked language.

They never had a school education in Czech. Concerning the heritage language Czech, we can speak here of uncontrolled and incomplete language acquisition, which is reflected, among other things, in their phraseological competence. The degree of Czech language acquisition varies among these speakers and is directly proportional not only to the speaker's linguistic talent, diligence, motivation, etc., but also to their family constellation and the length, intensity, and nature of their contact with the Czech environment. In general, it can be said that listening and speaking skills prevail over reading and writing skills. Regarding the grammatical correctness of their speech, it can be said that the speakers observed show a high degree of instability, especially in phenomena that are less frequent in spoken communication (for the language profile of these speakers, cf. Šichová 2024a).

3. Phrasemes

My understanding of *phraseme* follows Čermák (2007, 82–83). He also considers single-word units and propositional constructions to be phrasemes if they exhibit phraseological characteristics. The central feature that distinguishes phrasemes from units of “regular language” is their varying degrees and shades of anomaly. The most important characteristics include stability and idiomaticity (Burger 2003, 32); these characteristics are also relevant for the subsequent analysis.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to address the “psycholinguistic stability” of phrasemes (Burger 2003, 17). This property implies that a phraseme – despite possible surface variation – functions, like a word, as a single entity and is stored in the mental lexicon as such. Speakers retrieve it holistically rather than constructing the syntagm anew according to syntactic rules; instead, they reproduce it as a “ready-made” lexical unit (Fleischer 1997, 63).

Phrasemes vary in their degree of idiomaticity. This semantic irregularity arises from the syntagm’s semantic and functional indivisibility: the overall meaning cannot be fully derived from the meanings of its components because of the absence of compositionality. According to Piirainen and Dobrovolskij (2007), certain phrasemes nevertheless exhibit *semantic motivation*, resulting from the relationship between the phraseological meaning and the mental image evoked by the lexical structure of the expression. As will be shown below, such conceptual representations are present in the lexicon of bilingual speakers.

4. Analysis

Knowledge of the following types of phrasemes was tested in various ways: 1. weakly idiomatic collocations, 2. strongly idiomatic phraseological comparisons, 3. different metaphorical verbal and nominal phrasemes, 4. proverbs, 5. iconic movie quotes. Even though no representative and statistically relevant results were achieved due to the small number of respondents and differing methodologies, I nevertheless believe that the summary of my experiments and observations presented here can shed some light on the hitherto unexplored questions of the phraseological competence of heritage speakers.

The individual experiments (number of respondents, data collection, etc.) are described in the respective studies (Šichová 2016, 2021, 2024a, 2024b, 2025). Overall, it can be said that the number of respondents ranged between 5 and 12, amounting to a total of around 40 different individuals. The phraseme samples examined were obtained either from the Czech National Corpus, based on frequency, from Čermák 2013, or from a textbook (Holá and Bořilová 2009; Hradilová *et al.* 2019). The experiments were conducted between 2006 and 2024.

4.1 Weakly idiomatic collocations

An experiment (cf. Šichová 2021, 121–130) conducted with fifteen adjective phrasemes that occur most frequently in the Czech National Corpus and are only slightly idiomatic consisted of a translation task (*materšská škola* (meaning ‘nursery school’), *volný čas* (meaning ‘leisure time’)). The units were part of short sentences, so there was minimal context. The task was to translate the fixed phrasemes into Czech.

Almost all respondents correctly translated almost all units (or with minor formal deviations such as *nic jinébo* instead of the correct *nic jiného* (lit. ‘nothing else’), or *ten zdravotný stav* instead of the correct *zdravotní stav* (lit. ‘state of health’)). This was certainly due to the high degree of equivalence between the given phrasemes in Czech and German, as well as to the fact that they are short syntagms, i.e., they consist of a small number of components, show no major structural anomalies, and are composed of elements that occur with very high frequency in non-phraseological contexts.

In this context, pragmatic phrasemes should also be briefly mentioned. No study has been conducted with my respondents specifically on this group of phrasemes. However, when teaching this group of respondents, I repeatedly observe that the phraseological expression of politeness in some generally definable situations (contact function, greetings, wishes, responses to thanks/requests, etc., e.g. *Tak se měj!* (meaning ‘Take care!’), *Všechno nejlepší!* (meaning ‘Happy birthday!’ / ‘All the best!’), *Není záč!* (meaning ‘You’re welcome!’ / ‘No problem!’) is well developed even among speakers with less developed competence in their heritage language.

4.2 Strongly idiomatic phraseological comparisons with adjectives

In another experiment (cf. Šichová 2021, 131–134), eleven respondents were asked to fill in an adjective that is part of a given phraseme in a short sentence. This cloze test with 15 units also focused on knowledge of the form of the phraseme, based on one of the most important characteristics of phrases, namely their lexicalization and reproducibility (psycholinguistic stability), i. e. *jako mávnutím _____ proutku (jako mávnutím kouzelného proutku)* (lit. ‘like a wave of a magic wand’), *jako na _____ pásu (jako na běžícím pásu)* (lit. ‘on an assembly line’).

Similes are generally less frequent in language, which, in combination with their semantic complexity, made this task more challenging for heritage speakers. A Czech control group consistently supplied adjectives attested in the Czech National Corpus and the dictionary, whereas the heritage speakers often left gaps unfilled or inserted inappropriate items (orthographic and grammatical deviations were not counted as errors). Overall, only one-third of respondents correctly supplied approximately half of the adjectives, while the remainder achieved even lower completion rates, despite the given context.

4.3 Metaphorical verbal and nominal phrasemes

In two experiments, in total seven students were asked about the meaning of the phrasemes presented to them. The first study (cf. Šichová 2021, 137–140) concerned phrasemes with numerals from the textbook *Česky krok za krokem 2* (Holá and Bořilová 2009), while the other (conducted in 2024) concerned different types of phrasemes from the textbook *Czech It Up* (Hradilová 2019). The students' responses, which were recorded, provide insights into the strategies used for mental processing of phrasemes. The strategies mentioned below can be seen in the recognition and subsequent comprehension of phrasemes, but also in tasks where the aim is to know the correct form that has been actively requested. Not all respondents use the same strategy for the same phraseme.

Similar to native speakers, heritage speakers recall the form and meaning of a phrase from their mental lexicon (as reflected in respondents' answers to the question *How did you arrive at that answer?* for example: *to bylo první, co mě napadlo* ('that was the first thing that came to my mind'), *to jsem měla v hlavě* ('that's what I had in my head'), *to je fráze, co sem slyšela už častěji v češtině* ('that's a phrase I have heard more often in Czech')).

In other cases, the speaker derives the overall (phraseological) meaning of the Czech phraseme from the literal meaning of the components or the entire syntagm. It should be noted that such answer does not have to be correct. This is demonstrated by respondent's statement on one exercise to the phraseme *dát si dvacet* (lit. 'to give twenty by oneself'). This phraseme expresses the meaning: 'to lie down (after lunch) for a short nap'. Of the meanings offered (*A. I eat twenty pieces of cake. B. I run for a while. C. I sleep for a while.*), the respondents chose options A and B because "the numeral twenty refers to the number of pieces of cake or the number of laps around a sports stadium".

Sometimes the speaker derives meaning from the metaphors of the individual components of the phraseme or the phraseme as a whole (respondents' answers to the question *How did you arrive at that answer?* to the phraseme *být jak(o) utržený ze řetzu* (lit. 'as if torn off a chain'): *ten obraz, kterej jsem měla v hlavě* (meaning 'the image I had in my head), more in Šichová 2021, 138–139, 2024b). This corresponds to the theory of the figurative meaning component ("bildliche Bedeutungskomponente", Dobrovolskij and Piirainen 2009, 13).

If the heritage speaker does not have a suitable solution in the heritage language, he or she turns to the dominant language for a solution: *to jsem rychle nevěděla, tak [...], pak mně to jde do té němčiny, když to nevím česky* (meaning 'I didn't know that right away, so [...], then it goes into German when I don't know it in Czech.').

In some cases, the assumption based on the analogy in the second language is further confirmed by the literal meaning of the components. It is possible that in such "situations of misunderstanding" he or she is in a so-called bilingual language mode (Riehl 2018, 15). However, the influence of the dominant language can also be a source of interference.

The indicated mental processes can also take place in parallel. For instance, when determining the meaning of the phraseme *jako zmoklá slepice* (lit. ‘like a watered hen’), the respondent first gave the equivalent phraseme in German *wie ein begossener Pudel* (lit. ‘like a watered poodle’). She then added: *úplně jako zmoklý takový trošku že s ním máme že ten člověk nám je jí líto, já to vidím že prostě mi přijde obraz v hlavě* (meaning ‘like a wet one, we feel a little sorry for the guy, I can see it, it is just the image in my head’).

4.4 Proverbs

As a cloze test (conducted in 2015, 2016, and 2023) had shown, the heritage speakers have basically not stored the proverbs that are among the most common in written texts (Čermák 2013, 132; Kopřivová and Šichová 2023) in their mental lexicon, except for a few that appeared in their Czech language textbook *Tschechisch kommunikativ* (Maidlová and Nekula 2009). This clearly shows that the presence of proverbs in language classes and books is very important.

Most students knew the proverb *Oko za oko, zub za zub*. (meaning ‘An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth’), which is fully equivalent in German (*Auge um/für Auge, Zahn um/für Zahn*). Some answers also suggest that students are familiar with the proverb, although often based on German, but are unsure of its exact formal form in Czech: *Oko za oko, zub v zubu*. (lit. ‘An eye for an eye, a tooth in a tooth’), correct *Oko za oko, zub za zub*.; *Šaty dělají lidi*. (lit. ‘Clothes make the people.’), correct *Šaty dělají člověka*.; *Kdo hledá, ten najde*. (lit. ‘He who seeks he shall find.’), correct *Kdo hledá, najde*., *Stará láska nerezne*. (lit. ‘Old love never rustes.’), correct *Stará láska nerezaví*.

When students were given texts in which a proverb was omitted and several proverbs were offered as choices, they completed 90-100% of the items correctly. It seems that heritage speakers can infer the meaning of the proverb from its lexical form if the context in which the proverb appears is given and clear.

4.5 Famous Film Quotes

Catchphrases are very popular in Czech culture. Quotes from Czech TV fairy tales and comedies are often used in everyday conversation, and this is common across all generations. This type of phrasemes is also used a lot in the media. Some of these units have even found their way into the dictionary of the Czech language (cf. Šemelík 2024).

A total of ten students completed a questionnaire as part of a small experiment (academic years 2023/24 and 2024/25) in which they were asked to complete the ten most famous film quotes according to Kopřivová and Chen (2023) and to mark those they knew from a list of 30 other well-known film quotes. Respondents were also asked whether they were familiar with the phenomenon of famous film quotes and whether they could give examples from English or other languages.

While all students are familiar with the phenomenon and can give examples from German and English, they were unable to complete almost any Czech sentences and knew hardly any famous film quotes.

These findings are consistent with the results of another study (Šichová 2025) that focused on knowledge of Czech realia: Second-generation heritage speakers have relatively large gaps in their knowledge of culture (such as literature, films, history, etc.), while they are very familiar with everyday aspects of their ancestors' country.

5. Phraseological competence

Phraseological competence and its development vary from speaker to speaker. It cannot be postulated that all speakers have the same quantitative and qualitative prerequisites for recognizing, understanding and using phrasemes, and studies show that many speakers have major deficits in the phraseological competence of their mother tongue (Burger 2003, 125; Korhonen 1987). This also applies to the heritage speakers.

Researchers agree that phraseological competence as a kind of knowledge of the specific features of the phraseological units of the language on the one hand and the mastery of a certain set of frequently used phrasemes on the other is part of the linguistic competence of native speakers (Burger *et al.* 1982, 172; Hallsteinsdóttir 2001, 11f.). Annelies Häcki Buhofer (2007, 856) postulates several “acquisition dimensions” for phrasemes, which “just as little as any other phenomenon of language acquisition – are acquired one hundred percent at a certain moment in the sense of adult language competence”. Between these dimensions “years or decades of the individual language biography” can lie.

The last two dimensions of acquisition, those relating to the meta-level and reflections on language contexts (understanding ambiguity, language awareness), first appear during primary school age. Since the respondents were adults and university students, it can be assumed that the meta-part of phraseological competence, i.e. the knowledge of phraseological specificity, is known to the heritage speakers and they can make use of it in both or all their languages. Sometimes students explicitly want to learn phraseological units in the heritage language, which indicates that they are aware of the phraseological specifics (*Naučte nás ty Redewendungen* (meaning ‘Please teach us the idioms.’), *My ty český přísloví moc neumíme* (‘We don’t know Czech proverbs very well.’) (Šichová 2024, 227). Incidentally, this interest goes hand in hand with the desire to learn the heritage language as comprehensively as possible, including for professional purposes (cf. Nekula 2021).

Furthermore, studies show that different groups of phrasemes are acquired differently. For example, children acquire frequent collocations or pragmatic phrasemes at a very early age (Häcki Buhofer 2007, 855). The results of one

of the tests (see above) also point to this. Heritage speakers develop their phraseological competence in both languages only up to a certain point (and not necessarily in a symmetrical manner). In the case of my informants, their acquisition of Czech was limited in comparison to German, as it was neither consolidated nor further deepened through reading exercises or systematic teaching at school. Consequently, the processes of expanding phraseological competence to include more complex or less frequently used units continued predominantly in German, while in Czech it either stagnated, slowed down or declined both quantitatively and qualitatively. From this stage onwards, the individual linguistic development paths and biographical experiences of the speakers seem to exert a decisive influence.

6. Conclusions

The studies described above have shown, using the example of second-generation heritage speakers with the language pair German and Czech, that phraseological competence in the heritage language exhibits specific characteristics. It appears that phrasemes from the heritage language which are frequently used, consist of few components, display little or no idiomaticity, and are syntactically simple are more securely stored in the mental lexicon. Moreover, phrasemes with a high degree of cross-linguistic equivalence can often be retrieved or understood in the dominant language, although this may give rise to phenomena of language mixing. Heritage speakers also actively possess several phrasemes that serve primarily to guide oral communication. This indicates, among other things, a domain-specific control of the language by speakers of Czech as a heritage language. These observations still need to be examined.

Heritage speakers employ a range of strategies – sometimes simultaneously – for the mental processing of phrasemes, particularly in the case of unfamiliar syntagms whose meaning cannot be inferred from context. These processing strategies show parallels to those described in research on both native speakers and foreign language learners (Hallsteinsdóttir 2001; Wray 2007). Finally, the communicative situation itself also plays a crucial role in shaping the phraseological competence of heritage speakers. Further research is needed to describe the strategies in greater detail.

Another applicable goal could be to develop appropriate teaching methods to improve the phraseological competence of heritage speakers. Experience from teaching and the experiment with proverbs outlined above show that, similar to morphosyntax or spelling, explicit teaching of phraseology and working with specifically selected texts can also have a positive influence on phraseological competence. The existing research on phraseodidactics for heritage speakers is still quite limited and should be expanded in view of the growing number of such speakers, regardless of their specific languages.

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