

The Question of Linguistic Nationalism in Medieval Bohemia

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The present paper is a brief and in all respects preliminary presentation which documents the link between language and group identity in medieval Bohemia and discusses the question whether this link provides any evidence for early Czech nationalism. The point of departure is the so-called Dalimil Chronicle, a text dating from 1314. The chronicle, one of the oldest long texts in Czech, is fairly well known in Czech studies, where it has often been recognized, among other things, for its rather explicit anti-German sentiment¹.

As is frequently the case in old literature, the author of the chronicle remains unknown. At one point in the late 18th century, a cleric named Dalimil Meziříčský was assumed to have written this text, but we now know this was simply a misattribution. Thus the name is purely conventional. The text itself provides a broad range of episodes beginning with the Biblical deluge, then quickly narrowing to ancient Czech history and ending with events in Bohemia up to the moment the chronicle was completed. In matters of old Czech history, Dalimil relies heavily on *Chronica Boemorum* by Kosmas, a text written in Latin some two hundred years earlier (1119-1125). Dalimil is thus a good example of historical continuity of literacy in Bohemia, although not of the continuity of literacy in Czech — note that much of the literacy preceding Dalimil was simply in Latin.

1 For a bibliography on Dalimil, see the entry «Dalimilova kronika» in *Lexikon české literatury*, vol. 1, 1985 : 510-512.

1.

Some scenes in Dalimil appear particularly relevant in the context of language and group identity. One of them is the episode of Oldřich's marriage. During a hunting expedition, Oldřich, a Czech prince, surprises a peasant maiden at a stream doing her laundry, and, attracted by her beauty, marries her. He thus seemingly debases his class — a prince marrying a peasant. However, Oldřich pointedly rejects criticism from within his retinue, noting that nobility arose from commoners and had thus always had non-aristocratic roots. But there is more to his choice, he says² :

Raději sě chci s šlechtěnou sedlkú českú smieti než králevú německú za ženu jmiati. Vřet každému srdce po jazyku svému,	I'd rather frolick with an honorable Czech peasant maid than have a German queen for wife. Everyone's heart burns for his own <i>jazyk</i> , ³
a pro to Němkyně méně bude přieti lidu mému.	so a German will be less inclined to my folk.
Němkyni německú čeled bude jmiati a německy bude učiti mé děti.	German queen will be her retinue and German will she teach my children.
Pro to bude jazyka rozdělenie a ihned zemi jisté zkaženie.	There will thus be a split of <i>jazyk</i> and an immediate corruption of the land.
Páni, nevíte dobra svého, lajíce mi z manželstva mého. Kde byste řečníky brali,	My lords, little do you know when scolding me for my marriage. Where will you get your speakers from,
když byste před kniení stáli?	when facing your [German] princess?

(Dalimil 1 : 493)

2 All quotations from the Dalimil Chronicle are based on *Staročeská kronika tak řečeného Dalimila*, ed. J. Daňhelka et al., vols. 1-2, Praha 1988. English translations are mine; the first digit refers to the volume, the second to the page.

3 I leave *jazyk* untranslated at this point. For issues concerning the translation of this word see Section 2.

Obviously, the episode explicitly touches upon the status of the Czech language. Oldřich found it unacceptable that his children would be taught German and he reminded his lords that they too could become vulnerable because they would be unable to communicate with their queen if she were German. To Oldřich, the solution seemed simple — a Czech queen should speak Czech, hence no language problems would arise. But, clearly, it is a far cry from a ruler's linguistic admonition to his noblemen and the idea of linguistically based nationalism. Passages such as these cannot be automatically evaluated at their face value — some background information is necessary.

The Oldřich episode — and the entire Dalimil, for that matter — originates from a period of a deep crisis in the Czech nobility. The text is generally understood to have been written by an author strongly sympathetic to the cause of this group. Although well remembered, the great era of the so-called Přemysl dynasty was defunct by the time the chronicle was dated (1314). The last Přemyslide king had died eight years earlier and with the throne vacant, various factions, including parts of the nobility, but also the patriciate of Prague and Kutná Hora, and, most significantly, a number of foreign, mainly German speaking pretenders were attempting to gain power in Bohemia. Finally, in 1310, John of Luxemburg (1296-1346), the son of the German emperor Henry VII, acceded to the throne.

All this was happening against the backdrop of major social and demographic changes. The former included the rapid growth of the early Czech towns, a domain that was not only outside the jurisdiction of the land-based aristocracy, but often in direct competition with it. The latter involved what is usually called German colonialization. German presence in Bohemia was growing more and more perceptible during the 13th century, blossoming especially in towns which, by and large, were accepting organizational patterns then prevalent in Germany, including German city codes. Colonialization by land-taking and land-development was in progress also. German settlers were invited under advantageous conditions to settle and develop land in the border areas. Finally, high German clergy assumed a very important role in Bohemian affairs, reaching far beyond the domain of church institutions. In short, the German presence was not only obvious, but Germans, especially in towns and at

the court became a major political power. The situation came to head in 1315 when the Czech nobility, in an act of quasi-mutiny, succeeded in forcing John of Luxemburg to expel his German advisors from the court and from the country — at least for a while.

Given this background, the subtle meaning of Oldřich's message becomes clearer. Obviously, the passage is not about Czechs in general, but about the ruler and the nobility. All of this is the elite's own discourse. The nobility is fearful (and in this sense conservative) of foreign competitors, and the author of the chronicle expresses this anxiety and frustration by creating the image of "a good king" who does not let bad things happen. It is through the chronicle's author that Czech nobility speaks to John of Luxemburg, extolling the traditional duties and virtues of Czech princes. In this respect, the chronicle resembles the genre of *Prinzenspiegel*, a set of exempla and pronouncements that are hoped to make a ruler a good one. The passage about the lords' linguistic impotence vis-à-vis a German-speaking queen focuses on the distribution of power and conduct of business at the court. In other words, this is all about the customs and traditions of the Czech nobility and the fear that their loss will result in their direct demotion. Thus the basic concepts rest on the relation between the aristocracy and the ruler. Linguistic nationalism is not the primary point.

It is of course hard not to note that the language issue, although narrowly localized at the ruler's court, is raised to great prominence here precisely because of its localization at the court. We might go so far as to claim that whenever issues and conflicts concerning "ancient customs" are raised to so high a level, they gain an obvious political potential. Attractive as this idea might appear, we cannot simply assume that whenever the issue of language is focused upon at this high level, we are dealing with incipient nationalism. Even granting a symbolic meaning to the conflict, this remains to the discourse of an endangered elite. True, the elite experiences foreigners as a major cause of its duress, wishes to maintain its power and group identity, but this is not a broadly conceived "national" identity, this is the elite's identity. This conclusion is suggested by the overall tone of Dalimil, which includes a number of episodes that favorably depict courageous deeds of Czech noblemen, especially in armed conflicts with Germans.

At any rate, the notion of language involved here is a simple and straightforward one — an attribute of a social rather than ethnic group. This attribute is very important, but beyond that there is nothing very mysterious about it, it does not have to be cultivated in any particular way, and there is nothing about it that makes it better than German, or Latin. Language, at this point, is simply not yet an independent entity, a grand power that generates nations — modern nations, that is.

2.

Were it only for Oldřich's marriage, an essay about the role of language in Dalimil's chronicle would remain short. But there are further episodes in Dalimil which would also seem to the modern reader to touch upon the status of the Czech language. Unlike the Oldřich episode, however, they deserve a rather careful philological discussion before one renders an interpretation. One such episode revolves around Libuše, a mythological Czech princess, who possessed the gift of clairvoyance and delivered, among other things, a famous prophecy concerning the bright future of the Czechs and their capital Prague. A quasi-priestess without a husband, Libuše got into a conflict with her subjects and under pressure finally agreed to marry so that the Czechs might eventually have a ruler — a masculine ruler, that is. In making the decision she warned the Czechs though : the change would be tough, and those who insisted on it now would be sorry later. But there was a consolation — the rule of a masculine iron hand would be better than the rule of a foreigner :

Ale bude-li nad vámi cizozemec vlásti, nemoci bude váš jazyk dlouho tráti. [...]	But if a foreigner rules you, your <i>jazyk</i> will not last long. [...]
Každý kralije přátely svými, a ijeden múdrý neradi sě s cizími!	Everyone rules by means of his friends, and no smart man ask strangers for advice!
Pojmeť sobě lid jazyka svého a bude vždy hledati vašeho zlého.	[The foreigner] will bring people of his own <i>jazyk</i> and will always search for bad things among you.
Na váš lid hledati bude viny a svým rozdělí vaše dědiny.	He will look for your guilt and will give your villages to his own folks.
Češte své, i krastavo, nedaj v sě cizozemcóm, česká hlavo!	Take care of your own things, though they may be ugly, do not give in to strangers, Czech head!
Tomuť vy učí ženská hlava, kde jeden jazyk, tu jeho sláva.	This is what a woman teaches you, where there is one <i>jazyk</i> , its glory prevails.

(*Dalimil* 1 : 129)

This passage differs from the relevant passages in the Oldřich episode in that everything in it revolves around *jazyk*, a word I have intentionally left untranslated. And unless we get clear about the meaning of this word, we will not be able to say anything about medieval linguistic nationalism.

Today, the word *jazyk* has essentially two meanings in Czech : (1), tongue, i.e., a body part, and, (2), language. Clearly, if this modern usage is taken as the point of departure, the above passage will be of paramount importance in the discussion of linguistic nationalism. But old Slavic dialects operated with four meanings of *jazyk* in fact. A recent Old Church Slavonic Dictionary⁴, states that OCS *językъ* can mean : 1) tongue, 2) language, but also, 3) people, and 4) stranger (pagan). It is especially the third meaning, people, that is crucial for us. This meaning is documented, among other places, in the OCS translation of Matthew 24, 7. What reads in King James' version as "For nation shall arise against nation, and

⁴ *Staroslavjanskij slovar' (po rukopisjam X-XI vekov)*, ed. by R. M. Cejtlin et al., Moskva, 1994.

kingdom against kingdom” reads in OCS as : “Vъstanetъ bo językъ na językъ i cęsarъstvo na cęsarъstvo” — that is, modern English “nation” appears as *językъ*.

Although the situation in Old Czech may have been similar at some early point, we must seriously consider the possibility that in Dalimil *jazyk* only means “kin, our people”. Consider, for instance, another passage, that about the Tower of Babel. Talking about the builders of the Tower, Dalimil says :

[a] všickni jednu řěč mluviechu.	[and] all spoke one speech.
Bohu se jejich dielo neslŕbi	God disliked their work
i jejich jazyky tak zmýli,	and confused their <i>jazyk</i>
že bratr bratru nerozumě,	so that a brother did not understand a
	brother
ale každý svú řěč jmě.	but each had its own speech

(*Dalimil* 1 : 98)

When saying that the builders of the Tower had all one language at the beginning and many languages at the end, the author does not use the word *jazyk* — he uses *řěč* instead, a word that means “language, speech” only. The Babylonian confusion itself is predicated over *jazyky* — but this can perfectly well mean “tribes”. Naturally, we normally speak about the Babylonian confusion of tongues, but the author was under no particular pressure to express himself so — the whole of his description is perfectly correct : there was one language at the beginning and many at the end, in the middle the tribes got confused — that’s all it should be about.

As it seems that in Old Czech it was possible to say *mluvit jednou řečí* “to speak one language”, but not *mluvit jedním jazykem* “to speak one tongue” (as is possible now), we are well advised to translate *jazyk* in Dalimil as “kin, tribe” throughout. Thus when Libuše says : “But if a foreigner rules you, your *jazyk* will not last long”, I suggest that we read it “your kin will not last long.” Even where she says “He [the foreign ruler] will call people of his own *jazyk*”, we are advised to read this as “He will call people of his own kin”. (Similar considerations hold for other passages in Dalimil, notably 2, 135ff. and 2, 179ff.).

Is it true then that the usage of the word *jazyk* does not throw any light whatsoever on our original question ? Recall that the Old Church Slavonic dictionary quoted above distinguishes the meanings 2), language, and 3), kin, sharply. But older lexicographers were not all that keen on getting involved in this messy issue. Jan Gebauer's Old Czech dictionary⁵ lists examples of the second and third meaning under one amorphous rubric glossed as "řeč, národ, národnost", i.e., language, nation, nationality. Indeed, if we assumed no sharp split between meanings two and three, we might well be back in business because whenever we would encounter *jazyk* in meaning "language", we can also read it as meaning "kin".

Attractive as this might appear, this approach is far from clear. It is certainly interesting to note that old Slavic dialects used the same root for *language* and *kin*. But clearly, a more careful study would be necessary to establish the origin of this intriguing fact as well as the actual usage in the period involved. In view of the clear opposition between *řeč* and *jazyk* in the document studied here, we cannot simply argue that the ancient Czechs referred to kin with the word language. To be sure, this would not be odd typologically (after all they called the Germans *Němci*, i.e., those who cannot speak, don't have any language), but the usage simply does not point in this direction in the period under consideration.

To sum up, then, I see no reason to modernize the conflict depicted in Dalimil and view it as an instance of early linguistic nationalism. At the point when Dalimil's chronicle was written, language was one among the several attributes that contributed to the group identity of the Czech nobility. A modern reading that sees in language an autonomous entity that defines the natural boundaries within which a community can progress towards nationhood — as Herder or Fichte would have it — is simply not involved here. Just when this quality will start emerging is another issue — it may well be that the breaking point was not all that distant in 1314 and that the emergence of Hussitism towards the end of the 14th century already points in a new direction.

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5 *Slovník staročeský*, by Jan Gebauer, vols. 1-2, Praha, 1970. [First edition, 1916.]