

Petr Anténe et al.

# **“Route CZ-AT” to the USA: Perceiving American Culture in Central Europe**



Palacký University Olomouc  
Faculty of Education

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Perceiving American Culture  
in Central Europe**

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# Introduction

PETR ANTÉNE

The idea for this book was conceived at a conference which was held as part of the project “The Perception of the USA among Future Foreign Language Teachers in Austria and the Czech Republic” (no. 79p2). It was supported by Aktion Czech Republic – Austria, a program of bilateral cooperation in the tertiary sector by means of stipends and projects. A group of university instructors from the Institute of Foreign Languages at Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Republic, and Pädagogische Hochschule Tirol in Innsbruck, Austria, presented papers based on their current research at the event in October 2017. While the presenters were at various stages of their careers and were focused on different fields of research within the wide scope of foreign language teaching, they all shared a deep interest in the culture and language of the United States of America. The same could be said about their students, some of whom not only attended their instructors’ presentations, but also contributed to the conference program with their own papers. Since the discussion proved stimulating, the conference participants decided to expand their presentations into full-length articles and collect them in a monograph, published by Palacký University under the title “*Route CZ-AT to the USA: Perceiving American Culture in Central Europe*.”

As the title suggests, the volume focuses on the perception of selected features of the USA from the Czech or Austrian point of view. The two Central European countries are geographically proximate, share a common history, and all the authors carry out research in the English language and American culture. While English is the lingua franca and an established language in numerous countries all across the globe, it is its American variant that keeps spreading rapidly to other parts of the world. This is due to the wide ranging influence of the USA in politics and economics, as well as in global popular culture. The chapters included in this monograph thus

present various aspects associated with the perception of the USA, whether it be American English, a theme in American literature and culture or an analysis of their reception in and/or influence on one or both of the Central European countries. As all of the contributors work or study at an educational institution that prepares future teachers, most of the chapters either discuss the students’ or pupils’ point of view on the topic or provide another connection to the process of foreign language teaching.

The linguistic section of the monograph opens with a chapter by Wolfgang Haupt on early English learning in Austria, arguing that bilingualism is a valuable asset highly supported or even required by the European Union. In spite of this fact, Haupt observes that the situation regarding early foreign language teaching in Austria can still be improved and the current discussion of the issue is rather diffuse.

Wolfgang Haupt’s students Elena Salchner and Eva Maria Oberschneider have written on the influence of Americanisms on the German language. After providing a historical overview of Americanisms in German with a particular focus on youth language, they present the results of a questionnaire on the usage of Americanisms given to both students and teachers at a lower secondary school and a teaching college in Austria. Towards the end of the chapter, they also highlight certain lexemes shared by Czech and German as spoken in Austria and Bavaria to illustrate the varied contacts among Central European languages.

Václav Řeřicha focuses on cultural dimensions of lexical borrowings from English to Czech. Employing the methodology of lexical semantics, he discusses the relatively infrequent term xenism to introduce certain specific Anglicisms that are not simple lexical borrowings, as they are either based on the phonological replication of English, or have been coined as new lexical units independent from the source language. Certain features shared by Czech and German are once again included.

The chapter by Eva Maria Hrdinová concerns both linguistics and cultural studies, as it concerns a reflection on the American Wild West in European popular culture, particularly Karl May’s adventure novel *The Treasure of the Silver Lake*, in order to comment on the translation of literary texts. May was a late nineteenth century German author writing fiction about America, who became extremely popular in the former Czechoslovakia. His work therefore provides a connection between the American, Czech and German-speaking areas. Hrdinová thus approaches May’s novel as a translator who has to deal with elements of several cultures in one text.

The literature and cultural studies section opens with a chapter by Kateřina Kovářová, a 2017 graduate of Palacký University. Kovářová discusses the reflection of American culture in the works of two contemporary authors of young adult fiction, Stephen Chbosky and R. J. Palacio. While the novels are primarily concerned with the challenges of growing up in today's world, Kovářová surveys various sociological and ethical concepts of values and heroes as signs of particular cultures and shows which of them are manifested in the selected literary texts. The aim is to demonstrate how the two novels can inform readers from other cultures about typical features of American culture.

Petr Anténe and Andrea Hoffmannová have cooperated on an anonymous questionnaire given to students of English at Palacký University in various stages of their studies. While a survey of American history, literature and life and institutions is a compulsory part of the students' curriculum, the questionnaire primarily focused on what students actually know and think of the USA. In other words, the questionnaire aimed at finding out what students base their knowledge of the USA on.

In another chapter, Petr Anténe focuses on a specific young adult novel, Louis Sachar's *Holes*, and its employment in a children's literature course taught in the Czech Republic. The methodology comprises a close reading of the literary text against its historical and social background as prerequisites to using the novel in teaching the cross-curricular topic of multiculturalism.

Jana Kořínková focuses on the perception of the United States in Czech Tramp songs. As the Czech Tramp movement originated at a time when America was difficult to travel to, the vision of the country provided in the Tramp songs was far from realistic. Kořínková studied a substantial corpus of song lyrics in order to characterize in detail the image of the USA they present.

While the overview provided above divides the chapters, for the sake of convenience, into linguistics and culture focused ones, as language and culture are inseparable from each other, another view may highlight the similarities between various contributions throughout the book. Jana Kořínková focuses, for example, on the particular image of the USA provided by the Tramp subculture by highlighting, among other things, how the elements of the English language are transposed into the Czech environment. In a similar fashion, both the linguist Václav Řeřicha and the cultural studies scholars Petr Anténe and Andrea Hoffmannová refer to Geert Hofstede's theory of



values in order to comment on the differences between American and Czech cultures. Similar connections may be found among various other chapters; for example, the methodology of questionnaires given to students and/or teachers has been used in both the linguistic and cultural studies sections.

Finally, it should be noted that rather than providing an exhaustive study, the volume seeks to illustrate a variety of topics concerning the contemporary perception of the USA. The authors thus hope the book will be appreciated by the professional public as an example of current research in the wide field of American studies in Central Europe.

*The Chicago Manual of Style* (the author-date system) was selected as the reference style for all chapters. The access dates for electronic sources are not provided, as all the links were checked by the editor to be fully functional at the time of publication.

# 1 | Linguistics

# 1.1 The Advantages or Disadvantages of Early English Learning in Austria

WOLFGANG HAUPT

## Introductory Thoughts

Children have an innate need to discover and understand the world. They are curious and thirsty for knowledge. Language acquisition is the central instrument for unlocking the world in which children live.

Studies have shown that children, up to the age of 4, use only one neural network in their brain for all languages. This means that it is relatively easy for children to acquire a second or third language, in addition to their mother tongue, as their native language. The sooner children encounter a foreign language, the better. If children have the opportunity to learn a new language in this formative time, they will learn languages much easier later in life. The first contact with the new language should ideally be made before the age of 8. Early language learning is conducive to the innate curiosity of children and makes it easier for them to find their way in our globalized world. In addition, the early encounter with a foreign language is always an encounter with another culture. Early childhood language education also promotes intercultural competence and tolerance.

English is a language we come in contact with every day. When we turn on the radio, we hear English songs. If we open the newspaper, we see advertisements for beauty products and sales. If we want to use a computer, we need sufficient knowledge about hardware and software. English is used everywhere.

What is meant by language acquisition, bilingualism or language promotion? What is language? Comprehensive answers to these questions would fill books – here it should suffice to consider the essential functions and elements of spoken language. According to the linguist Edward Sapir, “language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols” (Sapir 1921, 8). In other words, language is not innate to humanity, but is acquired during development. The function of language is the com-

munication of thoughts, feelings and desires. Language consists of symbols for objects, actions, properties, etc.

Thoughts are communicated verbally (or in writing) – without language such phenomena as politics, education or science could not exist. Of course, young children are not concerned with such matters. The thoughts they utter are often self-centered rather than “loud thinking.” Also, the ability to conduct abstract discussions is not yet developed, but the expression of feelings and desires is overwhelming for children. From the moment of their birth, they share it, for example, through different kinds of crying or gestures and facial expressions. As the child develops, language takes over this function more and more (Leist-Villis 2016, 14).

## **Bilingualism**

Although researchers have been seeking out over recent years an exact definition of bilingualism, there is still no definition that can be used as a pure reference to define bilingualism. The living conditions under which children with more than one language grow up are very diverse, so there are many different forms of multilingualism. Definitions of bilingualism range from a minimal proficiency in two languages, to an advanced level of proficiency which allows the speaker to function and appear as a native-like speaker of two languages. A person may call themselves bilingual but only in the level of ability to converse and communicate orally.

The simplest definition of bilingualism is that it is an ability to use two languages, especially with equal or nearly equal fluency. In fact, the majority of the world’s population is bilingual. According to Li Wei (2000), there are 27 varieties of bilingualism.

It is interesting that a bilingual person talks to another bilingual with the same linguistic background by changing from one language to the other during the communication. This is called code-switching. Figure 1 shows the decision-making process of the bilingual speaker in language choice and code-switching (Wei 2000, 16).