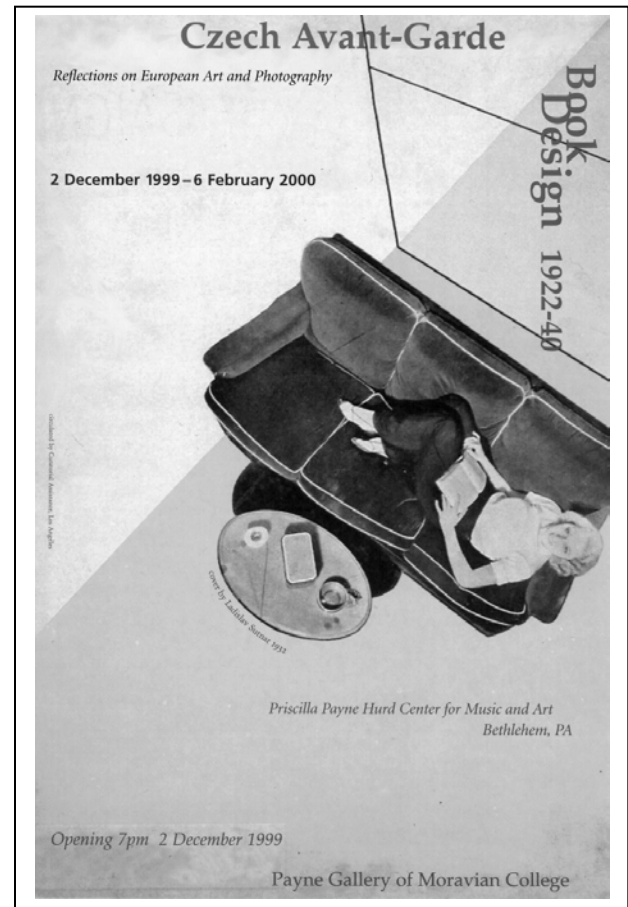


Jessica Lysczek



Nicole Drey

of creating advertisement postcards for the exhibit in the style of the Czech Avant-Garde. Even with all the new technological-artistic developments that have come with the Internet, the students could still learn much from experimenting with the styles and techniques of the best avant-garde designers.

Before its showing at Moravian College, the exhibit was displayed in Paris and at the Williamson Gallery at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. Those who wish to learn where the exhibit will be sent next or to request the exhibit in their own university galleries should contact Curatorial Assistance in Los Angeles. Curatorial Assistance can also provide a German-language catalog of a large portion of the Primus collection (*Tschechische Avant-Garde, 1922-1940*--Hamburg, published privately, no date given).

\*Special thanks to Dr. Diane Radycki, Assistant Professor of Art History at Moravian College and Curatorial Director of the Payne Gallery, and to Lori Brennan, Jessica Lysczek, and Nicole Drey (Moravian College '00) for allowing the reprinting of their artwork incorporating book covers originally made by Karel Teige, Otakar Mrkvička, Jindřich Štyrský, and Ladislav Sutnar. Special thanks also to Amanda and Danilo González and Mrs. Irene Smith for making it possible for the reviewer to visit this exhibit.

### Pragmatic Principles as Cultural Components in the Language Classroom

By Masako Fidler  
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#### 1. "Ahoj, paní profesorko!"

In the previous issue of *Czech Language News*, Neil Bermel made a very important point in his article "Common Czech and Standard Czech in Textbooks for Foreigners" (Fall 1999: 6). The author concluded that each of us, as a teacher of Czech, needs to reflect on who we want our students to sound like and write like. This paper considers potential problems that might affect this decision-making process: different strategies in rapport building and different interpretations of "formal" and "informal" in Czech and American English.<sup>1</sup>

Let us start with an episode. After one and a half semesters of Czech, a student comes knocking on her Czech teacher's office door where the teacher is talking to a visiting professor from Prague. When introduced by her teacher, the student, with a friendly smile on her face, expresses her warmest welcome to the visitor by greeting

<sup>1</sup> Many observations here are tentative and await detailed analysis.

him “Ahoj!”.. The Czech teacher despairs and wonders how this happened after teaching and reinforcing the formal and informal stylistic differences between *ty*- and *vy*-forms and different greeting modes; after all, the student is one of the best and is even starting to express complicated ideas in Czech.

Such a scenario, however, is not uncommon. There have been other students who wrote email messages starting with “Ahoj, paní profesorko!” before, although *vy*-forms are always used in the classroom. It is necessary to stress that these are students who can already put together grammatically correct sentences to perform various communicative tasks. The motivation for this failure might be sought elsewhere, perhaps in the way pragmatic principles work in the student’s native language.

## 2. Rapport Building Process

Languages express politeness by means of various strategies. To take Brown and Levinson’s positive and negative politeness model, there are strategies that respond to the addressee’s “negative face,” i.e., his desire to “have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded” (1987:134). In contrast, politeness may be “positive.” Positive politeness strategies satisfy the addressee’s positive face, the addressee’s wants that his/her actions, wishes and values should be thought of as desirable. This results in use of linguistic behavior similar to that between intimates. The speaker exchanges presuppositions indicating shared wants and shared knowledge, communicating that his/her wants (or some of them) are in some respects similar to the addressee’s wants (101). The only element that sets positive politeness apart from discourse between intimates is that the former has an element of exaggeration. This can be illustrated by the following expression of approval or interest: “How *ábsolutely* *márvellous!* I simply can’t imagine how you manage to keep your roses so exquisite, Ms. B!” (102). One possible explanation of the way the student reacted to the Czech visitor can then be viewed as her attempt to build rapport through positive politeness, i.e., claiming common ground with the addressee.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, treating a stranger “like a friend” seems to be important in the American context. While Czech morphosyntax and lexicon encode at least two types of relationships similar to the “in- and out-group” differences (cf. Wetzell 1994), such distinctions seem to be *intentionally* made ambiguous in the American context as part of politeness strategy.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This is, of course, a very rough generalization. Rapport building and politeness in American English may be much more complicated than this brief statement because of individual socio-economic and ethnic background, speech habit, speech situation, and other parameters.

<sup>3</sup> Conversely, Czech native speakers, not familiar with the positive politeness strategies in American English, might interpret American English speakers as “superficial”; they might also get the impression that Americans treat everyone equally, when socio-economic and other differences might be expressed elsewhere.

## 3. Students’ Concept of “Formal” and “Informal”

This rapport building strategy based on positive politeness above does seem to hold to a certain extent, when one observes how students interpret “formal” and “informal” speech registers as early as the first day when they learn greeting styles and *ty*/*vy*-forms. Students often prefer the *ty*-forms and tend to use them in task-oriented exercises, unless explicitly told not to. Use of *vy*-forms that draw a clear line between interlocutors may be perceived as stilted or as a transition to the eventual use of *ty*-forms. In the latter case, certain disappointment ensues when someone never switches to *ty*-forms even after the two people “get to know” each other.

Students’ attitudes towards Standard and Common Czech may also be connected with the politeness strategies in their native language. After discovering that Standard Czech is for “formal” situations, students are often not satisfied with the perspective of learning Standard Czech. Conversely, they are very eager to learn the Common Czech endings and lexicon, and try to use them because informal means friendly in their native culture. From their viewpoint, the concept of “formal” style<sup>4</sup> might imply “distant” or “cold.” According to the pragmatic principles in their native language, it would be preferable, therefore, to express friendly attitudes from the onset of contact with strangers. From the perspective of the students in the US, therefore, the Czech cultural expectation that foreigners should speak Standard Czech seems undemocratic, although there are many languages that distinguish in- and out-groups.

It is important to note that students do accept this linguistic behavior as part of the target culture, and successfully learn how to conjugate and decline; nonetheless, it takes a tremendous effort to apply such culture-related linguistic behavior naturally, hence the above mentioned episode with “Ahoj.”

## 4. Dual Functions of Language Teaching

Provided that our hypothesis holds, what should then a language teacher do? One the one hand, s/he needs to reach out for students, make the classroom atmosphere learner-friendly so that students feel uninhibited in language use. On the other, s/he needs to teach the language in its proper cultural context where there is a certain amount of formality between the teacher and students. For students, friendly atmosphere means apparent removal of any barriers. Formal style of presentation which is a default in a Czech classroom might send a false signal that the instructor is not forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> Here, the discussion is reduced to only “formal” and “informal” speech registers, since these are concepts that are familiar to students. It is clear, however, that Common Czech forms have various degrees of acceptability under different conditions (Kučera 1973; Sgall and Hronek 1992, Sgall et al. 1992).

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