

WHAT DO PEOPLE WANT TO KNOW ABOUT NAMES? ONOMASTIC INQUIRIES IN THE CZECH LANGUAGE CONSULTING CENTRE

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Abstract: Since as early as 1946, Czech language users have been able to consult their questions with the Czech Language Consulting Centre by phone. Since 2019, there is a software database available, making the unique data of obtained inquiries accessible to the public. This paper introduces those parts of this database that are connected with proper names (not only the origin and interpretation of proper names, but also their pronunciation, spelling, declension, etc.), identifies the categories of the most frequent queries and presents examples of questions. Onomastic inquiries are specific due to the fact that to answer them, an interdisciplinary approach, knowledge of foreign languages and orientation in the entire contemporary multicultural world are necessary.

Keywords: Czech, Language Consulting Centre, onomastic inquiries, software database.

Language consultations

In Czechia, language consultations are provided by the Czech Language Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences, specifically by its Department of Language Cultivation. This service is frequently used by a wide range of users. At present, a majority of queries are answered telephonically free of charge, though the consulting centre also provides paid written opinions (the unpaid e-mail consultation service was operated only in the years 1999–2011). Telephonic consultations have run regularly since 1946 and are operated every working day for 4 hours (two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon), during which on average 50 queries are answered.

Language consultations are not only an assistance given by linguists to the public, but it is also inquirers who provide linguists with valuable information about the facts they consider important, problematic or difficult in Czech, about their doubts and hesitation or possible use of linguistic handbooks, etc. (for more details see e.g. Uhlířová 1999 and 2001, Uhlířová *et al.* 2005, Smejkalová 2005). Thus, it is important to record linguistic inquiries continuously and extract valuable sociolinguistic data from them. It is also useful to capture the queries in order to keep unified procedures in everyday consulting practices, especially in the case of new phenomena not recorded in handbooks or phenomena solved ambiguously (for more details see e.g. Černá 2017,

Prošek 2020). In the past, the data obtained by means of contact with the public were processed in electronic databases of inquiries, which were not, however, highly developed and served exclusively for the internal needs of the linguists, not for the public. Therefore, a new, systematically created database, intended for the linguists and the wide public, has been in development for the last several years.

Linguistically structured database of inquiries

The linguistically structured database of the inquiries sent to the Language Consulting Centre has been in progress since 2016 thanks to a grant project involving not only the members of the Czech Language Institute, but also those of the Faculty of Applied Sciences of the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen (see also Zajíc *et al.* 2018, Zíma *et al.* 2017). The database, whose public part is available at <https://dotazy.ujc.cas.cz/>, includes older e-mail correspondence and especially the queries recorded from telephonic communication with clients of the Language Consulting Centre. The Automatic Speech Recognizer is applied, which enables the transfer of oral speech to a written text (see Zajíc *et al.* 2019). Naturally, it is necessary to annotate every query manually, i.e. to classify it to appropriate linguistic categories, verify the correctness and completeness of the answer and fill in as many other known data as possible (concerning, for example, the literature used, different data in the handbooks, discovered state of usage, and also the inquirers and the interaction with them – whether they provided information about their profession, whether they accepted the recommended solution or started a conflict, etc. Thanks to all these data it is possible to search in the database due to various criteria and thus obtain overall statistic surveys and additional sociolinguistically valuable information¹.

Classification of queries

As it has already been pointed out, the individual queries in the database are classified according to linguistic fields (for example, phonetics, morphology, syntax, stylistics, dialectology, etc., in addition to onomastics), and within these fields they are subdivided into individual detailed categories. The field of onomastics includes the following categories: interpretation of individual proper names, use of proper names (including the queries about the transcription of foreign names into Czech, official/standardized forms of names, etc.), onomastic terminology and theory, the issue of registration of personal names by state authorities and names in the calendar. These categories reflect the usual types of onomastic queries, but the rise of new relevant categories cannot be excluded in the future.

¹ The answers to linguistic queries are published in the form of a database freely accessible on the Internet, for example, also by the language consulting centre of the L. Štúr Linguistic Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in cooperation with the Internet portal Sme.sk (see <https://jazykovapordna.sme.sk/>, accessed July 19, 2022). However, the answers can be searched only by using the alphabetic list of keywords of the individual queries.

However, not all the queries about proper names are classified under the umbrella of the field of onomastics. For example, very frequent inquiries related to writing capital letters in proper names are separated in the category of orthography, the pronunciation of proper names is listed under phonetics, all the queries about the declension of proper names are grouped under morphology, and the word-formation issues of proper names belong to the category of word formation. Within these categories the queries concerning proper names form autonomous thematic groups differing from the groups regarding common nouns. For instance, if a user of the database is interested in browsing all the queries about proper names, it will be made possible thanks to the so-called detailed annotation of the inquiry. It will include the information that the given word mentioned in the query is a proper name, further on, what kind of proper name is concerned (anthroponym, toponym, other names – these three categories are also classified in more detail, cf. for example the individual categories of toponyms such as settlement names, non-settlement names, or exonyms, endonyms, etc.). These data can be employed in the overall statistic elaboration of the queries and they will help us find out which types of proper names are problematic for the users of the Czech language from the point of view of orthography, pronunciation, declension, etc., and which, on the other hand, are interesting to them from the point of view of their interpretation.

Frequent types of queries concerning proper names

As introducing individual queries in the database is still in its initial stage, it would be too early to draw an exact statistical conclusion concerning the number of queries about proper names for a specific time period, the number of queries in individual thematic fields, etc. It is, however, absolutely sure that proper names give rise to a truly significant number of inquiries (though the topic of proper names in the Language Consulting Centre has never been a subject of specific investigation, their high number is evident from other analyses of the language consultancy queries, cf. e.g. the enumerations of queries in Pravdová 2008 or the number of inquiries concerning the pronunciation of proper names in Štěpánová 2013a, 2013b). Preliminary case studies show that the most frequent categories of linguistic inquiries will include the capitalization of geographical names and names of institutions, the declension of particular anthroponyms and toponyms, the formation of feminine forms of surnames and the orthographic form of certain proper names of foreign origin (cf. e.g. an analogous observation made by Harvalík 2008: 83). Examples of individual categories of queries and answers can be found below:

Query: Our municipality wants to name a street *Husí louky* 'goose meadows'. Should the word *louky* be written with a capital letter?

Answer: In what concerns street names, a lower-case letter should be used. A capital letter would be appropriate if the name referred to a settlement or a part of the municipality.

Query: I use a surname of a foreign origin, *Savicki*, and I need assistance with its declension.

Answer: The surname *Savicki* should be declined according to the adjective type *mladý*; thus the individual case forms will be *Savického*, *Savickému*, etc.

Query: Is the right genitive form of the name *Korea* “Korey” or “Koreje”?

Answer: Both forms are correct for the name *Korea* in the genitive case; you can use both “Koreje” and “Korey”.

Query: What should be the feminine form of the Ukrainian surname *Solnik* in Czech (the Ukrainian feminine form is *Solnikova*)? Is the form *Solnikovová* correct?

Answer: Yes, it is; the correct Czech feminine form of the Ukrainian surname *Solnik* is *Solnikovová*.

Query: What is the correct Czech name of the historical figure of Konrad von Regensburg: *Konrad* or *Konrád z Řezna*?

Answer: There are no strict rules for Czechifying such names; in this case we would recommend the form *Konrád z Řezna*, in which all the components of the name are Czechified.

In the case of queries about the interpretation of individual names, inquirers are mostly interested in surnames. Nevertheless, they often do not realize that linguists can only provide information about the linguistic origin of the name (i.e. its etymology, basic motivation, the language from which it is borrowed), not specific historical details of the individual spread of the name (e.g. which ancestors got this name, for what specific reasons and when).

Query: What is the interpretation of the surname *Požár*?

Answer: The surname *Požár* is connected with the common noun *požár* ‘fire’. It is related to fire, fire site, burnt place, etc. The relation to the toponym *Požárý*, referring a settlement near Prague, cannot be excluded. The exact reason why a particular person got a certain name in the past cannot be found usually.

In connection with the above-mentioned, we should pay attention to remarkable queries about the identification of the Jewish or Romany origin of certain surname holders, queries which have recently become more frequent. However, the Language Consulting Centre cannot help in these cases either.

Query: Is the surname *Matzner* of Jewish origin?

Answer: The surname *Matzner* is definitely of German origin; the Jewish origin of its particular holders could be confirmed or disproved, for example, by means of a genealogical survey, not via linguistic sources.

The Language Consulting Centre also receives a high number of inquiries about the possibility of registration of particular anthroponyms, most often given names, by Czech state authorities. If they can be found in the basic handbook including verified name forms, it is possible to meet the inquirers’ request and inform them that there should be no difficulty concerning the registration of the name (however, the Language Consulting Centre substitutes the registry office, which should answer such queries – sometimes even registrars themselves address the Language Consulting Centre with

similar questions, though they should have the newest edition of the handbook on first names at their disposal, they should be able to use it and in the case of doubts require an opinion issued by a specialized registered expert).

Query: Is it possible to register the female given name *Bella*?

Answer: Yes, this form is included in the handbook *Jak se bude vaše dítě jmenovat* [What will your child's name be?] by M. Knappová as a German or English variant of the name *Bela*; it can be accepted by a Czech registry office without any problems.

If a particular form of a name is not found in the handbook, the Language Consulting Centre must refer the inquirer – according to the particular situation – either to the registry office, which may exclusively decide whether the name can be registered or not, or to the relevant judicial experts who are authorized to issue an expert opinion; this is outside the competence of the Language Consulting Centre.

Query: Is it possible to register the female given name *Francis*?

Answer: This query is outside the competence of the Language Consulting Centre, it is necessary to contact the Department of Onomastics of the Czech Language Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences (see <http://www.ujc.cas.cz/expertni-cinnost/index.html>).

Specificity of onomastic queries

As it is obvious from the above-mentioned examples, the Language Consulting Centre deals primarily with the Czech language, but the specificity of the onomastic queries lies in the fact that they often relate not only to Czech proper names and the Czech linguistic background, but they may also require an interdisciplinary approach, knowledge of foreign languages and orientation in the entire contemporary multicultural world to be able to answer them. For instance, the pronunciation or declension of foreign proper names in Czech is based on the sound form of the given proper name in its language of origin. Most necessary data can be found in the accessible handbooks by the members of the Language Consulting Centre.

Query: What is the correct pronunciation of the Greek surname *Konstantopoulos*?

Answer: In Modern Greek, “ou” is pronounced [u]. Therefore, the appropriate pronunciation of the given surname is [konstantopulos].

However, sometimes it is necessary to refer the inquirers to specialists in the given field, especially in the case of languages considered “exotic” from our point of view.

Query: What is the correct Czech pronunciation of the name written as Võ Nguyễn Giáp, belonging to a Vietnamese general?

Answer: According to a handbook which is at our disposal, this name could be pronounced [vo nguɛ̃n zap] in Czech. However, we recommend you to discuss this

problem preferably with experts in the field of Vietnamese, for example from the Far East Institute of the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Charles University.

The last example of linguistic query and its corresponding answer proves that the complete solution of a linguistic inquiry sometimes requires not only general knowledge and awareness of contemporary world affairs and latest events, but also a certain intuition to try to discover what could have motivated the inquirer to ask such a question. The query “What is the correct name of the capital of North Korea?” has, in fact, a seemingly simple answer: “The name of the capital of North Korea is transcribed as *Pchjongjang* into Czech (in English *Pyongyang*).” However, the inquirer mentioned that the media had recently used a different variant of the given toponym. Furthermore, the dialogue shows that the media employed a similar name, *Pchjongčchang* (in English *Pyeongchang*), which was, at that time, frequently mentioned in relation to the Olympic Games. The inquirer was mistaken that the Olympics took place in North Korea. To prevent such mistakes, the answer was complemented by the following piece of information: “The name *Pchjongčchang* belongs to a district in South Korea, where the Winter Olympic Games were held in 2018.”

Conclusion

Queries about various aspects of proper names are highly frequent in the Language Consulting Centre. Therefore, they can serve as a valuable source of data on what specific facts and issues connected with proper names are interesting to the inquirers, what causes difficulties when using names and what specific names are most often the subject of the queries, etc. This data can be employed, for example, when preparing onomastic handbooks or manuals intended for the general public, but they can be valuable even in fundamental research, as they can draw the researchers’ attention to some remarkable aspects of proper names that could otherwise remain unnoticed.

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