

CZECH AND SLOVENIAN LANGUAGE CONSULTING: WHAT DO THEY TELL US ABOUT LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE USERS?

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Članek se osredotoča na jezikovno svetovanje na Češkem in v Sloveniji, ki sta na mnogo načinov tesno povezana. Povezanost je očitna ne le v jezikovnih temah in težavah, o katerih sprašujejo uporabniki obeh jezikovnih svetovalnic, temveč tudi v nalogah in izzivih, s katerimi se morajo sodelavci svetovalnic spoprijemati. Članek poudarja pomen jezikovnega svetovanja kot dragocenega vira podatkov o jeziku in uporabnikih jezika, ki so zelo koristni posebej v postopku kodifikacije ter pri ustvarjanju slovarjev in drugih jezikovnih virov.

jezikovno vprašanje, jezikovno svetovanje, jezikovna svetovalnica, jezikovni vir, uporabnik jezika

This article focuses on the Czech Language Consulting Center and the Slovenian Language Consulting Center, which are closely related in many ways. This relationship is evident not only in the language topics and problems that users of both centers inquire about but also in the tasks and challenges that the members of the centers deal with. The article emphasizes the importance of language consulting as a valuable source of data about language and language users, which is particularly useful during the process of codification and the creation of dictionaries and other language resources.

language inquiry, language consulting, language consulting center, language resource, language user

1 Introduction

Language consulting, described as »an organized form of language care« (Uhlířová 2016: 748), exists in several European countries. Typically, it takes the form of a language consulting center established by research-oriented institutions affiliated with local academies of sciences or universities. These centers cater to the general public, offering services that are often provided free of charge. This is also the case of the Czech Language Consulting Center (Jazyková poradna) and the Slovenian Language Consulting Center (Jezikovna svetovalnica) (hereinafter the Czech center and Slovenian center), discussed below. Language users in the Czech Republic, as well as the general public in Slovenia, may use these services knowing that the information they receive is certified by the authority of research institutions with a long tradition and therefore trustworthy. Of course, there are some formal differences between the

Czech and Slovenian centers due to their different backgrounds. These language consulting centers (as well as their parent institutions) have different histories, provide different services, and operate under different conditions. This article hypothesizes that, despite the formal distinctions between the two centers, there are many points of contact between them, some of which are somewhat hidden from the public eye. Therefore, the third section emphasizes the essential contribution of other tasks of the Slovenian and Czech centers, those of a conceptual nature, because part of language consulting is transferring information about language to the public. These activities of the two centers simultaneously overlap with the tasks of lexicography because they contribute to developing and improving language resources. In addition, the data obtained from language consulting are useful for other linguistic research.

2 The Czech and Slovenian centers then and now

The first difference between the Czech and Slovenian centers is when they were established: the Czech center began operating in 1936. In the former Czechoslovakia, the Language Consulting Center was established by the Society for Slavic Linguistics in Prague and the editorial office of the journal *Naše řeč* (Our Language), with the aim of »providing, for a modest fee, advice and assistance with language inquiries to all interested parties« (*Naše řeč* 1936: 119). Starting in 1946, the Czech center operated as a regular service within the Czech Language Institute. The Slovenian center, as a public service provided by the Fran Ramovš Institute of the Slovenian Language, was officially established in 2012 (Dobrovoljc et al. 2020: 15), although it existed long before that in an unofficial form.¹

Despite this time difference, both centers arose out of the necessity to address language inquiries from the public. Language consulting centers are also closely linked to the creation of language resources such as dictionaries and reference books, which in turn affect the centers' practice. The establishment of the Slovenian center is connected to *Slovenski pravopis*, the normative guide for Slovenian, released in 2001. After the publication of this reference book, the institute's webpage presented conceptual texts and allowed feedback from users (Lengar Verovnik, Dobrovoljc 2022: 195). In the years that followed, the increase in inquiries from Slovenian language users via email demonstrated their growing need for institutionalized language consulting. Subsequently, observations on language rules published on the internet by laypeople multiplied significantly, leading to the undesirable situation known as codification plurality (Dobrovoljc et al. 2020: 15; Dovalil 2018: 2). This contributed to the establishment of the online language consulting center in Slovenia in 2012.

1 »The Institute of the Slovenian language has performed counselling about topical language dilemmas for decades; writers, authors, and editors originally asked questions over the phone and by mail with answering organized ad hoc among the Institute's employees« (Lengar Verovnik, Dobrovoljc 2022: 195).

2.1 The operation of the Czech and Slovenian centers: services, procedures, and consultants

The Czech Language Consulting Center operates under the Department of Language Cultivation.² It offers telephone-based language consulting services and provides detailed responses to complex or extensive questions through a written expertise service (for which fees are charged). Users typically receive their expertise via email or post within ten working days. Between 1998 and 2011, the Czech center answered language queries sent via email.³ Today, telephone consultations constitute the mainstay of the Czech center's services, available for two hours every workday. All department staff participate in telephone consultations. The Czech center handles approximately fifteen phone calls per day, although multiple inquiries are often addressed within a single call (the average number of inquiries per day is twenty-four). Annually, the Czech center receives over forty requests for written expertise.

Language consulting at the Slovenian institute operates exclusively through inquiries submitted via an electronic form. This online service has operated since 2016. Unlike the Czech center, the Slovenian center's language consulting activity is not tied to a specific department; instead, members from various departments collaborate on its tasks. Since 2014, the Slovenian center has consisted of an editorial board that includes six regular members and one leading moderator. Most queries are answered by the editorial board, but additional coworkers assist with more complex inquiries. Any member of the institute can be called upon to contribute expertise if he or she specializes in the relevant subject matter.⁴ Finally, an important difference between the practices of the Czech and Slovenian centers is that at the latter every answer to an inquiry must be approved by the editorial board. It can take up to three weeks to provide an answer, and twenty inquiries per month are published.

2.2 Databases and other resources for the public by the Czech and Slovenian centers

Both the Czech and Slovenian centers have developed databases containing answered inquiries that are accessible to the public. The Slovenian database (<https://svetovalnica.zrc-sazu.si/>) was created in 2012, and it is closely linked to the Fran language resources portal (fran.si), which pools dictionaries and other language resources for Slovenian. Answers are sorted by categories and by recency. The database of the Slovenian center also allows a more complex search through inquiries by specific publishing dates, frequencies, or authors of inquiries. As of March 21st,

2 The names of departments performing this activity changed during that time. In 1946 it was the Department for New Standard Czech Studies, and in 1967 the new Department of Language Cultivation and Stylistics was established (Dvořáčková 2011).

3 This form of language consulting service had to be canceled because the public interest in email language consultation has grown significantly, limiting other departments' research activities. To put this in perspective, between 1998 and 2010, the Czech center answered over 71,500 email queries (Pravdová 2015: 6).

4 Thanks to Helena Dobrovoljc and Nataša Gliha Komac for valuable information about the operation of the Slovenian center.

2024, the Slovenian center's database contains 3,639 published inquiries with their responses.

The Czech center's linguistically structured Language Inquiry Database was launched in 2019 and allows users to search and filter language inquiries (dotazy.ujc.cas.cz). The inquiries are organized into different language areas, further subdivided into categories, and then detailed down to the level of (general) inquiries and concrete inquiries. Users can search using keywords and employ more advanced methods, such as using inquiry IDs. As of March 21st, 2024, the Czech database contains a total of 13,481 published inquiries with related answers.

The beginning of this section mentioned the two centers' relation to producing language reference books. For the Czech center, this is the *Internet Language Reference Book*, and in the case of the Slovenian center it is the normative guide.

At the Czech center, the enormous growth of email inquiries between 2000 and 2010 (see footnote 3) was one of the motivations for offering those using the Czech center a language resource of a different form, based on their needs, which resulted in the creation of the *Internet Language Reference Book*. At the time of its publication in 2008 (prirucka.ujc.cas.cz), it primarily focused on linguistic phenomena that users of the Czech center perceived as problematic and on phenomena that had not yet been described in other official language resources. After sixteen years of existence, the *Internet Language Reference Book* is the most comprehensive resource on the codification of Czech. It consists of a wordlist section (with information about inflection and orthography, and other information about individual lexemes) and a reference section (providing general information on grammatical and orthographical phenomena). The wordlist section of the *Internet Language Reference Book* also has links to other monolingual dictionaries of Czech.

It was noted above that in Slovenia the revision of orthographic and other language rules is very closely related to the Slovenian center. Preparing the normative guide was not only one of the impulses for establishing an institutionally organized language consulting service, but it is also a long-term project that uses data from language consulting for its further development. The Slovenian center serves as a source of normative issues (Lengar Verovnik, Dobrovoljc 2022: 195ff.), as well as a platform for receiving feedback from the public (through various surveys), which has become a crucial part of the revision of new chapters of the normative guide. The revised chapters are published in the collection *Pravopis 8.0*. As of March 2024, six chapters are available for public discussion (<https://www.fran.si/pravopis8>).

2.3 Users of language consulting and the subjects of their inquiries

Uhlířová (1999) analyzed the Czech center's data on its users' professions from the 1990s. Nearly two decades later, in 2016–2017, the Slovenian center conducted an online survey of its users, focusing on their education, age structure, and motivations for using the center (Lengar Verovnik, Dobrovoljc 2022: 196). Despite the nearly two-decade gap between these surveys, they exhibit evident similarities. First, users' need

to contact the centers often stemmed from their professional requirements. Second, users of both centers tend to have higher education levels.

Another remarkable finding emerges from a comparison of the subjects that users of the two centers are interested in. Multiple sources of information are available: the subjects of inquiries are addressed in several articles (e.g., Uhlířová 1996; Dobrovoljc 2023). In addition, related data are available on the Slovenian website and in the Czech database. According to the Slovenian website and Dobrovoljc's (2023) findings, the language areas for which advice is most often requested at the Slovenian center are orthography, followed by morphology and word formation. Based on an analysis conducted in 1996 by Uhlířová, users of the Czech center also showed interest in orthography, followed by vocabulary and then inflectional morphology. Although one must consider the time gap between the publications of these articles, two decades of experience at the Czech center indicates that the emphasis on orthography remains consistent. The Czech Language Inquiry Database's statistics (<https://dotazy.ujc.cas.cz/statistiky/>) confirm the great interest of the Czech center's users in orthography, especially capitalization and punctuation.

Similarities in the topics of inquiries addressed to the two centers might also have other sources. Smejkalová (2020) and Dobrovoljc (2023) described the situation at the centers during the COVID-19 pandemic, which gave rise to specific types of inquiries regarding the orthography of new COVID-related words, for example, especially concerning neologisms. Equally important are their implications for language management and the role of language consulting during times of crisis (see also Section 3).

3 Overlaps in language consulting

The previous sections provided an overview of the historical background of the Czech and Slovenian centers and their organizational structures, databases, and websites. This section delves into the non-visible tasks of the two centers mentioned in the introduction.

The Slovenian and Czech centers can be perceived as public bodies of organized language management (Beneš et al. 2018: 120). In this context, it is important to recall Uhlířová's (1996) emphasis on the role of language consulting in facilitating dialogue between linguists and the public. In this tripartite interaction, the language user occupies one side, the linguists the other, and the language consultant acts as a mediator. Language consultants' responsibilities extend beyond assisting language consulting center users with language-related issues and proposing solutions. They also serve as representatives of the institution, embodying its authority in these specific interactions. In addition, the linguists working for the two centers are usually intensely engaged with the public when participating in additional language education activities and research communication. They give lectures, cooperate with TV and radio stations, and collaborate with many newspapers and periodicals.

The importance of language consulting centers' activities is validated by the crucial fact that a significant proportion of language users prefer to seek assistance from language consulting professionals rather than relying solely on dictionaries and other language resources. Several factors contribute to this preference. First, language consulting offers the opportunity for detailed explanations.⁵ Second, they provide access to »raw language data.« Language consultants from both centers actively monitor usage during their interactions with users, drawing on corpora and other resources. The demand for up-to-date information became particularly evident during the pandemic because users repeatedly sought guidance on new lexemes and collocations not yet documented in language resources.

It should especially be emphasized that language consulting is an activity that offers benefits to both linguists and language users, as illustrated in Figure 1.

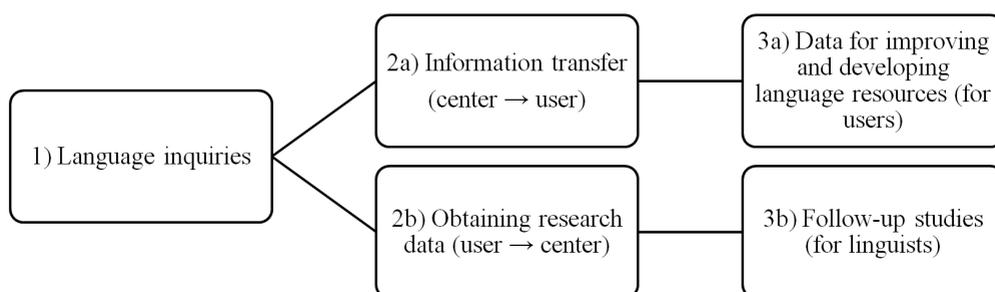


Figure 1: Language consulting input (1), information transfer (2), and output (3).

In the initial step, users of the centers seek consultation for language-related issues. Subsequently, consultants provide explanations (if available) or identify problems (such as missing information). Following this, consultants (as researchers) collect data about language (its system and description) and language users (their preferences, attitudes toward language, etc.). These data serve as valuable resources for the third step, which involves improving and developing language resources, as well as supporting other research (Mžourková 2022).

4 Conclusion

Language consulting is a well-established activity and long-standing practice, yet its processes and benefits remain insufficiently explored. This article introduces the tasks and principles of Czech and Slovenian language consulting. It shows that their practices are closely aligned with their motivations, tasks, and activities. Moreover, the resources provided by the two centers serve as valuable sources of data for Czech and Slovenian linguists. Language consultants possess authentic insights into customary language usage, attitudes toward language, and language-related challenges faced by users. These sources warrant further exploration in the future, benefiting both

5 Users of the Czech center have various problems consulting dictionaries or reference books. They might not be able to find the information they need or might not know how to interpret it (Mžourková 2022: 116ff.).

language users and linguists. Thanks to language consulting, there is information about language and its users, with the help of which it is possible to contribute to enriching language resources and improving their utility (Mžourková, Krivan 2019).

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