An Excursion to the Czech Literary Lingosphere

“This is just too impossibly cool for words … probably the single most cohesive thematic panel I’ve ever heard of at any conference”. That was the assessment by a peer-reviewer of the proposal for a panel entitled “Universal Linguistic Microcosms? Artificial Languages in Czech Literature” for the 2018 National Conference of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages held February 2-4, 2018 in Washington, DC. Whether or not we lived up to those high expectations is not for me to evaluate, but we definitely put our heads together in fine style. And we must thank Susan Kresin, Masako Fidler, IATC, our universities, and the České literární centrum for the moral and financial support that made this panel possible, and especially made it possible for writer Michal Ajvaz to join us in DC. Our panel was chaired David Danaher (University of Wisconsin) and featured presentations by Masako Fidler (Brown University) and Václav Cvrček (Charles University), Laura Janda (yours truly, UiT The Arctic University of Norway), and Andrei Rogatchevski (also representing UiT), followed by a discussion by Michal Ajvaz.

Before divulging the gist of our scholarly and literary ruminations, I would like to tell you a little about where the idea for this panel came from. Various twists of academic fate brought Andrei and me to Tromsø, Norway to teach Russian language and literature. Upon realizing that we also shared an enduring fondness for Czech, a language we otherwise had little opportunity to use in the Arctic, we agreed that we should read and discuss recent works of Czech fiction. The plan started out well: our first choice was *Lucemburská zahrada* (2011) by Michal Ajvaz. But rather than being propagated to other authors and works, our enthusiasm took root in that novel and didn’t let go. Like Paul, the main character in Ajvaz’ novel, we became mesmerized by an artificial language doubly embedded in the story: Yggur is the language of an alternative reality under threat of infiltration in an unfinished fantasy novel supposedly penned by Donald Ross, a cybernetics professor at the University of Albany. Unlike Paul, who adulterously squandered his summer and endured a befitting punishment from his spouse, we set about decoding Yggur and locating it in the context of the Czech literary lingosphere. But we needed help to make sense of the whole picture and that’s why we reached out to Masako, Václav, David, and Michal to create an opportunity to meet and compare notes. Our panel combined the analytic strengths of both linguistic and literary scholarship to analyze Michal’s linguistic creation, comparing it both to natural human languages and to other fictional languages.

Masako and Václav led off our panel with an examination of the artificial language Ptydepe that appears in Havel’s (1996) *Memorandum*, comparing it with the statistical behavior of Czech in the presidential speeches of the pre-socialist, socialist, and post-socialist eras. Ptydepe was allegedly designed as a language in service of power that would eliminate homonyms and promote “precision”, however, it also facilitated the obfuscation of both meaning and personal responsibility. Masako and Václav show that the socialist-era Czech speeches likewise convey relatively low degrees of agency in texts crowded with meaningless modifiers and few verbs.

I approached Yggur in the manner of a field linguist, fleshing out the grammar and lexicon, and comparing the distributional behaviors of words and morphemes in Yggur to those in natural languages. Despite the tiny size of the Yggur language sample (632 words of dialog), it bears all the hallmarks of a full-fledged typologically normal human language, including complex derivational morphology and syntax, as well as a Zipfian distribution of words. Yggur is, in miniature, a complete linguistic reality. I also compared Yggur to the universe of constructed languages that have been artificially devised by humans for literary, entertainment, and practical purposes.

Andrei investigated Yggur as a manifestation of the world’s invisible yet omnipresent structure, the primary substance called The One (ἕν) by the Greek philosopher Plotinus. It is by accidentally misspelling “Plotinus” in a Google search that the protagonist Paul discovers Yggur and its coded messages that unhinge his life. As Andrei puts it: “The novel suggests that, every now and then, life sends us a coded message about The One in the form of an incomprehensible language. If we decode this message, at least in part, it may change our existence dramatically, but not necessarily for the better.”

Michal rounded out the panel with an eye-opening overview of artificial languages that have appeared in Czech literary works of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Michal could be described as a “linguist’s writer”, since his works often include linguistic details to the delight of language enthusiasts. In *Druhé Město* (1993) the protagonist becomes connected with a parallel universe when he buys a book written in a mysterious script in a used-book store, and in *Zlatý věk* (2001) the narrator describes a language spoken on a fictitious island with capricious grammatical categories and an orthography that literally swirls about like sheets hung up in the wind to dry. In Michal’s experience, no language is entirely artificial, since even constructed languages depend on the grammatical categories of natural human languages. According to Michal, the closest cousin to Yggur in the Czech literary tradition is the Išhi language invented by Jan Lukeš in his eleven-volume sci-fi novel *Na Thetidě*.

Our collective goal now is to write up our findings as a cluster of articles to be submitted to the *Slavic and East European Journal* or a similar venue. And to hope that our results fall into the hands of peer-reviewers that hold the same high opinion of our efforts as the anonymous AATSEEL reviewer cited above.