Language biographies and the analysis of language situations: on the life of the German community in the Czech Republic*

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Abstract

The article analyses the linguistic, social, and political situation that has developed on the territory of the Czech Republic in the course of the twentieth century. The materials used are biographical accounts provided by people of German origin who live in the Czech Republic. A language biography is a biographical account in which the narrator makes the language, or rather languages, the topic of his or her narrative — in particular the issue of how the language was acquired and how it was used. The biographical method is discussed below as a sociolinguistic method that provides a means of understanding language situations. I deal with the problem of constructing individual language biographies as well as with the typical language biography. I propose a tentative typical language biography of Czech Germans, arguing that the narrative genre of language biography should be included reflexively in the description of language situations.

1. Introduction

The present article has two main objectives. First, I want to show what sociolinguists can expect to learn from the language biography used as a method of understanding language situations in general. Second, I want to provide a specific illustration of what this method can reveal about the language situation of the Germans who stayed in the Czech Republic (or rather in the former Czechoslovakia) after World War II and have continued to live in the territory since then. I shall focus on methodological questions.

The article is based on biographical research that has been going on since 1995.[1] More than 40 unstructured qualitative interviews have been recorded within its framework. It was characteristic of the interviews that the interviewees (respondents / informants) were allowed space to provide

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uninterrupted narratives, the so-called narrative interview being the ideal case (Schütze 1987). The interviews were conducted with citizens of the Czech Republic who, according to diverse sources, were known to be (ethnic) Germans. A majority of the respondents were born in the 1920s and 1930s. It follows from the nature of the biographical narrative method that the research was diachronic, in practice covering the life experience of at least three generations (i.e. the narrators themselves, their children, their parents, or even their grandchildren). The original aim of the research was to contribute toward understanding the life of the German community (cf. Stehlíková 1997), but the study of its members' language biographies became the specific goal. This research is still continuing, and some of the results presented here should be taken as interim (such results will be mentioned explicitly).

By a language biography I understand a biographical account in which the narrator makes a language, or languages — and their acquisition and use in particular — the topic of his or her narrative (cf. Franceschini 2001a, 2001b). However, a language is not merely a private matter: the individual learns it from someone and uses it with someone (inside and outside the family), and this is why language autobiographies naturally include aspects of other persons' biographies, family language biographies or, to a varying extent, aspects of language situations of a particular language community. It is this fact that makes it possible to obtain information about language situations by analyzing language (auto)biographies.

However, language biographies have not yet been used extensively for this research purpose. More often the analysis of language situations is based on demographic statistics, on various kinds of documents (literature, newspapers, administrative texts), on dialectological records of words and utterances, on questionnaires, and more recently on video and audio recordings of everyday conversations. Language biographies can contribute to the verification of findings obtained by the above methods and can act as an important component of research triangulation.[2] However, they need not be limited to this more or less complementary role. Indeed, they are indispensable if the possibilities of obtaining the relevant data are restricted — as is the case with investigations into the language situation of Germans in Czechoslovakia after 1945. For various reasons this research has not been carried out systematically (cf. Povejšil 1997). During the first two decades after World War II linguists worked with German respondents only sporadically, and there are no reliable demographic statistics for a number of sociocultural phenomena. My position is that language biographies are particularly useful for language-historical and diachronic research.

2. Methodological problems

So language biographies are useful in research, but are they reliable? Does the respondent not tell a different story each time? To what extent is his or her narrative stable and what factors can be monitored and controlled by the researcher during its production? These questions cannot be answered in general. In the current research I have focused on time, on the ethnic identity of the researcher, and on the formulation of the research aims. I varied these, observing the influence on the respondents' narratives. In practice this meant that several narratives were recorded with the same informant (see Nekvapil 2001a, 2001b).

As far as the time variable is concerned, the same informants have been interviewed at intervals of about a year (three times at most up to now). The analysis has shown that the stability of the narratives investigated is not substantially influenced by the time factor: the informants narrated basically the same stories. There are some problems, though. First, the narratives were repeated in the period between 1995 and 1998. By that time Czech society had already become relatively stabilized. If the German informants had narrated their biographies between 1987 and 1990, a period fractured by the social upheaval in November, 1989, their narratives might have been more likely to show a higher degree of variance. This is because biographical narratives provide the past in the light of the contemporary social situation in which the individual lives. This situation has changed considerably in the Czech Republic, or Czechoslovakia, since 1989, and so has the status of the German community. Second, the formulation "the informants narrated basically the same stories" allows for some difference among their narratives. How did the narratives differ and how can the differences be explained? We shall return to this question presently.

As far as the variable of the researcher's ethnic identity is concerned, the same informant was interviewed sometimes by a Czech interviewer and sometimes by a German one (or vice versa) at roughly annual intervals. The influence of the researcher's ethnic identity on the informants' narratives was examined because the researcher's ethnicity is connected to the question of whether the interview is conducted by a majority member (i.e. a Czech) or someone else, in particular a member of the same ethnic group as the informants themselves (i.e. a German).[3] The second reason was that in Central Europe, ethnicity is language-bound, and the use of Czech or German respectively as the language of the interview may be symbolic (e.g. of majority ethnicity) and so affect communication. (On the close link between the ethnic category and a particular language in Central Europe see Nekvapil [2000b] and Stevenson [2000].) The analysis has, however, shown that the researcher's ethnicity factor and the use of the

corresponding language does not have a significant influence on the stability of the narratives investigated. The informants related basically the same stories both in Czech and in German to Czech as well as to German researchers. What the expression "basically the same" in this formulation means, however, will be discussed below.

But what about the influence of various formulations of the research aim to informants? This was investigated to determine whether it was possible to use the narratives from a research project designed to elicit the biographies of German inhabitants *as Germans* in the investigations of language biographies. This formulation is not redundant. In the interview, even the German minority members can foreground identities other than being German. This problem can be made the topic of the interview itself. At the beginning of one interview a German informant asked directly if she was to narrate as a German.

Example (1) demonstrates the way the biography of respondent S was elicited as one of a German living in the Czech Republic; examples (2) (a telephone conversation recording) and (3) (the beginning of an interview) illustrate the focused elicitation of a language biography.[4] All three examples relate to the communication between the same interviewer E and the same informant S.

(1) (translated from Czech)

E: ((the way)) things were, just as you remember them, and nothing else. [simply just just]
S: [and er before that] I have some concerns (.)
E: pardon?
S: before that I have some concerns. and I'll ask you a few questions.
E: O.K.
S: you are an editor er=
E: =[I'm not I'm not]
S: [of a magazine, sort of or] or for:: the radio something
E: no
S: or something like that, aren't you?
E: no not at all at all
S: or for some association,
E: no. not at all [nothing] of that sort.
S: [no?]
E: I'm=
T: =your hobby?
E: I a-
T: [((laughter))]
E: [nothing of that sort either.] I'm from the university, and there at the university they are organizing a sociological research project,

S: hem
E: that is called Germans in Bohemia, and so it's about the life of er the German, German population, that has simply somehow here=
S: stayed [( )]
E: always [lived and] simply lives lives up to now.
S: hem

(2) (translated from Czech)
E: this time I would like to know, how you learned Czech.
S: that's very simple. I learned it myself.
E: but I'd like you to tell me more about it.

The expression "this time" refers to the preceding conversation between E and S, that is, the interview whose introductory sequence is included in example (1).

(3) (translated from Czech)
E: fine ((laughter)) I'd I'd I would like to know, eh, that when I listened to that to that re*co*rding with you, that, you know your Czech was absolutely marvellous, =
S. =well=
E: =so the question simply, simply suggests itself. like how, (.) how did it *come* about. (.) in your case.=

The formulation "when I listened to that to that re*co*rding with you" refers to the recording of the first interview whose introductory sequence is presented in example (1).

Was there a difference between the language biographies elicited in the first way (e.g. example [1]) and in the second way (e.g. examples [2] and [3])? The analysis has shown that not even the different formulation of the research aims had significant influence on the narratives concerning the acquisition and use of languages. Nevertheless, even this statement requires a comment. In the corpus of narratives elicited in the first way there appear a few narratives in which the language problem was not brought to the fore at all; in some of the narratives it was discussed frequently, in others hardly at all. This is due to the fact the narratives were elicited in order to discover the life stories of the German inhabitants (*as Germans*), the informants themselves determining, ideally, what is and what is not relevant for their story. And although the researcher was also active in the interview and the narratives originated through coproduction (cf. Leudar and Antaki 1996), it was not his research task to inquire about the informants' language. Nevertheless, it is for this reason that the narratives demonstrate the role and importance of language in the lives of the German population (on the basis of their mentioning the topic at all and including it in their

biographies in various ways, etc.). On the other hand, the relevance of language for a *general* life story need not be so evident in the interviews directed at language acquisition and use.

The narratives thus seem to be relatively stable and the language biographies to a reasonable extent reliable — the recorded narratives were not substantially influenced by the factor of time, or the ethnic identity of the researcher, or the formulation of the research aims. However, as mentioned above, there were certain differences in the narratives of the same informants, which could have been, to a certain extent, functions of any or all of the three factors. How can the differences be explained? Can a more profound analysis reveal one of these factors as more "powerful"? Such an explanation is hindered by a problem concerning the relationships between the factors studied. First, in principle only the factor of time can be varied independently. The other factors can be varied only in connection with it. Apart from this self-evident point, the fact that the narratives were repeated three times at most (often only twice) must be given consideration — consequently, the interplay of some of the factors was not tested.

When explaining the differences between the individual narratives of the same respondent, the "effect of the same researcher" and the "effect of the same topic" should also be considered. During the repeated narrative the informant may be governed by an approach that can be roughly formulated as "I have told you that, you must already know that." In what way can this influence the narrative? We have learned from Kallmeyer and Schütze (1977) that the narrator, *qua* narrator, must develop certain activities constituting the narrative: s/he must conclude the narrated story, or its partial aspects; s/he must focus on the essentials and condense the story accordingly, s/he must give details to make the story plausible. In terms of the conditions constituting the narrative it can be expressed as "Gestaltschließungszwang, Relevanzfestlegungs- und Kondensierungszwang" and "Detaillierungszwang" (see Kallmeyer and Schütze 1977). Naturally, a number of "details" may be eliminated from the repeated narrative as the narrator assumes they are already known. This reason can also have the reverse effect — the narrators give further details in order not to repeat themselves. The "same-researcher effect" leads to a general conclusion relating to the whole research: the number of repeated interviews shouldn't exceed a reasonable number.

However, the question is not only when to apply the language-biography method and to what extent the narratives are stable, but also what kinds of information can be obtained by the analysis of the (language-)biographical

narratives. Basically, three types of findings, corresponding to three approaches to the biographical narrative, can be gained from the respondents' narratives (cf. Denzin 1989; Konopásek 1998), viz. information on the following:

1. what "things" were like, how events occurred (findings from the sphere of the reality of life),
2. how "things" and events were experienced by the respondents (findings from the sphere of reality of the subject),
3. how "things" and events are narrated by the respondents (findings from the sphere of reality of the text).[5]

Which type of information is relevant in this article? The answer appears evident: if we want to characterize the language situation of a certain community, we are particularly concerned with "the reality of life," that is, sphere 1. This seems to correspond with the above-mentioned idea that the (language-)biographical method can serve to verify the findings obtained by means of more or less traditional (socio)linguistic methods. However, recent investigation has also been directed at the way language is experienced, and the characteristics of language situations have been partly based on profound research into language attitudes. (On this see an older programmatic study by Trnka [1983]; see also Daneš [1986].) Thus, we shall also be concerned with the "reality of the subject," that is, sphere 2. It should be added that even in this case the language-biography narratives can be used as a means of triangulation.

So far we have only clarified which types of information will be relevant for the investigation of a language situation. However, the key question is, how can we get this information? Concentrating on the "reality of life," which is no doubt the focus of sociolinguistics, let us ask a more specific question, whether the analysis of the language-biography narratives can possibly yield information from this sphere. The problem encountered here is a general problem of social reality representation. The question is whether there exists a direct relation between the biographical narrative and what is narrated, and if there is none, what factors operate here.

Various approaches to the analysis of biographies have offered various solutions to the problem. If the researchers assume a naive realistic attitude toward the biographical narrative, they have no problem indeed and they can credulously accept what the respondents tell them as "the reality of life." Others base their research on the assumption that the narratives do not provide information on how things and events occurred in life but on how they were experienced and focus therefore on the study of the "reality of the subject." And still others insist that the relationship between the narrative and what is narrated is further complicated by the act of narration itself as well as by the narrative conventions as a part of culture and focus

their investigation on "the reality of the text." For example, Denzin (1989: 34) says that biographies are "formalized expressions of experience" (for a more comprehensive discussion see Denzin 1989; Konopásek 1998).

It is not the point to adopt some of these approaches and assume a specific epistemological attitude. Those sociologists may be followed who, analyzing the biographical narratives, attempt to distinguish "when the bare reality manifests itself, when the subjective experience of this reality and when the biographical text itself does" (Konopásek 1998: 75). If the informant says, for example, that s/he started learning Czech in 1938, it seems acceptable as an item of information from the "reality of life" (Nekvapil 2001a); such information can be verified by means of another method, such as the study of written documents. Nevertheless, it is also possible to abandon the traditional methodology of social research and follow those sociologists who subscribe to the textual turn in social science. Their approach is based on the assumption that the "reality of life," the "reality of the subject," and the "reality of the text" cannot be separated from each other in a straightforward way, life having, for example, the attributes of the text and the text the attributes of life. We shall return to the question of the relevance of this approach for understanding language situations on the basis of language-biographical narratives in the conclusion of the article.

3. Language biographies of Czech Germans

I use the term "Czech Germans" for stylistic reasons (as an abbreviation). The term also occurred in the narrative of one of the informants — it therefore functions not only as a category devised by the analyst, such as the author of the present study, but also as an ethnocategory (cf. Stehlíková 1997). We shall now focus on the language situation of the Germans who have lived permanently in the Czech Republic (and the former Czechoslovakia). According to the 2001 census, 0.4 percent of the permanent population (39,106 people) in the territory of the present-day Czech Republic declared their ethnicity to be German. (On the macrosociolinguistic situation of ethnic communities in the Czech Republic in more detail see Nekvapil [2000a], Nekvapil and Neustupný [1998].)

We shall start by presenting the language biography of Mr. S, the same informant as in examples (1)–(3).

Mr. S was born in 1926 in the family of a village cobbler. His father and mother were Germans. The family lived in a village in east Bohemia, near the Czech–German language boundary. German was the only language spoken in the family. The father of Mr. S could speak a little Czech, his mother none at all. The most

important contacts of Mr. S with Czech during his childhood occurred on the following occasions: (1) in 1937/1938 he learned Czech at primary school for two hours a week (this lasted only one year, until the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Hitler); (2) for a short time, a Czech boy lived in the family to learn German; (3) several Czech children attended the same school as Mr. S for a longer time to learn German. Apart from Czech, Mr. S did not learn any foreign language at school. Originally, Mr. S wanted to become a farmer. However, when he was seventeen he was drafted into the German army (in 1943). As a German soldier he went to Hungary, where he learned a little Hungarian. He can still remember some Hungarian words. Immediately after the end of World War II he was sent to work in the interior by the Czech authorities. His family was deported to Germany.

Living in an exclusively Czech environment in the interior he had to learn Czech. In 1948 he met his future wife — a German born in 1926. She did not live in a purely Czech environment after 1945, which was why she did not master Czech so well as Mr. S. Being a Czech citizen, Mr. S had to serve in the Czechoslovak army in the early 1950s (for three years, followed by three years' work in the mines); he started learning Russian there. However, he took the first steps only. During this period he constantly improved his Czech. He also devoted himself to learning written Czech systematically.

Having finished working in the mines, he was employed (together with his wife) as a worker in a textile factory in east Bohemia until his retirement, that is, for 34 years. They both lived in the village K nearby. In 1958 he was proposed by the local council officials to become a representative of the German minority in the council, the reason being his good knowledge of Czech. Mr. S accepted the offer and held the office until 1974.

Mr. and Mrs. S have always spoken German to each other, as well as to their sons. Two varieties of German, however, were used in the family. Mr. and Mrs S spoke a dialect to each other, and standard German to their sons. The sons of Mr. and Mrs S, Horst and Kurt, have learned standard German actively, which made it possible for them to become representatives of foreign companies in the Czech Republic after 1989. They have a passive knowledge of the local German dialect, their parents' basic means of communication. Both of them mastered Czech perfectly. They both married Czechs. Their wives have only a passive command of German. Czech is spoken in Horst's and Kurt's families. The mother tongue of their children, the grandchildren of Mr. and Mrs. S, is Czech. German is a foreign language for them, beside English. They learn it at school in the county town where both the families live. When the children visit their grandparents in the village K, Mr. and Mrs. S try to change the situation and talk to them in German — the grandchildren understand, yet reply in Czech.

Leaving the contents of the language biography of Mr. S aside for the moment, we shall ask the following question: who has created the language biography? Mr. S himself? This is a meaningful question because even Mr. S could have written about himself using the third person and this story could therefore be his autobiography. Note that Denzin (1989: 27) mentions this form of autobiography in American culture. The author of

the language biography of Mr. S, however, is the author of the present article. Having said that, another question arises: what is the biography based on? The answer is, on three interviews conducted at intervals of roughly one year; two of them were conducted by the author of this article, and one by a German researcher; two were aimed directly at the investigation of language biographies, and one at the investigation of biographies of German inhabitants *as Germans*. Naturally, this means that the language biography presented above is an extract that originated through a number of textual operations, such as elision, selection, generalization, integration (van Dijk 1980). To make this clear, we shall now cite an uninterrupted narrative of Mr. S from the second interview, in which he himself presents his language biography as a whole. (Note that the beginning of example [4] has already appeared in this article as example [3].)

(4) (translated from Czech)

E: fine ((laughter)) I'd I'd I would like to know, eh, that when I listened to that to that re*co*rding with you, that, you know your Czech was absolutely marvellous, =
S =well=
E: =so the question simply, simply suggests itself. like how, (.) how did it *come* about. (.) in your case.=
S: =I tell everybody, eh (.) I am self-taught. (.) in Czech.
E: hmm,
S: and yet I've got no Czech schooling at all, (. .) yeah [I know] how to pronounce and everything (.)
E: [hmm]
S: in general well,
E: hmm,
S: but I can't explain cases
E hmm, [hmm] [hmm]
S: [like] 'cos I have no schooling. that's sim [ply that] I never learned how. but I know exactly how to say it but=
E: =hmm.
S: (.) I don't know which case exactly this one or that one is. you know.
E: hmm,
S: a great many people comes over here asking me to teach them German,
E: hmm,=
S: = yeah (.) and again those cases are my weak spot.
E: hmm,= [hmm,]
S: =yeah, [so] I simply can't, (.) say what's what and that's. (.) and how I taught myself. well. (.) in thirty-eight, (. .) we started at school with, e:h (.) two classes a week of Czech. (.) the teacher

himself had *no* Czech. right, (.) he knew (.) he knew only from books things like lamp pump gum tulip,=
E: =hmm,=
S: =and there were pictures alongside, and so in this way (.) this was how we started. (.) then (. .) in thirty- thirty-eight when (.) he occupied, (. .)
E: hmm=
S: =Hitler, didn't he, (.) Sudetenland,
E: hmm,
S: so Czech was out. (.) stands to reason, (.) and until forty-five nothing. (.)
E: [hmm hmm]
S: [and there I] stood, (.) just (. .) knew just a little bit. (.) but the rest I had to learn. (.) I went to the country, (.) the farmers, and in this way, (.)
E: hmm,
S: then I obt- got a job, (.) in forty-seven with a bloke by the name of Dejmek in Kamenice, (.)
he was in the concentration camp, but e:h
E: hmm,
S: that's not to say that he e:h would [say] anything against me,
E: [hmm,]
S: or lemme put it like this, (.) he had (.) four kids, (.)
E: (hmm,)=
S: =well and they just helped me to improve (.) my Czech. I always asked, and was glad when they obliged me, (.) when they corrected me, (.) well and when there was something I didn't know I went to ask, then little by little I began to read too, (.)
E: hmm, [hmm,]
S: yeah, [some] papers some literature and so on, (.) this way I got better, then I had to go to the Czech army as well, (.)
E: hmm,
S: yeah (.) there I served, (..) as (..) one of the *un*reliables=
E: = hmm=
S: =in the despised AATC, ((Army Auxiliary Technical Corps)) =
E: = hmm, ((laughter))=
S: =yeah, (.) began to work in mines,
E: hmm,=
S: =those in Ostrava, was in Orlová (.) [in the] Žofinka and Zápotocký collieries (.) well and
E: [hmm,]
S: after the army (.) I signed the contract (.) just when they vetted me then however, (.) only because I did, (.) sign for three years, (.)

E: hmm,
S: the temporary job, (.) in the mine.
E: hmm, hmm,
S: well and [then I went to]
T: [I don't know] eh-eh-eh is that our? (.) tea, but what it's goin' to do I don't know.
E: hmm. (.) [fine] well
T: [look] at it. it don't colour much.
E: oh thanks.=
S: =there I was lucky to join a good workgang, again boys eh from around České Budějovice, (.) from South Bohemia, (. .) yeah, (.) and they (.) spelling simply I began to write something too, (.)
E: hmm,=
S: =always gave it to them, one mate, (.) Peter (.) Pytelka by name (.)
E: hmm, [thanks] ((Thanking T, Mr. S' wife))
S: I gave to [him,] saying Peter. (.) have a look, (.) correct the mistakes for me, will ya,
E: hmm,=
S: =well he simply done it somehow, and says, look (.) man (.) after some time he says. (.) we've got Czech schooling, we (.) knows it too but (.) but we do make a mistake here and there just as well=never mind the mistakes. you just go on writing. (.) and so I began- and even today I'm not a hundred percent sure I won't make a mistake. (.)
E: hmm, hmm=
S: =so I just got e:h even better there. (. .) well and within those three years I was there, (.)
E: [hmm]
S: [so] it went just fine, (.) and then when I finished there, I started here in Lhotka, (.)
E: hmm,
S: me and my wife went to work=got married in the meantime, (.)
E: hmm,
S: and settled down in Lhotka until we retired. (.)
E: hmm, hmm,
S: well, that's just it (.) it's as simple as that and (.)
E: hmm, hmm,=
S: = yeah. fine

When comparing the contents of example (4) and the language biography, the reader should take into consideration the following facts: s/he not only

lacks access to the first and third interviews, but s/he can also see — the initial sequence left aside — only the uninterrupted narrative of Mr. S from the second interview. Most notably, the extensive part comprising the interaction between the researcher and the informant following the informant's continuous narrative, the so-called follow-up inquiry, is not available to the reader. (The whole interview lasted 45 minutes and is recorded in a transcript comprising 1020 lines.)

4. The typical language biography of Czech Germans

Let us proceed to the next methodological step: we shall move from the individual language biography to the typical biography and attempt to develop the typical language biography of Czech Germans. As is well known, such a task is accompanied by a complicated methodological problem of qualitative social research — the path from the individual cases studied toward a more general pattern of action (cf. e.g. Lamnek 1995). Such a task is facilitated by the fact that the informants are likely to resume in their narratives the narratives they have heard from different sources during their lives. It can be observed that the narratives comprise not only autobiographical features but also collective-historical features. In other words, the informants not only construct their individual life stories, or the corresponding family stories, but also the history of Germans in the Czech lands. The typification carried out by the informants can therefore serve as a resource for our construction of the typical language biography. (I have already done so in the case of the category "Czech Germans" introduced above.)

I shall now deal with the general features of the narratives under analysis that enable the analyst to design the typical language biography of Czech Germans. The narratives as a whole display two central areas of experience that can be formulated as follows:

1. how the informants strove to learn Czech, and
2. how they strove to retain German.

As far as the acquisition of Czech is concerned, two levels can be differentiated within the language-biographical narratives studied:

1. how the informants learned Czech (i.e. the experienced and reflected processes that can be narrated), and
2. the language acquisition theories formulated by the informants (cf. Fünfschilling 1998).

The same levels can be postulated for the retention (or reactivation) of German, that is,

1. how the informants retained German (again: the experienced and reflected processes that can be narrated), and
2. their own theories of language acquisition.

I shall now attempt to construct the typical biography of Czech Germans. I shall present all its individual features as a narrative product in order to highlight the fact that the language biography is based on biographical narratives. Where necessary I shall illustrate the feature in question with the informants' utterances. Many of these language-biographical features are well illustrated by the narrative of Mr. S (see example [4]) as well as by his language biography presented earlier.

It should be noted here that in the present study I am interested in language as the topic of the narrative. What is left aside is the question of whether during the interview the respondents speak Czech or German well or what variety of Czech or German they use. These linguistic problems are basically beyond the scope of language biographies understood as the products of narratives (for a different approach cf. Meng 1995). The choice of a language code may, however, be a constitutive element of a language biography, particularly when linked to the ethnic identity of the researcher (cf. above).

Note also that the biography is typical of the cohort of Czech Germans born in the 1920s and 1930s (see the selection of informants above).

A. The informants narrate that (and how) they encountered a language other than German in the prewar or war period (Czech before World War II, English in the course of it).

(5) (translated from Czech)

N: and *when* did you learn English.
P: e:r during the war. I'm an old man. So during the war I [learnt.]
N: [but where?]
where?
P: where? (.) in- in Krumlov and in Germany. (well) in German schools English was compulsory.
N: hem, hem,
P: 'cause the fuehrer ts guessed that when (.) he conquers the world then then er (.) er simply (.) [(he'll get) to]
S: [he'll also conquer America]
P: the *co*lonies, and they spoke English there.
S: that he'll also conquer America. [((laughter))]
P: [conquer also America, yeah]
M and P: ((laughter)) [((laughter))]
N: [um um] and you- how long did you learn English.=

P: =((deep out-breath)) I don't know about two three years.

B. The informants narrate that (and how) they knew no or hardly any Czech after World War II.

In order to further strengthen this statement, they refer to the fact that they did not even know that there existed a Czech language or indeed any other nation but the Germans; see the following excerpt:

(6) (translated from German)

M: . . . yeah? (.) so if I speak German I never say the towns ((in-breath)) towns in Czech. yeah? that's a sort of habit, (.)
X: (um sure)
M: yeah? that's a sort of habit, because we were born there and grew up and
Y: ([ ])
M: [*before* we didn't] know it, yeah? after all we didn't know a word in Czech. ((in-breath)) at home I didn't even know there existed some other nation or something like that. [yeah,] before the Americans came
X: [um]
M: (they freed us at) our place, were the Americans.

C. The informants narrate that (and how) it was difficult for them to use German publicly or that they couldn't use it publicly at all after World War II.

(7) (translated from German)

A: . . . and we stayed there, one day I had, (.) er to write as punishment, a hundred times I will not speak Czech at school. (.)
B: () ((something in the sense of: 'Czech?'))
A: not speak *German*.
B: I see
A: I will not speak *Ger*man. . . .

D. The informants narrate that they were suddenly forced (directly or indirectly) to learn Czech after World War II. They explain the successful acquisition of Czech by having been exposed to the Czech social environment (when working in the interior, in the sphere of public service, in the Czech army).

The indirect pressure is illustrated by the following sequence:

(8) (translated from Czech)

Mrs. H says: . . . nobody forced us to speak Czech at all.
Mr. H continues: but nobody understood us.

E. The informants narrate that they married German or German-speaking partners and have spoken German, namely a dialect, to each other at home up to the present. (Nevertheless, it should be noted that mixed Czech-German marriages also occurred. This requires further research; cf. also below.)

F. The informants narrate that (and how) they spoke German to their children at home, that is, a dialect or standard German.[6]

G. The informants narrate that (and how) their access to education was restricted substantially after World War II.

H. The informants narrate that (and how) their children began speaking Czech after they started attending school.

(9) (translated from German)

A: . . . because because ((cough)) no wonder, er when a German family came into a village, (.) where only Czech ones lived, (.) and and er

B: hm

A: (. .) always one showed (it) showed them when while you speak German, you will have difficulties, then parents (. .) themselves didn't want their children to continue, and the children themselves didn't want to either. (. .) as for example I had a wife, she (.) spoke German also, (.) she was from a mixed marriage, from the very beginning we spoke German with our children. (.) well right it worked till a certain point, (.) er until they went to school. (.) and then the children came home and said we don't want to speak German any longer, (.) because they keep telling us we are fascists. (.) (right,) (.) (in) in the books it was () simply so, Germans and so on they were fascists. . . .

I. The informants narrate that their children married Czech partners. The informants' children then spoke Czech in their families.

J. The informants narrate that (and how) their grandchildren did not learn German as their mother tongue and that they learned it basically as a foreign language at school.

Obviously, the above features represent in a dynamic way aspects of the language situation in Czechoslovakia after World War II. Using sociolinguistic terminology, the following variables can be described as

particularly prominent: language variety, generation identity, and communicative domain. The important point is that the reconstruction of the language situation is made possible primarily by language biographies and the biographical method in general. In this respect, the (language-) biographical method can be considered a sociolinguistic method.

The above typical language biography does not correspond with the following view, widespread among the Czech public. According to this view the interwar Czechoslovakia was characterized by a relatively developed Czech–German bilingualism. However, our research has shown that the knowledge of both Czech and German was more common among the Czech population than among the German population (cf. Nekvapil 2000b). Povejšil's formulation (1997: 1657) is even more straightforward:

> Before 1945 there lived only a few Czechs in the borderland who could not speak German. Among the German population the knowledge of Czech was minimal, if any at all. It was not until the 1920s that they adopted the practice of sending their children "for a *handel*" [exchange] to Czech families so that they could learn Czech, a practice already performed by the Czechs.

It was this finding that led me to include the feature B in the typical language biography of Czech Germans.

Nevertheless, further research concerning the multilingual character of interwar Czechoslovakia is needed. General statements about bilingualism tend to be misleading. What is referred to as bilingualism should be differentiated at least in terms of the generation, communication domain (home or family, school, work, authorities, public space in general), along the temporal axis, as well as according to specific social statuses, territory-dependence (the center, the borderland, the interior, particular localities), and possibly according to additional factors as well (cf. Stevenson 2000).

The question is how to explain the fact that *a single* typical language biography can be devised. Why should there be only one typical biography of Czech Germans? In my opinion, the explanation is that the lives of Czech Germans were influenced by certain identical social factors:

1. They are the Germans who stayed in the Czech territory after World War II.
2. They are relatively old people, "the witnesses of old times," born in the late 1920s or early 1930s.
3. They were of the same social status for several decades after World War II. They were, to quote one of the informants, "poor men." From the political point of view, these people came predominantly from antifascist, social-democratic, or even communist families.

It has also to be admitted that a certain biographical homogeneity was incorporated directly in the construction of the research project as the potential informants were chosen particularly on the basis of factors 1 and 2. Moreover, the given typical language biography is dependent on the construction of the research in another significant way: the narrators were primarily chosen using the so-called snowball technique, that is, one German respondent referred the researcher to the next potential German respondent. This way the research could focus on those who displayed the categorial features of the ethnocategory "a German" best, among others, the feature that "Germans speak German" (cf. Nekvapil 2000b). Such issues as mixed marriages and the language strategies employed in them were thus marginalized.

I'd like to mention another self-evident fact here: the attempt to devise the typical language biography posits the diversity and uniqueness of individual language biographies. Otherwise, why should the analysts seek typicality referring to scientific research at the same time? Naturally, this means that general as well as specific features can be investigated in language biographies. Let us mention at least one specific feature recorded in the language biographies studied: Mr. S learned a little Hungarian when serving in the army in Hungary (cf. his language biography).

5. A concluding remark: language biographies and the analysis of language situations

The present article has dealt with language biographies as the results of various construction activities. We have seen the way the informants produce their language biographies as well as the fact that this happens in a research situation, that is, basically in coproduction with the researcher. However, we have also seen the way the researchers devise their informants' language biographies as a result of their research. When doing so, both the informants and the researchers follow a set of rules constituting the narrative genre of language biography. The analysis of this set (or sets) of rules started only recently. However, it is evident now that there exist certain typical modes of presentation ("patterns of language-biography narrative") that the speakers employ when talking about language acquisition and use — let us cite at least one relatively familiar mode of presentation relevant to sociolinguistic methodology: the narrative about a language tends to be closely linked to the description of the actions and attributes of the speakers of the language — it follows that the attitude toward a language can represent, to a large extent, the attitude

toward the speakers of the language (cf. Franceschini 2001a; Fünfschilling 1998).

I suggest these patterns of language-biography narrative should be included in the description of language situations. I propose three diverse arguments to support this view:

1. the way that, for example, German, Italian, or Chinese informants speak about language acquisition and use is interesting in itself;

2. we often approach the "reality of life or the subject," in our case the aspects of the language situation, through the "reality of the text" (cf. the above-mentioned investigation of language attitudes); and sometimes we have no other possibility (cf. the language situation of the Germans after World War II alone);

3. the textual representation of the "reality of life" itself is the "reality of life" (cf. section 2).

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Appendix 1. Transcription conventions

?	rising intonation
.	falling intonation
,	continuing intonation
:	lengthening of the previous syllable
(.)	a very short, still audible pause
(. .)	a longer pause,
(. . .)	a long pause
-	a cut-off of the preceding word or syllable
(but)	items enclosed within single parentheses are in doubt
( )	no words could be distinguished in the talk enclosed within single parentheses
((cough))	in double parentheses there is a comment by the transcriber
out	italics indicate emphasis
[ ]	the onset and the ending of simultaneous talk of two speakers (overlap)
=	subsequent utterance follows without an audible pause (latching on)
X	speaker who could not be identified
. . .	the utterance continues but this part is omitted in the presented extract from the transcript

Notes

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1. The last phase of this research was supported by grant No. 405/98/0390 from the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic. The present article continues the article published as Nekvapil (2001a, 2001b) in terms of both the concept and the material.
2. In qualitative social research, the term triangulation is often used for "a combination of several methodologies aimed at studying the same phenomenon" (Lamnek 1995: 402). The use of biographical methods for testing hypotheses is dealt with in the introduction to "biographical perspectives" by Miller (2000).
3. The researchers taking part in our research were German citizens. However, it would also be possible for the interviews to be conducted by a member of the German minority investigated, or even by someone else, e.g. a British researcher. These two possibilities have not been exploited in the research so far.
4. See the transcription conventions in the Appendix. The recorded interviews were transcribed according to the conventions developed in conversation analysis (see, e.g., Psathas 1995) and then translated from Czech, or German, into English. The English translations strive to preserve, to a maximum degree possible, the specific features of the original recordings and the original transcripts. The spoken character and the spontaneity of origin of the analyzed data are responsible for the appearance in the presented samples of a number of features that — from the point of view of the traditional norms — are ungrammatical, or substandard (especially in syntax).
5. For a concise formulation cf. Denzin (1989: 30): "life as lived, life as experienced, life as told." Miller (2000) makes a clear distinction between levels 1 and 3 only.
6. They chose the standard language as there were no German schools in Czechoslovakia after 1945 — standard German as a high cultural value could have been passed on to the next generation of Czech Germans only in the family. Naturally, what is understood as a standard language by the informant need not be identical with the linguist's concept of standard language. The important point is that the informants themselves focused on the distinction between standard German and a dialect, making this distinction the starting point of their family language planning (cf. Nekvapil 2001a).

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