

Can Czechs Read Polish Names? Problems with the Adaptation of Foreign Anthroponyms and Toponyms¹

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Abstract

According to orthoepic manuals of Czech, the pronunciation of foreign proper names should typically reflect their pronunciation in the original language. As Czech and Polish are both West Slavonic languages and are to some degree mutually intelligible, I assumed that Czech speakers would have little trouble in pronouncing Polish names. To test this assumption, I created sentences containing well-known Polish anthroponyms and toponyms, which were read by 65 respondents. I also monitored how the same names are pronounced in the Czech media. Surprisingly, the results showed that the respondents read the Polish names mainly as they were spelled, while in the Czech media they were pronounced according to the original Polish pronunciation. These conflicting results beg the question whether the spelling of Polish anthroponyms and toponyms should be adjusted according to Czech orthography. The possibility of adjusting pronunciation according to the original spelling is blocked, however, by differences in orthography between the two languages. In cases when the spelling of a Polish name differed considerably from Czech orthography respondents had no idea how to read the name.

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Introduction

This paper presents the results of our research that focuses on how Czechs pronounce Polish and Hungarian proper names. Here the results for the Polish names are presented (see Jílková 2016, this volume) for the results concerning the Hungarian names). Our study aimed to identify if and how well Czechs can read names from languages spoken in countries situated close to the Czech Republic, more specifically Czechs' ability to pronounce Polish and Hungarian proper names. Although Polish and Hungarian are languages that are spoken in countries geographically very close to the Czech Republic, there is a big difference in the typological and genealogical relationship between these languages. Polish and Czech are both West Slavic languages, which are to some degree mutually intelligible. But the relationship between Czech and Polish orthography and phonology is far from straightforward. Let us start by considering how Czechs 'should' pronounce Polish names.

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Principles of Adaptation of Polish Names into Czech

The pronunciation of foreign names is in accordance with rules of the Czech phonological system; therefore, Czechs do not usually pronounce foreign names in their original form (i.e. the pronunciation differs from that of the source language). The recommended way of pronouncing foreign names is to pronounce them according to the phonological approximation principle. This means that foreign sounds are replaced with their nearest counterparts in the Czech phonological system, stress falls on the first syllable of a word, according to the rules of Czech, and prosodic, phonotactic and morphological rules of Czech are applied (Palková 1994, Hůrková 1995, *Výslovnost spisovné češtiny* 1978).

However, when speakers are not familiar with a particular foreign name or they do not know how the name is pronounced in the donor language, they would most likely pronounce the name according to the spelling pronunciation principle (see the eight principles of pronunciation adaptation listed in Duběda *et al.* 2014). According to the spelling pronunciation principle, speakers base their pronunciation on the graphic form of a name and apply pronunciation rules of Czech accordingly.

Although, after Slovak, Polish is the closest language to Czech, the relationship between Polish and Czech orthography and pronunciation is complicated. That said, there are only a couple of regular rules which Czech speakers should follow in order to be able pronounce Polish names correctly (i.e. according to the phonological approximation principle). Therefore, it is theoretically very easy for Czechs to learn how to pronounce Polish names. The mutual contact and socio-cultural relationship is an important part of learning the pronunciation rules, of course.

I state hereafter the main differences between Czech and Polish spelling and pronunciation and I list the basic rules of how Czechs should pronounce Polish names. Firstly, both the Polish retroflex fricative [ʂ], spelled as the diagraph *sz*, and the alveo-palatal fricative [ʃ], spelled as *ś*, *si*, should be pronounced by Czechs as a postalveolar fricative [ʃ], which in Czech is spelled *š*. (The combination *si* should be pronounced as [ʃi] when it is followed by a consonant and as [ʃ] only when it is followed by a vowel.) Here we see that only one Czech grapheme and one phoneme correspond to three different Polish spellings and to two different phonemes. For example, the name of famous writer Sienkiewicz should be pronounced by Czechs as [ʃɛnkjɛvʲɪʃ], not as [ʃɪjɛnkjɛvʲɪʃ].

Similarly, Czechs should pronounce the Polish retroflex affricate [tʂ], spelled as the diagraph *cz*, and the alveolo-palatal affricate [tɕ], spelled as *ć*, *ci*, as a postalveolar affricate [tʃ], spelled *č* in Czech. The retroflex fricative [ʐ] (*ż*) and the alveolo-palatal fricative [ʒ] (*ż*, *zi*) should be pronounced as a postalveolar fricative [ʒ] (*ž*). And, finally, the retroflex affricate [dʐ] (*dż*) and the alveolo-palatal affricate [dʑ] (*dź*, *dzi*) should be pronounced by Czechs as a postalveolar affricate [dʒ] (*dž*).

Polish phonemes	Czech phonemes
[ɕ, ɕ] sz, ś, si →	[ʃ] ([ʃi])
[tɕ, tɕ] cz, ć, ci →	[tʃ] ([tʃi])
[z, z] ź, ź, zi →	[ʒ] ([ʒi])
[dz, dz] dź, dź, dzi →	[dʒ] ([dʒi])

Table 1.

Another rule, which is even simpler than the one listed above, concerns the pronunciation of the palatal nasal. As both languages have the same palatal nasals, there should not be a problem. However, there is a difference in spelling: while in Czech the palatal nasal [ɲ] is spelled *ň*, it is spelled *ń* in Polish. In both languages [ɲ] is spelled also as *ni*, the only difference is again when a vowel follows the combination of graphemes *ni* in Polish, only [ɲ] should be pronounced.

With regard to vowels, the main difference between the two languages is that Polish has two nasal vowels: [õ] spelled as *ą* and [ɛ̃] spelled as *ę*. Czechs should read these graphemes as [on] and [ɛn]. Particularly problematic for Czechs is the grapheme *ą* ([õ]) which many speakers read as [a] or [an] rather than [on]. Another difference between Czech and Polish is that while there are two vowels ([i] *i* and [ɨ] *y*) in Polish, there is only one short vowel [ɪ] in Czech for the graphemes *i* and *y*. This distinction in Polish, however, does not cause any problems for Czechs because they read both the graphemes *i* and *y* as [ɪ]. Finally, the Polish grapheme *ó* is pronounced as [u] and this is somewhat confusing for many Czechs, given that the same grapheme is pronounced [o:] in Czech.

There are two exceptions to the phonological approximation principle in the recommended pronunciation of Polish names, which should be mentioned. Firstly, retroflex fricative [ʒ] spelled as *rz* should be pronounced as a raised alveolar non-sonorant trill [ʀ] (*ř*) because the graphic and etymological correspondence between Polish and Czech words is more important than phonology.

Secondly, for the same reason, the labio-velar approximant [w] spelled as *ł* should be pronounced as alveolar lateral approximant [l]. Therefore, in these two cases the recommended pronunciation differs from phonological approximation principle, and the spelling pronunciation principle is recommended instead.

Methods

The above rules are sufficient for any Czech speaker to be able to pronounce Polish names properly. It is clear that these rules are simple, especially if we compare difficulties in pronunciation that Czechs face when reading, for example, English, French or German names, let alone languages like Vietnamese and Chinese for which there are considerable problems regarding phonological adaptation. Unsurprisingly, therefore, newsreaders pronounce Polish names correctly: for example Mariusz Szczygieł is pronounced as [marɨjuf ʃʲɨgɨl], Alexander Kwaśniewski as [alɛksandr kvafɲɛfski] and Henryk Sienkiewicz as [henrik ʃɛnkjɛvɨʃ] (see also Zeman 2006).

But our main interest lies in how everyday Czech language users pronounce these and other Polish (and Hungarian names); we are not concerned with how they are pronounced in the media. To elicit this information we wrote 28 sentences including some more or less known Polish names which we assumed might be familiar to Czechs, and we asked 65 respondents (37 men and 28 women) to read these sentences. We also asked the respondents to underline the names with which they were familiar. Three independent variables were taken into consideration: ‘age’, ‘level of education’ and ‘sex’. We tested the pronunciation of the following Polish names: Mariusz Szczygieł, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Aleksander Kaczyński, Adam Mickiewicz, Adam Michnik, Gazeta Wyborcza, Zbigniew Czendlik, Jerzy Kosiński, Kazimierz, Donald Tusk, Olsztyn, Grudziądz, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Górny Śląsk, Kudowa Zdrój.

Results

Name	Recommended pronunciation (number of respondents)	Other variants (number of respondents)	Number of variants with one token only	Number of respondents familiar with the name (recommended pronunciation)
Mariusz	[mariju] 13	[ma:riju] 16 [ma:rijus] 13 [marijus] 9 [maurjus] 5 [mauriju] 2	7	6 (2)
Szczygieł	[ʃtʃigjɛł] 15	[sci:giɛł] 6 [ʃigjɛł] 5 [sci:gl] 3 [ʃitʃigjɛł] 3 [sigjɛł] 2 [sngjɛł] 2 [sci:gel] 2	25	5 (3)
Kwaśniewski	[kvaʃnɛfski] 47	[kvasnɛfski] 8	10	49 (45)
Kaczyński	[katʃɨnski] 19	[katʃɨnski] 36 [katsɨnski] 2	10	53 (19)
Mickiewicz	[mitskjɛvitʃ] 15	[mitskjɛvitʃ] 34 [mikjɛvitʃ] 4 [mitʃkjɛvitʃ] 3	9	48 (14)
Michnik	[mixɲik] 44	[mixɲik] 13 [mitʃɲik] 3 [miʃɲik] 2	3	26 (21)
Wyborcza	[vɨbortʃa] 42	[vɨbortsɔ] 11 [vɨborʃa] 2 [vɨbortʃa] 2	8	27 (27)
Czendlik	[tʃɛndlik] 41	[tsɛndlik] 6 [tʃɛndli:k] 5 [tʃɛdɲik] 3 [tʃɛdlik] 3	8	33 (26)
Jerzy	[jɛrɨ] 8	[jɛrɨ] 28 [jɛrɨ] 11 [dʒɛrɨ] 10 [jɛrdzi] 2	6	8 (0)
Kosiński	[kofɨnski] 13	[kosɨnski] 31 [kofɨnski] 6 [kosɨnski] 6	9	8 (3)

Kazimierz	[kazimjɛɾ] 1	[kazimjɛɾ] 20 [kazimjɛrs] 13 [kazimjɛr] 12 [kazimi:r] 5 [kazimjɛrʲ] 3 [kazimjɛɾʲ] 2	5	18 (0)
Tusk	[tusk] 46	[task] 18	1	34 (23)
Olsztyn	[olʃtin] 27	[olstɪn] 23 [olʃti:n] 6 [oscm] 2	7	14 (10)
Grudziądz	[grudzɔnts] 0	[grudzjats] 28 [grudzjats] 10 [grudzjatsʲ] 4 [grudzjatsʲ] 3 [grudzatsʲ] 3 [grudzjak] 2 [grudzɔntʲ] 2	13	0
Sienkiewicz	[ʃɛnkjɛvitʃ] 3	[sɪnkjɛvitʃ] 16 [sɪnkjɛvitʃ] 14 [ʃɪnkjɛvitʃ] 7 [sʲɛnkjɛvitʃ] 4 [sʲɛnkjɛvitʃ] 2 [sɛnkjɛvitʃ] 2 [sɪnkjɛvitʃ] 2	15	49 (2)
Górny	[gurni] 2	[go:rnɪ] 50 [gornɪ] 13	0	5 (1)
Śląsk	[ʃlɔnsk] 3	[ʃlask] 37 [slask] 19 [slɔk] 2	4	6 (1)
Kudowa Zdrój	[kudova zdruj] 4	[kudova zdroj] 58 [kudova zdro:j] 3	0	25 (2)

Table 2.

We see in Table 2 that not all respondents read the names according to the recommended pronunciation. The names for which the recommended pronunciation was most commonly observed are as follows: Szczygieł (though only 15 respondents pronounced the name as [ʃtʃɪgjel], other variants were pronounced by even fewer respondents, see Table 2), Kwaśniewski (pronounced by 47 respondents as [kvaʃɲɛfski]), Michnik (44 respondents), Wyborcza (42), Czendlik (41), Tusk (46), and Olsztyn (27).

The pronunciation of the other names in most cases differed from the recommended variant used in the Czech media. These names were as follows: Mariusz, Kaczyński, Mickiewicz, Jerzy, Kosiński, Kazimierz, Grudziądz, Sienkiewicz, Górny, Śląsk, Kudowa Zdrój. In total, the observed pronunciation of 11 names differs from the recommended pronunciation used in the Czech media. We now need to consider why this is so and to identify what role, if any, respondents' familiarity with the names plays in pronunciation.

Factors Influencing Pronunciation

Here I will consider the impact of the respondents' knowledge of the names on pronunciation. It is important to note in this respect that our respondents could recognize the Polish names under study merely from their written form, and not from speech, for they had at their disposal only written sentences.

Let us look at a few examples to demonstrate this point. First, let us look at the pronunciation of the name of the former Polish president Aleksander Kwaśniewski, whom 49 out of the 65 respondents claimed to know. Of these respondents 45 read the name correctly as [kvaʃɲɛfski]. On the other hand, of the 16 respondents who claimed not to know the name only two read it correctly, while for the other respondents forms like [kvaʃɲɛfski], [kva:ʃɲɛfski], [kvaʃɲɛvɛtski] were recorded. The relationship between familiarity and pronunciation is therefore clearly visible in this case.

Now let us look at the name of another former Polish president Lech Aleksander Kaczyński. We see that in this case the relationship between knowledge of the name and its pronunciation is not so straightforward. Although 54 of our respondents claimed to know the name, only two of them pronounced it according to the phonological approximation principle as recommended, that is, as [katʃɲski]. Most of respondents pronounced this name as [katʃɲtski]. Here there is only one slight difference, though: most of the respondents pronounced the Polish grapheme *ń* as [n] and not as [ɲ] (and after [n] we can see the assimilation of the sound [s], which was pronounced as [ts]). Conversely, the respondents who claimed not to know name Kaczyński struggled with the pronunciation of the name in considerably more cases, hence we could still state the impact of familiarity on pronunciation is visible.

Such impact was visible also in the pronunciation of the famous Polish writer's name Adam Mickiewicz: of 48 respondents who claimed to be familiar with this name, 15 pronounced it as [miʃkʲɛviʃ] and 34 as [miʃkʲɛviʃ], which again is only slightly different from the recommended pronunciation. On the other hand, only 4 of 17 respondents who were not familiar with the name were able to pronounce it in this way. Therefore, the relationship between familiarity with a name and its pronunciation seems to be significant.

However, if we take the case of the famous Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz, then the relationship between knowledge of the name and its correct pronunciation as [ʃɛnkʲɛviʃ] is not so straightforward. Although 48 of our respondents claimed to know the name, only four of them pronounced it as [ʃɛnkʲɛviʃ], and two of these four respondents hesitated and were not sure about the proper pronunciation. The name was read most frequently as [sinkʲɛviʃ] (16 respondents) and [sinkʲɛviʃ] (14). We therefore need to look for reasons why this case is different from those considered above and why respondents struggled with the pronunciation of this name.

Clearly, it is the spelling *si*, which should be pronounced as [ʃ] by Czechs, that caused problems for our respondents. The respondents also struggled with the names Kosiński and Kazimierz for similar reasons: that is, due to the pronunciation of the graphemes *si* and *zi*. Only one of them read the grapheme *zi* in the name Kazimierz as [ʒi] (we can assume the impact of the Czech exonym Kazimír on the pronunciation, but this is not the case with the names Sienkiewicz and Kosiński).

As we have already seen, most of our respondents had no problems with the graphemes *ś* and *ni* in the name Kwaśniewski or with the digraph *cz* in the names Kaczyński and Mickiewicz. We can conclude therefore that Czechs can read to some degree the digraphs *cz* (cf. also the pronunciation of the names Wyborcza, Czendlik, Sienkiewicz, Szczygieł) and *sz* (cf. also the pronunciation of the names Mariusz, Olsztyn and Szczygieł), and Polish graphemes which are similar to their counterparts: *ś* (cf. Czech *š*), *ź* (cf. Czech *ž*) and *ń* (cf. Czech *ň*). On the other hand, they struggle with spellings whose pronunciation differs from that of Czech, regardless whether they are familiar with the name or not. This is clear from the examples in which our respondents were unable to read the graphemes *si* and *zi* as [ʃi], or [ʃ] before a vowel, and [ʒi] or [ʒ].

From our research it is also obvious that the Czechs do not know how to pronounce the Polish graphemes *ą* and *ó*. We tested each of these graphemes in two names (Grudziądz, Górny Śląsk and Kudowa Zdrój) that comprise 130 tokens for each grapheme. The nasal vowel *ą* was pronounced correctly as [ɔŋ] in only three of 130 cases, and the Polish vowel *ó* was pronounced correctly as [u] only five times.

Our respondents also had problems with reading the Polish digraph *rz* as the Czech grapheme *ř* (that is, as [r̝]); this was clear from their pronunciation of the names Jerzy and Kazimierz. On the other hand, the Polish grapheme *ł* caused no problems: respondents pronounced it as Czech [l].

We can conclude that, on the one hand, most Czechs cannot read the Polish graphemes *ą*, *ó*, the digraphs *rz* and combinations of graphemes like *si*, *zi* and *dzi* (cf. the pronunciation of the name Grudziądz) correctly. On the other hand, however, they can read to some degree the Polish digraphs *sz* and *cz* and graphemes *ś*, *ź*, *ń*, especially when they are familiar with the names in which these graphemes occur.

Impact of English on Pronunciation

It is also worth considering the influence of English (and of other languages) on the pronunciation of Polish names. The influence of English was clearly noted in four of the sample names: Michnik, Jerzy, Mickiewicz and Tusk.

Firstly, the grapheme *ch* in the name Michnik was read by 5 respondents as [tʃ] and as [ʃ] in three cases, despite the fact that *ch* in both Polish and Czech is pronounced [x]. With the cases of the pronunciation *ch* as [ʃ] in the name of Michnik we can assume influence of French (cf. the pronunciation of the well-known name Michelin).

Secondly, the *j* in the name Jerzy was read as [dʒ] by 11 respondents, although the Czech variant of this name is Jiří read as [jiri:], with [j] as in Polish.

Thirdly, ten of our respondents read the combination graphemes *c + k* in the name Mickiewicz as [k] instead of [[tʃsk].

Finally, 19 of our respondents read the *u* in the name Tusk as [a]. We should take into consideration here that the first name of the Polish politician, Donald, does not sound Polish, but is characteristic of English, and this may have influenced respondents' pronunciation.

Written vs. Spoken Forms of Polish Names

Finally, I would like to give some thoughts to the relationship between written and spoken forms of Polish names. As was stated earlier, our respondents had only written examples at their disposal. An important question that needs to be addressed is whether or not there is a gap between the written form of a particular name and its spoken form, which is commonly used in the Czech media. It is important to know whether our respondents are unable to recognize certain Polish names in writing, but are familiar with them from speech.

This question became apparent while I was dealing with the results for the pronunciation of the name of the Polish writer Mariusz Szczygieł. Only 15 respondents read the name as [ʃʲɨgʲɛl]. For the others the name proved a difficult tongue twister, and the respondents had no idea how to pronounce it. Given what has been written so far, we might assume that the name Szczygieł would not be so problematic. We have already seen that Czechs can to some degree read the digraphs *sz* and *cz* properly as [ʃ] and [tʃ], especially in names with which they are familiar. The problem in the name Szczygieł may be that two digraphs immediately follow one another. The consonant cluster itself is not unfamiliar to Czechs, but they are not used to clusters comprising four sibilants without a sonorous consonant. Moreover, the most surprising finding was that only five respondents claimed to know this name. The level of unfamiliarity with this name is quite astonishing because Mariusz Szczygieł is a contemporary writer who wrote a well-known book about Czechs that is quite popular among Czech readers. In addition, a film based on the book was released this year and Mariusz Szczygieł has also appeared as an invited guest on a couple of popular Czech TV shows. Therefore, I am very suspicious that only five of 65 respondents were familiar with this name. I strongly suspect that most people would be familiar with the name from the media but that they were unable to recognise it in its written form. Similarly, some of our respondents might not have recognized the written form of the Polish town Grudziądz or the name of the Polish priest Zbigniew Czendlik, who has lived in the Czech Republic since 1992, who has appeared many times in the Czech media and who is quite popular among Czechs.

Conclusion and Discussion

An interesting observation emerging from our research is that Czechs struggle to read Polish names from their written form. They are able to read only some digraphs (*sz*, *cz*), and even then not entirely consistently, and Polish graphemes which are either similar to their Czech counterparts (*ś*, *ź*, *ń*, *ł*) or are the same (*a*, *r*, *p*, *k*, *t*, *e*, etc.) and which are pronounced more or less identically in both languages. Because of this inability there is a significant discrepancy between the spoken forms of the Polish names which Czechs hear in the media and the same Polish names that they see written in newspapers, magazines, etc. As linguists, we should think about possibilities for decreasing the gap between the written and spoken forms of Polish names. There are two obvious methods that we can use to address the issue.

Firstly, we might abandon the phonological approximation principle of pronunciation for Polish names and instead pronounce them according to the spelling pronunciation

principle. The problem with this method is that it would not be easy for Czechs to pronounce clusters of sibilants like *szcz*.

The second possible solution (which we might label ‘the Russian method’, as it is used in Russian) is to replace the Polish spelling with a spelling more characteristic of the Czech writing system. For example, we could write Ščigjel, Kačiňsky, Kažiměř, and so on. But obviously, the gap between the written and spoken forms of the Polish names would have been decreased at the expense of increasing the gap between the written forms in Czech and in the original language (i.e. in Polish). Secondly, if we use Czech spelling for Polish names, then why should we not do the same for Hungarian, German or English names? And here is a very important point. Czechs tend to (and like to) use the original spelling of loanwords and proper names, especially those coming from English (this tendency is also evident in decline of exonyms of the type Řezno for Regensburg, or Vratislav for Wrocław). Consequently, if Czechs want to be able to recognise Polish names both in their written and spoken form, then they should learn rules outlined in the first part of this paper.

Most Czechs, however, are unlikely to do so, as, for the most part, they have little interest in cultural, political or sports events in Poland. We may assume that this is the case not only from the reactions of our respondents, but also from the lack of interest shown by the Czech media in events taking place in Poland. In fact, the above-mentioned media interest in the writer Mariusz Szczygieł and the priest Zbigniew Czendlik is triggered merely by the connection between these people and the Czech Republic, as what is interesting for most Czechs, is how they are perceived by foreigners.

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