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Czech-Slovak intercultural intersections on the example of the interlanguage phraseological competence of Czech university students

Contemporary linguistic research focusing on communication competence concentrates on the question of acculturation mainly dealing with „the acquisition of cultural identity parameters of a certain foreign nation whose indicators are prototype (nationwide dominant) symbols/signs and moral values of everyday (i.e. normal) life” (Orgonová 2005, p. 258). In this respect, it is the phraseological unit (units) that „more aptly and pregnantly express(es) and evaluate(s) typical, but usually less easily capturable life situations and conditions, as well as phenomena of external reality...” (Miko 1989, p. 17), and „test(s)” the perception and unproblematic understanding of a foreign language text from the intercultural point of view. One of the indispensable pre-conditions for a successful communication is actually the knowledge and appropriate semantic interpretation of the most common phrasemes of the language in question (comp. the observation of J. Šindelářová concerning the necessity of drawing attention to the most common Czech phrasemes in the attempt to remove the communication barriers in the process of preparation of future Czech language teachers for the multiethnic communication in schools¹ – Šindelářová, 2006, p. 167).

¹ On the Slovak side, the question of multicultural understanding of the world applied to the equalization of cultural differences in school education is dealt with by for example V. Cabanová (2006).

Researches focusing on the liveliness of phrasemes or the phraseological competence of the language users are, even in Slavic phraseology, considered as progressive². Not only in connection with the dynamics of the phraseological stock, but also from the point of view of paremiodidactics or phraseodidactics, they are used as a means of determining the paremiological or phraseological minimum (Ďurčo 2001). Defining the phraseological minimum or minima can have a positive impact not only on the native language but also foreign language teaching.³

Since the adequate semantic interpretation of phrasemes and skill in their usage improves students' communication skills and influences the understanding of foreign language (even if linguistically cognate) text, the focus of our scholarly interest are phrasemes or, more precisely, the phraseological competence of the representatives of young generation of two linguistically and culturally close nations: Slovaks and Czechs, intentionally focused on exposition and subsequent analysis of the present state of Slovak-Czech and Czech-Slovak passive bilingualism.

Contemporary linguistics views the mutual relationship of Slovak and Czech languages from different aspects. J. Dolník (2007) points out the usefulness of the reflection of standardized judgments while analyzing this relationship. These judgments are applied within the Czech and Slovak environment and they structure the perception of the mutual relationship of the representatives of given cultures – these are so called stereotypes which are either carried over from the past or

² In broader sense this question has its substantiation also in translations of foreign language texts (see for example: Biloveský, Kráľová 2002).

³ According to some Czech linguists, the Czech language at the beginning of the 21st century got into a specific situation in terms of teaching it as a foreign language, because of the new geopolitical context, „which brought and still brings many new roles for a language of a so called small nation, whose historical territory is moreover strictly monolingual. These historically determined reasons, more than in other national communities, underline the importance of care for Czech as a foreign language and its teaching” (Hádková, Šindelářová 2007, p. 57).

they spring up as a reaction to altered socio-political context (accommodation, delimitational, barrier, mental, heuristic stereotype). Naturally, while looking at the Czech-Slovak relationship from the point of view of stereotypes and their utilitarian function (to the benefit of certain interests of a group), it is important to bear in mind that reality and stereotype do not necessarily have to coincide, quite the contrary. The concordance between them can be only partial, or not existing at all. A linguist considering the Czech side concentrates on a so called barrier stereotype based on the assumption of gradual linguistic separation of Czechs and Slovaks (creation of a language barrier). Since the basic objective point of departure (affinity of these languages) is invariable, from the given observation emerges a question, what the assumption of the language separation, presented mainly as concerning the young generation, is based on. Here the author emphasizes that:

Objectively given easy overcoming of interlanguage differences is still valid, only the apperception promptness is suppressed (Dolník 2007, p. 137),

thus the actualization of potential Czech-Slovak apperception competence is not possible without a proper number of stimuli. Similar conclusions are presented by M. Nábělková (2006) who continually investigates the functioning of Slovak language in Czech environment and observes that there is a real decline in the contact with Slovak language. In the case of many young people it results in situations of an absence of perception competence (discomfort during the contact with Slovak spoken or written texts brought about by sporadic contact with Slovak).

In his research concerning the reception of Slovak language by Czech students of education programs, P. Mitter (2007) using the method of questionnaires, focuses, among other things, on attitudes of the contemporary young university microsociety towards Slovak language. His questionnaire offers these options:

- a) Slovak is a close language to the respondent,
- b) Slovak is a foreign language just like other Slavic languages,

c) Slovak is not a close language, but not foreign either.

Survey realized on the sample of 100 students confirmed a certain „above standard” relationship of Czech respondents to the Slovak language. 74% claimed it was a close language (and 62% considers the knowledge of Slovak as important), none of the respondents evaluated Slovak to be on the same level with other Slavic languages as a foreign language. Remaining 26% respondents chose the third option: Slovak is not close, but at the same time not absolutely foreign. This result makes the author believe that the hypothesis about not approaching of the Czech and Slovak languages in Czech Republic in the youngest generation is correct. He thus reacts to the observations of M. Nábělková (1999) who, in connection with the prognoses of the mutual relationship between Czech and Slovak languages in the communication practice of the representatives of both language communities, talks about a period of „separation” or detachment. According to P. Mitter, this appellation is suitable for middle and older generations, in case of young generation, he prefers the term „not approaching” (Mitter 2007, p. 189, 192).

Whether we will deal with the question of Czech-Slovak relationships from the point of view of mutual detachment or not approaching, in any case the problem of Czech-Slovak bilingualism is frequently discussed in scholarly circles. Its natural component is also an understanding of the phraseological system of the cognate language. In spite of this, the phraseological aspect of the Czech-Slovak passive bilingualism was not an object of increased interest of scholars. In an effort to contribute, at least partially, to the complementarity of the absent aspect of this question, we have focused our attention on the survey of the interlanguage phraseological competence of Czech university students. There was a parallel research on the Slovak side as well. Results of Slovak university students were presented by D. Baláková in her report.

Methodology of the research of the phraseological competence of Slovak and Czech university students was identical. Respondents were supposed to consider a group of seven phrasemes excerpted from

the Slovak translation of the novel *Narrenturm* (in the original and Czech translation) written by Polish writer A. Sapkowski. The object of research were 1st–4th year students of Bohemian studies and education for elementary schools at the Faculty of Pedagogy University JEP Ústí nad Labem in an overall number of 252 respondents. Their task was to adequately semantically interpret individual phraseological units, and if possible to write down their Czech equivalent (analyzed phrasemes are given in bold):

1. Štvorčlenná posádka **dobre že sa od roboty nepretrhla...**
2. Človeku až **vlasy stávali dupkom.**
3. **Ako huby po daždi** vyrastajú falošní proroci...
4. K vozu sa priblížil aj Eustachy von Rochow. A tiež **vyceril zuby.**
5. Raz a navždy **si vybi z kotrby** ženu Gelfrada Stercza...
6. **Šaty nerobia človeka**, – ľadovo zareagoval Šarlej.
7. ... žena mohla **mať na chrbte rovnako štvrtý**, ako aj ôsmy krížik.

As we have already mentioned, the basis for the group of analysed phrasemes was the work *Narrenturm* (A. Sapkowski), in terms of the phraseological units used in its Czech and Slovak translation. Our objective is not to comment on the translational aspects of phrasemes, but the existence of this work in three Slavic languages (Polish, Slovak and Czech) created a suitable basis for the selection of phraseological equivalents of Slovak and Czech languages. The only exception is the phraseme number 4 (*vyceril zuby*), where the Czech translator did not use a phraseological unit (*usmál se*). In the group of selected equivalent phrasemes, certain particularities of respective languages are visible—these are mainly phonetic and lexical. For that reason, we were interested whether this fact (and to what extent) influences the correctness of phraseosemantic interpretation of non-native respondents.

Acquired results are presented in this order:

1. Comparison of success rates of Czech university students considering individual archisemes according to years (Chart no.1),

2. Comparison of success rates of Czech university students according to individual years (Chart no. 2),
3. Correctness of phraseosemantic interpretation of individual phraseemes (Chart no. 3),
4. Overall success rate of interlanguage phraseological competence of Czech university students (Chart no. 4).

Overview of success rates in semantic interpretation of individual phrasemes divided according to the years of study is presented in the chart no. 1. Already the configuration of phraseosemantic success rates of individual years suggests basic problem points. These are phrasemes no. 1 (*dobre že sa od roboty nepretrhla*), no. 5 (*vybi si z kotrby*) and no. 7 (*mať na chrbte štvrtý, ako aj ôsmy krížik*). The lowest success rate of all the years was recorded in the case of the phraseme no. 1. Such a relatively balanced situation does not exist in the case of phrasemes no. 5 and 7. The highest success rate is recorded in 4th year students, the lowest in 1st year students. Relatively balanced results from the aspect of individual years were reached in the case of phraseemes no. 2 (*vlasy stávali dupkom*) and no. 3 (*ako huby po daždi*), with only a slight predominance of the 4th years. A more substantial predominance of 4th year students was visible in the case of phrasemes no. 4 (*vyceril zuby*) and no. 6 (*šaty nerobia človeka*).

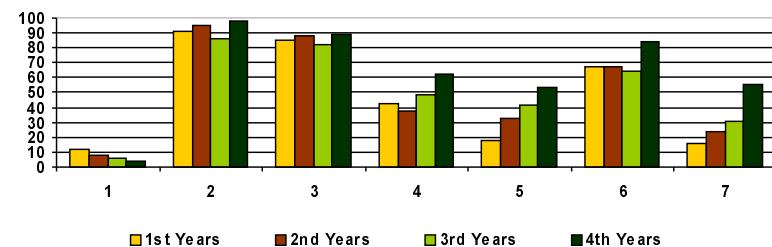


Chart no.1 Comparison of success rates (%) of Czech university students considering individual archisemes according to the years of study

Already the previous commentary suggested the differentiation of individual years from the point of view of adequate phraseosemantic characteristics (Chart no. 2). The 4th year students had the least problems to determine the archiseme (64%), the 2nd and 3rd years reached exceptionally balanced results (see Chart no. 2), not only in terms of mutual comparison between years, but also in terms of success rate (51%, 50%) or failure (49%, 50%) while interpreting the meaning. The success rate was the lowest in the 1st years, where the failure (53%) prevailed over success (47%).

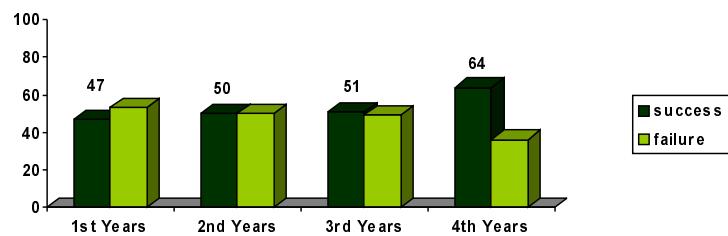


Chart no. 2 Comparison of success rate (%) of Czech university students according to individual years

From the chart no. 3 (Correctness of phraseosemantic interpretation of individual archisemes) clearly follows that while interpreting individual phrasemes Czech students did not obtain balanced results.

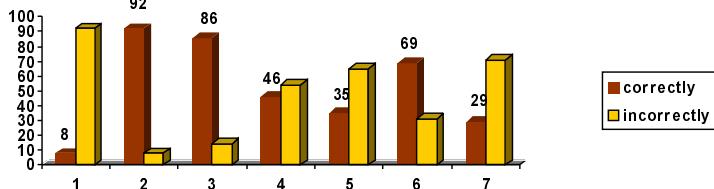


Chart no. 3 Comparison success rates in individual archisemes

While evaluating the results, certain groups of phrasemes started to form themselves (as suggested already in chart no.1). Their attributes may be problematic and unproblematic; their extremities are represented by phrasemes *vlasy stávali dupkom* (92% success) – *dobre že sa od roboty nepretrhla* (8% success). Phraseme *ako huby po daždi* (86%), in which the respondents not only noticed the importance of amount and extent (very much), but they paid attention to the importance of sudden, quick appearance, or based their phraseosemantic interpretation on the mutual connection of given possibilities, did not cause any significant troubles. Looking at their Slovak counterparts reaching 94% success rate in the phraseme *jako houby po dešti*, it is important to note that Czech university students' percentage was lowered by answers markedly deviating from the correct semantic interpretation (for illustration we provide some examples: *upřímný člověk, co si myslí, to poví – co na srdci, to na jazyku; když skončí nějaká akce, která se nepovedla, spousta lidí říká, že by to udělala lépe – po bitvě je každý generál; vyjadření něčeho názoru; když někdo lže; nikdo by neměl soudit nic dopředu*). Relatively high percentage of correct answers reveals that phonetic similarity of the component *huba* compared to Czech *houba* did not constitute any significant source of ambiguity.

If we look at the percentage of adequate semantic interpretation of the phraseme *šaty nerobia človeka* (69%), to some extent surprisingly low success rate is not caused by the difference of lexical components in the Slovak and Czech equivalent of the phraseme (*dělat – robit*), but by the failure to notice the negative form of the Slovak component (*robia – nerobia*) and thus understand the semantic shift. The basic form *šaty robia človeka* meaning *človeka posudzujú, súdia podľa oblečenia* anchored in mind prevailed over the attentive perception of the phraseme's actualization used in the text. Slovak students „struggled“ with a similar problem (85% success of interpretation), so it means that in the case of answers based on the phraseological meaning of the phraseme's basic form in both Slovak and Czech translation, the phraseme was approached as a constant, petrified unit with a fixed positive

form and the interference into the composition and form was not expected.

Four phrasemes (*vyceril zuby*, *vybi si z kotrby*, *mat' na chrbte štvrtý*, *ako aj ôsmy križik*, *dobre že sa od roboty nepretrhla*) ended up under the 50% line. From the aspect of interpretation, the most interesting results were in those phrasemes in the case of which the attempt to adequately explain the meaning was the least successful (*vybi si z kotrby* – 35%, *mat' na chrbte štvrtý*, *ako aj ôsmy križik* – 29%, *dobre že sa od roboty nepretrhla* – 8%). The answer to the question where to search for the causes of troubles is not the same for all three cases.

In the case of analyzed phrasemes *vybit' si z kotrby* and *mat' na chrbte štvrtý*, *ako aj ôsmy križik*, semantic discrepancies were the consequence of the inability to identify certain lexemes. Particularly problematic was the lexeme *križik* (Czech *křížek*), in some cases also in combination with the form of substantive *chrbát* (*na chrbte*). On the contrary, in some other answers the prepositional form *na chrbte* constituted certain basis but this, when failing to realize the connection with the lexical *křížek* a *križik*, was not sufficient to the correct expression of the archiseme. From among the given possibilities we choose for example: *mohla mít za sebou čtvrté nebo osmé dítě*; *několikrát mohla přijít o život*; *žena pobrala všechno*; *nezáleželo, jestli měla 4 povinnosti nebo 8*; *ženu přenásledují nějaké problémy, nese sebou těžký úder* (*nese na bedrech kříž*), *mít něco na zádech, trest*. In numerous cases, the reflections of respondents turned to the religious domain, for example: *byla velmi pobožná, žena měla za sebou už nějaké hříchy*, *mohla mít na bedrech hřích, který si sebou nesla, mít na svědomí šestý (!) až osmý hřích, nezáleží na tom, kolikrát se proviníme, pokud se to stalo vícekrát, ostatní nás už budou stejně brát jako hříšníky*. Recognition of the neuralgic point of the explanation of the phraseological unit's meaning lead us to the conclusion that vague answers like *jedná se o věk, označení stáří, byla (moc) stará, vypadá přepracovaně a starče, žena vysokého věku* should be evaluated as incorrect.

In the case of *vybi si z kotrby*, respondents had to deal with an interpretation of a phraseme's lexical variant (*vybit' si z hlavy* – *vybit' si*

z kotrby) which was created by the substitution of a stylistically neutral component *hlava* by a synonymous, but expressive lexical unit *kotrba*. This substitution using a component unknown to the young Czech public⁴ caused a significant failure in the attempts to capture the meaning and to give possible Czech equivalents of this phraseme. In the mentioned reactions it is possible to discern two basic interpretational approaches: in the first, connected with the verbal form *vybit'*, there is an aspect of violent act of exiling somebody (a woman) from a residential space, for example: *vyhnat ženu z chalupy*, *vyhnat ženu z domu, stavění, vyhnal ji z domova, vyhodit ji z pokoje*. In the other case, the component *žena* shifts the phraseosemantic interpretation towards marital relationships, for example: *pravděpodobně při vdavkách, vzal si jí za ženu, za manželku* (*šel do chomoutu, už je pod pantoflem, uvázal si ji na krk*).

In the case of phraseme *dobre že sa od roboty nepretrhla*, extremely low success rates are neither caused by the inability to deal with an unknown lexical component, nor by different phonetic forms of lexemes in Czech or Slovak, which were the result of phonetic changes effectuated during the independent development of the two Slavic languages. The roots of this phraseosemantic failure lie in the problem of negation used in the constitution of the phraseme and its impact on the phraseme's meaning specification. In the case of the phraseme *trhat' sa v robote*, *Krátke slovník slovenského jazyka* (2003, p. 622) [The Short Dictionary of the Slovak Language] gives the semantic characteristics *veľmi húževnatá robiť*. The form using the negation broadens the possibility of the semantic interpretation, because besides the already mentioned phraseological meaning this phraseme with weakened imagery in which the key word understood as a basis of semantic transposition is the component *pretrhnúť sa* (prílišnou námahou sa vyčerpať), admits also ironical, opposite meaning. And this ironical

⁴ Lexeme *kotrba* was known in the Old Czech and according to the data from the Machk's Etymological dictionary (1957, p. 227) it was used as an unkind or humorous expression for a head.

(for example: *nepracovala, flákala se, nenadřela se, líný člověk se nemá k práci, vše mu trvá a otáli, schválně zdržuje, v práci nejsou příliš produktivní, nepracovat na 100%, s plným nasazením, posádka nepracovala tak, jak by měla, laxní přístup k práci*). From the overall number of 252 questionnaires, only 19 respondents gave preference to the meaning of persistent, industrious work. But the inclination towards the ironical meaning was the weak point. While attempting to determine the archiseme, they did not pay due attention to the presence of the component *dobre že* which in connection to negation substantially influences the phraseosemantic characteristics and admits only the meaning of hard, diligent work. *Krátky slovník slovenského jazyka* states that *dobre že* with a negation expresses extreme but unfeasible measure of action and this meaning illustrates an example of phraseological and nonphraseological usage: *chodil, dobre si nohy nezodral; bol by vylezol dobre že nie na strechu*. While analyzing the cases with component *dobre/dobre že, div/div že* in the position of a limiting verb (for example: *oči mu šli vypadnúť – dobre (že) mu oči nevypadnú – div mu oči nevypadnú*), D. Baláková (2005, p. 40) emphasizes that changes (analogical usage of the verb *íst* alternated with particles) did not affect the substance of the phraseological unit and basic components of meaning remained unchanged.

Taking these things into consideration, from the group of correct answers we had to exclude predominant answers highlighting laziness and lukewarm approach to work, and this fact had a radical impact on the percentage of correct interpretations of the given phraseme.

In the case of these so called problematic phrasemes (in terms of the phraseosemantic interpretation presented by the respondents) it is important to point out that the percentage is caused not only by the incorrect answers but also by numerous cases when the respondents did not give any answer – they renounced to even minimal indication of some mind processes in the uncovering of the phraseological meaning. This most strikingly appears in case of phrasemes *mať na chrbte štvrtý, ako aj ôsmy krížik* and *vybit' si z kotrby*, where in the first case 70 (28%) and in the second 110 (44%) respondents from the overall

number of 252 did not attempt to determine the meaning of these phraseological units. It signalizes that the Slovak form of these phrasemes is totally unknown and confusing to them.

When considering the overall success rate of the interpretation of given phrasemes by Czech university students (chart no. 4), at the beginning of the research it was expected to be higher. It is necessary to mention that this assessment was made taking into consideration the selection, in which the gist comprised phrasemes with a Czech equivalent. Search for an answer to the question to what extent the contemporary young Czech generation is able to adequately semantically explain phrasemes existing in the phraseological system of the Slovak language (naturally with respect to the system and application of the selective principle) in fact brought boundary results: 53% overall success rate does slightly prevail over the 47% failure, but in comparison with the results of Slovak university respondents (74% success, 26% failure)⁵ it confirms the legitimacy of the observation concerning certain suppression of the potential Czech-Slovak apperception competence of the young Czech generation.

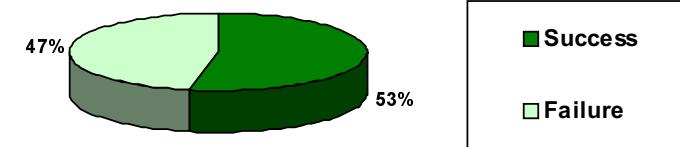


Chart no. 4 Comparison of the overall successfulness (%) of the phraseological competence of the Czech university students

The results of this survey of the phraseological competence must be viewed in a broader context. Presented material enables us to outli-

⁵ In the case of the analysis of Slovak university students' results, it is possible to apply the aspect of comparison not only with respect to the results of Czech respondents, but it is also possible to draw from the preceding partial results of the

ne – at least partially – the present state of Czech-Slovak passive bilingualism, as well as to see the common problematic points of the phraseological competence of the contemporary young (Slovak and Czech) generation, without taking into consideration the native or contact language of the respondents. These are mainly the questions of the realization forms of phrasemes (petrified units, variants and actualizations of phrasemes; questions of forms and faces of phrasemes in Slovak is theoretically elaborated in the monograph by J. Mláček, 2001) and their possible consequences on the correctness and adequacy of the phraseosemantic interpretation in the given context. Within the excerpted selection of phrasemes, it is obvious mainly in case of *šaty nerobia človeka/šaty nedělají člověka* and in the Czech respondents also in the case of *dobre že sa od roboty nepretrhla*. Use of negation within the individual kinds of phrasemes has different validity, as J. Mláček (2006) pointed out in his essay *Osobitosti uplatňovania záporu vo frazeológii* [Particularities of negation use in phraseology]. In connection with negation he distinguishes four types of phraseological units.⁶ In the case of realization forms of phrasemes employed in

Slovak university students. The first survey of the Slovak-Czech passive bilingualism from the phraseological point of view was realized in 2006. Its object were 284 students of the Slovak language and literature teaching program at the Faculty of Arts and Letter CU (1st-4th year) who assessed a collection of seven phrasemes excerpted from the Czech translation of T. Pratchett's *Men at Arms* (transl. J. Kantírek) with the aim to adequately give the archiseme of the Czech phraseological units, or their Slovak equivalent (see Kováčová 2006). Overview of conclusions based on an identical research carried out within the Slovak secondary grammar school microsociety is presented by Baláková 2006). 70% of correct answers in the previous survey and 74% success rate in the newest view on the interlanguage competence of the young Slovak generation not only confirms that the knowledge rate of Czech phraseological units is quite high, but there is also a unique balance in obtained results.

⁶ The first type is represented by phrasemes with a verbal component in both, the affirmative and negative form. Change from the affirmative to negative does not affect the stability of the unit (*mlátit/nemlátit prázdnú slamu*). The second type is represented by units which can have both, the affirmative and negative form, but the

the Slovak translation of the work *Narrenturm* the first case (*šaty nerobia človeka*) is an example of the actualization of the unit *šaty robia človeka*, which is usually fixed in the affirmative form; in the second (*dobre že sa od roboty nepretrhla – div že sa od roboty nepretrhla, skoro sa od roboty pretrhla*) the negation „appears to be a means of separation of certain variants of given phraseotextemes, as a sign, in the case of some variants, quite stable and incommutable” (Mláček 2006, p. 73).

Substitution of a phraseme's lexical component by its expressive synonym (*vybit' si z kotrby niečo – ženu*) also found its place in the questionnaire: in this case we are dealing with units in which the results offered by the Czech university students were influenced by knowledge or ignorance of relevant lexical means used also as parts of phraseological units. While on the one hand, the differences in the contemporary vocabulary were causing obvious problems of interpretation (*kotrba*); on the other, they did not always constitute a source of considerable discrepancies. Analogously, the changes occasioned during the divergent phonetic development of the two Slavic languages either constituted (*krížik*), or did not constitute (*huby*) the source of interpretational ambiguities.⁷

derived paremiological unit has only a negative version (*mal'ovať/nemaľovať čerta na stenu – Nemaluj čerta na stenu!*). The third type (*nezarobiť ani na slanú vodu*) are phrasemes with only a negative fixed form. In case of the fourth type represented by the example *ženu neprekričí iba trepačka*, „the form of the locution and the real illocutional value [...] are directly opposed“ (Mláček 2006, p. 65–66).

⁷ In the phraseosemantic interpretation it is necessary to take into consideration the influence of mother tongue and closeness of Czech and Slovak languages. As the Czech linguist M. Šindelářová (2007) has it, on the basis of the results of a research of knowledge and understanding of traditional/folk Czech phraseology by foreigners, the representatives of Slavic nations (in case of Czech phraseological units mainly Slovaks) have the least problems with phraseological units of a Slavic language. Within the framework of established threshold levels of European languages knowledge (A1, A2 – user of language basics, B1, B2 – independent language user, C1, C2 – experienced language user) and on the basis of the phraseological research, she is persuaded that „according to our opinion, the threshold level for Slovaks

Acquired phraseological material thus demonstrates the validity of the wider thesis about the impact of opposed forces in the case of Slovak presence in the contemporary Czech language situation (Nábělková, 2006, p. 451) also for the field of phraseology.

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acquiring Czech and vice-versa could be considered level B2“ (Šindelářová 2007, p. 352). In certain cases, the close relationship of Slovak and Czech languages can have a counterproductive effect on respondents: on the one hand, it can facilitate the understanding of phraseological units; on the other, the perception of some, acoustically similar but semantically different lexical components, through the prism of mother tongue, can lead to the false track and subsequently cause incorrect semantic interpretation of the phraseme.