

From Idealised to Usage-Based Norms: Linguistic Correctness in West Slavic Languages

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Članek preučuje spreminjajoča se pojmovanja jezikovne pravilnosti v poljski, češki in slovaški jezikoslovni tradiciji od poznega 19. do začetka 21. stoletja. Na podlagi ključnih teoretskih besedil pokaže skupen premik od avtoritativnih, pogosto purističnih modelov k pristopom, utemeljenim na empirični rabi, funkcionalni diferenciaciji in sociolingvistični zavesti. Jezikovna pravilnost je tako na novo razumljena ne kot fiksna skladnost z normo, temveč kot dinamičen, družbeno umeščen pojav, kar odraža širšo srednjeevropsko preusmeritev v upravljanju standardnega jezika.

The article examines changing views of linguistic correctness in Polish, Czech and Slovak linguistics from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century. Through key theoretical texts, it shows a shared shift from authoritative, often puristic models toward approaches grounded in empirical usage, functional differentiation and sociolinguistic awareness. Correctness is thus reinterpreted not as fixed conformity to norm but as a dynamic, socially embedded phenomenon, reflecting a broader Central European reorientation of standard-language management.

Ključne besede: jezikovna pravilnost, kodifikacija, preskriptivizem, na rabi temelječe norme, zahodnoslovanski jeziki

Keywords: linguistic correctness, codification, prescriptivism, usage-based norms, West Slavic languages

1 Introduction¹

In Central Europe, language has long been regarded as a cornerstone of national identity. Although the origin of this view can be traced back to

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the Middle Ages, it was in the nineteenth century that it became firmly embedded in the processes of nation-building. During this period, Herder's conceptualization of language as the embodiment of the national spirit was adopted by Romantic nationalists, translated into political programmes, and disseminated across all social strata (cf. Kohn 1944; Hroch 1985). Gradually, this central role in identity construction came to be associated with a particular variety—the standard language—which was seen both as representative of the nation and as the primary medium of its higher cultural functions (cf. Haugen 1966; Ferguson 1968; Ayres-Bennett & Bellamy 2021). With the spread of the ideology of the standard language (cf. Lippi-Green 2012; Milroy & Milroy 1999), the standard came to be regarded as the sole legitimate variety and increasingly became the focus of organised attention, notably in the form of so-called language cultivation.

Although language cultivation is practised worldwide (for the European context cf. Janich & Greule 2002), it has in Central Europe traditionally been considered one of the core domains of linguistic knowledge. It typically appears in two principal forms: the codification of the standard language and prescriptivist interventions in its use. Codification manuals describe the grammatical and lexical rules of the standard language and present them as norms to be observed. Prescriptivist interventions, by contrast, are realised either as language criticism—that is, the evaluation of usage in specific texts or discourses (cf. Niehr, Kilian & Schiewe 2020)—or as language advice, which provides guidance on issues of usage perceived as particularly problematic, whether in usage guides (cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2018) or in responses to questions raised by language users themselves through language counselling (cf. Förster 2000; Ginter 2016). Both codification and prescriptivism have an underlying shared notion of linguistic correctness: a socially constructed conceptualization of what an exemplary language looks like, or is expected to look like.

This article examines evolving conceptualizations of linguistic correctness—that is, what has been regarded as the basis for codificatory and prescriptivist activities undertaken by linguists—in three West Slavic communities: Polish, Czech and Slovak, from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the present. It analyses key authors and works concerned with linguistic correctness and highlights positions which have most significantly influenced the theory and practice of language cultivation in the respective communities. The works selected for this purpose are those that have obtained canonical status within their respective national traditions—texts that are widely cited, that have shaped subsequent theoretical debate, or that have played a direct role in codification practice. The analysis does not aim at exhaustive coverage but at identifying the positions

that have most durably aligned scholarly and practical engagement with linguistic correctness in each community.

While these languages differ in the ways their modern standard varieties were established—for example, Czech and Slovak underwent far-reaching structural reconfiguration in the nineteenth century, whereas Polish inherited an earlier norm that primarily required wider social dissemination—they nonetheless display a shared developmental trajectory. Across all three cases, debates over language cultivation have been shaped by concepts of linguistic correctness shifting from idealised and authoritative models toward approaches which are increasingly grounded in the observation of actual language use. The three traditions differ, however, in the timing of this reorientation: while Polish and Czech experience a decisive break with idealised, purist conceptualizations already in the interwar period, a similar shift in Slovak came considerably later, gathering momentum only from the 1970s onwards and accelerating after 1990.

The trajectory described here is not unique to the West Slavic context. The Slovenian tradition of language cultivation, embedded in the same Central European institutional and ideological framework, has navigated comparable tensions between puristic normativity and usage-based flexibility. This broader relevance is part of what has motivated the present study: undertaken from the vantage point of a scholar working within the Croatian linguistic tradition, where analogous questions about the relationship between codification, usage and prescriptivism remain an on-going debate, it is offered as a contribution to a broader Central European conversation, in which the Slovenian scientific community is a significant participant.

2 Linguistic Correctness in the Polish Context

The Polish standard language of the nineteenth century did not undergo radical structural change, but instead faced a major challenge in terms of dissemination across broader social strata. To address this challenge, numerous dictionaries of language errors were published in the late nineteenth century. These works catalogued and corrected deviations from the traditional norm observed in the press, specialist writing, fiction, and the speech of the “educated classes.” Their focus lay primarily on lexical, semantic and syntactic borrowings from German, Russian and French, as well as on regionalisms and, occasionally, so-called “failed” neologisms. The intended readership consisted primarily of the educated elite. As Walicki explicitly stated: “I write for you, citizens, men and women, who are educated, some of you indeed exceptionally learned in your professions, and against whom

only one reproach can be raised—that you neglect your mother tongue too much” (Walicki 1876: VI).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, a new conceptualization emerged: linguistic correctness was no longer grounded in an idealised inherited norm but increasingly depended on contemporary usage. Artur Passendorfer, for instance, argued that “the highest authority in linguistic matters is the contemporary, generally prevailing linguistic custom.” Words and constructions in common use, he maintains, are correct even if they have departed from grammatical rules, whereas formally “correct” forms become incorrect once they fall out of use (Passendorfer 1904: 3). In the 1920s and 1930s, this usage-based criterion came to be justified functionally, by reference to communicative effectiveness, while the notion of “generally prevailing linguistic custom” was defined socially as “the usage of the educated classes”.

In the 1930s, the “linguistic custom” that implicitly governed usage began to be described as the norm only a few years after the Prague Linguistic School had introduced the term in this sense. Stanisław Szober, the first Polish scholar to adopt it, likewise emphasised the variability of the norm, observing that change originates in individual usage and then, “through social interaction and the mutual influence of individuals on one another, often begins to spread, thereby contributing to the gradual transformation of the hitherto prevailing linguistic norm” (Szober 1937: 50). Szober was also the first Polish author to employ the term language cultivation.

In the post-war period, two authors offered syntheses of the achievements of Polish normative linguistics to date. Responding to the jurist Jerzy Lande—who claimed that linguists should prescribe the linguistic norm in the same way legislators prescribe laws—Zenon Klemensiewicz (1947) reaffirmed that the fundamental criterion of linguistic correctness is *usus modernus excultus*, refined contemporary usage. Based on knowledge of the language, its history and developmental tendencies, the linguist may judge the correctness of a form as it appears in the usage of the educated strata of society. Yet, Klemensiewicz insists, such judgement cannot itself constitute a binding norm, but merely a recommendation.

A similar understanding of the norm was articulated by Witold Doroszewski, who defined correct forms as those “which do not conflict with the linguistic customs prevailing at a given time and in a given linguistic environment, and which do not disrupt the reception of the content expressed by a given form or word” (Doroszewski in Doroszewski & Kurkowska 1973: VII). Doroszewski readily recognised the coexistence of multiple norms across different communicative contexts and acknowledged the possibility of admitting certain colloquial forms into literary language. He also addressed terminological questions and emphasised the educational dimension

of work on language, whose purpose was to enhance the effectiveness of linguistic expression as a tool of thought and action. Crucially, he rejected any view of the linguist as an enforcer of linguistic discipline, claiming that “the notion that work on linguistic correctness consists in issuing prohibitions and commands – long widespread [...] – is an anachronism and a misunderstanding” (Doroszewski 1982: 408).

In the 1970s, Halina Kurkowska developed a comprehensive concept of language culture grounded in the Prague School and Coseriu. While she agreed with earlier authors that the norm is an inherent component of language, she introduced a significant innovation: the recognition of speaker’s right to innovate. Some innovations, she argued, are functionally motivated and deserve admission to the literary language: “The more useful a given innovation is with respect to communicative needs and linguistic economy, the less widely spread it should be in order to be accepted. Also, the lesser its value for improving communication, the more support from usage it requires” (Kurkowska 1973: 36). For Kurkowska, the central task of linguists was to describe and codify what is sanctioned by social linguistic custom: “The source for learning about the norm of the Polish language is the observation of contemporary usage, the linguistic custom of Poles, as manifested in spoken and written texts representing different situational and stylistic varieties of Polish” (Kurkowska 1973: 59). Alongside this stabilising function, linguists also had a modifying role in recognising functionally justified innovations and a pedagogical role in preventing the spread of undesirable ones.

Stanisław Gajda, by contrast, emphasised the inevitably subjective dimension of codification. Since the usage norm is inherently variable, he argues, it cannot be captured through static description, which is why codification needs to involve selection. As he put it, “every speaker (including the codifier) has a certain concept of the linguistic norm—an imaginary norm. Codification must take into account these subjective judgements [...] correcting them by means of objective measures such as the so-called criterion of linguistic correctness” (Gajda 1979: 364–365). For Gajda, then, the norm is grounded in usage, but its final shape is determined by the codifier on the basis of an individual imaginary norm provided by scientific knowledge of the language.

In the 1970s and 1980s, increasing attention was devoted to the internal stratification of the norm. Kurkowska (1977: 24) proposed a three-level model of the literary-language norm, distinguishing a colloquial-usage norm, a public norm, and an exemplary norm. Building on this framework, Danuta Buttler argued for the existence of a “real norm,” defined as “the most stable elements of Polish accepted by all (or at least the majority of) educated speakers, but for various reasons not necessarily codified” (Buttler

1986: 607). She suggested that acknowledging this “real norm” would help overcome rigid, “black-and-white” prescriptivism and prevent the exclusive codification of the exemplary norm, which might otherwise “lead to ossification, or even a kind of archaicism, of the careful public varieties of Polish” (Buttler 1986: 610).

This dual-level conception of the norm was adopted in *Praktyczny słownik poprawnej polszczyzny nie tylko dla młodzieży* [Practical Dictionary of Correct Polish Not Exclusively for Young People] (Markowski 1995), which for the first time formally distinguished between the exemplary and colloquial norms and explicitly incorporated the colloquial norm—earlier referred to as the usage norm—into codification. The colloquial norm was characterised as typical of informal conversation, grounded more in frequency of usage than in tradition, and allowing for a higher degree of variation. The exemplary norm, by contrast, was described as “a ‘high’ norm, based on knowledge of the history of the language and on the linguistic tradition transmitted by the intelligentsia of earlier generations [...], placing considerable demands on those who would adhere to it” (Markowski 1995: 13).

The publication of the *Practical Dictionary* sparked extensive debate on linguistic norm and codification, with Jadwiga Puzyna’s intervention (Puzyna 1997) being among the most influential. Puzyna raised a series of fundamental questions: how can socially accepted forms be identified when the customary norm is unclear? What precisely is meant by “educated Poles,” whose judgement is held to underpin codification? Who has the authority to codify, and how should suggestions about language be formulated when expert opinions diverge? While at least in principle accepting the dual-level concept of codification, Puzyna argues for clearer distinctions between exemplary and usage norms, and within the latter between colloquial and sociolectal layers. She also acknowledged the legitimacy of variation even within the exemplary norm.

Anna Cegięła (1996) approached the issue from a sociolinguistic and pragmatic perspective, arguing that the choice of norm depends on communicative context. The exemplary norm, she maintained, plays a crucial role in unifying the community and in fulfilling broader social functions: constructive (towards culture), accumulative (towards values), synergistic (towards members of the community), and consociative (towards the past). Communication oriented towards immediate efficiency, by contrast, may legitimately operate at the level of the usage norm. As Cegięła puts it, “the choice of norm depends on the sociolinguistic situation: about whom and what we are speaking, and which social and linguistic roles we are playing” (Cegięła 1996: 32).

The distinction between two layers of the standard language was subsequently adopted in *Nowy słownik poprawnej polszczyzny* [New Dictionary

of Correct Polish] (Markowski 1999), later published as *Wielki słownik poprawnej polszczyzny* [Great Dictionary of Correct Polish] (Markowski 2004). The exemplary norm was defined as comprising elements of language used consciously, with an awareness of their semantic and stylistic value, and in accordance with linguistic tradition, grammatical rules and observable developmental tendencies. The usage norm, by contrast, was described as “comprising words, their forms and combinations characteristic of those types of contacts in which language is treated as a utilitarian value ... a set of linguistic resources used in occasional, primarily informal, interactions” (Markowski 2004: 1627). In this conceptualization, communicative effectiveness takes precedence over adherence to tradition or the system.

A key moment in the contemporary development of Polish concepts of linguistic correctness was Andrzej Markowski’s address at the Congress of Polish Teachers in Kraków in 2004. He questioned whether the prescriptive model continued to meet the needs of the time. He also questioned whether the concepts of “error” and “correct form” remained adequate, or whether they should be replaced by communicative effectiveness as the primary criterion of evaluation. He further contemplated whether codification might give way to standardisation, seen also as “setting limits to variation that ensure the success of a communicative act, beyond which forms which are ineffective in a given type of sender–receiver relationship lie” (Markowski 2005: 543).

Mirosław Bańko proposed an alternative approach to variation within the norm, drawing attention to the vagueness of the concepts of exemplary and usage norms and to the ambiguity of the criteria used to distinguish between them. He proposed replacing this distinction with that between a descriptive norm, reflecting actual usage, and a deontic norm, describing “desirable” usage. His argument is that “like the multi-level norm postulated by Kurkowska [...], this distinction deprives the evaluation of linguistic facts of its absolute character. But while the multi-level norm relativises assessments with reference to communicative situations and varieties [...], the multi-point norm makes them dependent on other circumstances” (Bańko 2008: 13).

The concept of a multi-point norm also makes it possible to account for internet usage, according to Katarzyna Kłosińska. It is characteristic of online communication that there is distribution and reproduction of both correct and incorrect forms, which raises the question of the importance of stability in such a communicative environment, or whether usefulness and entertainment become the primary criteria instead. Accordingly, Kłosińska observes that “adhering to the rules resulting from the codification of the norm [...] is, indeed, extremely difficult in a culture in which the capacity

for abstract thinking has been disrupted and replaced by randomness and fragmentariness in the association of phenomena” (Kłosińska 2017: 83).

To sum up, the Polish debates on linguistic correctness reveal a gradual but consistent reorientation from an idealised, tradition-bound concept of the norm toward a usage-based, and functionally and socially differentiated model (cf. Kołodziejek 2018; Markowski 2018). While nineteenth-century prescriptivism was primarily concerned with protecting an inherited standard and disseminating it among the educated strata of society, the twentieth century brought an increasing recognition of contemporary usage as the principal reference point of correctness. This shift was accompanied by a redefinition of normativity itself: from a fixed set of prescriptions to a dynamic, internally stratified system sensitive to communicative context, variation and change. Codification was no longer understood as the authoritative imposition of rules, but rather as a mediating practice, balancing stability and innovation, descriptive accuracy and evaluative judgement. By the early twenty-first century, Polish standardology had thus largely abandoned rigid, “black-and-white” prescriptivism and replaced it with reflexive models that foreground empirical usage, acknowledge speaker agency and accept the coexistence of multiple normative perspectives within the standard language.

3 Linguistic Correctness in the Czech Context

The modern Czech standard language took shape at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through a deliberate revival of the sixteenth-century linguistic norm. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were retrospectively considered a period of decline, attributed primarily to a massive influx of Germanisms (cf. Šlosar et al. 2009: 91–102). Initially confined to a narrow circle of intellectuals familiar with both archaic morphology and a rapidly expanding vocabulary, the codified norm gradually spread from the mid-nineteenth century into journalism, secondary education, theatre and administration. Although this expansion brought a growing number of active users, there was a persistent conviction that actual usage diverged from the idealised norm and therefore required prescriptive refinement. This purist orientation gave rise to numerous manuals in the second half of the nineteenth century and found its principal institutional platform in the linguistic journal *Naše řeč* [Our Language], founded in 1916.

Czech linguistic purism primarily targeted lexical items and constructions modelled on German. It was characterised by a high degree of subjectivity, with judgements of correctness resting, to varying extents, on attestation in older texts, vernacular usage and contemporary literature. In

an effort to achieve greater objectivity, Jiří Haller—generally regarded as the last major representative of Czech purism—argued that no single criterion could suffice and that only criteria combined were methodologically valid. He regarded forms attested in all three domains as fully correct, and those present in two as requiring scrutiny. Indeed, he was most sceptical of forms found exclusively in contemporary usage. He maintained that “the very development of human physical and spiritual life brings along the necessity of new linguistic creations. What matters is to discern in them a common system [...] and thereby also a binding criterion for every such case” (Haller 2007 [1931]: 42). In short, new forms were acceptable only if they could be shown to conform to a systematic rule previously established through attestation in older texts and the vernacular.

However, following the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918, Czech gradually emerged from the shadow of German and developed into a multifunctional and socially prestigious medium of communication. It entered domains in which it had previously played only a marginal role—such as the army, state administration and the railways. This expansion led to a swift enrichment of the language’s resources and to a broadening of its social base. Under these conditions, the traditional purist approach increasingly lost its credibility, prompting some linguists to seek alternative conceptualizations of linguistic correctness.

One of the earliest such alternatives was proposed by Václav Ertl, who grounded linguistic correctness exclusively in contemporary literary usage. He argued that “good writers” should serve as models of correctness, referring to authors of belles-lettres whose language combined aesthetic quality with broad readership. Even so, Ertl did not treat individual authorial usage as decisive. Only forms shared by the majority of such writers—that is, majority usage—were to be regarded as correct. He succinctly claimed that “in matters of language, it is not the individual who decides, but the community” (Ertl 1929: 57). He further maintained that while resistance to Germanisms had once played an important role in the national struggle, it was no longer justified after Czech emancipation. Once assimilated into usage, “Germanisms were no longer errors to be corrected” (Ertl 1929: 40).

The decisive turning point came with the emergence of the Prague Linguistic Circle, which combined structuralist and functionalist approaches, and with the publication of its 1932 volume *Spisovná čeština a jazyková kultura* [The Czech Literary Language and Language Cultivation], conceived as an explicit response to the purist practices of the journal *Naše řeč*. In the field of language cultivation, the most important contributions in this volume were made by Vilém Mathesius and Bohuslav Havránek.

Mathesius argues that the highest aim of the standard language is linguistic subtlety—that is, the ability “to formulate even the most delicate

observations and thoughts precisely, fully, and clearly” (Mathesius 1932: 14). What matters, therefore, is not historical purity or absolute regularity in word formation, but the extent to which the language is elaborated as a medium of philosophy, science, literature and social communication. Stability is equally essential, though it must remain sufficiently flexible to accommodate new communicative needs. Interventions in language use may help establish stability where it is lacking—for instance by recommending widely used forms—but they must not undermine stability where it already exists. The scope of actual usage, Mathesius maintains, can be assessed only on the basis of “the average of Czech literature over the past half-century” (Mathesius 1932: 25), in the broadest sense of the term, encompassing both belles-lettres and scholarly writing.

Havránek, too, maintained that the aim of language cultivation was to establish and stabilise the norm of the standard language while developing specific means that distinguish it from the vernacular. He defined the norm as a set of grammatical and lexical resources governed by rules of use, noting that although every variety has its norm, the standard norm is more complex, more compulsory and thus requiring greater stability. Codification—most often realised in the form of language manuals—constitutes the principal means by which theory intervenes in the norm; yet Havránek insisted that such intervention reflect the norm immanently present in the language itself. As he puts it, “a necessary prerequisite of any theoretical work discussing literary language is that the actual state of that language be determined and described as accurately as possible” (Havránek 1932: 32). Havránek also laid the foundations of functional stylistics, distinguishing scientific, administrative, conversational and poetic styles, each characterised by its own lexicon, syntax and modes of expression. Accordingly, linguists are encouraged to contribute to functional differentiation by developing terminologies, by elaborating stylistic usage and critically evaluating texts and discourses in functional terms.

The year 1948 marked a watershed moment not only in the social and political history of Czechoslovakia but also in Czech concepts of language culture. With the Communist Party’s seizing power, political pluralism and market economy were abolished. Under the new ideological conditions, linguistic purism was condemned as a manifestation of bourgeois nationalism, while structuralism was denounced as a form of bourgeois idealism. Functionalism, by contrast—with its conviction that language could be deliberately shaped to function more effectively as a tool of communication—was promoted as the dominant framework. This shift towards functionalism, however, took place at a moment when the key mechanism of the social transmission and maintenance of the standard language had already begun to erode. Profound changes in the composition of the upper

social strata meant that mastery of the standard variety could no longer be assumed, and elements of colloquial language—most notably Common Czech,² its most widespread form—began to penetrate first semi-formal and later even formal domains of communication.

The first major contribution to the revival and re-evaluation of the Prague School's programme of language cultivation was made by Miloš Dokulil. He argued that codification should not merely record the existing norm but should also actively reflect its internal dynamics and developmental tendencies. "Codification, therefore, must, alongside its static aspect, also possess perspectival depth" (Dokulil 1952: 139), that is, it should highlight elements that are not yet dominant but are likely to become so. Dokulil further addressed the intensified interaction between the traditional literary language and Common Czech, predicting that the influence of Common Czech would lead to a simplification of the morphology of the literary language. "The natural consequence of this," he argues, "will be that, with the increasing regularity of Czech literary language—especially in the domain of morphology—mastery of the language will be facilitated across all strata of society, thereby enhancing its democratic character" (Dokulil 1952: 139).

The interaction between the standard language and Common Czech was also a central concern in the work of Petr Sgall. He pointed to numerous cases in which the traditional standard language sounded artificial or pedantic, leading speakers to prefer Common Czech instead. Sgall pointed out that the relationship between the two could not be reduced to a simple spoken–written opposition, since they systematically differ at the lexical, syntactic, morphological and phonological levels, and therefore constitute distinct language varieties. At the same time, both belong to the core of the Czech language and, unlike traditional dialects—which are in retreat—remain dynamic and are expanding. According to Sgall, one of the principal tasks of Czech linguistics was to analyse these interactions and to determine which features of the standard language were becoming obsolete and which features of Common Czech had become so widespread as to merit codification. He observes that "since the very norm of literary language develops,

² Common Czech (*obecná čeština*) is a non-standard, supra-dialectal variety of Czech that originated in central Bohemia, particularly in the Prague region, and has subsequently spread across most of the Czech-speaking territory. It is characterised by a distinctive set of phonological, morphological and lexical features that differentiate it from the codified standard language. Although it lacks official codification, Common Czech functions as the predominant spoken variety in everyday informal communication and increasingly extends into semi-formal contexts. Positioned between local dialects and the standard language, it today constitutes the dominant vernacular variety in the Czech Republic.

it is necessary from time to time to change its codification as well” (Sgall 2012 [1960]: 10).

Amid intense debates on the relationship between the standard language and Common Czech, František Daneš examined the role of language attitudes in language cultivation. He distinguishes rational attitudes, which view language primarily as a tool of communication and aim to enhance its efficiency, from affective attitudes, characterised by emotional attachment and the valuation of distinctive features. Every language situation, he argued, requires a balance between these two orientations, although the point of equilibrium varies. While processes of social development tend to strengthen rational motivations, affective attachments remain persistent. Daneš further elaborated the notion of flexible stability, according to which language systems maintain equilibrium by balancing resistance to innovation and openness to change. Codification, he insists, should function as “an important instrument for balancing tendencies of resistance and acceptance” (Daneš 1968: 125), which implies that language manuals must incorporate variants classified according to function, frequency and developmental potential—despite public expectations of clear-cut prescriptions and prohibitions. Indeed, Czech grammars of the period consistently introduced distinctions between bookish, neutral and spoken means of expression.

Alois Jedlička focused on the developmental tendencies of contemporary Czech and emphasised that codification must respond to the language’s synchronic dynamics. He argued that contemporary change in Czech was driven not only by internal structural tensions but also by broader social transformations and shifting communicative functions, particularly the increasing role of journalism and the changing relationship between spoken and written usage. Jedlička identified a threefold tension—between the standard norm and Common Czech, between written and spoken forms, and between different functional styles—the outcome of which was the emergence of linguistic variants. As regards phonological, morphological and syntactic phenomena, he maintained that variants do not weaken the norm but instead constitute the very mechanism of language development, and that codification should therefore deal with them systematically. “The task of linguists is to study developmental processes in the contemporary language and to assess the dynamics of the synchronic linguistic system” (Jedlička 1969: 94).

Some four decades later, Václav Cvrček put forward a radical alternative to traditional concepts of language cultivation. Rejecting the Prague School’s programme as ill-suited to contemporary Czech, he argued that linguistics should not deprive speakers of their right to spontaneous linguistic behaviour. In his view, even the functionalist language-cultivation programme

remained fundamentally puristic insofar as it continued to disqualify non-standard forms. Cvrček sought to restore a spontaneously established linguistic order by advocating parallel codifications grounded in measurable criteria—such as frequency, register and regional distribution—derived from balanced digital corpora, including spoken data. He further called for weakening the influence of traditional codification in publishing and the media, proposing its replacement by usage-based alternatives. “The only appropriate response to linguistic variation is variation of its descriptions” (Cvrček 2008: 291).

Taken as a whole, the Czech case shows a long-term shift from an idealised, historically anchored concept of linguistic correctness toward a dynamic, usage-based and functionally differentiated understanding of the standard language. Nineteenth-century purism, geared toward the revival of an earlier norm and the elimination of perceived foreign influence, gradually gave way to a concept of normativity grounded in communicative function, empirical usage and structural systemness. In the post-war period, this functionalist legacy was reinterpreted in response to changing social conditions, as the growing role of Common Czech and the erosion of traditional mechanisms of norm transmission foregrounded variation and synchronic dynamics. By the early twenty-first century, proposals such as Cvrček’s corpus-based parallel codifications marked a further step in this trajectory, redefining codification as a means of mediating between stability and change through systematic engagement with actual usage rather than institutional prescription alone.

4 Linguistic Correctness in the Slovak Context

In the Slovak context, linguistic correctness and codification were integral to the formation of the standard language. Strong dialectal fragmentation and the lack of a stable prestigious written tradition meant that standardisation was decisively shaped by the choice of a dialectal base (cf. Krajčovič & Žigo 2002). Anton Bernolák codified southern Western Slovak at the end of the eighteenth century; Ľudovít Štúr adopted northern Central Slovak in the mid-nineteenth century; and the reform associated with Michal Miloslav Hodža and Martin Hattala subsequently consolidated a compromise standard in which Central Slovak predominated, though traces of Czech usage remained. In the early twentieth century, Samo Czambel and Jozef Škultéty further stabilised the norm, with Czambel advocating a strongly puristic and pan-Slavic programme aimed at eliminating Czech and other foreign elements, while Škultéty favoured a more moderate stabilisation grounded in literary tradition and educated usage.

A new phase began in the 1930s with the founding of the journal *Slovenská reč* [Slovak Language], which promoted Slovak as a modern, fully functional language. In close collaboration with Henrich Bartek, the journal articulated a conception of the standard language that rejected both artificial dialectalisation and externally motivated interventions, particularly those stemming from Czech influence. While selectively engaging with Prague School ideas, Bartek prioritised the purity and distinctiveness of Slovak over functional differentiation, insisting on its autonomous development from its own structural resources (Bartek 1933/1934: 8). Although often labelled a purist, his position was more nuanced: he opposed mechanical purism and archaism while accepting structurally compatible loanwords.

These developments culminated in the late 1930s in the first explicit attempt to conceptualise the internal stratification of Slovak as a national language. Rejecting a binary opposition between correctness and deviation, Ján Mihál argued that dialects constitute a permanent and legitimate source of the standard, asserting that “every genuine dialect is at least as correct as the standard language” (Mihál 1938/1939: 215). He distinguished three layers: the literary language; the popular language comprising local and social dialects; and a general colloquial variety functioning as a mediating, supra-dialectal layer between dialects and the literary norm. By treating variation as functional rather than defective, Mihál anticipated later stratificational models.

The early 1950s marked a new phase in Slovak reflection on the standard language. A key milestone was the nationwide Conference on the Norm of the Standard Language held in 1955. The conference addressed the relationship between linguistic norm and social change, the dynamics of norm and usage, and the role of codification in expanding communicative domains. In his opening address, Štefan Peciar framed the discussion by pointing out the drawbacks of the unprecedented expansion of standard Slovak into all spheres of social life, which, as he noted, had led to a “certain loosening of the old norms”, and posed a programmatic question as to “whether and to what extent should one consider new elements and developmental tendencies in the standard language, or whether one should consistently adhere to the existing norms” (Peciar 1955: 193).

Within this framework, Ján Horecký introduced a more differentiated conceptual apparatus by distinguishing between the literary language and the standard form. The literary language was understood primarily as a codified and socially prestigious variety governed by explicit normative rules, while the standard form was conceived more broadly as a functional communicative variety shaped by actual usage in public domains. In line with this, Horecký emphasised that elements of non-standard usage do not enter the literary language directly, but rather “through the filter of standard

usage” (Horecký 1955: 198), so that innovation becomes legitimate only after it is mediated by educated and literary practice.

In his contribution to the 1955 debate, Vincent Blanár aligned Slovak reasoning on language cultivation with the theoretical principles of the Prague Linguistic Circle. He conceptualised the development of the standard language as a dialectical unity of stability and change, arguing that a stable norm secures continuity with cultural tradition, while controlled variability enables both simplification and enrichment of linguistic resources. He formulated his ideas as follows: language cultivation must be guided by “the developmental tendency towards a dialectical unity of stability and variability” (Blanár 1955: 210). For Blanár, the evaluation of correctness and appropriateness could not be uniform across different contexts but largely depend on the specific demands of individual functional styles.

In his influential contribution, Štefan Peciar conceptualised codification as a two-stage process involving the empirical identification of the linguistic norm and its systematic description. He strongly cautioned against equating the norm with its codification, noting that such equating would foster the misleading view that linguistic norms function in a similar fashion as rules of law. He claims succinctly that “every codification by which the norm is strengthened and temporarily stabilised also contributes to a better knowledge of the existing norm” (Peciar 1955b: 242). Peciar emphasised that norms must be established on the basis of broadly attested usage and treated as inherently variable.

Building on the developments of the 1950s concerning norm and codification, the Slovak debate about the standard language assumed a rather explicitly programmatic form in the mid-1960s with the formulation of the “Theses on Slovak”. Designed for the 1966 conference on the cultivation of the Slovak standard language and published in 1967, the document stated that “Slovak is a differentiated national language, and its varieties constitute a dialectical unity” (Ružička et al. 1967: 129). Linguistic correctness was grounded in the interrelated criteria of systematic coherence, stability and functionality, while selected usage, cultivated linguistic awareness and the existing intellectual attainment were identified as the main sources of the norm. While the “Theses on Slovak” display a protective concern for the stability and systemness of the standard language, this orientation does not amount to classical purism but remains embedded within a functionalist and usage-sensitive model of normativity.

By the late 1970s, Slovak standard-language theory increasingly focused on internal stratification, i.e. particularly on the relationship between the literary variety and other forms. Ján Horecký proposed a differentiated model based on the concept of the language situation, incorporating institutional care for language and conceptualising the national language as a system

of interacting literary, standard and substandard forms. His key innovation was to elevate the standard form as a central dynamic component of contemporary Slovak without challenging the privileged status of the literary language: “Emphasising the importance of the standard form does not mean diminishing the significance or the unique position of the literary form” (Horecký 1979: 224). Horecký’s model sparked both engagement and criticism. František Kočíš rejected this stratificational approach, reaffirming the traditional identification of the literary and national language, and asserting that “the literary language = the all-national language” (Kočíš 1984: 38), while dismissing standard and substandard forms as mere norm violations rather than distinct varieties.

From the early 1990s, Slovak linguistics underwent a pronounced sociolinguistic turn associated with Juraj Dolník. The latter sharpened the divide between codification-based system approaches and perspectives emphasising natural variation and language use. Dolník criticised language-cultivation theory for its limited responsiveness to actual practice, arguing that it functioned “more as a closed system of theses guiding cultivation than as an explanation of actual or potential processes of language use” (Dolník 1996: 282). His intervention foregrounded practice-based systematisations and empirical research into usage and attitudes, which eventually reframed debates on the standard language.

Building on the above critique, Ján Horecký maintained that Slovak linguistics still lacked a consensual theory of language cultivation and of the standard language itself. While reaffirming systemness as a core criterion of standardness and codification, he accepted the existence of partial systems aligned with speakers’ needs, and stressed that theory must integrate the language system with speakers and their linguistic awareness: “The theory of language cultivation should not be based solely on the theory of the language system, but also on knowledge of the users of the language and their linguistic consciousness” (Horecký 1997: 82).

The late 1990s and later saw the debates on Slovak language cultivation intensifying around Juraj Dolník’s pragmalinguistic critique. Ján Kačala (1997) was sceptical in his response, accusing Dolník of undermining the theoretical and practical foundations of language cultivation, while Dolník (1997) clarified the distinction between global systematisation by linguists and partial systemisation by speakers, reframing the controversy as a methodological opposition between abstract-systemic and pragmatic approaches to language culture. This divide became particularly visible in codificatory disputes, which Dolník described as a conflict between reflexive-logical and pragmatic-logical reasoning, warning that the former “introduces into language a logic that is not in harmony with its nature and thus shifts away from linguistic reality” (Dolník 2000: 217). Drawing

from sociolinguistic insights, he advances a pragmalinguistic framework that reconceptualised the language user as an autonomous and socially situated actor, whose competence constitutes an objective component of linguistic reality.

Taken together, the Slovak discussion of the standard language and language cultivation reveals a long-term tension between norm-stabilising and usage-sensitive conceptualizations of linguistic correctness. From early codification efforts grounded in dialect selection and puristic norm enforcement, through functionalist reinterpretations inspired by the Prague School, all the way to stratificational models and late-twentieth-century pragmalinguistic critiques, Slovak theory has repeatedly renegotiated the relationship between system, norm and use—not as a linear replacement of one paradigm by another, but as a cumulative process in which new approaches redefine earlier insights within broader theoretical frameworks. This trajectory unfolded at a slower pace than in the Polish and Czech traditions, in part because Slovak linguistics was longer preoccupied with establishing and defending an autonomous norm *vis-à-vis* Czech. The most recent debates underscore a decisive shift toward viewing normativity as dynamic, socially embedded and empirically accountable, while still preserving the stabilising role of the standard language as a shared cultural resource.

5 Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Polish, Czech and Slovak conceptualizations of linguistic correctness reveals a shared long-term trajectory from idealised, normatively rigid models toward more differentiated, usage-based and functionally grounded understandings of the standard language. In all three contexts, early prescriptive frameworks were shaped by nation-building imperatives and by the need to stabilise and legitimise the standard language as a marker of collective identity. Linguistic correctness was initially conceived as conformity to an inherited or reconstructed ideal, often defended through puristic argumentation and enforced by authoritative codification. Over time, however, this idealised conceptualization proved increasingly untenable in the face of expanding speaker bases, functional diversification of the standard language, and growing awareness of variation within actual usage.

A decisive shift occurred when usage—variously conceptualised as the practice of educated speakers, majority usage, or socially sanctioned linguistic custom—was elevated from a secondary reference point to the primary criterion of correctness. This shift did not entail the abandonment of normativity, but rather its redefinition. Across the examined Central European

traditions, codification and prescriptive intervention came to be understood less as instruments of enforcement and more as mediating practices aimed at balancing stability and change, resistance and innovation. Functional considerations, communicative effectiveness and sociolinguistic context increasingly informed normative judgement, while internal stratification of the norm and the legitimacy of variation were progressively acknowledged. In this process, the role of the linguist was recalibrated—from guardian of linguistic purity to expert mediator between system, usage and social practice.

The three traditions examined here share this broad trajectory but differ significantly in its timing. In the Polish and Czech cases, the decisive re-orientation away from idealised, purist conceptualizations occurred already in the interwar period—in Polish with Szober, in Czech with the Prague Linguistic Circle—and was consolidated in the post-war decades through the syntheses of Klemensiewicz and Doroszewski in Poland and through the institutional dominance of functionalism in Czech linguistics. In the Slovak tradition, by contrast, a comparable shift came considerably later. While functionalist impulses appeared in the 1950s, the stratificational reorientation gathered momentum from the 1970s onwards, and the more radical pragmalinguistic critique accelerated only after 1990 with Dolník's sociolinguistic challenge to codification-based approaches. This difference in pace reflects not only distinct standardisation histories but also divergent sociopolitical trajectories in each community.

By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, conceptualizations of linguistic correctness in Central Europe had largely converged on models that foreground empirical description, speaker agency and the dynamic interaction between codification and usage. While important differences remain in institutional arrangements, theoretical vocabularies and degrees of normative conservatism, the overarching tendency is clear: the standard language is no longer conceived as a fixed ideal to be defended against usage, but as a historically evolving, socially embedded and functionally differentiated system whose norm emerges from regulated interaction between linguistic practice and expert reflection. This reorientation not only reshapes the theoretical foundations of language cultivation but also reframes prescriptivism itself—as a reflexive, context-sensitive and analytically grounded form of normative engagement with language rather than an exercise in enforcing immutable standards.

Data Availability Statement

The article is based on research data from existing and publicly available textual sources listed in the *References* section.

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OD IDEALIZIRANIH NORM K NORMAM, TEMELJEČIM NA RABI: JEZIKOVNA PRAVLNOST V ZAHODNOSLOVANSKIH JEZIKIH

V članku so obravnavana spreminjajoča se pojmovanja jezikovne pravilnosti v poljski, češki in slovaški jezikoslovni tradiciji od konca 19. do začetka 21. stoletja. Na podlagi ključnih teoretskih besedil – tistih, ki so pogosto citirana, ki so oblikovala nadaljnjo teoretsko razpravo ali so neposredno vplivala na kodifikacijsko prakso – je prikazana skupna razvojna pot vseh treh tradicij: premik od avtoritativnih, pogosto purističnih modelov k pristopom, utemeljenim na empirični rabi, funkcionalni diferenciaciji in sociolingvistični zavesti.

V zgodnjem obdobju so bile vse tri tradicije zaznamovane z nacionalnoidentitetnimi imperativi in potrebo po stabilizaciji standardnega jezika. Jezikovna pravilnost je bila razumljena kot skladnost z idealiziranim ali historičnim vzorcem, ki so ga vzdrževali preskriptivistični priročniki in puristične intervencije. Ta model je postal neustrezen ob soočenju z rastjo govorne skupnosti, funkcionalno diferenciacijo standardnega jezika in vse večjim zavedanjem o jezikovni variantnosti.

Odločilni preobrat se je zgodil, ko je postala dejanska jezikovna raba – razumljena kot navada izobraženih govorcev, večinska raba ali družbeno potrjeni jezikovni običaj – primarna osnova za presojanje pravilnosti. Kodifikacija in preskriptivizem sta začela igrati vlogo mediatorja med stabilnostjo in inovacijo, funkcijska ustreznost, sporazumevalna učinkovitost in sociolingvistični kontekst pa so vse bolj sooblikovali normativno presojo.

Tradicije se razlikujejo po tempu teh sprememb: v poljskem in češkem jezikoslovju je do preloma prišlo že v medvojnem obdobju, v slovaškem pa se je primerljiv premik odvijal počasneje in se pospešil šele po letu 1990, deloma zaradi daljše osredotočenosti slovaškega jezikoslovja na vzpostavljanje avtonomne norme nasproti češčini. Ob koncu 20. in v začetku 21. stoletja so se koncepcije jezikovne pravilnosti v vseh treh tradicijah uskladile: standardni jezik ni več nepremični ideal, ki ga je treba braniti pred rabo, temveč zgodovinsko razvijajoč se, družbeno umeščen in funkcionalno diferenciran sistem.

Opisana razvojna pot ni edinstvena za zahodnoslovanski kontekst – prispevek je ponujen kot del širše srednjeevropske razprave, v kateri je slovensko jezikoslovje pomemben sogovornik.