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Preservation of identity versus natural process: changes of proper names during their adaptation into Czech*

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, all languages in the world (and their speakers) face various challenges. Among these challenges is the necessity to use proper names from a wide variety of languages, which are often seen as “exotic” or entirely unfamiliar from the perspective of the speakers. Each language and its users deal with this need in their own way; proper names in the context of globalization and multiculturalism are currently addressed, for instance, in publications edited by FELECAN and BUGHEȘIU (2021; 2022), as well as in article by RUTKIEWICZ-HANCZEWSKA (2010). This paper focuses on this issue from the perspective of the Czech language and its speakers, though many of the strategies presented here are, of course, also applied in other languages and communities.

Linguistic changes in proper names in Czech can be observed on several different levels. We will go through the main ones, primarily based on specific material: the questions that Czech language users ask the Language Consulting Centre of the Czech Language Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences. This service has been operating in Czechia for many decades (specifically since 1936) and currently provides free answers to telephone inquiries, while written responses are less common and are subject to a fee. The telephone calls are recorded with the caller’s consent, stored in a database (for more details see ŠTĚPÁNOVÁ 2022; 2023), and published online (after necessary editing of course). The operation of the Language Consulting Centre is governed by rules outlined in the document *Standard of Language Consulting Towards Universally Accepted Principles and Best Practices* (2024), which was developed through collaboration between the Institute of the Estonian Language and the Czech Language Institute. More detailed information about Czech language consulting has been published in English, for example, in texts by MŽOURKOVÁ (2024), MŽOURKOVÁ and MARTINKOVIČOVÁ (in print), LEEMET, DUFEK and DVOŘÁKOVÁ (in print), PROŠEK (2020), LUDÁNYI (2020), BENEŠ et al. (2018) and UHLÍŘOVÁ (1997; 1998).

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As an introductory example of a question and the response to it, a case has been chosen that relates not only to the topic of adapting proper names to Czech but also to the location of the last ICOS congress. The question concerning the name of the Finnish capital city was posed by a staunch advocate of “preserving the identity” of the original name, i.e., an opponent of using any exonyms, whose arguments, however, are entirely incorrect:

Query: How is it possible that Czechs call the Finnish city *Helsinki* as *Helsinky*? I find it unacceptable; no other nation does this. Moreover, it should correctly be singular masculine, not plural as it is in Czech.

Answer: The name *Helsinky* is indeed very commonly used for the city of Helsinki in Czech, and it is the official form. [...] The existence of exonyms is entirely natural not only in Czech but also in other languages, and there is no reason to resist it or label such names as unacceptable, especially when they are well-established and widely understood, as is the case here. [...] Some other languages also have their own exonyms for *Helsinki*, such as the Swedish and Norwegian *Helsingfors*. And in no way can it be claimed that the Finnish name *Helsinki* is of the masculine gender, as Finnish does not have the category of grammatical gender at all. The difference from Czech is that in Finnish, it is a singular noun, while in Czech, *Helsinky* is considered a plural noun due to its ending.

2. Phonetic Changes in Names

The following part of the paper focuses on the first category of changes foreign proper names undergo when adapted into Czech, specifically their phonetic aspect. In the vast majority of cases, names undergo some sound changes during their adaptation into Czech (cf. the principles of phonological adaptation into Czech in DUBĚDA et al. 2014, DUBĚDA 2017; 2020, and further, for example, ŠTĚPÁNOVÁ 2016). It is important to recognize that while it is appropriate to follow the original pronunciation, an attempt at complete imitation may sound unnatural or affected to listeners. In certain situations, this so-called “citation pronunciation” may be acceptable, but most frequently, proper names are adapted into Czech according to the following principles: stress is shifted to the first syllable of the word; foreign sounds are replaced with the closest Czech sounds; and phonetic rules that apply to native Czech vocabulary, such as the assimilation of voicing, are applied to foreign names as well.

However, not all foreign proper names are pronounced in Czech based on their original sound in the source language. In some cases, pronunciation follows the written form, while in others, various linguistic analogies play a crucial role. Often, different phonetic variants of the same name compete in common usage. Although the original identity of the name may sometimes be completely lost



from the perspective of the source language, it is pointless to label these forms as incorrect in Czech if they are sufficiently established. Any attempts by linguists to “correct” them are likely doomed to failure. This situation can be appropriately illustrated by the following example from the Czech Language Consulting Centre:

Query: How should the English surname *Chamberlain* be correctly pronounced in Czech?

Answer: Although pronunciation guides agree on the recommended form [ˈʃɛjmbɛrlɪn], which is appropriate from the perspective of adaptation from English, this pronunciation might be surprising to some listeners and paradoxically hinder comprehension, as the form [ˈʃɛmbɛrlɛjn] is deeply rooted in common usage. Neither pronunciation should be strictly rejected, as both have their justifications and their disadvantages. It also depends on the context and the speaker’s preference which form to choose. For instance, if it is in a documentary about the person bearing the name, it would be appropriate to briefly address and justify the pronunciation choice.

Efforts to respect the appropriate identity of individual names can be complicated when it is not entirely clear which language the original pronunciation should be derived from. For example, determining the correct pronunciation of the Pope Francis’s surname is complicated, when it is not entirely clear which language the original pronunciation should be derived from:

Query: How should Pope Francis’s name *Jorge Mario Bergoglio* be pronounced in Czech?

Answer: The first names *Jorge* and *Mario* are recommended to be pronounced based on Spanish as [ˈxorxe] and [ˈmarijo]. Determining the correct pronunciation of the surname *Bergoglio* is complicated by the fact that while the Pope is from Argentina, so Spanish should again be the reference, he has Italian ancestry, and the Italian pronunciation is supported by the Vatican environment. Therefore, possible forms include [ˈbergoglijo], [ˈbergoljo], [ˈbergolijo]. Given that the Pope’s surname has hardly appeared in usage since he took the name *Francis*, the differences between the variants are minor and likely won’t affect comprehension, so we recommend being tolerant of all the mentioned forms in this somewhat exceptional case.

An ideal solution for personal names is to find out how they are or were pronounced by their bearers. Today, it is possible to encounter a phenomenon where an established pronunciation begins to waver due to English influence, where the name is pronounced differently:

Query: How is the surname of *Albert Einstein* correctly pronounced in Czech?

Answer: The pronunciation guide recommends [ˈʔajnštajn], which is also consistent with common usage. The variant [ˈʔajnstajn], if it appears in Czech, may be influenced by the sound of the name in English. Since the famous bearer



of the name *Einstein* was from Germany, lived in Europe, and only emigrated to America later in life, the pronunciation based on German has become established in Czech, not the English one.

3. Graphic Changes in Names

The next part will deal with the graphic aspect of proper names, that is, how they are written. This topic is highly frequent and varied in Czech Language Consulting Centre, therefore it will form the core of this paper.

3.1. Transcription and Transliteration

It is significant that the Language Consulting Centre receives many inquiries regarding the transcription and transliteration of names from languages that do not use the Latin alphabet (currently, due to the geopolitical situation, there is a high demand for transcription from languages using Cyrillic); the issue of transliteration of proper names into the Latin alphabet has been addressed, for example, by CONNOLY (2009) or COHEN and ELHADAD (2019). Although this change in a proper name appears fundamental at first glance, its necessity is undeniable. In addition to languages using Cyrillic, there are also requests for assistance with the transcription of names from languages such as Arabic, Hindi, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Japanese, which requires consultation with relevant experts. It sometimes becomes apparent that, according to general transcription rules and in line with the original language, the proper name should be adapted to the Latin alphabet differently from what is already established (for example, the placement of vowel quantity, the most famous example being the name of the mountain range *Himalayas*, which often appears in Czech as *Himaláj*, not respecting the fact that in Sanskrit, it is a compound of the words *hima* meaning ‘snow’ and *ālaya* meaning ‘abode’). In such cases, it is very difficult to decide whether to prioritize preserving the name’s identity from the perspective of the original language, which language experts usually insist on, or to respect the already well-established usage among Czech speakers.

Another challenge in the transcription of proper names that the Language Consulting Centre encounters is the ambiguity of which language to base the transcription on. A pertinent and current example is names written in Cyrillic that appear the same in both Ukrainian and Russian, but whose transcription into Czech differs. In 2018, for example, we answered the following question:

Query: How should the name of the director and civic activist *Sencov* be transcribed into Czech: should it be *Oleh* or *Oleg*?

Answer: There is no simple answer to this question. According to our information, he is a Ukrainian director of Russian nationality. It depends on which language we base the transcription of the name written in Cyrillic as



Олег. If it's Ukrainian, then the proper form is *Oleh*, if Russian, then *Oleg*. It is thus extremely difficult to decide which language identity the name should bear in Czech, as this issue is very sensitive for some language users.

Another group of inquiries relates to the influence of English on the transcription of proper names that, of course, do not originate from the Anglophone world. However, Czech has its own transcription rules, which are often quite different from English. The difference between English and Czech transcription is illustrated by the following examples:

Query: How should the name of the Indian mathematician be transcribed into Czech? In English, this name is transcribed as *Shakuntala Devi*. Can I use this form?

Answer: The use of the English transcription cannot be recommended in these cases, the correct form for Czech is *Šakuntala Déví*.

Query: Is the correct Czech name for the Russian city *Чита* or *Chita*?

Answer: The name of this city in Czech is *Číta*; the form *Chita* is used in English.

There are also quite common cases concerning the names and surnames of foreigners (usually Ukrainians or Russians) who have lived in the Czech Republic for a long time. They often have their names in official documents (typically passports) transcribed into the Latin alphabet. These transcriptions unsurprisingly do not follow Czech rules, mostly being based on English rules, though not always and not consistently. How the name should be used depends primarily on the type of communication situation: If someone has a form corresponding to English transcription in their documents, it must be respected, but only in official documents. In other types of texts, such as newspaper articles, we recommend adhering to Czech rules. However, no Czech law regulates this common practice.

When these people acquire Czech citizenship, their names in official documents are automatically changed according to Czech rules for transcribing from Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet. On one hand, this is an understandable step related to the integration of foreigners into the Czech environment; on the other hand, some of them resent it, as they see it as a disruption of the identity of their name's Latin form, to which they have often been accustomed for many years, and the change causes significant practical difficulties.

3.2. Special Graphemes

The issue of transcription is loosely related to cases where names, though written in the Latin alphabet, contain special graphemes not used in Czech. In the past, these characters were usually replaced with the closest letters available in Czech due to the limited capabilities of text editors and typewriters.



Nowadays, it is recommended to preserve the original form of the name as much as possible (cf. PRAVDOVÁ–SVOBODOVÁ et al. 2024: 118–119):

Query: Should the place name *Bijakovići* be written in its original form with the *ć* in a Czech translation from Croatian, or as *Bijakoviči*?

Answer: We recommend preserving the original form of the name in Czech text if possible. Most text processors and other programs allow for the entry of letters not present in the Czech alphabet. If this is not possible, letters with the closest phonetic value should be used (e.g., *Buñuel* – *Buñuel*) or the corresponding letters without diacritics (e.g., *François* – *Francois*, *Ernö* – *Erno*). For the name *Bijakovići*, using *ć* should not be problematic.

Other similar questions have been asked about the Croatian name *Milušić*, the Romanian name *Ceaușescu*, or the Polish place name *Częstochowa*.

3.3. Orthographic Adaptation to Czech

Continuing on the graphic level of the language, let us move to the issue of orthographic adaptation of names. There is, for example, considerable confusion regarding the spelling of various types of ancient names.

The very common issue involves the marking of vowel length. In Czech, we distinguish between short and long vowels with significant distinctive value (apart from diphthongs). Given the relatively widespread knowledge of classical languages among writers and readers of texts featuring originally Latin and Greek names, it was previously unnecessary to explicitly mark vowel length in writing. However, this gradually changed from the mid-20th century onwards. Consequently, the pronunciation of these names became unstable, and some established vowel lengths began to appear in writing. The authors of the 1993 orthographic rules (cf. *Pravidla českého pravopisu* 2008: 380) addressed this by choosing to mark vowel length in writing only for so-called fully established names (this definition is admittedly quite vague), which presents certain difficulties (cf. HŮRKOVÁ 2005: 8–9), as illustrated by the following example:

Query: What is the correct form of the name of the Greek god of war in Czech? *Ares* or *Áres*?

Answer: The handbook Czech Orthography Rules recommends the form *Ares*, as the authors decided not to mark the original vowel length in writing except for fully established names. However, in the usage, several variants can currently be found. From a linguistic perspective, the form *Arés* cannot be excluded, as it reflects the adaptation of the name based on correct pronunciation, which is [ˈʔare:s]. On the contrary, the variant *Áres* (as well as *Árés*, which also appears) seems more problematic to us because it is based on a mistaken understanding of the original vowel lengths. In any case, we also recommend considering the overall nature of the text and its intended audience.



There is a tendency of some writers to mark vowel length in ancient names contrary to codification but in line with their pronunciation (names like *Apollon/Apollón, Poseidon/Poseidón*, etc.). It reflects the natural need of Czech users to adapt not only common nouns but also proper names of foreign origin into the Czech linguistic system as accurately as possible. From an external perspective, this raises an almost “philosophical” issue: if I am interested in preserving the identity of the proper name in its sound form, it is advantageous to adjust its graphic representation to correspond to the usual letter-sound relationships in Czech. If I insist on preserving the graphic identity, I expose the name to the risk of its sound form diverging from the original more than it is necessary. However, a completely different approach must be taken towards foreign-origin names of contemporary bearers. Although they exist in multiple graphic forms (and it is thus possible to freely choose one of them when entering it into official documents), in official communication, the chosen variant must be respected, and the name must not be altered, which could lead to a loss of the individual’s proper identity.

The following example represents curiosities connected with the various factors that can influence the use of specific forms of a particular name:

Query: How should the nickname of Elisabeth of Bavaria be correctly written in Czech: *Sisi* or *Sissi*?

Answer: Given that it is not the official form of a personal name, neither variant can be excluded, and it is no surprise that usage varies (in both Czech and German). In the current Czech context, *Sissi* predominates. Internet sources suggest that the original spelling in German (used by the name bearer herself and her family) was *Sisi*, but thanks especially to the well-known film trilogy about the Empress Elisabeth of Bavaria (*Sissi; Sissi, the Young Empress; Sissi, the Fateful Years of an Empress*), the spelling *Sissi* became widespread.

Another set of questions related to the graphic adaptation of names in Czech is closely linked to the issue of using exonyms (cf. ŠTĚPÁNOVÁ 2023). To illustrate this, let us mention two examples of seemingly similar names that, however, are not adapted the same way in Czech:

Query: Can the name of the U.S. state *California* be written in Czech as *Kalifornie* with a *k* at the beginning?

Answer: Yes, in line with current geographic standardization and language guides, we recommend writing this name as *Kalifornie*. The non-Czechified name *California* appears mostly in proper names, such as in the song *Hotel California* or the car *Ferrari California*.

Query: What is the correct spelling of the U.S. state *Colorado* in Czech: *Colorado* or *Kolorado*? The text here at the ministry also includes the name *Kalifornie*, so is it possible to write *Colorado* analogously as *Kolorado*?



Answer: In line with current geographic standardization and language guides, we recommend not Czechifying this name and writing *Colorado* (the Czechified name *Kolorado*, according to the Index of Czech Exonyms, refers exclusively to the American river, not the state). Furthermore, in usage, the form *Colorado* overwhelmingly prevails. Analogous procedures cannot be universally applied to the spelling of foreign proper names, especially in official texts, where it is recommended to adhere to geographical standardization guides, which are binding for certain institutions (e.g., some ministries).

In the above examples, we see names of the U.S. states starting with the letter *C*, pronounced as [k], where one underwent complete orthographic adaptation (not only orthographic: $c > k$, but also morphological: $a > e$), while the other retained its original graphic identity (though not phonetic, at least because *Colorado* is pronounced in Czech with a final vowel [o], not with a diphthong as in English).

Different degrees of Czech adaptation can be observed in exonyms at the graphic level, where they undergo minor or significant changes compared to the endonyms (e.g., the Czech *Lucern* versus the German *Luzern* or the French *Lucerne*; the Czech *Bretaň* versus the French *Bretagne*). Such transformations, when fully established in the language, facilitate the use of the name in both writing and pronunciation, as well as in declension, and are generally effective for communication.

4. Morphological Adaptation of Names

Given that Czech is an inflectional language with seven distinct cases (in both singular and plural), a natural part of adapting foreign proper names into Czech is assigning them to specific declension types, based on the ending of the name in its pronounced form (if no type fits, the name remains indeclinable). To someone unfamiliar with the structural properties of Czech, it might be surprising how a name can appear in Czech texts (e.g., the instrumental singular of the name *Barack Obama* is *Barackem Obamou*). However, this is not a capricious intervention disrupting the name's identity, but a necessary means of integrating it into the sentence structure. In the Language Consulting Centre, used predominantly by Czech native speakers, we frequently encounter uncertainty about which declension type to assign a borrowed proper name. This is closely related to the fact that users do not always have clear information about the phonetic form of a given name, often only knowing its graphic form, which may not be sufficient. Although the Language Consulting Centre constantly receives a large number of questions concerning the morphology of proper names (cf. ŠTĚPÁNOVÁ 2022), this issue will not be discussed here in detail, as it involves specialized issues relevant mainly to Czech studies, which would significantly diverge from the scope of this contribution.



5. Adapting Names to the Czech Naming System

The last topic to be discussed in this paper is adapting names to the Czech naming system. In the Language Consulting Centre, we also address questions related to foreign personal names that have structures different from what is typical for Czech personal names. This includes handling surnames that include a preposition (e.g., *von*, *van*, *Van*):

Query: I need to write an article about the South African sprinter named *Wayde van Niekerk*. If I use only his surname, should it be *van Niekerk* or just *Niekerk*?

Answer: We recommend using the full surname *van Niekerk*, as the preposition *van* is part of the surname. For comparison, with the well-known name *van Gogh*, occurrences like *van Goghův obraz* ('van Gogh's painting') are highly prevalent over *Goghův obraz* ('Gogh's painting'); the opposite is true only for the surname *van Beethoven*.

Another category of questions concerns the order of names. It is well known that, for example, in Hungarian, the given name usually follows the surname, but when adapting Hungarian personal names into Czech, the order is changed (e.g., *Németh László* to *László Németh*).

Given that there is also a sizable Vietnamese minority in the Czech Republic, we have encountered questions about naming systems that are quite different from those in Czech and European languages, particularly regarding the categorization of names as given names and surnames for specific individuals. For privacy reasons, a specific example found in the inquiry will not be provided here, but generally, for instance, the Vietnamese name *Nguyen Van Gian* will be officially recorded in Czech public documents in the order *Van Gian* (given name) *Nguyen* (surname). However, in media texts, the name is usually respected as a whole and presented in its original order, i.e., *Nguyen Van Gian*.

The final adaptation change that is to be addressed briefly is the so-called feminization (or formation or gender inflection) of foreign female surnames. This refers to deriving female forms from male surnames, most often with the suffix *-ová*, e.g., from the surname *Obama* to the female form *Obamová*. Feminization allows for the clear identification of the person as a woman, which is significant for Czech, a language that differentiates gender in names. It also enables the incorporation of surnames into the Czech declension system, which is advantageous for forming coherent texts. However, feminization of surnames is not mandatory in everyday or official communication by law, regulation, or decree.

This topic is very sensitive and has become notably relevant recently, during the Summer Olympics in Paris in 2024. Feminization of female surnames has been practiced in Czech for centuries, but it seems that in recent decades, there



is a growing tendency to use women's surnames in their non-feminized form. There are various opinions in Czech society regarding feminization, ranging from staunch opponents of any "change" in surnames to proponents of this practice. The former usually argue that it is necessary to preserve the name's identity exactly as it appears in the woman's documents (not recognizing that integrating the name into Czech leads to at least phonetic changes and that, for example, adding declensional endings to male surnames also potentially "disturbs" the identity of the individual). The advisory database contains questions such as: *Why are foreign names distorted by feminization? Is there any law about it?; I am bothered that female athletes' names are feminized. After all, those are not their names, they are named differently; I am bothered that names of foreign female nationals are feminized. After all, those women are not named that way, they do not have -ová in their surname.* Similar negative opinions are sometimes encountered even among foreign women who are surprised by the feminized form of their surname in Czech text.

6. Translation of Names

A specific case of adapting proper names into Czech is their translation (a wide range of studies has been dedicated to the issue of translating names in different languages; see, for example, VERMES 2005). In artistic literature, there is no uniform strategy for translating names. As it can be seen from the following example concerning the name of the character *Captain Hook*, which appears in a children's poem, this fictional character is usually found in Czech literature as *kapitán Hook*, but the translation *kapitán Hák* also appears:

Query: How should the name of the character *Captain Hook*, which appears in a children's poem, be handled in Czech? Should it be Czechified or translated?

Answer: It depends entirely on the translator's decision, as there are no universally applicable rules, and it depends on many factors. Specifically, this fictional character is usually found in Czech literature as *kapitán Hook*, but the translation *kapitán Hák* also appears. We do not recommend graphic Czechification such as *kapitán Hůk/Húk*.

Similarly, in current Czech usage, translated versus original names of some institutions are competing. In the Language Consulting Centre, we frequently encounter questions about whether the names of foreign universities should be translated (e.g., *University of Georgia* versus *Georgijská univerzita*), and it is typical that many of these names have multiple commonly used translation options (e.g., *University of Cambridge*: *Univerzita v Cambridgi*, *Univerzita v Cambridge*, or *Univerzita Cambridge*):



Query: What is the correct Czech translation of the English name *University of Cambridge*: *Univerzita Cambridge*, *Univerzita v Cambridge*, or something else?

Answer: There are several commonly used options for this name in Czech: *Univerzita v Cambridgi*, as well as *Univerzita v Cambridge* (the geographical name *Cambridge* can be either feminine or neuter in Czech, in which case it is indeclinable), or *Cambridgeská univerzita*. The least commonly used variant is *Univerzita Cambridge*, but even this cannot be considered unacceptable.

7. Conclusion

This paper has focused primarily on the changes to proper names when adapted into Czech. As example material, queries from the Language Consulting Centre were used. From the perspective of linguistic levels, we focused most on changes in the graphical form of foreign names. These are immediately noticeable, but not every foreign name must undergo spelling adjustments upon its “arrival” in Czech. On the other hand, phonetic adaptation changes are less noticeable (many Czech users may not even be aware that they occur). Unlike spelling, which can remain identical to the original language, the vast majority of names undergo some form of phonetic adaptation in Czech. A deliberately provocative question about whether foreign names can be used in Czech without any adaptation would likely be answered negatively by phoneticians. Similarly, morphological adaptation of names can be seen in this context, as most names adapt to the Czech declension system, accepting appropriate Czech endings and sometimes undergoing phonological changes in this process. This is entirely natural for native speakers but may at least surprise those unfamiliar with the structure of the Czech language when names they know are handled in this way. The seeming loss of a name’s identity is also a common argument against the feminization of foreign surnames.

When it comes to the attitudes of individual language users toward the adaptation of proper names into Czech, we encounter a wide range of opinions, including extreme views on both ends of the spectrum. Some speakers advocate for maximal Czechification, often citing arguments about protecting the language, preserving its “purity”, and similar concerns. Others, conversely, insist on using proper names exactly as they appear in the source language to supposedly preserve their identity, viewing proper names as, in a sense, “untouchable”. However, these individuals are usually unable to fully adhere to this principle, particularly when it comes to the phonetic aspect of the language. These radical stances are most commonly encountered in queries (or, at times, complaints) about the feminization of women’s surnames and the use of exonyms (see ŠTĚPÁNOVÁ 2023 for a more detailed discussion). Most inquirers, however, approach the issue with the understanding that an ideal



outcome does not always exist and strive, in cooperation with linguists, to find an approach that works as effectively as possible in communication.

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Abstract

The paper focuses on different aspects of adaptation of proper names of foreign origin into Czech. From the point of view of the individual language levels, changes can be observed on phonetic level, graphical level (e.g. transcription or transliteration from different graphical systems) or morphological level (declension of a majority of names for the sake of their incorporation in the sentence structure). Another adaptation strategy is represented by name “translation” or accommodating a name to the Czech naming system (e.g. feminization of foreign surnames or assigning categories “given name” and “surname”, although the name forms belong to different naming categories in the language of departure). The data of the inquiries addressed to the Czech Language Consulting Centre may show what attitudes are adopted by the Czech language speakers (from enforcing a maximum of Czechified forms on one hand to refusing any adaption at all because of preservation of the name holder’s identity on the other hand). The paper also tries to answer a provocative question: is it possible to use foreign proper names in Czech without any adaptation?

Keywords: adaptation, proper names, foreign origin, Czech, Language Consulting Centre

