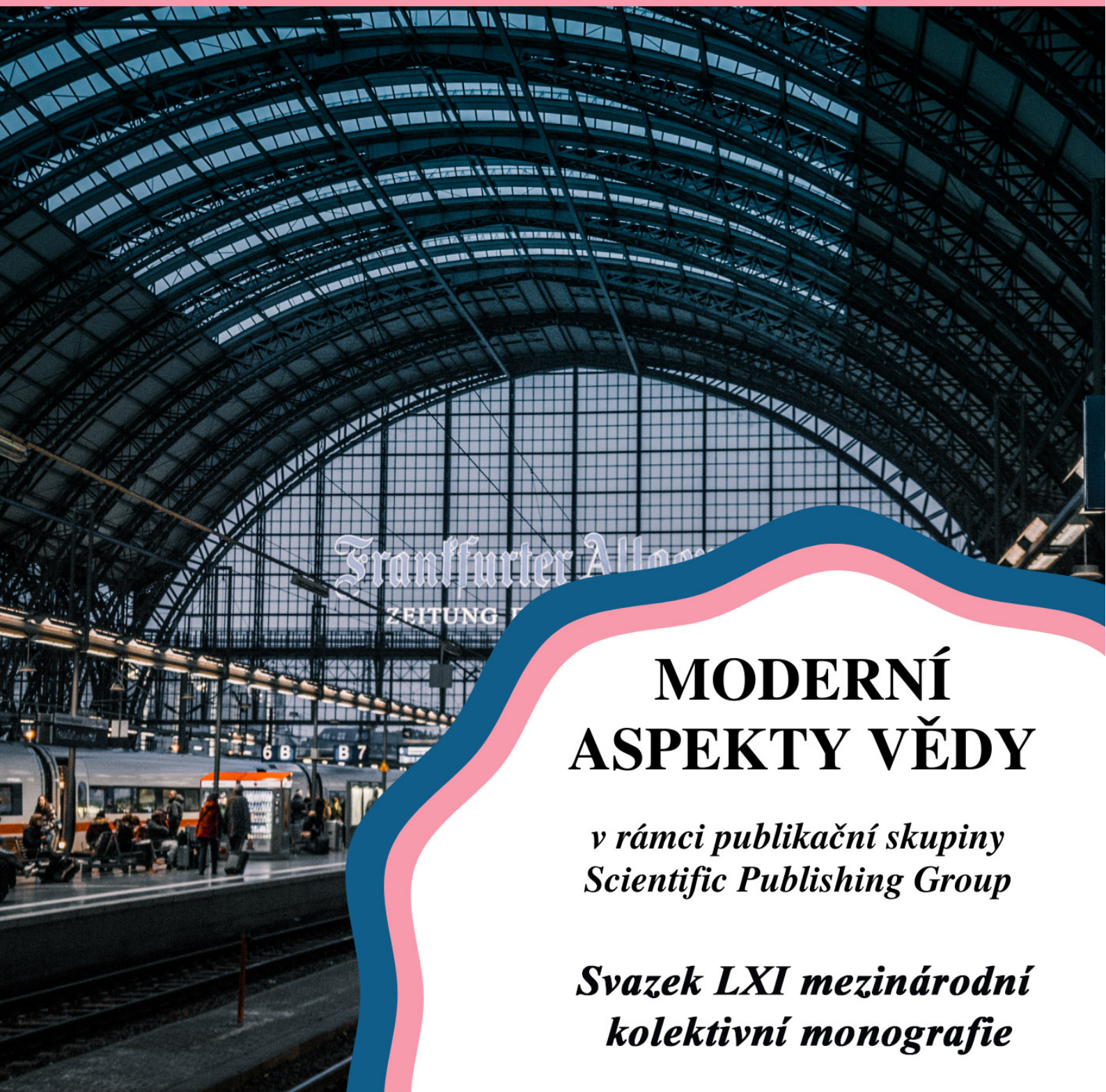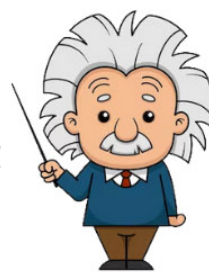# MODERNÍ ASPEKTY VĚDY

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ODDÍL 3.
PEDAGOGIKA, VÝCHOVA, FILOZOFIE, FILOLOGIE

§3.1 HISTORICAL MULTILINGUALISM IN SLOVAKIA: BETWEEN COEXISTENCE AND CONTENTION (**Gladushyna R.M.,** Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University)

Introduction. Multilingualism has long been a defining, though often debated, feature of the Slovak lands. Located at the crossroads of Central Europe, present-day Slovakia has historically served as a contact zone between empires, ethnic groups, and languages. Each of these has left its mark on the region's sociolinguistic landscape, from the multilingualism of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the nation-building language policies of the 20th century. Additionally, the history of language use in Slovakia is characterized by cultural integration and sociopolitical tension.

This chapter examines the historical development of multilingualism in Slovakia, with a focus on how linguistic repertoires have evolved in response to shifting political borders, state ideologies, and social hierarchies. Drawing on key sociolinguistic concepts including language contact, diglossia, language ideology, and linguistic commodification, the study examines how languages have operated not only as means of communication but also as markers of identity, expressions of power, and tools of resistance.

Particular attention is given to the interaction between Slovak and other historically present languages such as Hungarian, German, Latin, Ruthenian, Romani, Yiddish, and Czech. These interactions have fluctuated between mutual

accommodation and open contention, depending on broader sociopolitical conditions. The chapter also aims to examine the impact of language policies, educational systems, and census practices in shaping linguistic hierarchies and language visibility in historical and modern contexts.

Thus, the study seeks to move beyond a static or romanticized notion of multilingualism as inherently harmonious. Instead, research interrogates the complex dynamics through which languages have coexisted, sometimes peacefully, often unequally, and how these dynamics continue to inform language ideologies and practices in present-day Slovakia.

The Main Body. The study of historical multilingualism in Central and Eastern Europe has gained renewed attention in recent decades, as scholars have moved beyond nationalist narratives to examine the linguistic complexity and hybridity that characterized the region before the 20th-century rise of nation-states. In the Slovak context, this shift reflects a broader trend in sociolinguistics and linguistic historiography, emphasizing language contact, sociopolitical hierarchies, and the role of language ideologies in shaping multilingual practices.

Foundational work on language contact [1], [2] and diglossia [3], [4] provides critical theoretical grounding for understanding multilingual arrangements in historical Slovakia, particularly within the context of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where Latin, German, Hungarian, and Slovak coexisted in complex administrative and educational hierarchies. More recent sociolinguistic scholarship [5], [6] has extended these frameworks to critically examine the ideological dimensions of language use, such as how power and identity are negotiated through linguistic choice and visibility.

Regionally, the works [7], [8] offer valuable insights into the politicization of language in multilingual Central European contexts, including the shifting meanings of bilingualism and the symbolic value attached to different languages.

Studies specifically focusing on Slovakia remain relatively limited in the international discourse, although Slovak and Czech scholars have made significant contributions to documenting the linguistic histories of minority communities [9], [10]. These works have examined the legacy of Magyarization, the post-World War II expulsions and resettlements, and the state's evolving approach to language rights, particularly for Hungarian, Ruthenian, Romani, and German-speaking populations.

The intersection of historical linguistics and sociolinguistics is also key. Works by [11], [12] explore the diachronic development of Slovak in relation to other Slavic and non-Slavic languages. Studies of code-switching and language shift [13], [14] provide tools to analyze the dynamics of bilingual and multilingual speakers across generations.

Importantly, recent interdisciplinary approaches, including linguistic anthropology, historical sociolinguistics [15], and language policy studies [16], offer frameworks for integrating textual, oral, and policy data into a more holistic understanding of how multilingualism has been regulated, practiced, and remembered. These approaches are particularly useful in addressing the tension between everyday multilingual practices and the nationalist monolingual ideologies that came to dominate in the 20th century.

By placing Slovakia within these broader theoretical and regional frameworks, this chapter contributes to the growing body of research that views multilingualism not as an anomaly or a transitional phase, but as a historically rooted and ideologically contested norm in Central Europe.

This chapter aims to examine the historical development of multilingualism in the Slovak lands from a sociolinguistic and linguistic perspective, with particular attention to how language contact, state policy, and sociopolitical shifts have shaped patterns of linguistic coexistence and conflict. By analyzing both macro-level language ideologies and micro-level language practices, the chapter

uncovers the complex and often contested nature of multilingualism in Slovakia across historical periods.

The main objectives of this study are:

1.   To trace the historical trajectories of major languages spoken in Slovakia

2.   To examine language contact phenomena and outcomes

3.   To highlight the linguistic experiences of minority groups

This chapter employs a **desk-based research methodology** grounded in sociolinguistic and historical-linguistic approaches. As the focus is on the historical development of multilingualism in the Slovak lands, the study relies on secondary sources, including published academic literature, historical records, language policy documents, census data, and relevant archival materials.

The research is interdisciplinary in nature, combining perspectives from:

- **Historical sociolinguistics** – to examine how language use and language ideologies have evolved in relation to social and political change.

- **Contact linguistics** – to understand the outcomes of sustained language contact, such as code-switching, borrowing, and language shift.

- **Language policy and planning studies** – to assess how state policies influenced language hierarchies and linguistic behavior.

- **Critical sociolinguistics** – to question the role of power, identity, and ideology in shaping multilingual practices.

 Discussion. The historical trajectory of multilingualism in Slovakia reveals not only a deeply layered linguistic landscape but also a complex interplay between **language, power, and identity**. Far from being a neutral or harmonious coexistence of languages, multilingualism in the Slovak lands has often been shaped by broader political agendas, nationalist ideologies, and institutional mechanisms that have either **promoted**, **suppressed**, or **exploited** different languages.

1. Multilingualism as Historical Norm, Not Exception. One of the clearest patterns to emerge from the analysis is that multilingualism was the initial state in the Slovak territories until the consolidation of the modern nation-state in the 19th and 20th centuries. Latin, German, Hungarian, Slovak, Ruthenian, and Yiddish functioned in distinct but overlapping domains: administration, religion, education, and everyday life. This aligns with the domain theory of multilingualism [4]. According to [4], languages coexist in specialized functions, often without displacing each other entirely. Language behavior indicates socio-cultural patterning.

Contemporary interpretations are challenged by the dynamic and context-dependent use of these languages by individuals and communities. Multilingual repertoires were practical and identity-based, and language choice did not necessarily reflect ethnic origin. This key point is often overlooked in nationalist historiographies. As [7] and [17] have argued, language choices are always socially embedded, and historical multilingualism in Slovakia functioned within such negotiated social contexts.

2. Language Policy and the Construction of Linguistic Hierarchies. From the mid-19th century onward, state institutions more desired to regulate and standardize language use, particularly under the dual pressures of Magyarization (in the late Austro-Hungarian period) and later Slovakization (in Czechoslovakia and post-World War II socialist regimes). These policies reflect what [5] labels the "politics of scale," where state power attempts to impose a singular linguistic order over complex, heterogeneous practices.

The promotion of Hungarian in schools and administration during the dual monarchy downgraded Slovakia to a subordinate status. Later, Slovakia itself was elevated under Czechoslovakia, while German and Hungarian languages were relegated, particularly after World War II. Census categories, educational policies,

and language laws became tools of linguistic nation-building [18], [19], serving to fix identities and enforce monolingual ideologies.

The censuses of 1910, 1930, and 1950 exemplify this trend, offering an illusion of linguistic clarity while suppressing multilingual identities and forcing individuals to align with a single "mother tongue." This process supports Bourdieu's (1991) notion of the "linguistic marketplace," in which certain languages gain legitimacy while others are devalued.

3. Minority Languages and the Logic of Marginalization. While Slovak gained dominance as the national language, minority languages were subject to varying degrees of marginalization. That dynamic intensified during and after the nationalist and socialist periods. The Hungarian language retained a regional stronghold in southern Slovakia, though it was challenged by policies promoting linguistic integration, particularly in education and media access. German, once prestigious, was delegitimized and erased after the post-war expulsions.

Ruthenian/Rusyn communities experienced alternating policies of recognition and suppression, often shaped by shifting discourses around Pan-Slavism, Ukrainization, and minority rights. Meanwhile, Romani remained structurally excluded, not recognized as a legitimate language in official policy or public discourse. The sociolinguistic invisibility of Romani speaks to deeper issues of racialization and linguistic marginality [20].

Jewish linguistic heritage, primarily Yiddish and Hebrew, was nearly destroyed by the Holocaust and subsequent communist secularization. These languages were historically vital to Slovakia's urban and rural communities but now survive largely in archival materials and memorial culture, rather than in living linguistic practice.

4. Language Shift, Erosion, and Ideological Erasure. The long-term effects of language policies and assimilation have led to language shift across

many communities. Ruthenian speakers shifted toward Slovak; Romani speakers face the pressure of linguistic assimilation in education and employment. Younger generations within Hungarian communities are gradually becoming Slovak-dominant. This reflects the theory of markedness [24] in language choice: minority languages become "unmarked" only in intimate or restricted domains, while the dominant language controls access to mobility and legitimacy.

However, these shifts are not merely linguistic. They are ideological erasures [21] that involve the erasure of multilingual histories, replaced by narratives that promote national purity and uniformity. In the Slovak national discourse, multilingualism is often remembered and selectively celebrated as cultural heritage in folklore. Yet it is denied in contemporary policy frameworks that privilege a monolingual state.

5. Continuities and Discontinuities in the Present. Today, Slovakia officially recognizes several minority languages under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. However, tensions remain concerning bilingual signage, minority education, and the effective implementation of linguistic rights. The historical roots of these tensions lie in earlier language regimes that associate multilingualism with disloyalty, fragmentation, or backwardness.

At the same time, new forms of symbolic multilingualism are emerging, especially in border towns, tourism, and EU-facing communication, where minority languages are commodified for economic or soft power purposes [22]. This development raises important questions about which forms of multilingualism are considered valuable, and for whom.

Conclusion. This chapter has explored the sociolinguistic history of Slovakia through the lens of multilingualism, revealing it as a deeply entrenched, yet often contested, feature of the region's linguistic landscape. Far from being a marginal or exceptional phenomenon, multilingualism in the Slovak lands has

historically constituted a normative sociolinguistic condition, shaped by the interaction of diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities across centuries.

Through a diachronic analysis grounded in sociolinguistic theory, the chapter has demonstrated that language contact, ideological constructs, and state interventions have consistently influenced the status and function of languages in Slovakia. The historical coexistence of Latin, German, Hungarian, Slovak, Ruthenian, and Yiddish under imperial rule contrasts sharply with the monolingual pressures of nation-state and socialist policies. The Slovak case demonstrates that multilingualism is not merely a linguistic condition, but also a site of political struggle.

The persistence of linguistic hierarchies, shaped by changing regimes and ideologies, has elevated certain languages while marginalizing or erasing others. The role of language policy, education, and census practices in constructing and institutionalizing monolingual national identities at the expense of multilingual lived experience. The erosion of minority languages, whether through language shift, suppression, or lack of institutional support, and the symbolic uses of multilingualism in contemporary political and economic discourse.

Importantly, this history challenges dominant narratives that frame monolingualism as natural or desirable. Instead, it affirms the value of a critical sociolinguistic approach that views multilingualism as both a social resource and a site of power negotiation. As Gal (2016) and Blommaert (2010) remind us language is never neutral: it is always implicated in broader structures of inequality, legitimacy, and identity formation.

Looking forward, the Slovak case has several implications:

- For **linguistic research**, it underscores the need for further investigation into how historical multilingual practices inform contemporary language ideologies, particularly in post-socialist and post-imperial contexts.

- For **language policy**, it suggests a reconsideration of how multilingualism is accommodated not only symbolically (e.g., in signage or festivals) but also substantively in education, media, and public life.

- For **minority language communities**, it highlights the importance of reclaiming historical narratives that recognize their linguistic presence as integral—not peripheral—to the Slovak story.

Ultimately, by situating historical multilingualism within broader sociolinguistic debates, this chapter contributes to an evolving understanding of Central Europe not as a space of ethnic-linguistic homogeneity, but as a dynamic, contested, and plural linguistic landscape—one shaped by centuries of coexistence, contention, and continuous negotiation.

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