Ethnolinguistics and literature:
the meaning of svědomí ‘conscience’
in the writings of Václav Havel

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Co všechno dnešnímu světu hrozí, víme velmi dobře, vůle k odvrácení těchto hrozb je však pramálo. Číli: nestačí říkat pravdu, je třeba, aby se vzpamatovalo lidské svědomí.

We know quite well what threatens our world today, but there is precious little will to deter those threats. Or rather: it’s not enough to speak the truth, it is necessary to awaken our human conscience.

— Václav Havel, November 1995

Introduction

Of the many paradoxes associated with Václav Havel is one that renders his writing an ideal candidate for comparative ethnolinguistic analysis: Havel is a Czech writer who has achieved world renown primarily through translations of his texts into English. The implications of this paradox for reading Havel have yet to be acknowledged in existing scholarship on Havel. Indeed, many commentators on Havel in the English-speaking world are themselves not proficient in Czech and have operated under the assumption that the translated versions of his texts are canonical. This unconscious assumption fails to raise a question that follows logically from Havel’s paradox: how do the English translations differ from the original texts in Czech and how might these differences influence our reading and interpretation of them? Answering this question seems like a proper task for a kind of literary criticism that is grounded in ethnolinguistic analysis.

The question has particular relevance with regard to key concepts or key words in the texts – words that represent core vocabulary in Havel’s thinking. While Wierzbicka

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1 This citation is taken from an interview in the magazine Kavárna. Havel’s speeches and other texts as president are available online, indexed by year, at http://old.hrad.cz/president/Havel/speeches/index.html. Translations from Czech to English are mine unless otherwise cited.
(1997) uses the term “key word” in application to a language or culture,² it would also seem productive to apply the same strategy to literature: that is, to search for and analyze words that occupy a key position in a work – or even the entire oeuvre – of a given author because they exhibit a special organizational and semantic potential for that work or for that particular author’s whole system of thought. Given Havel’s paradox, a focus on Havelian key words begs the question of the extent to which the meanings of their English translations are, from an ethnolinguistic perspective, indeed equivalent to the meanings of the Czech originals.

To be clear, I do not intend to suggest that this is a question of the translations themselves, and I am certainly not casting doubt on the skills of Paul Wilson, Havel’s main English translator, whose work is exemplary. Indeed, as we will see, the Havelian key word under consideration here – Czech svědomí – has an absolutely stable translation equivalent into English – conscience – that the translator is necessarily obliged to use. Rather, the nature of the question is ethnolinguistic in Bartmiński’s sense of the term in that ethnolinguistics is a discipline that:

- deals with manifestations of culture in language… It attempts to discover the traces of culture in the very fabric of language, in word meanings, phraseology, word formation, syntax and text structure. It strives to reconstruct the worldview entrenched in language as it is projected by the experiencing and speaking subject. (Bartmiński 2009: 10)

In this regard, ethnolinguistics has a potentially significant role to play in literary analysis, not only for reading and interpreting literary texts in the context of one culture but perhaps especially for comparing the interpretation of literary works in the original with their translations.³

An application of ethnolinguistic analysis to literature ought to respect the texts as literature and strive to engage with the literary-critical discussion surrounding both the texts and their author. This is quite a different approach from using works of literature as

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² Vaňková (forthcoming) contains a useful discussion of and commentary on Wierzbicka’s understanding of the term.
³ Bartmiński 2009 contains a discussion of comparative ethnolinguistics in chapter 17 where a proposal is made to initiate investigation of semantic discrepancies in terms for values that have sociopolitical or ethical import. Examples given include democracy, human rights, justice, sovereignty, freedom, homeland (2009: 220).
resources in ethnolinguistic analysis proper, a valuable methodology in its own right. In the sense, however, that I am advocating it here, the application of ethnolinguistic analysis to literature may be considered a hybrid discipline in which a literary figure is investigated with help from an ethnolinguistic ground (see Gross 1997, Vaňková 2005, and Danaher 2007). Ethnolinguistics is, then, a methodological tool that can contribute to the ongoing literary-critical dialogue.

The result of such an investigation will ideally represent a contribution to both ethnolinguistics proper as well as literary criticism. Ethnolinguistic grounding can open up our reading of a text by developing an understanding of the meaning and semantic potential of key words in it, which has implications for criticism at the textual level (the aesthetic organization of the text) as well as at the personal level (the reader’s response to it).  

Put another way: if defamiliarization is one of the main functions of literature, then it is helpful to know the starting point of that process or the “familiar” meaning that the work of literature seeks to reshape and reframe; such an awareness helps us arrive at an appreciation of the literariness of the author’s project and allows us to better visualize our personal relationship to that project. The literary-critical discussion may benefit from an ethnolinguistic approach because familiarity – which comes into being through the interplay of language and culture – is the very thing that ethnolinguistics seeks to uncover and describe. More specifically and in the context of the present contribution, I will show that the status of svědomí as a key word in Václav Havel’s writing and thinking is essentially a response to the ethnolinguistic claim that cultural concepts have cognitive reality (Bartmiński 2009: 13).

Key words in Havel’s writings and thinking are not difficult to identify, and they tend to be key in the broader sense of extending across a range of texts and time periods. They are words that Havel continually returns to because they act as metaphysical touchstones in his thinking. Svědomí, especially in its relationship to a kind of responsibility (odpovědnost) that lies at the core of human identity, is one of those words. It is a key word in Havel’s pre-1989 so-called “dissident” essays and forms the

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5 See Danaher 2010 for an exploration of three such words.
6 Danaher 2010 (253ff) sketches an approach, amplified here, to svědomí as a Havelian key word.
The literary figure: svědomí ‘conscience’ as a Havelian key word

In his 1984 essay Politika a svědomí (Politics and Conscience), Havel problematizes the contemporary meaning of the word by arguing that modern man has privatized conscience by locking it up in our bathrooms and thereby cutting it off from engagement with the world. Conscience – and the responsibility that ought to come naturally with it – is reduced to a personal matter or what Havel calls a “phantom of subjectivity (přeluda subjektivity)” (1991: 255; 1999, 4: 425). An echo of the conscience-
in-the-bathroom image appears in the essay Thriller, written about the same time, where Havel imagines modern “demons” in business attire who inflict moral ruin on the world as the “gods” sequester themselves in the “refuge” of individual conscience: “Démoni si prostě dělají, co chtějí, zatímco bohové se plaše skrývají v posledním útulku, který jim byl vykázán a který se nazývá ‘lidské svědomí’ [The demons simply do what they want while the gods take diffident refuge in the final asylum to which they have been driven, called ‘human conscience’]” (1991: 288; 1999, 4: 510). A privatized and personalized understanding of conscience – a conscience seeking refuge from the world – is decidedly not what Havel intends to invoke when he writes dramatically of the need to “awaken our human conscience” in the citation that serves as epigraph to this paper.

Havel is not the only modern intellectual to have raised the question of the privatization or individualization of conscience. Jedediah Purdy, for example, has noted that in the American cultural tradition, “free conscience” came to be understood as “being true to oneself”, which risks both failing to look beyond oneself and thereby falling into a solipsism “that is often as banal and derivative as it is self-impressed” (2010: 21). In more hard-hitting terms than Havel, Purdy wonders “whether the spirit of conscience that Burke called ‘the dissidence of dissent’ has arrived at the end of history as full-blown narcissism” (2010: 22).

In Politics and Conscience, Havel places the phrase lidské svědomí (human conscience) at the very end of the essay as the culminating term in a rhetorical question that he leaves for the reader to ponder: does not hope for a better future, Havel asks, lie in making “a real political force out of a phenomenon so ridiculed by the technicians of power – the phenomenon of human conscience?” (1991: 271; 1999, 4: 445). The essay as a whole defamiliarizes our conventional understanding of conscience and specifically its relationship to politics. By liberating conscience from the confines of the individual mind – by freeing it from Purdy’s narcissism – Havel presents a possible way out of the existential crisis that engulfs the modern world.

The groundwork for Havel’s reframing of conscience in the essays of the mid-1980s was laid in his 1979-1983 philosophical letters from prison, published in 1983 as Dopisy Olze (Letters to Olga), in which ruminations on svědomí comprise a central theme. Foreshadowing the bathroom image, Havel notes that conscience as an active
force in the world is but a shadow of what it ought to be: it has become perfunctory, ritualized, a mere formality. The crisis of the modern world is a crisis of human identity and human responsibility, but Havel insists that an “orientation toward Being” – which conscience somehow embodies – has not disappeared. After all, “who would dare to deny that they have a conscience?” (letter 142). The “voice of Being” has not died out: “we know it summons us [že nás volá], and as human beings, we cannot pretend not to know what it is calling us to [k čemu nás volá]” (letter 142). We have many ways in the modern world of drowning out that voice (“[i]t is just that these days, it is easier to cheat, silence or lie to that voice” [letter 142]), but no matter how badly we behave, there is always a voice in some corner of our spirit saying that we ought not to have done so.

Indeed, throughout the letters Havel emphasizes the dialogic nature of conscience and its inherent relationship to what he terms the “voice of Being” (hlas bytí). This frees conscience from its cage of narcissism as conscience is understood to be not so much an inner, personal voice but rather an internalized manifestation of the voice of Being itself. In letter 139, Havel claims that while the hlas bytí informs the voice of conscience, it is greater than that personal voice. At the same time, the personal voice of conscience manifests the interconnectedness of two worlds, the world of man (the concrete human here and now) and the world of the transcendental (of God, of the absolute). These worlds are one and the same, but our access to Being is necessarily grounded in the former: “Being is one, it is everywhere and behind everything; it is the Being of everything and the only way to it is the one that leads through this world of mine and through this ‘I’ of mine” (letter 139). Conscience is internal to the individual only in the sense that its personalized voice represents a concrete realization of the transcendent voice of Being: rather than saying that conscience (Being) is in us, it would be more true to say, in Havel’s interpretation, that we are in conscience (Being).

Havel’s focus on the voice of Being in its relation to conscience is not surprising given Heidegger’s influence – largely via Jan Patočka, Charter 77’s philosophical godfather – on Czechoslovak dissident intellectuals. According to Hannah Arendt, Heidegger’s later writings are unusual in the Western philosophical tradition for Heidegger’s emphasis on hearing over seeing as a primary metaphor for thinking: “Metaphors drawn from hearing are very rare in the history of philosophy, the most
notable modern exception being the late writings of Heidegger, where the thinking ego ‘hears’ the call of Being” (Arendt 1978: 111). Havel seems to have borrowed Heidegger’s metaphor of the “soundless voice of Being” and elaborated it in his treatment of conscience.

In *Letters to Olga*, Havel hangs his philosophical argument concerning conscience on one concrete and rather trivial experience: you are in an empty night tram and have to decide whether or not to pay the fare for the ride. Your “voice of conscience” is activated, and Havel insists that the resulting inner dialogue takes the form of an exchange between your ego and a “partner” that is outside of your ego and therefore not identical with it:

This “partner”, however, is not standing beside me; I can’t see it, nor can I quit its sight: its eyes and its voice follow me everywhere; I can neither escape it nor outwit it: it knows everything. Is it my so-called “inner voice”, my “superego”, my “conscience”? Certainly, if I hear it calling me to responsibility [*slyší-li jeho volání k odpovědnosti*], I hear this call within me [*slyší toto volání v sobě*], in my mind and my heart; it is my own experience, profoundly so, though different from the experiences mediated to me by my senses. This, however, does nothing to alter the fact that the voice addresses me and enters into conversation with me, in other words, it comes to my “I” – which I trust is not schizoid – from the outside. (letter 137)

One thing seems clear to Havel: that our “I”, if it has not completely suppressed its orientation toward Being, “has a sense of responsibility purely and simply because it relates intrinsically to Being as that in which it feels the only coherence, meaning and the somehow inevitable ‘clarification’ of everything that exists… because it hears within and around itself the ‘voice’ in which this Being addresses and calls out to it [*kterým ho toto bytí oslovuje a volá*]” (letter 137).8

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7 In this connection, Arendt notes the Jewish tradition of “a God who is heard but not seen” and compares Hebrew truth, which is “heard”, versus the Greek *vision* of the true (1978: 111). Some implications of Arendt’s statement with regard to the ethnolinguistics of the senses are discussed in Vaňková 2007 (176ff) and Vaňková et al 2005 (98, 109, 132).

8 In an earlier letter, Havel defines responsibility (*odpovědnost*) in terms of being responsible to or for something else (one responds or odpovídá) that is usually concrete and immediate, although not only so.
Commenting on Havel’s understanding of the relation between conscience and responsibility, Radim Palouš has written that Havelian responsibility exerts an “ever-present claim” upon us and that this claim “may be expressed as the ‘mere’ voice of conscience” (Palouš 1997: 171). Havel insists that we rely on this voice as a moral instinct. It represents something simultaneously inside and outside of us: “Indeed, it is through conscience that a demand to be in harmony with the world’s moral order is exerted upon us” (Palouš 1997: 171). Conscience initiates a dialogue with Being.

Havel’s reframing suggests a latent dramatic potential in the voice of conscience and its relation to the voice of Being. The “absolute horizon” of meaning – the voice of Being that “calls out [volá]” to us – is “present in us not only as an assumption, but also as a source of humanity [zdroj lidskosti] and a challenge [apel]” (letter 95). Conscience is a uniquely human experience that serves as a challenge or appeal (apel), and this is a characterization that explicitly references Havel’s dramatic style, which is associated with the “theater of the appeal” (divadlo apelu).9 (This leads us into another argument – that Havel is primarily a playwright because theater of the appeal is the genre that best expresses his approach to meaning and the key role that conscience plays in it – but one that would be more profitably undertaken in another venue.)

By the time Havel becomes president, first of Czechoslovakia and then of the Czech Republic, his conceptual reframing of svědomí has been established. The presidential speeches and other published texts from this time reinforce and extend this reframing, continuing to insist on the importance of conscience (as Havel describes it) for confronting the existential and moral crisis that defines the modern world. A non-exhaustive list of post-1989 contexts that reinforce and extend his reframing would include the following:

(1) The argument that conscience ought not be understood as “psychologized” or “localized” in our minds is reinforced in, among others, a speech at the University of Malta where Havel notes that svědomí is activated when we fail to do something good or

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9 For an account of Havel as playwright with a discussion of his association with “theater of the appeal”, see Rocamora 2004.
do something wrong. This, however, is a psychologized characterization of conscience as a mere sentiment “as if conscience was a particular segment of our brain, identifiable within a certain area, or some kind of singular feature of a human being” (Valletta 2002). The reality is more complicated: responsibility means “awareness [jsme si vědomi] that there is someone who watches us”, and we are “intrinsically conscious of that silent eye and relate to it”.

(2) In place of psychological localization, the dialogic aspects of conscience are described in a 1991 speech before a joint meeting of the Czechoslovak parliament (Vystoupení ve federálním shromáždění, 24 September) where Havel emphasizes both that svědomí is activated in any kind of dialogue and that dialogue means both speaking and listening.10 This sentiment is echoed a decade later in a speech given in New York when Havel states that although each of us may have a conscience, not all of us heed its voice and many of us have become skilled at deceiving it.

(3) Conscience as a point of access to the transcendent is consistently reinforced (for example, in the major international speeches given at Asahi Hall in Japan in 1992 and George Washington University in 1993). It is subjectively through our individual consciences that we establish a connection with the metaphysical order that both includes and transcends us. In a 1996 speech at Trinity College, Havel quite explicitly defines conscience and responsibility as “a certain attitude of man toward that which reaches beyond him, that is, toward infinity and eternity, the transcendental, the mystery of the world, the order of Being”. This sentiment is echoed in his 1999 speech at Macalester College where conscience is equated with a moral order that promotes love for fellow humans.

(4) A final theme reinforced in the post-1989 texts is that conscience is the hope for the future, a sleeping force whose potential has yet to be tapped: “A conscience slumbers in every human being, something divine. And that is what we have to put our trust in” (Harvard University 1995).

(5) Havel extends his pre-1989 account by granting conscience a key role in bringing down the socialist regimes in Central Europe (Davos 1992) with the corollary that an understanding of politics as moral conscience was what the post-1989 East could

10 This speech is available only in the original Czech.
offer the West (Warsaw 1999). For Havel, this was, in fact, the true meaning and lesson of the dissident movement in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and elsewhere: “Our fundamental experience has taught us very clearly that only politics that is preceded by conscience really has any meaning”¹¹ (Warsaw 1999).

(6) A further extension derives directly from the argument made in Politics and conscience (as well as in a number of Havel’s plays): that the technological, scientific age of humanity – an age that privileges explaining over understanding¹² – lacks a conscience in the sense that Havel conceives of it. In a speech in February 1990 to commemorate the anniversary of the 1948 communist-party putsch in Czechoslovakia, Havel notes: “Science [věda] does not have a conscience. It is certainly beautiful and important…, but the human spirit is not mere rationality [rozum]. It is judgement. Deliberation. Conscience. Decency [slušnost]. Tact. Love for those close to us. Responsibility. Courage. Stepping away from the self. Doubt. Even humor”¹³ (Prague, 25 February 1990). In other speeches, Havel similarly suggests that human conscience lags behind technological and scientific knowledge, which may very well be the modern world’s defining dilemma.

(7) Havel’s final post-1989 extension is his suggestion that conscience plays the same key role in shaping modern democratic political communities that it played in the dissident era under socialism. Democracy is defined as an “unending journey” and a “constant appeal [trvalá výzva] to the human spirit and human conscience” (Prague, 12 March 1996). The task of Europe – the meaning of which ought not to be reduced to cooperation on economic and political matters – is to once again find its conscience and sense of responsibility in the world (Aachen 1996). Cultivating this extended understanding is the chief responsibility of intellectuals, who are the “conscience of society” (Wellington 1995).

By way of summing up Havel’s reshaping of the meaning of conscience over the course of his literary and political career, we might look back at the epigraph to this

¹¹ The English version of this speech online has a serious mistranslation, rendering the original Czech “politika, které předchází svědomí” as “politics that precede conscience”, which is the exact opposite of the intended meaning.
¹² For a discussion of the dichotomy between explaining and understanding that underlies much of Havel’s thinking, see Danaher 2007.
¹³ A translation of this speech is not available.
contribution, in which he plainly pins hope for the future of humanity on the awakening of “human conscience”. What Havel means by this is just what we have explored in this section on conceptualizing conscience as literary figure. The awakening of human conscience – and Havel frequently insists on the adjective “human” in reference to conscience as if to continually emphasize the responsibility that having a conscience places on us as human beings14 – presupposes a reconceptualization of its spiritual and cultural meaning. While a degenerate understanding of conscience – that ultimately leads to solipsism – localizes it in the individual’s mind as an exclusively internal dialogue, Havel imagines conscience as a transcendent dialogue with Being – an appeal for engagement in and with the world – that has the potential to be a game-changing political and moral force.

If lexis is a classifier of social experience that “provides access to the conceptual sphere, to the realm of ideas and images important in a given culture” (Bartmiński 2009: 17), then Havel seeks to influence the cultural sphere through a careful and systematic redefinition of the meaning of human “conscience”. The status of svědomí as a key word in Havel’s thinking is therefore a response to the ethnolinguistic claim that cultural concepts have cognitive reality.

The extent to which Havel’s redefinition of svědomí differs from the conventional meaning of the concept remains, however, to be determined. In other words, if Havel defamiliarizes, then what is his starting point, the familiar ground? And to extend this line of thinking: is that ground the same for Czech svědomí as it is for English conscience? These are essentially ethnolinguistic questions, and it is to them that I now turn.

The ethnolinguistic ground: svědomí and conscience compared

In comparing Czech svědomí with English conscience, we first note that they are, etymologically speaking, parallel: each has a prefix meaning with (s- and con-

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14 Indeed, the adjective lidský (along with the derived word lidskost) represents another key word in Havel, especially in his post-1989 texts: in the presidential speeches, Havel uses this adjective in combination with over one hundred different nouns. Translating lidský into English is not as straightforward as it might seem since its meaning can subtly blend the meaning of the two separate (although obviously related) English words human and humane. See Danaher In preparation.
respectively) attached to a suffixed root with the original meaning of knowledge (-vědomí and -science). The origin of both words implies a form of mental deliberation that comes “with knowledge” of the world, and this brings them close to Havel’s extended definition: conscience establishes a relationship between ourselves (our inner voice) and events in the world at large (the voice of Being). In other words, conscience responds to questions that are raised by our experience in and knowledge of the world: what we know should therefore be closely related to what we do and how we act (Ralston Saul 1997: 181).

The etymological identity already exposes, however, a crucial difference in how the words resonate in each language: the Czech root for “knowing” (-věd-) is more etymologically and semantically transparent in a host of other common words related to knowledge, consciousness, and awareness than the comparable English root (-sci-), which, if anything, might tend to associate English conscience with a particular – scientific – kind of knowledge. A partial list of Czech words where -věd- is immediately perceivable and where a connection between svědomí and knowing or awareness is therefore strongly felt include the following: vědět (to know; Pol. wiedzieć), věda (scholarship or science; Pol. wiedza), vědomí (consciousness; Pol. świadomość), povědomí (awareness; Pol. świadomość), and uvědomit si (to realize, become aware of; Pol. uświadomić sobie). By comparison, the -sci- in conscience is conceptually opaque: even the connection between conscience and consciousness is, at best, only tenuously felt. Whereas Czech has one root that serves as a semantic locus for many experiences of “knowing”, the multiplicity of English roots for “knowing” fails to activate a connection between conscience and Being that Havel privileges and extends in his interpretation.

A crucial concept in the Czech vědomí-svědomí nexus proves to be the Czech terms for witnessing: svědek (witness; Pol. świadek) and svědectví (testimony; Pol. świadectwo). English here has yet another root (wit), but the Czech words derivationally conflate knowledge, witnessing, and conscience. In Jungmann’s entry on svědomí, the

15 Etymological and lexical information on svědomí is taken from Machek 1968, Jungmann 1989 [1835], and Gebauer 1970. In Polish we encounter a somewhat different situation. The word świadosość follows the same etymological path as conscience and svědomí, but it means consciousness or awareness. In Polish, conscience is sumienie, which consists of the now unproductive prefix sq- (with) and Old Polish mnienie (thinking or conviction: cf. Greek mnême ‘memory’ or Latin mentis ‘reason’). I am grateful to Adam Gładz for this clarification.
second meaning is listed as svědectví, glossed as Latin testamentium, and it is this witnessing connection that is arguably more activated in the meaning of Czech svědomí as opposed to English conscience. The association of svědomí with svědectví also helps lay the groundwork for Havel’s creative extension of the meaning of the former. Indeed, in an analysis of faith and belief in Havel’s writings, Milan Balaban sees Havel’s concept of the “absolute horizon of Being” as “the most important witness [svědek]... of the deliberations that we have with ourselves on a daily basis” (2009: 43-44): in other words, svědomí – in Havel’s extended philosophical sense – is a dialogue with the svědek of Being, and this is an active kind of witnessing since we, who also belong to Being, both observe and simultaneously participate in it.

Although Balaban does not mention it, it would be productive to read Havel’s plays within what might be called a “witnessing framework”: the theater of the appeal activates conscience by transforming theater-goers in the audience into witnesses. The witnessing element in Havel’s dramatic style is embodied in particular by the character of Vaněk, who appears in three of Havel’s plays and has been turned into a theatrical device by other playwrights (Goetz-Stankiewicz 1987). As Havel himself has said about the “dramatic principle” that is Vaněk: “[H]e does not usually do or say much, but his presence on stage and his being what he is make his environment expose itself in one way or another… He is, then, a kind of ‘key’, opening certain – always different – vistas onto the world… a kind of catalyst, a gleam if you will, in whose light we view a landscape. And although without it we should scarcely be able to see anything at all, it is not the gleam that matters, but the landscape” (quoted in Rocamora 2004: 381).

If the semantic development of Czech svědomí in relation to other words in the same etymological and derivational network reaffirms a connection to witnessing, the meaning of English conscience seems to have shifted away from the knowledge-witnessing relationship toward the more personalized or privatized understanding of conscience that Havel aggressively polemicizes with in Politics and conscience and elsewhere. This development also seems to have run parallel with the narrowing of the meaning of English conscious as outlined in Humphrey 1999 (117ff). Humphrey notes the etymological structure of the word and states that the original meaning of the Latin verb conscire (from which the adjective conscius is derived) was “to share knowledge
widely”. As time passed, the usage changed, “and it shifted to mean sharing knowledge with some people but not others, sharing it within a small circle – and thus being privy to a secret” (1999: 118). This knowledge circle narrowed even further “until eventually it included just a single person, the subject who was conscious” (1999: 118). Humphrey sums up:

Thus, as the English language has evolved (and perhaps as the users of the language have become more self-concerned and introspective), the meaning of the word ‘conscious’ has not only become narrower and narrower, it has in effect turned around. Rather like the word ‘window’, which has changed in meaning from ‘a hole where the wind come in’ to ‘a hole where the wind does not come in’, ‘conscious’ has changed from ‘having shared knowledge’ to ‘having intimate knowledge not shared with anyone except oneself’. (1999: 119)

The parallel with a privatized conscience (or one that is locked up in the bathroom) is rather striking.

At the very least, the narrowing of the dialogic aspects of English conscious – its journey from sharing to not sharing – is similar to the way in which the “voice” of conscience has come to be internalized. Both svědomí and conscience share a conventional metaphorical association with a voice (Uličný 1999), but the schema suggested by the voice metaphor is open to a variety of elaborations. Is it a voice entirely inside one’s head – an inner dialogue with oneself – or, as Havel advocates, an inner voice that instantiates a connection with the very voice of Being? In other words, we conventionally understand conscience as something internal to each of us whereas Havel instead argues that we are participants in a dialogue with Being that is activated by conscience.

This distinction evokes Erich Fromm’s writing on modern identity and specifically the opposition that he details between, on the one hand, having or using and, on the other, being. Fromm wrote: “Man became a collector and a user. More and more, the central experience of his life became I have and I use, and less and less I am. The means – namely, material welfare, production, and the production of goods – thereby became the ends” (2005: 21). In Fromm’s terms, then, a privatized conscience is one that
we have and that we use. Opposed to this is Havel’s understanding of conscience – an understanding grounded in the knowing-witnessing nexus – that is much less a matter of practical utility and much more a matter of who we fundamentally are.

Existing scholarship on the conventional meaning of conscience confirms a tendency toward conceptual narrowing (personalization) and a having/using interpretation. Miroslava Nejedlá (2001) studied the semantics of Czech vědomí (consciousness) and svědomí in comparison with English and concluded in part that English conscience seems to be understood as more of a mechanism than Czech svědomí: with conscience there is more of an element of individual will that makes its function potentially controllable by an exertion of that will (2001: 29). This correlates with a sense of duty or moral obligation in conscience, a sense not as strongly felt in the meaning of svědomí (2001: 29). The qualms or prickings of Czech svědomí “are considered to be phenomena independent of the will of the subject who is undergoing them” (2001: 30). Perhaps another way of making the same point would be to say that English conscience – in comparison with Czech svědomí – is conceptualized more as an ability, one that we have and that we use.

In this connection and in the American context, we might mention Stanley Fish’s recent discussion (Fish 2009) in the New York Times of the so-called “conscience clause” that allows medical professionals to deny healthcare (for example, contraception) that they believe runs counter to their own moral or religious beliefs. Fish notes that it is so named “because it affirms the claims of conscience – one’s inner sense of what is right – against the competing claims of professional obligations”. He then, however, demonstrates that the meaning of conscience has radically changed over time. Fish cites Hobbes, who had quite a different sense of the word and who argued that considering conscience to be “the private arbiter of right and wrong” was a “corrupted usage” invented by those who desired “to elevate ‘their own… opinions’ to the status of reliable knowledge and try to do so by giving them ‘that reverenced name of Conscience’”. The sense, then, that conscience represents an inner mechanism for determining right from wrong is entrenched in modern English to such an extent that it has become the substance of legal maneuvering, but, at the same time, this entrenched sense is not entirely beyond dispute.
Predating and foreshadowing Fish’s discussion of the “conscience clause” is Anna Wierzbicka’s tracing of the historical development of the English concepts right and wrong and the extension of these originally conversational words into the ethical realm – a realm that includes conscience (Wierzbicka 2006). She argues that the rise of right and wrong is a language- and culture-specific phenomenon, and it sets English apart from other European languages in which good and bad – which have a more general meaning and are less subject to an individual’s will – still hold sway. She writes: “[T]he ascendancy of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ over ‘good’ and ‘bad’ seems to reflect a more rational, more procedural, more reason-based approach to human life and a retreat from a pure distinction between GOOD and BAD unsupported by any appeal to reason, procedures, methods, or intersubjectively available evidence” (2006: 72). In Wierzbicka’s analysis, ethical decision-making has evolved into a matter of good thinking (like scientific thinking) and interpersonal validation: “It is a rational ethics, an ethics that doesn’t need to be grounded in metaphysics (in particular, in God) but can be grounded in reason” (2006: 72).16

The concepts of right and wrong are, in this view, Anglo cultural constructs (2006: 65). When other concepts are defined in terms of right and wrong, these concepts are then imbued with the Anglo-specific associations related to right and wrong. In this regard, Wierzbicka specifically mentions conscience, which is defined in the Oxford Companion to Philosophy as “the sense of right and wrong in an individual” (2006: 66). She notes that this was not, in fact, how philosophers who were not speakers of modern English understood conscience, and gives the example of Aquinas: “But for Aquinas, conscience was not ‘the sense of right and wrong’, but rather the sense of bonum and malum, that is, ‘good’ and bad’… For speakers of most modern European languages, too, ‘conscience’ is usually linked with the notions ‘good’ and ‘bad’, rather than ‘right’ and ‘wrong’” (2006: 66).

If Nejedlá, Fish, and Wierzbicka are correct, then we could conclude that conventional usage of English conscience strongly implies the kind of understanding that Havel cautions

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16 Both Wierzbicka’s focus on a “rational ethics” and the notion that English conscience – in opposition to Czech svědomy – might be understood more as a mechanism or ability raise the question of whether reason itself is also a mechanism or ability. It can be and, of course, has been (or conventionally is?) construed as such, but this may very well also be a culturally grounded understanding. For a persuasive counter-argument in the cognitive-linguistics tradition, see Johnson 2007.
against: it has been privatized and rationalized, reduced to a mechanism in each of our minds that is more or less subject to our control. The conventional meaning of Czech svědomí, however, seems to resist this process whether it be because the concepts of good and bad still predominate over right and wrong (Wierzbicka) and individual will is less emphasized (Nejedlá) or, and this might be stating the same idea in different terms, the relationship between an individual and her or his awareness (vědomí) of the world – a relationship mediated by svědomí and its semantic/derivative network – is more foregrounded. In Fromm’s terms, English conscience privileges a having/using mode while Czech svědomí leaves more semantic space for an interpretation in the being mode – a space that Havel uses to full effect in his conceptual reimagining of the import of svědomí for the modern world.

By way of summing up this comparative analysis, we might move away from scholarly investigations and consider naïve evidence of the semantic distinction between Czech svědomí and English conscience. Comparison of the respective English and Czech Wikipedia pages devoted to conscience and svědomí provides just this sort of evidence and confirms the analysis that has been offered here. The English page from the outset defines conscience as “an aptitude, faculty, intuition, or judgment of the intellect that distinguishes right from wrong”; dialogic aspects of the term are downplayed while its potential link to reason is highlighted (if questioned). A possible feature of the naïve semantics of conscience that has not been considered here – but perhaps ought to be looked at in the future – is its close association to religious or spiritual traditions: this association is given a special status in the English – but not the Czech – Wikipedia entry.

In contrast, the Czech page does not mention “right” or “wrong”, and the focus from the outset is on the dialogic aspects of svědomí, which is defined as “vnitřní instance, mlčenlivé volání, které vede soudy člověka o tom, co sám způsobil nebo co se chystá způsobit [an inner authority, a silent calling that guides a person’s judgments about what he or she has done or intends to do]”. Beyond the dialogic aspects, there is an emphasis on svědomí as a primarily procedural ability (schopnost) – as “sebereflexe, tj. schopnost uvažovat o sobě samém, podívat se na sebe jinýma očima než je pohled vlastního zájmu a prosazování [self-reflection, ie, the ability to contemplate one’s own

self, to look at oneself through eyes other than ones concerned with one’s own interests and with self-promotion)” – and this is not privileged in the English entry. In the procedural part of the definition we also find a suggestion that svědomí inherently involves transcending self-interest whereas in the English entry on conscience, this semantic aspect is not foregrounded in any way other than stating that conscience is associated with “moral evaluations” (of right and wrong).

The Czech page also has a section devoted to an etymological breakdown of the word svědomí and in which the vědomí - svědomí relationship is made explicit. This relationship is further underlined by the mention of fixed phrases in Czech that contain both words: for example, the oath uttered when assuming an important office that states that the person promises to carry out the duties “podle nejlepšího vědomí a svědomí” (literally, “according to the best of one’s consciousness and conscience”). English does not have an equivalent.

The Wikipedia comparison serves to highlight the semantic differences between svědomí and conscience that we have previously noted. Some of these differences are stark while others are more a matter of nuance or emphasis. Considered together, they demonstrate that the conventional meaning of svědomí – which is Havel’s conceptual ground, his starting point – already contains the seeds that will grow into Havel’s defamiliarizing semantic extension: conscience as, potentially, a moral and political force to be reckoned with in the modern world. In contrast to the meaning of svědomí, the entrenched meaning of English conscience is decidedly less amenable to the kind of aesthetic extension that Havel has in mind: the conventional understanding of conscience is, in fact, much closer to the privatized, mechanistic conceptualization that Havel sets out to undermine.

Conclusion

18 In light of Havel’s argument, should conscience be added to the list of value terms that Bartmiński (2009: 220) suggests be ethnolinguistically studied because they have a direct bearing on sociopolitical and ethical questions? If Havel is to be taken at his word, then discrepancies in how we understand the term – and how it functions in both our individual lives and the life of society – may well lie at the heart of the success or failure of politics in the modern world.
In other words, the semantics of svědomí provides more fertile ground for Havel’s argument than do the semantics of conscience: the English reader of Havel is obliged to make a greater leap of faith in following the line of Havel’s thinking because conscience is not, from an ethnolinguistitc perspective, a semantic equivalent for svědomí. There is a hint of a “transcendent breeze” in svědomí that conscience lacks, and this seems to be true for a range of Havelian key words in comparison with their translations into English (Danaher 2010). Havel’s paradox – that he is a Czech writer who has gained world-wide influence as an intellectual through translations of his texts – is a phenomenon that warrants consideration, and ethnolinguistics can provide a methodology to ground the investigation.

In conducting comparative ethnolinguistic research, Bartmiński has noted that comparing concepts related to “spiritual culture” presents the greatest challenge:

The comparative procedure is relatively straightforward in the case of objects unambiguously identifiable on the basis of extralinguistic empirical observation, such as the sun, stars, the elements, plants, animals or body parts. It is more difficult in the case of artifacts, such as clothes, prepared foods, kitchen utensils etc., very different in different cultures and environments. The most problematic are components of the spiritual culture, such as political, social or moral concepts and ideas. These are mainly untranslatable, specific to individual cultures and languages.

(2009: 216)

In analyzing terms related to spiritual culture, it is perhaps necessary to delve into literature – and ethnolinguistic literary analysis of the kind exemplified here – to help us better grasp the entrenched semantic value of each term and to help us better perceive its familiar starting point.

Literature is, after all, at least partly concerned with reframing entrenched meanings, and I am reminded in this regard of Milan Kundera’s famous assertion regarding the novel: “A novel is often, it seems to me, nothing but a long quest for some elusive definitions” (1988: 127).19 If literature reshapes familiar meanings as part of its

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19 Note the recent best-selling epic novel by Jonathan Franzen entitled Freedom: the novel itself is a narrative reframing of the meaning of this key cultural term in the American context.
core mission – and if the cognitive definition itself is, as Bartmiński compellingly argues, a cultural narrative – then an ethnolinguistic approach to literature has a potentially crucial role to play in both ethnolinguistic analysis proper as well as literary criticism. It is in this dual spirit that the present contribution is offered.20

References

David Danaher. In preparation. “An ethnolinguistic approach to key words in literature: lidskost and duchovnost in the writings of Václav Havel”.

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