



FACULTY OF
**MEDIEVAL
AND
MODERN
LANGUAGES**

Information for the Preliminary (Prelim) course in

CZECH (WITH SLOVAK)

2026/27

This handbook gives subject-specific information for your Prelim course in Czech (with Slovak).

For general information about your studies and the faculty, please consult the Faculty's [Undergraduate Course Handbook](#)

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FACULTY PREFACE

FHS students of MML are offered a wide array of choices that allows them to build on Prelims. They can follow existing and discover new interests, while developing and honing their language skills. A mixture of faculty and college-based teaching – lectures, language classes, seminars and tutorials – nurture students' intellectual growth, exposing them to the diverse and varied cultures, both past and present, that speak the languages in which they are gaining confidence.

Teaching for language papers is designed to further that confidence, drawing on cultural and identity nuances. The learning of a language is a cultural act. The combination of FHS language, literature and linguistic papers enables students' cultural understanding to develop in profound, synergistic ways. Materials chosen for translation, prose and oral classes include authors and sources from multiple ethnicities and genders, with complex and fluid identities, underlining a faculty-wide commitment to highlight different voices at every level of teaching. In fact, the choice to learn languages is already a choice to take on difference. Thinking through other cultures provides an exciting way to think about your own identities in a different light. Thinking through other languages enables you to exceed the parameters and expectations of anglophone thought, breaking out from its strictures in creative ways and enriching it by bringing other viewpoints back in.

Language teaching develops a range of different skills, from speaking and listening with ease, to equipping students to write in and translate thoughtfully into and out of different languages. The aim of the FHS course is to achieve by the end of your studies near-native fluency in your chosen languages when writing and speaking, as well as an awareness of linguistic variations and register. These skills are acquired through different classes and exercises. They include vocabulary learning, which is best done individually and regularly, and grammar classes. They also include prose classes in which texts are translated from English – a sought-after skill in itself, but also a good way of consolidating grammar knowledge. Translation into English develops a sense of nuance and register, and links language learning with the subtle readings required for literature and culture papers. It also develops an awareness of linguistic diversity in both English and your chosen languages. Oral exercises help to develop fluency, accurate pronunciation, listening skills, and also a sense of linguistic diversity. Essay writing classes develop active vocabulary and the ability to communicate complex arguments in writing.

All modes of learning are underpinned by self-study and reading to develop active vocabulary, consolidate grammar, and refine a sense of register. Developing and establishing methods for self-study is particularly important in your second year. Depending on the languages you study, one class may serve more than one purpose. An essay writing class will also enrich your vocabulary and support essay-writing strategies for literature and culture papers. A translation from your chosen language will underpin grammar revision as well as commentary

work. Oral discourse work will develop the active vocabulary required for the translation and essay papers.

Language teaching is delivered by a range of tutors and lecturers, both College and University based. What matters from the perspective of students is the sum of all language teaching. Your college tutor or director of studies will have oversight over all arrangements, so if you have questions, do raise them with your college tutor in the first instance.

There are many links between language, literature, culture and linguistics papers. All papers have a strong language dimension. Period papers develop an awareness of linguistic diversity. Commentaries develop a sense of nuance and register and require a large active vocabulary. Pre-modern papers develop awareness of historical developments underpinning contemporary language. Linguistics papers focus on technical ways of assessing language. In advanced translation options, students develop an ability to read texts in the original, and to assess available translations critically against that original.

In your second year, developing independent ways of cross-fertilising your reading for literature papers with work on vocabulary, register and grammar consolidation is an integral part of language learning. Attending lectures provided by the faculty – including those run by languages you may not be directly studying – can often be a way of exploring new topics, even if they do not relate directly to your current tutorial work.

The flexibility that characterizes student options in literature, culture and linguistics papers in FHS provides multiple possibilities to explore difference, and to learn how texts create, exemplify, sustain and contest diverse ways of being in the world. The study of literature, culture and/or linguistics over a wide chronological arc, employing a range of critical tools and methodologies, is a fundamental component of students' intellectual development in FHS. Lectures delivered across the faculty, which students are welcome to attend, cover a multiplicity of methodological pathways and intersectional approaches – from gender and race theories, textual studies, performance-based art forms and pre-modern cultures to queer perspectives, postcolonialism and linguistic diversity. Faculty-based teaching also provides contextual background, interpretative tools and theories that can work well beyond single authors under consideration, and be pertinent to a wide range of material covered in College-based tutorials.

The faculty's commitment to diversity as a marker of scholarly ambition is affirmed in the annual award of two diversity prizes for the best extended essays, portfolio of essays or linguistic projects submitted as part of your FHS assessment. The first is awarded for work that engages with issues of race and racialization; the second for work that engages with intersectionality.

Students are encouraged to take advantage of the faculty's vibrant intellectual community, and to attend seminars and public lectures that dovetail with their interests.

CZECH: PRELIMINARY COURSE

Czech teaching normally takes place at the Faculty in The Schwarzman Centre. Czech language and literature are taught by:

Dr Rajendra Chitnis (Associate Professor of Czech, Ivana and Pavel Tykač Fellow, University College)

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E-Mail: rajendra.chitnis@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk Phone (term-time only): 01865 286881

Dr Vanda Pickett (Czech Language Tutor)

E-Mail: vanda.pickett@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk

Czech language at Oxford is taught as a Beginner's language, i.e. no previous knowledge of Czech is required. First Year students will receive three hours of intensive Czech language classes per week. Native speakers, speakers with Czech or Slovak background, or otherwise more advanced students of the language will be given more demanding language work, tailored to their needs and abilities.

Throughout the year, First Year students also attend weekly seminars and tutorials on Czech literary texts and a lecture series on Czech history and culture. You will be asked to attend a meeting towards the end of 0th week in Michaelmas Term to finalize the timetable.

■ Further details about the papers to be taken in the Preliminary Examination and set texts for literature are given below, together with an introductory reading list, recommended dictionaries, textbooks and some other background reading.

LANGUAGE

Two Czech language examination papers are taken by all students at the end of the first year (whether beginners or not), as follows:

PAPER I (Prose Composition and Grammar Sentences):

- One passage (in English) to translate into either Czech or Slovak
- Ten sentences, designed to test knowledge of grammar, to translate into either Czech or Slovak

PAPERS IIA & IIB (Unseen Translation from Czech):

- Both papers consist of a translation from Czech of a prose passage (c. 300 words each).

The level of language work set in the examination is aimed primarily at Beginner candidates.

Oral

There is no formal oral examination, but in order to pass the Preliminary Examination in Czech (with Slovak), colleges are required to present, for each candidate, a certificate of attendance and active participation in oral classes. Candidates must attend and actively participate in no fewer than eight oral classes in Czech before the end of the fourth week of the Trinity Term of their first year. The classes may consist of reading aloud with attention to proper pronunciation and intonation of Czech, and/or discussion of passages dealing with issues in contemporary Czech culture. The Senior Tutor of each candidate's college will be asked to submit to the Undergraduate Studies Administrator, Modern Languages, Examinations Office, The Schwarzman Centre, a certificate endorsed by the Senior Tutor and a Modern Languages Tutor (the latter acting on behalf of the sub-faculty and Russian and Slavonic Languages) stating that they have attended, and participated in, the required number of classes. Candidates who fail to satisfy this requirement for the June examination shall have their mark for each of the two written language papers in Czech reduced by ten marks. Candidates for a language paper in the September examination (re-sits) who have not previously in that academic year satisfied the attendance requirement will be examined *viva voce* to demonstrate at least basic competence in spoken Czech. Certification is required by noon on the Friday of 5th week of Trinity Term.

LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS & DICTIONARIES

The primary language textbook we use throughout the degree in Czech (with Slovak) is:

James Naughton, *Colloquial Czech* (Routledge, 2010).

Please ensure that you obtain the MOST RECENT (3rd) edition.

For reference purposes throughout your studies in Czech, we also recommend you acquire:

James Naughton, *Czech: An Essential Grammar* (Routledge, 2005)

■ You may be able to obtain these and other recommended books second-hand, via websites like www.abebooks.co.uk or www.amazon.co.uk

Throughout your studies, you will find that it is normally cheaper and often only possible to buy Czech-language books, including e-books, direct from the Czech Republic. For new books, the most widely used on-line bookshops are:

■ <https://www.kosmas.cz/>

■ <https://www.academia.cz/eshop>

■ For second-hand books, <https://muj-antikvariat.cz/> will search second-hand bookshops throughout the country. Unfortunately, many of these do not currently accept on-line payments or post to international destinations, so this option may prove most useful when you are based in the Czech Republic.

Dictionaries

Free on-line dictionaries and translation tools are useful in emergencies, but for students of Czech are not adequate replacements for the dictionaries listed below.

The best single-volume English-Czech/Czech-English dictionary currently available is:

- Josef Fronek, *Anglicko-český a česko-anglický slovník* (Prague: Leda, 2012).

The best readily available large English-Czech and Czech-English pair of volumes are currently:

- Josef Fronek, *Velký česko-anglický slovník* (Praha: Leda, 2013).
- Josef Fronek, *Velký anglicko-český slovník* (Praha: Leda, 2016).

■ It may be cheapest to buy these dictionaries direct from the publisher: <https://www.leda.cz/Jazykove-ucebnice-slovniky.php?jazyk=Anglictina|3>

In Second and Final Year, the best dictionary for reading FHS Paper VIII and X literature is:

- Ivan Poldauf, *Česko-anglický slovník* (Prague: SPN, 1990)

This dictionary is regularly available cheaply second-hand via <https://muj-antikvariát.cz/>

As your Czech improves, you will find the following pages from the Institute for Czech Language:

- ▀ Searchable dictionary (definitions and synonyms in Czech): <https://ssjc.ujc.cas.cz/>
- ▀ Searchable grammar (declensions, conjugations etc): <https://prirucka.ujc.cas.cz/>

LITERATURE

Two Czech literature papers are also taken at the end of the Preliminary year, one devoted to Czech poetry and drama, the other to Czech short prose fiction. Both are designed to develop techniques of close reading in Czech while introducing you to some major themes, genres and names of modern Czech literature.

PAPER III: Poetry and Drama

Prescribed texts:

- Karel Hynek Mácha: *Máj* (1836) Available with English translation and glossary at:
[Mácha: Máj: Czech Prelims 25/26](#)
- Karel Hlaváček: *Mstivá kantiléna* (1898)
[Hlaváček: Mstivá kantiléna: Czech Prelims 25/26](#)
- Karel Čapek: *R.U.R.* (1921)

Available at: <https://web2.mlp.cz/koweb/00/03/34/75/81/rur.pdf>

There are many translations available, of which the best is perhaps *Rossum's Universal Robots*, translated by David Short, with a foreword by Arthur Miller (Hesperus, 2011). Other good translations include *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, translated by Claudia Novack-Jones, with a foreword by Ivan Klíma (Penguin, 2004) and *Four Plays: R.U.R., The Insect Play, The Makropulos Case, The White Plague*, translated by Peter Majer & Cathy Porter (Methuen, 1999).

The three-hour examination, taken in Trinity Term, is divided into two sections. The first section contains an extract for commentary from each work of poetry studied, the second contains an essay question on each text studied. You must answer one question from each section (i.e. one commentary and one essay) and a further question chosen from either section. You may not answer twice on the same text.

PAPER IV: Short Prose

Prescribed texts:

- Jan Neruda: 'Jak si nakouřil pan Vorel pěnovku' (1876)

From *Povídky malostranské*. Translated by N.P.Jopson as 'How Mr Vorel Coloured His Meerschaum Pipe', available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4201864>, and by Michael Henry Heim as 'How Mr Vorel Broke In His Meerschaum' in *Prague Tales* (Central European University Press, 1993).

- Růžena Jesenská: 'Mimo svět' (1909)

From *Mimo svět*. Translated by Kathleen Hayes as 'A World Apart' in *A World Apart and Other Stories: Czech Women Writers at the Fin de Siècle* (Karolinum, 2001).

- Milan Kundera: 'Falešný autostop' (1965)

- From *Druhé sešit směšných lásek*. Translated by Suzanne Rappaport in Milan Kundera, *Laughable Loves* (Faber & Faber, 2000) Jan Balabán: 'Kluk' (2004)

Translated by Charles S. Kraszewski as 'Boy' in Jan Balabán, *Maybe We're Leaving* (Glagoslav, 2018).

- Milena Slavická: 'Sestra' (2018)

From *Ona*. Not available in English translation.

The three-hour examination, taken in Trinity Term, consists of one extract from each of the short stories studied. You must write a commentary on three of the extracts.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE CZECHS AND SLOVAKS

During the Preliminary Year, while you are developing your Czech language skills, you are strongly encouraged to deepen your knowledge of Czech and Slovak culture and history through sources written in or translated into English or other languages you know well. Exploring the history of the Czechs, reading literature in translation or watching subtitled films will enrich your understanding of what you are studying and help you to decide the kinds of topics and papers you want to work on in later years.

History

The Preliminary Year includes a lecture series that introduces you to the history of the Czechs, focusing particularly on periods central to Czech literary culture. The following books will help you build your understanding of the history of the Czechs and Bohemia in its various incarnations:

- Agnew, Hugh, *The Czechs and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, 2004.
- Demetz, Peter, *Prague in Black and Gold: The History of a City*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998.
- Heimann, Mary, *Czechoslovakia: The State that Failed*, New Haven, CT, London: Yale University Press, 2011.
- Pánek, Jaroslav et al. (eds), *A History of the Czech Lands*, Prague: Karolinum Press, 2011.
- Seton-Watson, R. W., *A History of the Czechs and Slovaks*, London: Hutchinson, 1943.
- Teich, M. et al. (eds), *Slovakia in History* (Cambridge University Press, 2011)

Literature

Internationally, the most famous works of Czech literature are:

- Karel Čapek - *Rossum's Universal Robots* (*R.U.R.*, 1921), an anti-utopian play that gave us the word 'robot'.
- Jaroslav Hašek - *The Good Soldier Švejk* (*Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války*, 1921), a rambling series of comic stories about a working-class Czech man's experience of (not quite) fighting for Austria in World War One.
- Milan Kundera - *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (*Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 1984), a novel that uses the impact on three Czechs of the 1968 Soviet-led military intervention in Czechoslovakia to explore questions of existence and identity.

At no other time have so many current Czech creative writers had works available in English. They include Michal Ajvaz, Jan Balabán, Bianca Bellová, Radka Denemarková, Jiří Hájíček, Emil Hakl, Petra Hůlová, Alena Mornštajnová, Iva Pekárková, Magdalena Platzová, Zuzana Říhová, Jáchym Topol, Michal Viewegh and Tomáš Zmeškal. Among those books that will also give you a sense of aspects of Czech history and contemporary society are:

- Daniela Hodrová – *I See A City* (*Město vidím...*, 1992), a psycho-geographical exploration of the sights of Prague, and *A Kingdom of Souls* (*Podobojí*, 1991, also included in *City of Torment*), a novel exploring the mysterious recurring patterns and merging identities and fates underlying Prague history, in which the dead often seem more alive than the living.
- Petra Hůlová – *Three Plastic Rooms* (*Umělohmotný třípokoj*, 2006), the darkly entertaining monologue of an ageing Prague prostitute about the state of the world.
- Tomáš Zmeškal – *Love Letter in Cuneiform* (*Milostný dopis klínovým písmem*, 2008), a novel about how politics interferes in a family's life between the 1940s and 1990s.

Jáchym Topol – *The Devil's Workshop* (*Chladnou zemí*, 2009), a novel set in contemporary Theresienstadt and Belarus, exploring official and alternative ways of memorializing the atrocities of the twentieth century.

At the same time, the range of writers from earlier periods available in English is also expanding: from the Communist period Ladislav Fuks, Václav Havel, Miroslav Holub, Bohumil Hrabal, Josef Jedlička, Arnošt Lustig, Josef Škvorecký, Ludvík Vaculík, from the earlier twentieth century Karel Čapek, Jaroslav Durych, Jaroslav Hašek, Vítězslav Nezval, Ivan Olbracht, Vladislav Vančura, and from the nineteenth century Karel Jaromír Erben, Jiří Karásek, Božena Němcová and Jan Neruda.

The following anthologies of short stories introduce the work of various writers from the 1890s/1900s and from the late twentieth century:

- *A World Apart and Other Stories: Czech Women Writers at the Fin de Siècle*, selected and translated by Kathleen Hayes, Prague: Karolinum, 2003, 2021
- *Povídky: Short Stories by Czech Women*, edited by Nancy Hawker, London: Portobello, 2006.
- *And My Head Exploded: Tales of Desire, Delirium and Decadence from Fin-de-Siècle Prague*, selected and translated by Geoffrey Chew, London: Jantar, 2018.
- *Beyond the World of Men: Women's Fiction at the Czech Fin de Siècle*, selected and translated by Geoffrey Chew, Prague: Karolinum, 2024.

Recommended classic works available in translation include:

- Karel Jaromír Erben, *Kytice* (1853), a cycle of dark and sometimes disturbing verse fairy tales, available in a bilingual edition from Jantar Books.

- Božena Němcová, *Grandmother (Babička)*, 1855), fictionalized, pastoral reminiscences about the author's early teens, spent with her siblings in the care of her grandmother in rural north-east Bohemia. Commonly regarded as the first major text of modern Czech prose writing. To be published in a new, definitive translation by Susan Reynolds in October 2025 by Jantar Books.
- Jakub Arbes, *Newton's Brain (Newtonův mozek)*, 1877), a supernatural story commonly regarded as the first work of Czech science fiction, in which a man builds a machine that can go back in time.
- Jan Neruda, *Prague Tales (Povídky malostranské)*, 1878), gently satirical comic stories about life in the district of Malá Strana (below Prague Castle) in the 1840s.
- Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic, *A Gothic Soul (Gotická duše)*, 1900), a moving Decadent novel tracing the thoughts of a young man unable to conform or find love in materialistic, bourgeois Prague.
- Karel Čapek, *Hordubal* (1933), a detective novel about a peasant who returns to Ruthenia after working in America.
- Ivan Olbracht, *Nikola the Outlaw (Nikola Šuhaj loupežník)*, 1933), a novel about a Robin-Hood-like bandit in Ruthenia, and *The Sorrowful Eyes of Hana Karajich ('O smutných očích Hany Karadžičové')*, 1937), a short novel about a Hasidic Jewish girl in Ruthenia.
- Vítězslav Nezval, *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders (Valerie a týden divů)*, 1935), a Surrealist-influenced Gothic fairy-tale about the coming-of-age of an adolescent girl, and *Prague with Fingers of Rain (Praha s prsty deště)*, 1936), a cycle of Surrealist poetry focused on Prague.
- Josef Škvorecký, *The Cowards (Zbabělci)*, 1958), a novel about the end of the German occupation in Bohemia, as seen through the eyes of a late teenage boy more interested in jazz and girls.
- Milan Kundera – *The Joke (Žert)*, 1967), a classic novel of revenge, portraying the disillusion of middle-aged intellectuals who, as students, supported the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia.
- Ladislav Fuks, *The Cremator (Spalovač mrtvol)*, 1967), a disturbing novel about a Czech who becomes a Nazi collaborator.
- Bohumil Hrabal, *I Served the King of England (Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále)*, 1989), a picaresque comic novel about an ambitious little waiter's experiences against the backdrop of turbulent mid-twentieth-century Czech history.

Slovak literature has only really opened up to English-speaking readers in the past decade; it is quite different in style, themes and humour from Czech literature and very much worth discovering. Two excellent recent anthologies are:

- *Into the Spotlight: New Writing from Slovakia*, edited and translated by Magdalena Mullek and Julia Sherwood (Slavica, 2017)
- *The Dedalus Book of Slovak Literature*, edited by Peter Karpinský (Dedalus, 2015)

Contemporary writers now available in English translation include Balla, Jana Beňová, Ivana Dobráková, Mária Ferenčuhová, Mila Haugová, Nicol Hochholczerová, Jana Juráňová, Daniela Kapitáňová, Uršula Kovalyk, Peter Krištúfek, Peter Pišťanek and Pavel Vilikovský.

You will find a regularly updated list here: <http://www.slovakliterature.com/books.html>

Cinema

Czech cinema has enjoyed an outstanding international reputation since at least the 1960s. The first film to win the Best Foreign Film Oscar was actually in Slovak: *Obchod na korzo* (The Shop on the High Street, 1965). It was followed in 1968 by *Ostře sledované vlaky* (Closely Observed Trains, Jiří Menzel, based on a Hrabal short novel, 1966) and *Kolja* (Jan Svěrák, 1996). Many films have been based on works by major writers, and you will have the chance in later years to explore the cinematic adaptation of Czech literature. The list of films below reflects the range of genres and styles in which the Czechs have excelled, from knockabout comedy and animated film to documentary, Surrealism and arthouse, and also includes several films that deal explicitly with recent Czech history. Some of them are available with subtitles on YouTube.

A good introduction to the diversity of the Czech 1960s 'new wave' is *Perličky na dně* (Pearls of the Deep, 1965), a compilation of short films based on Hrabal stories. Other recommended films from this generation of directors include:

- Menzel's *Rozmarné léto* (A Capricious Summer, based on a Vančura novel, 1968), *Skřivánci na nití* (Larks on a String, 1969) and *Postřižiny* (Cutting It Short, 1981) (both based on Hrabal stories)
- Miloš Forman's *Lásky jedné plavovlásky* (A Blonde in Love, 1965) and *Hoří, má panenko* (The Firemen's Ball, 1967)
- *Sedmikrásky* (Daisies, Věra Chytilová, 1966)
- *O slavnosti a hostech* (A Report on the Party and Guests, Jan Němec, 1966)
- *Marketa Lazarová* (František Vlácil, based on a Vančura novel, 1967)
- *Všichni dobří rodáci* (All My Good Countrymen, Vojtěch Jasný, 1968)
- *Spalovač mrtvol* (The Cremator, Juraj Herz, based on a Fuks novel, 1969)
- *Valérie a týden divů* (Valerie and Her Week of Wonders, based on a Nezval short novel, 1970)
- *Ucho* (The Ear, Karel Kachyňa, 1970).

Other recommended films from the post-Communist period include:

- Svěrák's *Obecná škola* (Elementary School, 1991)
- Petr Zelenka's *Knoflíkáři* (Buttoners, 1997), *Karamazovi* (The Karamazovs, 2008) and

Ztraceni v Mnichově (Lost in Munich, 2015)

- *Pelišky* (Cosy Dens, Jan Hřebejk, 1999)
- *Samotáři* (Loners, David Ondříček, 2000)
- *Otesánek* (Little Otik, Jan Švankmajer, leading Czech animator, 2000)
- *Štěstí* (Happiness, Bohdan Sláma, 2005)
- *Katka* (Helena Třeštíková, leading Czech documentarist, 2010)
- *Alois Nebel* (based on Rudiš/Jaromír 99 graphic novels, Tomáš Luňák, 2011)
- *Rodina je základ státu* (Long Live the Family, Robert Sedláček, 2011)
- *Hořící keř* (Burning Bush, Agnieszka Holland, 2013)
- *Cesta ven* (The Way Out, Petr Václav, 2014)
- *Zátopek* (2021, David Ondříček)
- *Vlny* (2024, Jiří Mádľ)

When drawing up this handbook we have tried to be as accurate and clear as possible. The texts prescribed for study for individual papers are now listed in this handbook.

The Examination Conventions, detailing the structure of each examination paper, including rubrics, are also available as a separate document at:

[Examination conventions: MML UG Information \(ox.ac.uk\)](#)

The revised edition of the University's Examination Decrees and Regulations lists the examination papers and their permitted combination for your degree course. (For further details, refer to the handbook and the examining conventions.) See:

[Exam Regulations - Search \(ox.ac.uk\)](#)

Courses and regulations are constantly under review, so always check also with your college tutor to confirm what is written here and in the Examination Conventions.

In addition, do not hesitate to ask for clarification about the course from any member of the Sub-Faculty who is lecturing to you or tutoring you; we will always do our best to help.

Last revised: 18/08/25