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# Language is not only about correct spelling.

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## Čeština není jen to, jak se co píše. S fonetiky o projektu Sound To Sense, kráse adekvátnosti a umění naslouchat

Fourteen university departments from eleven European countries have participated in the interdisciplinary “Sound To Sense” project, part of the Marie Curie Research Training Network financed by the European Union. The Czech partner in the project was the Institute of Phonetics at the Charles University Faculty of Arts. IForum discussed the project, which brings together linguistic phoneticians, engineers and psychologists, with its leaders, the director of the Institute of Phonetics doc. PhDr. Jan Volín, PhD. and Prof. PhDr. Zdena Palková, CSc.

### What was the idea behind the Sound To Sense project and what exactly does it deal with?

The Marie Curie Research Training Network project as a whole is focused on the education and sharing of experiences with the new, upcoming generation of researchers and has interdisciplinary grounds. The specific Sound To Sense project is focused on speech and its sound representation. The aim is to study the subject matter from different angles: from the point of view of a linguist, phonetician, psychologist, acoustician and technician. The objective is to provide an interdisciplinary view of the subject because partial viewpoints tend to be quite diverse.



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While the project did not support research as such, it operated on the fact that research would help to educate a young generation of European researchers capable of competing with Asian and American scientists. This is explicitly stated in the project provisions even though Asians and Americans were hired as junior scientists. The other motive – tackling the problem of fragmentation was also attractive from our point of view.

Psychologists approach the issue of speech communication in their own way but they lack the linguistic and technical expertise. Engineers are working on automatic speech recognition, speech synthesis, search tools for databases and similar applications but they are not achieving the results they could if they knew speech from a different viewpoint and not just the technical one.



**Doc. PhDr. Jan Volín, PhD., the director of the Institute of Phonetics of the Charles University Faculty of Arts**

Equally, linguistics has to take into account the psychological aspect of speech communication and learn about its technical and technological features. Communication among these three basic fields was poor and the European project pledged to bridge the gaps. I believe that was one of the crucial moments for us while deciding whether to take part in it. The overall idea comes from England and that's where four of the fourteen university departments are based, with the coordinator located at Cambridge University.

**As we speak the Sound To Sense project is coming to an end. Do we know its results? What will be its concrete outcome?**

**JV:** The first project concentrated on the building of databases. Namely our centre contributed with a part of a database but mainly with a general description and organisational structure of database building, so at one moment we played quite an important role in the project. We did not take an active part in the second project but it was very interesting if rather technical. Its goal was an automatic recognition of a particular defined problem in the collected databases – because with a classic database you need to tag each millisecond of speech. We were also heavily involved in a project studying foreign accents in general, but we were particularly interested in Czech English because English is being promoted as a communication code, a modern-day lingua franca. We were interested in what a Czech accent in English entails and to what extent it can hinder perception and hamper understanding. You may say – it's just a foreign accent, it's cute and it doesn't do any harm – but sometimes a particular feature of a foreign accent may perhaps not directly cause misunderstanding but it can hinder communication and wear the listener out. We managed to describe a few interesting principles and we published a special issue of *Speech Communication* magazine which summarizes the findings of the departments involved including one of our own articles.

**This elaborately structured project has lasted a number of years – will its results serve another purpose apart from educating another generation of phoneticians?**

**JV:** The outcome of this project is really those roughly 25 interns who travelled around Europe and learned something on a doctoral level, some on a post-doctoral level. These young researchers are now familiar with modern speech science and can look at speech not only through the eyes of a traditional linguist or psychologist but through those of engineers, psychologists and linguists at the same time. That could prove valuable.



(Marie Kohoutová)

*Translation: Pavla Horáková*