

From Czech to Slovak: Learn by Decoding

A transformation manual for Czech speakers acquiring Slovak — rules auto-generated from IE-CoR gold cognate data; pedagogy authored

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Provenance & scope. The rule tables (§2–§3) are sound correspondences harvested automatically by aligning Czech↔Slovak cognate pairs in the IE-CoR database (expert cognacy), ranked by frequency; they are phonemic (IPA-ish), not spelling rules, and are a data-driven first draft. The pronunciation, bridge-sentence and instructor sections are authored and illustrative — validate all of it against a full corpus and a native speaker before course use. Counts are small (a Swadesh-sized list), so treat low-count rules as tendencies.

1. The good news: your crib

Of 170 basic concepts, 154 (91%) are cognate — the Slovak word is a regular transformation of the Czech word you already know. Only 16 (9%) are genuinely different words to memorise. Your learning target is therefore mostly a rule system, not a vocabulary.

Sounds that usually stay the same (transfer for free): /ɔ/, /ä/, /s/, /k/, /v/, /p/, /m/, /h/, /z/, /b/, /x/, /ts/, /tʃ/, /ʃ/, /c/, /ʒ/.

2. The rules to learn — consonants (the recognition skeleton)

Consonants carry most of a word's identity; these are the highest-leverage rules.

rule	count	reliability	examples
/t/ → /c/	48	100%	hrä:t→hräc (play); tä:hnoʊt→cä:häc (pull)
/ʔ/ → ∅	12	92%	ʔu:stä→u:stä (mouth); ʔu:ski→u:ski (narrow)
/r/ → /r/	6	86%	ʔokrouhli→okru:hli (round); ʔostri→ostri: (sharp)
/ɾ/ → /r/	4	100%	tɾi→tri (three); kɾi:dlɔ→kri:dlɔ (wing)
/ɾ/ → /r/	4	50%	bɾixɔ→bruxɔ (belly); ɾekä→riekä (river)
/l/ → /l/	4	50%	vɛlki→vɛl'ki: (big); su:l→sɔl' (salt)
/j/ → ∅	4	50%	jme:ɲɔ→me:ɲɔ (name); bjɛʒɛt→bɛʒäc (run)
/d/ → /ɟ/	4	100%	jɛdɛɲ→jɛʒɛɲ (one); studɛni:→stujɛni: (cold)
/n/ → /ɲ/	3	50%	kɔɾɛɲ→kɔɾɛɲ (root); kä:mɛɲ→kamɛɲ (stone)

3. The rules to learn — vowels (the main body of shifts)

Vowels shift more than consonants; this is where most of the transformation lives.

rule	count	reliability	examples
/ɪ/ → /i/	17	85%	tlätʃɪt → tlätʃic (push); sxɪɪli: → zɦɪɪti: (rotten)
/i:/ → /i/	17	74%	ʔu:ski: → u:ski (narrow); ʔɔkrouɦli: → ɔkru:ɦli (round)
/ɛ/ → /ä/ (variable)	10	43%	ku:ʒɛ → kɔʒä (skin); zvrätset → vrätsäc (vomit)
/ɔ/ → ∅	7	88%	ʔɔkrouɦli: → ɔkru:ɦli (round); ʔɔpuxnɔut → puxnu:c (swell)
/ä:/ → /ä/	5	83%	ɦrät:t → ɦräc (play); tä:ɦnɔut → cäɦäc (pull)
/u:/ → /ɔ/	3	75%	su:l → sɔɭ (salt); ku:ʒɛ → kɔʒä (skin)
/u/ → ∅ (variable)	3	38%	tä:ɦnɔut → cäɦäc (pull); ʒluti: → ʒɭti: (yellow)

4. Genuinely new words (no rule bridges them) — and your hidden access points

These 16 concepts are not cognate, so no rule turns the Czech word into the Slovak one. But your language often still keeps a cognate of the Slovak word — as a cultism, technical term, archaism or regional word, sometimes with a shifted meaning. That word is an access point: a hook already in your head. Where the meaning differs we flag the false friend, so the hook helps you remember the Slovak word without misusing it. (E.g. Spanish has no everyday cognate of Portuguese vermelho ‘red’ — but it has bermellón ‘vermilion (pigment)’: the colour is not the same, the word is.)

	meaning	Czech (everyday)	Slovak	access via Czech	note — meaning may differ
back		zä:dä	xɪbä:t	hřbet	CZ hřbet ‘spine, ridge (of an animal or book)’ = cognate of SK chrbát ‘back’.
bad		ʃpätɪni:	zli:	zlý	CZ zlý ‘evil, angry’ = cognate of SK zlý — meaning narrowed; SK uses it for ‘bad’ generally.
bite		kousät	ɦri:sc	hryzat	CZ hrýzt / hryzat ‘to gnaw, nibble’ = cognate of SK hrýzt ‘to bite’.
claw		drä:p	päzu:r	pazour	CZ pazour ‘claw, paw’ (colloquial) = cognate of SK pazúr.
do		ʒɛläť	ɾɔbic	robota	CZ robota ‘drudgery, labour’ (the source of robot), dial. robít = cognate of SK robít ‘to do/work’.
hear		slɪʃɛt	pɔtʃuc	cítit	CZ cítit ‘to feel, sense’ shares the root čuti ‘to perceive’ with SK počut ‘to hear’.
hide		sxɔvä:vät	ukri:väc	krýt, ukrýt	CZ krýt, ukrýt ‘to cover, hide’ = cognate of SK ukrývat’.
hunt		ɭɔvɪt	pɔɭɔväc	pole	SK poľovať ‘to hunt’ is built on poľ ‘field’ — CZ pole ‘field’ is the root you recognise.
liver		jä:trä	pɛtʃɛɲ	pečeně, péct	CZ pečeně ‘roast’, péct ‘to bake’ = the root of SK pečeň ‘liver’ (the ‘roasted’ organ).
say		ɪi:tst	pɔvɛdäc	pověděl, odpověď	CZ pověděl ‘(he) told’, odpověď ‘answer’ = cognate of SK povedat’ ‘to say’.
shadow		sci:n	ciɛɲ	—	
sky		nɛbɛ	ɔblɔɦä	obloha	CZ obloha also means ‘sky, firmament’ (beside everyday nebe) = SK obloha.
smoke		kouɻ	dim	dým	CZ poetic dým ‘smoke’ (beside everyday kouř) = cognate of SK dym.

meaning	Czech (every-day)	Slovak	access via Czech	note — meaning may differ
stick	klátsək	pälıtsä	palice, palička	CZ palice ‘mallet, club’, palička ‘drum-stick’ = cognate of SK palica ‘stick’.
tail	ʔotsäs	xvost	chvost	CZ chvost ‘tail (literary; of a comet)’ (beside everyday ocas) = SK chvost.
thick	tlusti:	ɦrubi:	hrubý	CZ hrubý ‘coarse, rough, rude’ = cognate of SK hrubý — SK uses it for ‘thick’.

5. Pronunciation, rhythm & parallel listening

Reference accent — the one closest to you. Standard cultured Slovak (the central-Slovak-based standard).

Rhythm & sounds to train:

- Stress on the first syllable in both — the rhythm transfers directly.
- Slovak rhythmic law: a long syllable is usually not followed by another long one (the second shortens). Czech has no such rule — train the ear to the shortening.
- Slovak has soft d', t', ñ, Ľ (di, ti, ni, li are palatalised); and Czech ř simply becomes r (tři → tri).

Parallel listening. For each bridge below (next section), hear the target sentence, then its bridge echo in your own language, back to back. You train not only the sound rules but the mode — the rhythm and melody the target speaks in.

6. Bridge sentences — feel the mode

A bridge is your own language bent toward the target: real words of your language, sometimes less usual ones, chosen so the sentence lines up almost word-for-word with the target. It is not the most natural phrasing — that is given too — but it lets you cross into the target's form and mode in the smallest step. Read the target, then the bridge, then the natural line.

- Slovak (target): Dcéra číta knihu.
- Czech (bridge — bent to align): Dcera čítá knihu.
- Czech (natural): Dcera čte knihu.
- The daughter reads a book — bridge bends CZ čítat to echo SK čítat' (natural CZ is čte).
- Slovak (target): Chlapec pije studenú vodu.
- Czech (bridge — bent to align): Chlapec pije studenou vodu.
- Czech (natural): Chlapec pije studenou vodu.
- The boy drinks cold water — already transparent; hear the rhythmic-law shortening studenou→studenú.

7. How to study (decoding drill)

1. Trust the crib: read Slovak and let the Czech cognate surface.
2. Learn the consonant rules first — they let you recognise.
3. Drill the vowel rules by conversion: take Czech words and produce the Slovak form, then check.
4. Do parallel listening on the bridge sentences in the reference accent — internalise the mode, not just the segments.
5. Memorise the short new-word list.
6. Watch for false friends (form matches, meaning does not) — they are the rules' failures.

8. Pedagogical distance (this pair)

Cognate coverage 91%; 14 regular correspondence rules carry the bulk of the crossing; 16 new words. A close, cheap key — the method is at its strong end here.

9. For the instructor

Sequence. Teach recognition before production: the consonant rules (the skeleton) first, so learners decode what they hear and read; then drill the vowel rules by conversion. Use the bridge sentences. For each sentence show three lines — the target, the bridge (the student's language bent to align), and the natural phrasing — so students internalise the transformation of form and mode, not just the meaning. Fix one reference accent (the one closest to the student, in the Pronunciation section) and do parallel listening in it from day one: the mode — rhythm, vowel quality, nasality — is half the crossing. Teach false friends explicitly as the rules' failures. Keep sessions short and productive: a few rules + one bridge sentence + a conversion drill each.

This pair specifically. The pair is 90 % transparent; spend most time on the soft consonants and the rhythmic law, which are what make Slovak sound different despite near-identical spelling.

Rules generated by *build_manual.py* from IE-CoR; pronunciation, bridges and instructor notes authored. Refine against a full corpus, add the orthographic layer, a false-friend list and a native-speaker pass before use as a real course.