

Selected grammatical categories in the Czech language as understood by non-Czech speaking students¹

Abstract

Teaching elementary Czech to university students is a challenging task. Given the profound complexity and numerous exceptions found in the Czech language system, a balance between oversimplification on the one hand and the risk of overwhelming students on the other hand needs to be sought. The objective of this study is to find out whether and to what extent do beginner Czech learners understand how selected grammatical categories work in Czech. The results imply that more attention should be paid to word formation processes as insufficient understanding of them was identified not only in students who were new to Czech but also in the control group.

Introduction

In the era of high student mobility both inside and outside the European Union, it has become increasingly important to study learning strategies adopted by incoming students who have diverse backgrounds and needs. The acquisition of a new language is affected by students' mother tongue and its similarity or dissimilarity to the target language. The process is also substantially impacted by the language family the two languages belong to and whether a particular mother tongue is analytic or synthetic.

Students who apply for university studies in a different country usually have a good to excellent command of English, as this com-

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monly constitutes an integral part of the application process. Therefore, not only the mother tongue and English, but also other languages may interfere with the acquisition of Czech.

Although inner motivation for studying Czech varies significantly between students, outer motivation represented by, for example, high demands for the completion of a Czech course, is not commonly that strong because such courses principally serve for introducing students to a country through its language as a part of their cultural experience. The new language environment students find themselves in impacts the process in various ways. Those who like to socialize may immerse themselves in Czech, while others, who can be rather introverted, may substantially limit their exposure to the language.

Depending on the length, the courses are usually centered around students' basic needs and situations they might need to solve in the course of their stay. This shapes the process in a way that grammar in short-term courses (single semester) is usually pushed back while simple conversation and specific phrases have the priority. Putting practical application in the spotlight is an understandable strategy in the context of the limited time period of learning Czech, combined with the need to resort to practical basics and, at the same time, not to overwhelm students, especially when their study field is not language – oriented. Finding the best possible compromise when designing these courses is vitally important. As Hrdlička (2014) emphasizes, Czech formal morphology is very difficult, even when compared to other Slavic languages.

Given that the Czech language has, unlike English or Spanish, quite a simple system of tenses with one past, one present and one future tense, the real complexity of verb usage lies in their conjugation and word formation, especially in relation to verbal aspect which constitutes a fundamental element of Czech.

The aim of this paper is to investigate whether students new to Czech understand the concept of subject – predicate agreement and whether they recognize the past tense. Also, their perception of Czech inflection in contrast to a productive word formation process is

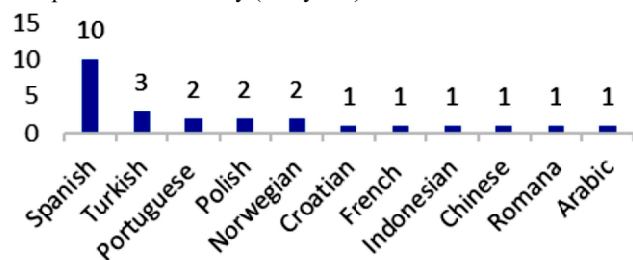
studied in terms of students' ability to separate these processes because proper differentiation should help them expand their vocabulary in a logical and systematic way.

Materials and Methods

Data were acquired and interpreted using a questionnaire concerned with selected grammatical features found in the sentence that reads: *Moje asistentka pracovala v Brně (My assistant worked in Brno)*. More specifically, it focused on the noun form *asistentka* and the verb form *pracovala*. The questionnaire was intentionally kept simple, focusing on a sentence perception in terms of subject – predicate agreement and inflection of these two expressions as seen by new students of Czech, who have very limited knowledge of the language (A0–A1), and then compared to more advanced students (A1 and higher).

The questionnaire, which was created in MS Forms and distributed online to non-Czech speakers studying at the University of Veterinary Sciences Brno and at Masaryk University, was completed by 46 students. The first one grouped the students who had studied Czech for 0–1 year (25 students), the second one those who had studied the language for 1–3 years (15 students), 3–5 years (3 students), and 5–10 years (3 students). The second group served as a control group and although it involved students with diverse levels (given the different number of years of studying Czech), they were considered from the perspective of their experience with and/or exposure to the language rather than the level they had acquired.

Table 1. Respondents nationality (0–1 years)



Nationality was inquired about to find out whether students' mother tongue belongs to those that utilize declension and conjugation because these distinctive features of a language could make certain grammatical structures of Czech easier to comprehend. As seen in Table 1, most of them were Spanish native speakers and 3 respondents stated their language to be a Slavic one (Polish and Croatian), which inherently gives them a significant advantage.

The respondents were provided with the English version of the sentence as the objective was not to make them think about the translation but about the grammatical structures used. The questionnaire was subdivided into 3 parts according to the studied grammatical category. The first part was concerned with the grammatical gender of the noun *asistentka*, whose suffix *-ka* signifies the feminine gender created through the process of feminine noun formation. The aim of this noun – related question was to find out whether “new” students of Czech take account of noun endings and consider them significant or not.

The second part focused on the verb *pracovala* which is a conjugated form of *pracovat*. This is quite complex as it entails the *-l* participle indicating the preterit, the only past tense used in modern Czech, followed with *-a* gender ending indicating the femininity of a verb in past tense as well as its singular number. As Czech applies subject – predicate agreement, it corresponds in gender and number to the aforementioned *asistentka*. More specifically, the noun, which functions as the subject of this sentence, is in charge of the verb form; it determines it. The third part looked into the recognition of gender-number agreement which is another fundamental feature of Czech that deserves attention

Results

The acquired results were separated into two groups. The first one studied the questionnaires collected from students whose studies of Czech did not exceed one year (0–1 year). The second group involved questionnaires exceeding that period. It is likely that some respondents completed the questionnaire on their phones which may have

produced typos. That means that not all incorrectly written answers should be attributed to a lack of knowledge but rather to carelessness. Therefore, the answers that seem to have been the result of such activity were grouped (see the charts below).

Students were not supposed to produce any part of the word. Instead, they were asked to:

- 1) remove a segment of it [*asistentka* – *asistent* (1a); *pracovala* – *pracoval* (2a)], which is an easier task in comparison with active production of a specific ending or a suffix, or
- 2) simply detect a certain part or pattern found in the presented expressions (all other questions). Furthermore, we can see that a few students decided to avoid specifying their answers (Fig. 1c, 2e).

They might have chosen not to because they did not consider it relevant but the possibility they avoided it intentionally should not be dismissed.

Perception of the noun form. The question *What is the opposite grammatical gender of the noun asistentka?* produced 88% of correct answers which showed that the respondents were generally aware of the *asistent* – *asistentka* distinction at early stages of learning. The control group confirmed the trend (Fig. 1b).

Figure 1a.

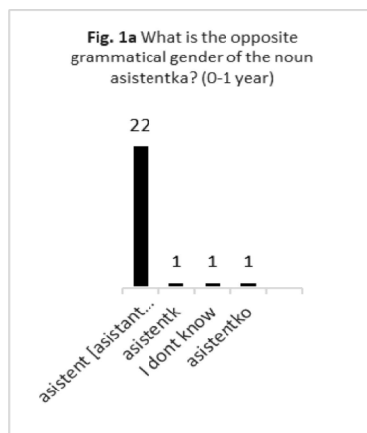
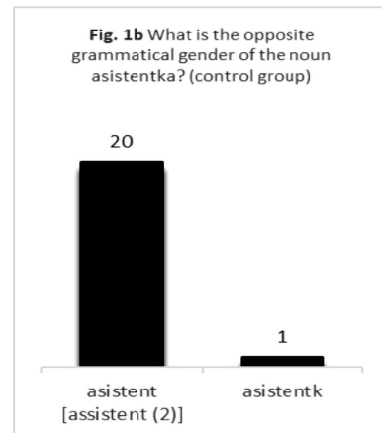


Figure 1b.



The next question was whether the students were able to identify the part of the word *asistentka* that signifies its feminine gender. As shown in Fig. 1c, the answers were variable and specific identification of this word forming suffix posed an issue.

The chart shows that the particular part which is perceived by this group of students to be responsible for feminine noun formation varies from *-ka* through a sole *-a* to quite complex *-tka* endings. Linguistically speaking, the ending is only *-a*, with *-k* being a word – formation suffix, but such a detailed distinction is not relevant at this stage of learning. In the context of this paper, the best answer would be *-ka* as this distinguishes the feminine *asistentka* from the masculine *asistent*.

It is imperative to note that there is significant variability associated with the *-a* ending in Czech nouns. It serves diverse purposes in Czech declension, participating in the formation of different grammatical categories. It occurs in all genders (*žena* (a woman, f.), *předseda* (a chairman, m.), *kuřata* (chickens, n., pl.), both numbers (*žena* (a woman, sg.), *kuřata* (chickens, pl.)) and certain cases (N. of *žena* (a woman), G of *pán* – *pána* (without a man), A. of *města* (I can see towns, pl.)). As shown in Fig. 1c, the correct option *-ka* was the most frequent answer. Unfortunately, 4 respondents did not specify the ending which makes their answers incomplete. Given that students new to Czech become familiar with the structures *Já jsem student* (I am a student (m.)) – *Já jsem studentka* (I am a student (f.)) at the beginning of any Czech course when the topic of introducing and meeting people is presented, the fact they did not associate it with any already learnt structure is worth noting because the *asistent* – *asistentka* pair follows the same pattern. Also, the removal of *-a* results in the incomprehensible word form *asistentk*. The same applies to 3 other students who decided for *-tka* which would leave only a fragment *asisten*, making the word incomprehensible as well.

It is surprising that the control group manifested quite a high degree of either incorrect answers (19%) or failed to provide any answer at all (14%).

Figure 1c.

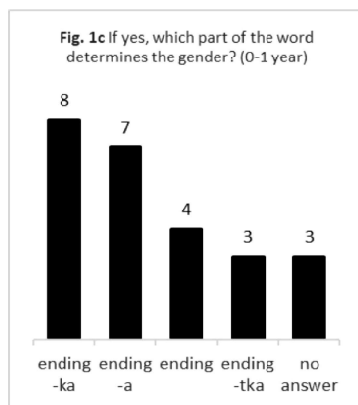
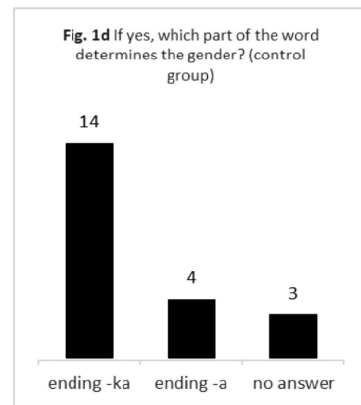


Figure 1d.



The results obtained from both groups imply that more attention should be paid to this phenomenon in order to make the distinctions like *student – studentka* and *asistent – asistentka* clear.

Afterwards, the **perception of the verb form** was studied. As seen in Fig. 2a, the ending *-a* is well understood to be forming the feminine of the verb *pracoval*. There is one incidence of *provocal* and one incidence of *pracoval* which I find to be the result of carelessness or automatic corrections rather than a deliberate act.

Figure 2a.

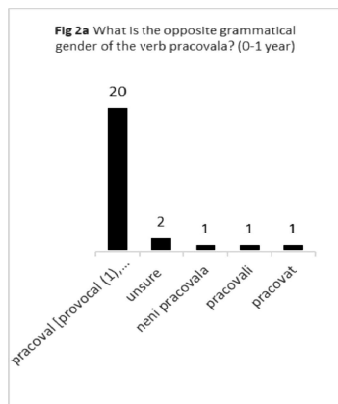
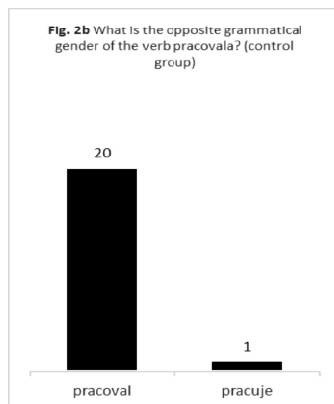


Figure 2b.



I will comment on the other answers which all occurred only once but they could have been caused by the following: *pracovali* and *pracovat* may be a consequence of not understanding the question, *neni pracovala* shows interference possibly caused by the verb *to be* whose usage and conjugation is typically in the center of attention at this stage of learning.

Figure 2c.

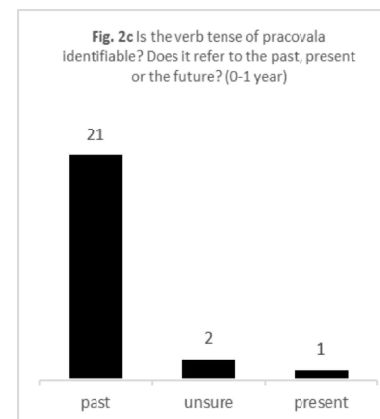
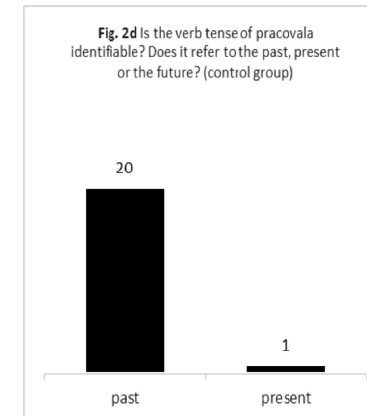


Figure 2d.



The next question looked into the recognition of the past tense. Again, the respondents in both groups alike were able to identify the tense (Fig. 2c), but the identification of the segment forming it posed an issue and the answers varied significantly (Fig. 2e).

The past tense of the verbs in Czech is formed by the *-l*, participle, that is, a combination of the *-l* suffix with a corresponding ending. This feature is regular in Czech. It is easier to detect it in comparison to present (diverse verb classes) and future (often unintelligible, the role of a verb aspect is very significant, complicating the differentiation between present and future due to diverse prefixation²).

² For more information about expressing the future in Czech visit <https://www.czechency.org/slovník/FUTURUM>.

Figure 2e.

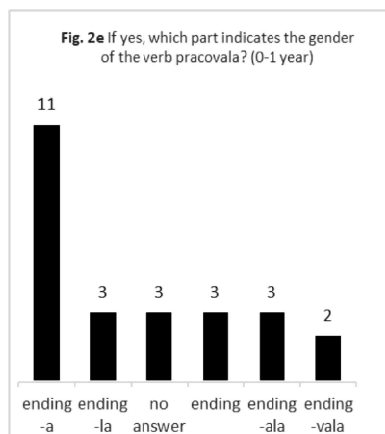


Figure 2f.

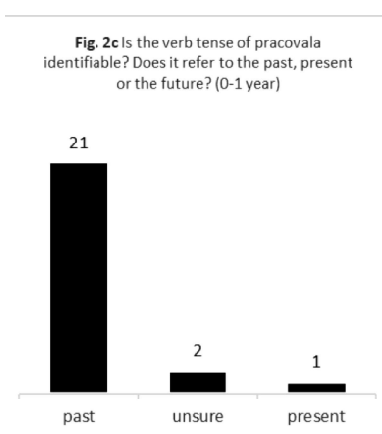


Figure 3a.

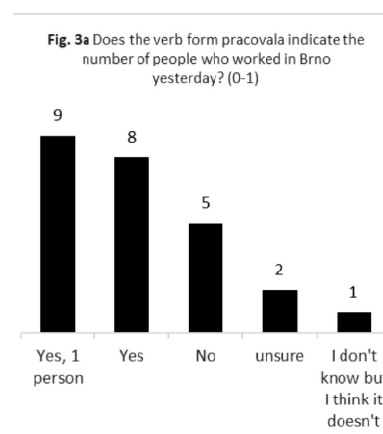
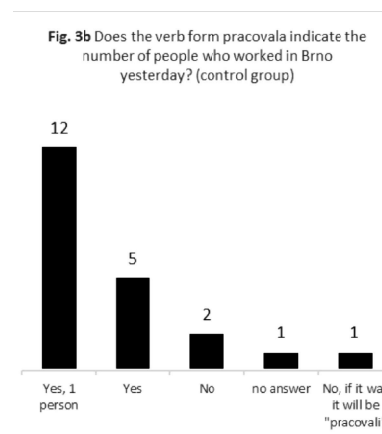


Figure 3b.



The answers looking into the issue of which particular segment determines the gender of the verb *pracovala* produced variable answers as well. The majority of the students correctly determined *-a* ending, but there were evenly distributed incorrect answers ranging from *-la*, *-ala* and even to *-vala* endings.

Regarding the **grammatical number**, it is evident that some beginners were not familiar with its functions. Number is grammatically dependent on the respective noun, reflecting its singular or plural form even in the absence of the noun itself. The answers resulted from incomplete knowledge of conjugation in the past combined with insufficient understanding of gender – number agreement in Czech.

Fig. 3a revealed an important issue. Despite the fact that not only the conjugated form *pracovala* but also the word *asistentka* both cohesively refer to just one person, 5 students stated that one cannot identify the number of people involved and 3 of them stated they did not know the answer. It is obvious that some students are not familiar with subject – number agreement.

Conclusion

It has been found that identification of selected grammatical categories (i.e., gender, tense, and, to a lesser degree, number) is not very demanding for beginning Czech learners but the ability to determine a particular segment which represents a semantic distinction by means of functional grammar poses a problem. Although it may seem not to be important at early stages of learning, the features studied in this sample sentence are systemic, they do not represent exceptions, and their understanding and subsequent application would make Czech a bit less complicated. It would also contribute to better orientation within the language system.

It is understandable and expected that students use simplification strategies and try to generalize by means of applying already learnt structures on new content. The generalization should not be taken too far, teachers help to regulate this process. Although it is difficult to learn Czech, oversimplification is considered defective and thus discouraged by experts (Hrdlička, 2009).

Both groups alike (Fig. 1c and 1d) manifested an erroneous pattern in the way they treated the feminine noun formation process as demonstrated on the word *asistentka*. Students in both groups had quite a high rate of incorrect or unanswered questions (beginners 68%, control group 33%). It seems it may be beneficial to dedicate more time to teaching word formation processes to help reduce this rate. Nouns could be possibly taught in gender pairs from the very beginning, especially those that do not undergo any structural changes, thus introducing students to the regular pattern of feminine noun formation first before proceeding to those involving changes of the base word (*student – studentka, asistent – asistentka, Francouz – Francouzka*). Although there are numerous word formation processes used to make nouns in Czech, this one is very common, and, according to The Dictionary of Affixes used in Czech “exceptionally multifunctional” (Vondráček 2021).

As demonstrated in Fig. 2c, students of elementary Czech are able to grasp the way Czech speakers express the past at early stages of learning. Therefore, there is no need to delay introducing students to this tense which, in fact, is not that complicated in Czech. In relation to this finding, I have compared a few modern Czech textbooks in terms of their approach to introducing students to past tense in Czech. For example, Hejtmánková in *Czech for English speakers* (2015) and Hronová, Hron in *Čeština pro cizince H+H – First Steps* (2009) do not mention the formation of past tense at all; M. Boccou Kestřánková, D. Štěpánková a K. Vodičková in their book *Čeština pro cizince* (2020) start with future tense (in lessons 6 and 7) and introduce the past after that (in lesson 8); while Lída Holá’s *Czech Step by Step* (2016) opts for the opposite approach and starts with the past (in lesson 6) and future (in lesson 8). An approach adopted by Jana Harperová in *Čeština Extra* (2012), which concentrates on Czech grammar, is a particularly interesting one as she introduces past tense at the beginning of the book. As we can see, the methodologies vary. I do not consider one approach to be better than another. They are all

logical, viewing Czech from different perspectives, allowing teachers and students to find an alternative best tailored to their needs.

Declension, conjugation, and word formation are different processes with their own sets of rules. I consider it important to remind students that these three seemingly separated categories must work in synergy and respect subject – predicate as well as subject – number agreement when sentences are formed.

Even though the sample size is not large, the results may have some implications for teachers of Czech as a foreign language:

- 1) word formation processes deserve more attention in teaching Czech;
- 2) past tense may be presented to students at early stages of learning the Czech language.

The study did not take account of a textbook used or a teaching style adopted. These factors, among many others, substantially contribute to the success of an institution-based language learning process.

In my experience, it has proven to be more beneficial and maybe more practical to introduce students to the *he was here – he is here – he will be here* distinction (*byl tady – je tady – bude tady*) then to the *I work – you work – he works* distinction (*já pracuji – ty pracuješ – on pracuje*) first, as the former, given its temporal perspective, may enable students to communicate more effectively at early stages of learning Czech.

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