Czech verbs with preposition-less instrumental and their Chinese equivalents: the acquisition of instrumental constructions by Chinese learners of Czech

Key words: L2 Czech; Chinese; instrumental case; verb construction; language acquisition

The paper examines how the frequent Czech verbs with the preposition-less instrumental case are conveyed in Chinese, a language without cases, and how structural differences affect its acquisition by Chinese speakers.
The Czech instrumental case can be understood as "a peripheral accessory (...) associated either with an activity or with another item" (Janda & Clancy, 2006, p. 181). In the former case, it designates literally or metaphorically a path through space or time, from which several meanings are derived: 1) an instrument (means), 2) a controlled item, 3) an item with a positive or negative emotional value. In the latter case, the instrumental describes labels/categories of other items.
This study is based on the 100 most frequent Czech verb lemmas with instrumental objects from the Czech corpus SYN2020. Based on their semantic classification and comparison with their Chinese equivalents, four verb groups are identified:

1. Verbs expressing ‘means/instrument’ correspond to the Chinese structure "to do sth. with the help of sth. / with an instrument" (ex. 1).
2. Verbs denoting actions and emotions lack a direct equivalent in Chinese and prefer the SVO order (ex. 2).
3. Verbs expressing labels, i.e. phases of an action or classification, correspond to Chinese structures with the verb *为(wei)*, meaning "*as*" in English. (ex. 3)
4. Some verbs have no systematic parallel in Chinese.

The empirical part of the research is based on a questionnaire distributed to B1-B2 Chinese learners of Czech (N=13), testing representative verb lemmas in each category. It consists of two parts:

1. A multiple-choice task, where respondents select a Czech structure based on a Chinese sentence.
2. A translation task from Czech to Chinese.

The questionnaire, including distractors, is designed to test the following hypotheses:

1. The first category of verbs will be the easiest to acquire due to semantic and syntactic parallels.
2. Learners will tend to use the accusative instead of the instrumental for the second category.
3. In the third category, students will insert *为(wei)* in the translation, meaning “to be” or “to act as”, to mirror Czech instrumental constructions.
4. Verbs with no systematic L1 equivalent, including some label verbs, will be the most difficult.

Preliminary results confirm most hypotheses. For verbs denoting actions and emotions, students frequently used the accusative instead of the instrumental. In the third category, the tendency to insert *为(wei)* appeared in the translation task. The results for the first group were less satisfactory than expected, possibly due to sentence complexity or individual differences. The last category had the lowest accuracy, likely due to both syntactic differences and lower verb frequency.
These findings offer insights into L2 acquisition regarding the (non-)correspondence of syntactic constructions in typologically different languages.

References

Janda, L.A. & Clancy, S.J., 2006. *The Case Book for Czech*, Bloomington: Slavica Publ.

Křen, M. – Cvrček, V. – Henyš, J. – Hnátková, M. – Jelínek, T. – Kocek, J. – Kovářiková, D. – Křivan, J. – Milička, J. – Petkevič, V. – Procházka, P. – Skoumalová, H. – Šindlerová, J. – Škrabal, M.: SYN2020: reprezentativní korpus psané češtiny. Ústav Českého národního korpusu FF UK, Praha 2020. Available from < http://www.korpus.cz>

Examples

(1)

Vybavil		laboratoř	novými	přístroji.	
equip$_{3.SG.PRET}$		laboratory$_{ACC}$	new$_{INSTR}$	instruments$_{INSTR}$	
他	**用**	新	设备	装备了	实验室。
he	**with**	new	instruments	equipped	laboratory

"He equipped the laboratory with new instruments."

(2) a.

V poslední době		se zabývá	výzkumnou	činností.
lately		engage$_{3.SG.PRES}$	research$_{INSTR}$	activities$_{INSTR}$
他	近年来	一直从事	研究	活动。
he	lately	engage	research	activities

"Lately, he has been engaged in research activities."

b.

Vězni	trpívají	hladem.	
prisoners	suffer$_{HAB}$	hunger$_{INSTR}$	
囚犯	经常	遭受	饥饿（之苦）。
prisoners	often	suffer	hunger

"Prisoners often suffer from hunger."

(3)

Stal se		novým	ředitelem.
become$_{3.SG.PRET}$		new$_{INSTR}$	director$_{INSTR}$
他	成为了	新	主任。
he	became-**as**	new	director

"He became the new director."

(4)

Jazyk	disponuje	množstvím	výrazových	prostředků.
language	possesses	variety$_{INSTR}$	expressive	means
语言	拥有	大量的	表达	手段。
language	possesses	variety	expressive	means

"The language possesses a variety of expressive means."