

# Czech Language News

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## Message from the President

Dear Members of NAATC:

Czech studies can be said to be a ‘virtual’ community in both senses of the word. Outside the Czech Republic, it exists on the margins of other departments (Russian, history, literature, music...), with one specialist here, another there, and rarely more than two in any one place. For most of us, all our day-to-day professional interactions involve colleagues who flinch at the sight of a *háček*. So we are ‘virtual’ in that Czech studies rarely forms part of our everyday worlds.

Organizations like NAATC, however, help make us a ‘virtual’ community in the other sense of the word—one connected by shared interests over long distances and with only occasional personal contact. Three times a year NAATC’s newsletters and conference panels remind us that other people share our interests, and when we voice concerns in, say, *Czech Language News*, we can be sure that there are people out there listening.

At the annual business meeting at last year’s AATSEEL conference in Washington, we discussed how we can help NAATC continue to play this role in the future.

First, all of us would like to see NAATC expand its contacts with the Czech Republic, and revive the Czech side of its organization. We could benefit greatly from being more aware of what our colleagues there are doing, and they in turn will appreciate more news about the Czech community abroad. For instance, many of you may not have known about the Czech Language Institute’s conference this September, an announcement of which appears in this issue. Second, as an Old World resident, I am keen to increase NAATC’s profile here in Europe. NAATC is not widely known here, and yet some of the largest and most successful Czech programs outside the Czech Republic are in Britain, Scandinavia, and German-speaking countries. Third, we would like to see NAATC interacting more regularly with Czech heritage organizations, and learning about the Czech art, music and cultural events that they promote and sponsor.

What can you, as NAATC members, do to help? First, you can contribute to CzLN – in English or in Czech! If you want to write, but don’t know what to write about, ask and we’ll suggest something. Second, you can propose papers for NAATC’s sponsored panels (Czech language/linguistics; Czech and Slovak music; Czech culture in North America) at AATSEEL 2001. Third, and most basically, you can pay your dues. NAATC runs on dues payments—they cover printing and mailing costs for the newsletter. It’s virtually the most important thing you can do.

Neil Bermel, Sheffield University

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### Teaching the “General” Meaning of the Czech Present Perfective

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The modality of the present perfective in Slavic languages in sentences like Czech *To vám neřeknu*, Russian *Ja vam ne skažu* ‘I can’t tell you’ instead of ‘I won’t tell you’ is generally recognized. Czech seems to go further than Russian in its appropriation of perfective lexical items into non-aspectual modal status: e.g., *dovedu, dokážu, dá se*: e.g., *To vám nedovedu říct* ‘I can’t tell you that’. These examples expressing possibility and achievement are also generally recognized (i.e., no one claims that *dovedu* still means ‘lead to’, *dokážu* still means ‘prove’ or that *dá se* has anything to do with giving. The fact that present perfective modals in lexical items as well are commoner in Czech than in Russian can be illustrated by an example like the following:

- 1a. Já ho nesnesu. (commoner than nesnáším)
- 1b. Ja ego ne vynušu.  
‘I can’t stand him.’

Perfectives are also drafted to express possibility and achievement in a group of Czech verbs prefixed by *u-*: e.g., *Uneseš to?* ‘Can you carry that?’ *Ujede 150 kilometrů za hodinu* ‘It can do 150 kilometers an hour’ and others.

Less often noted, though, is the use of present perfectives in what we might call the “general” meaning. F. Kopečný; (*Slovesný vid v češtině*, 1962:34) uses the terms *mimočasový*; ‘tenseless’ and *charakterizační* ‘(generally) characteristic’. On the same page he explains that a perfective may even express an idea that is not general but actually going on: *Neplač, maminka to uvaří a dá ti papat.* ‘Don’t cry; Mommy’s **cooking** it and will give to you to eat’. Here, Mommy is already cooking and, hence, the verb is no more than a present tense with implied endpoint rather than a future. Perfectives of “general” (the term “gnomic” has sometimes been suggested) meaning can be confusing in translation, though, unless the point is explained directly in the classroom. In these two examples from C. Townsend (“Can Aspect Stand Prosperity”, *The Scope of Slavic Aspect*, 1985:291) Czech perfectives correspond to Russian imperfectives:

- 2a. Země **oběhne** slunce jednou za rok.
- 2b. Zemlja **obxodit** solnce raz v god.  
‘The earth **circles** the sun once a year.’
- 3a. On si ted' **vydělá** (or vydělává) 1500 měsíčně.
- 3b. On **zarabatyvaet** 1500 v mesjac.  
‘He **earns** 1500 a month.’

The ubiquitousness of such verbs and the importance (difficulty) of their correct translation can be illustrated by examining some examples from Michael Heim’s *Readings in Czech* (1985) (authors and page numbers in Heim are given). In scanning some of the often rather difficult passages in this reader I found the following examples

where failure to recognize the “general” meaning of perfective presents (and assigning it future meaning it doesn’t have) results in inadequate comprehension of the construction. Present perfectives and their English renditions are boldfaced:

4. Když to **povážím**, strýc císaře, a voni ho **zastřelí** (Lit. Cz *zastřelí*).  
‘When I **think** about it, His Majesty’s uncle, and they **shoot** him.’ (J. Hašek, 47)
5. Vstoupit do továrny, ovšem. Jenže každý sem **přijde** s něčí vizitkou.  
‘Coming to the factory, fine. Only everyone **comes** (thinks he **can come**) on somebody’s business card.’ (K. Čapek, 49)
6. I to však co z ní **zahlédneme**, naplňuje nás obdivem k básnivosti jazyka.  
‘But even what we (**can**) **glimpse** of it fills us with wonder at the poeticness of the language.’ (J. Mukařovský, 91)

*Perfectives of “general” (the term “gnomic” has sometimes been suggested) meaning can be confusing in translation... unless the point is explained directly in the classroom.*

7. ... mé dílo se bude dávat pro “chudé dělníky”, kteří **vydělají** týdně 18 dolarů ...  
‘my work is going to be presented for “poor workers”, who **earn** 18 dollars a week.’ (A. Dvořák, 98)

8. **Utratíme** zde málo a tak doufám, že ,, můžeme nejméně 400 dol., uspořit!.  
‘We **spend** little here and so I hope that we can save at least 400 dollars.’ (A. Dvořák 100)
9. **Poznáme** je dnes podle toho, že odčínují křivdy, napravují chyby, ...  
‘We (**can**) **recognize** them today by the fact that they are righting wrongs, correcting mistakes ...’ (L. Vaculík, 104)

A final example of the “general” meaning of the perfective present is stage directions, in which English uses the present tense but Czech frequently uses the perfective present instead of the imperfective present, sometimes even in the same line:

10. *MARIUS vstoupí*: Pane řediteli, nějaká dáma prosí – (K. Čapek 49)  
*MARIUS otevře dveře*: Račte, paní. *Vejde*  
*HELENA GLORYOVA, MARIUS odejde*.  
(K. Čapek 49.)
11. *HELENA vstane a podává mu ruku*: Mé čestné slovo. (K. Čapek 50)

English has the present tense in all cases: ‘**enters, opens, enters, leaves, gets up, offers**’. Notice, of course, that here as in all the above cases the English present tense corresponding to the Czech ‘general’ present perfective is always the *non-progressive*. The *progressive* present corresponds, quite naturally, to the Czech present imperfective.