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The Czech able

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THE CZECH *ABLE*[1]

Abstract

In the article, I look at two constructions that roughly correspond to the English morpheme -ABLE: the first is a synthetic form based on a verb, in which the root is followed by the suffix TEL and the suffix N, while the other is an analytic form with the verb in the infinitive and a form of the verb GIVE and an impersonal SE. I argue for a particular nanosyntactic view of the THEME-TEL-N combination such that the morphemes are a particular spell out of the features that correspond to the paraphrase with the verb GIVE and the morpheme SE.

Keywords

Czech; morphology; nanosyntax; -ABLE

1 Outline

Consider the examples of the Czech adjectives with *able* meaning in (1)[2]

(1)   *able* = (pref)-root-theme-TEL-N-adj
    a.   u-děl-*a-tel-n*-ý
           pref-do-AJ-TEL-N-adj.M.SG 'doable'
    b.   forward-*ova-tel-n*-ý
           forward-OVA-TEL-N-adj.M.SG 'forwardable'
    c.   léč-*i-tel-n*-ý
           cure-I-TEL-N-adj.M.SG 'curable'

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2   From a long list of discussions on English *able*, I only refer to ALEXIADOU (2018), see references therein. See also CAHA – KARLÍK (2005) for an analysis of the Czech counterpart.

(2)   *paraphrase* = GIVE SE V$_{INF}$
      a.   dá   se   u-děl-a-t
            give.3.SG   SE   do.INF
            'it can be done'
      b.   dá   se   forward-ova-t
            give.3.SG   SE   forward.INF
            'it can be forwarded'
      c.   dá   se   léč-i-t
            give.3.SG   SE   cure.INF
            'it can be cured'

The morpheme composition in (1) seems straightforward enough: an optional prefix, root, theme, the suffix -TEL, the suffix -N and the adjectival agreement. In what follows, I argue for a particular nanosyntactic view of the *theme-TEL-N* combination such that the morphemes are a particular spell out of the features that correspond to the paraphrase in (2): a form of a verb GIVE with an impersonal SE and the infinitive of the verb.[3]

A note on the paraphrase: There are multiple such paraphrases possible – also without GIVE, but with another modal verb, as for instance, a paraphrase to (2-b) might be *může být forwardován* 'it can be forwarded'. Notice, however, that the Czech GIVE is special: it has a modal reading. I argue that there are independent reasons to think that the morpheme N behaves like GIVE in other respects (and that is why I concentrate precisely on this paraphrase).

2 Theme

Looking at the morphological makeup of the Czech *able*, the first component – after the root (and the optional prefix, that I leave outside the discussion here) – is the thematic suffix. The themes in Slavic introduce argument structure of the verb; there are 7 of them: Ø, OVA, E, EJ, NU, AJ and I. [4]

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3   I am not concerned with perfectivity of the verb: both perfective (*sdělit – sdělitelný* 'communicate – communicable') and imperfective (*dělit – dělitelný* 'divide – divisible') verbs can get an *able* derived adjective, though, it seems that in general, perfective verbs are more prone to creating them (and I do not discuss it any further). It is also true that many of the *able* adjectives are better negated, but I leave it aside as well.

4   For the classification of the themes, I follow the one-stem verb system introduced by Jakobson (1948) and brought into the current shape by Townsend – Janda (1996). It uses the stem that is 'more telling' for the (Russian) conjugation system; its advantage is that it helps to distinguish between classes that – in other classifications – would remain lumped together, cf. EJ and I in the traditional Czech classification. It, however, means that the theme in (1-a) is marked AJ, despite the fact that in its past stem the glide J does not appear; for the sake of consistency, the theme is still marked as the present stem theme AJ, cf. *děl-AJ-í* 'they do'.

(3)   The verbal types

Theme	Verb type	External arg.
Ø	unproductive	–
E	unacc/stative	–
EJ	unacc/psych	–
NU	degree achievement	–
NU	semelfactive	+
I	causative	+
AJ	all types	+
OVA	all types	+

For instance, the theme NU creates either semelfactive verbs (4) or degree achievements[5], i.e. unaccusatives (5) on the other, see Taraldsen Medová – Wiland (forthcoming) for some details.

(4)   *křik-nou-t* 'shout-NU-$_{INF}$'
       Karel   na   mě   drze   křik-nu-l.
       Karel   to   me$_{ACC}$ cheekily   shout-NU-L$_{ACT.PART}$
       'Karel shouted at me cheekily once.'

(5)   *hloup-nou-t* 'stupid-NU-$_{INF}$'
       Karel   stár-nu-l   a   hloup-nu-l.
       Karel   old-NU-L$_{ACT.PART}$ and   stupid-NU-L$_{ACT.PART}$
       'Karel was getting old and stupid.'

Crucially, not all of the themes can appear in the *able* construction and the decisive factor is whether the thematic suffix introduces (or not) an external argument. Thus, the *able* suffix (that is, the TEL part) can attach to the verbal theme AJ, OVA and I, as shown in (1). There are also *able* adjectives derived from the NU themes (for semelfactives only), as in (6).

(6)   NU *able*
       a.   ne-o-po-mi-*nu-tel-n-ý*
             NEG-pref-pref-root-NU-TEL-N-adj.M.SG 'unforgettable'
       b.   ne-dotk-*nu-tel-n-ý*
             NEG-root-NU-TEL-N-adj.M.SG 'untouchable'

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5   I use the name 'degree achievement' to be consistent with the literature, but as everybody else, I don't see these verbs as achievements.

   c.   ne-zvlád-*nu-tel-n-ý*
        NEG-root-NU-TEL-N-adj.M.SG 'impossible'

   d.   po-stih-*nu-tel-n-ý*
        pref-root-NU-TEL-N-adj.M.SG 'affectable'

However, there are no *able* adjectives derived from the themes E and the (obsolete) theme Ø, as shown in (7). And yet, the intended meanings – cf. 'visible' in (7-a) – is possible, if the theme changes from E/Ø to the theme I, as shown in (8). [6]

(7) *E, *Ø *able*
    a. *vid-ě-tel-n-ý
       Intended: visible
    b. *slyš-ě-tel-n-ý
       Intended: audible
    c. *pro-vés-Ø-tel-n-ý
       Intended: doable
    d. *snés-Ø-tel-n-ý
       Intended: tolerable

(8) *E, *Ø *able* → I *able*
    a. vid-i-tel-n-ý
       visible
    b. ne-slyš-i-tel-n-ý
       inaudible
    c. pro-ved-i-tel-n-ý
       doable
    d. snes-i-tel-n-ý
       tolerable

The contrast between (7) and (8) follows if, as I propose, the theme E introduces an external argument that is not a 'proper' agent and that the *able* adjective needs a proper ([+HUM]) agentive argument. Among the Czech themes, AJ, OVA and I are such that they introduce such an argument;[7] the theme I is the canonical introducer of an external volitional argument.[8,9]

3 TEL

The claim that the Czech *able* structure needs a [+HUM] external argument is corroborated by the fact that a part of the *able* spell out is a suffix otherwise found

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6   It is not the case that none of the Ø-themes can create an *able* adjective. If we take the verb *krýt* 'cover', the derived *able* adjective with Ø theme is perfectly fine: *za-kry-tel-n-ý* 'coverable'. It seems that only open-root verbs are prone to such derivation, cf. *nés-Ø-t* 'carry' doesn't allow an *able* in (7-d) vs. *krý-Ø-t* 'cover' above does. I leave the issue open.

7   I leave the theme EJ that introduces mainly secondary imperfectives out of discussion.

8   Needless to say, we are dealing with strong tendencies mudded by the phonological changes in the historical development of the Slavic languages. Thus, there are also unaccusative verbs with the I theme, *pěnit* 'foam' is an example. However, the majority of the I theme verbs are transitive and among them, the majority has a volitional external argument.

9   Moreover, the thematic E-I alternation is visible in other contexts as well, always in such a way that E appears in a context where the external argument is 'suppressed', cf. in passive N/T participle *slaz-E-n-ý* 'sweetened' – and the I theme whenever the [+HUM] external argument is at play, cf. in the infinitive *sladit* 'sweeten' and finite forms: *slad-í-m* 'I sweeten' and *slad-i-l* 'he sweetened'. And, if correct, also in the *able* constructions for certain verb classes, i.e. for the transitive E and Ø verbs.

(exclusively) in agent denoting nouns derived from verbs. I take it that it is precisely this suffix TEL that 'eats up' the [+HUM] portion of the external argument featural makeup.

The closest equivalent to the Czech agent denoting nouns as *cviči-tel* 'trainer' are nouns like 'advis-er, 'teach-er', etc.

It is the suffix TEL what is responsible for the restriction on theme vowels. In (9), I show that the thematic vowels which allow for the *able* forms combine with TEL. In (10), I show that TEL does not combine with the thematic vowels that refuse *able*.

(9)   *TEL-assuming verbs*
   a.   škol-i-tel
        supervisor
   b.   řed-i-tel
        director
   c.   kon-a-tel
        doer
   d.   zřiz-ova-tel
        establisher

(10)   *TEL-refusing verbs*
   a.   *vid-ě-tel
        Intended: 'seeer'
   b.   *slyš-ě-tel
        Intended: 'hearer'
   c.   *pro-vés-Ø-tel
        Intended: 'doer'
   d.   *snés-Ø-tel
        Intended: 'tolerant person'

Notice the minimal contrast using the verb *nosit* 'carry$_{habit}$'. On the one hand, there is the noun *nos-i-č* 'carri-er' which can be inanimate: 'a thing that is used to carry information', as luggage, etc. It can also be animate, but then, it has a low degree of prestige: *nos-i-č* 'a person who carries luggage'. On the other hand, there is the TEL-derived noun *nos-i-tel* 'a person who bears (carries) a distinction'.[10]

To sum up: the suffix TEL is inherently linked to the [+HUM] feature.

4 N

Recall the paraphrase in (2) with the verb GIVE. There is a class of verbs in Czech (semelfactives) which can also be paraphrased with GIVE. Thus, (4) above can be paraphrased as 'Karel gave me a cheeky shout'. More examples like that are given in (11).[11]

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10   There are a few TEL-derived nouns that do not refer to a human being: *dělitel* 'divisor' and *jmeno-vatel* 'denominator'. They were introduced in the 19TH century as a part of new (German-replacing) Czech math terminology. These nouns 'feel' more agentive than verb-derived nouns introduced by another suffx, -EC, for instance *dělenec* 'dividend'.

11   For detailed proposal on the GIVE in semelfactives, see Taraldsen Medová – Wiland (forthcoming).

(11)   GIVE paraphrase of NU-based[12] semelfactives
    a.   kop-nou-t 'give a kick'
    b.   štěk-nou-t 'give a bark'
    c.   hvízd-nou-t 'give a whistle'

There are reasons to think that *-nou-/-nu-* should be split into two morphemes, namely *-n-* and *-ou-/-u-*. That is because in the synthetic present and future tense of these verbs, only *-n-* is preserved, and *-u-/-ou-* is not. Instead, *-n-* is followed directly by the vowel *-e-*, yielding forms such as *kop-n-e* '(s)he is going to give a kick.' It thus seems reasonable to conclude that the constant part (the meaning of *give*) resides in the morpheme *-n-*, while the variable/inflectional part of the meaning (infinitive vs. tensed form) resides in the vowel following *-n-*.

My proposal is that the syntax and semantics is simplified if – indeed – the N's are unified, both meaning GIVE. The *able* forms then have the modal reading because we independently know that the Czech GIVE may have a modal meaning.

5 SE

In the previous sections, I presented the morphological pieces of the *able* form, now we look at the paraphrase. The paraphrase contains GIVE, and I claim that GIVE corresponds to the morpheme N in the *able* form. Furthermore, the *able* form contains a theme vowel – and the theme vowel finds its parallel in the infinitive. But there is one morpheme in the paraphrase that does not seem to correspond to anything in the *able* form: the SE. At the same time, there is one morpheme in the *able* form that does not correspond to anything in the paraphrase – and that is the TEL morpheme. So, if the parallel is worth pursuing, then SE must correspond to TEL. We already know that TEL is linked to [+HUM], so, if the parallel is correct, SE must be linked to [+HUM] as well. Incidentally, this is what I argue for in Medová (2009).

From the myriad of constructions including the reflexive morpheme SE, the SE we see in the *able* paraphrase is the impersonal one. This SE always has to be linked to the feature [+HUM]. Consider a verb that is usually not connected with human behavior – like 'bark': dogs bark, people don't (leaving aside metaphors). Yet, the sentence (12) with the verb 'bark' and the impersonal SE has to be interpreted as 'some (unspecified) people barked all night'.

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12   The NU theme is visible in participles, in infinitives, however, it is lengthened to the diftong. On templatic effects in Czech infinitives, see Caha – Scheer (2008).

(12)   *Impersonal SE has [+HUM] interpretation*
         Štěkalo se celou noc.
         bark   SE whole night

Thus: the link between the impersonal SE and the morpheme TEL is clear: both these morphemes spell-out structure with the feature [+HUM].

Recall also that the morpheme TEL needed more: the structure must also include the right theme – a theme introducing an external argument of the right type, external volitional argument. The impersonal SE, similarly, requires more: the structure must include feature finiteness, as shown by the following contrast from Dotlačil (2004, 26). In (13a), the periphrastic passive keeps the passive meaning even when embedded under modal construction. The SE in (13b), on the other hand, looses its impersonal (pragmatically very plausible) interpretation and it must be read reflexively.

(13)   *Impersonal SE needs finiteness*
      a.   *Není možné být zkoušen třikrát v jednom týdnu.*
             NEG.be$_{3.SG}$ possible be$_{INF}$ examined three-times in one week
             'It is impossible to be examined three times a week.'
      b.   *Není možné zkoušet se třikrát v jednom týdnu.*
             NEG.be$_{3.SG}$ possible examine$_{INF}$ SE three-times in one week
             Intended: *'It is impossible to be examined three times a week.'
             'It is impossible to examine oneself three times a week.'

I use finiteness as a catalyst: we know that within finiteness, external arguments are available. Furthermore, it is only with finiteness that the external *volitional* arguments (agents) are being introduced. Rather uncontroversially, I assume that there are external arguments of various types: actors – those that are external arguments but it is rather difficult to see them as real, volitional agents, as *sun* in *The sun dried all the puddles up.* Other external arguments – the real agents – have an extra feature: volitionality. Following Taraldsen (2010) (and many others), I proposed that the volitionality feature is syntactically manifested, it appears rather high (in the close vicinity of finiteness) and it is the feature the impersonal SE must feed on.

   In other words, we are trying to build a parallel between the external argument structure within a word (*léč-i-tel*) and within a sentence (*dá se léčit*). Within the word, we must have the right type of the external argument (on which the TEL can feed), within the sentential structure, we need the right type of the external argument structure as well, crucially big enough to include volitionality (i.e., real agents). The precise requirements will remain topic of the future research.
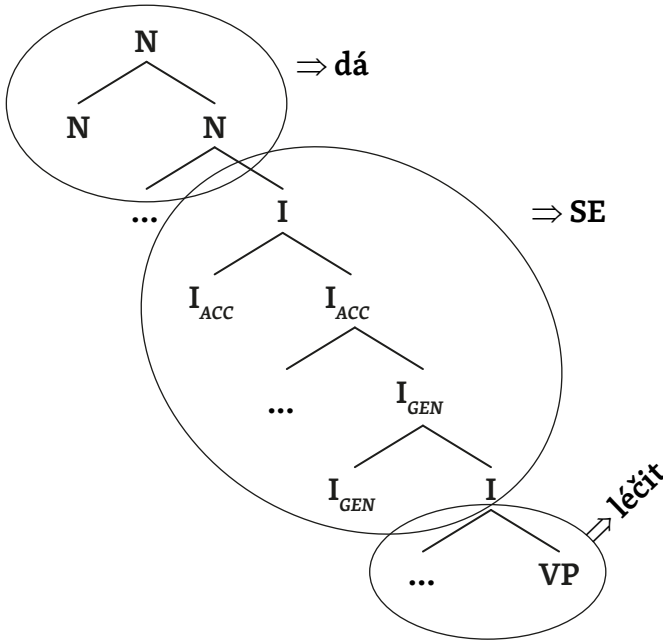
6 Conclusions

The *able* adjectives are derivable only from verbs that have the true agent and I identified it with the GEN case layer[13] in the external argument VP spine. In the *able* adjective, the theme must be big enough to include the GEN layer – that's presumably why the E-themes are not *'ablizable'*, they lack the agentive part provided, on the other hand, by the I theme when it steps in for the adjectives in (8). Thus, there are two ways to spell out the very same structure: either by a roll-up derivation in (14) and the *able* adjectives are derived, or by the paraphrase, with the spans spelled out by different morphemes in (15).

(14)   Roll-up derivation: *léč-i-tel-n*

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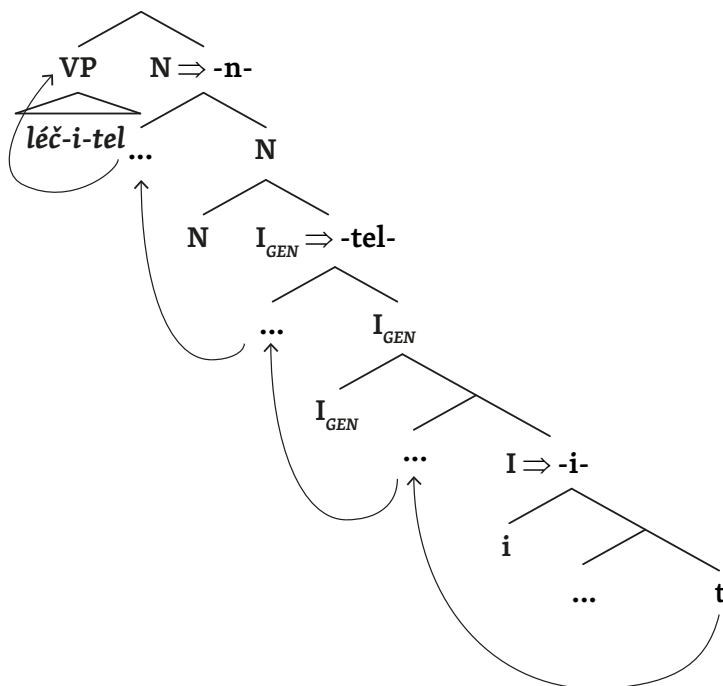
13   In the nanosyntactic tradition that dispenses with lexical selection, we do selection by peeling (Caha 2009, Starke 2014). In Medová (2009), I proposed to associate the (volitionality) of the external argument needed for impersonal SE with an ACC case layer; the GEN case layer represents the [+HUM] feature.

(15)   In-situ spell-out: *dá se léčit*

The tree diagram:

N $\Rightarrow$ **dá**

N   N

...   I $\Rightarrow$ **SE**

I_{ACC} I_{ACC}

... I_{GEN}

I_{GEN} I $\rightarrow$ *léčit*

...   VP

The I theme corresponds to two layers: the I_{ACC} layer and the I_{GEN} layer, the latter could be spelled out as part of the I theme – or by another morpheme – TEL or SE. In the paraphrase, the I_{GEN} and N layers start a new zone: any kind of infinitive can be embedded under them, so, they must be independent on the actual theme of the embedded verb. On the other hand, not every verb can be turned into an *able* adjective indicating that in the roll-up derivation we deal with a single zone.

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