

## The Use of Verb Tenses in Subordinate Content Clauses in Czech

**Keywords:** absolute tense, relative tense, subordinate content clause, primary agent, speaker

### Abstract

Research on the use of verb tenses in Czech subordinate clauses is based on the notions of absolute and relative tense and on the distinction between content and adjunct clauses. It is generally agreed that absolute tenses are used in adjunct clauses, whereas relative tenses are typically used in content clauses. Based on an analysis from the Czech National Corpus, I will demonstrate that, in addition to the assumed use of tenses and in contrast to their usage in English, there are also variations in their use: in content clauses, even tenses selected from the speaker's perspective are used in certain cases, and in certain adjunct clauses relative tenses may also be used.

### 1. Introduction

The study of the use of verb tenses in Czech complex sentences is connected to the distinction of adjunct and content subordinate clauses. It is generally agreed that absolute tenses are used in adjunct clauses, and relative tenses are used in content clauses<sup>1</sup>. Subordinate content clauses are traditionally considered to represent a unique environment for the usage of relative tenses in Czech (cf. Panevová, 1971, p. 290), as a result of which the Czech linguistic tradition has considered such content clauses mostly with regard to the specific use of verb

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<sup>1</sup> In English linguistics, in addition to the term “content clauses”, the term “complement clauses” is also used. For example, the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (1999) works with the term “complement clause” and provides the following definition: “Complement clauses are dependent clauses that complete the

tenses. The use of verb tenses in content clauses in Czech was studied in Czech linguistics particularly in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.<sup>2</sup> I further investigated these issues in my dissertation (Koutová, 2018) and in two further articles, where I investigated Czech subordinate content clauses and the verb tenses used therein (Koutová, 2019, 2021). In the current article I will outline the most important findings of my research, complete with comparative examples in English, which I hope will make my work accessible for a broader international audience.

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meaning of a verb, adjective, or noun.” (The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language points out, however, that the terms “content clause” and “complement clause” are not 100% equivalent. Cf. note 31 in this grammar (2016, p. 1017).) In works dealing with the use of verb tenses in content clauses in English, we also find the term “SOT clauses” (cf. Zagona, 2014) where the abbreviation SOT means “sequence of tenses”.

<sup>2</sup> A very comprehensive and detailed treatment of content clauses is given by J. Bauer in his study *Souvětí s větami obsahovými / Complex Sentences with Content Clauses* (1965). From the point of view of generative grammar, the subordinate content clauses and the tenses used in them were investigated in the 1970s by P. Sgall, E. Hajičová and notably J. Panevová. Important work from the period includes *The Meaning of Tense and its Recursive Properties* (Hajičová-Panevová-Sgall, 1971), *Relativní čas a rekurzivní vlastnosti významu času / Relative Tense and the Recursive Properties of the Meaning of Tense* (Panevová, 1971a), *Relativní čas / Relative Tense* (Panevová-Sgall, 1971), and *Vedlejší věty obsahové / Subordinate Content Clauses* (Panevová, 1971b). Content clauses are also dealt with by K. Svoboda in his monograph *Souvětí spisovně češtiny / Complex Sentences of Written Czech* (1970, 1972). A useful study dealing with verb tenses used in content clauses is the article *O relativních a subjektivních časech v češtině / On Relative and Subjective Tenses in Czech* by J. V. Bečka (1975). Bauer's article *Souvětí s větami obsahovými / Complex Sentences with Content Clauses* serves as the basis for J. Bauer and M. Grepl's observations on content clauses in *Skladba spisovně češtiny / Syntax of Written Czech* (1972, 1975 and 1980). A classification of content clauses based on valence theory is attempted by M. Grepl and P. Karlík in the 1986 edition of the *Syntax of Written Czech* and later in *Skladba češtiny / Syntax of Czech* (1999). Content clauses are also investigated from the perspective of valence syntax in the chapter devoted to content clauses in the academic *Mluvnice češtiny 3 / Czech Grammar 3* (1987), edited by J. Hrbáček. A separate entry „*Obsahová věta (kompletivní věta)*” / “*Content clause (completive*

## 2. An Explanation of the Terms *Content Clause* and *Relative Tense*

The traditional, often quoted definition of subordinate content clauses comes from J. Bauer: “Content clauses express the real content of what is only generally named, indicated (most frequently by a verb or verbal noun) or what is evaluated (by various predicative adjectives or adverbs) in the main clause. ... Content clauses most frequently express the content of the message, thought or sensory perception, and thus inform about some event that was the subject of the message, thought, or perception.” (Bauer, 1965, pp. 55–56) P. Karlík provides a concise definition grounded in valence theory: “Content clauses are subordinate clauses, by which the propositional actant implied in the semantic structure of the valence carrier is expressed in the valence position, and which thus completes this expression semantically.” (Karlík, 2002, p. 522)

Let us explain the characteristics of absolute tense and relative tense. We may speak of absolute tense when the meaning of a given verb form itself expresses a relation to the moment of speech, i.e. the past, present or future: *včera četl knihu* (*he read a book yesterday*), *dnes čte knihu* (*he reads a book today*), *zítra bude číst knihu* (*he will read a book tomorrow*). Relative tense, on the other hand, does not express a relation to the moment of speech, but rather expresses a temporal relation to some other event or state, i.e. it expresses a *n-tence*, *simultaneity* or *subsequence* with respect to another event or state: *řikal, že četl [PRET]<sup>3</sup> / čte [PRES] / bude číst [FUT] knihu* (literally: *he said that he read / reads / will read the book*)<sup>4</sup>. As I have already established, in Czech linguistics relative

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*clause*)”, compiled by P. Karlík, is devoted to content clauses in *Encyklopedický slovník češtiny / The Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Czech* (2002, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> The abbreviations given in square brackets represent the Czech verb tenses being considered, namely preterite [PRET], present [PRES], and future [FUT].

<sup>4</sup> In English, which observes a strict sequence of tenses (see below), the following tense combinations are nonetheless grammatical: *he said that he had read / read / would read the book*.

tenses are usually discussed in conjunction with subordinate content clauses. Outside of the Czech context, however, the study of relative tenses is much broader, and also encompasses subordinate temporal clauses, as well as others (see Comrie, 1985).

There are no special forms for relative tenses in Czech (with the exception of the transgressive). The same temporal forms of verbs (i.e. of present tense, past tense and future tense) are used to express both absolute and relative tenses. In other languages, however, such alternate forms do exist, for example, plusquamperfect in English. However, even in languages with a rich tense system, such as English, German or Romance languages, morphological forms of present, future and past tense, i.e. the same forms as for the expression of absolute tenses, are used alongside special verb forms in relative tenses.

In complex sentences with subordinate content clauses two tense planes collide – the one of the matrix clause and of the subordinate clause. The tense plane of the matrix clause is decisive for the whole complex sentence. In relation to the moment of utterance of the matrix clause, the entire complex sentence may have the meaning of the past, present or future, e.g.:

*Slyšel / slyší / uslyší*, že někdo ve vedlejší místnosti **mluví** [PRES].

He heard that someone **was speaking** [literally: **is speaking**] in the next room.

He hears that someone **is speaking** in the next room.

He will hear that someone **is speaking** in the next room.

The content clause expresses an event that, in its initial context, also had a separate temporal validity of its own: *Někdo ve vedlejší místnosti mluví*. (*Someone in the next room is speaking*.) However, as a subordinate clause, it refers to its matrix clause – the temporal forms of its predicate verb no longer express absolute temporal classification with respect to the moment of speech, but rather relative temporal validity with respect to the time of the main event. If the event is simultaneous, (i.e. happening at the time of the event of the matrix clause), the present tense is used in the content clause, e.g. *Věděl, že je [PRES] jeho žena v práci*. (*He knew that his wife was [literally: is] at work*.); if

it describes an antecedent action (i.e. an action that took place before the action described by the matrix verb), the past tense (preterite) is used in the content clause, e.g. *Věděl, že jeho žena byla [PRET] v práci.* (He knew that his wife **had been** [literally: **was**] at work.); if it describes a subsequent action (i.e. an action that will take place after the action of the matrix clause), the future tense is used, e.g. *Věděl, že jeho žena bude [FUT] v práci.* (He knew that his wife **would be** [literally: **will be**] at work.).

As has been shown in the previous section, the usage of verb tenses in Czech differs from that in English and in other Germanic languages, as well as from Latin and the Romance languages, all of which possess make use of the so-called *sequence of tenses* (lat. *consecutio temporum*). This means that the choice of tense in subordinate content clauses depends on the given tense of each respective matrix clause. Thus, if the matrix clause is in the past tense, the tense of the subordinate clause must shift to the past, i.e. the present tense changes to the past tense, the past tense changes to the past perfect, and the future tense changes to the future perfect.<sup>5</sup> Cf. examples of content clauses and their English equivalents from the parallel corpus InterCorp v13 of the Czech National Corpus<sup>6</sup>:

- (1) Když Ježíš viděl, že se **sbíhá** [PRES] zástup, pohrozil nečistému duchu. (Simultaneity)  
When Jesus saw that a crowd **was running** to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit.
- (2) Tehdy jsem se domníval, že **se směje** [PRES] mé nevzdělanosti. (Simultaneity)  
At the time I believed he **was laughing** at my ignorance.

<sup>5</sup> B. Comrie points out that this is not the case with indirect speech after a main verb in the future tense. In this case, the tense remains unchanged, since the main verb is not a past tense. It therefore follows that by reporting John's words *I am singing* in indirect speech, one should get *John will say that he is singing*, and not *John will say that he will be singing*. (Comrie, 1985, p. 112)

<sup>6</sup> Most of the evidence in this article come from the SYN v8 corpus of the Czech National Corpus. Examples (1)–(10) come from the parallel corpus InterCorp v13.

- (3) Každého laika vždycky překvapilo, jak hluboko takové základy **jdou** [PRES]. (Simultaneity)  
Laymen were always surprised at how deep foundations **were**.
- (4) Vadilo jim, že syn **leží** [PRES] na zemi. (Simultaneity)  
They were bothered by the fact that their son **was** still **lying** on the ground.
- (5) Poprvé v životě jasně cítil, že **nemá** [PRES] smysl zachraňovat ty, kdo se zásadně nechtějí dát zachránit. (Simultaneity)  
For the first time he really felt that it **was** no use trying to save those who fundamentally would rather not be saved.
- (6) Teprve po příjezdu lékaře pochopil, že ona dáma skutečně na někoho **vystřelila** [PRET] a že tím postřeleným **je** [PRES] on sám. (antecedence, simultaneity)  
It was not until a surgeon arrived that he understood that the lady **had** indeed **shot** someone and that the someone **was** himself.
- (7) Tom si vybavil, jak Marta **brečela** [PRET] hlady. (Antecedence)  
Tom remembered how Martha **had cried** from hunger.
- (8) Popsal jsem jí, co **se stalo** [PRET]. (Antecedence)  
I described to her what **had happened**.
- (9) Přitom jsem už dlouho předpovídal, že tato stagnace **bude mít** [FUT] nakonec politické následky. (Subsequence)  
I had long predicted that this stagnation **would** eventually **have** political consequences.
- (10) Doufal jsem, že ho náš pobyt v Lórienu zase **svede** [FUT] ze stopy. (subsequence)  
I hoped that our stay in Lórien **would throw** him off the scent again.

In Czech, however, there are also cases of verb tenses being used in content and adjunct clauses that break these rules. Sometimes in content clauses the tenses are chosen from the speaker's perspective, and in some cases the relative tense can also be used in adjunct clauses. Based on corpus derived evidence, this article will aim to describe the cases in which these deviations occur. I will concentrate mainly on relative past tenses in content clauses that express simultaneity with past tense actions described in the matrix clause.

### 3. The Originators of Message in Complex Sentences with Content Clauses

A crucial influence on the use of verb tenses in content clauses in Czech is the perspective from which the verb tense is chosen – whether from the perspective of the author of the original direct speech or from the perspective of the author of the entire complex sentence containing a content clause. For these originators of the message in complex sentences with content clauses, I have elsewhere (Koutová, 2019) proposed the terms *primary agent* and *speaker*.<sup>7</sup>

For the author of the original direct speech (or the experiencer of sensory perception, the agent of evaluation, etc.), I use the term *primary agent*, for the author of the whole complex sentence I use the established term *speaker*.

Let us explain the relationship between the originators of the message and the use of verbal tense in content clauses. A complex sentence with a subordinate content clause is a complex expression consisting of two components:

- 1) of an introductory predicate that contextualizes the verbal content in relation to overall context and temporal classification as related to the moment of utterance, thereby constituting an absolute tense;
- 2) of a content clause in which there is usually a shift in the temporal plane, as in indirect speech, and thus constitutes relative tense.

Indirect speech in Czech retains the same verb tense as in direct speech cf:

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<sup>7</sup> A similar linguistic issue in German (contrasting it with Norwegian and English) has been investigated by the Norwegian linguist Cathrine Fabricius-Hansen (2004), who uses the terms “Figur” (i.e. figure, analogous to our primary agent) and “Narautor” (i.e. narrator, analogous to our speaker) for these message originators. *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* works with the terms “original speaker” and “reporter”. Silvia Gennari, who in her article *Embedded Present Tense and Attitude Reports* (1999) deals with the use of the present tense in content clauses in English, calls these originators of the message “the attitude holder” and “the speaker”. Her terminology is also adopted by Kubota et al. in their article (2009).

- (11) Anna včera řekla: „Venku **je** [PRES] hezky.“ → (11a) Anna včera řekla, že venku **je** [PRES] hezky.  
Anna said yesterday: „It **is** nice outside.“ → (11a) Anna said yesterday that it **was** [literally: **is**] nice outside.

The author of the original direct speech, in our case Anna, is the primary agent of the speech act. The speaker, i.e. the author of the whole complex sentence with the content clause, is in this example the author of the article, Marta Koutová (in other examples used in this article, it is mainly different authors of examples drawn from the Czech National Corpus). The verb tenses in indirect speech are used in the same way as in direct speech from the perspective of the primary agent. In most complex sentences with content clauses, verb tenses are selected based on the same principle as in indirect speech, cf:

- (11b) Anna viděla/věděla/byla ráda, že venku **je** [PRES] hezky.  
Anna saw/knew/was glad that it **was** [literally: **is**] nice outside.

In these cases as well we will refer to the given originators of the message as the primary agent and speaker. In fact, the term “primary agent” does not refer only to the author of the original direct speech, i.e. the agent of the speech act (in clauses introduced by the predicates *řekl / he said, podotkl / he remarked, konstatoval / he stated...*). It can also be the agent of a mental action (*myslel / he thought, věděl / he knew, tušil / he suspected...*), the experiencer of a sensory perception (*viděl / he saw, slyšel / he heard, cítil / he felt...*) or an emotional state (*litoval / he regretted, překvapilo ho / he was surprised, radoval se / he rejoiced...*), the agent of an evaluation (*byl vděčný / he was grateful, cenil si / he appreciated, zdálo se mu zajímavé / he found interesting...*) or a volitional action (*prál si / he wished, toužil / he longed...*).

The primary agent and the speaker represent either two distinct persons, or alternately the same person in two different situations.

### 4. Content Clauses with Tenses selected from the Speaker’s Perspective

As discussed in the previous section, in most content clauses the tenses are chosen from the perspective of the primary agent. Cf. the

expression of the present with past action using the relative tense – the present:

- (12) Prohlásil/viděl/myslel/divil se/bylo (mu) příjemné, že tam je [PRES] sestra s ním.  
He stated/saw/thought/wondered/was pleased that the nurse was [literally: is] there with him.

However, certain kinds of Czech predicates introducing subordinate content clauses do not express the point of view of the primary agent, but rather that of the speaker. These are, for example, some impersonal predicates expressing evaluation (*prospělo mu / it benefited him, obohatilo ho / it enriched him, pomohlo mu / it helped him, zachránilo ho / it saved him, ublížilo mu / it hurt him, vymstilo se mu / it backfired on him, vyplatilo se (mu) / it paid off (for him), omlouvalo ho / it excused him; bylo čestné/rozumné/riskantní... / it was honest/reasonable/risky...; problém byl / the problem was, chyba byla / the mistake was...*) or predicates expressing existence or change (*stalo se (mu) / it happened (to him), došlo k tomu / it occurred, následovalo / it followed, projevilo se / it manifested; způsobil / he was the reason why, zavinil / he caused, to vedlo k tomu / it led to...*), see examples (13)-(22). The subordinate clauses dependent on these predicates do not actually have any primary agent; they reflect only the speaker's perspective. Therefore, even the tenses used in them are chosen from the perspective of the speaker and his moment of utterance. Cf. expressions of the present with past action using the preterite in content clauses dependent on predicate formulated in the speaker's perspective:

- (13) Jednou se stalo / pomohlo mu / bylo šlechetné / někdo zajistil, že tam **byla** [PRET] sestra s ním.  
 Once it happened / helped him / was generous / someone ensured that the nurse **was** there with him.
- (14) Vyšetřování policistům dlouho komplikovalo, že oběti útočnicka **popisovaly** [PRET] velmi odlišně.

For a long time, the investigation was complicated by the fact that the victims **described** their attacker very differently.

- (15) Dost mu ublížilo, že na něj lidi na stadionu **pokřikovali** [PRET] nesmysly.  
 He was quite hurt by the fact that people **shouted** nonsense at him in the stadium.
- (16) Její půvab ještě zvyšovalo, že **měla** [PRET] jedno oko modré a druhé zelené.  
 Her charm was enhanced by the fact that she **had** one blue eye and one green one.
- (17) Letuška měla štěstí, že **byla** [PRET] zrovna vzadu v kuchyňce.  
 The flight attendant was lucky she **was** at the back of the kitchen at the time.
- (18) Bylo asi spravedlivé, že finále **hrály** [PRET] dva nejlepší týmy sezony.  
 It was probably only fair that the final **was played** by the two best teams of the season.
- (19) Výhodné bylo, že rodiče matky **žili** [PRET] v Praze.  
 It was convenient that the mother's parents **lived** in Prague.
- (20) Největší problém byl, že jsme **nebyli** [PRET] pojištěni.  
 The biggest problem was that we **didn't have** insurance.
- (21) Naší chybou bylo, že **jsme nedokázali** [PRET] vstřelit druhý gól.  
 Our mistake was that we **didn't manage** to score the second goal.
- (22) Naposledy v roce 1995 se přihodilo, že na turnaji vůbec **nepršelo** [PRET].  
 The last time in 1995 it happened that it **didn't rain** at all in the tournament.

### 5. Content Clauses which usually use Verb Tenses from the Speaker's Perspective but in Special Cases also Verb Tenses from the Perspective of the Primary Agent

The present tense expressing simultaneity with the past, as used from the perspective of the primary agent, sometimes penetrates into the types of clauses that certain authors (e.g. K. Svoboda and J. Paněvová in their works from the 1970s) do not consider content clauses due to their reported inability to contain relative tenses. (The term

“relative tenses” is used by Svoboda and Panevová only for tenses chosen from the perspective of the primary agent, cf. e.g. Panevová, 1971a, p. 48; Svoboda, 1972, p. 129).

K. Svoboda (1970) analyses subordinate clauses which are introduced by adjectival predicates with the meaning of evaluation. According to the author, two cases must be distinguished:

- 1) In sentences like *Horší bylo, že nikdo nebyl [PRET] doma* (*It was worse that no one was at home*), a relative tense is not used because, as the author believes, the evaluation takes place primarily from the speaker's point of view, and therefore all of the tenses used relate back to the speaker himself. Since such clauses cannot contain relative tenses, Svoboda argues that they are in fact no longer content clauses.
- 2) According to Svoboda, the situation is different in cases such as *Bylo nám příjemné, že nikdo není [PRES] doma* (*It was nice for us that no one was [literally: is] at home*), wherein the matrix clause expresses not only an evaluation, but also a sensory perception of the agent, which is or can be expressed by the dative (“*nám*”). Therefore, the tense can also be used here as in indirect speech. According to Svoboda, the subject clause is then a content clause in terms of both meaning and form. (Svoboda, 1970, p. 69, p. 196)

Predicates introducing content clauses, which Svoboda classifies in group 1), primarily express the speaker's perspective and are therefore usually followed by tenses selected from the speaker's point of view. These predicates are of the type “*was* + adjective/adverb/noun with the meaning of evaluation”, such as: *bylo dobré/fajn / it was good/nice, bylo skvělé/úžasné/nádherné / it was great/awesome/gorgeous, bylo hrozné/mrzuté / it was terrible/painful; bylo pochopitelné/logické / it was understandable/logical; bylo nové / it was new, bylo normální/přirozené / it was normal/natural, bylo nezvyklé/podivné/neuvěřitelné / it was unusual/weird/unbelievable, byl div / it was a wonder, byl šok / it was a shock; bylo povzbudivé / it was encouraging, bylo těžké / it was difficult, bylo důležité/podstatné/rozhodující / it*

*was important/essential/decisive, bylo zajímavé / it was interesting, bylo markantní / it was striking; novinkou/pravdou/faktem bylo / the novelty/truth/fact was, etc.* As K. Svoboda observes, in content clauses dependent on these predicates, the evaluative agent cannot be expressed by a pronoun or a noun in the dative case, i.e. one cannot say \**bylo nám dobré/zajímavé/normální*, etc. (unlike evaluative predicates like *bylo (nám) divné/podezřelé/nepříjemné*, etc., where the dative expresses the primary agent, and the tenses here are therefore usually chosen from his perspective). However, the following examples show that even after predicates in which the primary agent cannot be expressed in the dative, tenses chosen from his perspective do indeed appear. In all of these clauses, the present tense could be replaced by the preterite (that is, a tense selected from the speaker's perspective). The present tense in these cases can be described as marked - its function is to emphasize the perspective of the primary agent.

- (23) *Bylo skvělé, že si můžeme [PRES] zahrát na tak významné akci a reprezentovat sebe, město Teplice i celou zemi.*  
*It was great that we were [literally: are] able to play at such an important event and represent ourselves, the city of Teplice and the whole country.*
- (24) *Hrozné bylo, že mé známky, má největší radost, jsou [PRES] pryč.*  
*The terrible thing was that my stamps, my greatest joy, were [literally: are] gone.*
- (25) *Byl rok 1983 a my neměli žádné starosti. Hlavní bylo, že nemusíme [PRES] do školy. To, že natáčíme [PRES] film, bylo na druhém místě.*  
*The year was 1983 and we had no worries. The main thing was that we didn't have [literally: don't have] to go to school. The fact that we were shooting [literally: are shooting] a film was secondary.*
- (26) *Kočky byly všechny tak vychrtlé, že byl div, že vůbec ještě žijí [PRES].*  
*The cats were all so skinny it was a wonder they were [literally: are] even still alive.*
- (27) *Československo ovládli komunisté a náš dům na Říčkách byl znárodněn. Holým faktem bylo, že se nemáme [PRES] kam uchýlit, že*

**jsme** [PRES] bez domova.

Czechoslovakia was taken over by the communists and our house in Říčky was nationalized. The simple fact was that we **had** [literally: **have**] nowhere to go, that we **were** [literally: **are**] homeless.

## 6. Content Clauses which usually use Verb Tenses selected from the Perspective of the Primary Agent but in Special Cases also Verb Tenses selected from the Perspective of the Speaker

The tense chosen from the speaker's perspective sometimes also manifest in content clauses in which tenses chosen from the perspective of the primary agent are otherwise commonly used.<sup>8</sup>

This phenomenon frequently occurs following introductory predicates with the meaning of sensory perceptions (*viděl / he saw, slyšel / he heard, cítil / he felt, všiml si / he noticed...*), emotional states (*líbilo se mu / he liked, překvapilo ho / he was surprised, vadilo mu / it bothered him, potěšilo ho / he was pleased...*) and also after (most often factive) predicates with the meaning of thinking (*věděl / he knew, tušil / he suspected, dozvěděl se / he learned, uvědomil si / he realized...*). Even in these cases, the expression of the difference in perspective between the speaker and the primary agent plays an important role. Cf. the following examples:

- (28) Mně strašně vadilo, že **byla** [PRET] pořád pryč a **neměla** [PRET] na mě čas.  
It bothered me terribly that she **was** always gone and **didn't have** any time for me.
- (29) Možná se pes vyděsil, že **byl** [PRET] příliš blízko.  
Perhaps the dog was frightened that he **was** too close.
- (30) Silnice byla zavátá, ale stopy po pneumatikách prozrazovaly, že **nebyla** [PRET] zcela neprůjezdná.

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<sup>8</sup> I discuss this issue in detail in my article *Užití slovesného času ve vedlejších větách obsahových / The Use of Verbal Tense in Subordinate Content Clauses* (Koutová, 2021), where I analyse the various factors influencing or causing the choice of the preterite to express simultaneity with the past in content clauses.

The road was covered in snow, but the tire tracks betrayed that it **wasn't** completely impassable.

- (31) Profesor ruštiny se při ústní zkoušce divil, jak velký **byl** [PRET] rozdíl mezi mým písemným projevem a jazykovou pohotovostí při ústní zkoušce.  
My Russian professor wondered during the oral exam how big the difference **was** between my ability to express myself in writing and my oral fluency during exam.
- (32) Všichni viděli, že mi to **prokluzovalo** [PRET].  
Everyone could see that I **was slipping**.

In this group of examples we see several content clauses, in which I believe, the preterite expresses an objective reality commented on from the speaker's perspective. If we transfer the content clauses into the present tense, our attention turns to the subjective experience of the primary agent, as if we were transported together with the primary agent to the moment in time when the action of the content clause occurred, and we were experiencing it together with him, or watched it as though it were happening right in front of our eyes:

- (28a) Mně strašně vadilo, že **je** [PRES] pořád pryč a **nemá** [PRES] na mě čas.  
It bothered me terribly that she **was** [literally: **is**] always gone and **didn't have** [literally: **doesn't have**] any time for me.
- (29a) Možná se pes vyděl, že **je** [PRES] příliš blízko.  
Perhaps the dog was frightened that he **was** [literally: **is**] too close.
- (30a) Silnice byla zavátá, ale stopy po pneumatikách prozrazovaly, že **není** [PRES] zcela neprůjezdná.  
The road was covered in snow, but the tire tracks betrayed that it **wasn't** [literally: **isn't**] completely impassable.
- (31a) Profesor ruštiny se při ústní zkoušce divil, jak velký **je** [PRES] rozdíl mezi mým písemným projevem a jazykovou pohotovostí při ústní zkoušce.  
My Russian professor wondered during the oral exam how big the difference **was** [literally: **is**] between my ability to express myself in writing and my oral fluency during exam.

- (32a) Všichni viděli, že mi to **prokluzuje** [PRES].  
Everyone could see that I **was** [literally: **am**] **slipping**.

In example (32), in addition to the factor “expressing the speaker's perspective vs. the primary agent”, the factor “expressing the overall view vs. expressing the course of action” already played a role. These two factors are closely intertwined and usually work together. In my view, a content clause with a preterite form represents the event described as a whole, or it shows the result of the event; the present tense, on the other hand, turns our attention to the course of the event or its perception. In the case of content clauses in the present tense, the introductory predicates are often imperfective verbs, which are inherently suitable for expressing the course of an event; content clauses in the preterite, on the other hand, are more often introduced by perfective verbs. Cf. Examples where the emphasis is on the course of the event, hence, in the subordinate clause, the use of the tense is ruled by the point of view of the primary agent (present tense to express the simultaneity).

- (33) Muž nás postrčil od břehu a pak se za námi díval, jak se **vzдалujeme** [PRES].  
The man pushed us away from the shore and then followed us with his eyes as we **moved** [literally: **move**] away.
- (34) Zadumaně jsem poslouchal, jak **slábne** motor [PRES].  
I listened thoughtfully as the engine **faded** [literally: **fades**].
- (35) Pozorovala ho, jak **pracuje** [PRES].  
She watched him as he **worked** [literally: **works**].

For the other examples I give here, replacing the preterite with the present tense would not be appropriate in my opinion – the present would draw too much attention to the course of action, whereas here it is more important to emphasize the overall view, cf:

- (36) Všichni viděli, že to **byl** [PRET] fantastický fotbal a **měli jsme** [PRET] více šancí než Spartak.  
Everybody saw that it **was** a fantastic football match and we **had** greater chances than Spartak.

- (37) Neslyšel jsi, co **jsme si vyprávěli** [PRET] o Manfredovi?  
Didn't you hear what we **said** about Manfred?
- (38) Jednou tajně vyslechla, jak jsme **mluvily** [PRET] o závěti.  
She once secretly overheard us as we **spoke** about the will.
- (39) I když vím, že festivalové publikum je trochu specifické, přesto mě potěšilo, že diváci **reagovali** [PRET] stejně jako na premiéře v Praze.  
Although I know that the festival audience is a bit specific, I was still pleased that the audience **reacted** the same way as at the premiere in Prague.

Another factor applied to the choice of tense in a content clause is “expressing mere simultaneity with the action of the main clause vs. expressing permanence or validity even at the moment of speaking”. The preterite takes precedence, or may even be the only possibility, when simultaneity with the past must be expressed, and the present tense would imply continued validity of the action at the moment of the speaker's utterance and/or permanent validity. Cf. the following examples:

- (40) Později jsem v různých táborech pozoroval, že **přežívali** [PRET] jen ti, kdo **měli** [PRET] tuto silnou víru v život.  
Later, in various camps, I observed that only those who **had** this strong belief in life survived.
- (41) Hlavně nás překvapilo, že Poláci naprosto dokonale **znali** [PRET] naši tvorbu.  
What surprised us above all was that the Poles **knew** our work perfectly well.
- (42) Jemu spíš imponovalo, že **jsem byla** [PRET] díky svalům jiná než ostatní ženy.  
He was rather impressed that I **was** different from other women because of my muscles.
- (43) Trápilo mě, že cestování **byl** [PRET] skutečně velký **problém**.  
It bothered me that travelling **was a** really big **problem**.
- (44) Jasně jsme dokázaly, že jsme tady **byly nejlepší** [PRET] a **máme** [PRES] opravdový tým, v němž není markantní rozdíl mezi hráčkami základu a z lavičky.  
We clearly proved that we **were the best** here and we **had** [literally:



**have]** a real team, where there was no marked difference between the base players and the bench players.

In examples (40) and (41), the speaker probably did not want to express general validity, so he chose a preterite that expresses validity only for the case at hand. In examples (42) and (43), the preterite in the content clause again obviously expresses mere simultaneity with the past, and the information expressed by it is probably already invalid at the time of the utterance. In the complex sentence in example (44), two content clauses depend on the introductory predicate, one with a predicate in the preterite, the other with a predicate in the present. The preterite in the first subordinate clause expresses simultaneity with the past, and thus validity only at that moment, while the present tense in the second clause expresses permanent validity or continued validity at the moment of the utterance.

Present tense generally cannot be used to express simultaneity with the past if tense of the content clause is affected by the proximity of another preterite. If both, a perfective and imperfective verb, are part of a content clause in the past tense, or if an adverbial temporal clause in the preterite depends on the given content clause, the tense of the imperfective verb in the content clause is aligned with this (usually finite) preterite, cf.

- (45) Pak cítil, že ho kdosi **nesl** [PRET, IMPERF] a **hodil** [PRET, PERF] do sedla.  
Then he felt that someone **was carrying** him and **threw** him into the saddle.
- (46) Slečna Simpsonová se zájmem přihlížela, jak kocour **kráčel** [PRET, IMPERF] dovnitř a **zamířil** [PRET, PERF] ke schodům.  
Miss Simpson watched with interest as the cat **walked** in and **headed** for the stairs.
- (47) Jen matně si uvědomovala, jak jí Craig **pomáhal** [PRET, IMPERF] do auta a **posadil se** [PRET, PERF] za volant.  
She was only dimly aware that Craig **helped** her into the car and **got** behind the wheel.

- (48) Slyšela jsem, jak chlapi na schodech **povykovali** [PRET], **když Zdeněk vešel**.  
I heard the guys on the stairs **cheer when Zdeněk entered**.
- (49) Nejvíc mě frustrovalo, že **když jsem si chtěla přivydělat bokem, musela** [PRET] jsem lhát.  
What frustrated me the most was that **when I wanted to earn money on the side, I had to lie**.

An important factor leading to the use of the preterite to express simultaneity is “the presence of a temporal adverbial referring to the past” J. V. Bečka (1975, p. 189) observes that in content clauses such as *Slyšel jsem, jak jste se včera domlouvali [PRET] (I overheard yesterday as you were arranging something)*, the preterite form removes the collision of tense and temporal adverbial. This fact does not only apply to typical temporal adverbials explicitly referring to the past, such as *před hodinou / an hour ago, včera / yesterday, minulý týden / last week, minulý rok / last year*, etc. As the following examples show, the tense in a content clause can also be affected by other temporal adverbials, such as *před startem / before the start, při té příležitosti / on that occasion*, etc., cf:

- (50) Nikdy se mi nelíbilo, jak mnozí **za komunistů jezdili** [PRET] už v pátek v poledne na chaty.  
I never liked how many people **during communism left** for their cottages on Friday as early as noon.
- (51) Sám jsem se oknem nějaký čas díval, jak **15. května vydělávala** [PRET] svým tělem peníze.  
For some time I observed from the window, as she **exchanged** her body for money **on the 15th of May**.
- (52) Nervózní jsem nebyl, jen mi vadilo, že **jsme před startem museli** [PRET] v autě dlouho čekat.  
I wasn't nervous; I was just annoyed that we **had to wait** so long in the car **before the start**.
- (53) Moje nevěřící oči zaznamenaly, že **při té příležitosti měla** [PRET] tmavé punčochy, a nikoli trikot.

My disbelieving eyes noted that on that occasion she was wearing dark tights and not a leotard.

## 7. The Use of Verb Tenses in Complex Sentences with Content Clauses of a more complex Structure

Again, the perspective of the primary agent vs. the speaker's perspective plays an important role in the selection of verb tenses in complex sentences with content clauses of a more complex structure. As J. Panevová (1971 a, b) points out in her work, relative tenses (i.e. tenses chosen from the perspective of the primary agent, MK note) are used not only in content clauses, but also in all subordinate adjunct clauses that depend on the content clause. Cf:

- (54) Sám věděl nejlíp, že jeho takzvaná společenská je [PRES] nanejvýš rozmarná mašina, která rozhodně nenaskočí [PRES] pokaždé, a pokud ano, tak se nejdéle do dvou hodin zadře [PRES].  
He himself knew best that his so-called sociability was [literally: is] at best a capricious machine, which certainly did not jump start [literally: doesn't jump start] every time, but if it did [in Czech literally: does], it would jam [literally: jams / will jam] within two hours at the longest.

In this example from fiction, all the subordinate clauses are presented as part of the character's (i.e., the primary agent's) train of thought. If a preterite were used in the adjunct dependent clauses, it would be a comment by the narrator (i.e., the speaker). Cf:

- (54a) Sám věděl nejlíp, že jeho takzvaná společenská je [PRES] nanejvýš rozmarná mašina, která rozhodně nenaskočila [PRET] pokaždé, a pokud ano, tak se nejdéle do dvou hodin zadřela [PRET].  
He himself knew best that his so-called sociability was [literally: is] at best a capricious machine, which certainly did not jump start every time, but if it did, it jammed within two hours at the longest.

The same is true in the following examples:

- (55) Myslí na to, že někde v jejím bytě jsou [PRES] jeho dopisy, které může [PRES] dávat kdykoli komukoli číst.  
He was thinking that somewhere in her apartment were [literally: are] his letters, which she could [literally: can] give anyone to read at any time.
- (56) Vyrojily se pomluvy, že prosazují [PRES] razantní řešení, protože sám na opravě mostu vydělávám [PRES].  
There were rumours that I was pushing [literally: am pushing] for a drastic solution because I myself was making [literally: am making] money off of the bridge repairs.

When a preterite expressing simultaneity is used in an adjunct clause dependent on a content clause, it is, as J. Panevová (1971a, b) points out, a speaker's comment. The present tense here, on the other hand, would indicate that it is part of a statement (of indirect speech), a sensory perception, a train of thought, an evaluation, or the emotional state of the primary agent. Cf:

- (57) K nehodě zřejmě došlo v okamžiku, kdy policejní auto jelo v levém jízdním pruhu a řidič si nevšiml, že automobil, který jel [PRET] v pravém jízdním pruhu, zastavuje [PRES] a dává [PRES] přednost chodkyni.  
The accident probably occurred when the police car was driving in the left lane and the driver failed to notice that the car, which was driving in the right lane, was stopping and giving [literally: is stopping and giving] way to a pedestrian.
- (58) Strážci zákona se podle slov tiskového mluvčího policie nejprve domnívali, že muž, který ležel [PRET] ve vozovce obličejem k zemi, je [PRES] vážně zraněn.  
According to a police spokesperson, the law enforcement officers initially believed that the man, who was lying face down in the roadway, was [literally: is] seriously injured.

## 8. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the use of verbal tense in subordinate content clauses. Using examples from the Czech National Corpus,

I have demonstrated that the use of verb tenses in content clauses and in all of the adjunct clauses dependent on them is governed by whether the speaker views the action of the content clause from his perspective or whether he adopts the perspective of the primary agent. I have focussed mainly on cases that defy the usual claims about the use of relative tenses in content clauses. I have pointed out that there exist introductory predicates expressing only the speaker's perspective, and as such, verb tenses cannot be selected based on the same principle as in indirect speech in those content clauses dependent on them. Furthermore, after predicates that otherwise introduce content clauses with tenses chosen from the perspective of the primary agent, tenses from the speaker's perspective are sometimes used. I have dealt with various cases of such marked usages and put forward my own interpretation of the factors involved. By translating the abovementioned examples from the Czech National Corpus into English I have shown that Czech, in contrast to English, is able to express certain minute stylistic distinction with the help of absolute and relative tense.

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