

## SAFETY INSTRUCTIONS VS. OPERATING INSTRUCTIONS IN CZECH INSTRUCTION MANUALS<sup>[\*]</sup>

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*Abstract:* The present article deals with the illocutionary functions distinguishable in Czech versions of instruction manuals. Instruction manuals are characterized as texts with a dominant instructive illocutionary function (traditionally pertaining to the functional realm of directiveness), including subsidiary information and also contact functions, and within the instructive sentences, two of their subtypes are described: safety instructions and operating instructions. The authors focus on the distribution of these functionally defined sections in manuals as well as on the forms expressing the necessity to perform the required action (verbal forms, modal verbs) and on the forms expressing the topic (the specific product, for the operation of which the instruction manual is intended) in safety and operating instructions.

*Keywords:* theory of speech acts, illocutionary function, instruction manual, safety instruction, operating instruction, imperative mood, modal verb, prohibition, Czech

### Introduction

If we buy an electrical appliance or any other product designed for more complex tasks, we expect to be provided with the manual how to use it. Moreover, to equip the products with manuals in the Czech language for the purposes of sale in the Czech Republic is the sellers' obligation given by law. Before the first use of the product, we should make ourselves familiar with the instruction manual, and in case of any handling, but also during storage, we should obey these instructions. Only in this way can we be sure that we use all the functions of the product and minimize safety risks associated with its use, as declared by the manufacturer.

Our intention in the present article is to focus on the instruction manuals as the text type defined by a certain illocutionary (communication) function, describe their expressing forms and contribute thus to the knowledge of expressing illocutionary functions in the Czech language. This study is based on the material obtained from 35 large Czech instruction manuals of common household and garden electric appliances from different manufacturers.<sup>1</sup> As most of these appliances bear the foreign brands, we assume that most of their

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<sup>1</sup> The text material has been deliberately provided with instruction manuals always for several appliances of the same type to be able to observe various forms of expressing analogous contents. Specifically this set

manuals were primarily created in foreign languages and only secondarily were provided with their Czech version. However, since the foreign language texts (or namely the English ones) were included in the same common brochure with the Czech text only in some of the analyzed manuals, we decided to illustrate the Czech examples by our own translations of these texts into English.

In part 1, we deal with the general notion of illocutionary functions and we define the instructive function as the dominant function of manuals for use as well as its two types: safety instructions and operating instructions. Part 2 is concerned with the distribution of informative sections and the both mentioned types of instructive sections in manuals. Part 3 shows the differences between expressing forms of these instructions while part 4 focuses on the differences of how to mark their topic (i.e. the specific appliance, for the operation of which the instruction manual is intended).

## 1. Dominant and subsidiary illocutionary functions of instruction manuals

According to the theory of speech acts, whose fathers are considered to be John Langshaw Austin (1962) and John R. Searle (1969, 1971, and 1979), and which – for specifics of the Czech language – was developed by Miroslav Grepl (e.g. Grepl & Karlík 1998), a speaker through his/her utterance in the particular communication situation not only says something about the world (expresses some propositional content), but he/she also tries to have an impact on the recipient (his/her utterance has a certain illocutionary function), i.e. he/she intends to inform the recipient about something (statement), or make the recipient perform an action (call), which may also be verbal (question), or he/she can, by his/her utterance, directly change something in the world (baptism, sentencing), etc.

A classification of the individual speech acts that we perform while speaking were initially carried out mainly with regard to interpersonal oral communication where these acts were considered at the level of individual utterances, but afterwards expanded its scope also to characterize the function of the whole extensive texts. Nevertheless, we rarely meet the single-purpose texts; the text is usually a functionally hierarchical unit with one overarching main function (dominant) and a number of sentences with subsidiary functions that underpin it (see, e.g. Brandt et al. 1983, Rosengren 1983). If we write e.g. a letter expressing a polite request we can underpin our asking by its justification, irrespective of the connected addressing, greetings and thanks in advance, which can also be included in such text.

As a simple intuitive test to distinguish which of the implemented illocutionary functions is in this case the most dominant, Teun A. van Dijk (1977) suggests reporting on the expressed sequence of utterances. If e.g. the sequence *Could you close the window, please, I am cold* will be summed up in words *He asked me to close the window because he was cold*, we are reporting on a request which is only supported by the announcement of the speaker about cold being felt. It is generally valid that the utterances with subsidiary functions can be omitted from the text, although it seems as to reduce the willingness of the recipient to do what we want him/her to do. A dominant function of a sequence of utter-

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included instructions for use of 8 toasters, 5 blenders, 5 vacuum cleaners, 6 washing machines, 5 drills, 3 hedge cutters and 3 chainsaws. Types of appliances were chosen so that comprehensive instructions were included to activities with both lower and higher risk.

ances can also be explicitly specified by the speaker/author in the introduction to this sequence (*I will give you a piece of good advice.*), in the subject of the letter (*Request*) or in the text heading (*Instructions for Use*).

The illocutionary function of instruction manuals (instructive function) is traditionally considered a type of directive function in which the speaker's intention is to make the recipient perform an activity (or in case of prohibition to make him/her not perform the activity). It is classified like this in Czech e.g. by Miroslav Grepl (Grepl & Karlík 1998). In a more detailed sequencing of directives suggested by Götz Hindelang (1978), it is a non-binding call preferring the recipient. Not performing the activity that is required from the recipient is not directly affected by any sanction and the required action is in the interest of the recipient. In this respect the instructions for use as a specific genre coincide with the usual advice (*You should not smoke.*)<sup>2</sup>

We have stated that usually the texts are not functionally homogeneous. This also applies to the case of instructions for use. Traditionally, these instructions distinguish the sections of text with illocutionary instructive functions (i.e. directive), informative, but also contact (advertising, e.g. (1)), among which the instructive function is a dominant one (see e.g. Möhn 1991, Světlá 2001).

- (1) Děkujeme za důvěru. Jsme si jisti, že vysavač AMBIA, který jste si právě koupili, Vás v plné míře uspokojí.

“Thank you for your trust. We are sure that the vacuum cleaner AMBIA that you have purchased will serve to your full satisfaction.”

But even the instructive sentences are not functionally homogeneous. We distinguish two types of them: **safety instructions** and **operating instructions**, which complement each other. Safety instructions are focused on safety aspects of the use and storage of the product with the aim to prevent damage to health, property (including damage to the appliance itself) and the environment (for example, they prohibit using the appliance with a damaged power cord). Operating instructions describe particular steps that have to be taken when operating the appliance (e.g. description of how to change the filter in a vacuum cleaner). However, it is necessary to admit that the boundaries between these two types of instructions are not sharp.

## 2. Distribution of informative and instructive sections in manuals

Informative sections (product description), but also safety and operating instructions are in extensive instruction manuals concentrated into separate textual sections marked by relevant headlines such as:

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<sup>2</sup> From another point of view, it could be also considered that the speaker's intention while expressing the instruction is not to make the recipient to perform an activity but only to inform him/her of appropriateness of this action. In this case, instructions could be assumed to be an example of the informative (assertive) utterances. Nevertheless, we keep to the mentioned traditional point of view which ranks instructions to the functional realm of directiveness.

- **Information, product description:** Charakteristika vysavače, Seznámení s ovládacím panelem, Informace o hluku/vibracích, Programová tabulka, Obecné informace o záruce;  
“Characteristics of vacuum cleaners”, “Description of the control panel”, “Information on noise/vibrations”, “Program table”, “General warranty terms”;
- **Safety instructions:** Všeobecná varovná upozornění pro elektronářadí, Bezpečnostní pokyny pro instalaci, Zabránění úrazu;  
“General warnings for power tools”, “Safety instructions for installation”, “Accident prevention”;
- **Operating instructions:** Údržba a čištění, Příprava jídel, Pokyny pro práci se strojem, Jak se otvírá a zavírá prací buben?;  
“Maintenance and cleaning”, “Food preparation”, “Instructions for machine operation”, “How to open and shut the washtub?”.

However, sections with these functions can also overlap. For example, the section dealing with safety instructions may contain informative sentences justifying why it is necessary to proceed in the required manner:

- (2) Nepoužívejte žádné elektronářadí, jehož spínač je vadný. Elektronářadí, které nelze zapnout či vypnout, je nebezpečné a musí se opravit.  
“Do not use any power tool if the switch is defective. Any power tool that cannot be turned on/off is dangerous and must be repaired.”

Also, essential safety instructions can be inserted in the description of appliance operation, often with a warning sign or an explicit indication of the function in the form of heading (*Upozornění, Výstraha, Pozor, Nebezpečí* – “Warning”, “Attention”, “Caution”, “Danger”). They can be graphically highlighted in bold or capital letters, with three exclamation marks, etc. that indicate the importance of the presented information:

- (3) **UVEDENÍ VYSAVAČE DO PROVOZU**  
Uchopte zástrčku přívodní šňůry a vytáhněte ji dle potřeby.  
**UPOZORNĚNÍ!!!**  
Při vytahování pozorujte přívodní šňůru, konec šňůry signalizuje žlutý pásek. Ne-  
tahejte dále za šňůru, mohlo by dojít k poškození přístroje.  
**“PUTTING A VACUUM CLEANER INTO OPERATION**  
Take hold of the plug of power cord and pull it out as needed.  
**WARNING!!!**  
Watch the power cord when pulling it out, the end of cord is indicated by a yellow  
tape. Do not pull the cord any further; it could cause damage to the appliance.”

### 3. Expressing forms of safety and operating instructions

The difference between the safety and the operation instructions is not, however, only in the thematic area related to these two groups of instructions. Although both of them have something to do with the non-binding calls (there is no direct sanction for the recipient

from failure to obey), they also vary in degree of their importance and applicability. Safety instructions are applicable to any product handling and it is necessary to keep obeying them. Operating instructions come into force, if the user chooses to perform a certain action with the product, e.g. to assemble it and switch on, and they carry the information as for how to proceed. This difference is also reflected in their linguistic form.

Although both of the types of instructions can be expressed by the imperative, which presents according to Miroslav Grepl (1979) one of the tests to prove that it is an illocutionary function related to the sphere of directiveness (including commands, suggestions, recommendations, requests, permissions, etc.)<sup>3</sup>, the imperative is not the only expressing form of instructions used in the Czech language. This just illustrates the fact that in language there is usually no one-to-one correspondence between the illocutionary function and its form. Not all Czech directive sentences have to be expressed in the imperative and the imperative does not necessarily express only the directive function, but also wishes (4), greetings (5); it may bear a contact function (6), or may occur in declarative sentences (7), see e.g. Svobodová (1985).

- (4) Brzy se uzdrav (2nd pers. sg. Imperative Refl. verb).  
“Get well soon.”
- (5) Bud' (2nd pers. sg. Imperative) zdrav!  
“Hi!” (Literally: “Be healthy!”)
- (6) Koukej (2nd pers. sg. Imperative), musíme to v klidu probrat.  
“Look, we need to talk in peace.”
- (7) Pak někomu věř (2nd pers. sg. Imperative).  
“Then trust someone.”

The imperative in **safety instructions** can be replaced by modal verbs and modal predicators expressing necessity (or permission); see the fourth sentence in (8).

- (8) Nesprávné použití může způsobit únik kapaliny z akumulátoru. Vyhnete se (2nd pers. pl. Imperative Refl. verb) kontaktu s touto kapalinou. Pokud ke kontaktu dojde, omyjte (2nd pers. pl. Imperative) zasažené místo vodou. Pokud dojde k zasažení očí, musíte (2nd pers. pl. Pres. “must”) po vypláchnutí vodou vyhledat (Infinitive) lékařskou pomoc.<sup>4</sup>  
“Improper use may cause a battery leakage. Avoid getting in contact with this liquid. In case of contact, wash the affected area with water. If your eyes are affected, after rinsing them with water, you must seek medical aid.”

In contrast, **operating instructions** can be expressed by the indicative forms of full verbs representing a description of the activities by which the recipient reaches the desired goal:

<sup>3</sup> Another of Grepl’s tests proving that the sentence can be intended as a call is that the action of directive sentence is always future-oriented and it therefore cannot use the verb in past form.

<sup>4</sup> It’s important to point out that in Czech grammars, the complex form “modal verb + full verb Infinitive” is generally considered a single predicate unit; its word order is governed by factors the description of which is beyond the topic of the present paper.

- (9) Pro zapnutí vysavače stiskněte (2nd pers. pl. Imperative) tlačítko hlavního vypínače P9. Vysavač vypnete (2nd pers. pl. Indicative Pres. Perf.) opětovným stisknutím tlačítka P9.<sup>5</sup>  
“After turning the vacuum cleaner on, press the power button P9. The vacuum cleaner is turned off by repeated pressing the button P9.”
- (10) Složenou nádobu vložíte (2nd pers. pl. Indicative Pres.) do přístroje tak, že nádobu otočíte (2nd pers. pl. Indicative Pres.) dnem vzhůru a zarovnáte (2nd pers. pl. Indicative Pres.) příchýtkami na nádobě se žlábkami na přístroji a potom ji otočíte (2nd pers. pl. Indicative Pres.) směrem doprava, dokud neuslyšíte (2nd pers. pl. Indicative Pres.) zacvaknutí.  
“You will insert the assembled container into the device so that the container is turned upside down and aligned by clips on the container with grooves on the device and then you will turn it clockwise until it clicks into place.” (Literally: “... until you hear the click.”)

When the instruction is executed in the form of imperative (11), the **agent of modality** (i.e. the person whose intention is to make the recipient perform something) coincides with the speaker; therefore the speaker’s attitude towards the content of the sentence is referred to in some conceptions (Šmilauer 1966) as “subjective modality”. Conversely, modal meanings of necessity, possibility and volition are ranked under the heading of “objective modality”, in which the agent of modality remains unspecified and, e.g. the necessity to perform an action, is presented as an objective factor (12).

- (11) Motorovou jednotku nemyjte (2nd pers. sg. neg. Imperative) v myčce na nádobí.  
“Do not wash the motor unit in the dishwasher.”
- (12) Nikdy nesmíte (2nd pers. pl. Pres. “must not”) motorovou jednotku ponořit (Infinitive) do vody nebo do jiné kapaliny, ani ji mýt (Infinitive) pod tekoucí vodou.  
“Never immerse the motor unit in water or any other liquid, nor rinse it under running water.”

When the instruction is expressed by the imperative form (11), and in examples such as (12), the **agent of required action** coincides with the recipient; moreover, we find also sentences in the instruction manuals where this agent remains unspecified. It happens especially in the safety instructions if the action is presented in the form of (in traditional Czech grammars) so-called complex passive (13), (14), so-called reflexive passive (15), (16) or by modal predicators (17), (18).

- (13) Jakékoliv nářadí s nefunkčním hlavním vypínačem je nebezpečné a musí být opraveno (3rd pers. sg. Indicative Pres. “must” + Infinitive “be” + Passive Participle).  
“Any tool with the out-of-order switch is dangerous and must be repaired.”
- (14) Pomocí řetězové pily smí být káceny (3rd pers. pl. Indicative Pres. “be allowed to” + Infinitive “be” + Passive Participle) pouze stromy, jejichž průměr kmenu je menší než délka lišty.  
“A chain saw is allowed to cut only trees with a diameter smaller than the length of rail.”
- (15) Vysavač se smí používat (Reflexive Particle + 3rd pers. sg. Indicative Pres. “be allowed to” + Infinitive) jen v případě, že v něm jsou originální filtrační sáčky.

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<sup>5</sup> In Czech, forms of the present tense of perfective verbs convey the meaning of the future tense.

“The vacuum cleaner is allowed to be used only provided that the original filter bags are included.”

- (16) Po použití se (Reflexive Particle) nádobka musí (3rd pers. sg. Indicative Pres. “must”) zcela vyprázdnit (Infinitive).  
“After use the glass jug must be emptied completely.”
- (17) Před seřizováním a opravami je nutné (modal predicator) odpojit (Infinitive) nářadí z elektrické sítě.  
“Before any adjustments or repairs the tool must be disconnected from the mains.”
- (18) Je možné (modal predicator) vypustit (Infinitive) vodu na zem za podmínky vyvedení hadice ve výšce mezi 90 až 65 cm od základny pračky.  
“It is possible to drain the water to the ground provided that the outlet of the hose is at the height between 90–65 cm from the base of the washing machine.”

However, even in these cases (13)–(18), the instructions imply that a stated action should be ensured by the recipient of the instruction manual, i.e. the person who will use the respective appliance, and who is considered by the author of the manual to be competent for such conduct. The recipient must ensure the existence of the required state factually even in the case when there is a need to achieve the state or operation of the appliance (19), or also other persons (20).

- (19) Po celou dobu řezání musí (3rd pers. sg. Pres. “must”) motor pracovat (Infinitive) na plný výkon.  
“Throughout cutting the motor must work at full power.”
- (20) Přihlízející osoby a zvířata musí (3rd pers. pl. Pres. “must”) zůstat (Infinitive) ve vzdálenosti alespoň 15 m od místa sekání.  
“Bystanders and animals must remain at a distance of at least 15 m from the point of cutting.”

Another principal difference between safety instructions and operating instructions lies in the distribution of **positive and negative imperative predicates**. Operating instructions can only be positive (guidelines how to proceed, e.g. (9), (10)), while a negated instruction (prohibition) is always related to safety:

- (21) Nepoužívejte (2nd pers. pl. neg. Imperative) přístroj v případě, že máte vlhké ruce.  
“Do not use the device if your hands are wet.”
- (22) Nikdy nenechávejte (2nd pers. pl. neg. Imperative) řetězovou pilu zapnutou bez dozoru.  
“Never leave the chainsaw turned on unattended.”
- (23) Mixér nikdy nepoužívejte (2nd pers. pl. neg. Imperative), pokud je prázdný.  
“Never use the blender if it is empty.”

On the other hand we find the positive safety instructions too, e.g. (8).

#### 4. Topic of instructions and its forms of expression

The difference between safety and operating instructions can also be found in the way the topic is marked, i.e. the specific product, for the operation of which the instruction manual is intended. Whereas in the information about the product functions and operating instructions the product is usually specified – *pračka*, *vrtáčka*, *vysavač* (“washing machine”, “drilling machine”, “vacuum cleaner”), etc. (24), in the sections of the text devoted to safety instructions where the instruction reaches nearly absolute validity (25), in contact sentences (26) or in generally informative sections of the text (27) there is a tendency to use superordinate names of the type *spotřebič/přístroj*, *výrobek*, *zařízení* (“appliance/device”, “product”, “equipment”).

- (24) Akumulátorovou sekačkou pohybujte vlevo a vpravo a přitom ji držte v dostatečné vzdálenosti od těla.  
“Move the cordless mower left and right while holding it sufficiently away from the body.”
- (25) Poškozený spotřebič nesmíte v žádném případě připojit.  
“A damaged appliance must not be connected in any event.”
- (26) Děkujeme, že jste si zakoupili výrobek Moulinex, který je určen výhradně pro použití v domácnosti.  
“Thank you for purchasing a Moulinex product which is designed exclusively for household use.”
- (27) Na námi prodaný přístroj poskytujeme záruku v trvání 24 měsíců od data prodeje.  
“The appliance sold by our company is provided with a warranty period of 24 months from the date of sale.”

Although the referred claims on distribution of superordinate names in case of safety instructions do not have an absolute validity in analyzed instruction manuals, this practice is for the author of these texts and manufacturers of appliances undoubtedly beneficial because it enables them to use the same non-specific sentences in the manuals for a variety of devices. This, on the one hand, accelerates the creation of texts and also their translation into different languages, and on the other hand it contributes to the uniformity of safety measures.

#### Conclusion

In the present article we defined instruction manuals as the texts with the dominant instructive illocutionary function (traditionally pertaining to the functional realm of directiveness) and namely as a non-binding call preferring the recipient and we observed that the informative and contact (advertising) sentences perform the subsidiary functions in manuals. We also distinguished two types of instructive sentences: safety instructions and operating instructions differing from each other in their thematic area, in their importance and applicability and last but not least in their forms.



Although these two types of instructions can be expressed in Czech by the imperative, their imperative form can be replaced in safety instructions by modal verbs and modal predicators expressing necessity or permission whereas operating instructions can be expressed by the indicative of full verbs. Operating instructions can be only positive, while a negated instruction (prohibition) is related to safety. Moreover, the differences between these two types of instructions can also be found in the way the topic is marked, i.e. the product, for the operation of which the instruction manual is intended. We can notice the tendency to use superordinate names in safety instructions and specified designations in operating instruction.

Even though our research was carried out on the Czech material we dare to say that the fundamental differences between safety and operating instructions are a general linguistic phenomenon. In addition, at least the distribution of negated predicates (prohibition) in manuals for use, exclusively in safety instructions, is expectable in other languages as well (a warning what not to do implicates a connection with safety in these texts). A comparative study dealing with expressing forms of safety and operative instructions in Czech and e.g. in English could be therefore a continuation of our paper. Varied language mutations of instruction manuals included in some of these texts give a good opportunity for such future research.

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