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## **Comparing the structures of academic texts written in English and Czech**

### **Struktura anglických a českých akademických textů**

**Key words:** stylistics, informative text, lexico-grammatical structure, text organization, English and Czech

**Annotation:** The article is a comparative stylistic study of written academic style, outlining certain differences in the organizational, and the lexico-grammatical structures of academic texts written by Anglophone and Czech authors. The different conventions in the two languages have linguistic, as well as historical and cultural roots. Czech academic writing, sharing many features with the writing styles of other Central and East European languages, is more intellectual and less reader-friendly than the Anglo-American academic style. Anglophone authors tend to present their ideas in a clear and easily comprehensible way: they organize their texts carefully, indicating text-organization by transparent graphical signals, and apply simpler lexical and grammatical patterns, including repetition. Many Czech authors, by contrast, prefer more complex grammatical structures, and—in agreement with the Czech stylistic norm—avoid the repetition of words by an extensive use of synonyms. Czech texts are often less logically and less transparently organized than texts written in English. English academic texts are primarily oriented towards the reader, while Czech texts focus on the topic and the presentation of all its complexity.

**Anotace:** Článek je srovnávací studií psaného akademického stylu. Věnuje se rozdílům v organizační a lexiko-gramatické struktuře textů anglofonních a českých autorů. Rozdílné konvence ve srovnávaných jazycích mají lingvistické, ale i kulturně historické kořeny. Český akademický styl, který sdílí mnohé rysy s jazyky střední a východní Evropy, je intelektuálnější, ale méně vstřícný ke čtenáři než styl angloamerický. Anglofonní autoři obvykle podávají problém jasným a snadno pochopitelným způsobem. Soustředí se na logické uspořádání textu a organizační strukturu naznačují meta-textovými signály. Používají jednodušší lexikální a gramatické prostředky a opakují stejné výrazy. Svou identitu naznačují

použitím zájmen první osoby jednotného čísla a volí asertivní formulace. Naproti tomu české texty působí skromnějším dojmem, protože autoři v souladu s českou stylistickou normou používají buď první osobu čísla množného nebo neosobní vazby. Autorská skromnost je dána také volbou méně asertivních formulací a modálních prostředků. Čeští autoři usilují o květnatý sloh – používají složitější gramatické struktury a opakování slov se vyhýbají bohatým užitím synonym. České texty jsou mnohdy méně přehledně uspořádány než texty anglické. Zatímco anglické texty jsou zaměřeny na čtenáře, české texty se soustředí především na podání tématu v celé jeho složitosti.

### **Comparing the structures of academic texts written in English and Czech**

One of the basic skills that an educated person is expected to possess in English speaking countries is the ability to write coherent and effective academic texts. Academic writing receives a lot of attention and is practised at all levels of education. At many British and American universities, academic writing is part of the compulsory curriculum—not only in humanities but also in the natural and technological sciences. Anglophone students are trained to produce texts displaying a high degree of clarity, consistency, and a logical formal layout. By contrast, the traditional Czechoslovak educational system was focussed on making students memorize large amounts of factual information, rather than developing their creative thinking. Academic writing skills were developed as a marginal goal within Czech and Slovak language classes and even there, the main focus was on learning correct grammatical forms and spelling. Owing to gradual European and global integration, however, professionals in Central and East-European countries have recognized the importance of effective written communication. A well designed application, academic article, or business contract can help its author achieve desired academic or business goals and prepare the ground for a successful professional career. Czechs, as well as Slovaks, are more and more often required to produce texts in foreign languages, especially English, because in communication across frontiers—with the exception of the Czecho-Slovak frontier—their native language is virtually useless.

Teaching academic writing at Masaryk University in Brno, and reading Czech students' essays written in English, I often recognize the students' lack of experience in creative thinking and writing, but also the interference between Czech and Anglo-American writing conventions. The differences between these conventions follow from the different grammatical structures of Czech and English, and different cultural and historical

backgrounds. Czech history has been closely related to the histories of Germany and Austria, and the Czech language therefore shares many features with the German language. Czech writing has also been influenced by Russian. Drawing on a selection of handbooks of academic writing (Axelrod et al. 1991, Laaken et al. 2001, Fowler et al. 2001, Čmejrková et al. 1999, and Šesták 2000), as well as my own experience of reading academic texts in English and Czech, I would like to summarize the main differences between-Anglo-American and Czech academic-writing styles. I will focus on the formal structure and content of academic texts (1) and the use of lexical and grammatical means (2); I will conclude by highlighting the differences in the overall orientation of the texts (3). The features discussed in this paper only describe the main tendencies in Anglo-American and Czech writing; no assumption is made that every author follows the outlined conventions.

## 1 Formal structure and division of content

### 1.1 Division into larger units

Texts written in English display a more fixed formal structure and division of content than texts written in Czech. Anglophone authors have to conform to stricter conventions of organizing the topic and indicating its organizational structure by formal means. An English academic text is divided into a distinct introduction, body, and conclusion; articles drawing on secondary sources are accompanied by a separate bibliography section or page; science articles are headed by an abstract. A necessary component of an English academic article is a clearly formulated thesis, indicating the general topic of the article, as well as the author's specific approach to the topic. Handbooks of academic writing define the individual sections of the introduction-body-conclusion framework in terms of the types of information that can be presented in them, as well as their relative lengths (see Figure 1). Long articles and monographs are usually further subdivided into chapters and subchapters, marked by consistent headings and logical numbering, indicating the hierarchy of and relations between the individual phenomena dealt with in the text (see Figure 2). Authors usually have to observe a certain length limit, given in numbers of words, and conform to a prescribed graphical layout of pages (see Figure 3). With respect to books, the contents page always appears at the beginning.

Figure 1 – Required structure of academic texts (modified version of Laaken et al. 2001: 15)

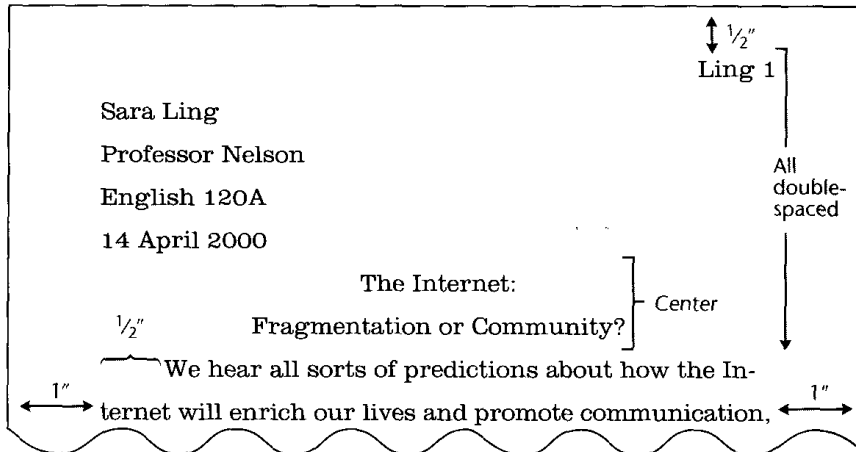
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>Body</i>	<i>Conclusion</i>
<i>General information</i>	<i>Specific information</i>	<i>General information</i>
<i>No details</i>	<i>Details—but only details related to thesis</i>	<i>No (new) details</i>
<i>5-15 %</i>	<i>70-80 %</i>	<i>5-15 %</i>

Figure 2 – Example of logical hierarchical numbering of chapters and subchapters in an academic paper (Prince 1981)

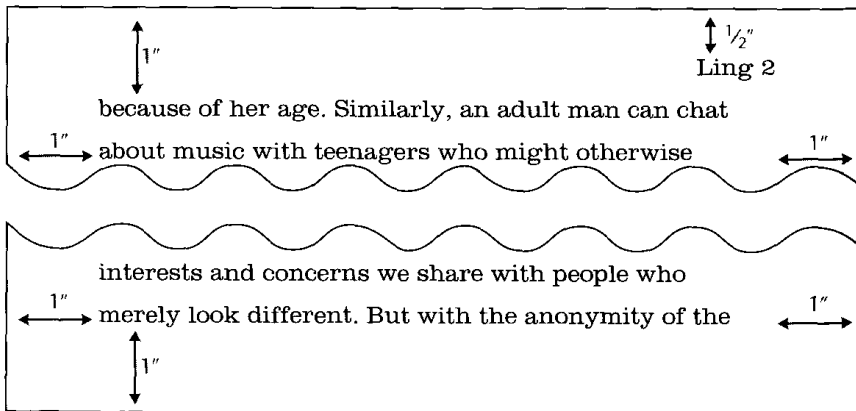
<p><i>Toward a Taxonomy of Given–New Information</i>  <i>Ellen F. Prince</i></p> <p><b>1. ON THE CONVEYING OF INFORMATION IN LANGUAGE</b></p> <p><b>2. “GIVEN–NEW”</b></p> <p>    2.1 <i>Givenness<sub>p</sub>: Predictability/Recoverability</i></p> <p>    2.3 <i>Givenness<sub>k</sub>: “Shared Knowledge”</i></p> <p>    2.4 <i>Relatedness of the Three Types of Givenness</i></p> <p><b>3. SO-CALLED “SHARED KNOWLEDGE”</b></p> <p>    3.1 <i>Terminology</i></p> <p>    3.2 <i>The Problem</i></p> <p>    3.3 <i>The Taxonomy</i></p> <p><b>4. ILLUSTRATION</b></p> <p><b>5. AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY</b></p>
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Figure 3 – Example of an essay in the MLA (Modern Language Association) format (Fowler et al. 2001: 216)

### First page of paper with no title page



### A later page of the paper



The structure of Czech academic texts, compared to texts written in English, is relatively free. The division into introduction, body, and conclusion is less consistent and less clearly identifiable. Works cited do not always form a separate section—they are often listed in footnotes. An explicit thesis is not strictly required in Czech academic texts; many authors resist the idea of revealing their intentions at the very beginning of their paper and prefer to disclose them only gradually. The body thus often contains information that the reader cannot predict after reading the introduction. This lesser degree of transparency of the author's intentions is also a consequence of the less consistent use of formal means: in Czech academic writing, the indication of the division of the text into chapters or sections by headings and numbers is often less logical, and sometimes it is missing completely. Figure 4 presents extracts from an article published in 1964, which is an example of such less

transparent text division. The beginnings of individual sections and subsections are indicated by Arabic numbers but no headings. Sections (i.e. units dealing with information of a higher level) are set off from subsections (i.e. units dealing with information of a lower level) only by the use of a cipher in bold type. The conventions of text division are changing gradually, however, and recent Czech publications, especially monographs and textbooks, often follow the more systematic 'western' model of text division displayed in Figure 2. The required length of Czech essays and even articles to be submitted for publication is still usually relatively flexible; it is set in numbers of pages rather than numbers of words. A precise graphical lay-out is usually not required. The contents page is traditionally placed at the end of the book.

Figure 4 – Example of a less transparent division of an academic paper (Jelínek 1964)

*MILAN JELÍNEK*

*VÝRAZY PŘEDLOŽKOVÉ POVAHY  
V DNEŠNÍ SPISOVNÉ ČEŠTINĚ*

*1. Zkoumáme-li slovní zásobu dnešní spisovné češtiny, zjistíme v ní vrstvu výrazových prostředků, které jsou frazeologicky ustáleny a které se blíží svým významem předložkám. Pátráme-li po historii těchto výrazů, ....*

*2. ....*

*3. ....*

*4. ....*

*5. Pokusím se nyní podat stručnou klasifikaci nových výrazů předložkové povahy. Třídění provedu podle základních vztahových funkcí, které tyto výrazy plní. Vedle tohoto hlediska se nabízí ještě hledisko formální, ....*

*1. Poměrně vyhraněná je skupina vyjadřující vztah souvislosti a shody. Rozpadá se ve dvě podskupiny, jak to vyplývá z vymezení daného vztahu. ...*

*2. Několik výrazů slouží k označení vztahu společenství (koexistence). Lze tu rozeznávat dvě hlavní podskupiny ....*

*3. ....*

*4. ....*

5. ....

## 1.2 Division into paragraphs

Different conventions of text division in English and Czech also apply at paragraph level. Anglophone students are trained in paragraph development, and handbooks of writing describe different paragraph types. The preferred paragraph structure resembles the structure of the entire text: it begins with a topic sentence which serves as an introduction to the information presented in the body of the paragraph, and the paragraph may end with a concluding sentence which closes the frame. Such paragraph structure is not unusual even in Czech texts, and some Czech scholars have paid a lot of attention to the analysis of paragraph structure (e.g. Mathesius 1942, Daneš 1994, and Čmejrková et al. 1999) but Czech writers are not always aware of the need for logical paragraph division and divide the text intuitively. A paragraph is usually defined as a stretch of text devoted to one compact topic. It is, however, impossible to measure the degree of ‘compactness’ needed for determining the boundaries between paragraphs. Different authors may divide texts at different ‘turning points’. Paragraphs in English academic texts devoted to linguistic topics are usually longer than paragraphs in comparable Czech texts. Čmejrková et al. (1999: 163) claims, however, that paragraphs in Czech texts related to humanities are often too long. The precise relation between the average lengths of paragraphs in different languages and different text-types has, to my knowledge, not been ascertained yet.

## 2 Use of lexical and grammatical means

## 2.1 Lexical and syntactic variation

Academic texts written in English are usually less complex at the lexical and syntactic levels than academic texts written in Czech. Anglophone authors tend to use straightforward lexical and syntactic structures and do not avoid repetition. The repetition of words and patterns makes the message more accurate and minimizes ambiguity. Anglophone authors subordinate their language to the aim of conveying clear and unequivocal information. Czech authors, by contrast, prefer more complex lexical and syntactic structures which allow them to express as many details as possible in one sentence; they search for synonyms because repetition is considered stylistically inappropriate in written texts. Czech authors strive to convey their message in an ornate language. Excessive lexical and syntactic variation—especially in writings of inexperienced authors, however, often obscures the message and leads to redundancy in expressing ideas.

## 2.2 Expression of author identity

In describing their research methods, or their intentions and conclusions, Anglophone authors usually indicate their identity by the use of pronouns of the first person singular (e.g. *I would like to illustrate that ... My data indicate that ...*). Quite frequently, author identity remains unexpressed, e.g. in passive-voice constructions and in sentences containing third person subjects that are not directly related to the author (e.g. *The measurements have been carried out in conditions of ..., The experiment indicates that ...*). The use of pronouns of the first person plural is restricted to texts written by two or more authors (e.g. *We have analyzed a corpus of..., Our data are in agreement with ...*).

The use of the first person singular in Czech texts is generally uncommon; it occurs only in more recent publications (e.g. *V závěru této kapitoly se pokusím objasnit ...*). As in English texts, identification of the author is often avoided by the use of third person subjects, impersonal constructions and passive-voice constructions, especially the reflexive passive-voice constructions (e.g. *Experiment probíhal v podmínkách ..., Je známo, že ..., Do této kategorie se řadí ...*). Most frequently, the author's identity—even in writings of a single author—is expressed by first person plural pronouns or verb forms. Two subcategories are distinguished, i.e. the 'authorial' plural used by a single author (*V této kapitole se pokusíme nastínit ...*), and the 'inclusive' plural through which the author indicates the inclusion of the



reader in the academic discourse (*Věnujme se nyní otázce ...*, *Tyto jevy označujeme jako ...*). The use of the authorial plural is quite common in other Slavic languages as well, e.g. Slovak, Polish, and Russian, but also in the German language; the authorial plural is thus determined by cultural and geographical, rather than linguistic factors (cf. Stašková 2004; and Čmejrková et al. 1999: 47-48). The use of the authorial plural is one of the most common mistakes in English academic texts written by native speakers of Czech.

### 2.3 Expression of author's self-confidence

On average, Anglophone authors demonstrate a greater level of self-confidence than Czech authors. The impression of authorial self-confidence in texts written in English is achieved by the choice of certain lexical and syntactic means. One of them is the use of the first person singular pronoun mentioned above. Other language means are the use of assertive statements (*The analysis indicates that ...*, *The results of my analysis corroborate the hypothesis ...*) and assertive titles of articles and monographs that directly name the topic (*Modal particles in German*, *The present situation in ...*).

Czech authors, in contrast, avoid assertive language means and prefer to demonstrate authorial modesty (see Čmejrková et al. 1999: 29-30). The impression of modesty is achieved by the use of first person plural forms mentioned above and structures containing modal expressions (*Tento jev by snad bylo možno interpretovat jako ...*, *Zdá se, že ...*, *Z těchto poznatků můžeme vyvodit závěr...*). Čmejrková et al. (1999: 28-29) describes this feature as 'modalization'. Authorial modesty is also demonstrated by modest formulations of the titles, suggesting that the article is only a minor contribution to a complex topic (*Několik poznámek o užití modálních částic v němčině*, *K současnému stavu ...*). Patterns such as *Několik poznámek o ...* or *K otázce ...* are very common also in German and other Slavic languages, and their use seems to be determined by the close ties between Slavic and Non-Slavic cultures in Central and Eastern Europe.

### 3 Conclusion: Overall orientation of the text

It is possible to outline certain different tendencies in both the organization and the lexical and grammatical structures of texts written in English and in Czech. These tendencies suggest that Anglophone and Czech writers have different priorities and focus on different aspects of

writing. However, individual authors have individual styles and may deviate from the conventions of their language culture.

The main focus of Anglophone authors is to make the reader understand a certain theory or problem. Authors try to present their ideas as clearly as possible and in a way which requires least effort on the part of the reader. They organize their text carefully, and select lexical and grammatical means that allow a smooth comprehension of the relationships between phenomena described in the text. Anglophone authors assume responsibility for the readers' comprehension of the presented material; their texts are primarily oriented towards the reader (cf. Čmejrková et al. 1999: 25-30).

The main focus of most Czech authors, in contrast, is to present a certain theory or problem in all its complexity. They therefore often employ complex syntactic structures capable of covering as many details of the theory as possible. Czech authors anticipate potential queries and try to answer them in advance or to present their findings through less assertive, 'modalized' formulations, suggesting that a different interpretation of the phenomenon in question is possible. Smooth comprehension of the text is not the writer's main priority. Authors pay less attention to organizing their texts in a logical way and sometimes obscure their message by excessive lexical variation. The responsibility for decoding the message is assigned to the reader. Czech academic texts are primarily oriented towards the topic (cf. Čmejrková et al. 1999: 25-30).

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