

The Case Book
for Czech

Laura A. Janda

and

Steven J. Clancy

Preliminaries

PRELIMINARIES 1 — The mission of this book

Na dveřích do Beátina budoáru byla velká obdélníková samolepka s nápisem PRIVATE a asi tucet starých vodových obtisků s portréty různých hudebních skupin, přičemž četné rýhy na mnoha z nich svědčily o marných pokusech je seškrábat. Když jsem se ani po třetím zaklepaní nedočkal žádné slyšitené výzvy, se slovy *Mohu dál?* jsem vstoupil.

V pokoji panovalo dusné a temné přítí, neboť brokátové závěsy na oknech propouštěly opravdu jen minimum světla. Chvilí mi proto trvalo, než jsem se zorientoval: celou místnost rodělovala dlouhá, asi půldruhého metru vysoká knihovna, která vybíhala z protější stěny a přímo proti vstupním dveřím byla po způsobu lodních přídílí zakončena barevnou dřevěnou figurou mořské panny, jejíž poněkud expresivně vztyčené paže sloužily jako šatní věšák. V menší části pokoje byl jednoduchý pracovní kout s psacím stolem, zavaleným knihami a papíry. Zbylým dvěma třetinám dominovala originální rohová sedací *sestava*, zahrnující dvě obrovské amorfní hromady jakýchsi buřtovitých polštářů, dva nízké, už napohled vratké kožené taburety a jedno autentické zubařské křeslo. Roli tradičního konferenčního stolku zajímavě suplovala polovina ropného barelu firmy Texaco, stojící uprostřed čtvercového koberečku s orientálními vzory. V rozích stěn byly zavěšené velké černé reproduktory a mezi zatměnými okny visela polystyrénová deska se spoustou ručně psaných poznámek a výstřížků z revue *Vokno*. Povlečení rozestlané postele, v níž čelem ke zdi ležela Beáta, bylo ovšem smutně tuctové.

On the door to Beáta's boudoir there was a large rectangular decal saying PRIVATE and about a dozen old stickers with the pictures of various bands, although numerous scratches on many of them attested to vain attempts to scrape them off. When even after knocking three times I didn't receive any audible response, I said *May I come in?* and entered the room.

A stuffy dark gloom pervaded the room because the brocade window dressings let in very little light, and it took me a while to get oriented. The whole room was divided by a long bookcase about five feet high, running from the opposite wall all the way to the door, where, like the bow of a ship, it was appointed with a painted mermaid, whose oddly expressive upraised arms served as coat-hooks. There was a workspace in the smaller part of the room, with a desk heaped with books and papers. The remaining two-thirds of the room were dominated by a creative corner seating arrangement, consisting of two enormous amorphous piles of sausage-shaped cushions, a pair of rickety-looking leather footstools and an authentic dentist's chair. Substituting for a traditional coffee-table was half a Texaco oil barrel standing in the middle of a square rug with an oriental pattern. Large black speakers were suspended in the corners, and between the darkened windows hung a styrofoam board with lots of hand-written notes and clippings from *Vokno* review. The sheets of the unmade bed, where Beáta was lying facing the wall, were however depressingly ordinary.

—from *Výchova dívek v Čechách*, by Michal Viewegh

Open a Czech-English dictionary and you will find the meanings of every kind of word.¹ Many dictionaries will even list translations for prefixes. But you won't find meanings for cases in your trusty dictionary. If you are lucky, your textbook might list some meanings for each case, but chances are these entries will look rather like the disheveled décor of Beáta's room, and be just as appealing. Take the dative case, for example. Your grammar book might tell you that the dative is used in the following contexts: for the indirect object; with the prepositions *k* 'toward' and *proti* 'against'; with certain verbs such as *odpovědět* 'answer', *chybět* 'be missing', *gratulovat* 'applaud', *zaplatit* 'pay', *podobat se* 'be similar to', *pomoci* 'help', *patřit* 'belong to', *věřit*

¹ Traditional explanations of Czech cases usually look like random lists of items.

‘believe’, *škodit* ‘harm’, *pomstít se* ‘take revenge on’, *divít se* ‘be surprised at’, *závidět* ‘envy’, *vévodit* ‘rule over’; in impersonal expressions of age and comfort such as *Je mi dvacet let/zima* [Is **me-DAT** twenty-NOM years-GEN/cold] ‘I’m twenty years old/cold’. There’s no obvious pattern in such an explanation, and it doesn’t prepare you to predict what other words might be associated with the dative, or to interpret a sentence like *Miminko nám pláče v noci* [Baby-NOM **us-DAT** cries in night-LOC] ‘Our baby cries at night’. The incoherent assortments of case usage offered up in this fashion are incomplete and suggest no logical motive. There is also no logical motive for the student to try to learn them, since they don’t make sense. The only choice seems to be to memorize lists of case uses, and this proves to be a formidable if not impossible task, since it is exceedingly difficult to assimilate information if it looks to you like just so much nonsense.

But entering the realm of Czech case meanings need not be as disheartening or disorienting as going into the room of a sloppy, spoiled teenager.² The goal of this text is to show you that there are patterns to case usage that make sense and can be learned fairly easily. This book can be used by students at any level of study, from beginner through advanced.

The meanings of the grammatical cases are probably the biggest obstacle faced by English-speaking students trying to learn Czech.³ Even advanced learners will often run into sentences they can’t interpret. Students often know plenty of vocabulary and how to find unfamiliar words in the dictionary, and maybe they can even figure out what cases all the nouns, pronouns, and adjectives are in, but if they cannot figure out what the cases mean, the meaning of a sentence remains a mystery.

The meaning of a sentence is a product of two interdependent forces: the words it contains, and the relationships they have to each other.⁴ In English these relationships are usually expressed by means of word order and prepositions, but in Russian this job is done by case. The words are fairly self-contained and concrete, since they can exist by themselves, outside of any sentence. The relationships that hold among words are relatively abstract and largely dependent upon context. The relationships themselves can be likened to a bare conceptual structure that is fleshed out by the actual words chosen. You can compare this to the concept *sandwich*, which indicates a set of relationships among bread, spreads, and fillings. By itself, *sandwich* is abstract, and if somebody asked you to “make a sandwich”, you would probably ask for more information. If instead the request sounded something like “give me an open-faced turkey sandwich on rye with lettuce, tomato, and mustard, hold the mayo”, you would find that more satisfactory, because you would know both the relationship (sandwich) and the specific items in that relationship (one slice of rye, mustard [not mayonnaise] for spread, filling of turkey, lettuce, and tomato).

Our culture has some abstract relationships that can’t be expressed in a single word, or even in a common expression.⁵ Take for example the various types of games that involve two teams of people, each of which tries to control the movement of a round object into a space belonging to another team. Variations in the type of object, parts of body or implements used to move it, playing environments, rules, etc. yield specific games such as basketball, football, soccer, volleyball, field hockey, ice hockey, lacrosse, rugby, water-polo, tennis, and ping-pong. The abstract relationship that holds among all the players, objects, playing environments, and rules is so familiar that it is transparent to us. We don’t even think about it, and we apply it effortlessly even when we encounter a new game we haven’t seen before. Now, imagine that there are some people who live in a radically different culture, where there are no such sports. If you led them onto a lacrosse field and handed them some sticks and a ball, they would be utterly clueless. Without any extra help, it’s extremely unlikely that these people would start playing anything remotely like lacrosse. The sticks might seem handy for gathering apples from some nearby trees, and maybe the ball could serve as the head of a child’s doll or ritual effigy. Goodness knows what they would make of the goals.

Nobody ever explained to you the principal relationship behind lacrosse or all the other games that work the same way. They didn’t have to. You saw plenty of examples all around you and

² This text explains the coherent patterns of case meanings and can be used at any level of study.

³ Why learning the meanings of Czech cases is an obstacle to students.

⁴ Czech cases show the relationships between words in a sentence.

⁵ Understanding Czech cases is like understanding how a game structures play.

internalized the principle without even thinking about it. In order to gain the kind of understanding you have for such games, newcomers who have never been exposed to such an idea will need an explanation, not just of the principle itself, but of how it functions in various actual games. The situation of a student learning Czech is very similar to the culture-shock of these outsiders. Until you get acculturated to the games Czechs play with their cases, it is impossible for you to interpret and manipulate Czech sentences the way that Czechs do. The objective is to make you into effective players of the case game. There are challenges to face, as in any game, but they are part of the sport, and the rewards of really mastering the language far outweigh the difficulties.

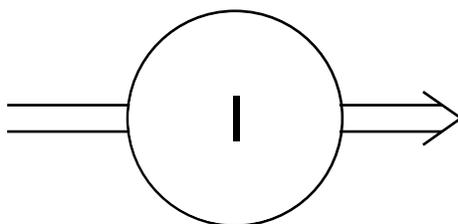
If a Czech asked you to explain the meaning of the English preposition *for*, you might be surprised and frustrated by the difficulty of this task. Even if you couldn't give your Czech friend a satisfactory answer, that wouldn't mean that *for* doesn't mean anything or that there are lots of different *fors* that are not related to each other in any systematic way. Intuitively you sense that *for* does mean something and that all uses of *for* relate to that meaning. The same goes for Czechs and cases: they may not be able to tell you why all those different verbs take the dative case, but they have an intuitive sense that the dative case does mean something and the contexts in which the dative appears has to do with that meaning.

PRELIMINARIES 2 — How information is presented in this book

This book will present to you the basic meanings of each case, and it will also show you all the specific uses and how they relate to the basic meaning.⁶ To help you focus on the cases and their meanings, all examples are presented with both a word-by-word gloss and a smooth translation. The cases will be marked with abbreviated tags in the word-by-word gloss: NOM for nominative, GEN for genitive, DAT for dative, ACC for accusative, VOC for vocative, LOC for locative (also known in some textbooks as “prepositional”), and INST for instrumental. The Czechs themselves use three systems of labels for their cases (which they call *pády*), all of which they learn in school: a numeric system, a system based on the case forms of the pronouns *kdo* ‘who’ and *co* ‘what’, and the Latin names of the cases (which are basically the same as our names, with adjustments made for Czech spelling).⁷ Here is a comparison of the three systems:

Notation in this book	Numeric system	“kdo - co” system	Czech versions of Latin names
NOM	1. (první pád)	kdo - co	nominativ
GEN	2. (druhý pád)	koho - čeho	genitiv
DAT	3. (třetí pád)	komu - čemu	dativ
ACC	4. (čtvrtý pád)	koho - co	akuzativ
VOC	5. (pátý pád)	<i>volání</i> , ‘calling’	vokativ
LOC	6. (šestý pád)	(o) kom - (o) čem	lokativ/lokál
INST	7. (sedmý pád)	kým - čím	instrumentál

Each case will further be associated with two labels, one of which is a word and the other a diagram. For example, the instrumental will look like this:



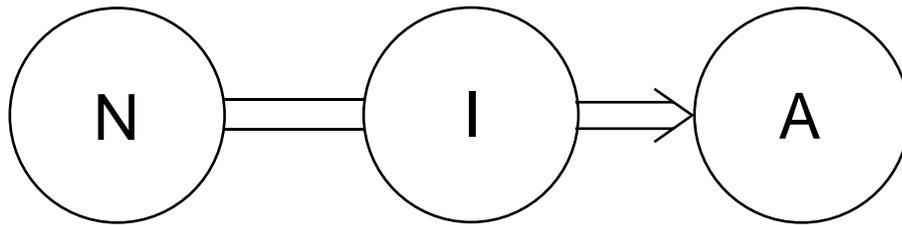
INSTRUMENTAL: A MEANS

⁶ The notation and presentation of case in this book.

⁷ How the Czechs label their cases by names and numbers.

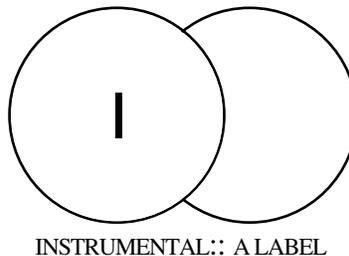
Both the word and the diagram are meant to suggest the basic meaning of the case, to give you a handle to grip your memory to. They are not definitions, nor do they imply that Czechs have such labels or think in pictograms or anything of that sort. They are merely a reference point for the process of working through the meanings. Both the word and the diagram focus only on the meaning of the case itself, which is usually embedded in a sentence that uses several cases. For example, a sentence like the following could be represented by a larger diagram in which INSTRUMENTAL: A MEANS would be only a component:

Řezník krájel maso nožem.
 [Butcher-NOM sliced meat-ACC knife-INST.]
 The butcher sliced the meat **with a knife**.

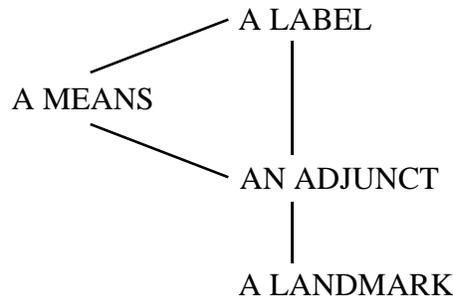


However, such diagrams would quickly become clumsy and distracting. We will focus on only one case at a time instead of diagramming entire sentences this way.

Most cases have submeanings related to the basic meaning; a double colon will be used to refer to a specific submeaning:



When there are submeanings, they will be arranged in a network to show how they are related to each other and to the basic meaning. For example, the network of the instrumental looks like this:



The object of this text is not to teach you the case endings for nouns, adjectives, pronouns, and numerals.⁸ Working through these materials will certainly reinforce your knowledge of what these paradigms look like, but there are many other books and materials for achieving that goal. Drilling

⁸ This book focuses on case meaning, not endings; tables of endings appear in every chapter and in the appendix.

the endings would distract you from concentrating on the meanings. However, if you want to review the case endings at any time, there are tables in the appendix giving complete declensions for your reference, and shortened tables specific to each given case are at the beginning of each chapter.

In addition to basic meanings and submeanings, metaphor plays an important role in case meaning.⁹ Case meaning takes as its point of departure the relationships that hold among physical objects placed or moving in space. These relationships can be metaphorically transferred to other domains such as time or social interaction, just as we see in English:

English *on* in space: I already have dinner *on* the table.

English *on* in time: I have a doctor's appointment *on* Monday.

English *toward* in space: The troops are advancing *toward* the border.

English *toward* in social interaction: That director is favorably inclined *toward* English actresses.

In these examples, time and social interaction are treated as if they were physical spaces. For the most part, Czechs use these metaphors in ways very similar to those familiar from English, though some uses might surprise you. Throughout the text mention is made of meanings that are extended to domains other than space. These metaphorical extensions, in conjunction with items specific to certain contexts, such as numerals, indirect experience, certain verbs and prepositions, are responsible for the more specific meanings that you will find nested under the basic meanings and submeanings.

There are also relations that hold between the cases.¹⁰ It is not essential for you to memorize or appreciate these relations at this point, but since these relations have some influence on the descriptions they are given, a brief overview is in order. This overview is purely for purposes of general orientation; the statements it makes are abstract and will probably make more sense to you after you have completed the text. The nominative basically names an item, and has no particular designation. The instrumental is relatively peripheral to the nominative, and names an item through which something happens; it is a mere conduit, envelope, or accompaniment for something else. Both the accusative and the dative signal direction; the accusative is the destination for some item or activity, and the dative, relatively more peripheral, is a receiver or experiencer of some item or activity, usually capable of producing some further action in response. The sectioning of a part from its source is expressed by the genitive; more abstractly such sectioning can involve background elements of the setting, expressed by the locative. The vocative is very different from the other cases since it is not really a part of a sentence, but it does overlap somewhat with the naming function of the nominative.

Most of the people using this book are probably already very familiar with the fact that Czech exists in two standard versions: a literary norm, known as Literary Czech, and a spoken language, known as Colloquial Czech (better thought of as two ends of a continuum of language use). In order to become proficient in Czech, a learner must master both versions, and this book acknowledges and presents examples of both Literary Czech (LCz) and Colloquial Czech (CCz). All case phenomena specific to Colloquial Czech, as well as all examples containing Colloquial Czech features will be designated CCz. The designation LCz will be used only when it is necessary to emphasize an exclusively literary case phenomenon or very bookish example.

You will notice that the examples in this book are very different from the examples you have seen in other textbooks.¹¹ That is because these are not textbook examples; not a single one of them was cooked up for this book. Our examples have been gathered from literature, periodicals, the Czech National Corpus, and the internet. Trying to learn Czech cases from traditional textbook examples is a little like trying to learn about the water cycle by studying the steam in your bathroom. It leads to the syndrome described at the beginning of this section, where you know all the words and endings, but still can't make sense of the sentence. Most learners hit this plateau at

⁹ Spatial relations and metaphor motivate case meaning.

¹⁰ The relationships between the cases.

¹¹ The examples in this book are real, not concocted.

some point, and if you're a fast learner, you risk getting stuck there even sooner. Rather than being contrived and antiseptic, the examples in this book and exercises will expose you to the cases as they really are, raw and unadulterated. This means that the examples will be somewhat messier than the ones you are used to seeing. But hopefully this guided tour of case realia will help to make your transition from language study to language use a confident, seamless stride rather than a desperate leap into a void.