

## The Dative Case in Czech: What It Means and How *si* Fits in

Laura A. Janda, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

### 0. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the way in which cultures make conceptual investments in their languages, using the Czech Dative reflexive clitic pronoun *si* as an example. The model of the meanings and uses of Czech *si* is based upon extensive research by the author and collaborators (Janda forthcoming a & b, 2002, 1998, 1993, 1988; Janda & Clancy forthcoming; Janda & Townsend 2000).

The human being and the conceptualizations each of us uses can be thought of as a prism mediating between the input of real-world experiences and the output of linguistic expression. Perhaps the most robust fact of linguistics is the intensity of variety: typologically languages are extremely varied, and there is clearly no one-to-one mapping of experiential input to linguistic output. All human beings live in the same world, with the same bodies and perceptual apparatus, but every language expresses the human experience in a different way. It is probably impossible to neatly differentiate between perception and conception, because conceptual structures focus on the attention of perception. Talmy (1996) has rightly coined the term “ception” to caption the intertwined forces of perception and conception. Language plays a particularly strong role in the shaping of conventional conceptualization patterns. And it is certainly the case that these conceptualization patterns differ from language to language (cf. particularly Slobin 2003 and Croft 2001). Languages differ both in the distinctions they make and in what they choose to ignore or emphasize. Our thesis will be that the Czechs have made a large linguistic investment in the expression of self-indulgence, and that this investment may reflect on their culture. This hypothesis will be explored through a semantic analysis of the use of the Czech Dative reflexive clitic pronoun *si*. Ultimately, *si* reveals what Czechs find to be beneficial to the self. In cases where the act is not beneficial, *si* implies an accident or self-flagellation (which might also be beneficial).

### 1. The Meanings of the Czech Dative Case

In order to analyze *si*, it is necessary first to examine the meaning of the Dative case. Since the use of *si* is always contextualized to the presence of a verb construction, we will limit the discussion to the semantics of the Dative in association with verbs (for a fuller analysis that includes prepositional and other constructions, see Janda & Clancy forthcoming).

Potential subjecthood is the hallmark of the Dative case; the Dative marks an item that has the capacity to react and therefore serve as a Subject. The capacity to react is further specified according to what stimulates the reaction, yielding three sub-meanings for the Dative:

- 1) The Dative may react to an Object, yielding the Dative: A Receiver sub-meaning;

- 2) The Dative may react to a Force, yielding the Dative: An Experiencer sub-meaning; and
- 3) The Dative may react to a Subject, yielding the Dative: A Competitor sub-meaning.

We will now take a brief look at each of these sub-meanings and see how they behave in the absence of *si*.

A Dative **Receiver** is expressed in conjunction with verbs that denote the giving or taking of an Object. There are, for example, verbs like *dát* ‘give’, and its near-synonyms, such as *doručit* ‘deliver’, *darovat* ‘give as a gift’, *nabídnout* ‘offer’. There are also verbs in which the Object is incorporated in the meaning of the verb, and therefore not overtly expressed. These involve communication (when the Object is a message or signal), as in *odpovědět* ‘answer’, *zavolat* ‘call’, *aplaudovat* ‘applaud’; and verbs that denote the giving of money or goods, such as *zaplatit* ‘pay’, *odměnit* ‘compensate, reward’. The Object may be the Subject itself, as when the verb denotes giving of the self, as in *narodit se* ‘be born’, *věnovat se* ‘dedicate self’, *představit se* ‘introduce self’. The direction of transfer of the Object may be reversed, yielding *vzít* ‘take’ and its near-synonyms, such as *ukrást* ‘steal’, *zcizit* ‘appropriate’, *zabavit* ‘seize’. And the Subject may take itself away from the Dative item, as in *utéci* ‘run away’, *zmizet* ‘disappear’, *zemřít* ‘die’, *uprchnout* ‘flee’.

A Dative **Experiencer** is expressed in conjunction with verbs that denote the exertion of a force that impacts the Dative item. These forces may be beneficial, as in *prospěť* ‘benefit’, *(po)dařit se* ‘be lucky, succeed’, *pomoci* ‘help’; or detrimental, as in *uškodit* ‘harm’, *vadit* ‘bother’, *překážet* ‘be in the way’, *ublížit* ‘hurt’. A special case are the verbs of punishment (built according to the pattern: *na-* + ‘deliver a blow’): *nabít* ‘beat’, *nafackovat* ‘slap’, *nakopat* ‘kick’, *namlátit* ‘thrash’, *naplácat* ‘spank’.

A Dative Competitor is expressed in conjunction with verbs that denote the comparison of the forces of the Dative item and the Subject. The forces may be matched, in which case the Dative and the Subject are on a par, as in *rovnat se* ‘equal’, *vzdorovat* ‘defy’, *odolat* ‘resist’. If the Dative item is weaker than the Subject, we have expressions of submission, as in *podrobit se* ‘submit’, *sloužit* ‘serve’, *ustoupit* ‘yield’. If the Dative item is stronger than the Subject, we have expressions of domination, as in *dominovat* ‘dominate’, *vládnout* ‘govern’, *předsedat* ‘preside’.

The Dative reflexive clitic pronoun *si* can be used to express both a Dative Receiver and a Dative Experiencer, but is not used to express a Dative Competitor. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to analyzing the use of *si* with the first two sub-meanings.

## 2. The Use of *si* to Express Dative: A Receiver

Czech *si* can be combined with many of the near-synonyms of ‘give’ to denote that recipient of the transfer of an Object is the Subject, who has “given” the Object to himself or herself, as in the following verbs, and as illustrated in examples 1) and 2): *dobýt si* ‘obtain (for

oneself)', *dovolit si* 'allow oneself', *koupit si* 'buy (for oneself)', *obstarat si* 'obtain (for oneself)', *opatřit si* 'obtain (for oneself)', *pořídít si* 'acquire', *vybrat si* 'choose (for oneself)', *zařídít si* 'arrange (for oneself)'. Note that in equivalent English expressions, there are usually no corresponding reflexives.

1) *Zrovna jsem si koupila nové auto.*

[Just AUX **self-DAT** buy-PAST new car-ACC.]

'I just bought (**myself**) a new car.'

2) *Podle průzkumu na pražských středních školách si jedenáct procent experimentujících opatřuje drogu přímo ve škole.*

[According study-GEN on Prague high schools-LOC **self-DAT** eleven-NOM percent-GEN experimenting-GEN obtain-PAST drug-ACC directly in school-LOC.]

'According to a study in Prague high schools, eleven percent of those who experiment with drugs get their drugs right in school.'

There are, additionally, a number of verbs that take on the meaning of 'give' only in the presence of *si*; these verbs cannot be combined with any other Dative forms in this meaning. Here are some of these verbs, illustrated by examples 3) and 4). Note again that corresponding reflexives are lacking in English: *chtít si* 'want for oneself', *naklonit si* 'win (a person) over', *osvojit si* 'acquire for oneself', *podmanit si* 'subjugate/capture for oneself', *vyžádat si* 'require/demand/exact for oneself', *potřebovat si* 'need' *přisvojit si* 'adopt/take possession', *přivlastnit si* 'take possession', *vynutit si* 'require/get by force', *zasloužit si* 'deserve', *zažádat si* 'demand', *získat si* 'get'.

3) *Nehoda si vyžádala dva mrtvé a devět zraněných.*

[Accident-NOM **self-DAT** exact-PAST two dead-ACC and nine-ACC wounded-GEN.]

'The accident exacted two dead and nine wounded.'

4) *Odveké nepřátelství mezi Řeky a Turky vyvrcholilo v roce 1812, kdy se hrdý řecký národ vzbouřil a vynutil si nezávislost.*

[Ancient hatred-NOM between Greeks-INST and Turks-INST peak-PAST in year-LOC 1812, when self-ACC proud Greek nation-NOM revolt-PAST and force-PAST **self-DAT** independence-ACC.]

'The ancient hatred between the Greeks and the Turks peaked in the year 1812, when the proud Greek nation revolted and got its independence by force.'

Verbs that have incorporated Objects can be used with *si*, but only to express reciprocity, as in *zavolat si* 'call each other'. Aside from this use of *si* to express mutual activity, we will see that *si* is used to express benefit and self-indulgence.

The verbs *dát* 'give' and *vzít* 'take' undergo a semantic collapse in the presence of *si*, and both express 'give to the self', as illustrated in example 5).

5) *Vzal si cigaretu a hned si ji zapálil.*

[Take-PAST **self-DAT** cigarette-ACC and immediately self-DAT it-ACC light-PAST.]  
'He took a cigarette and lit it immediately.'

The use of a verb with *si* to mean 'take from the self' is limited only to situations where this would be beneficial, and cannot be expressed by *vzít* 'take'. Example 6) illustrates such a use:

6) *Ten další zákusek sis mohl odřici, začínáš se podobat svému otci.*  
[That further pastry-ACC **self-DAT**-AUX can-PAST refuse, begin-NON-PAST self-ACC look-like own father-DAT.]  
'You could have refused that extra pastry, you're beginning to look like your father.'

And, of course, both *dát* 'give' and *vzít* 'take' participate in important idioms in conjunction with *si*, as illustrated by examples 7) and 8): *dát si* 'have (food, as when ordering in a restaurant), take (a shower)', *vzít si* 'marry (take wife, etc.), take (medicine)'.

7) *Dám si knedlo-vepřo-zelo.*  
[Give-NON-PAST **self-DAT** dumpling-pork-cabbage-ACC.]  
'I'll have the roast pork with dumplings and cabbage.'

8) *Chudák Ivana, ta si užije, jestli si ho vezme.*  
[Poor-person-NOM Ivana-NOM, that-NOM self-DAT experience, if **self-DAT** him-ACC take-NON-PAST.]  
'Poor Ivana, she'll be in for it if she marries him.'

### 3. The Use of *si* to Express Dative: An Experiencer

Czech *si* is very active in the expression of Benefit. In a sense, *si* can be used as a sort of barometer to determine what behaviors can be considered self-indulgent by the Czechs. Thus there are interesting distinctions between the uses of verbs with and without *si*, such as: *hrát* 'play' vs. *hrát si* 'play for fun', *házet* 'throw' vs. *házet si* 'throw for fun', *kopat* 'kick' vs. *kopat si* 'kick for fun', etc. In addition to standard uses that are well established in dictionaries (see examples 9) and 10)), we see that the use of *si* to express self-indulgence is highly productive, as demonstrated by examples 11) and 12). Note again the lack of emphasis on benefit to the self in the corresponding English.

9) *Hezky si užijte konec léta.*  
[Nicely **self-DAT** experience-IMPERATIVE end-ACC summer-GEN.]  
'Enjoy the rest of the summer.'

10) *Kanárek byl celkem fajn, koloraturně si zpíval, akorát dělal kolem klece děsný nepořádek.*  
[Canary-NOM by-PAST altogether ok, colorfully **self-DAT** sing-PAST, precisely do-PAST around cage-GEN dreadful mess-ACC.]

‘The canary was really okay, it sang beautifully, but it made a terrible mess around its cage.’

11) *Klikněte si pro větší obrázek.*

[Click-IMPERATIVE **self-DAT** for bigger picture-ACC.]

‘Click for a bigger picture.’

12) *V jednom seriálu jel hlavní hrdina autem, na klíně měl notebook a surfoval si po Internetu.*

[In one serial-LOC ride-PAST main character-NOM car-INST, on lap-LOC have-PAST laptop-ACC and surf-PAST **self-DAT** along Internet-LOC.]

‘In one serial the main character was riding in a car, he had a laptop on his lap and was surfing the Internet.’

Czech has a productive morphological derivation pattern that likewise indicates the “pleasure factor” of certain activities. If an activity can be performed for pleasure, it can be prefixed and used with *si* to create *po- si*, *za- si* verbs, as illustrated in examples 13), 14), and 15):

13) *“Moji chlapi” si zajezdili na horských kolech z půjčovny hotelu, já jsem si raději poležela na sluníčku.*

[“My boys”-NOM **self-DAT** ride-PAST on mountain bikes-LOC from rental-office-GEN hotel-GEN I-NOM AUX **self-DAT** instead lie-PAST on sun-LOC.]

‘My boys’ went riding on mountain bikes from the hotel’s rental office, while I preferred to lie in the sun.

14) *Na palačinkách si pochutnali návštěvníci oslav svatého Vavřince, patrona kuchařů a cukrářů.*

[On pancakes-LOC **self-DAT** tasted visitors-NOM celebrations-GEN St. Lawrence-GEN, patron-GEN cooks-GEN and confectioners-GEN.]

‘Visitors to the celebration of St. Lawrence, patron saint of cooks and confectioners, enjoyed tasting the pancakes.’

15) *Večer mě přepadla náhlá chuť na pizzu, kterou jsem ale záhy překonal tím, že jsem si pustil svoje reggae a půl hodinky si zaskákal na trampolíně.*

[Yesterday me-ACC overcome-PAST sudden appetite-NOM on pizza-ACC, which-ACC AUX however immediately overwhelm-PAST that-INST, that AUX self-DAT let own reggae-ACC and half-ACC hour-GEN **self-DAT** jump-PAST on trampoline-LOC.]

‘Yesterday I suddenly got a sudden urge for pizza, but I got over it by putting on my reggae tunes and jumping on the trampoline for a half hour.’

Verbs that express the taking of convenient positions require the use of *si*: *sednout si* ‘sit down’, *lehnout si* ‘lie down’, *dřepnout si* ‘squat’, *stoupnout si* ‘stand up’ (though the latter is used only when standing is convenient; the normal verb for ‘stand up’ is the *si*-less *vstát*). Example 16) provides an illustration:

16) *Včera mě ošklivě bolela hlava, šla jsem si brzy lehnout.*

[Yesterday me-ACC terribly hurt-PAST head-NOM, go-PAST AUX **self-DAT** early lie-down.]

‘I had a terrible headache yesterday and went to bed early.’

Verbs expressing the routine maintenance of body parts (and some possessions, usually shoes and clothes) are accompanied by *si*, which expresses benefit to the self and, by implication, possession, as illustrated in 17). English, by contrast, expresses possession, implying benefit.

17) *Každou neděli jsme se museli podrobit stejnému rituálu: vykoupat se, umýt si hlavu, vyčistit si zuby, ostříhat si nehty.*

[Every Sunday-ACC AUX self-ACC must-PAST submit same ritual-DAT: bathe self-ACC, wash **self-DAT** head-ACC, clean **self-DAT** teeth-ACC, cut **self-DAT** nails-ACC.]

‘Every Sunday we submitted to the same ritual: take a bath, wash **our** hair, brush **our** teeth, and cut **our** nails.’

Various verbs expressing relief are commonly combined with *si*, such as: *naříkat si* ‘lament’, *oddechnout si* ‘take a breather’, *odpočinout si* ‘rest’, *odskočit si* ‘relieve oneself (go to the bathroom)’, *pohovět si* ‘loungue’, *postěžovat si* ‘complain’, *povzdechnout si* ‘heave a sigh’, *pozastesknout si* ‘complain’, *říci si* ‘say (what one needs)’. 18) and 19) are quite typical examples of this use of *si*; 20) shows that *si* is productive beyond what is attested in dictionaries and also that *si* is encroaching upon the territory of the Accustative reflexive clitic *se*.

18) *Musela jsem si odskočit, bylo to naléhavé.*

[Must-PAST AUX **self-DAT** jump-away, be-PAST that-NOM urgent-NOM.]

‘I needed to go to the bathroom, it was urgent.’

19) *Kdybyste něco potřeboval, tak si řekněte, já tu znám skoro všechny.*

[If-AUX something-ACC need-PAST, so **self-DAT** say-IMPERATIVE, I-NOM here know-NON-PAST almost all-ACC.]

‘If you need anything, just say **so**, I know just about everyone around here.’

20) *Sory, trošku jsem si uprd. (CCz)*

[Sorry, bit AUX **self-DAT** fart-PAST.]

‘Sorry, I farted a bit.’

A more subtle expression of benefit comes with the verbs expressing awareness and capability that combine with *si*, illustrated in 21): *cenit si* ‘appreciate’, *myslet si* ‘have an opinion’, *považovat si* ‘appreciate’, *pamatovat si* ‘remember’, *uvědomit si* ‘realize, be aware’, *vážít si* ‘respect’, *vědět si rady* ‘know what to do’, *všimnout si* ‘notice’, *vzpomenout si* ‘recall’

21) *Dále já si uvědomuju, že kousek od chvály a pocty je vždycky schovaná nějaká ostuda. (CCz)*

[Further I-NOM **self-DAT** realize-NON-PAST, that piece-ACC from praise-GEN and honor-GEN be-NON-PAST always hidden-NOM some embarrassment-NOM.]

‘I also realize that not far from praise and honor there is always some hidden embarrassment.’

Whereas expressions of benefit are quite robust with *si*, harm is very limited and always carries implications of accident or ultimate benefit (through necessary punishment). Harm to a body part is necessarily interpreted as an accident (since otherwise *si* is an indicator of self-indulgence) in expressions such as: *narazit si palec* ‘stub one’s toe’, *podvrtnout si kotník* ‘sprain one’s ankle’, *pohmoždit si rameno* ‘bruise one’s shoulder’, *rozbít si koleno* ‘skin one’s knee’, *vyvrtnout si prst* ‘dislocate one’s finger’, *zlomit si nohu* ‘break one’s leg’. Example 22) illustrates this use, compounded by the presence of two ethical Datives (for more on the ethical Dative, which cannot be expressed by *si*, see Janda & Clancy forthcoming):

22) *Pustila jsem dceru na hory, a ona ti si mi zlomila nohu!* (CCz)  
[Let-PAST AUX daughter-ACC on mountains-ACC, and she-NOM you-DAT **self-DAT** me- DAT break-PAST leg-ACC!]  
‘I let my daughter go to the mountains, and she broke **her** leg (and you should feel sorry for me)!’

Though it may initially seem counter-intuitive, there is some limited use of *si* with the punishment verbs formed using the pattern *na-* + ‘deliver a blow’. On occasion, if a person feels the need to castigate himself or herself for doing something foolish, it is possible to use *si* with a punishment verb to deliver self-flagellation. This use of *si* retains the strong implication that the punishment is beneficial to the self, as seen in examples 23) and 24). This use seems to be limited only to *nafackovat si* ‘slap oneself’ and *nakopat si* ‘kick oneself’.

23) *Potom jsem si ještě dal studenou sprchu a před zrcadlem si nafackoval a řval na sebe "Idiote, naivní!"*  
[Then AUX self-DAT still give-PAST cold shower-ACC and before mirror-INST **self-DAT** slap-PAST and yell-PAST on self-ACC “Idiot-VOC, naive-NOM!”]  
‘Then I took a cold shower and slapped **myself** a few times in front of the mirror and yelled at myself “You naive idiot!”’

24) *Já mám na sebe vztek, já bych si nakopal, já jsem blbec.* (CCz)  
[I-NOM have-NON-PAST on self-ACC fury-ACC, I-NOM AUX **self-DAT** kick-PAST, I-NOM be-NON-PAST idiot-NOM.]  
‘I’m furious with myself, I could kick **myself**, I’m an idiot.’

To sum up, the Czech language makes a large and consistent investment in the emphatic expression of the benefit to the self of acts that increase comfort, convenience, pleasure, relief, and the like. Among the Slavic languages, only Slovak, which shares the convenience of a Dative reflexive clitic *si* shows similar investment in expressions of self-indulgence. Beyond Slavic, this emphasis is typologically unusual. It is tempting to speculate that the use of *si* to express self-indulgence may be correlated with embedded cultural patterns of conceptualization, as seen, for example, in the me-first self-indulgence of a Švejk, the individualized comforts offered by the

“inventions” of Jára D. Cimrman, Dubček’s policy of “Communism with a Human Face”, and the focus on personal comforts of the Husák administration (which even reasoned aloud that the Czech and Slovaks would tolerate Communism better if their personal needs were met). At this point it is not possible to prove that there is a connection, but the alignment of grammatical and cultural expressions is compelling.

## WORKS CITED

Croft, William. 2001. *Radical Construction Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford U Press.

Janda, Laura A. forthcoming a. “The case of time in Czech, Polish, and Russian”, forthcoming in a publication of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN).

Janda, Laura A. forthcoming b. “Cases in collision, cases in collusion: the semantic space of case in Czech and Russian”, forthcoming in *Where One’s Tongue Rules Well: A Festschrift for Charles E. Townsend*, ed. by Laura A. Janda, Steven Franks, and Ronald Feldstein. Columbus, Ohio: Slavica.

Janda, Laura A. 2002. “Sémantika pádů v češtině”, in *Setkání s češtinou*, ed. by Alena Krausová, Markéta Slezáková, and Zdenka Svobodová. Prague: Ústav pro jazyk český, pp. 29-35.

Janda, Laura A. 1998. “Constructing GIVE, HAVE, and TAKE in Slavic,” in *The Linguistics of Giving* (= *Typological Studies in Language* 36), edited by John Newman. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp. 249-265.

Janda, Laura A. 1993. *A Geography of Case Semantics: The Czech Dative and the Russian Instrumental* (= *Cognitive Linguistics Research*, v. 4). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Janda, Laura A. 1990. “The Radial Network of a Grammatical Category -- Its Genesis and Dynamic Structure” in *Cognitive Linguistics*, v. 1, No. 3, pp. 269-288.

Janda, Laura A. 1988. “Pragmatic vs. Semantic Uses of Case,” in *Chicago Linguistic Society 24-1: Papers from the Twenty-Fourth Regional Meeting*, ed. by Diane Brentari et al. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, pp. 189-202.

Janda, Laura A. and Steven J. Clancy. forthcoming. *The Case Book for Czech*, a coherent description of all the uses of all the cases with examples for linguists and learners. A companion CD-ROM will be co-authored with Steven J. Clancy. Complete draft of text available at <http://www.seelrc.org>.

Janda, Laura A. and Charles E. Townsend. 2000. *Czech* (= *Languages of the World/Materials* 125), coauthored with Charles E. Townsend. Munich/Newcastle: LINCOM EUROPA. 2000.



Slobin, Dan I. 2003. "Language and Thought Online: Cognitive Consequences of Linguistic Relativity", in Dedre Gentner & Susan Goldin-Meadow, eds. *Language in Mind*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Talmy, Leonard. 1996. "Fictive Motion in Language and 'Ception'", in Paul Bloom, et al., eds. *Language and Space*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.