Czech negative polar questions and their English counterparts in a parallel corpus of Czech and English

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1 Introduction

The present paper deals with negative polar questions from a comparative point of view, using a parallel corpus of Czech and English. This approach, it is hoped, will shed some new light on the type and marking of bias in Czech negative polar questions as well as on their discourse functions.

2 The material and methods

Our paper is part of the research project *Czech National Corpus and Corpora of Other Languages*.[1] The material has been drawn from the Czech/English section of the parallel translation corpora which are currently being built at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague. The present paper is based on 200 Czech negative polar questions and their English counterparts excerpted from 6 contemporary Czech novels and plays[2] and complemented by findings based on 100 English negative questions (from three novels) and their Czech translations. By choosing various authors and translators and by checking the translation counterparts we hope to have avoided one of the obvious pitfalls of using parallel corpora - the reliability of the translation.

The form of negative polar questions is different in Czech as compared to English. We shall distinguish between two formal types of questions in English: negative polar questions with subject-auxiliary inversion and interrogative intonation (1a) and negative questions with declarative syntax and interrogative in-

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[2] The sources include: for Czech-to-English translations, M. Kundera: Nesmrtelnost (KN), M. Kundera: Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí (KL), J. Otčenášek: Romeo, Julie a tma (OR), J. Topol: Kočka na kolejích (TK), M. Viewegh: Výchova dívek v Čechách (VV), J. Weil: Život s hvězdou (WZ), L. Fuks: Pan Theodor Mundstock (FM); for English-to-Czech translations, M. Ondaatje: The English Patient, J. Rowling: Harry Potter and the Philosophers' Stone, J. Fielding: Puppet.

tonation, i.e. the declarative questions (1b). In Czech, word order is not a distinctive feature of interrogative clauses; polar questions are distinguished from other sentence types on the basis of intonation (compare 2a – an interrogative clause, and 2b – a declarative one). They may be introduced by interrogative particles *což, cožpak*, or *copak* (2c).

(1)   a. *Isn't there any justice in the world*? (WZ)
         b. *You don't know his novels*? (KN)
(2)   a. *(Ty) nečteš noviny*?
         b. *(Ty) nečteš noviny*.
         c. *Copak nečteš noviny*? (WZ)

3 The bias and discourse function in negative polar questions

The primary illocutionary force of interrogatives is a question. Generally, "a polar question has as answers a pair of polar opposites, positive and negative." (Huddleston - Pullum, 2002: 868; henceforth *CamGEL*). English negative polar questions, however, are considered to be "always quite strongly biased" (*CamGEL*: 881). Following *CamGEL* (880), we shall distinguish between the epistemic bias (i.e. "the speaker thinking, expecting, or knowing that one answer is the right one") linked with the question force of the interrogative, and the deontic bias (i.e. "the speaker judging that one answer ought to be the right one"), which occurs where the interrogative acquires the force of a directive.

Czech grammars usually claim that Czech positive and negative polar questions are generally interchangeable,[3] listing various factors that may block or favour positive or negative polarity of the question. A different approach to polarity in *yes/no* questions is represented by F. Štícha (1984: 83): "the use of positive or negative polarity in a *yes/no* question is not based on the speaker's will; instead, it is governed by particular communicative intentions corresponding to particular conditions and attitudes" (translation mine).

We may therefore expect that where a Czech negative question is paralleled in the English translation by a negative interrogative clause, the Czech question is conducive.[4] At the same time, a comparison between the two corresponding structures may help us determine the bias and potential discourse function markers.

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[3] "The content of many polar questions may be formulated either positively or negatively. ... The semantic difference between the positive and negative polarity is neutralized in these cases, and their mutual substitutability is an expression of the fact that at the moment of speech the speaker draws on the presupposition that either the positive or the negative content may be valid" (*Mluvnice češtiny*: 324; translation mine).
[4] "... questions may be conducive, ie they may indicate that the speaker is predisposed to the kind of answer he has wanted or expected" (Quirk: 808).

4 The English counterparts of Czech negative polar questions

As shown in Table 1, only11.5% of Czech negative questions are translated into English as positive polar questions, which are not inherently biased. All the other counterparts suggest either the presence of a bias or a change in the discourse function.

Table 1 The English counterparts of Czech negative polar questions

clause type			Σ	%
interrogative clause	polar declarative question	positive 7 / negative 15	22	11.0
	declarative with a question tag	positive 1 / negative 14	15	7.5
	polar question with inversion	positive	23	11.5
		negative	113	56.5
	alternative question		2	1.0
	wh-question	positive 7 / negative 1	8	4.0
		how about / why don't you	8	4.0
declarative clause		positive 5 / negative 2	7	3.5
imperative clause		positive 1 / negative 1	2	1.0
TOTAL			200	100.0

4.1 Illocutionary force signalled by the sentence type of the counterpart

The Czech negative question may be reflected in English in a sentence type prototypically associated with a discourse function other than a question. We may, therefore, assume that the Czech negative question can function as a statement (3), an exclamation (4), or a directive (5). Moreover, these Czech clauses may be expected to contain markers pointing out the change in the discourse function. As we shall see below, the epistemic modifiers (*snad přece jen* in ex. 3) indeed suggest a statement function, the presence of evaluative expressions in copular predication (*úžasně* in ex. 4) is typical of exclamations, and modal verbs expressing volition and possibility are strongly associated with suggestions and invitations (*nechceš, nemohla bys* in ex. 5).

(3)   *Snad přece jen sem nejel nadarmo?* (KL)
       'Maybe there was some sense in his coming all that distance.'
(4)   *Není to úžasně optimistické?* (VV)
       'Isn't that so incredibly optimistic?'
(5a)   *Nechceš ke mně kousínek blíž?* (TK)
       'Come closer, won't you?'

(5b)   *Chtěl bych ti něco navrhnout: Nemohla bys mi – alespoň tady doma – tykat?* (VV)
        'I'd like to suggest something: How about using my first name – here at home at
        least?'

4.2 Declarative questions

English declarative questions are always conducive: positive declarative ques-
tions have an epistemic bias towards a positive answer, negative ones towards
a negative answer. "In asking a declarative question I am typically seeking con-
firmation of a proposition that I am inclined, with varying degrees of strength,
to believe. There may be deontic [...] bias as well as epistemic, but this is not
inherent to the construction as such" (*CamGEL*: 881–882). Thus, whenever the
declarative question is used as a counterpart of the Czech negative question, we
may expect a similar kind of bias and force (6–8).

(6)   *Divili se: "Tak ty nechceš bojovat proti okupaci své země?"* (KL)
        'they were amazed. "You mean you don't want to fight the occupation of your coun-
        try?"'
(7)   *A ty nevíš, kdo to byl? Přece se ti představil!* (KN)
        'And you have no idea who this man was? He introduced himself, after all!'
(8)   *"Ty neumíš česky?" řekl jsem.* (VV)
        '"You're no good at Czech?" I said.'

Declarative questions are typically highly context-bound: the contextual ties
are signalled by the initial *tak, a, to* ('and, so'). The request for verification of
the speaker's interpretation of the addressee's words may be expressed explic-
itly in English by the positive opening *you mean*. The verb is typically associated
with one's convictions and volition: the speaker expresses his surprise at the ad-
dressee's wishes or knowledge. However, what is presented as an epistemic bias
serves actually as a deontic one: the speaker indicates that it is desirable that the
addressee should fight the occupation, remember the man's name, etc. It is worth
noting that in the Czech questions, there is usually an overt pronominal subject
in pre-verbal position. Being unnecessary from the grammatical point of view,
the pronominal subject seems to function as a marker of a change in the discourse
function of the interrogative clause.[5] Without the discourse markers of contextual
inference and the initial pronominal subject, the interpretation of the negative
question would be fully context-dependent: *Nechceš bojovat proti okupaci své země?*
can be interpreted as a question or an invitation.

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[5] It also helps to shift the negative into the medial position in the clause. According to *Mluvnice
češtiny* (325), it is the medial position of the negative that blocks the substitution of the negative
polarity by the positive one.

The close link to the preceding context opens up the possibility for irony. The inference is evident from the cotext; the need to arrive at it is, however, presented as the addressee's task. In (8) it is evident that the addressee, being a native speaker of Czech, can speak Czech well. The sentence serves as an indirect means of criticism.

4.3 Interrogative tags

Declarative questions resemble tag questions in their function: "they express doubt or ask for verification: the question is biased towards an answer that confirms the anchor" (*CamGEL*: 894). A negative clause with a positive tag therefore resembles a negative declarative question (9). The hope that the negative polarity will be confirmed by the addressee may be conveyed in Czech in the same way as in English by an interrogative tag (*vid', vid'te, že,* 10) or by (epistemic) adverbial modification (*snad, přece, asi,* 11).

(9) *"Nelíbí se vám?" ptal se redaktor.* (KL)
     '"You don't like them, do you?" asked the editor.'
(10) *Ale on [Bůh] asi není, vid'?* (OR)
     'But there probably isn't any such God, is there?'
(11) *"Snad jsi nedostal předvolání?"* (WZ)
     '"You haven't gotten a summons for a transport, have you?"'

4.4 Negative polar interrogative clauses

Negative polar questions are always conducive in English. Depending on their bias, they may function not only as questions, but also as statements, exclamations, or directives (Malá, 2007). The particular type of bias and the discourse function, however, have to be inferred from the context, relying also on lexical and grammatical markers. "Negative interrogative questions typically suggest some element of contrast. [...] The negative epistemic bias commonly contrasts with a positive deontic bias" (*CamGEL*: 883).

4.4.1 The statement function
Czech negative questions often function as emphatic statements. The interpretation is based either on the generally accepted validity of the statement (as indicated also by the generic reference of the subject expressed by determiners in English) or on the speaker's certainty in a self-addressed question (12 and 13, respectively). In both types of statements the Czech clauses were often introduced by the particles *copak, což, cožpak.*[6] There is a contrast between the present situa-

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[6] Out of the 27 questions with initial *copak, což, cožpak,* 11 functioned as generic statements, 10 were rooted in the immediate situation (with 4 used as a means of reproach), and 6 contained verbs of perception or cognition (*nevíš, nevíte, nevidíte, necítíš,* etc.).

tion and what it should be (on the basis of generally shared or personally known information). The contrast may be explicitly signalled by contrastive discourse markers (*ale* 'but').

(12)   *Ale což neplatí, že autor nemůže mluvit než sám o sobě?* (KL)
        'But isn't it true that an author can write only about himself?'
(13)   *Copak nevzal zázrak, aby se tam držel?* (FM)
        'Hadn't he taken the miracle tablets so as to be able to stick it out?'

Another type of contrast involves the discrepancy between the obviousness of the statement and the addressee's inability to see or understand this (the verb expresses perception or cognition). The epistemic bias combines with the deontic one, the speaker finds it desirable that the addressee understand the situation as it was meant to be understood. Depending on the mutual relationship of the speaker and the addressee, the negative clause may be interpreted as a reproach (15).

(14)   *Vždyť já také ... copak to necítíš, že i já ... tě mám ráda?* (OR)
        'It's the same with me ... can't you see I'm ... just as much in love as you are?'
(15)   *"Nezdá se ti," ozval se konečně otec, "že jdeš trochu pozdě?"* (OR)
        '"Don't you think," his father spoke at last, "that it's a bit late to be coming home?"'

The function of a statement[7] may also be indicated in the English counterpart by the full negative particle *not* in pre-subject position, which is traditionally associated with the so-called rhetorical questions (16).[8] However, there are negative polar questions whose force of a statement is fully context-dependent, there being no formal markers of the function in Czech or in English (17).

(16)   *"Nemá snad učitel oči? ... Nemá učitel ruce, ústrojí, údy, smysly, náklonnosti, vášně?" pokračoval jsem zapáleně, parafrázuje Kupce benátského.* (VV)
        '"Hath not a teacher eyes? ... Hath not a teacher hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?" I continued fervently.'
(17)   *Nemá Šimon právo vyjádřit otcův život svým vlastním slovníkem? To je přece odvěké právo všech pozůstalých!* (KL)
        'Hadn't Simon the right to express his father's life in his own vocabulary? Of course he had: haven't all heirs had that right from time immemorial?'

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[7] We may also assume a statement interpretation of the negative question where its English counterpart is a *wh*-question of the type *Neříkal jsem to?* (TK) 'What did I tell you.' (i.e. 'I did tell you this'). Here the usual question-answer presupposition seems to be cancelled (cf. *CamGEL*: 900). Although it is not fully reliable, the punctuation can also serve as a clue here.

[8] These are, however, quite rare, and in *CamGEL* this position of *not* is considered "highly unnatural except in extremely formal declamation" (*CamGEL*: 801). In (16) both explanations apply – the sentence is a periphrasis of a Shakespeare's play and a rhetorical question which simultaneously serves the function of an emphatic statement of opposite polarity.

4.4.2 Exclamations

Both in English and in Czech, one form of exclamative clauses is parallel to negative polar questions and distinguished from them by intonation. This, however, is not always marked in writing. The exclamative function can therefore be distinguished on the basis of the presence of evaluative (gradable) expressions in a copular predication. These occur in the adverbial or adjectival modification (*úžasně, nádherný*) or in the noun (*mamlas*). The marking is the same in both languages although it may occur within different clause elements.

(18)   *Není to úžasně praktické?* (VV)
       'Isn't it incredibly practical?'
(19)   *Nejsou to nádherný střihy?* (TK)
       'Aren't they magnificent cuts, hey?'
(20)   *Nejsi mamlas?* (TK)
       'Aren't you silly.'

4.4.3 Directives

The negative question may have the force of a directive. As shown above in 4.1., this function may be signalled by the modal verb expressing volition or possibility in the predicate. The connection is so strong that even if the negative question was not probably meant as a suggestion, it is interpreted as such in ex. 22 (hence the surprise; cf. also the initial pronominal subject suggesting a change in discourse function).

(21)   *"Hele," řekl jsem, "nemůžeme pustit aspoň rádio?"* (VV)
       '"Hey," I said, "can't we put the radio on, at least?"'
(22)   *Évi: Ty bys nechtěl mít dítě? Véna: /překvapeně k ní vzhlédne/ Co-o?* (TK)
       'Évi: Wouldn't you want a child? Véna: /in surprise/ What?'

The directives acquire various functions depending on the relations between the interlocutors. The above examples are invitations or suggestions, other clauses may express requests. Here the English counterpart is a positive question, indicating that in Czech the polarity has a secondary function, viz. that of politeness (the speaker is prepared to accept the negative answer). The directives are often accompanied by vocatives. Another type of negative question with a deontic bias is used as a reproach (24).

(23)   *"Pane Halaburdo," řekl jsem, "nezbylo vám trochu krve?"* (WZ)
       '"Mr. Halaburda," I said, "do you have a little blood left?"'
(24)   *Copak ses nemohl smilovat nad starými lidmi?* (WZ)
       'Couldn't you have pity for two old people?'

4.4.4 Questions

Most frequently, negative interrogative clauses have the force of questions. The negative English counterparts, however, indicate the presence of bias. These questions appear to be often employed as a means of deliberation, the speaker weighing and contrasting (cf. *ale 'but'*) the pros and cons (25). The modal verb *can/could* expressing epistemic possibility (26) is used when the question refers to a possible explanation of a particular phenomenon. The negative polarity of the English counterpart indicates that although the normal question-answer presupposition applies, the speaker considers one option more probable. In some instances (27), the only marker in the Czech clause is the initial pronominal subject. As suggested above, it appears to be associated with a contextual inference and a contrast between a previous expectation and what the present situation seems to suggest. In English, the pronominal subject, being a grammatical device, cannot be employed in the same way. The marking in English is a matter of the whole clausal form, viz the negative polar question.

(25)   *Nedělala by nic? Ano, to bylo lákavé, ale nepřipadala by si náhle jako penzistka?* (KN)
       'Would she do nothing? Yeah, that was appealing, but wouldn't she suddenly feel like an old-age pensioner?'

(26)   *Nemůže to bejt mrak?* (TK)
       'Couldn't it be a cloud?'

(27)   *"Ty nemáš ráda hudbu?" ptá se Franz.* (KL)
       '"Don't you like music?" Franz asked.'

4.5 Positive polar questions

Positive polar questions with subject-auxiliary inversion constitute the only unmarked type of *yes/no* question in English. In our material, they occurred as the counterparts of Czech negative questions with the function of polite request (cf. 23 above), where the negative question is ruled out in English. In other examples (24–26), the positive polar question as a translational counterpart indicates a positive epistemic bias of the Czech negative question (rather than an interchangeability between the positive and negative forms). The positive polarity may be hoped for or feared by the speaker but it is always the one that calls forth the question: the speaker in (24) realizes that the addressee may be cold, in (25) he assumes that the person in question could indeed have been the addressee's relative, in (26) the question is only justified if the speaker hopes that the addressee can give him a piece of paper.

(24)   *Není vám zima?* (OR)
       'Are you cold?'

(25)   *Nebyl to váš příbuzný?* (WZ)
       'Was he a relative of yours?'

(26)   *Nemáte kus papíru?* (KN)
       'Do you have a piece of paper?'

5 Conclusion

The English counterparts of the Czech negative polar questions suggest that the choice of the negative form of a polar question is not random. The negative question is conducive: while the question-answer presupposition remains the same in positive and negative *yes/no* questions, the negative polarity serves as a bias marker. Going further beyond the presupposition, it indicates a bias towards one polarity while not excluding the other. The degree and type of bias (epistemic or deontic), however, are context-bound. They may be indicated by grammatical and lexical markers: contrastive discourse markers (*ale*), epistemic adverbs (*opravdu, snad*), particles (*copak, což, cožpak; to*), personal pronouns as subjects in pre-verbal position, or the verb (e.g. modal verbs of volition associated with invitation).

Parallel corpora seem to be a promising tool for contrasting the functions of corresponding constructions in the two languages. Such corpora make it possible to view the same sentence type in two contexts (Czech and English), thus highlighting, on the one hand, the markers of bias and discourse function shared by both languages and, on the other hand, drawing our attention to instances in which a more explicit expression in one language may contribute to our understanding of its counterpart in the other language.

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