

PHRASES

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Why do Czechs misuse phrases?

One could argue that every language is 'phrasal': we speak in word chunks or bundles that are stored in our head as units formed by several words. These sets of words are associated with a single meaning that only arises when the words combined. So when we learn another language it is natural that we translate phraseology from our own language word-for-word.

Direct translation is the reason foreign language speakers make such odd lexical choices in multi-word combinations. It also explains why some English errors are so specific to Czech learners!



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36. I told my friend / I said to my friend

Czechs tend to add *to* when it is unnecessary (*I told to my friend*) or omit *to* when it should be there (*I said my friend.*). The correct versions are “*I told my friend*” and “*I said to my friend.*” In Czech, there is only one phrase for “*I said to my friend,*” (*řekl jsem kamarádovi*), which is why “*I said my friend*” is such a common error.

Also, there are more verbs to express speech in Czech: *sdělit, říct, povědět, vyprávět, oznámit*, etc. These verbs are mostly used with the dative and take no preposition (*komu co*), explaining why Czechs omit *to*. Unnecessarily adding *to* occurs because it is a common English match with Czech dative constructions: *dát něco někomu* (*give sth to sb*); *pojd' ke mně* (*come to me*), etc.

37. Thank God!

Czechs say “*Thanks God*” instead of “*Thank God.*” For example, “*I am not ill anymore, thanks God!*” (Correct version: “*I am not ill anymore, thank God!*”) Perhaps this mistake stems from misunderstanding the true meaning of the phrase. *Thank God* is a command (i.e., “*Don't forget to thank God.*”), whereas *thanks God* addresses God directly (the full form being “*I thank you, God!*”). Alternatively, the mistake may be due to the direct translation of *díky bohu*, where *díky* is plural.

38. Can I ask a question?

Czechs often say “*Can I have a question?*”, which is likely a direct translation of “*Můžu mít otázku?*” In English, “*Can I have a question?*” suggests you are asking for a question, rather than requesting permission to ask one. The phrase you are reaching for is “*Can I ask a question?*”, or to be even more polite “*May I ask a question?*”

39. An idea came into my head

Czechs often say *came to my head* when the actual phrase is *came into my head* or *came to mind*. For example, “Some ideas that came into my head at the meeting were...” or, “Some ideas that came to mind at the meeting were ...”

40. As much as we did

When comparing two things, Czechs use *as well as we did* when they mean *as much as we did*. For example, “We hope you enjoy his performance as well as we did.” (Correct version: “We hope you enjoy his performance as much as we did.”) Perhaps Czechs confuse the phrase with *as well as*, which means ‘in addition to’, e.g., “He loves skiing as well as cycling.”

41. Let us know your opinion

Czechs tend to say “Tell us your opinion.” Technically there is nothing wrong with this sentence, but it sounds awkward. “Let us know your opinion” is much better. Perhaps Czechs make this mistake because *tell us your opinion* sounds okay in Czech (“Řekněte/Sdělte nám svůj názor.”).

42. In the long term

Czechs incorrectly conflate two similar phrases by saying *in the long-term view*. The correct phrases are *from a long-term point of view* and *in the long term*.

43. Not my cup of tea

This phrase is used to indicate that something is not to one's taste, i.e., "*This book is not my cup of tea.*" It cannot be used to express that something is to one's taste ("*That book is my cup of tea.*"). It's strange that Czechs make this mistake because the corresponding Czech phrase (which replaces tea with coffee) can also only be used in the negative sense.

44. A tough nut to crack

Czechs often say "*This is a tough nut.*" (Correct version: "*This is a tough nut to crack.*") The corresponding Czech phrase "*Je to (tvrdý) oříšek*" doesn't mention *cracking*, which could be the reason for this error.

45. Thanks for your response

A common mistake in Czech emails is "*Thanks for your respond.*" (Correct version: "*Thanks for your response.*") This may be a symptom of the more general problem of confusing verbs and nouns. In Czech, it is clear whether a word is a noun or verb from the form itself (ending). English nouns and verbs often have the same form (sometimes differing in stress), and it can be easy to mix them up in cases when they differ.

46. It makes sense

Here Czechs mistakenly replace *make* with *have*. For example, "*It has no sense to work late.*" (Correct version: "*It makes no sense to work late.*") This error is likely due to the direct translation of "*nemá (to) smysl*".