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On Old Czech Segmentative Verbs and Their Origin

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Abstract

This article proposes an analysis of the origin of a class of segmentative verbs in Czech, which are prefixed with *za-* and which profile a natural quantum of an action, not unlike semelfactives suffixed with congeners of Late Common Slavic **-nǫ-* (cf. Nesset 2013, Benacchio 2026). After a brief description of these verbs in contemporary Czech based on Łaziński (2020a, 2020b), it presents data for these verbs drawn from the *Vokabulář webový* and the *Staročeská textová banka*, which indicate that these verbs are of a relatively early provenance in Czech. It proposes an analysis of their rise as a temporal metaphorical extension of the original spatial meaning of *za-*, i.e., 'motion beyond a landmark'.

1. Introduction

This article discusses the origin of Czech segmentative verbs in *za-*, and offers the hypothesis that a source-oriented meaning of Old Czech motion verbs in *za-* was the source of Czech segmentative *za-*. In particular, it argues that a metaphorical extension from the domain of space to that of time was the mechanism whereby Czech segmentatives arose.

The term *segmentative* comes from Łaziński (2020a cf. also 2020b: 85 ff.), and refers to a verb prefixed with *za-* that "singles out one quantum of [a homogeneous] action" (Łaziński 2020a: 263). Two examples that he cites are *zawalczyć o coś* 'struggle/vie for something' and *zapozować* 'pose for a photo shoot'. Łaziński points out that reference to an actional quantum overrides any potential resultativity of a given predicate, so that in *zaśpiewać piosenkę* 'sing a song' the predicate simply refers to the singing of a typical object of singing, which is also why potentially transitive segmentative verbs do not

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need patients in the accusative, cf., e.g., *zagrać na fortepianie* ‘play on the piano’ and *zagrać w szachy* ‘play chess’.

Such verbs in the modern Slavic languages have been discussed previously, and termed differently. Dickey (2000: 222–229, cf. the references cited there) discusses verbs prefixed in *za-* as part of the east-west aspect division and the fact that the literature on Czech, Slovak and Sorbian has recognized that *za-* often has a totalizing meaning as opposed to an ingressive meaning in these languages, in contrast to the ingressive meaning dominant in East Slavic and Bulgarian (cf., e.g., Russian *zaigrat′* ‘start playing.PFV’, Bulgarian *zaigraja* ‘idem’). Thus, following on the point made above, Polish *zaśpiewać* ‘sing.PFV’ and Czech *zaplakat* ‘cry.PFV’ allow or even prefer reference to a total event. Petruxina (2000: 166–169, 193, 203) analyzes such verbs in Czech and Slovak as “quantal-delimitatives,” cf., e.g., (1a, 2a), which she avoids translating into Russian by means of ingressives in *za-*, as shown in (1b, 2b).

(1) a. ***Zahřmělo***. [Czech]
b. ***Progremelo***. [Russian]
‘It thundered/There was the sound of thunder.’

(2) a. *V kapse mu* ***zacinkaly*** *mince*. [Czech]
b. *V karmane u nego* ***prozveneli*** *monety*. [Russian]
‘Coins jangled in his pocket.’

Thus, there is cross-Slavic evidence for the class of segmentatives in West Slavic, as distinct from specifically ingressive verbs prefixed in *za-* in East Slavic and Bulgarian. Segmentatives in Modern Czech seem to be fairly productive. They are not restricted to verbs of sound (cf. the examples above); rather, they are attested with other verbs that express various homogeneous activities, as shown in (3).

(3) a. *Seděl na lodičce, sledoval dva splávky, občas* ***zaveslovал****, aby jej voda neodnesla blízko k jezu.*
‘He sat in the little boat, followed two rafts, occasionally rowed a little so the water would not carry him too close to the weir.’
b. *Ten vepředu hbitě* ***zamanévroval****, seskočili z chodníku a byli pryč*.
‘The one in front maneuvered numbly, they jumped off the sidewalk and were gone.’
c. *Dvojice pak párkrát* ***zapózovala*** *v přilehlém parku fotografovi, a nakonec se všichni odebrali do hotelu Troja v Kobylisích* […]
‘A couple then posed for a photographer a couple times in the adjacent park, and finally everyone left for the Troja Hotel in Kobylisy […]’

The verb in (3a), *zaveslovat*, is defined by the SSJČ as ‘perform a few motions with oars’. The verbs in (3b–c) are not in dictionaries, which suggests that they are of relatively recent origin. The examples in context can only be interpreted as single events consisting of one “quantum” of the respective actions (i.e., making a maneuver and posing for a photo shoot respectively).

It should be pointed out that dictionaries can vary somewhat regarding whether they define a given verb prefixed with *za-* as segmentative or ingressive. The *Slovník*

spisovného jazyka českého (SSJČ) consistently defines such verbs as segmentatives, e.g., *zafoukat* as 'blow briefly or for a while'. In contrast, the *Příruční slovník jazyka českého* (PSJČ) defines *zafoukat* as 'begin to blow, blow several times [on something]'. In general, though, the PSJČ and SSJČ agree, and the segmentative meaning predominates. Occasionally the PSJČ combines the definitions, as for *zavanout*, which it defines as 'begin to blow, ordinarily for a moment'. All of this can be interpreted as evidence that in Czech homogeneous activity verbs prefixed in *za-* are vague with respect to a distinction between segmentativity and ingressivity, and their interpretation depends on the context. However, segmentivity seems to dominate, which comports with Veselý's (2020: 82–91) typology of Czech perfective Aktionsart verbs, according to which activity verbs prefixed with *za-* are "quantitative" (and ingressive *za-* is barely mentioned). In this regard, it should be pointed out that verbs prefixed with segmentative *za-* and suffixed with semelfactive *-nout* are never defined as ingressive, cf., e.g., *zakřiknout* 'give a sudden shout'.

The next section presents a brief discussion of segmentatives in Old Czech, based on the evidence in the VW and STB.

2. Segmentatives in Old Czech

The existence of segmentatives in Old Czech is indirectly evident in the entries in the aggregate dictionary of the *Vokabulář webový* (VW); it can also be established from examples in the *Staročeská textová banka* (STB). These two methods are considered in order.

According to my assessment of Old Czech verbs prefixed in *za-* contained in the VW, there are 32 verbs that are either definite or potential segmentatives. Regarding the former, the VW gives definitions in the modern language that clearly indicate that the verbs are segmentatives. Thus, Old Czech *zatrúbiti* is defined as *zatroubit*, which the SSJČ translates as '(of brass instruments) emit a sound or tone'. Potential segmentatives are those that the VW defines with verbs which are in turn defined in the SSJČ with verbs that are ambiguous between a segmentative and an ingressive meaning. An example is Old Czech *zazvoniti*, which is defined as *zazvonit*, which the SSJČ defines as *krátce, chvíli zvonit; začít zvonit* 'ring briefly or for a while; start to ring'.

The 32 segmentatives in the VW are given below in (4):

(4) Old Czech *za-* segmentatives: definite segmentatives are bolded; potential segmentatives are in regular font; if known from the VW/STB, the time of earliest attestation is given.

zablyščiti 'flash (of the eyes)', 1417
zadmychnúti 'blow'
zahřímati 'thunder', 1471
zahřměti 'thunder', 1417
zaskoliti 'howl, whine'
zaskučěti 'howl, whine'
zastonati 'moan', turn of the 14th–15th cent.
zaščekati 'bark'

zahvízdati ‘whistle’
zahvízdnúti ‘whistle’
zajěčěti ‘scream’
zakašlati ‘cough’, 1444
zaklektati ‘shake’, 1360’s
zakokrhati ‘crow’, 1470
zakřičěti ‘shout’, late 1360’s
zakřiknúti ‘shout’, late 1360’s
zakvieliti ‘wail, lament’
zaláti ‘bark, scold’
zamáchati ‘wave’
zapěti ‘sing’, 1360’s
zaškřípěti ‘squeak, scrunch’
zatrúbiti ‘trumpet’, 1350–1375
zatřiesti ‘shake, rattle’, 1417
zaúpiti ‘wail, howl’
zaváti ‘break wind’
zavieti ‘blow’
zavrtěti ‘shake (one’s head), wag’, 1480’s
zavznieti ‘sound’, 1430’s
zazaháleti ‘loaf, laze’
zazvoniti ‘ring’
zazvučěti ‘sound’
zažěleti ‘regret, feel sorry’, 1469

Of these 32 segmentative verbs, 22 are verbs of sound phenomena; 8 are verbs of (agentive or non-agentive) physical activity; one is a verb of emotion (*zaželeti* ‘regret.PFV’); one is a verb of speaker evaluation (*zazaháleti* ‘laze.PFV’). The verbs that have an alternate meaning of ingressivity are all verbs of sound phenomena (though note that, ironically, the according to the PSJČ each of these only has a segmentative meaning).

From the available dates of first attestation, it appears that segmentatives of sound phenomena were in use by the 1360’s. One segmentative of physical activity (*zaklekati* ‘shake.PFV’) is attested at the same time. The emotion verb *zažěleti* ‘regret.PFV’ appears later, in 1469. From the available data it seems that segmentatives of sound phenomena and physical activities were in existence in the 14th century, with other verbs (e.g., emotion verbs) appearing later.

There are two stative verbs prefixed with *za-* in the aggregate dictionary of the VW, which do not fit the definition of segmentives, but seem to be related: *zasěděti*, which is defined as *posědět* ‘sit for some time’, with no attestations in the STB, and *zaležěti*, defined as *proležet* ‘lie for a period of time’, first attested in 1472 in the following example:

(5) *Vida v práci přietele, Jetřich nepomeška déle, vypusti tak žalostný hlas, jakož zaležal ten čas, neb jest smutka dosti jměl […]*
‘Seeing his friend in torment, Jetřich did not hesitate further, let out such a pitiable cry, as he lay there for that time, for he had enough sadness […]’

These verbs are not preserved in the modern language (similar to the evaluative verb *zazaháleti* ‘loaf, laze’, which has been replaced by *prozahálet* ‘loaf for a period of time’ in the modern language) and appear to represent some impulse to extend segmentative *za-*. These cannot be considered further here.

In any case, STB attests some of the verbs in *za-* given in (4) in contexts of a single quantum of an activity, as shown in the examples in (6).

(6) a. *An* ***zakřik*** *a velmi jej rozedřěv, vyjide z něho, […]* [late 1360’s]
‘It, having cried out and having convulsed him greatly, went out of him, […]’

b. *A rozedřěv jeho duch nečistý,* ***zakřičav*** *velikým hlasem, vynide z něho*.
[late 1360's]
'And having convulsed him the unclean spirit, having cried with a loud voice, went out of him.'
c. *Hovora jě sě jich prositi, aby jemu přieli třikrát* ***zatrúbiti****.* [late 14th cent.]
'Hovora started requesting that they allow him to blow the horn three times.'
d. *Tehdy Azaf* ***zavrtěv*** *hlavú, vece […]* [1480's]
'Then Azaf, having shaken his head, said […]'

These examples all display clear cases of single quanta of actions, as opposed to the onsets of continuing actions. Ex. (6a) contains the transgressive of *zakřiknúti* 'shout once.PFV', and the related non-semelfactive *zakřičěti* 'shout.PFV' occurs in another telling of the same Biblical story in (6b), both refer to a single whole event (whereby the respective meanings of segmentative *za-* and semelfactive *-nú-* overlap, cf. Benacchio 2026: 43). In (6c), *zatrúbiti* 'trumpet' refers to a single blow on a horn (to be repeated three times), and in (6d) Azaf's shaking of his head is a limited action communicating disagreement with Lucifer.

The data presented above are solid evidence for the existence of segmentative verbs in Old Czech from the 14th century. The existence of these verbs at this early point in time is interesting as it coincides with the existence of a small set of stative delimitative verbs (e.g., *pobyti* 'be for some time.PFV', *poležěti* 'lie for some time.PFV', *posědĕti* 'sit for some time.PFV'). Delimitative verbs never became a major productive class in Czech as they did later in East Slavic (cf. Dickey and Hutcheson 2003, Dickey 2009). The precise relationship between *za-* segmentatives and *po-* delimitatives in Old Czech lies beyond the scope of this article. However, the analysis of the development of segmentative *za-* offered in sections 3 and 4 can hopefully contribute to an understanding of the relationship between the different developments.

3. Old Czech Motion Verbs Prefixed with za- with Source Orientation

Source-oriented motion verbs in *za-* are attested in Old Czech, cf., e.g., *zajíti*, which Šimek (1947) defines first as *odejíti* 'go away.PFV'; and which the STB attests in this meaning in the form of *zajdenie*, defined in a late 14th-century glossary as *discessus* 'departure'. This seems to be a continuation of the situation in Late Common Slavic, inasmuch as Old Church Slavic and Old East Slavic data are indicative; the *Slovník jazyka staroslověnského* (SJS) defines OCS *zaiti* as (1) 'go beyond.PFV' and (2) 'go away.PFV', and the *Materialy dlja slovarja drevnerusskogo jazyka po pis'mennym pamjatnikam* (MSDRJa) defines OES *zaiti* as 'go away.PFV/abire', also as the second

definition. Representative examples of Old Czech source-oriented *zajíti* are given in (7).[1]

(7) a. *Tehdy ten chudý, vzem tu mísu, vesele* ***pryč zašel****.* [3rd quarter of the 14th cent.]
'Then that poor man, taking the bowl, cheerfully went away.'
b. *A jakž to Ciprián vece, tak diábel, velmi se zahanbiv, od něho vzplanul a* ***pryč zašel****.* [1476]
'And when Ciprián said this, the devil, greatly ashamed, blazed up from him and went away.'
c. *Takež svatý Pavel, věrných křesťanóv čeledín, utěšitel svých přátel,* ***zašel od*** *nás, již jeho viec zde nenaleznem*. [1476]
'Thus St. Paul, a man of the servants of true Christians, the comforter of his friends, departed from us, we will now no longer find him here.'

In exx. (7a–b) we see a common combination of *zajíti* and *pryč/preč* 'away', whereas in ex. (7c) *zajíti* combines with the source preposition *od* 'from'.

Such usage exists alongside goal-oriented usage, shown in (8).

(8) *To já, nebožka, uslyševši, přes Jordán se přebravši,* ***na*** *tuto púšť sem* ***zašla***. [1476]
'I, an unbeliever, having heard that, having gotten across the Jordan, I came to this wilderness.'

Note here that the first-person narrative combined with *tuto* 'this' precludes motion behind a landmark, i.e., to a location that is not visible/accessible to the conceptualizer. At most, the verb here expresses a nuance of unintended direction akin to Modern Czech *zabloudit* 'lose one's way', which is one of the definitions of *zajíti* in the VW.

Old Czech *zajíti* occasionally collocates with the preposition *za* 'beyond' to refer explicitly to a trajectory beyond a landmark, as shown in (9).

(9) *V tu dobu Židé hledáchu, kak by jeho jěli, an vyšel z rukú jich,* ***za*** *řěku Jordán* ***zašel****, tu ješto svatý Jan dřieve lidi krstil, puol čtvrti mile ot Jeruzalema, neb ješče utrpenie jeho čas bieše nepřišel*. [1360/1380]
'At that time the Jews sought to capture him, he eluded them and went beyond the River Jordan where St. John had baptized people before, a half a quarter mile from Jerusalem, because the time of his suffering had still not come.'

Ex. (9) may also express the idea of unplanned direction.

It is interesting that, in reference to a trajectory beyond a landmark, *zajíti* 'beyond-go.PFV' does not seem to have been required. For example, in (10) the simplex imperfective *jíti* 'go' combines with *za* 'beyond' in a sequence of events:

(10) *Tehdy ten Kolumbanus pojal jest svatého Havla s sebú a chodil jest s ním po mnohých miestech, až jest* ***šel za*** *hory Alpes tak řečené a tam jest na púšti bydlel*. [1495]
'Then that Columbanus took St. Havel with him and walked with him to many towns, and even went beyond the so-called Alpine mountains and lived there in the wilderness.'

[1] All Old Czech textual examples are taken from the STB.

The fact that *zajíti* is not required to express such trajectories is further circumstantial evidence that the verb had other meanings that in part determined its distribution.

Given the etymological meaning of *zajíti*, i.e., 'beyond-go.PFV' and its ability to combine with source-oriented adverbs and prepositions in addition to goal-oriented ones, it seems that the source-orientation of the verb was due to the dual nature of motion beyond a landmark—and thus by default out of the visual field of an observer: one segment of the trajectory is the onset of motion from the source up to the landmark, which is visible to the observer, and the other is the location and any motion beyond the landmark, which is invisible/inaccessible to an observer at the source. These components are diagramed in Figure 1.

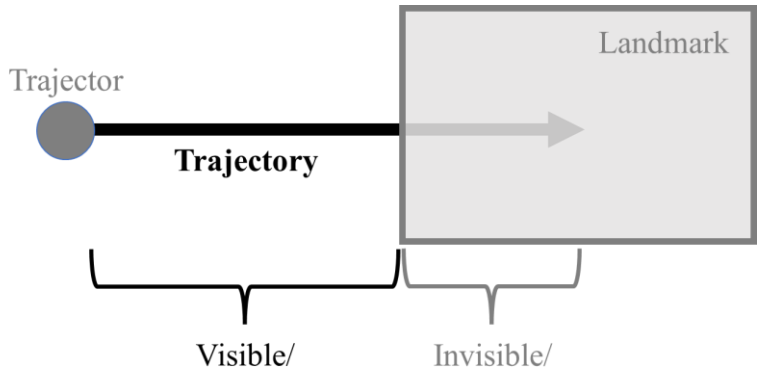


Figure 1. The Trajectory of ZAJÍTI ***and Visibility/Accessibility***

Thus, in (7a–c) the profile of *zajíti* is represented by the dark segment of the trajectory which extends up to the landmark in Figure 1.

The full set of Old Czech motion verbs and verbs with a motion component prefixed with *za-* contained in the VW (aggregate dictionary) is given in (11); if known from the VW/STB, the time of earliest attestation is given.

(11) *zaběhnúti* 'run away, disappear.PFV', mid 14th–cent.
zabežeti 'run away, disappear.PFV', 1360's
zabrati sě 'depart.PFV', 1476?
zahnati 'chase away/off.PFV', late 1360s
zajíti 'go away.PFV', 3rd quarter of 14th cent.
zaletěti 'fly away.PFV', late 1360s
zalétnúti 'flap away.PFV'
zametati 'hurl away.PFV', 1466
zanésti 'carry away.PFV', turn of 14th and 15th cent.
zaplúti 'sail away.PFV' 3rd quarter of 14th cent.
zapuditi 'chase away/off.PFV', 1360's
zavandrovati 'wander away.PFV'
zavrci 'hurl away.PFV', late 1360's

Most of these verbs are attested with *pryč/preč* and the preposition od in the STB (exceptions are *zabrati* sě, *zalétnuti*, *zavandrovati*; *zaletěti* is only attested with the preposition *od*, and *zametati* and *zaplúti* only with *pryč/preč*).

To conclude, this section has shown that source-oriented motion verbs prefixed with *za-* existed at the same time as the segmentatives prefixed with *za-*. The next section proposes an analysis of the origin of the latter.

4. The Origin of Old Czech Segmentatives in *za-*: the TIME IS SPACE Metaphor

In view of the foregoing, the hypothesis offered here is fairly simple to formulate. According to the TIME IS SPACE metaphor, abstract notions of time are conceptualized in terms of more concrete spatial notions (cf. Janda 2002 and the references cited there). The spatial extent of the accessible trajectory of motion verbs prefixed with *za-* diagramed in figure 1 correlates with a limited duration in time, i.e., the time it takes to pass along that segment of the trajectory. The space-time correlation is diagramed in figure 2:

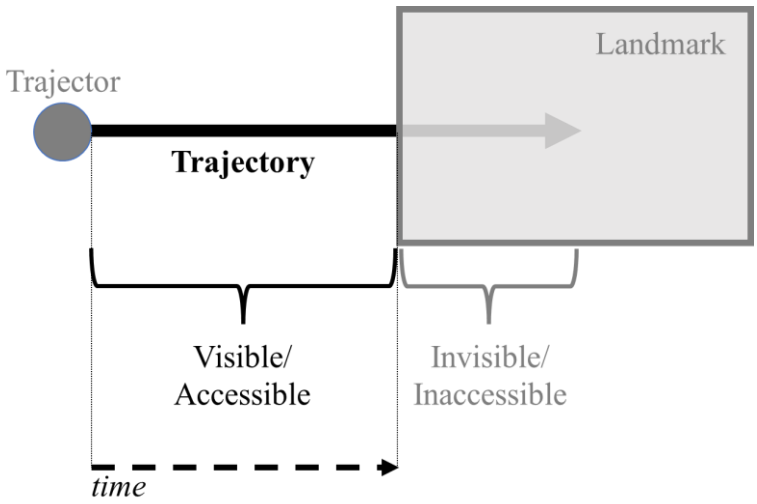


Figure 2. The Space-to-Time Transfer between Source-Oriented Spatial ZA- and Segmentative (Temporal) ZA-

In figure 2, the dotted lines running from the initial point and endpoint of the spatial trajectory accessible to the conceptualizer to the limits of the corresponding duration in time provide the mereological basis of the metaphorical extension. This metaphorical extension can probably account for the ingressive meaning of verbs in *za-* as well, inasmuch as the etymological meaning of 'beyond' of spatial *za-* includes an inaccessible trajectory that can be considered to correspond to the continued activity implied by an ingressive verb, which is not in focus.

A small piece of circumstantial evidence for the hypothesis proposed here is the fact that the VW defines Old Czech *zavieti* as either *zavanout* 'blow/start blowing for a little while' or *odvanout* 'blow off/away'. The polysemy of one verb with both the segmentative and the source-oriented spatial meanings of *za-* suggests that these two meanings are related.

5. Concluding Remarks

This paper has argued that the origin of Old Czech segmentative verbs prefixed in *za-* lies in a metaphorical extension of a spatial source-oriented meaning of the prefix evident in motion verbs. Crucially, there is no evidence that segmentatives existed prior to motion verbs prefixed with *za-* (which appear to retain a Common Slavic meaning of the prefix). The hypothesis offered here is plausible given the plethora of linguistic units in languages all over the globe that can only be explained by the TIME IS SPACE metaphor, at least as a diachronic source.

This development is similar in its mechanism to the later development of delimitatives prefixed in *po-* in East Slavic as detailed by Dickey (2007), who argues that the original spatial meaning of *po-*, surface-contact, gave rise through a metaphorical extension to the temporal meaning of temporal delimitation. A comparison of these two developments as well as other issues raised by this analysis such as the precise relationship between segmentativity and ingressivity in the history of Czech are, however, topics that must be left for a later day.

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