

The prosodic attachment of Czech clitics

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Olomouc Linguistics Colloquium 2025
June 5, 2025

Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Czech vs. Slovenian
- 3 Experiment
- 4 Results
- 5 Discussion
- 6 Summary

Summary

- Czech has second-position clitics, similar to Slovenian
- A previous perception study found that in Slovenian, these clitics prefer to attach to the *following* word (procliticize)
- Phonological and distributional arguments suggest that Czech clitics should instead prefer to attach to the *preceding* word (encliticize)
- An analogous study in Czech yields non-significant results qualitatively similar to Slovenian
- We propose that the distributional difference is due to differences in *syntax* and not the result of different prosodic requirements for clitic attachment direction

Introduction

- Czech auxiliary and pronominal clitics typically appear after the first constituent of a clause.
- They are prosodically flexible:
 - Can have pauses on either side → attachment in the other direction

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NOTE: All examples from SYN2020 corpus (Křen et al., 2020)

- (1) Vyhráli **jsme** o čtrnáct bodů
won PST.IPL by fourteen points
'We won by fourteen points.'
- (2) Atmosféru, kterou přináší, **jsme**= chtěli rozvézt dál
atmosphere which brings PST.IPL wanted deliver.INF farther
'We wanted to deliver the atmosphere it brings farther'
- (3) Čekaly =**jsme**, že zápas bude vyrovnanější
waited PST.IPL that match FUT.3SG balanced.CMPR
'We expected the match to be more even'

Introduction

- Czech auxiliary and pronominal clitics typically appear after the first constituent of a clause.
- They are prosodically flexible:
 - Can have pauses on either side → attachment in the other direction
 - Or even on both sides → prosodic word projection?

(4) *Considering whether to have an actor enter the stage by flying in suspended from the catwalk:*

Vzhledem k jeho úctyhodné hmotnosti a v takovém případě i nezbytnosti naší přítomnosti na lávce během manévru,
'Given his impressive mass and, accordingly, also the necessity of our presence on the catwalk during the maneuver,'
jsme, byť s určitou lítostí, toto entrée oželeli.
PST.IPL albeit with certain regret this entrée forewent
'we, albeit with some regret, forewent this entrance.'

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Czech has *fixed word-initial stress* – two options for proclitics (attaching rightward):

- Stress shifts to the proclitic, which is now the start of the prosodic word
 - This is typical with e.g. prepositions
- Stress stays on the post-clitic word, which is no longer the start of the (outer) prosodic word
 - Fried (1999) reports examples of unstressed proclitic complementizers and particles, as well as (optionally) some prepositions

Czech stress has no reliable acoustic correlates (Skarnitzl and Eriksson, 2017), so whether clitics are stressed is hard to measure objectively

- Czech's initial stress may disprefer rightward attachment (procliticization) when both attachment directions are available
- Slovenian stress is stem-final by default (Simonović, 2020) but mobile – no preference one way or the other

Prediction: A stronger preference for second-position clitics to attach to the preceding word (encliticize) in Czech than in Slovenian

Syntactic distribution

Where Czech and Slovenian differ in clitic placement syntactically, Czech prefers clitics to be preceded by a prosodic word.

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Sentence-initial adjunct CP:

- (5) Když mě uviděla, *zarazila* **se** ve dveřích.
 when me.ACC saw stopped REFL.ACC in door
- (6) Ko me je zagledala, **se** **je** *ustavila* pri vratih.
 when me.ACC PST.3SG spotted REFL.ACC PST.3SG stopped by door
 ‘When she saw me, she stopped in the doorway.’

Syntactic distribution

Where Czech and Slovenian differ in clitic placement syntactically, Czech prefers clitics to be preceded by a prosodic word.

Clitic complementizer:

- (7) ... že (se) dny (se) střídají bez pozoruhodností.
that REFL.ACC days REFL.ACC alternate without noteworthinesses
- (8) ... da se dnevi (*se) vrstijo brez česar koli omembe vrednega.
that REFL.ACC days REFL.ACC alternate without anything note.GEN worthy
'... that the days passed by without anything noteworthy.'

In Slovenian, phrases can go between complementizer and clitics when contrastive.

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Where Czech and Slovenian differ in clitic placement syntactically, Czech prefers clitics to be preceded by a prosodic word.

Coordination of verbal phrases:

- (9) Zavřel oči a *opřel se* o parapet.
 closed eyes and leaned REFL.ACC on windowsill
- (10) Zaprl je oči in *se* *naslonil* na okensko polico.
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 ‘He closed his eyes and leaned on the windowsill.’

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Sentence-initially in polar questions:

(11) *Bojíte se budoucnosti?*
fear.2PL REFL.ACC future

(12) (Ali) *se bojíte prihodnosti?*
Q REFL.ACC fear.2PL future
'Are you afraid of the future?'

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- Syntax leaves (at least some) clitic position undetermined, so prosody can assert its preference
- Speakers learn prosody from the syntactic distribution

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Research question

Target environment:

- (13) Právník **mu** **ho** zítra možná donese.
lawyer.NOM him.DAT it.ACC tomorrow maybe bring
'Maybe the lawyer will bring it to him tomorrow.'

Unambiguous cases:

- (14) Článek, || který jsi mi poslal, || **jsem= si=** ráno rychle
article.ACC which.ACC PST.2SG me.DAT sent PST.1SG REFL.DAT morning quickly
přečetla.
read

'This morning I quickly read the article you sent me.'

- (15) Vrátný **=by** **=tě,** || když bude mít čas, || pustil do
doorman.NOM COND.3SG you.ACC when FUT.3SG have.INF time let into
budovy.
building.

'The doorman, if he has time, will let you into the building.'

What is the prosodic attachment of the clitics in sentences like (13)?

Research question

Target environment:

- (I3) Právník **mu=** **ho=** zítra možná donese.
lawyer.NOM him.DAT it.ACC tomorrow maybe bring
'Maybe the lawyer will bring it to him tomorrow.'

Unambiguous cases:

- (I4) Článek, || který jsi mi poslal, || **jsem=** **si=** ráno rychle
article.ACC which.ACC PST.2SG me.DAT sent PST.1SG REFL.DAT morning quickly
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If Czech speakers attach clitics **rightward**, (I3) should pattern experimentally with (I4).

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'The doorman, if he has time, will let you into the building.'

If Czech speakers attach clitics **leftward**, (I3) should pattern experimentally with (I5).

Prosodic boundaries

Tabachnick et al. (2025): Testing speakers' implicit prosodic parse through perception of the location of beeps inserted into sentences (cf. Ladefoged and Broadbent, 1960; Fodor and Bever, 1965; Garrett et al., 1966)

- If listeners attach clitics to the preceding word, there will be a prosodic word boundary between the clitics and the following word
- Hypothesis: Prosodic boundaries are “perceptual attractors” of beeps – beeps are more likely to be heard closer to boundaries
- Thus, if beeps are perceived more often after the clitic cluster than before them, this means that clitics are attaching to the previous word (and vice versa)

Experimental task

Speakers hear a sentence with a beep and are asked to identify the location of the beep.

- (13) Právník **mu** **ho** zítra možná donese.
lawyer.NOM him.DAT it.ACC tomorrow maybe bring
'Maybe the lawyer will bring it to him tomorrow.'

Prá vník mu ho zí tra mo žná do ne se.
○ ○

Experimental task

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- (I3) Právník **mu** **ho** zítra možná donese.
lawyer.NOM him.DAT it.ACC tomorrow maybe bring
‘Maybe the lawyer will bring it to him tomorrow.’



Six target beep locations, evenly spaced between the middle of the syllables before and after the clitics.

Since syllables have different lengths, the beeps are not evenly spaced “orthographically”.

Conditions

30 sentences divided into 5 conditions, with expected prosodic boundaries:

Condition		Sentence			
1	noun	? clitics ?	noun		rest
2	modifier noun	? clitics ?	noun		rest
3	noun	? clitics ?	modifier noun		rest
4	noun relative clause	clitics	(modifier) noun		rest
5	(modifier) noun	clitics	adjunct clause		rest

Objects labelled “noun” can also be an adverb.

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4	noun relative clause	clitics	(modifier) noun	rest
5	(modifier) noun	clitics	adjunct clause	rest

- (I6) Svůj plán **jsi** **mi** týdny úspěšně tajil.
 own plan.ACC PST.3SG me.DAT weeks successfully hid
 ‘You successfully hid your plan from me for weeks.’

Conditions

30 sentences divided into 5 conditions, with expected prosodic boundaries:

Condition	Sentence				
1	noun	? clitics ?	noun		rest
2	modifier noun	? clitics ?	noun		rest
3	noun	? clitics ?	modifier noun	 	rest
4	noun relative clause	clitics (modifier) noun		rest	
5	(modifier) noun	clitics adjunct clause		rest	

- (17) Plánům **jsem se** pár let věnovala naplno.
 plans.DAT PST.ISG REFL.ACC couple years.GEN dedicated fully
 'For a couple of years I fully dedicated myself to the plans.'

Conditions

30 sentences divided into 5 conditions, with expected prosodic boundaries:

Condition	Sentence				
1	noun	? clitics ?	noun		rest
2	modifier noun	? clitics ?	noun		rest
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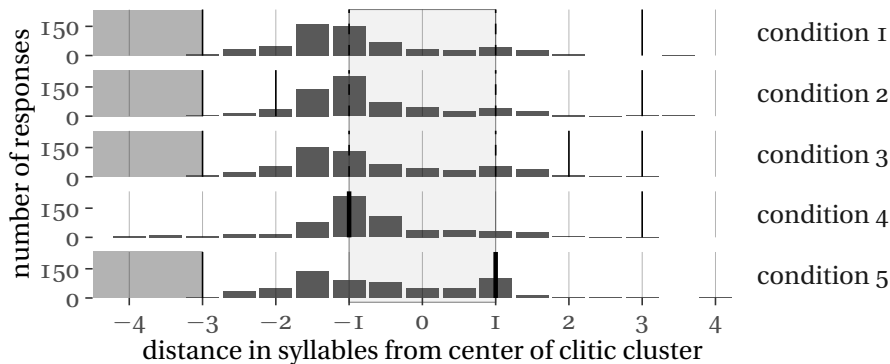
Prediction: 1–3 pattern like 5 (though the boundary effect may be weaker)

- 51 participants (recruited through Prolific)
- 90 trials each (60 target, 30 filler)
- Sentences read by one female speaker as neutrally as possible
- Sentences and beep locations per condition evenly distributed for each participant
- Mixed linear models predicting distance of perceived beep from left/right edge of clitic cluster

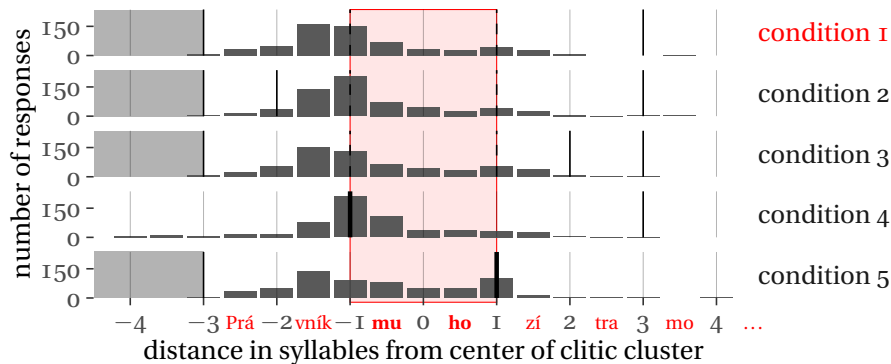
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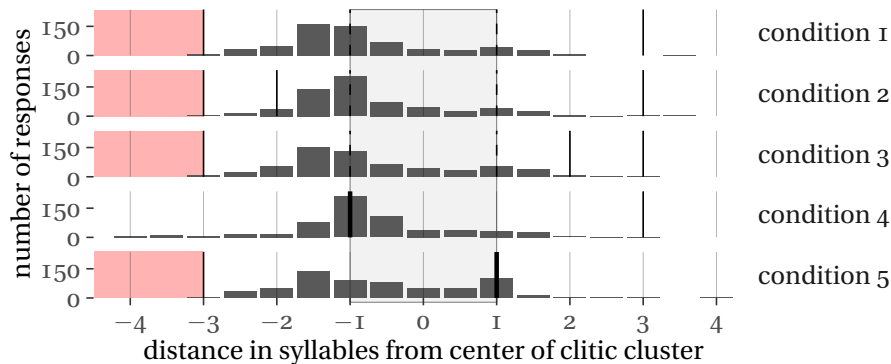
Results



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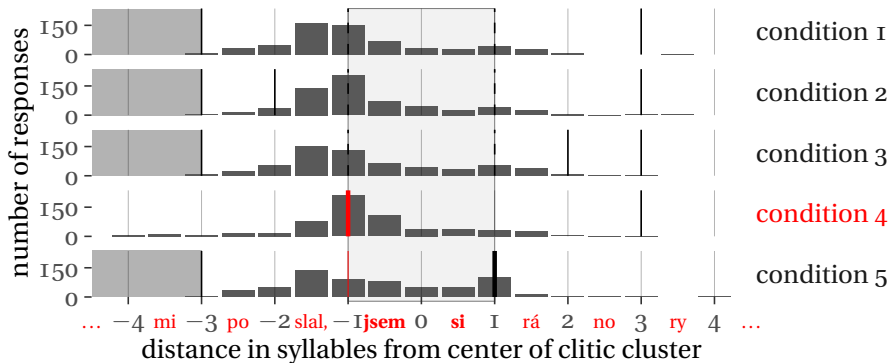


Results



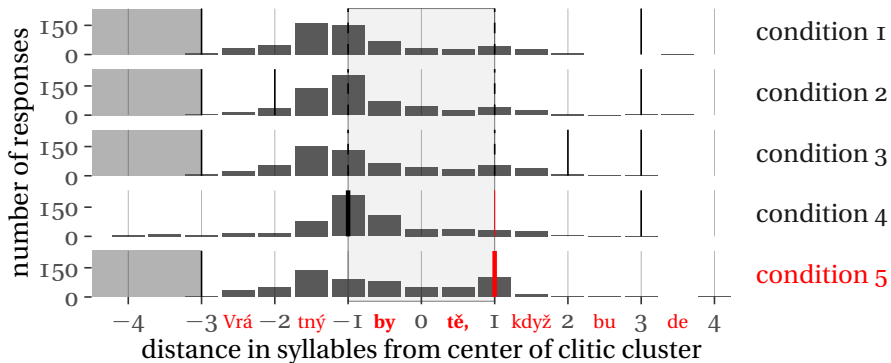
Most conditions only have two syllables before the cluster

Results



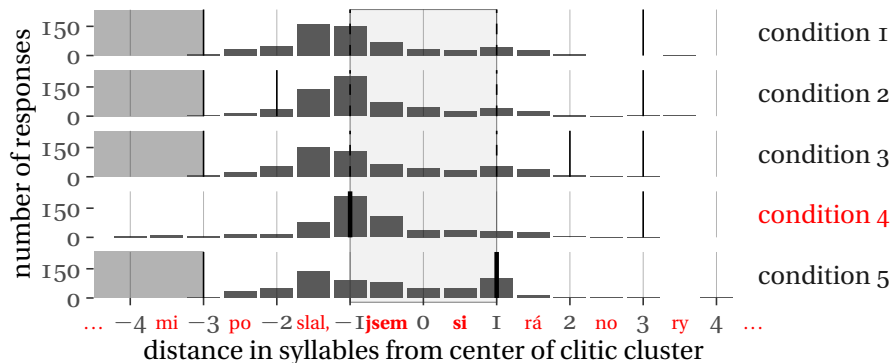
The two conditions with clause boundaries pattern very differently (significant at both edges of cluster)

Results



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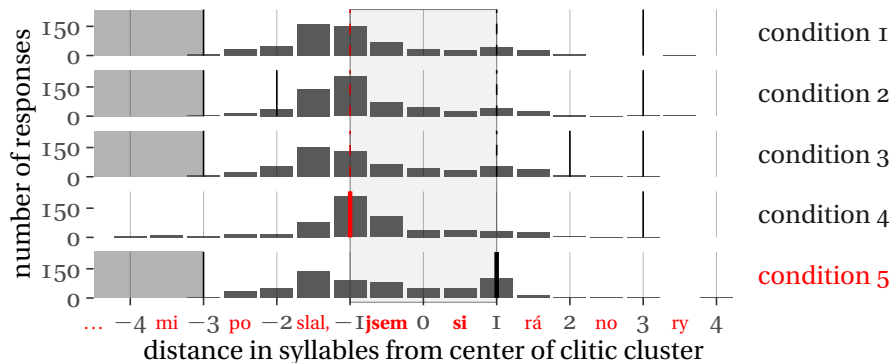
Results



No consistent evidence for the hypothesis (test conditions pattern with 5 and not 4)

- left edge of cluster: 4 > 3, others not significant
- right edge of cluster: 4 not significantly different from any of the test conditions

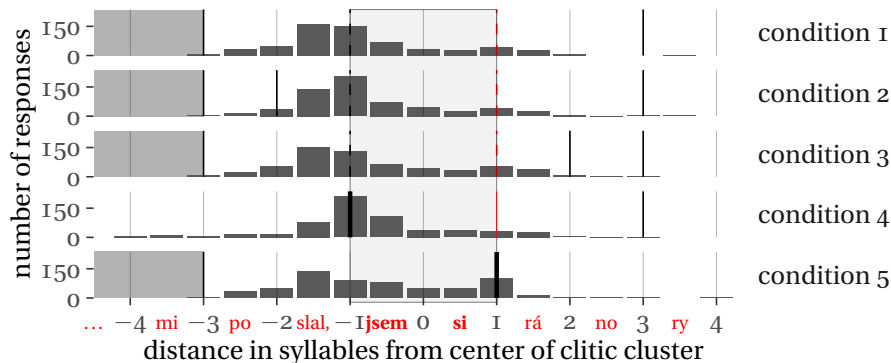
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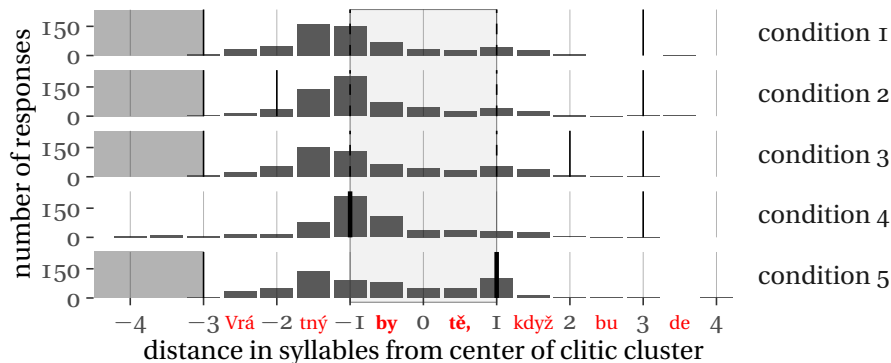
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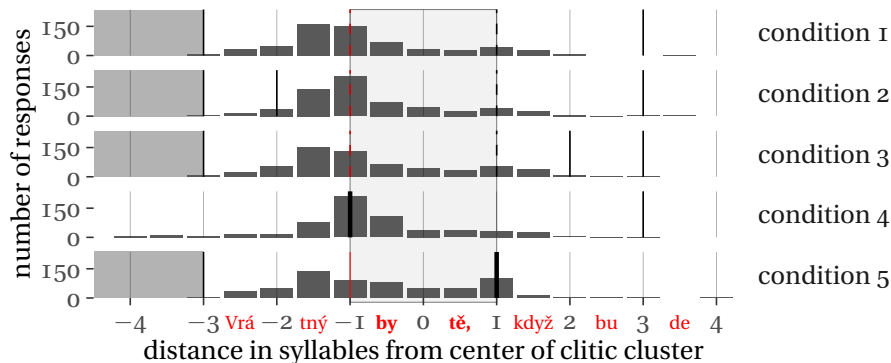
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No consistent evidence for the converse of the hypothesis either (test conditions pattern with 4 and not 5)

- left edge of cluster: $5 < 2$, others not significant (also, $2 < 3$)
- right edge of cluster: $5 > 1$, others not significant

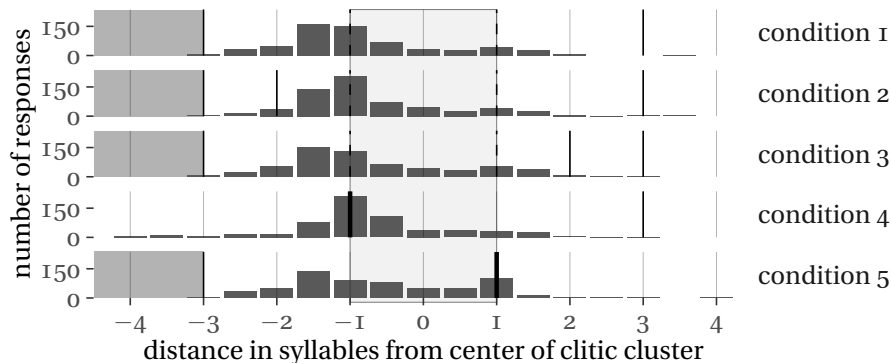
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- **left edge of cluster:** $5 < 2$, others not significant (also, $2 < 3$)
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Results



The test conditions do not consistently pattern as having a boundary on either side of the clitics, though they seem closer to condition 4 (boundary before clitics)

- Qualitatively similar to Slovenian results

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Interpretation of results

No conclusive results: clitics were not consistently perceived as attaching to the previous or following word

- Results qualitatively similar to Slovenian, where clitics were perceived as attaching to the *following* word
- Assuming the experimental method works (as in Slovenian), there may be more language-internal (individual or not) variation?

Consistent with Czech production and perception studies in Poľomská and Ziková (2025)

- Clitics tend to attach to preceding *verbs*
- Clitics tend to attach away from preceding *adverbs and PPs*
- No preference for pre-clitic nominals

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We need to reconsider the phonological and distributional arguments presented earlier

Argument: Czech fixed word-initial stress should lead to preference for clitics to attach to previous word

- Maybe it's not so bad for word-initial clitics to be unstressed (cf. Fried, 1999)
- Maybe second-position clitics *are* stressed – testable in theory, though Czech stress is hard to measure

Syntactic distribution

Argument: Slovenian's greater tolerance for second-position clitics without a preceding prosodic word reflects clitic attachment direction

- If this distributional difference does not reflect or cause a prosodic difference, it must be a *purely syntactic* difference

Proposal: Czech and Slovenian clitics are in different positions

- Czech clitics occupy a *fixed position* in a clause (auxiliaries in Fin/Mood, pronouns in CliticP) and stay there (Toman, 1999; Lenertová, 2004; Sturgeon, 2008; Tabachnick, 2024), usually preceded by Fin with an EPP feature that attracts a phrase from the *v*P edge (Biskup, 2006; Sturgeon, 2008) or the finite verb (Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou, 1998; Lenertová, 2004)
- Slovenian clitics are attached (syntactically or prosodically) in the *highest overt projection* of a clause, whatever this may be (Marušič, 2008) – for the sake of concreteness, we display them as adjoined to the highest head

Sentence-initial adjunct CPs

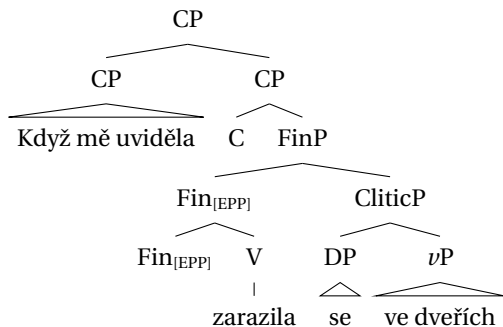
Alternative to Lenertová (2004), who locates this difference in the location of adjunct CPs: outside the main CP in Czech, inside it in Slovenian (see also Junghanns, 2002)

- (5) Když mě uviděla, *zarazila se* ve dveřích.
 when me.ACC saw stopped REFL.ACC in door
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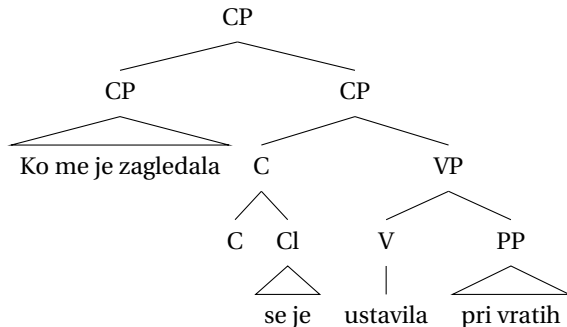
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Clitic complementizers

In Czech embedded clauses, the EPP feature attracting an XP to pre-clitic position is optional

Alternatively: Czech CPs can optionally embed another CP (Kaspar, 2016)

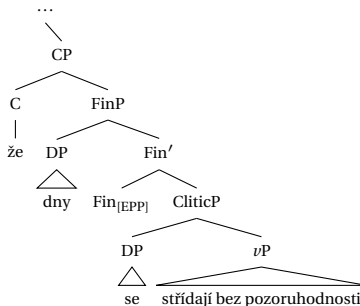
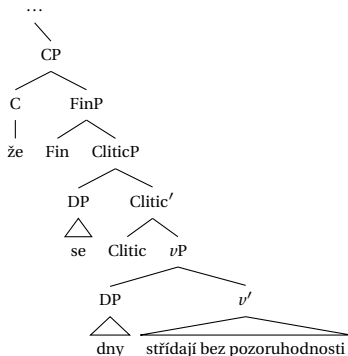
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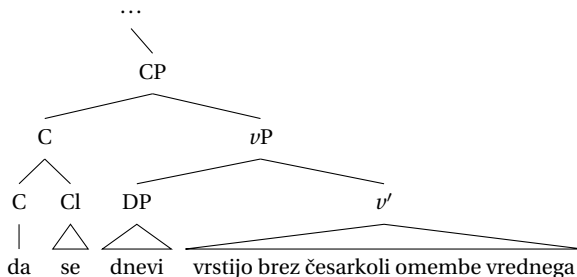


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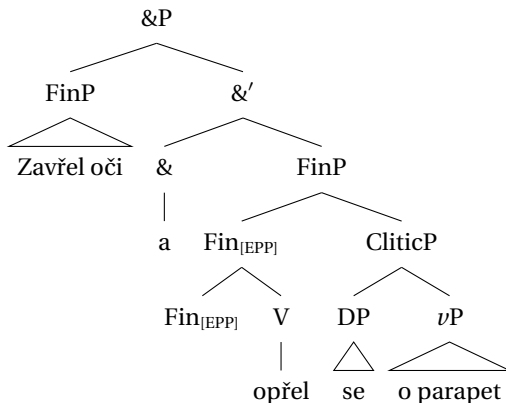


Coordination of verbal phrases

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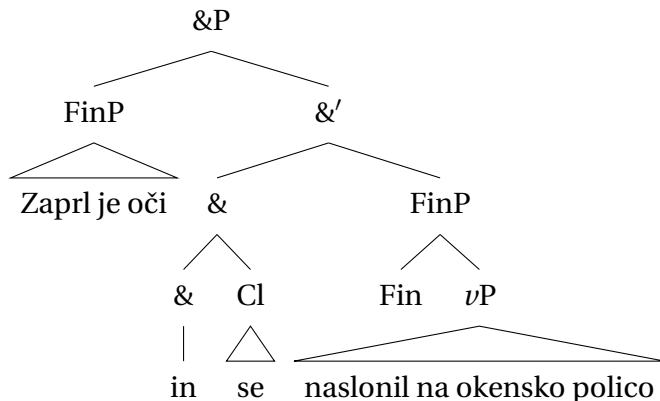
Coordination of verbal phrases

- (9) Zavřel oči a opřel se o parapet.
closed eyes and leaned REFL.ACC on windowsill
'He closed his eyes and leaned on the windowsill.'



Coordination of verbal phrases

- (10) Zaprl je oči in se naslonil na okensko polico.
closed PST.3SG eyes and REFL.ACC leaned on window shelf
'He closed his eyes and leaned on the windowsill.'



Slovenian's polar question operator is optionally covert but counts either way as “filling” the CP projection for the purposes of clitic placement.

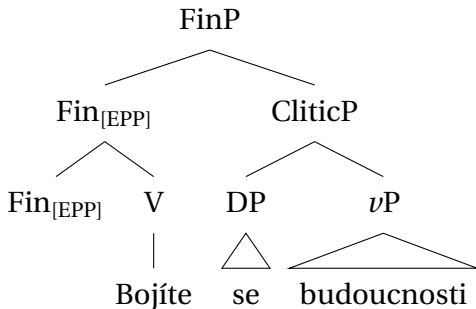
(I1) *Bojíte se* budoucnosti?
fear.2PL REFL.ACC future

(I2) (Ali) *se bojite* prihodnosti?
Q REFL.ACC fear.2PL future
'Are you afraid of the future?'

Polar questions

Slovenian's polar question operator is optionally covert but counts either way as “filling” the CP projection for the purposes of clitic placement.

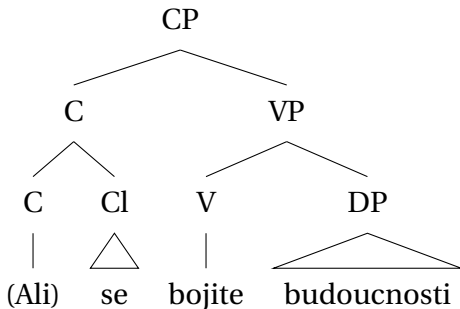
- (11) Bojíte **se** budoucnosti?
fear.2PL REFL.ACC future
‘Are you afraid of the future?’



Polar questions

Slovenian's polar question operator is optionally covert but counts either way as “filling” the CP projection for the purposes of clitic placement.

- (I2) (Ali) **se** bojite prihodnosti?
Q REFL.ACC fear.2PL future
‘Are you afraid of the future?’



Other evidence: fixed participles in Slovenian

Marušič (2008): Slovenian participles must stay below sentential adverbs like *nedvomno* ‘undoubtedly’, but clitics can be on either side of them (cf. Bošković, 1995)

- Adverbs and participles have a fixed position, clitics do not

- (I6)
- a. Včeraj **sem** **ji** nedvomno pokazal rezultate poskusa.
yesterday PST.ISG her.ACC undoubtedly showed results experiment.GEN
- b. *Včeraj **sem** **ji** pokazal nedvomno rezultate poskusa.
yesterday PST.ISG her.ACC showed undoubtedly results experiment.GEN
‘Yesterday I undoubtedly showed her the results of the experiment.’
- (I7)
- a. Nedvomno **sem** **ji** pokazal rezultate poskusa.
undoubtedly PST.ISG her.ACC showed results experiment.GEN
- b. *Pokazal **sem** **ji** nedvomno rezultate poskusa.
showed PST.ISG her.ACC undoubtedly results experiment.GEN
‘I undoubtedly showed her the results of the experiment.’

(Marušič, 2008, 268–9)

Other evidence: mobile participles in Czech

Czech finite verbs must stay below sentential adverbs like *určitě* ‘certainly’ (Veselovská, 1995) unless they move into pre-clitic position

- Verbs can move to the left periphery, clitics seem to be fixed in place afterwards

- (18) a. Petr určitě napíše Elišce dopis.
Petr certainly write Eliška.DAT letter
b. *Petr napíše určitě Elišce dopis.
Petr write certainly Eliška.DAT letter
‘Petr will certainly write Eliška a letter.’ (Veselovská, 1995, 64)

- (19) Dokáží se určitě dostat i do míst, kam by
manage REFL.ACC certainly get.INF even to places whither COND.3SG
dospělý zloděj ne-pronikl
adult thief NEG-penetrate
‘They can certainly go even into places where adult thieves can’t break in.’

Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Czech vs. Slovenian
- 3 Experiment
- 4 Results
- 5 Discussion
- 6 Summary

Summary

- A previous perception experiment in Slovenian indicated that second-position clitics attach by default to the *following word*
- A comparison of the two languages predicts the opposite attachment direction in Czech
- However, an analogous experiment found no clear results for Czech clitic attachment one way or the other
- Instead, distributional differences between Czech and Slovenian clitics may be in part due to differences in their *syntactic position* rather than their *prosodic properties*

Acknowledgements

This work was produced with financial support from Slovenian Research Agency (ARIS) grants P6-0382 and N6-0314.

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