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Corners of variation in the Czech pronominal clitic system

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November 9, 2026

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Outline

Introduction

Variation and modularity

Accusative and genitive clitics

Clitic climbing

Conclusion

Introduction

- Despite increased attention in recent years, syntactic variation remains understudied
- For most generative syntacticians, variation involves multiple grammars, the choice between which is a matter of usage (not grammar)
- Two corpus studies showing variation in the Czech clitic system
- What it would take for this variation to be in the grammar itself, by generative standards

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The generative ideal

For (most) generative linguists, the language capacity in the mind includes a *grammatical* component with these properties:

- **Categoricity**: the grammar sorts structures into grammatical (derivable) or not, and will always derive the same structure given the same input
- **Modularity**: the grammar is divided into distinct modules

This grammar constitutes linguistic *competence*, distinct from *performance* (certain aspects of production and processing, speech errors, etc.)

Variation

One challenge for this: *variation* (more than one way of saying the same thing)

- Phonology: *c*[iː]*tit* vs. *c*[ɛj]*tit* ‘feel’
- Morphology: *kopá* vs. *kope* ‘she kicks’, *dived* vs. *dove*
- Syntax: *I gave Jana the book* vs. *I gave the book to Jana*

Competing grammars

One way to explain this: speakers have *multiple grammars*, and variation is competition between grammars that output different structures for the same input

- An extension of bilingualism, bidialectalism, etc.
- Neat explanation of historical change (Kroch, 1989)
- Don't worry about combinatorial explosion …

Variation between grammars

Embick (2008): The choice between two grammars is a question of *language use*, and the factors affecting it (social significance, processing, etc.) should, barring strong evidence to the contrary, be handled in the usage module, not the grammar module(s)

Theories with the Modularity Assumption […] separate grammar from language use, and, in the 'classic' generative sense, aim to explain properties of the former. At the same time, they do not deny that there are patterns of language use (probabilistic or otherwise) that are worthy of explanation; rather, they say that grammar and use are dealt with via distinct cognitive mechanisms that should not be conflated. The claim that 'generative theories' with [modularity] and [categoricity] fail to account for such effects might therefore be true, but it is not probative; it might, in some sense, be like saying that the cognitive neuroscience of vision does not account for the aesthetics of sculpture, or whatever else the visual system might be employed for. What is required is a demonstration that the probabilistic effects are crucially part of the grammar per se, not part of some other system. Merely pointing to statistical patterns and claiming that they are not accounted for by some treatment or other falls far short of this. (73)

Variation within a grammar

What would constitute *"a demonstration that the probabilistic effects are crucially part of the grammar per se, not part of some other system"*?

Modularity cuts both ways:

- The usage module that chooses between grammars does not have access to the vocabulary of the syntax module
- If syntactic variation requires description in terms of the vocabulary of the syntax module, we cannot hold both categoricity and modularity

But: how to prove that the conditioning factors take place inside the syntactic module?

Example: English dative alternation

Bresnan et al. (2007) show a series of preferences for English direct and indirect objects:

definite > indefinite

Jana gave **the children** the textbooks.	Jana gave **some children** the textbooks.
Jana gave **the textbooks** to the children.	Jana gave **some textbooks** to the children.
Jana gave the children **some textbooks**.	Jana gave the children **the textbooks**.
Jana gave the textbooks to **some children**.	Jana gave the textbooks to **the children**.

Example: English dative alternation

Bresnan et al. (2007) show a series of preferences for English direct and indirect objects:

definite > indefinite
given > non-given
pronoun > non-pronoun
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- These factors are often correlated (making it difficult to tease them apart)
- Many of these are syntactically encoded …
- But are best explained by reference to usage factors like parsing complexity (Hawkins, 1994) and especially information structure (e.g. Šimík & Wierzba, 2015, 2017)

Demonstrating variation within a grammar

What would constitute *"a demonstration that the probabilistic effects are crucially part of the grammar per se, not part of some other system"*?

Demonstrating variation within a grammar

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- Case assignment (structural and lexical)
- Agreement and attraction
- Intervention effects
- Phase/clause boundaries

Demonstrating variation within a grammar

What would constitute *"a demonstration that the **probabilistic effects** are crucially part of the grammar per se, not part of some other system"*?

- Case assignment (structural and lexical)
- Agreement and attraction
- Intervention effects
- Phase/clause boundaries
- Individual-level, not just population-level
- Both variants are grammatical, broadly speaking (cf. Şenşekerci & Przepiórkowski, 2026)
- Minimal effect on processing (frequency)

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The following studies won't demonstrate all of these criteria, but will show a potential path forward

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Czech pronominal clitics

Czech has *clitic pronouns* that cluster in second position after auxiliaries in the typical order reflexive–dative–accusative:

(1) Ne-odvážila jsem **se** **jí** **ho** dát.
NEG-dared PST.1SG REFL.ACC her.DAT it.ACC give.INF
'I didn't dare give it to her.' (cf. Veselovská, 1995, p. 273)

Genitive clitics are much rarer and follow datives:

(2) Můj život má právě tolik smyslu, kolik **mu** **ho** dám.
my life has just as much meaning.GEN how much it.DAT it.GEN give.1SG
'My life has just as much meaning as I give it.'

Non-canonical ditransitives

Other combinations are possible as well, as in the approximately two ditransitives with genitive or accusative second objects:

(3) ‘FEAR OF SNAKES?’
Padesátikilová kobra tygrovaná **vás** **ho** zbaví.
fifty-kilo cobra tigered you.ACC it.GEN rid
‘The fifty-kilo tiger cobra will rid you of it.’

(4) ‘Well, that’s a nice song,’
kdopak **tě** **ji** naučil?
who.EMPH you.ACC it.ACC taught.INF
‘who on earth taught it to you?’

Genitive and accusative clitics

What is the canonical (templatic) order for genitive and accusative clitics?

- Veselovská (1995), Toman (1999): GEN–ACC order standard
- Lenertová (2004): ACC–GEN order required
- Franks and King (2000), Hana (2007): preferences vary, judgements strained, combination perhaps ungrammatical

Theoretical disagreement and reported variation – good subject for study of syntactic variation

Other clitic clusters without dative

Extraction of a genitive clitic from a quantity subject:

(5) Při hlasování **jich** **ho** podpořilo 14 ze 16.
during voting them.GEN him.ACC supported 14 from 16
'14 of 16 of them supported him in the vote.'

Accusative control verbs:

(6) Kniha Řeč těla **vás** **ji** naučí číst od A až po Z.
book speech body.GEN you.ACC it.ACC teach read.INF from A even to Z
'The book Body Language will teach you how to read it from A all the way to Z.'

Combinations of the other types:

(7) 'Although only three of the seven judges spoke out in favor of stopping the trial, for the case to continue,'
muselo by **jich** **ho** podpořit nejméně pět.
must COND.3SG them.GEN it.ACC support.INF at least five
'at least five of them would have had to support it.'

Corpus study

1269 tokens with two accusative and/or genitive clitics from non-translated texts in SYNv11 corpus (5.9 billion words, mostly newspapers from 2004–21) (Křen et al., 2022)

construction	cases	tokens
quantity subject, ACC object	GEN ACC	476
quantity subject, embedded ACC object	GEN ACC	26
ACC–GEN ditransitive	ACC GEN	204
ACC–ACC ditransitive	ACC ACC	342
ACC object, embedded ACC object	ACC ACC	209
other		12

Merged order

Order of clitics compared with their putative merged order: full arguments in neutral information structure (cf. Dvořák, 2010)

(8) Jedenáct sportovců vrátilo medaile
eleven athletes.GEN returned medals.ACC
'Eleven athletes return medals'

(9) Hasiči zbavili lékaře sršňů
firefighters rid doctor.ACC hornets.GEN
'Firefighters rid doctor of hornets'

(10) Studenti učili protinožce dějepis
students taught antipodeans.ACC history.ACC
'Students teach antipodeans history'

(11) Hanáci učí svět pěstovat banány
Hanáks teach world.ACC grow.INF bananas.ACC
'Hanáks are teaching the world to grow bananas'

Crossover from merged order

Despite frequent assumption, Czech clitics need not (sometimes cannot) match merged order (Tabachnick, 2024)

(12) a. Nevidomí darovali dětem betlém
blind.PL gifted children.DAT creche.ACC
'Blind gift children creche' (cf. Dvořák, 2010)

b. 'Women dedicate themselves to [their hockey player husbands],'
v podstatě **se** **jim** darují.
in essence.LOC REFL.ACC them.DAT give
'they essentially gift themselves to them.'

(13) a. Věznice svěřila klíče vězňům
prison entrusted keys.ACC inmates.DAT
'Prison entrusts keys to inmates' (cf. Dvořák, 2010)

b. 'Foster parents […] must […] wait until the authorities, usually regional, find them a child and'
soud **jim** **ho** svěří.
court them.DAT it.ACC entrusts
'a court entrusts it to them.'

Clitics are given and can thus freely scramble to rearrange themselves (see Biskup, 2006; Stegovec, 2020; Sturgeon, 2008)

Person

In general, Czech clitics show a strong preference for clitics with local (first and second) person to precede third-person clitics (Medová, 2009; Sturgeon et al., 2011)

- Typically framed cross-linguistically as the Person Case Constraint: in local–third ditransitives, the local person must be the indirect object (e.g. Béjar & Rezac, 2003, 2009; Deal, 2024; Nevins, 2007)
- This cannot be the whole story, at least for Slavic clitics (Stegovec, 2020)
- With some exceptions (e.g. Haspelmath, 2004), the restrictions are typically viewed today as *syntactic*
- Plausible information structure justification

Expected effects on reversal of merged order: third merged above local > two third > local merged above third

Case

Tabachnick (2024) predicts a baseline preference for genitive–accusative order

- Pure (morpho)syntactic explanation: a consequence of deriving the standard dative–accusative order through a particular syntactic mechanism
- No plausible parsing/“usage” justification I can think of

Expected effects on reversal of merged order: ACC merged above GEN > two ACC > GEN merged above ACC

Embedding

Previous work has argued that clitics must follow merged order when one is embedded in an infinitival TP (Hana, 2007; Rosen, 2001; Tabachnick, 2024)

- Syntactic explanation: clitics can't scramble outside TP (Kučerová, 2007, pp. 34–5), so embedded clitics cannot obviate intervention effects in cliticization (Tabachnick, 2024)
- Are all embedded infinitives TPs? Probably not (e.g. Lenertová, 2004; Rezac, 2005)

Expected effect on reversal of merged order: less common when one clitic is embedded

Results: person and merged order

Reversals of merged order are rare, except to place local person above third person

merged order	no flip	flip	% flip	% local > third
third > third	128	14	9.9	—
local > third	730	11	1.5	98.5
third > local	41	345	89.4	89.4

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(14) Při hlasování jich ho podpořilo 14 ze 16.
during voting them.GEN him.ACC supported 14 from 16
'14 of 16 of them supported him in the vote.'

(15) 'He underwent his first interview with journalists right at the airport.'
Čekalo ho jich ještě několik.
awaited him.ACC them.GEN still several
'Several still awaited him.'

Results: person and merged order

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(16) ‘The activities are not complicated and’
rádi **vás** **je** naučíme.
glad you.ACC them.ACC teach.1PL
‘we will gladly teach them to you.’

(17) ‘Under the term soft skills imagine the traits and skills you have innately,’
nikdo **je** **vás** nikdy ne-učil
nobody them.ACC you.ACC never NEG-taught
‘nobody ever taught them to you’

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(18) '… the playoffs have at least another twelve matches.'
Téměř vždy však **jich** **vás** čeká mnohem více.
almost always however them.GEN you.ACC await many more
'However, many more almost always await you.'

(19) 'There are no surprises in the name, but'
na samotné farmě **vás** **jich** čeká spousta.
on very farm you.ACC them.GEN await lot
'a lot await you on the farm itself.'

Results: embedding

Embedded clitics are less likely to move above matrix clitics (significant once all persons are taken into account)

merged order	embedding	no flip	flip	% flip
third > third	no	112	13	10.4
third > third	yes	16	1	5.9

(20) ‘Adam Vodička likes people and’
baví **ho** **je** i lehce popichovat.
entertain him.ACC them.ACC even lightly tease.INF
‘he even likes teasing them a bit.’

(21) ‘… even though his music is demanding,’
baví **ji** **ho** dělat.
entertain it.ACC him.ACC do.INF
‘he likes doing it.’

Results: embedding

Embedding only slightly counteracts the preference for local person to precede third person

merged order	embedding	no flip	flip	% flip
third > local	no	35	331	90.4
third > local	yes	6	14	70.0

(22) Věřím, že jich nás přijde podpořit hodně.
believe.1SG that them.GEN us.ACC come support.INF many
'I believe that many of them will come to support us.'

(23) … věřím, že nás jich přijde podpořit ještě víc
believe.1SG that us.ACC them.GEN come support.INF still more
'… I believe that even more of them will come to support us'

Results: case

Case has no significant effect (not many ditransitives)

merged order	ditransitive type	no flip	flip	% flip
third > third	ACC–ACC	10	2	16.7
third > third	ACC–GEN	18	2	10.0

(24) ‘And where on earth did he come to that Czech sentence?’
Naučila **ho** **ji** jeho dívka, Češka …
taught him.ACC it.ACC his girl Czech woman
‘It was taught to him by his girlfriend, a Czech …’

(25) ‘Be patient with the training and repeat the individual tricks and’
učte **je** **ho** klidně několikrát.
teach.IMP them.ACC it.ACC calmly several times
‘don’t hesitate to teach them to it several times.’

Results: case

Case has no significant effect (not many ditransitives)

merged order	ditransitive type	no flip	flip	% flip
third > third	ACC–ACC	10	2	16.7
third > third	ACC–GEN	18	2	10.0

(26) ‘Now it will only be possible to limit a person’s legal capacity,’
nikoliv **ho** **jí** zbavit.
not him.ACC it.GEN rid.INF
‘not take it away from him.’

(27) ‘They gave an ex-mayor a function for mayors.’
Museli **jí** **ho** zbavit.
had it.GEN him.ACC rid.INF
‘They had to take it away from him.’

Summary

- Person and embedding have the expected effect (especially the former), case does not
- In all circumstances, the dispreferred variant is attested
- Some of this may be the “ungrammatical” result of “speech errors”, but the interaction of factors is systematic
- Some may be due to particularly permissive speakers
- Other factors (animacy, right-edge focus of subjects, etc.) surely play a role

Theoretical considerations

Probabilistic grammar

- Previously proposed boundaries (embedding) and intervention effects (person) hold
- For (at least) some speakers, they assess penalties rather than triggering ungrammaticality

Competing grammars

- (At least) some speakers have grammars: with and without the person restriction, with and without the embedding restriction
- The grammars that generate the dispreferred outcomes must all *require* a suboptimal step of movement/cliticization with no grammatical advantage
- Alternately, most flips are ungrammatical (“speech errors”), though 10% seems high for this

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Clitics from embedded infinitives do not always surface in the matrix cluster (climbing):

(28) tak jako jsem **se** šel jako nenápadně podívat
so like PST.1SG REFL.ACC went like inconspicuously look.INF
'so like I went to like inconspicuously look'

(29) no tak jsem šla **se** podívat na záchod
well so PST.1SG went REFL.ACC look.INF on toilet
'well so I went to look in the bathroom'

Climbing blocked

In some cases, climbing seems to be categorically blocked by material in the matrix clause (Lenertová, 2004; Rezac, 2005; Tabachnick, 2024)

(30) a. já **se** **ho** snažím nějak rozumně vyřešit
I REFL.ACC it.ACC try somehow sensibly solve.INF
'I try to sensibly solve it somehow'

b. já ne-vím čemu **se** snažíte furt **se** vyhejbat
I NEG-know.1SG what.DAT REFL.ACC try.2PL always REFL.ACC avoid
nebo bránit jako
or prevent like
'I don't know what you're always trying to avoid or prevent, like'

(31) a. jsme **mu** **je** pomáhaly vařit
PST.1PL him.DAT them.ACC helped cook.INF
'we helped him cook them'

b. oni **mu** pomáhají nahoru **se** dostat
they him.DAT help upward REFL.ACC get.INF
'they help him get up'

Corpus study

2187 tokens with clitics from embedded infinitives from ORTOFON v3 corpus (3 million words of surreptitiously recorded conversations throughout the country) (Lukeš et al., 2021)

- Testing whether clitics merged inside embedded infinitives climb into the matrix clause or not
- Today: effect of the type of embedding predicate (very preliminary!)

Other effects relevant, e.g. climbing is less common over structurally high adverbs (Jelínková, 2025)

Syntactic variation in clitic climbing

Some structure categorically blocks clitic climbing

- Matrix clitics block climbing of reflexive clitics
- Finite clauses and other CPs

(32) *Ne-vím **ho** jak představit.
NEG-know.1SG him.ACC how introduce.INF
'I don't know how to introduce him.' (Rezac, 2005, p. 111)

If other structure simply makes climbing *less likely*, this could motivate variation within the syntactic grammar

- Syntactically present object controllers can serve as partial interveners
- Higher adverbs (potentially) require more structure for the clitics to climb over

Plausible processing explanation for at least some effects

Categorical climbing

Non-climbing is very rare for raising verbs that likely have small complements and/or are themselves functional projections

verb type	climbing	no climbing	% climbing
modal	1058	21	98.1
moct 'can', *muset* 'must', *mít* 'should', *smět* 'be allowed'			
future	355	8	97.8
bude			
phasal	82	1	98.8
začí(na)t 'begin', *přestat* 'stop'			

Likely performance explanation for non-climbing (sentence planning):

(33) tak by tam mohlo **se** vlézt víc lidí
so COND.3SG there could REFL.ACC fit more people.GEN
'so more people could fit there'

Subject control

Non-climbing is a bit more common for verbs of motion with subject controllers

verb type	climbing	no climbing	% climbing
modal	1058	21	98.1
motion	142	18	88.8

jít/jet ‘go’, *přijít/přijet* ‘come’, etc.

(34) co si jde sednout do kavárny čte **si**
that REFL.DAT goes sit down.INF to cafe reads REFL.DAT
knížku
book
‘who goes to sit at a cafe, reads a book

(35) jdeme pak ještě **si** někam sednout
go.1.PL then still REFL.DAT somewhither sit down.INF
‘then we’ll go sit somewhere else’

Climbing out of adjectival phrases

Predicative adjectives show variable climbing (cf. Dotlačil, 2017) which is somewhat individual – unattested with impersonals

adjective type	climbing	no climbing	% climbing
predicative	6	20	23.1
schopný 'capable', *ochotný* 'willing', etc.			
impersonal	0	26	0.0
dobré 'good', *těžké* 'tough', etc.			

(36) kdy bysme **se** byli schopni nějak potkat
if COND.1PL REFL.ACC be capable somehow meet.INF
'if we were capable of meeting somehow'

(37) ne-jsme schopni **se** domluvit
NEG-be.1PL capable REFL.ACC agree.INF
'we aren't capable of coming to an agreeement'

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NEG-be.1PL capable REFL.ACC agree.INF
'we aren't capable of coming to an agreeement'

(38) ale to by bylo rozhodně lepší **se** domluvit s ním
but it COND.3SG be definitely better REFL.ACC agree.INF with him
'but it would definitely be better to arrange with him'

Climbing out of nominal phrases

"Some idiomatic noun phrases" (Dotlačil, 2017) also show occasional climbing – presumably also somewhat individual but too little data to say

embedding type	climbing	no climbing	% climbing
predicative adjective	6	20	23.1
complex noun phrase	2	17	10.5
potřeba 'need', *šance* 'chance', etc.			

(39) ona **ho** prostě ne-má šanci chytit
she him.ACC simply NEG-has chance.ACC catch.INF
'she just doesn't have a chance to catch him'

(40) ne-máš šanci **se** sem dostat tak často
NEG-have chance.ACC REFL.ACC hither get.INF so often
'you don't have the chance to make it here so often'

Summary

- Constructions with embedded infinitives show a range of clitic climbing from fully blocked to nearly always
- The most transparent verbs (modals, etc.) plausibly have grammatically obligatory climbing with occasional planning failures
- Presence of additional structure (null subject controller, nominal case, etc.) lowers possibility of climbing
- Some evidence for individual differences/preferences

Theoretical considerations

Probabilistic grammar

- Clitics have landing spots in the matrix and (usually, at least) embedded clauses
- Sometimes access to the higher landing spot is fully blocked, but in most cases movement to it is optional
- Cliticization across more functional heads or certain interveners is penalized

Competing grammars

- Two broad categories of grammar, those that send clitics to the highest possible landing site and those to the lowest
- Various gradations (across and possibly within speakers) for what blocks access to the matrix landing site
- Some rare failures to climb are ungrammatical and due to performance factors

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- Embick (2008) and other generativists have proposed that syntactic variation stems from competition between grammars whose outputs can be adjudicated according to usage considerations
- Refuting this requires finding cases of syntactic variation that can *only* be described in the language of the syntactic module (a difficult, if not impossible, task)
- Variation in Czech clitic placement is a promising place to look
- Movement penalized by economy (longer movement is dispreferred) or relativized minimality (movement across similar objects is dispreferred)
- Only careful experimental work can untangle relevant competence and performance effects

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