

NEGATIVE INTERFERENCE FROM RUSSIAN IN CZECH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: ERROR ANALYSIS OF THE COPULA AND AUXILIARY VERB IN RUSSIAN SPEAKERS

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Abstract

Language interference is a key challenge in foreign language acquisition. When learning a second language, students transfer the knowledge from their mother tongue. This article focuses on transfer and interference phenomena between two closely related Slavic languages: Czech and Russian, in the context of teaching Czech as a second language. In particular, the grammatical patterns comprising the copula verb (present indicative) and the auxiliary verb (the compound past indicative) are examined. The study analyzes frequent errors collected from 15 Russian-speaking students from Kazakhstan during classroom interaction in May-June 2025. Furthermore, a marginal analysis on verbs of preference (*mít rád, rád*) is performed. The findings are used to formulate proposals for teaching methodology.

Keywords

Contrastive analysis; Language interference; Slavic languages; Syntactic structure; Teaching methodology; Zero copula.

Introduction

Czech is a closely related language to Russian. Therefore, teachers must be familiar with the mechanisms of closely related Slavic languages and understand the possible transfer and interference that may occur. When selecting textbooks, preference is given to textbooks for teaching Czech to Russian speakers. This comprehensive approach, combined with the daily exposure of international students to Czech in Ostrava, ensures maximum teaching effectiveness. The Institute of Languages at the Technical University of Ostrava offers an intensive Czech language course for Russian-speaking students, designed to prepare them for studying in Czech at universities in the Czech Republic. The target level is B1. The choice of the topic is therefore highly relevant as the zero copula and the omission of auxiliary verbs are pervasive errors arising from typological differences.

While existing literature extensively documents the general dynamics of Slavic intercomprehension (Fałowski, 2023; Hofmański & Pospiszil-Hofmańska, 2022) and the typological differences that lead to interference between Slavic languages (Bogoczová, 2018), a significant research gap remains. Specifically, there is a lack of systematic, empirical error analysis of these specific phenomena (the Russian zero copula and the omission of the auxiliary verb in compound verb forms) at the B1 proficiency level of general Czech. The few existing studies (Krejčová et al., 2024; Žaža, 1996) primarily describe theoretical differences or focus

on specialized language contexts. This article directly addresses this gap by presenting a focused error analysis derived from classroom interaction.

The primary objective of this article is to analyze and categorize specific grammatical errors resulting from negative Russian interference among Russian-speaking students learning Czech.

The issue of negative interference and positive transfer in general terms is the subject of Section 1, specifically within the context of second language teaching. Subsequently, the specific manifestations of interference from Russian into Czech language observed among participants in a Czech language course for Russian-speaking students at the Technical University of Ostrava will be introduced in Section 2. The contrastive error analysis methodology is employed to categorize and document these syntactic errors. Section 3 focusses on the grammar of the verb *to be* in the present tense (copula *být*) and the past tense (auxiliary verb *býl*), as well as verbs *like st* (meaning *to do*) and *like doing st* (e.g., *mít něco rád, rád*). Section 4 summarizes the main results in comparison with studies by other authors and follows up on them with directions for future research listed in the Conclusion Section.

1 Literature Review

To begin with, it is essential to define the concepts of language transfer and interference. Language transfer refers to the process by which some aspects from one language system are carried over to another. A distinction is made between positive and negative transfer. In positive transfer, the correspondence between elements in both languages is strong enough to facilitate the acquisition of the target language; for example, it positively influences the pace of acquisition. In contrast, negative transfer involves the transfer of incompatible elements from one system to another, leading to the use of incorrect constructions in the target language and resulting in interference (Mertins, 2017).

To summarize the previous studies and their main results, the author must begin with the foundation stone of Slavic studies: Old Church Slavonic language (OCS). Fałowski (2023) considers it important for future teachers of Slavic languages as second languages to obtain a specific knowledge of OCS. This knowledge enables them to see the links between Slavic languages and to predict potential interference issues. The most significant phenomena of OCS include the Cyrillic script, old Slavic phonetic processes, its flexible morphology, and lexical aspect. OCS is included in the curriculum of Slavic studies at the faculty of arts in the Czech Republic, which the author also finds most useful for the teaching and learning process.

A further approach to teaching closely related languages involves comparing them, specifically the native language and the target language. Polish linguists Hofmański & Pospiszil-Hofmańska (2022) study the phenomenon called Slavic Intercomprehension (examining Polish and Ukrainian). They note the rapid pace of competence acquisition at the beginning of the learning process, which then slows down when the competence reaches the level of language variability and functional styles, depending on the communicative situation.

Saturno (2023) works with the term *interlingual proximity* and investigates the role of interlingual correspondences between etymologically related words in closely related languages (Polish and Russian). However, the present research is focused on grammar rather than vocabulary.

Krejčová et al. (2024) focus on teaching a second language (specialized Czech to Ukrainian medical students). Since both languages are Slavic, they suggest that they should be managed by the teacher, who draws detailed attention to phenomena that are either different or identical to those in the native language. Similarly, Perkins & Zhang (2022) emphasize the importance

of developing a strategy to leverage language similarities, and in their work, they outline pedagogical implications for language instructors.

Building on the findings from previous studies, the author of this article adopts the view of Perkins & Zhang (2022) that teaching methodology should incorporate two key attitudes: *contrastive analysis* and *error analysis*. The author conducted a contrastive analysis of Russian and Czech, focused on verb forms, the zero copula in the present indicative in Russian and Czech compound verb forms. In the follow-up research, the author examined frequent errors made by course participants.

Russian and Czech differ mainly in the degrees of nominality and analyticity. Both Russian and Czech are inflected languages, with Czech being considered the most inflected Slavic language of all (Bogoczová, 2018). In contrast, Russian shows a tendency towards analyticity, which is supported by the high frequency of multi-verbal lexical units in the language. This is thought to contribute to more precise and explicit expression. Grammatical phenomena that distinguish these inflectional and analytical types include, for instance, the role of the verb in a sentence (i.e., verbal vs. nominal character of a sentence).

The most significant typological feature of Czech syntax is the high degree of action dynamism, which underscores the important role of the finite verb. In contrast, in Russian the shift away from the inflectional type is associated with the weakening of the personal verb form's position and a significant nominalization of sentence patterns. This includes phenomena such as the absence of copulas in the present indicative in Russian, as well as the more frequent use of infinitives, participles, and verbal nouns. The zero copula is related, among other things, to the necessity of using personal pronouns as subjects, for example: *Мы довольны. Я после обеда дома. Вы здесь один?* (Flídrová & Žaža, 2005).

In connection with the described copula, the Russian language specialist Stanislav Žaža observes specific features of negation in Russian sentences, where the difference between sentence and constituent negation is often blurred (e.g., *Он не механик. Он не механик, а шофер.*). Žaža also describes cases where an adjective functions as a predicate: in the former case, a positive attribute is negated and it is a sentence negation (*Результатами он не доволен.*), in the latter case, two attributes are contrasted, which results in a constituent negation (*Результатами он не доволен, а разочарован.*) (Žaža, 1996). In Czech, which retains the copula in the nominal predicate, sentence negation logically prevails over constituent negation (Matyášková, 2024).

2 Methodology

The study employs a descriptive, qualitative approach using contrastive error analysis, following the methodology proposed by Perkins & Zhang (2022). The primary research question is:

What are the most frequent errors arising from negative Russian interference in Czech verb morphology (copula and auxiliary verbs) among students learning Czech?

The participants of the research were 15 students from Kazakhstan enrolled in an intensive Czech language course at the Technical University of Ostrava, Czech Republic. The specific course determined the group size of 15. The selection criterion was their common native language, making them an ideal homogenous sample for investigating the predictable patterns of negative Russian transfer in Czech.

The data were collected during lessons in May and June 2025, following the arrival of all students in Ostrava. The primary data collection method was observation, along with systematic written documentation of errors produced by students during classroom interactions and oral

exercises. No recordings were made due to potential legal concerns regarding the use of student data.

The method chosen for data processing was qualitative error analysis. Students often produce initial utterances containing interference errors, but they typically improve after receiving teacher correction. Consequently, only the initial error-containing version of their responses was captured, as subsequent versions could be influenced by teacher input or peer correction. Errors due to interference are analyzed in the context of the phenomena discussed in the theoretical section of this article: the zero copula and compound verb forms. Written examples of the most common errors collected during lessons are sorted and annotated with correct versions and explanations. They are divided into three groups according to the type of frequently occurring phenomenon. The errors were sourced from general conversation topics often found in B1 textbooks (e.g., family, hobbies, etc.).

3 Results

Table 1 presents a categorization of errors focusing on the copula and verb forms. The examples are structured according to the assumed negative transfer, and the correct equivalent is provided for each example. Some of the examples contain other types of errors, which are irrelevant to this research and are therefore left without comment.

Tab. 1 Investigated phenomena

1	Redundant copula verb
2	Copula verb missing
3	Missing auxiliary verb in the past tense compound verb form

Source: Own

3.1 Redundant Copula Verb

This section displays errors where students insert copula (*jsem, je, není*) redundantly, indicating hypercorrection due to the knowledge that Czech requires the copula more often than Russian (Phenomenon 1).

There are errors in the copula and negation:

Můj pokoj je není velký. Correctly: *Můj pokoj není velký.*

To bylo není nebezpečné. Correctly: *To nebylo nebezpečné.*

Errors are observed in the past and future tense of the verb *být*:

To je bylo tři čtyři roky. Correctly: *To bylo tři čtyři roky.*

To je byly jahody. Correctly: *To byly jahody.*

To je bude v budoucnosti. Correctly: *To bude v budoucnosti.*

The following examples show how students incorrectly apply the copula pattern to main verbs, inserting the present copula (*je*) before the main verb:

To je dělá moje maminka. Correctly: *To dělá moje maminka.*

To je nevím. Correctly: *To nevím.*

To je může být. Correctly: *To může být.*

These are crucial examples, combined with an error involving the verb *to have*. Students attempt to mimic the Czech verbal pattern, but incorrectly:

Jsem mám opakování kvůli špatné docházce. Correctly: *Mám opakování kvůli špatné docházce.*

Jsem mám tatínka. Correctly: *Mám tatínka.*

3.2 Copula Verb Missing in the Present Indicative

This section includes the most common grammatical errors. These are direct examples of negative transfer from Russian to Czech (Phenomenon 2). There is the omission of the third-person singular copula *je* in a nominal predicate:

Moje maminka moc inteligentná žena. Correctly: *Moje maminka je moc inteligentní žena.*

Nevím, jak to v létě. Correctly: *Nevím, jak je to v létě.*

Studovat tady velmi zajímavý. Correctly: *Studovat tady je velmi zajímavé.*

V ČR velmi mnoho turistů. Correctly: *V ČR je velmi mnoho turistů.*

V České republice chladněji než v Kazachstánu. Correctly: *V České republice je chladněji než v Kazachstánu.*

V Ostravě často zataženo, a v Almaty větš slunečné dni. Correctly: *V Ostravě je často zataženo, ale v Almaty jsou většinou slunečné dny.*

V Albertu lepší pečivo než v Lidlu. Correctly: *V Albertu je lepší pečivo než v Lidlu.*

The following example contains the omission of the third-person singular copula *je* in a subordinate clause:

Otec, myslím, že starý. Correctly: *Myslím si, že otec je starý.*

The personal pronoun shows a tendency towards nominalization (as discussed in the theoretical section)—the use of personal pronouns and the absence of a copula mimic Russian syntax.

On také z Kazachstánu. Correctly: *On je také z Kazachstánu.*

In the following example, the positive attribute is denied, and it is a matter of sentence negation. The student attempts to form a negation without the copula, thus replicating a Russian syntactic structure.

Ještě ne hotova ke zkoušce. Correctly: *Ještě nejsem připravena ke zkoušce.*

3.3 Missing Auxiliary Verb in the Past Tense Compound Verb Form

This section addresses the third key area of interference (Phenomenon 3). The examples demonstrate the structural difficulty Russian speakers face when constructing the Czech past tense, which is a compound form requiring the auxiliary verb *být* (forms: *jsem*, *jsme*, *jsi*, *jste*) for the first and second persons. The core reason for these errors is the negative transfer from Russian, where the past tense is a simple form without the auxiliary verb. The first-person singular errors are persistent. They prevail as students speak about themselves. The third person form does not require an auxiliary verb, making errors in that person unrelated to this specific interference.

Celý červenec nosila džíny. Correctly: *Celý červenec jsem nosila džíny.*

Když přijel tady do České republice... Correctly: *Když jsem přijel tady do České republiky...*

Měl dvouch morčat. Correctly: *Měl jsem dvě morčata.*

Měl o nich strach. Correctly: *Měl jsem o ně strach.*

Nikdy nebyl v divadlo. Correctly: *Nikdy jsem nebyl v divadle.*

Ověřil svou totožnost. Correctly: *Ověřil jsem svou totožnost.*

Staral se o nich. Correctly: *Staral jsem se o ně.*

Taky si dala knedlíky s řízkem. Correctly: *Taky jsem si dala knedlíky s řízkem.*

Včera šel do banku. Correctly: *Včera jsem šel do banky.*

In the following example, there are two errors of the same sort in two different forms: the first person singular and the first person plural.

Dříve měli trolejbusy v Almaty, teď už neviděl to. Correctly: *Dříve jsme měli trolejbusy v Almaty, teď už jsem je neviděl.*

3.4 Marginal Analysis

This section deals with errors with verbs of preference (e.g., *mít rád, rád; like st, like doing st* in *I like sports. I like watching sports on TV.*). The most common mistake observed in the students' output is the use of an infinitive instead of the required verbal noun or a direct conjugated verb form when expressing preference. This type of error likely stems from negative interference, as a Russian frequently uses the infinitive after verbs of preference.

Mám rád dívat se na televizi. Correctly: *Mám rád sledování televize. Rád se dívám na televizi. Já rád dívat se na fantastické filmy.* Correctly: *Mám rád sledování fantastických filmů. Rád se dívám na fantastické filmy.*

Rád se seznamovat s dívkou. Correctly: *Mám rád seznamování se s dívkami. Rád se seznamuji s dívkou.*

In the following example, the omission of the reflexive pronoun *se* is another standard syntactic error, demonstrating a further influence from Russian structure where the reflexive element is absent:

Maminka ráda učí anglicky. Correctly: *Maminka se ráda učí anglicky.*

4 Discussion

The error analysis confirmed the central role of negative transfer from Russian in the acquisition of Czech verb grammar among Russian-speaking students. The study identified three widespread error types, providing a direct response to the primary research question. The three investigated phenomena – the zero copula in the present indicative, the redundant use of the copula, and the omission of the auxiliary verb in the compound past tense – accounted for the majority of frequent grammatical errors observed in the most basic syntactic structures.

Copula omission (zero copula, Phenomenon 2): this was the most prevalent error, consistent with the typological difference between Czech (highly inflectional, requiring explicit copula) and Russian (showing tendencies towards analyticity and nominalization). The data confirmed a direct transfer, where a zero copula pattern was applied to nominal and existential predicates in Czech (e.g., *Moje maminka moc inteligentná žena.*). The analysis also supported the observation regarding the sentence and constituent negation in Russian, as students often failed to supply the auxiliary verb when negating an attribute.

Redundant copula (hypercorrection, Phenomenon 1): This type of error, where the copula is incorrectly inserted (e.g., *To je dělá moje maminka.*), suggests hypercorrection. As students become aware of the need for the copula in Czech, they overapply the rule to constructions that already contain a main verb, including compound verb phrases and modal constructions.

Omission of auxiliary verb (past tense, Phenomenon 3): errors involving the compound past tense were consistently observed in the first and second person forms. This is a clear case of negative transfer, where the Russian simple past tense structure is incorrectly transferred to Czech (e.g., *Celý červenec nosila džíny.*).

The findings directly align with the literature on Slavic language interference, supporting the general observation that transfer is inevitable between closely related languages (Fałowski, 2023). Specifically, regarding the copula and auxiliary verb structure, the results confirm the typological observations made by Bogoczová (2018) regarding Czech's highly inflectional nature versus Russian's tendency toward analyticity. The persistence of these errors, despite

explicit teaching, confirms the necessity of pedagogical strategies stressed by Krejčová et al. (2024) and Perkins & Zhang (2022).

However, the study has several limitations. First, the sample size was small, limiting the generalizability of the frequency data. Second, the errors were primarily documented from classroom speech (as opposed to standardized testing), which is difficult to quantify precisely. Despite these limitations, the identified patterns clearly confirm the theoretical predictions of negative transfer between Russian and Czech.

Conclusion

This article investigated the negative influence of Russian as the native language on the acquisition of Czech verb grammar among a group of university-bound students, confirming that language interference is a challenging aspect of teaching closely related languages. The error analysis demonstrated a clear pattern of three interference-based errors related to the copula verb and compound past tense, directly resulting from typological differences between the two languages. These findings confirm the theoretical predictions made in the literature regarding language transfer and specific grammatical hurdles faced by Russian speakers learning Czech.

Future studies should utilize a larger, more diverse corpus of both written and transcribed spoken data to quantify the frequency of these interference errors precisely. This quantification would be invaluable for validating the observed error hierarchy.

For the teaching process, the findings strongly recommend adopting a methodology that explicitly combines contrastive analysis and error correction. Teachers should directly highlight the grammatical and semantic differences between the zero copula in Russian and the obligatory copula in Czech. Furthermore, the data suggest that teacher preparation should ideally include knowledge of Russian or Old Slavonic language to better anticipate, explain, and correct interference errors.

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NEGATIVNÍ INTERFERENCE Z RUŠTINY V ČEŠTINĚ JAKO DRUHÉM JAZYCE: CHYBOVÁ ANALÝZA SPONY A POMOCNÉHO SLOVES A U RUSKY MLUVÍCÍCH STUDENTŮ

Jazyková interference je klíčovou výzvou při osvojování cizího jazyka. Při výuce druhého jazyka si studenti přenášejí znalosti ze svého mateřského jazyka. Tento článek se zaměřuje na fenomény přenosu a interference mezi dvěma blízce příbuznými slovanskými jazyky: češtinou a ruštinou, v kontextu výuky češtiny jako druhého jazyka. Zejména jsou zkoumány gramatické vzory obsahující sponu (přítomný indikativ) a pomocné sloveso (složený indikativ minulý). Studie analyzuje časté chyby získané od 15 rusky mluvících studentů z Kazachstánu během interakce ve třídě v květnu až červnu 2025. Dále je provedena marginální analýza preferenčních sloves (*mít rád, rád*). Poznatky slouží k formulaci návrhů metodiky výuky.

NEGATIVE INTERFERENZ AUS DEM RUSSISCHEN IM TSCHECHISCHEN ALS ZWEITSPRACHE: FEHLERANALYSE DER KOPULA UND DAS HILFSVERB BEI RUSSISCHSPRACHIGEN LERNENDEN

Sprachinterferenz ist eine zentrale Herausforderung beim Erlernen einer Fremdsprache. Beim Erlernen einer zweiten Sprache übertragen die Lernenden Kenntnisse aus ihrer Muttersprache. Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit den Phänomenen des Transfers und der Interferenz zwischen zwei eng verwandten slawischen Sprachen: Tschechisch und Russisch, im Kontext des Unterrichts von Tschechisch als Zweitsprache. Insbesondere werden grammatikalische Muster untersucht, die eine Konjunktion (Präsens Indikativ) und ein Hilfsverb (zusammengesetzter Indikativ Vergangenheit) enthalten. Die Studie analysiert häufige Fehler, die von 15 russischsprachigen Studierenden aus Kasachstan während der Interaktion im Unterricht im Mai und Juni 2025 gesammelt wurden. Darüber hinaus wird eine marginale Analyse der Präferenzverben (*mít rád, rád*) durchgeführt. Die Erkenntnisse dienen der Formulierung von Vorschlägen für die Unterrichtsmethodik.

NEGATYWNA INTERFERENCJA Z ROSYJSKIEGO W JĘZYKU CZESKIM JAKO DRUGIM JĘZYKU: ANALIZA BŁĘDÓW W UŻYCIU ŁĄCZNIKA I CZASOWNIKA POSIŁKOWEGO U STUDENTÓW ROSYJSKOJĘZYCZNYCH

Interferencja językowa stanowi kluczowe wyzwanie w procesie przyswajania języka obcego. Podczas nauki drugiego języka studenci przenoszą wiedzę ze swojego języka ojczystego. Artykuł skupia się na zjawiskach przenoszenia i interferencji między dwoma pokrewnymi językami słowiańskimi: czeskim i rosyjskim, w kontekście nauczania języka czeskiego jako drugiego języka. Analizowane są w szczególności wzorce gramatyczne zawierające łącznik (czas teraźniejszy, tryb oznajmujący) oraz czasownik posiłkowy (złożony czas przeszły, tryb oznajmujący). Badanie obejmuje analizę częstych błędów popełnianych przez 15 rosyjskojęzycznych studentów z Kazachstanu podczas interakcji na zajęciach w maju i czerwcu 2025 roku. Ponadto przeprowadzono marginalną analizę czasowników preferencji (*mít rád – lubić, rád – chętnie*). Uzyskane wyniki pozwalają sformułować propozycje dotyczące metodyki nauczania.