

Introduction to aspect

What is aspect? Does English have aspect?

What is the difference between imperfective and perfective verbs?

In Czech, **aspect is called *vid***, which comes from the verb *vidět*. ***Vid* expresses how speakers see or view a situation.**

English also has means to express how we view a situation and how the same situation — for instance, *reading an explanation about aspect*, can be viewed from different temporal perspectives. *I was reading the explanation for a long time* denotes an internal or process-oriented view of the situation — as if the person is being filmed while reading and we are watching that activity play itself out. In contrast, *I read through the whole explanation* expresses a completed view of it — the act of reading is viewed from the outside as a *fait accompli* or as an event that has already happened. **In English, however, verbs themselves, like *read*, are ambiguous with regard to aspect while in Czech the form of the verb makes the aspectual view clear:** thus, *číst* would indicate the process-oriented understanding of reading and *přečíst* the event-oriented view.

In other words, **aspect is systematically encoded in the Czech verbal system in a way that it is not in English.** While speakers of English can and do understand the conceptual distinctions made by Czech imperfective and perfective verbs (that is, they can understand how a situation can be viewed from various perspectives), they do not naturally and effortlessly grasp how Czech lexicalizes and grammaticalizes these distinctions. **Learning aspect therefore presents a major challenge to speakers of English. A crucial first step in confronting this challenge is simply being aware that aspect is systematically present in Czech verbs.**

Most Czech verbs come in aspectual pairs: that is, they have an **imperfective** form (*číst, dělat, psát, zpívat...*) and a corresponding **perfective** form (*přečíst, udělat, napsat, zazpívat...*). The **imperfective is the form that students of Czech learn first** because the imperfective can denote **an immediate present tense** (what we are doing *right now*), which is the first tense learned. Imperfective verbs **also occur in the past tense where they can denote a past activity or process** (as in *I was reading the explanation for a long time* or, in Czech, *Dlouho jsem četl vysvětlení*), and they are **used in the future** in the same sense (*Dlouho budu číst vysvětlení* or *I will be reading the explanation for a long time*).

Imperfective verbs capture a situation as a process or activity unfolding in time. We see the unfolding as if watching a film of it. Imperfective verbs therefore **happily combine with a focus on the duration of a situation** (note the use of *dlouho* or *for a long time* in the sentences above) and **can also be used to denote habitual or repeated situations** (*Každý den čtu toto vysvětlení znovu* or *Every day I read this explanation again*). In a narrative, **imperfective verbs tend to be in the background:** they present descriptions that support the telling of the story but they do not form the backbone of the story's main events.

We learn about perfective verbs later in our study of Czech because **perfectives cannot describe an immediate present tense**, so their **use is limited to the past and the future**. They are used in the past and future to **capture a situation as an event or something that has already occurred** (and we can see it as a whole) **or will have occurred**. A perfective verb communicates **an external view of a situation**. In a narrative, **perfective verbs serve as the skeleton of the plot**, and they **drive forward the story event by event**. An example would be the classic sentence about Julius Caesar: *He came, he saw, he conquered* or, in Czech, *Přišel, uviděl, zvítězil*.

Because imperfectives and perfectives present different views of a situation, it should not be surprising that **certain situations — and therefore certain verbs — lend themselves to being viewed either imperfectively or perfectly**.

Many very common verbs are more or less imperfective by default because of the meaning that they express: *být* (to be), *mluvit* (to speak), *pracovat* (to work), *cestovat* (to travel), *hledat* (to look for), *hrát* (to play), *jmenovat se* (to be named), *bydlet* (to reside somewhere), *mít* (to have), *potřebovat* (to need), *řídít auto* (to drive a car), *spát* (to sleep), *pršet* (to rain), *sněžit* (to snow), *sportovat* (to do a sport), *studovat* (to study), *žít* (to live), *vypadat* (to look like), *znát* (to know), *znamenat* (to mean)... **These verbs by their very nature tend to be either states, processes, or activities**, and they are therefore primarily imperfective.

This is not to say that none of the above verbs has a perfective counterpart, but just that the primary meaning and use of the verb is an imperfective one. And if we take a look at perfective forms of some of these verbs, we see immediately that **perfectivization necessarily alters their basic meaning**. For example:

odpracovat	to work off (a certain number of required hours)
přejmenovat (se)	to rename (yourself)
poznat	to recognize
vystudovat (univerzitu)	to finish a degree at (or graduate from) a school
vyspat se	to get a good night's sleep
přežít	to live through or survive
zasněžit	to snow (as an event)

These perfective counterparts essentially turn the imperfective state, process, or activity into an event: they concretize the basic meaning of the verb and associate it with a specific context. Sometimes this perfectivity is indicated in English by a preposition (*to live through* versus *to live*, *to work off* versus *to work*...).

Sometimes a basic imperfective verb can have a range of perfective forms that concretize its meaning in a number of related but different ways. For example, the verb *hrát* (to play) has perfective counterparts in *zahrát* (to begin to play), *vyhrát* (to win), and *prohrát* (to lose). Note also the range of perfective possibilities for the imperfective verb *stěhovat se* (to move or change residences):

přestěhovat se	to move (as an event)
odstěhovat se	to move away
vystěhovat se	to move out of some residence
nastěhovat se	to move into some residence

Other verbs have a primary meaning that is event-oriented, and these are used more often in the perfective past or future as required by context. For example, *koupit* (to buy) is a perfective verb that is used more often than its imperfective counterpart *kupovat* since the very acting of buying usually presumes a focus on a result or completion of the transaction. The perfective verb *dát si* (to order food or drink in a restaurant) is another example: ordering food or drink profiles the result, so *Dám si...* is literally a perfective future which is the equivalent of the English phrase *I'll have...*

Because perfective verbs are event-focused and because they tend to concretize and specify, they often require an object to complete their meaning:

Četli jsme (knihu).	We read (a book) / We were reading (a book).
Přečetli jsme knihu.	We read the book.

The perfective *přečetli jsme* requires the object *knihu*: the sentence would be incomplete without the object since the perfective *přečíst* requires a focus on result. The imperfective *četli jsme*, however, can occur with the object, but it does not require one just to denote the activity or process of reading.

Modal verbs in Czech — *chtít* (to want), *muset* (must), *mít* (should), *umět* (to know how to), *moc* (can), *smít* (to be allowed to) — **are always imperfective.**

Formation of aspectual pairs

Verbs in aspectual pairs are related to each other in one of three ways:

(1) **Suffixation:** members of the pair have the same root but different suffixes.

<i>Imperfective</i>	<i>Perfective</i>	
kupovat	koupit	buy
uklízet	uklidit	clean
dostávat	dostat	get, receive
dávat	dát	give
zapomínat	zapomenout	forget

(2) **Prefixation:** the perfective is formed by adding a prefix to the imperfective verb in the pair.

<i>Imperfective</i>	<i>Perfective</i>	
dělat	udělat	do, make
psát	napsat	write
vidět	uvidět	see
fotit	vyfotit	photograph
zvat	pozvat	invite

(3) **The verbs in the pair have different roots** (this type is rare).

<i>Imperfective</i>	<i>Perfective</i>	
brát	vzít	take

Some common aspectual pairs

Here are some common aspectual pairs. It goes without saying that **aspectual pairs need to be memorized**, but even more important is that students recognize that every new verb that they learn will be either imperfective or perfective. This fact must be taken into account when learning a verb. Awareness that aspect systematically exists in Czech in a way that it does not in English is a first and necessary step to figuring out how it actually works in all of its details.

Impf / perf (sample context)

brát / vzít (něco)	to take (something)
cvičit / zacvičit	to exercise
čekat / počkat (na někoho)	to wait (for someone)
číst / přečíst (knihu)	to read (a book)
dávat / dát (něco někomu)	to give (something to someone)
děkovat / poděkovat (někoho za dárek)	to thank (someone for a gift)
dělat / udělat (chybu)	to do or make (a mistake)
dívat se / podívat se (na někoho)	to look at or watch (someone)
dostávat / dostat (dopis)	to get or receive (a letter)
fotit / vyfotit (Pražský hrad)	to photograph (Prague Castle)
hrát / prohrát ~ vyhrát (zápas)	to play / to lose ~ to win (a match)
jíst / sníst (koláč)	to eat (a cake)
koupat (se) / vykoupat (se)	to bathe (take a bath)
krást / ukrást (počítač)	to steal (a computer)
kupovat / koupit (suvénýr)	to buy (a souvenir)

lít / nalít (někomu vodu)	to pour (someone some water)
luxovat / vyluxovat (byt)	to vacuum (the apartment)
malovat / namalovat (obraz)	to paint (a picture)
milovat se / zamilovat se	to make love / to fall in love
mýt / umýt (nádobí)	to wash (the dishes)
nabízet / nabídnout (někomu něco)	to offer (something to someone)
nastupovat / nastoupit	to get on (a tram, bus, metro...)
oblékat se / obléct se	to get dressed
odpočívat / odpočinout si	to rest or relax
odpovídat / odpovědět (někomu)	to answer (someone)
péct / upéct (dort)	to bake (a pie)
pít / vypít (pivo)	to drink (a beer)
plánovat / naplánovat (party)	to plan (a party)
pomáhat / pomoci (někomu)	to help (someone)
posílat / poslat (někomu balík)	to send (someone a package)
používat / použít (slovo)	to use (a word)
platit / zaplatit (za něco)	to pay (for something)
prát / vyprat (prádlo)	to wash (laundry)
prodávat / prodat (auto)	to sell (a car)
překládat / přeložit (text)	to translate (a text)
přestupovat / přestoupit	to change (metro lines)
připravovat / připravit (salát)	to prepare (a salad)
psát / napsat (esej)	to write (an essay)
ptát se / zeptat se (někoho na něco)	to ask (someone something)
rozvádět se / rozvést se	to get a divorce
říkat / říct (něco někomu)	to tell or say (something to someone)
seznamovat se / seznámit se	to meet, become acquainted with
scházet se / sejít se	to get together
smát se / zasmát se	to laugh / to begin to laugh
smažit / usmažit (řízek)	to fry (a cutlet)
sprchovat (se) / vysprchovat (se)	to shower (take a shower)
tancovat / zatancovat	to dance
učit se / naučit se (nová slova)	to study / to learn (the new words)
ukazovat / ukázat (někomu něco)	to show (someone something)
uklízet / uklidit (byt)	to clean (the apartment)
umírat / umřít	to die
vařit / uvařit (čaj nebo kávu)	to cook, boil, make (tea or coffee)

vidět / uvidět (někoho)	to see (someone)
volat / zavolat (někomu)	to call (someone)
vstávat / vstát	to get up in the morning
vystupovat / vystoupit	to get off (a tram)
vysvětlovat / vysvětlit (gramatiku)	to explain (grammar)
začínat / začít (úkol)	to begin (an assignment)
zpívat / zazpívat	to sing
zvat / pozvat (někoho na party)	to invite (someone to a party)
žehlit / vyžehlit (košili)	to iron (a shirt)

Examples of usage

What aspect are the verbs in these sentences? How does that affect the meaning of the sentence?

1. Dřív jsme říkali, že potřebujeme udělat krok dopředu a ten jsme právě udělali.
2. Vezmi si, co dostáváš — a dostaneš, co dáváš.
3. Úředníci vzali do rukou lopaty a pomáhali s úklidem sněhu.
4. Nejraději fotím nehybné nebo pomalu se pohybující předměty, ale neznamená to ovšem, že bych si nevyfotil nějakého motýla.
5. Čtu, četl jsem a číst budu. Knížka v ruce je prostě radost.
6. Se stávajícím partnerem jsem dva roky, naplánovali jsme svatbu a plánujeme po svatbě miminko.
7. Naučte se jak se učit! Jak se naučit více a přitom se méně učit?
8. Číňan si poprvé po 26 letech umyl vlasy.
9. iPhone jsem si nekoupil a nekoupím. Kupuju obyčejný mobil za mnohem míň.
10. Náčelník se díval zamyšleně do časopisu a pak se podíval na mne. Nemluvil.
11. Nesnáším, když si s někým píšu a on/ona mi napíše, že mám tam chybu.
12. David řekl, že ještě přijde a abysme ne něj počkali. Čekali jsme asi hodinu a on nikde.
13. Vysprchoval jsem se, oblékl a šel dolů k ostatním, abychom jeli společně do školy.
14. Zjistila jsem, že Martin miluje domácí jablečný koláč a jeho žena je sice skvělá kuchařka, ale nerada peče. Tak jsem mu ho upekla podle receptu mé mámy.
15. Jak můžeš o něčem říct, že to je kravina, když jsi to ani nepřečetl?
16. Pozveme rodiče, oba sourozence a dědu, ale my letos mého otce nezveme — místo něho přijde mamčin přítel.
17. Nastupujete? Nechte nejprve ostatní vystoupit.
18. Po cestě domů jsem se Milana zeptala, kdo byl ten muž, kterého v nemocnici potkal. Odpověděl mi, že byl spolužák ze střední školy. „Jak se jmenuje?“ zeptala jsem se.
19. Práce trvala celé odpoledne a odpracovali jsme 20 hodin.

20. Mám ženicha absolutně netanečního. Ne že by neuměl, rytmus cítí mnohem lépe než já. Zatancovali jsme si spolu párkrát doma, ale prostě na veřejnosti tancovat nebude.
21. V Česku chtějí tři čtvrtiny lidí umřít mezi blízkými, ale tři čtvrtiny lidí umírají v léčebnách, domovech důchodců a nemocnicích.
22. Snažil jsem se udělat nějakou dobrou a upřímnou muziku po svém, aby to nebylo to, co dělali ostatní. Chtěl jsem udělat něco, co nebude plýtváním času lidí, kteří to poslouchají.
23. Na Moravě slabě zasněžilo a sněžit ještě bude.
24. Je mi tak smutno bez Tebe, pusinky posílám do nebe, andělíček je vyzvedne a k Tobě je pak pošle.
25. Policisté zadrželi čtyřiatřicetiletého muže, který prodával svým stálým zákazníkům drogu pervitin a marihuanu. Muž prodal minimálně 120,5 gramu metamfetaminu za 203 tisíc korun.