

From ‘not knowing’ to making a subjective guess

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Even the most mundane verbal interaction, though seemingly effortless, is the result of a very complex mental activity, in which its participants draw on their conventional and culturally grounded knowledge of the code that is shared within a given speech community. At the same time, the natural state of the code is its permanent variability, which inevitably leads to observable changes over time. The emergence of a new linguistic device is also the main concern of this talk, which is framed by the general task of uncovering the ways in which language users may recruit existing resources in order to create new linguistic patterns with new functions.

This general issue will be illustrated on a particular case taken from conversational Czech and largely left untouched in Czech reference grammars or in relevant research: the usage of the word *jestli* ‘if/whether’ not in its etymologically motivated function as a syntactic complementizer (as in *Nikdo neví, jestli to Martin udělá* ‘Nobody knows if Martin will do it’) but in its pragmatic, non-propositional function of expressing a subjective guess about something being likely (1) or unlikely (2):

- (1) *Esi vona nečekala na telefon*
‘[I don’t know for sure but I think] she may’ve been waiting for a phone call.’
- (2) *Jesi vůbec tam maj nějaký dřevo na topení*
‘[I don’t know for sure but I think] they many not have any wood to burn’.

The expressions (1-2) exemplify a typologically wide-spread and well-attested phenomenon known as insubordination (Evans 2009), whereby an erstwhile subordinate clause introduced by a dedicated subordinating complementizer, such as *jestli* ‘whether’ in (1-2), but also *když* ‘when’, *ačkoli* ‘although’, and others) retains its form but loses its main clause and develops a new conventional meaning.

Insubordination represents a very rich, interesting, and so far not very systematically analyzed phenomenon, which raises a number of issues of general interest, both descriptively and theoretically. I suggest that the origins and development of insubordination must be analyzed primarily as an issue of discourse organization rather than from a purely syntactic perspective (such as loss of a paratactic structure or simple ellipsis of main clause). The existing empirical studies indicate that all the known types of insubordination belong to conversational language and all contribute to navigating ‘online’ interaction, roughly in three general patterns: marking indirect interpersonal control (such as directives, admonitions, etc.), expressing a broad spectrum of modal meanings (e.g. epistemic, obligative, evaluative, etc.), and signaling presupposed material (negation, disagreement, etc.). I will show that the *jestli*-patterns in (1-2) incorporate the latter two meanings, based on the conversational data from the Czech National Corpus. I will also demonstrate how the emergence of the new intersubjective function can be traced through gradual shifts in both form and meaning. Overall, the new patterns facilitate cooperative conversation in which the speaker’s lack of factual knowledge is presented as a subjective epistemic stance, while simultaneously leaving room for a face-saving retreat if need be; the new meaning thus also offers a specific politeness strategy.