

# Concept of verbal attribute as a Didactic Challenge: Applying the Theory of Generic Models in Language Education

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## Abstract

This study examines students' conceptualization of the syntactic function traditionally referred to as *doplněk* (the Czech equivalent of the verbal attribute). The primary aim was to determine the extent to which an eighth-grade student can grasp the nature of this linguistic phenomenon through an *isolated model*, a method based on the Theory of Generic Models, originally developed in mathematics education. A qualitative case study approach was employed, focusing on the cognitive processes of a single student, which were explored via a semi-structured interview centred on sentences containing *doplněk*. Data were analysed using open coding. The findings indicate that the student's understanding of *doplněk* was strongly influenced by prior instruction, which had not adequately explained the formation of this syntactic structure. While the application of the isolated model contributed to a partial improvement in comprehension, the student struggled to abstractly recognize the dual dependency characteristic of *doplněk*. The study suggests refining didactic strategies to help students overcome misconceptions in syntax acquisition.

**Keywords:** verbal attribute, student conceptions, language education, Theory of Generic Models, syntax acquisition, lower-secondary education

# Učivo o doplňku jako didaktická výzva: aplikace teorie generických modelů v jazykové edukaci

## Abstrakt

Příspěvek se zabývá žákovským pojetím učiva o větném členu tradičně nazývaném doplněk. Cílem studie bylo zjistit, nakolik je žák na druhém stupni ZŠ schopen pochopit podstatu tohoto jazykového jevu prostřednictvím tzv. izolovaného modelu, který vychází z teorie generických modelů používané v didaktice matematiky. Kvalitativní přístup s designem případové studie se zaměřil na jeden případ žáka 8. ročníku, jehož myšlenkové procesy byly sledovány při polostrukturovaném rozhovoru nad větami s doplňkem. Data byla analyzována metodou otevřeného kódování. Z výsledků vyplynulo, že žákovo pojetí učiva o doplňku je silně ovlivněno předchozí edukací, ve které mu nebyl objasněn vznik tohoto jazykového jevu. Použití izolovaného modelu vedlo k jistému posunu v porozumění, ale žák nebyl schopen abstraktně identifikovat dvojí vazbu doplňku. Studie doporučuje upravit didaktické strategie tak, aby žákům pomohly překonat miskoncepce při učení syntaxe.

**Klíčová slova:** Doplněk, žákovo pojetí učiva, jazyková edukace, teorie generických modelů, osvojování syntaxe, 2. stupeň ZŠ

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## Introduction

The aim of this study is to analyse students' conceptualization of the verbal attribute and examine whether understanding of this phenomenon can be enhanced through the application of the theory of generic models, originally developed in mathematics education (Hejný & Kuřina, 2001). No previous studies, either in Czech or international research, have applied the theory of generic models to the acquisition of linguistic concepts. However, the principles of this theory allow for an in-depth examination of how students gradually construct linguistic knowledge.

## 1 Significance of topic

Our research objective was formulated with the recognition that searching for didactic strategies that accurately convey scientific knowledge in an educational setting is futile unless these strategies are aligned with the students' perspectives. This has been demonstrated in research on science and mathematics education (e.g., Baalman & Kattmann, 2001; Minstrell, 1992; Palmer, 2003; Stehlíková & Ulrychová, 2011) as well as in research on first languages didactics (e.g., Čechová, 2011/2012; Derewianka & Jones, 2010; McLeary, 1995; Myhill, 2005; Štěpáník, 2014; 2020; Zimová, 2005/2006; 2011/2012; 2015/2016). Language education must be grounded in linguistic research, and its success depends on recognizing students' developmental stages, prior experiences, and existing knowledge. Without this foundation, linguistic knowledge remains purely formal, and students will struggle to integrate it into broader contexts and apply it for their communicative needs (Myhill, 2005).

In Czech L1 didactics, the topic of the verbal attribute has not yet received sustained, systematic attention; nevertheless, brief remarks in Šmejkalová (2007) and in Štěpáník & Šmejkalová (2016, pp. 29, 35) note that teaching this category is perceived as difficult and frequently unsuccessful. This accords with our interviews with practising lower-secondary teachers, which indicate that limited instructional time and perceived complexity lead many to address the verbal attribute only cursorily and that pupils often regard it as one of the most challenging elements of sentence analysis.

The national curriculum (Rámcový vzdělávací program pro základní vzdělávání, RVP ZV)<sup>1</sup> emphasizes the development of students' communicative competence. However, prior research (e.g., Myhill, 2021) shows that a communicative approach to L1 instruction cannot dispense with explicit, systematic engagement with the language system. Our study underscores this point by examining how the theory of generic models can support pupils' conceptualization of the verbal attribute, thereby linking communicative aims with robust grammatical knowledge.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

The acquisition of linguistic knowledge can be understood as a specific type of concept formation process. In the Czech context, this process has been extensively studied within mathematics education by Milan Hejný. Hejný and Rybářová (1984, p. 599–600), building on earlier psychological research (Piaget, 1970; Vygotskij, 1978; Galperin, 1989 in Hejný & Rybářová, 1984, p. 599), identified three fundamental aspects of concept formation:

<sup>1</sup> <https://prohlednout.rvp.cz/zakladni-vzdelavani/vzdelavaci-oblasti/jjk/cj/> [seen 2025-05-10.]

1. The process of concept formation is an integral part of overall cognitive development.
2. The emergence and transformation of a concept result from an individual's active engagement.
3. Concept acquisition occurs progressively, with distinct stages following an internal hierarchy and logic.

These principles laid the foundation for the theory of generic models in mathematics education which is based on the premise that cognitive processes involve the creation and generalization of models representing knowledge structures. The gradual accumulation of experience with specific exemplars of a concept is referred to by Hejný (2004) as the level of isolated models. These isolated models begin to cluster and organize, eventually forming a generic model, which serves as a generalization of the initial isolated models. Abstract knowledge emerges through what Hejný terms the abstraction lift, during which a set of isolated and generic models is restructured, allowing the learner to develop a higher-level conceptual insight.

In mathematics education, it has been shown that knowledge that is not grounded in an isolated model (a concrete mental representation) tends to remain highly formal. Consequently, students struggle to connect such knowledge with other concepts and apply it effectively (Ulrychová & Stehlíková, 2011, p. 41).

The analogy between our study and research on mathematical concept acquisition arises from the fact that, similar to mathematics education, the first language education also involves working with phenomena that possess symbolic functions and universal characteristics. Both language and mathematics are structured systems governed by certain regularities, and instruction aims to guide students toward recognizing these regularities (Šmejkalová, 2012).

## 2.1 The Verbal Attribute from a Linguistic Perspective

In order to apply the theory of generic models to language instruction, it is necessary to clarify the nature of the verbal attribute as a linguistic phenomenon. Our research is complicated by the fact that the verbal attribute in bohemistic literature is not fully established. Therefore, we needed to select a clear linguistic framework for our investigation. As the theoretical foundation for both our research and the development of the isolated model, we adopted the work of Oldřich Uličný (1969, 1970) for two key reasons:

1. Uličný's explanation accounts for the formation of sentence structures containing the verbal attribute, providing a theoretical basis for understanding this linguistic phenomenon.
2. His framework allows for a precise classification of instances of the verbal attribute.

Although Uličný's work is relatively dated, his conceptualization of the verbal attribute as an optional complement of full-meaning verbs aligns with the most recent linguistic definitions of this category (Panevová et al., 2014). By adopting this theoretical framework, we adhere to the principle that instructional content should be based on up-to-date linguistic research.

Most Czech linguistic studies define the verbal attribute based on its dual syntactic dependency – on both the predicate verb and the noun functioning as either the subject or the object. According to Uličný (1969), the verbal attribute should only be considered an optional complement in full-meaning verb constructions. In contrast, obligatory predicative complements occurring with semi-lexical verbs are classified by Uličný as inseparable structures (e.g., *The runners looked exhausted. Závodníci vypadali vyčerpáni.*), whereas structures containing a verbal attribute are decomposable (e.g., *She saw herself as a teacher. Viděla se učitelkou. She saw herself. + She was a teacher. Viděla se. Byla učitelkou.*). Uličný represents the integration of the verbal attribute into sentence structure as the result of a two-base embedding transformation.

However, Czech school grammar continues to follow the approach of Havránek and Jedlička (1963), which classifies even obligatory predicative complements of semi-lexical verbs as verbal attributes (with the exception of linking verbs, which are considered part of a copular predicate) (Styblík et al., 2004). We argue that school-based definitions of the verbal attribute should be revised in accordance with the latest grammatical research, limiting the verbal attribute to optional elements only. A similar approach—incorporating the transformational characterization of the verbal attribute—has already been applied by Hirschová in the Czech language textbook for eighth-grade students in the Prodos series (2000). Therefore, our study also focuses on conceptualizing the verbal attribute as an optional syntactic element. The question of how best to incorporate obligatory complements of semi-lexical verbs into instruction remains open for future research.

The two-base embedding structure, which condenses the content of a constituent clause into a matrix clause, implies that sentences containing a verbal attribute are transformed sentences resulting from the integration of one clause into another. The prerequisite for this transformation is referential identity of the subject in both clauses (in cases where the verbal attribute depends on the subject), as in:

Turisté se vrátili unavení. (The tourists returned exhausted.)

Turisté se vrátili. (The tourists returned.) + Turisté byli unavení. (The tourists were exhausted.)

Alternatively, the transformation requires identity between the object of the first clause and the subject of the second clause (Uličný, 1969, p. 15–16).

Thus, the verbal attribute functions as a secondary predication, which emerges through the embedding of a constituent clause into a semantically complete syntactic

structure, referred to by Uličný as the matrix clause. The key criterion distinguishing the verbal attribute from an obligatory predicative complement is its transformational nature.

## 3 Methodology

A key objective of our study was to determine whether the student, based on exposure to concrete examples of the so-called verbal attribute, would reach a level of generalization that would enable independent work with sentences containing this syntactic element.

For the purposes of our research, we selected generally comprehensible, simple sentences that included both congruent and incongruent verbal attributes. Given the limited scope of the study, we focused on non-clausal expressions of the verbal attribute and did not address cases in which it is realized as a dependent clause. As part of the work with the isolated model, the student was introduced to an example of a congruent verbal attribute. The incongruent type was not demonstrated through the model. This decision is based on Uličný's work – the congruent and incongruent forms have same syntactic characteristics from the perspective of the transformational characteristics of the verbal attribute.

The section below further describes the research design, participant selection, data collection, and analytical procedures.

### 3.1 Research Design and Participant

To investigate students' conceptualization of the verbal attribute, we conducted a qualitative case study focusing on a single eighth-grade student from Prague elementary school who was in the final months of eighth grade at the time of the research. A qualitative research approach with a case study design allowed us to focus on the student's cognitive processes and to conduct a detailed analysis of the collected data (cf. Gavora, 2010).

#### 3.1.1 Data Collection and Procedure

The primary research method was a semi-structured interview focused on sentence analysis. The student worked with the isolated model of the verbal attribute. The semi-structured interview with the student was divided into four phases which are further described below.

### Phase 1: Initial Assessment of Student's Prior Knowledge

The goal of the first phase was to assess the student's prior knowledge of the verbal attribute and to map their subjective understanding of the language education they had undergone. We considered this mapping of prior knowledge and experience essential for the subsequent interpretation of data from the later interview phases. The student was presented with several sentences with similar content and asked to determine whether a verbal attribute was present in each. If they identified one, they were asked to pinpoint the relevant element and justify their answer. The following sentences were provided:

1. Autobus dorazil do Brna zpožděný. (The bus arrived in Brno delayed.)
2. Autobus je zpožděný. (The bus is delayed.)
3. Autobus dorazil do Brna se zpožděním. (The bus arrived in Brno with a delay.)
4. Někteří cizinci u nás pracují jako lékaři. (Some foreigners work as doctors in our country.)
5. Jsem lékař. (I am a doctor.)
6. Do kina jsme šli tři. (We went to the cinema as a group of three.)
7. Už vidím své kamarády přicházet. (I can already see my friends arriving.)
8. Dorazila jsem do cíle úplně vyčerpaná. (I reached the finish line completely exhausted.)

### Phase 2: Introduction of the Isolated Model

In the second phase of the interview, the student was introduced to the isolated model. In this case, it consisted of a concrete example illustrating the incorporation of two sentence structures, conditioned by referential identity of the subject in both base sentences. The student was presented with the following sentences:

Turisté se vrátili. (The tourists returned.)

Turisté byli unaveni. (The tourists were exhausted.)

The student was asked to identify the shared elements in both sentences. Referential identity of the subject was emphasized as a necessary condition for the incorporation of the two sentence structures. This was demonstrated with the transformation:

Turisté se vrátili. + Turisté byli unaveni. (The tourists returned. + The tourists were exhausted.)

Turisté se vrátili unaveni. (The tourists returned exhausted.)

The word *unaveni* (*exhausted*) in the transformed sentence was identified as the verbal attribute. At this stage of the interview, the student was explicitly told that this structure contained a verbal attribute. This example served as a representative case of the general concept, illustrating a two-base sentence structure with a verbal attribute. In our study, we refer to this as the isolated model.

### Phase 3: Student's Application of the Model

In the third phase of the interview, after gaining experience with the isolated model, the student was asked to work independently on the following task:

"Where possible, merge the following sentence pairs into a new sentence. Where is it possible and why? Where is it not possible and why?"

The student was presented with the following pairs of sentences:

- a) Ovoce jíme. (We eat the fruit.)  
Ovoce je umyté. (The fruit is washed.)
- b) Slyším matku. (I hear my mother.)  
Matka zpívá koledy. (My mother is singing carols.)
- c) Some foreigners work in our country. (Někteří cizinci u nás pracují.)  
Some foreigners are doctors. (Někteří cizinci jsou lékaři.)
- d) I arrived home. (Přijel jsem domů.)  
Pavel is tired. (Pavel je unavený.)
- e) Peter visited his grandmother. (Petr navštívil babičku.)  
Peter was sick. (Petr byl nemocný.)

The student was also asked to comment on whether a verbal attribute was present in any of the transformed sentences and, if so, to identify the specific word functioning as the verbal attribute. Additionally, the student was asked to justify their responses. The aim of this phase was to observe whether, based on concrete experience with the isolated model, the student could independently reach the generic model—that is, whether they could generalize their understanding to meaningfully combine base sentences or, alternatively, determine that incorporation was impossible due to the absence of referential identity of the subject in the base sentences. The student had been introduced to this condition in the explanation of the isolated model.

### Phase 4: Re-evaluation of the Initial Tasks

In the fourth phase of the interview, the student was once again presented with the same sentences from the first phase. This time, they were asked to identify the base sentences wherever possible—in other words, they were encouraged to attempt to "deconstruct" the given sentence structures when feasible. Furthermore, the student was asked to determine whether a verbal attribute was present and, if so, to indicate its location. The goal was for the student to reevaluate their responses from the first phase based on their experience with the isolated and generic models. The purpose of this phase was to determine whether the student had reached an abstract understanding, enabling them to independently identify transformed sentence structures and recognize the presence of the verbal attribute within them.

### 3.1.2 Analytical Approach

The semi-structured interview was conducted in person at the student's school during a scheduled consultation. The session was audio-recorded with the student's and legal guardian's consent. Data were transcribed and analysed using open coding in MAXQDA. The codes were designed to capture key features of the student's reasoning, including awareness of dual dependency or use of formal criteria.

## 3.2 Findings

The following section presents the results of the case study in relation to the phases of the semi-structured interview.

At the beginning of the interview, we confirmed that the student had encountered the concept of the verbal attribute in seventh grade. However, the student stated that this syntactic function was no longer covered in eighth grade: "I've heard of it, but not in a way that we actually studied it. The teacher said that it's not really used, so we just kind of mentioned what it is, but we didn't really go into it. (...) But that was last year."

In the first phase, the student correctly identified a verbal attribute in sentences 1 and 6. However, they also mistakenly labelled *se zpožděním* (with a delay) in sentence 3 and *Někteří* (some) in sentence 4 as verbal attributes. In sentence 8, the student classified *úplně vyčerpaná* (completely exhausted) as an adverbial of manner, even though *vyčerpaná* (exhausted) is actually verbal attribute. Notably, the student provided this classification spontaneously, without being specifically prompted by the researcher.

From the student's responses, we can infer the following:

- The student does not apply formal criteria when identifying the verbal attribute. They did not consider agreement with the governing noun, as seen in their classification of *se zpožděním* (with a delay) and *zpožděný* (delayed) both as verbal attributes and in their treatment of *úplně vyčerpaná* (completely exhausted) as an adverbial.
- The student does not consistently use the question-based method when identifying sentence constituents, relying on it only when analysing *úplně vyčerpaná* (completely exhausted) in sentence 8.
- The student does not recognize the dual dependency of the verbal attribute. They did not mention this essential feature when justifying their responses.
- The student's conceptualization of the verbal attribute appears influenced by the lexical meaning of the term *doplněk* (supplement). The student described it as something "just added to make the sentence more developed," "kind of extra," or "something that completes the sentence."

- The student strongly associates the verbal attribute with subordinate clauses. Even when dealing with simple sentences, they attempted to identify the main clause and perceived the verbal attribute as "something like a subordinate clause."
- The student does not consider word order as a criterion for identifying sentence constituents.

In the third phase, we observed whether the student could assess the feasibility of incorporating two base sentence structures and whether they could correctly identify and justify the verbal attribute in transformed structures.

From this part of the interview, we conclude that:

- The student was able to correctly merge some sentence pairs after being introduced to the isolated model. They successfully transformed examples b. *Slyším matku zpívat koledy.* (I hear my mother singing carols.) and c. *Někteří cizinci u nás pracují jako lékaři.* (Some foreigners work as doctors in our country.)
- The student recognized referential identity as a necessary condition for sentence incorporation. This can be inferred from their comments on pairs they were unable to merge, such as d. ("Each sentence is about something different, so they don't really go together.") and e. ("Petr visited his grandmother. Petr was sick. They're two different things. But since it's the same subject, there might be a way to connect them. But it still wouldn't make much sense to me."). The student ultimately transformed pair e. into a complex sentence: "Petr was sick, but he visited his grandmother."
- The student understood that the verbal attribute arises from the incorporation of two sentence structures. They identified verbal attributes in the following transformations:
  - a) *umyté* (washed). However, the student produced *Umyté ovoce jíme* (Washed fruit, we eat), which they noted "just doesn't sound right."
  - b) *koledy* (carols).
  - c) *jako lékaři* (as doctors).

The student justified their verbal attribute identifications using reasoning similar to the first phase of the interview: "So, 'carols' is the verbal attribute because 'I hear my mother singing' can be a full sentence on its own, and 'carols' just adds to it and explains what she's singing." "And 'as doctors' is the verbal attribute, I'd say, because it just expands the sentence and clarifies how the foreigners work." The student's persistent conceptualization of the verbal attribute as an additional explanatory element – comparable to a subordinate clause – remained strong even after working with the isolated model.

- Although the student recognized referential identity in sentence pair e., they were unable to form a transformed simple sentence (Petr visited his grandmother sick). Even though they had encountered this word order in the isolated model, they did not produce a sentence structure where the adjective appeared at the end. Similarly,

in pair a, they did not generate the expected transformation *Ovoce jíme umyté* (We eat the fruit washed). These word orders may not align with their linguistic intuition or communication practice. Again, the student did not consciously consider word order when determining sentence constituents.

- As previously noted, the student did not initially work with the dual dependency of the verbal attribute as a distinguishing feature. Therefore, we explicitly reintroduced this characteristic and asked the student to identify dual dependencies in transformed sentence structures. The student attempted to locate syntactic pairs, leading to some revised answers. Ultimately, they identified dual dependency only in example c. Student: "(...) Some foreigners work as doctors in our country, and I marked 'doctors' as the verbal attribute. 'They work; they work doctors'—that makes sense. And foreigners? Doctors? That doesn't really work."

Researcher: "And what about 'foreigners are doctors'?"

Student: "Foreigners are doctors. That makes sense. So, I'd say 'doctors' is the verbal attribute."

In the fourth phase of the interview, the student maintained their original verbal attribute classifications in sentences 1, 3, and 6 but modified their responses for sentences 4 and 8, correctly identifying *jako lékaři* (as doctors) and *úplně vyčerpáná* (completely exhausted) as verbal attributes. However, they still struggled to fully reconstruct both the matrix clause and the constituent clause in transformed sentences.

### 3.2.1 Summary of Key Findings

Our study sought to determine the extent to which the student, after being shown how the verbal attribute emerges in a transformed sentence structure through the isolated model, was able to independently incorporate sentence structures, recognize the condition of referential identity of the subject in base sentences, identify the verbal attribute, and recognize its dual dependency.

The eighth-grade student was able to incorporate some sentence structures based on the isolated model, suggesting that they had reached a generic model. However, it became evident that they found it difficult to create a transformed structure in which an adjective appeared at the end of the sentence. We therefore propose placing greater emphasis on word order when determining sentence constituents in instruction, as this aspect proved to be a weak point in the student's conceptualization of the verbal attribute both before and after working with the isolated model.

A particularly interesting finding was that, in the fourth phase of the interview, the student revised some of their original incorrect answers – specifically in the sentences *Někteří cizinci u nás pracují jako lékaři*. (Some foreigners work as doctors in our

country.) and *Do cíle dorazila úplně vyčerpaná*. (She reached the finish line completely exhausted.) However, we cannot conclude that the student achieved abstract conceptualization, for several reasons:

- The student struggled to correctly determine both the matrix clause and the constituent clause in transformed sentence structures. Identifying the matrix clause appeared to be particularly difficult, as the student made more errors in this area (only one correct formulation was provided).
- Even after working with the isolated model, the student did not fully understand dual dependency as a defining characteristic of the verbal attribute. They did not identify it independently and had difficulty recognizing it even when prompted.
- The student did not consider formal criteria (such as agreement with the governing noun) when determining the verbal attribute.
- The student did not take word order into account when identifying the verbal attribute.

## 4 Discussion

In this section, we reflect on the student's learning trajectory and discuss the broader implications of the findings for language education and concept-based grammar instruction.

The findings of this study indicate that the student's conceptualization of the verbal attribute is strongly influenced by prior education, which, however, did not lead to the acquisition of the essential nature of this syntactic phenomenon or the ability to reliably identify it. The student did not comment on the formal properties of expressions, word order, or dual dependency when determining the verbal attribute. Furthermore, the student mistakenly perceived the verbal attributes something akin to a subordinate clause, implying that it could be omitted.

The student's perception of the verbal attribute as an omissible sentence constituent suggests that they have a good intuitive grasp of verbal valency (a phenomenon confirmed in several studies, most recently by Žiláková, 2016). Based on this, we propose a modification in school practice: distinguishing cases of non-valency-bound optional complements in full-meaning verbs and restricting the term verbal attribute to these cases exclusively (in line with Uličný's framework). The question of how to handle valency-bound complements of semi-copular verbs in school instruction remains open for further research, although one possible solution has already been suggested by Hirschová (2000).

## Conclusion

This study explored an eighth-grade student's conceptualization of the verbal attribute using the Theory of Generic Models as a pedagogical framework. Through a qualitative case study design involving a four-phase semi-structured interview, we examined how the student processed and transformed syntactic structures containing verbal attributes.

The research showed that while the student was able to engage with concrete models and apply sentence merging techniques, their understanding of the verbal attribute remained limited in abstraction. Key grammatical features—such as dual dependency and formal agreement—were not consistently recognized.

Nevertheless, the study demonstrates the value of introducing conceptual frameworks based on model-building into grammar instruction. In a broader context, our research demonstrates that the theory of generic models can serve as a productive framework for language education. The application of this theory opens new methodological pathways for researching syntax acquisition and provides guidelines for innovating didactic strategies in grammar instruction.

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