

## DEBATE AND EDUCATION

## Grammatical problems with Slovak in foreign students studying medicine in Slovakia

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**Abstract:** Many foreign students (mainly from Scandinavian countries) come to study medicine to Jessenius Faculty of Medicine, Comenius University, in Martin. From the first weeks after their arrival, they have to learn besides specialized subjects also Slovak. Slovak seems to be a very difficult language to them. In this article we will deal with the most serious grammatical problems they have to cope with (Ref. 1). Full Text (Free, PDF) [www.bmj.sk](http://www.bmj.sk).

Key words: grammar errors, conjugation, declination, irregular verbs.

When learning a foreign language we have to distinguish between understanding, practicing, and performing the language. A man of average intelligence is able to manage the rules of a foreign language. But only systematic practice of a given subject matter can bring an expected result, i.e. managing the language. Language learning is a very time-consuming process lasting many years. On the way to manage and use Slovak language in an appropriate way, foreign students have to struggle not only with new words of unusual pronunciation and spelling, but also with complicated grammar full of various exceptions. In our previous article *Phonetic problems with Slovak in foreign students studying medicine in Slovakia* published in BLL 2/2007, p. 112–113, we dealt with the commonest phonetic problems in foreign students. In this article we will try to analyze the most frequent grammatical errors the students commit when they learn Slovak language.

After the first everyday phrases and greetings, we teach the students to conjugate and use the first verbs „*byť*“ (to be) and „*mať*“ (to have). These two verbs enable them to give the basic information about themselves. Here is a short presentation of a female Norwegian student: *Ahoj! Ja som nórsky študent. Ja som 20 rokov* that should sound correctly *Ahoj! Ja som nórška študentka. Mám 20 rokov*. The first grammar problem, the students come across in Slovak language, are the grammar genders (masculine, feminine, neuter). From the nouns denoting professions it is possible to derive feminine nouns from masculine ones by means of the ending *-ka*, e.g. *učiteľ – učiteľka, profesor – profesorka, doktor – doktorka*. No wonder that they want to continue using the suffix *-ka* in other nouns denoting family member, e.g. *švagor – švagorka, svokor – svokorka, synovec –*

*synovečka, zat’ – zat’ka, vdovec – vdovečka/vdoveca* instead of correct forms *švagriná, svokra, neter, nevesta, vdova*. The other mistake (*Ja som 20 rokov.*) was done under the influence of either their mother tongue or English. We Slovaks, we are not old, we just have years. The genders are distinguished also in Slovak adjectives. So we say *nórsky študent (M), nórška študentka (F), nórské dieťa (N)* (Norwegian male student, Norwegian female student, Norwegian child). The adjective *nórsky* is often falsely used in stating their nationality, e.g. *Ja som norský, on je nemecký* instead of *Ja som Nór, on je Nemec* or they use the name of their country presenting themselves, e.g. *Ja som Norsko, Som z Norsko, Som Norsko*.

Genders and declinations in Slovak remain a puzzle for foreigners for ever. In the following sentences you can observe the fight with genders and cases of nouns and adjectives: *Môj telo je dobré, je strava a silná, hoci niekedy myslím že je trochu tuchna (ako každý iný slečna)*. instead of correct version: *Moje telo je dobré, je zdravé a silné, hoci niekedy si myslím (ako každá iná slečna), že som trochu tučná*. Another example: *Pred niekoľko roky najviac bežny choroba bola rakovina a infarkt. Dnes najviac nebezpečny a bežny choroba je cukrovka*. instead of correct version: *Pred niekoľkými rokmi najbežnejšou chorobou bola rakovina a infarkt. Dnes najnebezpečnejšou a najbežnejšou chorobou je cukrovka*. Following is an interesting description of epilepsy: *Epilepsia je chronická neurologický choroby. Moja sestra mala tieto choroby a to byl riadeny s lieky. Ale nema tento choroba teraz. Doktory hovorili ona pestovala narucny. Dostala tu chorobu pro jej hlavni bezpravnost ze dostala na vazny autova nahoda hoci byla dieta*. Here we can only assume what the writer wanted to tell us because s/he had committed several other errors, not only grammatical ones: *Epilepsia je chronická neurologická choroba. Moja sestra mala túto chorobu a tá bola riadená liekmi. Teraz, ale nemá túto chorobu. Doktori hovorili, že si ju pestovala náročky. Pre túto chorobu sa stala bezprávnou za to, že sa jej stala vážna automobilová nehoda, hoci bola dieta*.

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We need to pay special attention to practicing the social phrase *Ako sa máš?/Ako sa máte? – Ďakujem. Mám sa dobre. (How are you? – I am fine.)* Coming from social and language environment, where people do not distinguish among polite and familiar or informal way of speaking, it is very difficult for start to use these two forms in Slovak language. No wonder that they tend to address their teacher in a very familiar way that is completely unacceptable: *Ahoj, profesor! Ako sa máš?* Hours and hours we emphasize to our foreign students that they will use this phrase in contact with Slovak patients and that they have to use the polite form *Ako sa máte?* One student has appreciated the existence of informal *ty* and polite *vy* in his essay in the following words: *Tiez mam rad vas jazyk, lebo mate „vykat“, teraz nemame v norsko, mali sme velmi davno. Ja myslim toto je dobre pre respekt.*

In spite of practicing the verb *mat' sa* the mistake of the type *Ona bola chorá. Teraz je dobre.* instead of correct *Teraz sa má dobre. (She was ill. Now she is well.)*, can occur even in the later stages of the language learning. If we emphasize too much the difference between the verbs *mat'* and *mat' sa*, then some students start to fabricate new errors due to overuse of the reflexive pronoun *sa*, e.g. *Skušku mam sa v maji. (I have an exam in May.)*

The verb *mat'* is always followed with a noun in accusative, which brings a new set of errors. A short sentence *Ja mám brata Petra. (I have a brother Peter.)* is usually misinterpreted and students think that *brata* is another form of *sister (brat > brata/bratka)* and *Petra* is a girl's name and cannot be used for naming a man. They are more successful with the verb *volat' sa – Moj brat vola sa Peter. (The name of my brother is Peter.)*

The problem with use of the reflexive pronouns *sa* and *si* is too complicated for foreigners and practicing it requires special attention. On the other hand when it is not put on correct position in the sentence, it is just a “cosmetic” mistake that does not complicate the communication, e.g. *Rano zobudim, sa sprchujem, poobede učim sa, večer umyjem moje vlasy.* Instead of correct: *Ráno sa zobudim, osprchujem sa, poobede sa učim, večer si umyjem vlasy.*

We have our foreign students to connect the new knowledge with that they already know by using the method of deduction. We do not always tell them all rules but we let them discover the principles of the Slovak language themselves. When students have mastered the forms of the verbs „*byť*“ and „*mat'*“, we teach them other useful verbs. We do not present them the complete conjugation chart, but write the particular forms of various verbs scattered on the blackboard. We ask the students to organize them to a system of singular and plural from 1st to 3rd person. In this way the students are able to discover that the suffix *-m* always belongs to the 1st person singular, the suffix *-me* to the first person plural, etc. In spite of this seemingly successful teaching method, students do not always avoid mistakes of the type: *Moji rodičia býva v Nemecko. Ti mladi lekari pracuje v nemocnici. On mam skúška. Zajtra my mám skúška. On robim skúšku. Je tam dve lekárska fakulty. Ked' skončite študium, budem doktorka.*

The verbs with ending *-ovat'* like *cestovat', pracovat', študovat'* (*travel, work, study*) are a nightmare for majority of our foreign

students. It takes them several months till they start to use them correctly. So the errors of the type *On cestova vlakom, ja rád cestovam lietadlom, or ja rad cestajem lietadlom (He travels by train. I like travelling by plane.)* occur quite often. Even if they already pronounce the forms correctly, under the phonetic influence of their own language, they tend to write *o* instead of *u*, e.g. *cestojem, cestoješ, cestoje.*

In the following example there is a combination of errors – some verbs are not conjugated at all, others with ending *-ovat'* are conjugated falsely: *Pluca ziskat kyslik a prepustit oxid uhlicity. Srce dostat krv do zily a pumpova krv cez cieva. Pecen je najväcsi zlaza na telo, to vylucova zlc a skladova glycogen. Oblicka vylucova moc.* The sentences should be written correctly as follows: *Pľúca dostávajú kyslík a prepúšťajú kysličník uličity. Srdce dostáva krv zo žíl a pumpuje krv cez cievy. Pečeň je najväčšia žľaza v tele, vylučuje žlč a skladuje glykogén. Obličky vylučujú moč.*

Another problem is to distinguish between *Mám rád futbal. (I like football)* and *Rád hrám futbal. (I like playing football.)* The first structure is easier for them. Sometimes they just forget to use the verb *mat'*, e.g. *Eva rada čaj s medom.* The second structure seems to be extremely difficult for them. On the question *Čo rád robi Peter?* they give us various answers, e.g. *Peter rád robi číta noviny. / Peter rád čítat noviny.* Similarly: *Čo radi robia deti? (What do children like to do?) – Deti radi robia hrajú sa v parku. / Deti radi hra majú sa v parku. / Deti radi hrat sa v parku.* Either two verbs are conjugated or none. The sentence *Susan likes travelling and she likes the sea* was translated as follows: *Zuzana rada cestuje a rada more.*

A lot of frequently used Slovak verbs are irregular. This leads students to many mistakes of the type: *písať – písam/pišam, začať – začam, žiť – žim, piť – pim, spať – spam, brať – bram, stáť – stám, prať – pram, vedieť – vediem, chcieť – chciem, musieť – musiem.*

The sentences “*I can read and write in Slovak but I cannot speak very well yet.*” and “*My girl-friend speaks English*” were translated in several wrong ways, e.g. *Viem čítať a písať na Slovensku, ne viem hovoriť dobre, ale hovorím zly. / Viem čítať a písať po slovensku, alebo neviem hovoriť. / Čítam a pišam po slovensku, ale hovorim už nie dobre. Moja priateľka hovorí anglicku. / Moja priateľka hovorí anglečina.* From the given examples we can see that students have not managed the usage of the common language structure – *písať, čítať, hovoriť po slovensky, po anglicky (to write, read, speak Slovak, English etc.)* and they try to compensate it with all possible they can say – *slovenčina, Slovensko, po slovensku.*

With conjugation of verbs, formation of imperatives is very closely connected. Unfortunately imperatives are used in medical Slovak very often and it is very difficult for foreigners to remember three possible ways of imperative formation + a lot of irregular imperatives, e.g. *nespať > Nespate v škola!, piť > pijte veľa voda!, vyzliecť sa > vylezte sa!, obliecť sa > oblezte sa!, hovoriť > hovorte áa! (instead of Nespite v škole!, pite veľa vody, vyzlečte sa, oblečte sa, povedzte Áá!).* Another problem is use of modal verbs. Students often conjugate simultaneously the

modal verb and the meaningful verb in one and the same sentence, e.g. *Viem citam a pisam slovenčina, ale len neviem hovoriť veľmi dobre. Moja priateľka viem hovoriť angličtinu. Ona chce študovať medicínu.* The English modal verb *can* which can be translated into Slovak in two ways, i.e. *Viem spievať.* = *I can sing.* and *Môžem spievať?* = *Smiem spievať?* in the sense *Am I allowed to sing?* and *Môžem prísť.* = *I can come,* confuses them completely because *viem* means for them first of all *I know*. So the English sentence *I know him* is often wrongly translated *Viem on* instead of the correct version *Poznám ho*.

At the beginning, when students hear that there is only one past tense in Slovak, they are very lucky. But later when they have to distinguish between perfective and non-perfective verbs, they feel to be completely lost. Once they have learned the verb „*kúpiť*“ (to buy), they refuse to accept another verb „*kupovať*“ (to be buying), and so they go on using the perfective verb *kúpiť* also in future tense: *Budem kúpiť novú knihu slovenčina*. Similarly: *Zajtra budem ísť do Žiliny, budem kúpiť nový kabát. Poobede budem uvariť polievku. Keď budem vyštudovať fakultu, budem pracovať v nemocnici. Budem byť dobrá doktorka, ak viem všetko.*

A lot of mistakes are caused by complicated Slovak declination, e.g. *V moju domov byva tiež moji starý otec. Peter je v domov, pretože je unavený. /Peter je domov, pretože je unavený. Ja bývam v Martin, v Slovensko. Moji rodičia bývajú v Norsko. Na fakulte sú hodne učebná. Každý učebná má stôl, stolicky, tabula. Byvam na sturovo námestie 30. Univerzita vola Jessenius, a myslím je dobre lekárske fakulta.*

Another hated part of Slovak grammar are those “little” words – prepositions as students use to call them. There is quite a large scale of prepositions that are used with all cases, i.e. they permanently require use of some other ending and their meaning is also sometimes difficult to remember, e.i. *za* – *behind/for*, *s/so* – *with*, *z/zo* – *from*, *o* – *about*, *do* – *into*, *v/vo* – *in*, etc. It is really very difficult to remember two-letter words with completely different meaning, so they confuse them. *Je pondelok ráno a pani*

*doktorka pred chvíľou prišla na prácu. (It is Monday morning and Mrs doctor has just come to work.) Taxi do internat, prosím. (Taxi to students' hostel). Zajtra idem na Nemecko. (Tomorrow I go to Germany.) Na tretí rok prednásky a seminare je na nemocnica v Martine.* Here is a short case record in Slovak: *Ja pracoval na zahrada včera, a nepredvídaný jeden pes bežal do mňa, spadnul zranil sa. Kost' je zlomená. Myslim zlomenil moj zápästie. Myslim najlepšie sa dala do sadry.* Instead of correct: *Včera som pracoval v zahrade, keď zrazu bežal ku mne jeden pes, ja som spadol a zranil sa. Kost' je zlomená. Myslím, že som si zlomil zápästie. Myslím, že najlepšie bude dať ho do sadry.*

In spite of the fact that Slovak language is difficult, we teachers are very proud when our students struggle with it and step by step manage it. In some cases they manage it so well, that they decide to stay in Slovakia for ever or at least use it actively during their study stay in Slovakia. The hope that they really want to manage it, reflects in the following words of one first-year student: *Ja študujem medicínu lebo mam rád pomoc ľuďom, a ja už pracujem v nemocnici v nórsko a tam je dobre práca prostredia, mam dobre pocity keď som tam. V nemocnici ja stále stretnem doktora a keď mám rozhovor na práci ja tiež chcem byť doktor. Keď som konci pomoc pacienty oni pozri na mňa a hovorí ďakujem, budem mať veľmi dobré pocity. Ale tento škola je ťažké a dúfam všetko pôjde dobre. Ja stále myslím slovenský jazyk je ťažké, potrebujem hovoriť po slovensky a potom bude lepšie veľmi rýchlo, dúfam.*

To be honest not so many students are as enthusiastic as this one, the majority refuses to use it actively, because they do not learn it properly reasoning they have not come to study language but medicine.

## References

Dzukanova B, Balkova D. Phonetic problems with Slovak in foreign students studying medicine in Slovakia. Bratisl Lek Listy 2007; 2: 112–113.

Received April 21, 2008.

Accepted June 20, 2008.