

Why the hell *what*? A remark on the syntax and semantics of ‘why’ and ‘what’ in Czech
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1 Some general properties of *wh*-adjuncts (*when, where, why*)

All questions in (1) are ambiguous:

- | | | |
|--------|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| (1) a. | Where did you say that Peter left? | [where > say; where > works] |
| b. | When did you say that Peter works? | [when > say; when > left] |
| c. | Why did you say that Peter smokes? | [why > say; why > smokes] |

Wh-adjuncts may be used in non-interrogative embedded clauses

- | | |
|--------|-------------------------------------|
| (2) a. | He told us [where he was traveling] |
| b. | He told us [when he was born] |
| c. | He told us [why he is angry] |

2 Why cannot do so much

At least in Czech, *why* observes stricter conditions on the embedded construal:

- | | | |
|--------|--|-------------------|
| (3) a. | Kde-s neříkal, že pracuješ?
‘Where didn’t you say that you work?’ | [where > work] |
| b. | Kdy-s neříkal, že ráno vstáváš?
‘When didn’t you say that you get up in the morning?’ | [when > get up] |
| c. | *Proč-s neříkal, že máš rád pivo?
‘Why didn’t you say that you like beer?’ | [why > like beer] |

3 Why can do more: it has a special property X

Background...

All Czech verbs are marked for aspect: they are either [+perf(ective)] or [–perf(ective)]. Perfectiveness is a grammatical category which has a range of meanings, e.g. progressivity, punctuality, continuity.

[–perf] verbs (2a) are compatible with *for an hour* adverbs but not with *in an hour* adverbs¹
[+perf] verbs (2b) are compatible with *in an hour* adverbs but not with *for an hour* adverbs

- | | | | |
|--------|--|-------|--------------------------|
| (4) a. | psal | esej | hodinu / *za hodinu |
| | wrote.IMP | essay | for an hour / in an hour |
| | ‘He was writing his homework in an hour’ | | |
| b. | na-psal | esej | *hodinu / za hodinu |
| | PERF-wrote | essay | for an hour / in an hour |
| | ‘He wrote his homework in an hour’ | | |

¹ We have to be careful the *in an hour* adjuncts are potentially ambiguous: they can refer to [i] the duration of the (accomplished) process itself and [ii] the time-span preceding the process. The second reading is compatible with imperfectives. We ignore this reading further on and the grammaticality judgments concern reading [i].

Sometimes perfective reading is licensed also with an imperfective verb-form. The standard context is **negative imperative**. Importantly, negative imperatives almost exclusively surface with imperfective verbs. Perfectives are very marginal in such contexts.

- (5) a. Ne-piš ten esej hodinu / za hodinu!
 NEG-write.IMP the essay for an hour / in an hour
 ‘Don’t write the letter (for) an hour / in an hour!’
- b. Ne-na-piš ten esej *hodinu / za hodinu!
 NEG-PERF-write the essay for an hour / in an hour
 ‘Don’t write the letter in an hour!’

Why has the same power as the negative imperative. Other *wh*-adjuncts do not.

- (6) Proč / *Kdy / *Kde jsi psal ten esej za hodinu?
 why / when / where AUX.PAST.2SG write the essay in an hour
 ‘Why did you write the letter in an hour?’

Example (6) is a bit clumsy for Czech speakers. However, the same contrast can be shown very naturally with a different verb-pair in (7): *jít* vs. *chodit* ‘go’. The former usually expresses a single activity (go1 in glosses); the latter iterativity (go2). Interestingly, there is not a perfectivity contrast in this case—both are [–perf]—but *jít* ‘go1’ has some prototypical [+perf] properties: it is incompatible with future auxiliary *budu* ‘will’, ex. (8), and very marginal with negative imperatives, ex. (9).

Importantly, *why* but not e.g. *when* licenses a go1 reading of go2, i.e. we observe a similar aspectual shift as above.

- (7) a. Proč jsi včera chodil do toho kina!?
 why AUX.PAST.2SG yesterday go1 to the cinema
 ‘Why did you go to the movies yesterday!?’
- b. *Kdy jsi včera chodil do toho kina?
 why AUX.PAST.2SG yesterday go1 to the cinema
 ‘When did you go the movies yesterday?’
- (8) * Zítra budu jít do kina
 tomorrow AUX.FUT.1SG go2 to cinema
 ‘Tomorrow I will go to the movies’
- (9) Ne-chod’ / *ne-jdi do kina, ten film za to ne-stojí
 NEG-go2.IMP NEG-go1.IMP to cinema the film for it NEG-is.worth
 ‘Don’t go to the movies, the movie is not worth it’

4 **Why cannot do more in certain contexts: property X is unavailable**

(1c) shows that *why* can be construed as an adverbial in an embedded clause. However, in the embedded readings, *why* loses its special licensing conditions:

- (10) ???Proč jsi říkal, že Petr včera chodil do kina?
 why AUX.PAST.2SG say that Petr yesterday go1.PAST to cinema
 ‘Why did you say that Peter went to the movies yesterday?’

Why does not license the perfective reading when it is in a non-interrogative embedded clause; however, the example is grammatical otherwise

- (11) !! Řekl, proč chodil do toho kina tak pozdě
 say why go2 to the cinema so late
 ‘He said why he came to the cinema so late’

Why does not license the perfective reading with negated verbs

- (12) * Proč jsi nepsal ten esej za hodinu?
 why AUX.PAST.2SG write.IMP the essay in an hour
 ‘Why did you not write the letter in an hour?’

5 **What meaning why (further WHAT)**

WHAT can express the core meaning of *why*; it seems to have an additional (pragmatic) meaning: negative attitude of the speaker / reproach; this meaning can also be present with *why*

- (13) Co pracuješ tak dlouho, když tě to tak unavuje?
 what work.2SG so long when you.ACC it so make tired
 ‘Why are you working so long when it makes you tired so much?’

WHAT does not licence the embedded reading at all (as opposed to *why*; see ex. (1))

- (14) Co-s říkal, že Petr psal ten esej? [co > říkal; *co > psal]
 what-AUX.PAST.2SG say that Petr wrote the essay
 ‘Why did you say that Peter wrote the letter?’

WHAT cannot be used with non-interrogative embedded clauses

- (15) ???Řekl, co chodí do kina (as opposed to *why*; see ex. (11))
 say what go2 to cinema
 ‘He said why he goes to the cinema’

WHAT is incompatible with [+perf] but licenses perfective reading

- (16) Co-s (*na-) psal ten esej za hodinu?
 what-AUX.PAST.2SG PERF- write the essay in hour
 ‘Why did you write the letter in an hour (=so fast)?’

WHAT does not license the perfective reading over negation

- (17) * Co jsi nepsal ten esej za hodinu?
 what AUX.PAST.2SG write.IMP the essay in an hour
 ‘Why did you not write the letter in an hour?’

WHAT is compatible with negated [+perf] verbs

- (18) Co-s ne-na-psal ten dopis?
 what-AUX.PAST.2SG NEG-PERF-write the letter
 ‘Why did you not write the letter?’

Some data show (Jakub Dotlačil, p.c.) that the claim about the incompatibility with perfective verbs may be too strong:

- (19) Co-s přišel *(tak pozdě)?
 what-AUX.PAST.2SG come so late
 ‘Why did you come (so late)?’

The example above seems to suggest some tricky interplay with focus, here *tak pozdě* ‘so late’.

However, note that we can also question the focus by itself (with a VP ellipsis), the example (20); furthermore, in such cases WHAT seems to lose its special licensing conditions.

- (20) Vím, že jsi nakonec přišel, ale co tak pozdě?!
 know.1SG that AUX.PAST.2SG finally come but what so late
 ‘I know you eventually came but why (did you come) so late?’

- (21) ???Co-s včera chodil do toho kina tak pozdě?
 what-AUX.PAST.2SG yesterday go2 to the cinema so late
 ‘Why did you come to the movies SO LATE yesterday?’

Some tricky data to think about:

- (22) Co-s tam měl co chodit?
 what-AUX.PAST.2SG there have what go2.INF
 ‘Why did you go there? / What made you go there at all?’

- (23) Měl-s tam vůbec co chodit?
 have-AUX.PAST.2SG there at all what go2.INF
 ‘Did you have any reason to go there at all?’

6 Account...?

Syntax:

WHAT properties and X properties of *why*

- They license perfective reading of imperfective verbs; (6), (7), and (16)
- They are not available when the modified verb is negated; (12) and (17)²
- They are not available for long distance relationships; (10) and (14)
- They are not available in non-interrogative embedded contexts; (11) and (15)

→ WHAT is X

→ *why* (may) contain(s) WHAT

Exclusively *why* properties (no WHAT)

- Long distance questions (not over negation in the matrix clause)
- Non-interrogative embedded contexts

Morphology:

Cross-linguistically *why* is often expressed as something + *what*

Czech: *proč* ← *pro co* ‘for what’; more productive in older Czech: *nač* ← *na co* ‘on what’

perhaps German, Dutch: *warum* ← *um was*; *waarom* ← *om wat*

English: *what for*

Speculations:

Why is WHAT realized as ‘what’ (*co* in Czech) and a number of other languages (Germanic, Slavic, but probably also Chinese)? ‘What’ is arguably a default wh-word and perhaps has the power to realize the most underspecified [operator] feature. A radical underspecification of WHAT may be in correlation with the following facts:

- Two juxtaposed clauses are most readily interpreted in a causal relation.
- Reason subordinate clause may be introduced by a standard (declarative) complementizer *že* in Czech.

In the light of these facts, reason interrogatives may be just a tiny piece “bigger” than yes-no questions. In other words, they may contain only one more feature and this feature is WHAT, which is interpreted as a question about cause.

² It is unclear to me why WHAT is still grammatical in this context, see (16); it may be connected with different focus properties of the modified verb when it is negated; cf. ex. (19).

7 A selective appendix: Other intriguing facts about <i>why</i>
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- *Why* cannot induce the comparative reading of a superlative, which is normally “available in the environment of a WH/FOCUS phrase, and the ‘frame of comparison’ is a function of which constituent the WH/FOCUS phrase is”; Szabolsci (1986: ex. (14), (31)):
- (24) Who climbed the highest mountain?
 ‘Who climbed a higher mountain than how high mountain anyone else climbed?’
- (25) *Why do the fewest children cry?
 ‘Why do fewer children cry than how many children cry for any other reason?’
- *why* does not leave a trace (Szabolsci (1986)); *why* is base-generated (Boeckx (2000))
 - *why* never triggers agreement (as opposed to *when/where*); Boeckx (2003)
 - There are no reason resumptives (as opposed to temporal and locative ones); Boeckx (2003). However, Aoun and Li (2003) claim that in Chinese there are...
 - In Korean and Japanese ‘why’ is the only *wh*-word which may be preceded by a scope-bearing/sensitive element (NPI, *only*, ...); Ko (2006)
 - there is no *whyever*, *somewhy* in English; in Chinese *weishenme* ‘why’ is not ambiguous between a *wh*-word and an existential quantifier, as e.g. *shenme* ‘what’; Tsai (1994)
 - the Chinese ‘why’ is the only *wh*-word which is (strong/weak) island sensitive

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