

The absent description: compensating for its evocative and identifying function

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In everyday spontaneous spoken utterances, particularly in face-to-face dialogue, very specific “descriptions” often occur. These tend to be implicit and indefinite, containing a large number of anaphoric devices or indefinite and pseudo-demonstrative pronouns, inseparably associated with “filler” words. An explicit description based on autosemantic words is sometimes almost entirely missing here, but then even this kind of indefinite, almost “minus” description performs its function in conversation; the participants understand each other perfectly even without autosemantic words and they have no problem in identifying all the entities referred to by mere indefinite hints. Here I shall attempt to present the operation of descriptions of this type in several situations in ordinary everyday communication, and I shall first offer several samples to present a clear picture.¹

¹ The exemplifications of everyday spoken communication in this contribution are chosen from a corpus of recordings and their transcriptions that has been created under the supervision of Olga Müllerová in the Czech Language Institute since the 1980s until recently. Currently, the research of this type of dialogues benefits from the collection of spoken texts ORAL of the Czech National Corpus. These sources confirm that neither the linguistic nor the stylistic characteristics of everyday face-to-face dialogues have changed significantly in the past few decades.

1) Dialogue between a customer and a dressmaker

- D tak pudeme do kabiny / **to** našpendlíme na vás / tak co říkáte šíří? [so let's go into the changing room / we'll pin **that** onto you / so what do you think of the width?]
- C no jak myslíte vy [well, whatever you think]
- D tak záda sou **takle** / vám je předvedu pardon / já myslím širší už ne / že sme tu šíří trefily [so the back is **like that** / I'll show it you, excuse me / no wider, I'd say / we've got the width right]
- C já myslím **takle** nó [**like that** then, I think]
- D jo? je **to**? jak ulitý **to** sedí [yeah? is **that** it? **that** fits just right]
- C nó [right]
- D límeček stojáček dáme níž / **to** je moc vysoko / **tady nahoře** je menší / vy máte [we'll put the stand-up collar lower / **that's** too high / **up here** it is smaller / you have]
- C krátkej krk [a short neck]
- D krátký krk / no tak asi **takle** ho nechám [a short neck / okay maybe I'll leave it **like that**]
- C jo dobrý dobrý **to** bude [okay, **that** will be okay]
- D hm a dýlka? **to** je dlouhý ne? **to** zkrátíme asi [hmm and the length? **that's** long, isn't it? we could shorten **that**]
- C jak myslíte / nó **takle** to je / ano / ani dlouhý ani krátký [whatever you think / yes, **that way** it is / yes / neither long nor short]
- D no vy máte sukni asi **takle** / **takle** ne? [well, you have a skirt **like that** perhaps / **like that**, no?]
- C nó no no [yes, yes, yes]
- D **tý** dýlky? tak **todle** dáme níž / **to** bude lepší níž [**this** length? so we'll take **this** down / **that** will be better lower]
- C jasně jasně [sure, sure]

In this dialogue which accompanies the activity (action) performed jointly by both participants, the dressmaker is actually progressively piecing together a description for the customer of the cut-out clothes, using a couple of basic noun “terms” (*šíře* [width], *dýlka* [length], *záda* [back], *sukně* [skirt], *límeček stojáček* [stand-up collar]), though the most frequently used terms here are deictic, anaphoric, demonstrative and pseudo-demonstrative

pronouns or pronominal adverbs (*to, todle, takle, tady nahoře*), which accompany the gestures and movements concerned. I am in no way being innovative in referring to this situation: as early as 1932, Miloš Weingart wrote with passion on the dialogues he had with his tailor as this good fellow tried out a new suit on the professor; he hardly used any autosemantic words, but only substitute *to, tady, todle, takle*. But Weingart, too, judged that this considerably fragmentary and implicit mode of expression is entirely sufficient in the given situation – on the basis of joint activities, movements and gestures the inferences work perfectly and the dialogue participants understand each other.

2) A conversation between two fifty-odd-year-old former classmates (Ivana and Jarka) about their postsecondary meeting and one of its participants

- I je fakt že sem na ní koukala / každěj nabral / ale vona teda nabrala extra / nepředstavitelně / to je koule / vona se jen valila [it's true I looked at her / everybody had put on weight / but she'd put on extra weight / incredible / she's a ball / she was just rolling around]
- J no vona taky že je menší žejo trošinku / no tedka vona teda nikdy nebyla twigy / ale byla tak jako normálně že jo [well, she's also smaller isn't she a little / well now she was never twiggy / but she was like normal, wasn't she?]
- I vona přišla a já ti na ní koukám / říkám si to snad není možný / né teda kuli tý tlouštce / to sem eště ňák přehlídla protože vona to dost maskuje / měla **takovy** šaty na tom sako černý / **to se tak ňák to** / ale Jarčo já ti na ní koukla ve vobličejí a říkám si to není možný / **to ti todleto ti měla takovy sevrkly ti jako a takle ti to** viselo přes voči / vona byla jak meloun teda ve vobličejí / teď ohromně byla nalíčená [...] a **tedko tady ty** voči a vona ti nemohla ty voči snad ani vovedvřít / jak ti měla ukrutně **taji ty** klapničky **takovy jako** vopuchly / ale tak ta kůže ti jí visela až přes **to** / říkám si no Ivano to si nefandíš ale jak ta zestárla to teda [...] **tedko jo ti taji ten** obličej a **teď tuletý** faldy všechno [she came and there I am looking at her / and I wonder if it's really possible / not just because she was fat / I'd still kind of overlooked that because she rather covers it up / she had **such** clothes on and a black jacket / it

was kinda / but, Jarka, I tell you, I looked her in the face and wondered if it was possible / **I tell you she had this kinda shrivelled like and like this it** hung over her eyes / her face was like a melon / now she was awfully done up [...] and **now here those** eyes and I tell you, she couldn't even open her eyes / the way she had **those here lids all like** puffed up cruelly / but then her skin hung over **this**, I tell you / and I say to myself, well, Ivana, you don't think that much of yourself, but the way she has aged, well now... [...] **now yeah that** face here and **now these here** folds and everything]

Jarka did not take part in the last meeting. Ivana is telling her about it and as part of her narrative she is describing some classmates. The amount of deictic terms, pseudo-demonstrative and indefinite pronouns and pronominal adverbs is clear at first glance, just like in some cases the absence of autosemantic words: **takovy šaty [such clothes]; todleto ti měla takovy secvrkly ti jako a takle ti to [I tell you she had this kinda shrivelled like and like this it hung over her eyes]** viselo přes voči; ta kůže ti jí visela až přes **to** [her skin hung over **this**]... Nevertheless both friends have no problem in understanding each other, the dialogue is lively, the classmates slander with gusto and shameless criticism. This is again facilitated by the essential use of non-verbal devices (gestures and the like), and their usage is actually constitutive for the descriptive sections of the dialogues: Ivana points to the “shrivelled” and “puffed up” parts of her classmate's face on her own face.

3) Conversation between two twenty-something secondary school friends (Zdena, Táňa) about a flat that one of them (Táňa) has visited

- Z já sem úplně na půdní vestavby / mně se tydlety úhly a všechny ty různý / ježiš to se mi strašně líbí [I'm totally into loft conversions / those angles and all those various... / Gosh, I really like that]
- T to je nádhera vid' / normálně maj rohovou vanu v koupelně / a **takovou tu** eště víš kterou / **takhle** nahoře eště **s tim sedacím jako** [it's marvelous, isn't it? / basically they have a corner bath in the bathroom / and one of **those**, you know the ones? / **like that** above but also **with that sitting one like**]
- Z a maj to **s tim kulatým?** [and do they have it **with that round one?**]

T no kulatou / a prostě sedací ještě **takhle** [...] vpravo tam maj kuchyň plus obejvák / ale to maj přepažený **jenom tak takovym tím vysokym** [...] potom **jako** tam maj vstup do malý chodbičky / **jakoby** vlastně nejsou to dveře [...] pak tam maj eště krásný letiště **s takovym tím kulatym** ze strany [yes, the round one / as well as the sitting one basically **like this** [...] to the right there they have a kitchen plus living room / but they **only** have it partitioned **about this high** [...] then **like** there they have an entrance to a little passage / as if there isn't actually a door [...] then they also have a fine double bed **with one of those round ones** from the side]

Táňa is describing a flat to her classmate and implicitness is again manifested in this dialogue by the omission of a number of autosemantic words (e.g. words like *sedátko* [stool], *přepážka/zástěna* [partition], *noční stolek* [bedside table] were not explicitly stated) and the high frequency of substitute expressions, particularly pronominal. However, sample 1) involved direct reference to objects present within the situation (clothes and the customer's body), whereas in sample 2) the slandered classmate was not actually present, but the face of the participant in the conversation served as a substitute for her face. In sample 3) the description of somebody else's flat does not at all involve reference to objects present at the time and the place of the conversation and so only evocative gestural hints can be used to qualify them, e.g. "*kulatý*" [round] and "*vysoký*" [high]; instead of clear non-verbal devices, it is primarily the common knowledge and communicated experience of both friends that comes to the fore and is asserted here. On this basis again inference operates, and there is no problem in supplementing the "literal meaning" (Grice, 1975: sentence meaning) with the "implied meaning" (Grice: "speaker meaning") for total understanding to be achieved. Similarly, when an old lady describes the landscape of her childhood: 4) "no to bylo údolí / to bylo údolí úplně / ta řeka dělala krásný oblouky / **takový** točila **takový** / no bylo to krásný" – [well, it was a valley / it was entirely a valley / the river did fine curves / **like this** it curved **like this**] the word "*meandry*" [meanders], which she does not remember, can easily be supplemented.

Of course, if the dialogue is not an uncommitted conversation among friends, but e.g. a conversation in an institutional environment, then the missing description can sometimes inevitably make understanding more dif-

ficult – e.g. when an old woman calls a fire brigade operator because a frightened neighbour has come running to ask her to phone as there is a fire in her bathroom. The old woman is unable to formulate the description that the fire brigade operator requires, but even here on the basis of his experience, the professional gradually places the required information into the description and understands.

5) F – fire brigade operator, C – caller

- F vo co tam de mi řekněte [tell me what it's about]
 C je to / hoří v bytě [it's / there's a fire in the flat]
 F a co tam hoří v bytě? [and what's on fire in the flat?]
 C no v bytě to hoří / **já nevím** /v koupelně je to / je tam voheň [yes, there's a fire in the flat / **I don't know** / it's in the bathroom / there's a fire there]
 F co tam hoří nevíte? [what's on fire there, don't you know?]
 C **no to já nevím** / hoří tam vošklivě / je tam voheň [**I don't know that** / there's an awful fire there / there's a fire there]
 F no ale co? to nevíte? vy ste tam nebyla? [yes, but what? don't you know? haven't you been there?]
 C no já sem to viděla / dyť tam hoří [well I saw it / it is on fire]
 F a v tý koupelně hoří? a má tam plyn v tý koupelně? [and there's a fire in the bathroom? and is there gas in the bathroom?]

It might be possible to notice some other interesting facts here, e.g. the way that the participants in the dialogue sometimes jointly, by means of dialogical exchanges and mutual reactions “co-produce” the description, e.g. while shopping:

6) C – customer, S – sales assistant

- Z **ňákej** stan pro dva / aby byl s kopulí ale vzádu / **asi** nemáte vite [**some kind of** tent for two / but with the dome at the back / you **probably** don't have one, eh?]
 P **ňákej** / vy chcete **ňákej** malinkej stan [**some kind** / you want **some kind** of little tent]

- Z no **takovej** / no nemusí bejt úplně malej / no ale [well **one like that** / it doesn't have to be totally small / well but...]
- P **takovejdle někej?** [something like that?]

To follow the samples I shall endeavour to at least briefly classify this type of “description” within particular theoretical and methodological contexts. In articles published between 1997 and 1999 (two of which came out in *Slovo a slovesnost*, and another two in *Česká literatura*) Ladislav Nebeský highlights what is **unclear**, invisible or hidden in communication, and in the “blank spaces” in the text. He distinguishes intentional obfuscations and the unintentional lack of clarity in spoken communication, caused e.g. by various background noises. He writes that “communication from the author of an unclear utterance to the addressee is only possible if the addressee shows interest in a clarification of the unclear utterance”, as this becomes “a challenge to find the hidden (even if this hiddenness is sometimes only a mere convention)”. Even then two other conditions must be met for trouble-free communication: 1) the author chooses an unclear utterance, the intended elucidation of which can easily be revealed to the addressee; 2) the addressee expects the author to have made this choice. These conditions regarding the author’s and addressee’s strategy and motivation, as well as their mutual expectations are met in our conversations. No particular “blanks” emerge in them and perhaps we should not speak of “invisible signs”, but we can talk of a potential lack of clarity in view of the high level of indefiniteness and the downplaying of autosemantic words. However, such lacks of clarity do not occur in communicative reality and descriptions are not in any way functionally defective. Nebeský states that “the formation of unclear utterances is a violation of natural language (Czech)”; in our case this is problematic, or we might understand it that way when focusing on the standard of written speech; however, such “unclear utterances” organically belong to Czech as a natural language in its spoken form.

In some of his articles Nebeský refers to the work of Irena Vaňková on silences; it is primarily the chapter on “Silence, inner speech and implicitness” from her 1996 book that is most applicable to our subject (1996: 27nn). This is based on Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky, who writes on the subject of internal speech, that it is elliptical, fragmentary and allusive, and according to Josef Vachek (1983) in these respects our spontaneous spoken utterances are simi-

lar to internal speech. Vygotsky states that when the participants in a conversation have a meeting of minds and the same focus of awareness then the role of speech stimuli is reduced to the minimum, but understanding takes place without problems, so that between people living in close psychological contact, understanding through elliptical speech is more the rule than the exception (Vygotskij 1976: 273–274). If living contexts are shared to a high extent (or even identical) among the participants in communication then “expression by means of hints” and “understanding through guesswork” in situationally and “relationally” based everyday practice is common. Vygotsky quotes Yevgeny Dmitrievich Polivanov that “in fact everything we say requires a listener who knows what it is about”. This was evident, for example, in sample 3). And Vaňková adds that even hermeneutists expect pre-understanding: one always already understands a text (and being) to some extent, when you approach it, because one is always already equipped for it with some experience. Her problem is how far the implicitness, ellipsis and allusoriness that allow for guesswork and eventual understanding can go, i.e. whether they can go as far as silence (to which none of the participants in conversations 1–3 are inclined at all).

Another few words on **implicitness** and **explicitness**: here I must definitely mention a seminal article by Karel Hausenblas (1972) entitled “Explicitness and implicitness in linguistic expression”. Here the author defines explicitness as “literal expression of something”, while he believes that implicit expression is that “from which one understands something that is not expressed literally, but that can be interpreted”. Clearly, we are coming very close here to Grice’s contrast between “literal” and “implied” meaning (“sentence” vs. “speaker” meaning), though apart from Grice we should also mention the context created by other philosophers of language, sociology and ethnomethodology, such as Alfred Schütz, Harold Garfinkel, Erving Goffman, Thomas Luckmann and others, who highlight the (stereo)typification of everyday communication and the conventionalization (sedimentation) of experiential patterns. They state that language is a store of socially valid typifications or “interpretational templates”. Hence in everyday communication we continually move – as in our aforementioned “descriptions” – among typifications, routinizations of linguistic behaviours (enabled by the sedimentation of long-term experience) on the one hand and their specific contextual involvement on the other hand. This is nothing new: it is only

this connection between the specific and experiential contexts that allows for the interpretation of vague indexical terms (e.g. the deictics with which our samples are so replete), and at least relative deindexicalization leading to understanding. (For a summary of these approaches see Auer 1999).

In conclusion let us go back to explicitness / implicitness and Irena Vaňková, who says that silence as a speech phenomenon is at the very extreme pole of **implicitness**, from which a transitory zone of (textual) expression extends with varying degrees of implicitness / explicitness all the way up to (textual) expressions of maximum **explicitness**. I shall present one more sample from an everyday dialogue which is not far from being a monologue: one of the participants (a child) is primarily passive and his competence only allows him to perform quite minimal reactions (signals of comprehension / incomprehension), while the other one (his mother) is very active and produces a maximally explicit description. (Or perhaps an exposition? Evidently here the traditional classifications of “stylistic approaches” – narration, description, exposition etc – are insufficient.) Here the mother is preparing her young son to take part in a relative’s wedding ceremony; with the aid of photographs and great patience she gradually (and repeatedly) clarifies what *wedding announcement*, *wedding guest*, *myrtle*, *train*, *wedding ring* and so forth actually mean.

7) Conversation between a mother (M) and her 3–4-year-old son (S)

- M hele tak **tomuhle se říká svatební oznámení**. to dycky když někdo chystá svatbu tak si nechá udělat takovýhle kartičky: a tam je napsáno kdo s kým bude mít svatbu kdy ta svatba bude a kde bude hm aby to všichni věděli aby tam mohli přijít na tu svatbu. pozor pozor abys to nezmačkal jo? [here, so **this is called the wedding announcement**. whenever somebody is arranging a wedding then he has this kind of little cards made: saying who is going to have a wedding with whom, when and where the wedding is going to happen, hmm so that everybody knows they can go to the wedding, careful, careful not to crumple it, eh?]
- S co to tam je: [what’s that?]
- M **to je myrta. to je taková kytička**: a všichni **svatebčani** (.) **to sou hosti na svatbě**: tu si připnou takhle na šaty. hele až bude mít Ondra s Kájou svatbu tak ty budeš mít taky **takovou myrtu. to je taková kytička**

a hele tady má **špendlík**. vidíš? [**that's myrtle. it's kind of a flower**: and all the wedding guests – the guests at the wedding – they pin it like this to their clothes. here, when Ondra and Kája have their wedding then you are also going to have this myrtle. **it's kind of a flower** and here is a **pin**. see?]

S jo. [yeah]

M **to je kytička s mašličkou a v tý mašličce je špendlík** [.] [...] hele koukni a tudyto: **tomu se říká vlečka**. ty šaty jsou dlouhatánské až na zem a vzadu mají **vlečku**. a tu **vlečku** nese družička [...] [**it's a little flower with a ribbon and there's a pin in the ribbon**. here, look at this. this is called a train. these clothes are so very long they reach down to the ground and have a **train** at the back. and this train is held up by the bridesmaid]

In this case here in this asymmetrical conversation / mother's utterance, we barely note any hint of implicitness: on the contrary the “keywords”, i.e. the weight-bearing autosemantic words (*myrta* [myrtle], *kytička* [flower], *mašlička* [ribbon], *špendlík* [pin], *vlečka* [train], and so forth) are frequently repeated. However, we consider this to be an exceptional case – in everyday communication, symmetrically profiled situations definitely predominate, in which experience shared by partners results in high implicitness. Together with the use of extra-linguistic means, these facilitate the success of those “absent”, “minus”, “allusive”, “indefinite”, implicit descriptions, the evocative and identifying function of which is extensively involved.

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