PROSODIC PROMINENCE OF MODAL VERBS IN NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

The study deals with accentuation (presence or absence of realized lexical stress) of modal verbs in continuous spoken texts. The material was taken from audiobooks where Czech professional actors (8 male + 8 female) read out various narratives produced by renowned authors. A corpus of over 17,000 words was used. The recordings were annotated with special attention to presence or absence of materialized stress (i.e., accent). The chief purpose of the study was to provide descriptive data on modal verbs in connected speech, namely in the genre of narrative monologue. The results showed that modal verbs were deaccented in more than a quarter of their occurrences, but that monosyllabic and polysyllabic verbs behaved differently from each other. The infinitives associated with modal were also inspected. They were much less often unaccented and, important-ly, the influence of monosyllabicity followed a different pattern than in modals. Additionally, information on mutual position of modals and associated infinitives is provided and an observation of negative forms of modals is made. The data can be further used in follow-up research to find out how structural and communicative requirements interact to produce the actual prosodic forms, or how modals in narratives differ from those in other communicative genres.

Keywords: accenting; associated infinitive; modal verbs; modality; nega-tive form; prominence; prosodic backgrounding

1. Introduction

Like in many other languages, the lexical *stress potential* in Czech is preferably materi-alized in the actual use on autosemantic words (nouns, adjectives, full verbs, etc.), whereas synsemantic words (pronouns, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs, etc.) are candidates to remain unaccented or prosodically backgrounded (e.g., Palková, 1994: 282; Volín et al., 2024: 34–36). If not specified otherwise in this study, the term *stress* will refer to a prominence *potential* of the first syllable in Czech lexical items, whereas the term *accent* will refer to actually *materialized* prominence in spoken utterances (see also Volín & Skarnitzl, 2020).

Contrary to the unrefined rule mentioned in the preceding paragraph, a recent study revealed that a considerable number of autosemantic verbs (also termed full verbs) are

not accented in Czech narratives (Volín & Hanžlová, 2024, but *cf.* also Franz et al., 2022 on German). These cases (over 10% of all autosemantic verbs), however, were plausibly explained if information structure was taken into consideration. The concept of *givenness* seemed to be especially useful in justifying the 'deaccenting'. When the semantic content of the verb was fully or partially given by the preceding co-text or factual context, the stress potential of the verb was not exploited by the speaker and the verb remained unaccented.

Unmarked unaccentedness, on the other hand, was typical of auxiliary verbs that served as mere grammatical markers of Czech past or future tense, or of verbal copulas (Volín & Hanžlová, 2024). These facts inspired a question concerning another principal group of verbs: the *modal verbs* or *modals* for short. They are often classified as auxiliary, yet with some reservations since they typically signify important concepts of *ability*, *obligation*, *possibility/probability* or *permission* (e.g., Grepl & Karlík, 1986; Klinge, 1993; Hoye, 2005). These subjective evaluations of the speakers' views on reality seem to be less predictable and more informative than semantic contents of typical auxiliaries. The prosodic prominence of modal verbs is, therefore, a chief concern in this study. We would like to find out, whether the extent of (un)accentedness in modal verbs is more like that of auxiliary verbs or that of full verbs, or whether it is similar to neither of the two types.

There is no consensus in the exact delimitation of the set of modal verbs even within one language, let alone across languages, even if scholars generally agree on what modality is (see, e.g., Svoboda, 1967; Benešová, 1973; van der Auwera & Plungian, 1998; Palmer, 2001; Hengeveld, 2004; Nauze, 2008). It follows that certain modal verbs are recognized as such even by authors who otherwise disagree with each other in various conceptual standpoints. Disagreements usually involve classification schemes. Typically, there is a small set of 'core' modal verbs like *must* (*muset* in Czech), *may* (*smět* in Cz.), *can* (*moct* or *umět* in Cz.), and an extended set in which verbs of similar meanings but different grammatical or semantic properties are included. Our present study has no ambition to contribute to the debate on what exactly modal verbs are. We use the guidance of Karlík and Šimík (2017) and, for interested parties, we present all the verbs included in our analyses in the Appendix at the end of this study. Rather, our concern is accentuation of the modal verbs and a few related questions, like that of infinitives associated with modals in an utterance (see below).

As our study is exploratory and not confirmatory, we stipulate no hypotheses. Instead, seven research questions are asked. These are listed below and the presentation of the results in this paper will refer to them as they are numbered here.

Research Questions

RQ1: How often is the modal verb in continuous narratives accented/unaccented?
RQ2: What is the ratio of monosyllabic modal verbs in the accented and unaccented set?
RQ3: What is the ratio of accented and unaccented infinitives associated with the modals?
RQ4: Does the monosyllabicity in associated infinitives display similar pattern as in modals?
RQ5: How often is the modal verb followed immediately by the associated infinitive?
RQ6: What is the accentuation pattern if the modal verb immediately precedes the infinitive?
RQ7: Do negative forms of modals display similar patterns as the positive forms?

Monosyllabicity in RQ2 and RQ4 is of interest because of the Stress Clash Rule, discussed sometimes as the Stress-Class Resolution or Rhythm Rule (e.g., Geigerich, 1992: 195; Hualde, 2010; Féry, 2017: 215; Lunden, 2019: 77; for Czech see Volín & Skarnitzl, 2018: 66). This rule operates in Czech and constrains occurrences of two accented syllables neighbouring each other (with some exceptions). It follows that monosyllabic words in phrase-internal position need specific treatment to avoid stress clash.

In sum, the purpose of this exploratory 'mapping' is to provide a clearer picture of the prosodic situation regarding modal verbs should any specialized future research necessitate this elementary information (see also Section 4 – Discussion).

2. Method

2.1 Material

Our material represents the genre of narratives read out to audiences. Even though the target listeners were not facing the speaker at the time of the reading, the recordings represent speech with clear communicative objectives. They were produced in studios manufacturing audiobooks for commercial purposes. The speakers were theatre or film actors by profession with established reputation for their skills. Likewise, the texts of the narratives were written by renowned authors. Given the purpose of the recordings, great care can be presumed in the production of the narratives (for instance, a presence of a director, follow-up checking, perhaps even pre-production consultations). We, therefore, believe that our material represents ecologically valid speech performances of the given genre.

As to the extent of the sample, there were 16 speakers (8 male + 8 female), and we required a stretch of continuous spoken text of at least 1,000 words per speaker. That amounts to approximately 140 utterances or 240 prosodic phrases per speaker. The speakers were of various ages ranging from about 30 to 65 years of age. Likewise, the time of recording spans about fifty years, from the 1970s. Therefore, we can generally speak of adult professional speakers of current Czech.

2.2 Sample annotation

Annotation of the sound recordings was carried out in Praat (Boersma & Weenink, 2022). It was all done in a blind fashion as a general part of corpus construction project at the Institute of Phonetics in Prague. It follows that the annotators did not know any hypotheses concerning the later exploitation of the corpus. Careful manual annotations (preceded by some semiautomatic procedures) were done at the level of phones, accent-groups, prosodic phrases and utterances. Within accent-groups (i.e., actually materialized stress-groups) each syllable was marked as accented or unaccented. All annotations were done by trained phoneticians with senior experts always checking the whole process. It should be noted that in the case of accent status identification, two senior experts reached mutual agreement of 97.5%. The rest (2.5% of the cases) was resolved through a debate over the repeated listening to audio recordings. Modal verbs were identified by the author of this study with the guidance of Karlík & Šimík, 2017.

3. Results

The sample provided 236 modal verbs. Table 3.1 provides their overview: central meanings with the number of occurrences in the sample. (A complete list of the Czech verbs identified in the spoken text here can be found in the Appendix at the end of this article.) The verb *can* is divided into two sets according to the meaning because apart from the central meaning of probability or permission, the Czech language has the verb *umět* which is very often translated by the English *can*. This division, however, was performed just for this introductory overview. It is not utilized in the analyses of prominence since it would open a complex area of research that would reach beyond the scope of this paper.

Table 3.1 English equivalents of modal verbs found in the sample with the numbers of their occurrences.

Verb	*n*
must	82
can (permission)	54
can (ability)	46
want	43
may	6
have sth. done	5

The answer to RQ1 (i.e., *how often is the modal verb accented*) is displayed in Figure 1. Almost a third (29.2%) of the modal verbs found in our sample were realized without an accent. That is clearly different from what previous research found in autosemantic verbs on the one hand, and auxiliary verbs on the other hand.
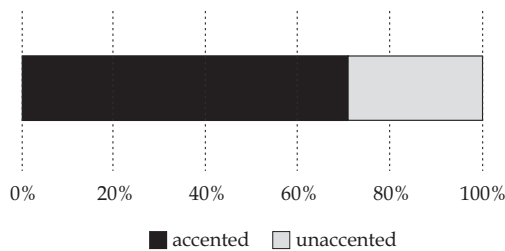

Figure 1 Visualization of the ratio of accented (black colour) and unaccented (grey colour) modal verbs in the sample of narratives.

To see how rhythmic and communicative requirements interact, it is important to examine the ratio of monosyllabic verbs in the accented and unaccented sets. This is because Stress-Clash Rule in Czech constrains accentuation of monosyllables in phrase-internal positions (Volín & Skarnitzl, 2018: 66). Figure 2 displays the ratios, which in effect provides the answer to RQ2 (i.e., *occurrence of monosyllabic modals in the accented and unaccented set*).
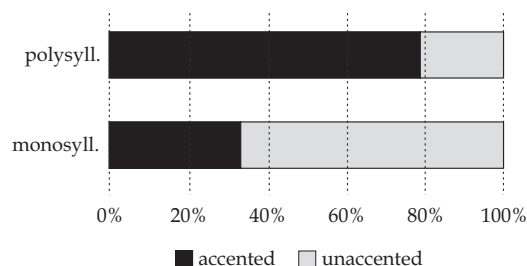
Figure 2 The ratios of accented (black colour) and unaccented (grey colour) modal verbs in the set of polysyllabic verbs (top bar) and monosyllables (bottom bar).

The difference in the ratios was established as statistically significant: $\chi^2 (1) = 34.6$; $p < 0.001$, hence more or less holding in other samples of narratives outside the current one. Apparently, the monosyllabic status strongly increases the probability of 'deaccenting'. The fact that two thirds (66.7%) of monosyllables are unaccented, whereas only 21.1% of polysyllables were produced without an accent suggests that the semantic importance and informational status of the modal verbs are not that powerful – rhythmic considerations, namely the SCR (Stress-Clash Rule), exert their influence, too.

One of the defining features of modal verbs is their obligatory link to infinitives of other verbs whose semantic scope is affected by the modals. The result in the previous paragraph leads to a related question – that of *accentedness in associated infinitives* (RQ3). Although we found 236 modal verbs, there were only 227 associated infinitives. In nine instances, the infinitive was elided as it was obvious from the co-text and did not have to be repeated. Arguably, such elisions could be interpreted as ultimate backgrounding and, therefore, added to the count of unaccented (hence backgrounded) infinitives. However, to present descriptive data in clearer fashion, the nine infinitive elisions are held apart and excluded from the following graphs.

Figure 3 visualizes the ratio of accented to unaccented infinitives (associated with the modal verbs). There were 35 (15.4%) unaccented and 192 (84.6%) accented infinitives. Given that modal verbs merely adjust their infinitives, this result is not surprising. Also, it corresponds with what Volín and Hanžlová (2024) found out about autosemantic verbs – majority of them were accented with a very similar ratio.
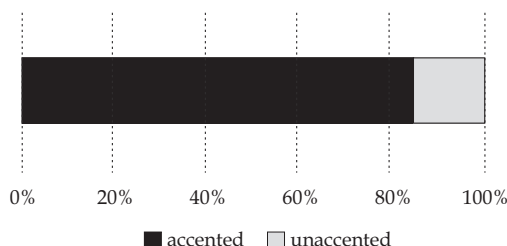

Figure 3 The ratio of accented (in black) and unaccented (in grey) infinitives associated modal verbs.

What needs to be asked now, is the ratio of unaccented to accented monosyllables and polysyllables in the infinitive set, i.e., a question parallel to RQ2 (and Figure 2 which displays the answer to it). In the Introduction, the question of unaccented monosyllables and polysyllables in infinitives is labelled RQ4. Figure 4 shows that monosyllabicity plays a role: only 5% of polysyllabic infinitives were produced without an accent. The difference in accentedness between monosyllabic and polysyllabic infinitives is statistically significant: χ^2 (1) = 58.2; $p < 0.001$.
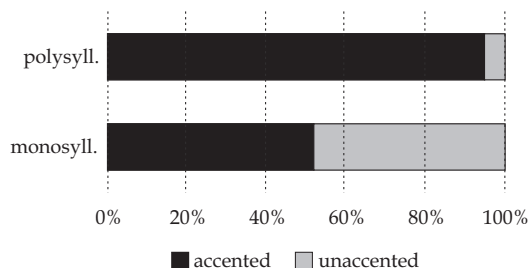

Figure 4 The ratios of accented (in black) and unaccented (in grey) infinitives in polysyllabic (top bar) and monosyllabic (bottom bar) forms.

Figures 2 and 4 are worth comparing: in the case of monosyllabic modals, the ratio of unaccented to accented items is 2 : 1, whereas in monosyllabic infinitives it is roughly 1 : 1. In polysyllabic modals, the ratio of unaccented cases to accented items is about 1 : 4, whereas in infinitives it is merely 1 : 19. Entering the actual counts (the outcomes of RQ2 and RQ4) into a statistical significance test yields the following result: χ^2 (7) = 25.6; $p < 0.001$. Inspection of the individual test criterion components shows that the main contributor to the significance is the behaviour of unaccented polysyllables in modals and infinitives.

Research questions 5 and 6 ask about mutual positions of modal verbs and infinitives and their stress pattern. A pictorial answer to RQ5 is offered in Figure 5. There were 149 (66.2%) infinitives immediately following their modal verb, and 76 (33.8%) infinitives with one or more words intervening. In other words, about two thirds of modal verbs are immediately followed by their associated infinitive in Czech narratives.
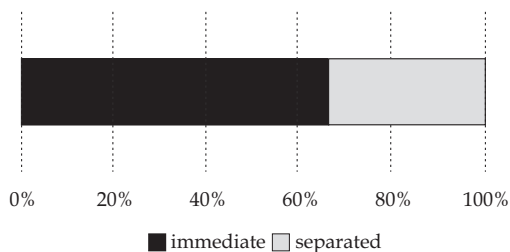

Figure 5 The ratio of infinitives immediately after modals (in black) to infinitives separated from their modals with one or more words (in grey).

The nine cases of infinitive elisions are not included and neither are two cases of infinitives preceding the modal. However, these two exceptional pre-positioned cases should

perhaps be presented here: exceptions often point to interesting aspects of the problem. Here, the relevance is guaranteed by a clear link to prominence/backgrounding issues and information structure considerations. The first wording is as follows:

(1)　　*Spát se nám nechtělo ani trochu.*　　　*To sleep we didn't want a least bit.*

The infinitive here is in the initial position because it represents the theme of the utterance. It is unambiguously contextually bound (Daneš, 1979). The co-text before this utterance describes in some detail an evening situation and location that is clearly set for sleeping. The actors (a group of children) are getting ready to sleep. Moreover, the verb *sleep* itself is actually uttered 12 words beforehand. The phrase '*didn't want a least bit*' is apparently the rheme of the utterance and its position after the theme is typical of Czech information structure.

The second case is somehow different:

(2)　　*…, což jsem ovšem tušit nemohl*　　　*…, which I actually suspect could not*

The infinitive *tušit* (*to suspect*) is not implicated by the co-text and does not represent the theme (the theme comprises the subject *I* referred to by the morphemic *-em* of *jsem*, and a fact referred to by the relative pronoun *což*). However, the post-positioning of the modal verb together with the nuclear accent creates extra strong emphasis on the expressed ability, or in this case, inability of the narrator. That gives the utterance more affective power.

Be that as it may, we still have 225 modal verbs with their associated infinitive in post-position, of which 149 are immediately followed by their infinitive. RQ6 asks about the *accentuation patterns* in these 149 configurations. The answer is visualized in Figure 6.
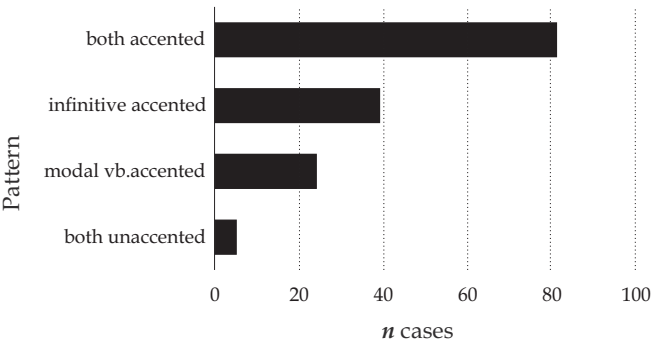

Figure 6 Patterns of accentuation in modals followed immediately by the infinitive.

The results resonate with the answers to previous RQs, but provide clearer numerical detail. In majority of the cases there, accents are on both the modal verb and the associated infinitive ($n = 81$, that is 54.4%). On the other hand, unaccenting of both elements occurred only five times (3.4%). If one of the verbs was unaccented, then it was the modal more often (second column from the top in Fig. 6).

Just to complete the description of this subject matter, we would like to add some information on the words separating the modal verb and the associated infinitive (per-

haps as a cue for future experimental design or cross-genre comparisons, etc.). As stated above, there were 76 cases of modal verbs followed by one or more other words before their associated infinitive. Table 3.2 shows how many times certain counts of intervening words occurred in the sample.

Table 3.2 Counts of words intervening between modals and associated infinitives in the corpus (1st line) and numbers of their respective occurrence in the sample (2nd line).

n intervening wds.	1	2	3	4	5	6
n times in the sample	34	19	12	4	6	1

Mostly, there was just one word between the modal and infinitive (*n* = 34), but there was also an unusual case of six intervening words. It is clear from (3) that this case involved an intervening clause (the modal and infinitive are underlined).

(3) *co lze bez obav, že bychom se mýlili, považovat za jedno z nejohavnějších období…*
    what can be without fear that we would be mistaken denounced as one of the foulest periods…

As to syntactic or semantic functions of the intervening words, they were mostly adverbials (37 times), objects (10 times), or combinations of adverbial + object (5 times). Interestingly, a syntactic subject also occurred in the position between modal and its associated infinitive, but this happened only three times. The rest were particles, reflexive pronouns and various mixtures of synsemantics.

The final research question to be answered (RQ7) focuses on negative forms, which in Czech are constructed with the prefix *ne-* (e.g., *mohl = could × nemohl = could not*). Although it is possible to have a negative infinitive after a modal, or even simultaneous negation on both modal and infinitive, our sample did not contain any of such cases. There were only negative modal verbs with positive infinitives, and we found 54 of them. Only four of these were unaccented, which leaves 50 (92.6%) negative modals accented. This prevalence is commented on below, in the Discussion.

4. Discussion

More than two thirds of the modal verbs in the sample were accented, while about 30% were unaccented. That clearly differs from the situation both in autosemantic (full) verbs and in auxiliary verbs reported in Volín & Hanžlová (2024). However, the answer to RQ2 (*number of monosyllabic forms in accented and unaccented sets*) suggests that the communicative importance of modal verbs is not the singular force to determine their prominence, and that rhythmic (structural) factors exert quite a strong influence on the actual prosodic form. The need to avoid stress clash contributes to the fact that the monosyllabic forms of modal verbs remain unaccented much more often than the polysyllabic forms.

The examination of accentuation of infinitives associated with modals (RQ3) showed that the infinitives are prosodically backgrounded in only about 15% of the cases. That is just a half of the cases compared with the modals. This naturally leads to the question

of monosyllabicity, through which speech rhythm (more specifically the Stress-Clash Rule) manifests its power, and a subsequent comparison of the ratios of unaccented to accented cases in modals and in associated infinitives (RQ4). Monosyllabic modal verbs were found to be unaccented in the ratio of 2 : 1, monosyllabic infinitives only in the ratio of 1 : 1. When addressing the question of factors that cause the difference, one could hardly argue that modal verbs are more predictable or communicatively less important than their infinitives. Modals express very important subjective stances of the speakers to the pieces of reality that are being thematized. Therefore, we suggest that thanks to their high frequency of occurrence in speech, modal verbs are relatively easy to recognize and speakers intuitively save energy on them whenever the situation allows for it.

RQs 5 and 6 (*mutual position and accentuation pattern of modals and their infinitives*) also offer inspiration for further research, for instance, in the area of word order. In roughly a third of the cases, there was one or more words intervening between the modal and the associated infinitive. It would be interesting to know how such cases contribute to cerebral processing costs or, on the other hand, to the naturalness of the wording used. A perceptual experiment with pairs of utterances differing only in the distance between the modal and its infinitive would be useful, especially if realistic contexts of the utterances were involved.

RQ7 directed our attention to the modals in negative forms. Those were found hardly ever unaccented (only in 7.4% of the cases). There are two factors to consider when interpreting such finding. First of all, the negative prefix *ne-* makes the word form one syllable longer and it is a well-known fact that the increasing number of syllables in the word raises the probability of the accented spoken form (Volín & Skarnitzl, 2020). Second, the negative has a special semantic (or rather pragmatic) meaning – we could argue that positive forms are unmarked, while the negative ones are marked. Such pragmatic markedness could easily attract greater prosodic prominence.

There are many future tasks that stem from the current study. Importantly, there is the need to look into a finer classification of modal verbs (like, e.g., de la Rosa & Romero, 2021). For instance, it is possible that the *deontic* use of modals interacts with prosodic forms somehow differently from the *epistemic* use. Certain challenge in this area, though, would be the plethora of classification schemes offered by various scholars (see, e.g., the references in the fourth paragraph of Introduction). Nevertheless, van der Auwera and Plungian's classification (1998) seems suitable for Czech, and projects like these could actually test their suitability.

One line of follow-up projects should focus on cross-language or cross-genre comparisons. It is suggested that modality as such is a universal phenomenon, only expressed differently in different languages (Palmer, 2001; Nauze, 2008). That would extend the research to modal particles, modal adjectives, etc. One the other hand, even if we stick to modal verbs, various speech communication genres are very much likely to produce quite disparate patterns of modality expression. To go into further detail, one might be interested in sound change and see if older speakers treat modals differently from younger speakers or if there is any difference between recordings made, let us say fifty years ago and recently. That would naturally require a sample of audiobooks collected with attention to appropriate criteria.

Last but not least, the perceptual consequences of reversed accenting or unaccenting should be investigated. Those relate quite closely to the questions of effectiveness

in speech communication, and current behavioural or neuroimaging procedures could provide valuable findings if based on realistic speech material.

We hope that our study will be appreciated in the above-mentioned instances.

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APPENDIX

List of verbs that were analyzed as modal in the current study together with the number of occurrences in the sample (cf. Table 3.1 above).

General denotation	Verbs	total
obligation	muset (48), mít (34)	82
possibility	moct (50), jít/lze (3), dát se (1)	54
ability	moct (26) umět (12), dovést (5), dokázat (3)	46
permission	smět (6)	6
intention	chtít (36), snažit se (3), mínit (2), chystat (1), hodlat (1)	43
assigned obligation	nechat (3), dát (si) (2)	5

RESUMÉ

Tato studie se věnuje akcentování (realizaci přízvukového potenciálu) modálních sloves ve spojité řeči. Materiál pochází z audioknih, v nichž profesionální čeští herci (8 žen + 8 mužů) posloužili jako mluvčí, když četli vyprávění různých zavedených autorů. Zkoumaný vzorek obsahoval přes 17 000 slov, vždy nejméně 1 000 slov na mluvčího. Zvláštní pozornost při anotaci zvukových souborů byla věnována přítomnosti či absenci realizovaného slovního přízvuku (akcentu). Hlavním cílem této exploratorní studie je poskytnout referenční údaje týkající se modálních sloves v žánru narativního monologu. Výsledky ukazují, že modální slovesa se ve více než čtvrtině svých výskytů objevují bez realizovaného přízvuku, tedy neakcentovaná. Jednoslabičné formy se však v tomto ohledu chovají jinak než formy víceslabičné. Prošetřili jsme také infinitivy asociované s modálními slovesy. U nich docházelo k neakcentování (prozodickému upozadění) méně často a také chování monosylab probíhalo podle jiného vzorce. Studie dále poskytuje údaje o vzájemné pozici modálního slovesa a asociovaného infinitivu, a taktéž o záporných formách modálních sloves. Získané výsledky by měly být využity v následném výzkumu, například ohledně podílu komunikativních a formálních požadavků při prozodické strukturaci promluv nebo při zkoumání rozdílů mezi různými komunikativními žánry.

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