THE WORDS ARE FALLING: THE SYNTAGMATIC COMBINATION OF THE LEXEMES *SLOVO* 'WORD' AND *PADNOUT/PADAT* 'TO (BE) FALL(ING)' AS A BUILDING BLOCK OF OTHER STEREOTYPED EXPRESSIONS AND PHRASEMES

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Abstract: This study examines the syntagmtic combination of the lexemes *slovo* 'word' and *padnout/padat* 'to (be) fall(ing)' in contemporary Czech, focusing on how this structure functions as a building block for various multiword expressions and phrasemes. Based on data from the Czech National Corpus (Syn v13), the research analyses the syntactic and lexical development of this syntagm and its semantic functions in different contexts. The findings reveal that this combination appears in several distinct multiword expressions with varying degrees of stability and idiomaticity, rather than representing modifications of a single phraseme. While some expressions serve as verba dicendi that can be freely developed syntactically and lexically, others form the nucleus of established phrasemes, most notably the biblical expression *slova padla na úrodnou půdu* 'words fell on fertile soil'. The study demonstrates significant differences in the usage patterns of perfective versus imperfective verb forms, and singular versus plural forms of the noun, which correlate with specific phraseological meanings and contexts.

Keywords: multiword expression, phraseme, journalistic style, language corpora

1   INTRODUCTION

The language or style of the mass media, or in the classical concept of functional stylistics, journalistic style, is characterized by a high frequency of automatism, i.e. using established stereotyped expressions or clichés. At the same time, media texts are also the domain of the opposite phenomenon, namely the de-automatization of expression (Havránek 1932, pp. 52–60), which is achieved, among other things, by variations of stereotyped expressions and phrasemes,[1] or by using phrasemes that are unexpected in the given context. In the previous study (Mrázková 2025), I examined

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[1] Čermák (2007, p. 82) distinguishes between phrasemes and idioms on the one hand and stereotypical expressions on the other. He considers the distinctive feature of phraseology to be an anomaly, consisting in the impossibility of paradigmatic substitution of one component by another.

the use of the stereotyped multiword expression *ostrá slova padají* 'sharp words are falling' and its near-synonymous (in media contexts) lexical variants with adjectives *silný* 'strong' and *tvrdý* 'hard', comparing traditional journalism and new online media. The research on these multiword expressions revealed, among others, that the syntagm formed by the lexeme *slovo* 'word' as subject and the verb *padat* (to be falling, imperfective) as predicate is part of other multiword expressions. Some of these can be understood as amplifications or modifications of the multiword expression *ostrá slova padají* 'harp words are falling', but some cannot; their meaning and use are different. The aim of the present study, based on a corpus of mostly media texts, is to find out how the syntagm containing the subject *slovo* 'word' and the predicate *padnout* (to fall, perfective) or *padat* (to be falling, imperfective) is complemented and developed both syntactically and lexically, and what is the meaning and use of the multiword expressions formed in this way.

2   ANALYSIS

2.1   Data

The analysis is based on the corpus Syn version 13 (hereafter Syn v13), which, with its 6.4 billion positions, is currently the largest corpus of the Czech National Corpus. Syn v13 is a referential corpus, not a representative one, as it consists of about 80% journalism. The remaining 20% is specialist literature and fiction. Although I am primarily interested in the use of stereotypical multiword expressions in media texts, I have not created a sub-corpus of only media texts to exclude other genres. This is because fiction can provide instances of usage that are atypical (e.g. creative variations of a phraseme), and thus represent a certain contrast to the prevailing media usage.

I have searched in Syn v13 corpus for the co-occurrence of the lemmas *slovo* 'word' and *padnout* 'to fall', respectively *slovo* and *padat* 'to be falling' in the context of two positions. That is, evidence was sought for the use of the verbs in the present tense, the preterite, the future and the infinitive, in different word order, the noun *slovo* could have been in singular or plural and in either case. This search was supplemented with queries combining co-occurrence of lemmas with the grammatical category of number to show the frequency of the conjunction of the searched verbs with the noun in singular or plural. The concordances found that did not match the syntagm in which *slovo* is the subject and *padnout* or *padat* is its predicate were removed manually.

2.2   The syntagm *slovo* 'word' + *padnout/padat* 'fall/be falling' as verbum dicendi

In utterances like *jelikož byl dotyčný kuřák, okamžitě padlo slovo „rakovina"* 'since the person in question was a smoker, the word "cancer" immediately has fallen' or *padají už i slova o tom, kdo koho vlastně živí* 'even words about who

actually feeds whom are falling', the syntagm formed by the noun *slovo* as subject and the verb *padnout/padat* as predicate works as a verbum dicendi. However, it would probably be more accurate to speak of a metalinguistic or metacommunicative expression, as it does not meet the definition of verbum dicendi as formulated by Daneš (1999). According to this definition, verbum dicendi should be "an action verb whose agent participant (the one who in a sentence with an active verb finite will be in the position of the subject) is the agent of the action that consists in the use of language" (Daneš 1999, p. 105), which is not the case here. To avoid unnecessary complications, however, I will continue to refer to it as verbum dicendi.

As multiword expression, "*slovo + padnout/padat*" is a lexicalized metaphor whose metaphorical nature is no longer perceived in language. It is one form of ontological metaphor in which "message […] (i.e. what is said)" is conceived as a "thing" (Vaňková 2007, p. 147) and can be treated as such.

Phrases like "the word has fallen" or "words were falling" hide the speaker, conceptualizing speech in a depersonalized way, as a process separate from the producer. But instances such as *padala slova, pochodovaly emoce* 'words were falling, emotions were marching' or *slovo padlo a musí za ním stát* 'the word has fallen and he must stand behind it' are not very common. Unlike the common verba dicendi, "*slovo + padnout/padat*" is not much used on its own, without further syntactic and lexical development. The sentence is usually completed by identifying the speaker, the content of the speech (by quotation or paraphrase), or the "words" are characterized by attributes that indicate the content of the speech. In the case of 'words were falling, emotions were marching', the nature of the speech and, in part, the content are inferred from the context, in the latter case, 'the word has fallen' means 'a promise has been made', so it is a different verbum dicendi than above.

Not all uses of the syntagm are verba dicendi, among others because the verb *padnout* has also other meanings than 'to fall', e.g. "to fit" as in *Každé slovo musí padnout, aby se neporušil rytmus* 'Every word has to fit so as not to break the rhythm'. Individual multiword expressions containing the syntagm "*slovo + padnout/padat*" also differ in whether they prefer the perfective or imperfective verb and whether the noun is more often in the singular or plural form, as shown by the results of the corpus search presented below.

2.3   Perfective vs. imperfective, singular vs. plural

The absolute frequency of the syntagm "*slovo + padnout*" (with perfective verb) in the Syn v13 corpus in context of two positions is 7,932, its relative frequency being 1.24 i.p.m. By contrast, the syntagm "*slovo + padat*" (with imperfective verb), also within a context of two positions, has an absolute frequency of 3,888, which equates to a relative frequency of 0.61 i.p.m. This more or less corresponds to the proportional representation of each verb: 95 i.p.m. for the perfective *padnout* 'to fall' and 38.74 i.p.m. for the imperfective *padat* 'to be falling'. As a predicate of the

subject *slovo*, the imperfective *padat* is slightly more frequent (33% of total usage) compared to its overall frequency (28% of total usage).

Fig. 1 shows the frequency of combinations of the perfective and imperfective verbs with the singular and plural, respectively. Of these combinations, the imperfective verb with the singular noun has the lowest frequency, 0.01 i.p.m., and accounts for 0.8% of all uses of the syntagm "*slovo + padnout/padat*". In contrast, the perfective verb *padnout* with the singular of *slovo* is the most frequent, with a relative frequency of 0.95 i.p.m. and a 54.6% share of the usage of all the variants of the syntagm. The combination of the imperfective verb *padat* and the plural noun *slova* has a frequency of 0.51 i.p.m. in Syn v13 and accounts for 31% of the usage of all variants, while the frequency of the perfective verb and its subject in plural is about half as low, exactly 0.27 i.p.m. and accounts for 15.4% of the usage of all variants of the given syntagm.
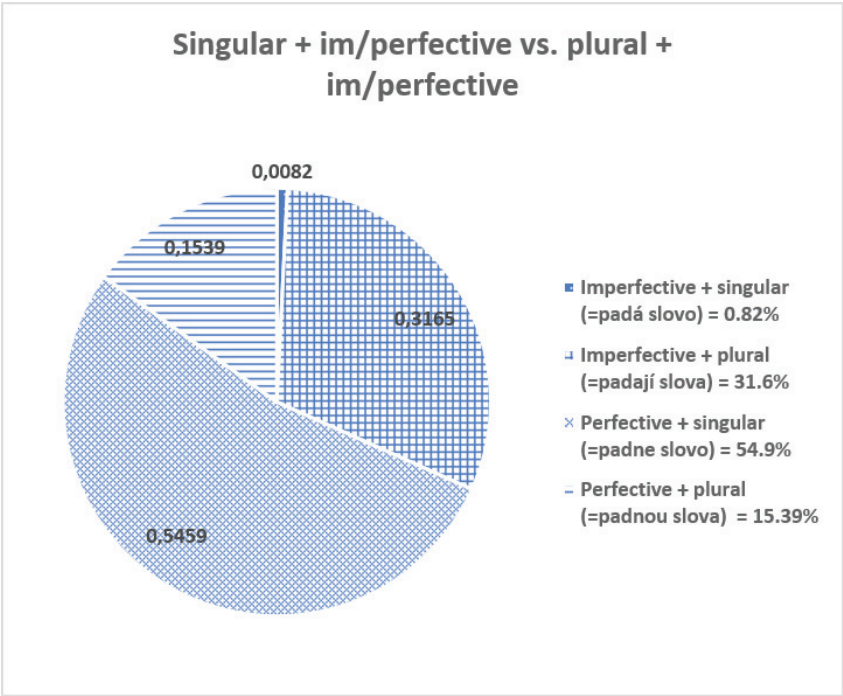

Fig. 1. Frequency of singular + im/perfective vs. plural + im/perfective

The reasons for the above-mentioned differences in the frequency of individual combinations lie in the different meanings of perfective and imperfective verbs, and thus in their different involvement in multiword expressions and phrasemes. Below I will try to show the most significant cases of these differences in usage.

2.4 Reported speech

The results of the corpus search confirm that the syntagm formed by the subject *slovo* 'word' and the predicate *padnout/padat* 'to (be) fall(ing)' in both the perfective and imperfective variants is overwhelmingly used as a verbum dicendi, i.e. to quote or report someone's speech. The perfective and imperfective verbs differ, however, in the ways in which a speech is usually reported. The perfective verb *padnout* is most often used to report on a speech that did not take place, serving as a variant of *o tom nepadlo ani/jediné slovo* 'not a single/no one word was spoken about'. This usage (Ex. 1) accounts for almost half of all occurrences of the syntagm *slovo + padnout*, i.e. with the perfective verb (see Fig. 2). In contrast, analogous evidence of negative constructions with the imperfective such as in Ex. 2 is a bare minimum; in the Syn v13 there are 15 such instances in total which, given the size of the corpus, means a relative frequency of zero.

(1) *O presumpci neviny nepadne ani* slovo.
 'No one word falls of the presumption of innocence'.

(2) *O tom, že by mohly mít nějaké problémy také banky, nepadá ani slovo.*
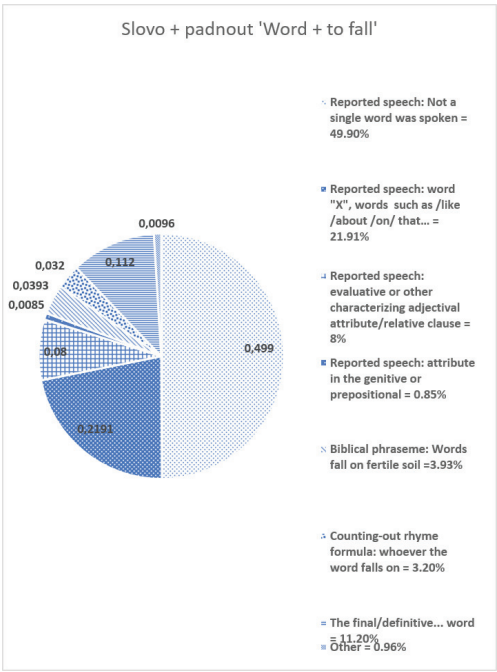 'Not a word is falling about the fact that banks might have some problems too'.

Fig. 2. Frequency of individual types of use of "*slovo + padnout*" 'word(s) + to fall'

Positive constructions with a singular subject and an imperfective verb, expressing the repeated use of a single word such as in Ex. 3, are slightly more frequent; the overall frequency of both positive and negative constructions of the imperfective with its subject in singular is 0.01 i.p.m. Quotation of a specific word, words or sentences, sometimes in quotation marks (Ex. 4) or using the conjunction *jako* 'as', and indirect quotations, i.e. in a dependent clause with the conjunctions *že* 'that' (Ex. 5), *aby* 'to', *jestli/zda* 'if/whether', etc. belong to the most frequent uses of the syntagm *slovo + padat* as a verbum dicendi. The frequent thematizations of speech content using the preposition *o* 'about', such as in the expression 'word(s) fall(s) about' (Ex. 6), are also included in this category. This group accounts for almost 22% of *slovo + padnout* (perfective verb) usage and 38% of *slovo + padat* (imperfective verb) usage. Thus, imperfective verb is relatively almost twice as frequent for this type of speech reproduction, although the absolute number of combinations with the perfective is slightly more prevalent (1 737 perfectives vs. 1 491 imperfectives).

(3) *Z úst jedněch i druhých padá nejčastěji slovo "voliči".*
     'The word 'voters' is falling most often from the mouths of both.'

(4) *Přesně padala ta slova* "*Proč podporovat soukromou akci?*"
     'The exact words were falling "Why support a private event?"'

(5) *Přitom loni po velkém zátahu padala slova, že drogová scéna v kraji dostala velkou ránu.*
     'Yet last year, after the big bust, the words were falling that the drug scene in the region had taken a big hit.'

(6) *Mezi funkcionáři občas padnou slova o koupení zápasu* […]
     'Words about buying the game occasionally fall amongst the officials […]'

Likewise, when the subject *slovo* is complemented by evaluative or other specific attributes—either adjectives in grammatical agreement with the subject or substantives in the genitive or prepositional case—it can also be regarded as a form of reported speech or a report on speech. Attributes such as *ostrý* 'sharp', *sprostý* 'vulgar', *velký* 'big', etc., or genitive constructions *slova díků* 'words of thanks' or *slova chvály i opovržení* 'words of praise and words of scorn', give a more definite or vague information about what was said. The same is true of relative clauses complementing the subject *slovo.* In total, this group presents 53% of uses with the imperfective (see Fig. 3).

A comparison of the frequencies of collocations with the adjectival attribute *ostrý* 'sharp' shows the clear predominance of the imperfective, even in terms of absolute numbers. While the combination of the syntagm *ostrý + slovo* 'sharp + word' with the

imperfective has 742 occurrences in Syn v13 (Ex. 8), which is 19% of all uses of the imperfective in syntagm *slovo + padat*, there are only 164 combinations with the perfective (Ex. 7), which corresponds to 2% of the total use of this syntagm with the perfective verb *padnout*.

(7) *Když se zkouší, tak samozřejmě padnou ostřejší slova, jsme v časovém presu* [...]
‘When you're rehearsing, of course the sharper words fall, we are in a time crunch […]'

(8) *Na adresu představitelů města padala ostrá slova.*
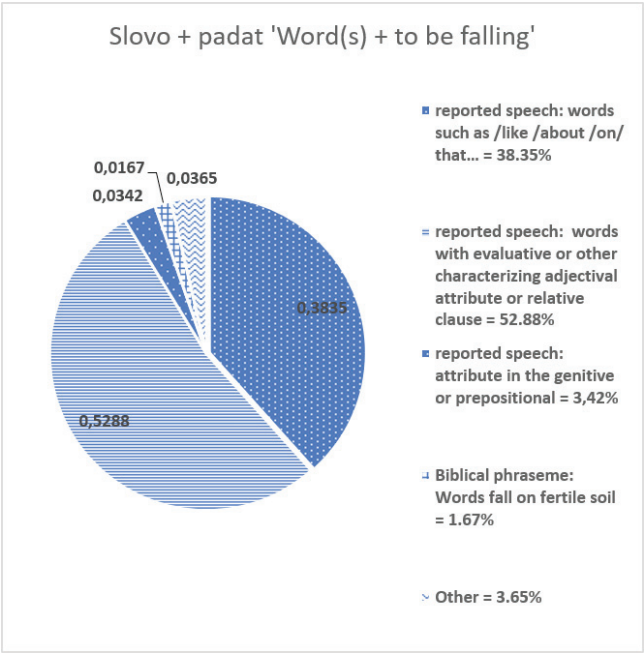‘Sharp words were falling down on the town officials.'

Fig. 3. Frequency of individual types of use of "*slovo+ padat*" ‘word + to be falling'

2.5 "Words fell on fertile soil"

The syntagm *slovo + padat* is also part of larger established multiword expressions, which refer to speech or talk as well, but it is not a mere development of the above verba dicendi but a separate phraseme. It is especially the biblical phraseme (*nějaká/něčí*) *slova padla na úrodnou půdu* ‘(some/someone's) words fell on fertile soil' and its various modifications and variants. The phraseme is related to the parable of the sower in the Gospel of St. Matthew, in which the working of God's

word is compared to seeds falling on different places, on a path, on a rock or also on fertile soil (Matthew 13). The subject *slovo* is nearly always in the plural and the perfective verb prevails over the imperfective, both in absolute number of occurrences (312 vs. 65) and relatively, given the ratio of the variant in relation to the overall use of the syntagm *slovo + padnout/padat* with perfective (3.9%, Ex. 9, 11, 12) and imperfective (1.7%, Ex. 10, 13), respectively.

(9)   *Jeho slova padla na úrodnou půdu a po přestávce vyběhlo na hřiště úplně jiné mužstvo.*
      'His words fell on fertile soil, and after the break a completely different team ran onto the field.'

(10) *Jak se však zdá, půda, na kterou dobře míněná slova padala, byla stejně kamenitá jako Kalifornie sama.*
      'But apparently the soil on which the well-meant words were falling was as rocky as California itself.'

(11) *Na tuto půdu padla slova misionářů, jejich odhodlanost a obětavost.*
      'On this soil fell the words of the missionaries, their determination and dedication.'

(12) *Na úrodnou půdu ale jeho slova nepadla.*
      'But his words did not fall on fertile soil.'

(13) *Vltavský dokument […] je otevřenou výpovědí moudré ženy, jejíž slova padají do půdy církve těhotné změnou […]*
      'Vltava's documentary […] is the open testimony of a wise woman whose words fall on the soil of the Church pregnant with change […]'

The nucleus (Jelínek, Kopřivová, Petkevič and Skoumalová 2018) of the biblical phraseme consists of the lexemes *slovo* 'word', *padnout/padat* 'to (be) fall(ing)', *na* 'on', *půda* 'soil', and overwhelmingly, *úrodný* 'fertile'. *Slovo*, nearly always in the plural, is the subject of the verb *padat/padnout*, *půda* is in accusative case with the preposition *na*, and *úrodný* is the adjectival attribute of the noun *půda*. The lexical variations allow the substitution of *půda* 'soil' for *zem* 'earth' and the substitution of *úrodný* 'fertile': here the lexical variations are more varied: *živný* 'nurturing', *nakypřený* 'ploughed', *vděčný* 'grateful' or *těhotný změnou* 'pregnant with change'. The phraseme is of course also used as a negative statement, and this can be achieved not only by negating the verb in the predicate (Ex. 12), but by complementing the noun 'soil' with adjectives such as *hluchý* 'deaf' (Ex. 14), *neúrodný* 'barren' or *tvrdý* 'hard' as well. A similar meaning can be expressed using an attribute in the genitive case, as in Ex. 15.

(14) *Tentokráte však slova padla na hluchou půdu.*
'This time, however, the words fell on deaf soil.'

(15) *Začasté padají má slova na půdu totálního nepochopení a nezájmu.*
'Often my words fall on the soil of total misunderstanding and disinterest.'

Syntactically, this phraseme is further developed by adding to the subject *slova* some attribute referring to the author of the "words" or specifying the "words" in some way. Most often this attribute is a possessive pronoun (Ex. 9, 12, 15) or a possessive adjective; the author of the words can also be referred to by attributes in the genitive case (Ex. 11). Among the adjectival attributes, lexemes such as *ostrý* 'sharp' appear in the evidence from media texts; however, they are not nearly as common as in the metalinguistic variants of 'sharp/strong/hard etc. words are falling'. If the subject *slovo* is not syntactically complemented by any attribute, it is because it has already been specified in the previous context.

Examples 10, 13 or 15 show that this biblical phraseme is indeed used in a variety of ways in texts and its individual elements often appear in the syntactic structure in distant positions, as in Ex. 10. On the other hand, most of the instances are rather stereotypical and come mainly from sports journalism: it is the words of football or hockey coaches that most often fall or fail to fall on fertile soil (Ex. 9).

2.6 "The final word has fallen"

Another notable use of the syntagm *slovo + fall*, which is close to verbum dicendi but has a somewhat shifted meaning, is *konečné/poslední/definitivní etc. slovo padlo* 'the final/last/definitive etc. word has fallen'. Its meaning is not just to report on the speech but means 'a final decision has been made'. Similarly to *nepadlo ani slovo* 'not a word has fallen', this established multiword expression is exclusively associated with the perfective verb *padnout* and accounts for 11.2% of the total usage of the syntagm *slovo + padnout*. Ex. 16 is a typical example.

(16) *Konečné slovo padne, až bude uzavřeno i poslední čtvrtletí minulého roku.*
'The final word will be given (= fall) when the last quarter of the previous year is closed.'

2.7 "Whoever the word falls on..."

The last specific multiword expression containing the syntagm *slovo + padnout* that will be mentioned here is the penultimate verse of the children's counting-out rhyme *na koho to slovo padne* 'whoever the word falls on' / *ten musí jít z kola ven* 'has to go out of the round'. In the corpus evidence, the last verse, "has to go out of the round," is usually just inferred and the usual meaning of this multiword expression here is "who will be chosen" (Ex. 17). The form of this phraseme is fixed,

the subject is always in the singular and the verb is always perfective; the use of this phraseme accounts for almost 4% of the total use of the syntagm "*slovo + padnout*", i.e. the variant with perfective (see Fig. 2).[2]

(17) *Do dalších parlamentních voleb nebude jasné, na koho to slovo padne, a o to bude politický diskurz bouřlivější.*
'Until the next parliamentary elections, it will not be clear who the word will fall on, and the political discourse will be all the stormier.'

3   CONCLUSION

The analysis confirmed that syntagm *slovo + padnout/padat* 'word + to (be) fall(ing)' is a segment of different types of multiword expressions with different degrees of stability and idiomaticity; it cannot be said that these are variations or modifications of one phraseme. On the one hand, there are formulations in which the syntagm serves as a verbum dicendi and can be complemented and developed both lexically and syntactically according to what the speaker is referring to, without being limited by the idiomaticity of the expression. The figurative meaning of these multiword expressions is not perceived, they are very stereotyped and are typical of journalism; they are an example of automatism that allows easy production and reception of the text. On the other hand, the syntagm *slovo + padat/padnout* is the nucleus of multiword expressions that are clearly phrasemes, the most significant of them being biblical phraseme *slova padla na úrodnou půdu* 'the words fell on fertile soil'. Its idiomaticity and fixedness is manifested by the preference for the plural noun and the perfective verb, while its integration into the context is often quite creative.

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² The corpus evidence is quite heavily influenced by citations of the titles of two plays so named, one by Alena Vostrá and the other by a Hungarian playwright Gábor Görgey.

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