Negative Polar Questions in English and Czech

Markéta Malá[1]

1. Introduction

In both English and Czech, negative questions have been studied from various points of view, formal and functional. We shall approach them from a contrastive point of view, using the parallel corpus of Czech and English being currently built at Charles University, Prague.[2] The approach is hoped to throw some new light on the semantic and pragmatic properties of these questions, relying more on the context in which they occur than on the comparison with the corresponding positive questions.

While in English negative polar questions are always biased, in Czech their function may range from neutral questions equivalent to their positive counterparts, via cases where negation is an expression of politeness and tentativeness, to questions with the same degree of conduciveness as the corresponding negative English questions. A comparison of the corresponding structures (in both directions of translation) can reveal the types of bias (positive vs. negative; epistemic and deontic) conveyed by negative polar questions, and the marking of bias in the two languages.

2. The form of polar negative questions

We shall focus on independent[3] negative polar interrogative sentences. In English five sentence types of polar negative questions (with a finite verb predicate negated by the particle *not*)[4] can be distinguished applying two types of criteria: the word order (the presence / absence of subject-auxiliary inversion; the position of the negative before / after the subject) and the non- / contracted form of the negative,[5] *cf.* Table 1.

---

[3] Tag questions, being fully dependent on the clause they follow in their form, and considerably limited in terms of their functions, will not be dealt with here.
[4] In the English source texts there were fourteen polar questions with 'absolute negators' (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002: 812) – *none, no, never* – ten of them declarative questions, e.g. *You never told him?* (JRH) - *Tys mu vůbec nic neřekl?* These sentences will not be dealt with in the present study. They seem to display the same behaviour as those with *not* negation; they are, however, so few that no conclusive results can be presented here.
[5] The declarative questions will be considered interrogative sentences since "the relative importance of the … devices of interrogation is not the same, (*wh*-words and) intonation being superordinated to word order in that they can override its effect." (Dušková, 1999: 131)

		contracted negative	non-contracted negative
subject-auxiliary inversion	*not* precedes subject	*Don't we forgive everything of a lover?* (MOE)	*Is not laughter a lightning thought that has just grasped the comical?* (MKN)[6]
	not follows subject		*Do you not understand why it was killed?* (JRH)
non-inverted interrogative (declarative question)		*You haven't remarried?* (JFP)	*It's not poison?*

Table 1: The form of polar negative questions

In Czech, word order is not a primary means of differentiating the interrogative from other sentence types. The interrogative sentence is often distinguished from a declarative one only by the intonation (or punctuation), *cf.* exx. 1.a and 1.b (there is no overt subject in the Czech sentences, the verbal grammatical suffix serving as an indicator of person and number). The interrogative form may be introduced by an interrogative particle (e.g. *což* in ex. 1.c).

1.a. Opravdu nemohl zanechat svých erotických přátelství?
Was he genuinely incapable of abandoning his erotic friendships?
b. Opravdu nemohl zanechat svých erotických přátelství.
He was genuinely incapable of abandoning his erotic friendships.
c. Což opravdu nemohl zanechat svých erotických přátelství? (MKL)
Was he genuinely incapable of abandoning his erotic friendships?

3. The discourse function and bias in polar negative questions

The primary illocutionary force of interrogatives is a question. Generally, "a polar question has as answers a pair of polar opposites, positive and negative." (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002: 868; henceforth *CamGEL*) English negative interrogative and declarative questions, however, are considered to be "always quite strongly biased" (*CamGEL*: 881). In Czech, most grammars claim that positive and negative polar questions are generally interchangeable.[7] Nevertheless, there are many factors that may block or favour positive or negative polarity of the question.

English polar negative questions may display several types of bias, linked with their secondary illocutionary force. Huddleston and Pullum (*CamGEL*: 880) distinguish between epistemic, deontic and desiderative bias, which can further differ in the degree or strength of the bias. Apparently, the epistemic bias (i.e. "the speaker thinking, expecting, or knowing that one answer is the right one") is linked with the question force of the interrogative, the deontic bias (i.e. "the speaker judging that one answer ought to be the right one") occurs where the interrogative acquires the force of a directive. The desiderative bias is "not greatly different from the deontic" (i.e. "the speaker wants one answer to be the right one") – it will therefore be subsumed under the deontic bias in the present paper. In English, the negative form of the interrogative

---

[6] The position of *not* before the subject, however, appears to be rare, with a single occurrence attested in our material.

[7] "The content of many polar questions may be formulated either positively or negatively. … The semantic difference between the positive and negative polarity is neutralized in these cases, and their mutual substitutability is an expression of the fact that at the moment of the utterance the speaker draws on the presupposition that either the positive or the negative content may be valid." (Mluvnice češtiny: 324; the translation is ours)

sentence is itself conducive. If it is used as an equivalent of a Czech negative question, it may therefore suggest a bias even if this is not grammatically marked in Czech. On the other hand, explicit marking of bias in Czech equivalents of English negative questions may suggest the type and degree of bias in English. Since bias is linked with the illocutionary force, we shall also point out the different discourse functions performed by the negative polar questions.

4. The material and method

Our paper is a part of the research project *Czech National Corpus and Corpora of Other Languages*. The English / Czech section of the parallel corpus is under construction now – the choice of texts is therefore largely influenced by what is available in the corpus at the moment. By choosing various authors and translators and by checking the translation counterparts we hope to have avoided one of the obvious pitfalls of using parallel corpora –the reliability of the translation. 100 negative questions and their counterparts were excerpted in each direction of translation, using one Czech play and five Czech novels, and three English novels and their translations.[8] For the representation of the individual formal types of negative questions in the material see Table 2. The texts forming the subcorpus were searched using the concordancer for parallel texts Paraconc.

In this paper we shall focus primarily on the English – Czech direction, trying to answer the question of what types of bias and what discourse functions may be conveyed by negative questions and how this is encoded in the interrogative sentence. The Czech counterparts of the English negative questions (displaying means of marking different from English) will serve as indicators of the function. We shall draw on the Czech – English direction mainly to illustrate alternative ways of expressing the particular function or bias.

word order	form of negative	number of sentences	total
declarative negative questions	**n't*	35	37
	not	2	
questions with subject-auxiliary inversion	**n't*	60	63
	not	3	
total number			100

Table 2: The form of English polar negative questions in the sample examined

5. Declarative negative polar questions
5.1 Marking both in English and in Czech

Let us focus first on the declarative negative questions.[9] According to *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, "the expected answer is here the statement with

---

[8] The texts used: Czech to English: M. Kundera: Nesmrtelnost (MKN), M. Kundera: Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí (MKL), I. Otčenášek: Romeo, Julie a tma (IOR), J. Topol: Kočka na kolejích (JTK), M. Viewegh: Výchova dívek v Čechách (MVV), J. Weil: Život s hvězdou (JWZ); English to Czech: M. Ondaatje: The English Patient (MOE), J. Rowling: Harry Potter and the Philosophers' Stone (JRH), J. Fielding: Puppet (JFP).

[9] The form with full *not* is limited to two cases, always following contracted *be* (ex. 6).

the same propositional content as the question … In asking a declarative question I am typically seeking confirmation of a proposition that I am inclined, with varying degrees of strength, to believe." (*CamGEL*: 881) The 'statement + request for verification' interpretation of declarative questions is closely linked with the declarative form of the question since "prosody and punctuation commonly serve as markers of indirect force – such markers of the indirect force have the effect of increasing the difference in salience between the indirect speech act and the direct one, pushing the latter further into the background" (*CamGEL*: 864).

The epistemic bias in declarative questions may be reinforced lexically in English by confidence markers, e.g. *no doubt*, *surely*.

Both in English and in Czech, these questions may be introduced by contrastive conjunctions or conjuncts *but / ale*, *ovšem*, which serve here as discourse markers: the speaker expresses strong hopes (ex. 2) or recommendation (ex. 3) contrasting with what may be assumed on the basis of co-/contextual evidence. The bias is epistemic or deontic, respectively. With the deontic bias the declarative question assumes the illocutionary force of a directive. In both cases the polarity of the question corresponds with that of the proposition, i.e. a hope that the negative applies in ex. 2, and a recommendation that the negative apply in ex. 3. Accordingly, the answer confirms the negative expectation.

> 2. "You think it could be Alzheimer's?" "I guess that's a possibility." "But you don't think that's it?" "I don't think that's it," he admits. (JFP)
> "A co Alzheimer?" "Myslím, že to je jedna z možností." "Ale nezdá se ti to?" "Neřekl bych, že to bude ono," připustil.

> 3. "But you don't use them?" said Mr. Ollivander sharply. "Oh, no, sir," said Hagrid quickly. (JRH)
> "Ovšem nepoužíváte je?" zeptal se pan Ollivander ostře. "To ne, pane," řekl Hagrid kvapně.

The marker *ale* was found in the Czech counterparts of English negative declarative questions also where there was no marking in English (ex. 4). The Czech question in ex. 4 is positive with a modal verb expressing epistemic modality (the literal translation is *You must have a lot of work with that?*), which signals the epistemic bias of the question in English (the speaker trying to verify her assumption). The relation between the polarity of the question and that of the propositional content of the bias is different from that in exx. 2 and 3: although formulated negatively in English, the question expresses a positive expectation (i.e. the speaker expected that schooling the children at home is a lot of work but the context seems to suggest otherwise), which, however, is refuted in the answer. In Czech the positive expectation is expressed by a positive question.

> 4. "The kids are home-schooled." "That isn't a lot of work for you?" "No. I enjoy it." (JFP)
> "S tím ale musíte mít spoustu práce?" "Ne, já si to užívám."

Both in English and in Czech the dependence on the preceding context may be explicitly signalled by *so / takže, tak* (ex. 5).[10]

---

[10] Another fact linked with the context-dependence is the form of the subject: both in declarative and in inverted negative questions, the subject is typically expressed by personal or demonstrative pronouns. If the subject is not pronominal, its referent is still easily recoverable since it either has generic reference (e.g. *Women* aren't violent? (JFP) - *Ženy nejsou násilnické?*) or it has the form of a proper noun, whose reference is therefore unique in the situation (e.g. … *wasn't Daddy always telling her that?* (JFP) - … *copak jí to tatínek pořád neopakoval?*).

5. "Did you speak to my mother this morning?" "No." <u>"So she still doesn't know I'm here?"</u>
   "I'm hoping the shock of seeing you will loosen her tongue." (JFP)
   "Mluvil jsi dneska ráno s mou matkou?" "Ne." <u>"Takže pořád neví, že dneska přijedu?"</u>
   "Doufám, že jí šok z toho, až tě uvidí, rozváže jazyk."

5.2 Marking in Czech only

In our material, there was often no overt lexical marking of the bias in English apart from the declarative form of the question itself. On the other hand, considering the Czech counterparts of the declarative negative questions, a number of signals of markedness can be traced. The particle *to* in initial position indicates inference based on the situation or the preceding turn, which the speaker is reluctant to believe (the polarity of the proposition to be confirmed is negative). In ex. 6 this is further strengthened by *snad* (perhaps), signalling the epistemic bias. In English the non-contracted negative particle *not* is stressed, placing the emphasis on the negation rather than on the adjectival subject complement.

> 6. "He's not serious?" he muttered to Percy. (JRH)
>   "To snad nemyslí vážně?" zeptal se Percyho šeptem.

It is significant that in fourteen Czech counterparts of English declarative questions the subject is expressed and placed initially (there are also two pronominal indirect objects in initial position, which is a marked placement for indirect object in Czech). This is particularly striking in the case of ten pronominal subjects since in Czech the person and number of the predicate verb is expressed by inflection, and the presence of the pronominal subject is therefore marked. While the overt pronominal subject itself may be considered an indicator of a biased question, it also helps to shift the negative into the medial position in the clause. According to *Mluvnice češtiny* (325) it is the medial position of the negative that blocks the substitution of the negative polarity by the positive one. The function of these questions seems to be slightly different from the preceding type: it involves an additional element of surprise or disbelief. The speaker is forced by the situation to re-evaluate his expectation: in ex. 7 the speaker presumed the addressee would be able to remember the message she left him; however, it seems now that this is not the case and the speaker is forced to re-assess the situation. In this respect, the declarative clause in ex. 7 is different from that in ex. 2. While in ex. 2 there was an epistemic bias towards a negative answer and no change in expectation, in ex. 7 the original expectation was positive and the present expectation is neutral (i.e. the speaker is ready to accept a positive or a negative answer) or negative. In this respect, this declarative negative question has the same function as the inverted one. Indeed, the same marking, viz. the subject expressed by a personal pronoun in initial position, may occur in the Czech counterparts of inverted negative questions (ex. 8).

> 7. "What was with that message you left on my voice-mail?" "The message…?" <u>"You don't remember?"</u> Amanda struggles to regroup. "I don't remember my exact words. I'm half asleep. …" (JFP)
>   "Co měl znamenat ten vzkaz, cos mi nechala na záznamníku?" "Vzkaz…?" <u>"Ty si nepamatuješ?"</u> Amanda se snažila sebrat. "Nepamatuju si, co přesně jsem tam namluvila. Napůl spím. …"

> 8. "Do you not see that unicorn?" Firenze bellowed at Bane. (JRH)
>   "Vy jste neviděli toho jednorožce?" rozkřikl se Firenze na Banea.

5.3 Czech to English

Another, supplementary way of pointing out the bias in English negative declarative questions consists in approaching them as one of several means used in English to convey the same function. We shall therefore use the opposite direction of excerption, focussing on those Czech negative questions which display the markers mentioned above, viz. the overt pronominal subject in initial position and the lexical discourse markers, and their English counterparts. These types of markers occur in ex. 9. In both languages a negative declarative clause (in Czech there is no difference in word order between an interrogative clause and a declarative one) is followed by a tag conveying a request for verification (indicating the epistemic bias, which is further supported by the adverbial *probably* / *asi*). The speaker bases his question (with negative form and negative bias) on contextual evidence (of there being no God, although it would be nice if there were one) and asks for the addressee's consent.

> 9. Je tam bůh? … <u>Ale on asi není, viď?</u> (IOR)
>   Is God there? … <u>But there probably isn't any such God, is there?</u>

Among the English counterparts of the Czech negative questions with the overt pronominal subject in initial position there can be found another explicit expression of the same function in English - *you mean* (ex. 10). The inferential character of the statement may be further strengthened in Czech by the particle *tak* (*so*) (ex. 11).

> 10. Oni nepublikovali váš text tak, jak jste ho napsal? (MKL)
>   You mean they didn't publish it the way you wrote it?

> 11. Divili se: "Tak ty nechceš bojovat proti okupaci své země?"(MKL)
>   … they were amazed. 'You mean you don't want to fight the occupation of your country?'

The close link to the preceding cotext opens up the possibility for irony. The inference is evident from the cotext, the need to arrive at it is, however, presented as the addressee's task. In ex. 12 it is evident that the addressee can speak Czech. The sentence serves as an indirect means of criticism.

> 12. "Ty neumíš česky?" řekl jsem. (MVV)
>   "You're no good at Czech?" I said.

Due to the close links to the preceding cotext declarative negative questions can also be used as echo-questions, repeating the previous turn and asking again for verification (ex. 13).

> 13. Nikdo nesmí nic vědět! <u>Nikdo nesmí nic vědět?</u> (IOR)
>   Nobody must be allowed to know! <u>Nobody must be allowed to know?</u>

6. Negative polar questions with inversion

English negative questions with subject-operator inversion are also conducive, "and the epistemic bias can be towards either the negative or the positive answer" (*CamGEL*: 883). Considering the discourse functions of these questions, it seems that they can be associated not only with questions but also with statements (assertions),

directives and exclamations. Again, the Czech counterparts may help us determine the particular type of bias and the function.

6.1 The statement and the question functions

The statement function stands out especially if the Czech counterpart is a declarative sentence (ex. 14 b). Moreover, the Czech sentence in ex. 14 b is positive, suggesting a positive epistemic bias of the English question. Ex. 14 comprises a series of negative interrogative clauses, all with the same function (viz. a statement of positive polarity accompanied by an appeal for verification since there are situational clues which suggest that the statement may not be true). While there is no encoding of the function in English (apart from the generally conducive negative form itself), in Czech two of the questions (ex. 14 d) display no markers, and in 14 a and 14 c *snad* (*probably*) serves as a lexical marker. The initial *přece* (*surely*) in 14 b performs a similar function. However, it expresses a higher degree of certainty consistent with the declarative form of the sentence. The various markers of the same function in Czech contribute to stylistic variation.

> 14. [It was surely this other self who'd agreed to let Ben drive her to the airport when he showed up at her mother's house at six-thirty this morning, despite their already having said their goodbyes the previous day.]
> a. Hadn't they both agreed it would be easier that way for both of them, less gut-wrenching and certainly more adult, a fitting and calm conclusion to a surprising and tumultuous week?
> b. Hadn't they hugged chastely and wished each other well?
> c. Hadn't he promised to keep her apprised of her mother's progress?
> d. Hadn't she promised to stay in touch? Hadn't they congratulated one another on a job well done? (JFP)
>
> [Každopádně to, které souhlasilo s tím, aby ji Ben odvezl na letiště, když se v půl sedmé ráno zjevil v matčině domě, navzdory tomu, že se rozloučili už večer předtím.]
> a. Nedohodli se <u>snad</u>, že to bude pro oba snadnější, ne tak bolestné a rozhodně dospělejší, když se klidně a vyrovnaně rozloučí na závěr toho zběsilého a vzrušeného týdne?
> b. <u>Přece</u> se včera cudně objali a popřáli si upřímně všechno nejlepší.
> c. Neslíbil jí <u>snad</u>, že ji bude informovat o vývoji matčina případu?
> d. Neslíbila mu, že s ním zůstane v kontaktu? Nepogratulovali si navzájem k tomu, jak skvělou práci odvedli?

The same function, assertion of positive polarity (which should be obvious to the addressee) may be marked in Czech by the interrogative particle *copak*, *cožpak*, *což*.[11] In ex. 15 the particle is used as an alternative to the above-mentioned *snad* (*probably*). The statement function is further supported by the question being self-oriented.

> 15. Now he came to think about it… every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry… and the very last time Dudley had hit him, <u>hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?</u> (JRH)
> Když o tom teď uvažoval…Všecky ty podivné věci, které vždycky tak rozčílily jeho tetu a strýce, se staly, když byl rozrušený nebo měl vztek… A když ho Dudley naposledy uhodil, <u>nepomstil se mu **snad**, aniž si to vůbec uvědomil? **Copak** na něj nepoštval toho hroznýše?</u>

---

[11] The particles *copak*, *cožpak*, *což* were not used in the counterparts of declarative questions.

Comparing the English - Czech direction with the opposite one, we can see that the particle *copak, cožpak, což* can be preceded by *ale* (*but*). This suggests the presence of an element of contrast and surprise. The speaker presents the (positive) proposition as obvious although, surprisingly to him, the addressee may not consider it evident (ex. 16). This is further strengthened by the fact that the Czech particles *copak, cožpak, což* often co-occur with verbs of cognition and perception (ex. 17). In the English - Czech direction, the verbs of cognition and perception (*think, know, understand, see, etc.*) occurred in thirteen inverted questions, with eight of them being translated into Czech using the particle *copak, cožpak*.[12] What is questioned is not the proposition itself but rather the fact that the addressee does not seem to understand or see that its validity is obvious.

16. Tvrdí celý život, že jejím nepřítelem je kýč. <u>Ale což si ho sama nenese v sobě?</u> Jejím kýčem je obraz domova, klidného, sladkého, harmonického, kde vládne hodná matka a moudrý otec.(MKL)
   All her life she had proclaimed kitsch her enemy. <u>But hadn't she in fact been carrying it with her?</u> Her kitsch was her image of home, all peace, quiet, and harmony, and ruled by a loving mother and wise father.

17. Don't they understand she only has so much time? (JFP)
   Copak nechápou, jak málo času má?

The element of surprise and re-evaluation is present also where the the *copak, cožpak, což* particle is used in interrogatives with the function of a question rather than statement. In ex. 18 it seems obvious to the speaker that death is a public record. However, she is forced to re-assess her positive expectation.

18. "Look, I don't understand why this is so difficult. Isn't death a public record?" "No, actually. It isn't." (JFP)
   "Poslyšte, já nechápu, proč je to tak složité. <u>Copak</u> úmrtí není veřejná informace?" "Ne, vlastně ne."

The aspect of being forced to re-assess an obvious positive expectation may be employed to convey ironic scolding. In ex. 19 it is obvious that the addressees do read; the ironic implication (in Czech emphasized by the object *vůbec nic – nothing at all*) is based on the addressees' themselves arriving at the conclusion that their ignorance has forced the speaker to re-assess what is evident, viz. that they read.

19. "Oh, honestly, don't you two read? (JRH)
   "Proboha, copak vy dva vůbec nic nečtete?

The negative polar question is closest to a statement when it functions as a rhetorical question. "The answer, being obvious, is not required." (Dušková, 1999: 137) However, unlike in the preceding example, the obviousness of the answer is not usually dependent on a particular context (*cf.* the universal quantifier, generic reference of *we* and *a lover*, and atemporal present tense in ex. 20). Negative rhetorical questions function as forceful, emotionally coloured statements of opposite polarity. The epistemic bias is again indicated in Czech by *snad* (*probably*).

---

[12] In the Czech - English direction negative questions introduced by the particles *copak, což, cožpak* were more closely linked with generic statements: out of the twenty-three negative clauses with these particles, seven rely on general knowledge rather than situational obviousness, e.g. *Copak milování není než věčné opakování téhož?* (MKL) - *Isn't making love merely an eternal repetition of the same?*

20. Don't we forgive everything of a lover? (MOE)
    Neodpouštíme snad milenci všechno?

6.2 The exclamatory function

The positive bias (as well as emotional colouring and evaluation) occurs also in negative questions with the function of an exclamation.[13] Unlike the typical rhetorical question, the exclamatory question is tied to a specific (situational) context. In Czech the markedness of the question may be indicated by its having the form of a subordinate clause (although the initial *že* is a subordinator, it is stressed in this function) – ex. 21. Alternatively, the exclamation may have the same form in Czech and in English (ex. 22). The predication is typically copular, expressing evaluation.

21. "Yum. Doesn't that smell wonderful?" (JFP)
    "Mňam! Že to voní úžasně?"

22. "Isn't he beautiful?" Hagrid murmured. (JRH)
    "No není krásnej?" zamumlal Hagrid.

6.3 Directives

The predicate verb in the negative question may itself suggest a non-interrogative function of the sentence. Modal verbs may indicate deontic bias. Such negative questions have the force of directives – invitations, requests, demands *etc.* They are often accompanied by vocatives (ex. 23). The positive deontic bias is reflected in the use of assertive items in the interrogative clause (ex. 24). Deontic bias may also be associated with future orientation (ex. 25). Concerning the polarity of the 'directive' questions, Dušková points out that "although positive and negative questions are as a rule not interchangeable in English, there are instances [with a secondary function of invitation or offer] in which the use of the positive or negative form does not play a role." (Dušková, 1999: 133) Indeed, in examples like 24 the negative and positive forms seem to be interchangeable. However, "the negation adds some emotive component of meaning, perhaps impatience or persuasiveness" (*CamGEL*: 940).

23. "Ben," her mother says, ignoring Amanda, "shouldn't we be going inside?" (JFP)
    "Bene," oslovila ho matka a Amandu ignorovala, "neměli bychom už jít dovnitř?"

24. "Couldn't you do something about it, Dumbledore?" (JRH)
    "Nemůžete s tím něco udělat, Brumbále?"

25. "Aren't you going to invite me inside?" (JFP)
    "Nepozveš mě dál?"

As mentioned above, dependent tag questions were excluded from the present study. However, there are independent negative questions resembling tag questions both in terms of form and function. Like questions with modal verbs, they presents a request, either for action (ex. 26), or merely for confirmation of the speaker's statement (ex. 27). The vocative is often used. The Czech translation of ex. 26 takes

---

[13] In spoken language exclamatory questions are distinguished from interrogative sentences by intonation.

the form used in Czech question tags, with the positive polarity showing the positive deontic bias of the question. Both in English and in Czech the appeal for the addressee's opinion can be made explicit by the choice of the verb (*think – nemyslíte* in ex. 28). The Czech translation can make the request function manifest - in ex. 27 the verb *řekni*, i.e. *tell*, is in the second person of the imperative mood in the Czech clause.

26. "What about dinner?" Spenser demands. "Your sister can take care of that," Mrs. Mallins says. "Can't you, love?" "Of course," Hope replies … . (JFP)
"A co večeře?" zeptal se Spenser. "Tvoje sestra to zařídí," odpověděla mu matka. "Viď, že ano, zlato?" "Jasně," odpověděla Hope …

27. "Harry was talking to it, weren't you, Harry?" (JRH)
"Ale Harry se s ním bavil, no řekni, Harry?"

28. Lucky they found Hagrid, don't you think? (JRH)
Měl opravdu štěstí, že natrefil zrovna na Hagrida, nemyslíte?

6.4 Politeness

The verbs of cognition illustrated in ex. 28 are not restricted to interrogatives resembling tag questions. Asking about the addressee's opinion (rather than asking the question directly) may be considered a politeness strategy (ex. 29).

29. Don't you think purple's too much? (JFP)
Nemyslíte, že je ta purpurová až moc výrazná?

In Czech, the polarity of the question (usually with a verb expressing volition) may serve as a means of politeness in requests and invitations. In ex. 30 the discourse function of the Czech interrogative, viz. the invitation, is revealed in its English counterpart. In Czech a positive question would be acceptable but less polite. By using the negative form the speaker seems to indicate that they are ready to accept a negative answer. The politeness aspect of the Czech negative question with the function of a request stands out particularly where its English counterpart is positive (ex. 31).

30. "Máničko, nechtěla bys jít do biografu?" ptal se mladý muž dívky. (JWZ)
"Manicka, how about going to the movies?" a young man asked a girl.

31. "Prosím vás, pane, nevíte, co mi chtějí?" (JWZ)
"Excuse me, sir, do you know what they want?"

7. Conclusion

All the English negative polar questions studied were conducive. The negative form of the question itself may therefore be understood as a marker of bias. The particular type of bias, however, has to be inferred from the context. Negative questions proved to be highly dependent on the context, as indicated on the one hand by the anaphoric or situational uniqueness of the subject, and on the other by the presence of various lexical devices providing (and specifying) the link to the context – contrastive conjunctions and conjuncts, vocatives, repetition in echo-questions. Since in Czech

the negative form is not a straightforward marker of conduciveness, additional means of indicating bias could be found: particles *copak*, *cožpak*, *což*, particles *to*, *tak*, an explicit pronominal subject in initial position (and the medial position of negation). We hope to have shown that also the predicate verb may serve as an indicator narrowing down the interpretive options for the particular negative question (copular verbs being associated with evaluation and exclamatory function, deontic modal verbs suggesting deontic bias and directive force, verbs of cognition and perception often co-occurring with the interrogative particles *copak*, *cožpak*, *což*). The declarative form of the English question itself marks it as biased.

As far as the discourse function of English negative interrogative clauses is concerned, the declarative questions operate typically as statements accompanied by an invitation for verification. In this respect they resemble sentences introduced by *You mean*, and tag questions. They are typically accompanied by an expression of surprise, doubt or discontent. The element of contrast with the expected situation is usually conveyed in the Czech counterparts by the interrogatives with an overt pronominal subject in initial position. The bias is usually epistemic, as often indicated by adverbials (*surely*). Nevertheless, they may acquire the deontic function of recommendation.

Negative questions with inversion may perform the functions not only of biased questions but also of exclamations, statements and directives. Again the Czech translation can reveal the function, especially where a structure prototypically corresponding to the particular discourse function is used as the equivalent of the English question. In these Czech structures, the polarity of the proposition may also suggest a positive or negative bias of the English question. In requests, where both positive and negative questions may be used, the polarity is chosen with respect to politeness in Czech.

In the present paper we tried to offer an alternative approach to bias marking in English negative polar questions. The parallel corpus makes it possible to study the same sentence in two contexts, with its discourse function and bias being marked by the same or by different devices in the two languages. Both the same and the different marking is useful for determining the bias and function of the English negative question: the former draws our attention to phenomena that may otherwise be neglected but become prominent due to "repetition" in the two languages; the latter may either show the function more explicitly, or it can make it possible to group the English negative question together with other English structures whose Czech counterparts, expressing the same function, all receive the same marking.

References

Büring, D. and C. Gunlogson (2000) Aren't Positive and Negative Polar Questions the Same? Available on-line from
http://www.linguistics.ucla.edu/people/buring/ (accessed: 30 May 2007)
Dušková, L. (1999) Negative Questions in English, in L. Dušková, Studies in the English Language, pp. 131–43. Prague: Karolinum – Charles University Press.
Huddleston, R. and G. K. Pullum (2002) The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Mluvnice češtiny 3 – Skladba (The Grammar of Czech 3 – Syntax) (1987). Praha: Academia.

Romero, M. (2005) Two Approaches to Biased Yes/No Questions, in J. Alderete *et al.* (eds) Proceedings of the 24th West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics, pp. 352–60. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

Štícha, F. (1998) 'Forms and meanings in yes-no questions (a contrastive study of English, French, German and Czech) 1'. *Linguistica Pragensia 8*, 73–80.

Štícha, F. (1999) 'Forms and meanings in yes-no questions (a contrastive study of English, French, German and Czech) 2'. *Linguistica Pragensia 9*, 30–42.