

## HEALTH IN CZECH PHRASEOLOGY: WHO IS HEALTHY AS A HORSE AND WHO HAS ROBUST HEALTH?

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**Abstract:** *This contribution aspires to show one linguistic aspect of two words: health (a noun) and healthy (an adjective), namely their occurrence and usage in phraseological expressions. We will focus on comparisons such as healthy as a beet, healthy as a fish, healthy as a beech, and phraseological units adjective + health, like iron health, strong health, robust health, or conversely damaged health, broken health, poor health. We will attempt to determine the frequency of these phraseological connections in contemporary Czech writings within the Czech National Corpus called SYN, which comprises 500 million words and their variations, and we will consider the subject matter of the texts that contain these phraseologisms, for example if, and to what extent, primarily publications inform about the impact of various living conditions on one's health, about the sharing of health-oriented experiences, about the need to promote a healthy lifestyle, etc. We will also try to contemplate the ways of using phraseological expressions with the words health and healthy in scholastic practice intended to meet the objectives of the General Educational Program for Basic Education.*

**Keywords:** *Health and related phraseology, Czech language, human health, vocabulary, health education.*

If the students are to learn how to communicate about the various aspects of health, and to articulate their views on health issues as foreseen by the General Educational Program for Basic Education (Czech abbreviation RVP ZV) via subjects “Health Education” and “Physical Education” in the educational module Human Health (see RVP ZV 2007: 72 n.), it is essential to develop their expressive abilities, which means to project the theme of *health* into the Language and Verbal Communication module and into the “Czech Language and Literature” subject. Reading, for example, plays a significant role. N. Siegllová (2009) showed how reading of well chosen books can help advance the requisite knowledge and skills in the various areas of health education. Reading is also considered an important factor

in expanding the vocabulary and attaining eloquence. Another source of vocabulary enrichment in teaching the language part of the “Czech Language and Literature” is phraseology, that is to say, fixed verbal units with figurative meaning. Among them are comparisons using the adjective *healthy*, typically comparing the human condition of *being healthy* to a plant (*healthy like a turnip/beechnoak...*), or an animal (*healthy as a fish/minnow/lynx...*), and fixed verbal combinations of the noun *health* with a metaphorically applied adjective (*strong health, broken health*). The exposure to phraseology will expand the students’ vocabulary as well as reveal the richness of the mother tongue and its cultural heritage.

Some authors of academic theses showed that children are sensitive and receptive to phraseology and the meaning of phraseological expressions as early as first grade of primary school. Textbooks of the Czech language for the first grade of primary schools have exercises asking the children, among other things, to explain the meaning of some comparisons and sayings. These authors cite a number of examples from textbooks published by Alter – *Český jazyk 3*<sup>1</sup>, Scientia – *Čeština s maňáskem Hláskem 2*<sup>2</sup>; *Čeština s maňáskem Hláskem 3*<sup>3</sup>; Nová škola – *Český jazyk 3*, and others. Textbooks of the Czech language for the second grade of primary schools also feature several exercises devoted specifically to phraseology (*Čeština hravě 6*: 34–37<sup>4</sup>; *Čeština hravě 9*: 5).

Apparently phraseology, particularly proverbs and sayings, is not without interest to the writers of textbooks. Besides textbooks, teachers can draw on additional resources such as phraseological dictionaries (see detailed information in the list of literature), excerpts from novels or publications, and texts in the SYN Czech National Corpus, which may inspire some to choose certain fictional or non-fictional materials. The SYN Corpus system contains 500 million words and their variations, and it encompasses a multitude of contemporary written texts in electronic form, mostly from periodic publications (more than 390 million words), but also novels (about 55 million words), and technical literature (about 50 million words). Much less represented are factual literature, administrative articles, poetry, song lyrics, etc.<sup>5</sup> We searched this electronic library for comparisons involving the adjective *healthy*, and metaphorically applied adjectives in combination with the noun *health*.

<sup>1</sup> Students are asked to explain, for example, the meaning of comparisons *soft as velvet, quick as a lynx*, and to fill in the right word in comparisons *swift as ....., nimble as .....*

<sup>2</sup> Students are asked for example to explain the meaning of sayings *Pavel high-tailed it out of there; Radek made a bee line for the house*; and the like.

<sup>3</sup> Students are asked to explain the meaning of sayings, e.g. *It’s Greek to me; A fox in charge of the henhouse*; comparisons, e.g. *She sings like a bird; He is as fit as a fiddle*, proverbs, e.g. *An apple a day keeps the doctor away, Birds of a feather flock together*. They are further asked to find a proverb or a saying that best illustrates an article, e.g. *Better safe than sorry, Crying over spilled milk*. (For details about the use of various phraseological expressions in textbooks of the Czech Language for primary schools see Z. Kolářová, 2003: 35–54; Dopitová, 2004: 29–69).

<sup>4</sup> Students are asked to unravel and explain “mixed-up proverbs”, for example *Where is a will, there is a silver lining; All that glitters is thicker than water; Better late than the mother of invention*; etc. Another exercise uses proverbs with pronouns; students are supposed to complete the sentence using a correct pronoun, e.g. *\_\_\_ who laughs last, laughs best; Every man for \_\_\_*. Yet another requires filling in the right numerals: *\_\_\_ heads are better than \_\_\_; \_\_\_ come \_\_\_ served*.

<sup>5</sup> In addition, the following corpora containing 500 000 – 1 000 000 words and their variations are available: DIAKORP – the corpus of old Czech language, KSK Dopisy – the corpus of private correspondence, and 3 corpora of spoken materials: Spoken Corpus for Prague, Spoken Corpus for Brno, and ORAL 2006. (More information is available at <http://ucnk.ff.cuni.cz/>).

The phraseological dictionaries at our disposal feature comparisons *healthy as/like + means of comparison* i.e. the object to whose characteristics the attribute *healthy* is being compared (in alphabetical order): *healthy as a beech*, *healthy as an oak*, *healthy as a mushroom*, *healthy as Jura*, *healthy as a horse radish*, *healthy as a linden tree*, *healthy as a fish*, *healthy as a minnow*, *healthy as a lynx*, *healthy as a strapping lad*, *healthy as a buster*; *healthy as a beet*, *healthy as a turnip* (Dictionary of Czech Phrases and Idioms, Comparisons: 459 – further referred to as DCPI). Added to these comparisons are those that do not contain the adjective *healthy* directly, but exemplify an appearance or state related to health: *(to be) like a turnip*, *(to be) made of iron*, *girl like a pea pod*, *boy like a drummer*.

The SYN Corpus identified the following comparisons (listed by the frequency of occurrence):

**Table 1**

Phraseologism	Number in SYN Corpus	Phraseologism	Number in SYN Corpus
Healthy as a turnip	95	Healthy as a canary	1
Healthy as a minnow	33	Healthy as a horse radish	1
Healthy as a fish	21	Healthy as a horse	1
Healthy as a beech	17	Healthy as little goats	1
Healthy as a beet	7	Healthy as a linden tree	1
Healthy as an oak	4	Healthy as a bear in spring	1
Healthy as a lynx	3	Healthy as Popeye	1
Healthy as a beet	3	Healthy as a strapping lad	1
Healthy as a broomstick/wash-tub	1	Healthy as a buster	1
Healthy as Virgin Mary	1	Healthy as a strapping man	1
Healthy as a moron	1	Healthy as a rock	1
Healthy as Bondy	1	Healthy as an athlete	1
Healthy as a bull	1	Healthy as a pig	1
Healthy as a mushroom	1	Healthy as a Turk	1
Healthy as little mushrooms	1	Healthy as a bell	1
Healthy as the beet in spring	1	Healthy as can be	1
Healthy as Jura	1		

Thus the findings in the half-a-billion repository show that although other than the traditional folksy comparisons with the word *healthy* exist, the authors of novels and publications continue to prefer the conventional ones. This is born out by the prevalence of phrases *healthy as a turnip*, *healthy as a fish*, *healthy as a minnow*, *healthy as a beech*, and by the fact that only 8 expressions with the adjective *healthy* out of 33 (or 24%) appeared in our texts more than once. While the most frequent comparisons had strong presence in novels (*healthy as a beet* – 32, *healthy as a minnow* – 16, *healthy as a fish* – 9, *healthy as a beech* – 7), the greatest number of references originated in publications (*healthy as a beet* – 56, *healthy as a minnow* – 12, *healthy as a fish* – 11, *healthy as a beech* – 9), which is probably due to the preponderance of publications within the SYN Corpus system. The listed comparisons

are to be found in both classical and vernacular, even colloquial, literature. Thus the adjective *healthy* appears in several variants (in Czech *zdráv/zdravý/zdravej*) not only in works of fiction but in periodic publications as well. No longer has the traditional comparison the spicing effect (immediacy of expression), even in publication-type materials. Less common, almost unique, similes now tend to be used for that purpose, often not of the traditional folk variety but reflective of the author's creativity, usually with humor or a play on words (see *healthy as a strapping lad* – *healthy as a strapping maid*):

- *At other times it appeared that he had a keen interest in the equality of sexes. For example, he investigated if people as healthy as strapping lads could be simultaneously as healthy as strapping maids.* (From Mr. Kaplan Likes the Class by L. Rosten, a fictional book)
- *.... give my best regards to Mrs. Slavka to whom I wish, from the bottom of my heart, to be healthy as a Turk.* (A quote from the correspondence of F. Halas.)
- *And now, after Felix, please convalesce nicely, and be as healthy as a canary when I get back.* (A quote from the correspondence of K. Čapek.)
- *But she was healthy and strong as a bear in spring.* (From a work of fiction.)
- *If she will watch the time and temperature, she can cook spinach in the hot springs and be as healthy as Popeye.* (From a work of fiction.)
- *.... the grandchildren will be here in a moment, sprightly and healthy as little mushrooms.* (From a work of fiction.)
- In some cases, these comparisons may convey humor or even sharp irony.
- *I'm amazed to be as healthy as a moron all the time.* (A quote from a book by L. Vaculík.)
- *A cow as healthy as Bondy is standing on a hill. And I'm living still.* (Lyrics of a song.)

In works of fiction, these comparisons crop up in excerpts from Czech literature by various authors at various times (K. Čapek, J. Voskovec + J. Werich, J. Trefulka, L. Vaculík, Z. Vrubová, J. Šebánek, J. Štětina, I. Diviš, V. Stiborová and others), as well as in translations from foreign literature (G. Meyring, A. Christie, R. Gordon, G. Orwell, W. Styron...). The non-fictional excerpts with these expressions come from daily newspapers (*Lidové Noviny*, *Mladá Fronta Dnes*, *Blesk*, less often *Právo*) and magazines (mostly *Reflex*, *Respekt*, *Folk and Country*, less often *Vlasta*). The figurative comparisons refer almost exclusively to human health, the exceptions being comments about the health of animals (for example a polemic about genetic experiments on animals). Also,

the lyrics of a well known song by Nedvěď brothers invoke the health of land: *Then I would hope, that again in spring, my land will be healthy as a beech.* Another excerpt from a publication compares *the health* (in the sense of quality) of mushrooms to the health of a beech tree:

- *...because I, too, long to remain seated for a while by this miracle, to savor the silence of the morning forest, to anticipate pulling them out of the earth one by one and trimming them lovingly, knowing that these little mushrooms will be as healthy as a beech.* (A non-fictional text.)
- The comparisons appear mostly in materials characterizing a specific person's health, while relatively few voice a deeper (often critical) insight.
- *In no small number of cases the patient is not found at home, he gets scared, goes to the health center the following day and tells the astonished doctor that he is as healthy as a turnip and eager to go to work.* (A non-fictional text.)
- *Drivers abuse privileges for the disabled. With an invalid sticker on the windshield, healthy people drive in walk-only zones, endangering pedestrians. Although healthy as turnips, quite a few businessmen and well-known people park at the spots for the disabled.* (A non-fictional text.)
- *We all know how patients cheat. They stay at home malingering even though they are as healthy as a turnip. They say that women most often fall ill before Christmas, when it's cookie baking time. Men take to bed mainly in the spring, at the beginning of the gardener's year.* (A non-fictional text.)
- *The author also points out that there are no miraculous recipes in the book. "I will not promise that if you eat as described here you will shed 20 kilos in 14 days, be beautiful into your seventies, as healthy as a turnip and as lively as a minnow."* (A non-fictional text.)
- *Healthy as a turnip... At the time when this vegetable was still routinely grown and consumed in this country, our grandmothers compared every healthy and "well built" fellow to a turnip.* (A non-fictional text.)

An explicitly stated comparison *sick as a...* is not listed in any of the monitored dictionaries. There is, however, a number of comparisons which the authors of DCPI Comparisons perceive as being characteristic of a sick, or sickly looking, person: *he looks as if he rose from the grave, he looks as if he got away from the gravedigger's shovel*<sup>6</sup>, *he looks as if he had death on his tongue, he looks like a living corpse, he looks like a shadow, he looks lifeless, he looks like Lazarus, he looks like the seven dear/hungry/skinny years.* (DCPI Comparisons: 435)

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<sup>6</sup> Phraseologism *He got away from the gravedigger's shovel* actually implies that the individual unexpectedly regained health or recovered from a severe illness/injury.

In terms of the phraseological composite *adjective + the word health*, the following appeared in the monitored dictionaries: *poor health* (unsatisfactory physical condition with a constant threat of falling ill or actually having a protracted illness; DCPI Non-Verbal Expressions: 394); *undermined/broken health* (physical condition compromised by dissolute life, hazardous work, great suffering, etc.; DCPI Non-Verbal Expressions: 394); *strong/steel/iron health* (very good physical condition characterized by high resistance to illness of any kind; DCPI Non-Verbal Expressions: 394).

The SYN Corpus contains more phrases of this type with a negative connotation:

**Table 2**

Phraseologism	Number in SYN Corpus	Phraseologism	Number in SYN Corpus
Broken health	228	Feeble health	1
Poor health	200	Decrepit health	1
Fragile health	68	Uncertain health	1
Damaged health	15	Ruined health	1
Impaired health	15	Ravaged health	1
Shattered health	10	Undermined health	1
Frail health	10	Devastated health	1
Deteriorating health	5	Weakened health	1
Unstable health	3	Eroded health	1
Cracked health	2	Spoiled health	1
Dilapidated health	2		

Phraseologisms with a positive connotation found in the SYN Corpus:

**Table 3**

Phraseologism	Number in SYN Corpus	Phraseologism	Number in SYN Corpus
Strong health	315	Solid health	2
Iron health	44	Resilient health	2
Robust health	6	Bronze health	1
Steel health	2	Earthy health	1
Sweet health	2		

The counts in Table 2 and 3 show considerable differences in the frequency with which the individual phraseologisms occur: 18 (60% of 30) appeared more than once, which is significantly more than with proverbs. Some phraseologisms of the *adjective + health* type clearly predominate in texts on certain subjects, something that was not evident in comparisons. *Broken health* is mentioned mainly in periodic publications (199 times of the total), and so are the phrases *healthy as a turnip*, *healthy as a fish* etc., namely in the magazines Reflex and Respekt, the dailies Lidové Noviny, Mladá Fronta Dnes and Blesk, less often in Cinema and Filmový Přehled. In memoirs of prominent personalities and reviews of artistic works, *broken health* is often depicted as a consequence of severe deprivations, such as having been in a concentration

camp during WWII or in prison for a long time in the 1950s. Synonymous with *broken health*, in terms of a hardship-induced decline in health, there is *damaged health*, and the less frequent but more expressive *eroded health* or *shattered health*, whereas the otherwise frequent phraseologism *poor health* appears rather sparingly in materials of this nature.

Another subject conducive to phrases like *broken health*, *damaged health*, the more expressive *eroded health*, *ruined health*, and less frequent *frail* or *poor health*, is sport. The excerpts speak of health problems caused by long-term involvement in extreme sports. Praised, however, is the ability of good athletes to overcome *eroded health*, or possibly *impaired* or *cracked health*, and still achieve good results (the names of ice hockey player Maria Lemieux, athletes Sanchez, Rubin and others are mentioned in that connection more than once). Politicians are not overlooked as people with *broken*, *damaged*, or *weakened health* – most often the former president Havel, former Russian president Boris Jelzcin (whose name is linked with the phraseologisms already mentioned and more, like *frail health*, *undermined health*, *unstable health*, *feeble health*). *Poor health* appears in the encyclopedic texts in connection with prominent personalities from the past (Václav II, Jack London, Terezie Měchurová – the wife of F. Palackého) and the present (sports figures, politicians).

Considering the fact that it is the publication category in which the above phraseology prevails, it may be surprising that phraseologisms with negative connotations are quite rare in testimonials about health compromised (*broken*, *damaged*) by addiction, whether it is alcoholism, drug abuse, anabolic steroids, or work overload (musicians). Likewise, there were few warnings of risks associated with certain types of employment, like mining, or concerns about poor health care that is commonplace in this country:

- *Many miners, often people with broken health, thus feel shunted and without future; they need a big chunk of courage to redirect their life elsewhere.*
- *Influenced by the progress in medicine, people have the impression that impaired health can be fixed as easily as a broken car.*

The most frequent phraseologism associated with the word *health* in a positive sense – *strong health* – occurs most frequently in publications, particularly in various anniversary congratulations (wishes that may be penned by family members, usually named, friends from work, or the public – if prominent personalities like the former president Havel, the current president V. Klaus, or an outstanding athlete are involved), and in New Year's greeting cards. However, *strong health* appears more frequently in statements about the need to improve the health of children, about the importance of good nutrition for better health (including the notions that wine fortifies health), and about the need to promote health education:

- *The only remedy is to promote strong health, and even stronger character, in the young generation.*



- *Educational campaigns play a certain role in the media, in schools, and in the institutions that educate the citizens about health-related issues. (...) Wholesome food is the basis of strong health.*
- *It has been confirmed that lower intake of animal fat and salt, no smoking and more exercise guarantee stronger health.*

Not even pharmaceutical companies are spared criticism for their campaigns promising a quick and easy access to health by using their products. In isolated cases, the opposition *strong health* – *weak health* refer to the state of economy.

*Iron health* is discussed in publications where the author professes his admiration for longevity, for example if he reports on a 100th or even higher-numbered birthday celebration, or when he admires athletic accomplishments. The expression *bronze health* in personal wishes such as: “*Yea, and iron, or at least bronze, health, and a lot of love*” or possibly *steel health*, may be an update of the commonly used phraseological connection *iron health*. Interesting is the use of a highly expressive phrase *earthy health* and *robust health*. *Earthy health* is used in an encyclopedic essay contemplating the symbolism of red color, since red happens to be, according to the author, the symbol of earthy health. Surprisingly, *robust health* is mentioned mainly in reviews of literary and artistic works analyzing some character in film or literature, or the actor’s conceptual approach, where signs of robust health are very important. In one case, the epithet of robust health is applied to the American economy.

The half a billion contemporary texts in the SYN Corpus indicate that the writings potentially usable in education are those touching upon health of athletes, ways of improving health, stories of physical handicaps conquered by strong will (although that may bring up the need to control the degree of *sport-induced stresses lest they lead to health problems*). Articles about health *broken* or *damaged* in consequence of difficult situations (e.g. unjust incarceration) open the possibility of teaching the Czech language in conjunction with health education, and capitalize on the affinity of these subjects with those in the educational module Man and Society. As far as the Czech language and its phraseology are concerned, not always do the textbooks provide enough linguistic material. It is, therefore, up to the teacher to take advantage of the current possibilities in accessing the various types of texts, inclusive of electronic sources, and to be effective in selecting the most appropriate ones.

## ZDRAVÍ A ČESKÁ FRAZELOGIE (KDO JE ZDRAVÝ JAKO ŘÍPA A MÁ PEVNÉ ZDRAVÍ?)

**Abstrakt:** V příspěvku chceme ukázat jeden jazykový aspekt výskytu slov zdraví (podstatné jméno) a zdravý (přídavné jméno): sledujeme jejich uplatnění ve frazeologických spojeních. Zaměříme se na přirovnání typu zdravý jako řípa, zdravý jako ryba, zdravý jako buk a frazeologická spojení přídavné jméno + zdraví: železné zdravý,



pevné zdraví, robustní zdraví, nebo naopak nalomené zdraví, podlomené zdraví, chatrné zdraví. Pokusíme se vysledovat četnost výskytu těchto frazeologických výrazů v textech současné češtiny v Českém národním korpusu SYN, tvořeném 500 miliony slov a slovních tvarů, a ukázat tematickou náplň textů, v nichž se tyto frazeologismy vyskytují, tj. např. zda a do jaké míry především publicistické texty vypovídají o vlivu různých životních podmínek na zdraví, o předávání zkušeností s upevňováním zdraví, o potřebě prosazovat zdravý životní styl apod. Pokusíme se též zamyslet nad tím, jak mohou být frazeologické výrazy se slovy zdraví i zdravý využity ve školské praxi při naplňování cílů v Rámcovém vzdělávacím programu pro základní vzdělávání.

**Klíčová slova:** zdraví a frazeologie, český jazyk, člověk a zdraví, slovní zásoba a výchova ke zdraví