

1 Lost in translation – the influence of language on infant sleep research

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Objectives: We consider whether language shapes cultural interpretations of sleep in the family context using ethnographic data from the Czech Republic to explore one of the methods employed by Czech parents in helping their children aged 0-3 years fall asleep.

Methods: Multi-methodological ethnographic data were collected in the Czech Republic during 2015-2018 with supplemental online data obtained in 2020. This involved focus groups with 90 participants in mother-baby centres, and interviews with 30 families, supplemented with 468 online responses.

Results: In the Czech Republic the use of parental presence with or without physical contact to help a child to fall asleep is a widespread practice. It is well-embedded within Czech culture and referred to by a widely known term: *Uspávání*. Parents expressed multiple motivations for using *Uspávání* to help their child sleep.

Discussion: Within much of the Anglophone sleep literature the practice of actively helping a child to fall asleep is perceived as problematic. A child who cannot fall asleep alone is considered to exhibit 'behavioural insomnia of childhood', and parents are advised to prevent this 'sleep problem' by promoting self-soothing techniques in infancy. We suggest that as there is no English-language equivalent for the word *Uspávání* the concept it encapsulates is under-valued by sleep researchers, and the practice and its consequences are insufficiently researched.

Conclusions: Some important variations in parental sleep practices that are embedded in everyday family systems lack English terminology; *Uspávání* is one such example. This may lead to researchers overlooking or rejecting the validity of such diverse family sleep practices. There is a need for more ethnographic research of sleep in the context of different cultural environments and family systems to explore how language constrains understanding of parent-child sleep.

Keywords: bedtime, sleep, parental approach, infant sleep, sleep research

1 Introduction

2 When anthropologists began examining infant sleep in the late 20th century the diversity of parent-
3 child sleep practices revealed around the world challenged the paradigms of an established infant
4 sleep science predominantly embedded within the Anglosphere.¹ Over the past 20 years sleep
5 patterns and behaviours have been increasingly explored and documented using comparative
6 anthropological approaches, leading to novel insights regarding the diversity of community and
7 familial sleeping practices, as well as new ways of thinking and talking about infant sleep.²⁻⁶

8 Anthropologists Mol and Law⁷ exhort academics in all disciplines to consider the words that they think
9 with, particularly the English words that frame their conceptual paradigms given the ubiquity of
10 English in many academic disciplines. In this paper we consider whether the words we use to think
11 with when considering parent and child sleep cause us to frame family sleep (and family systems) in
12 ways that are unimaginable to speakers of other languages. Furthermore, we consider whether non-
13 English languages have specific words for family sleep behaviours that are unknown and
14 irreproducible in English, and which capture family sleep dynamics that are unfamiliar to infant sleep
15 researchers working only in the Anglosphere. Addressing how parent-child sleep is conceptualised
16 within and beyond the English language is of particular relevance to understanding 'Sleep in the Family
17 System'. We therefore consider whether English-language concepts not only frame, but potentially
18 constrain, our thinking about sleep and families, particularly where family systems diverge from an
19 Americentric model.

20 Ethnographic research has already provided important insights into the topic of family sleep; studies
21 conducted beyond the Anglosphere have described a wide range of parental sleep practices
22 incorporating bed-sharing/co-sleeping, swaddling, soothing, and holding^{5,6,8-11} but to date these have
23 not been incorporated into the dominant paradigm of infant sleep science. For instance, although
24 many research articles point out that co-sleeping is common in Asian countries¹², ethnographic
25 research conducted by Tahan⁵ helped reconceptualize notions about co-sleeping, touch, and intimacy
26 in families. Understanding embodied experiences of touch (including body, mind, heart, spirit,
27 environment, space) became crucial in understanding Japanese experiences of closeness practiced by
28 co-sleeping and co-bathing.

29 In this paper we use ethnographic research to explore cross-cultural conceptions of bed-time routines
30 and the role of parental presence in the transition to sleep for babies and young children. The study
31 from which these data are drawn investigated the experiences and practices of Czech mothers
32 regarding to bedtime routine of their children aged 0-3.

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34 Methods

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36 A multi-methodological ethnographic study was conducted in the Czech Republic from 2015-2018 by
37 LM with supplemental online data collected in 2020. Ethical approval for this study was provided by
38 Charles University, Prague. The Czech Sociological and Anthropological Association (CASA) guidelines
39 on research ethics were followed to ensure that participants provided informed consent (written and
40 verbal) prior to all data collection activities.

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42 The research took place at community centres for mothers in three cities located in CR with
43 permission of directors of the centres and leaders of mothers' groups. One of the cities is in the west
44 of CR, the second in the south and the third in the east; all were chosen as research sites due to the
45 similar size of the cities and the presence of active community centres which regularly organised
46 community groups for mothers and children.

47

48 A substantial component of the research involved focus group discussions about infant sleep. As
49 mothers in community centres regularly shared their attitudes and experiences within the group of

1 other mothers, we conducted focus groups to gather important data from these discussions, Focus
2 group participants were mothers aged 25-40 years, married, CR residents, on maternity leave, and of
3 middle-income status. All had either secondary or university education. All mothers who took part in
4 focus groups had children aged 0-3 years old.

5
6 As Krueger pointed out, focus groups have several benefits, one of which is to obtain information in a
7 socially oriented environment.¹³ Cohesion of the group of participants who are familiar with each
8 other can make participants feel safe in sharing their thoughts and experiences.¹⁴ Two focus groups,
9 each of 120 minutes duration, were held in each city with 15 mothers in each group. Mothers were
10 asked by the first author about their children's sleep experiences and practices and mothers discussed
11 their experiences within the group. Discussions were audiotaped and field-notes were taken by the
12 researcher during the discussion. Focus group data were analysed using constant comparison analysis
13 which is widely used in research where multiple focus groups are conducted in one study.¹⁴ Data were
14 coded in units, then split into categories and at the end themes from each focus groups were
15 expressed and analysed (see below).

16
17 Additional data were collected via semi-structured interviews with families recruited via opportunistic
18 sampling during community centre sessions. Thirty families comprising 30 mothers, 19 fathers and 5
19 grandmothers from similar socio-economic backgrounds were interviewed. The age range of parents
20 was 25 – 40 years while grandmothers were aged between 53-65 years. All adult family members
21 provided verbal consent prior to all data collection and mothers provided written consent. Interviews
22 lasted for approximately 60 minutes on average; field-notes were used to record important non-verbal
23 data.

24
25 Interviews and focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed. The 1st author then read through the
26 text multiple times to code (label) words, opinions, sentences, and phrases which were relevant to the
27 topic of the research or were mentioned several times by the participants. The labelled codes were
28 then grouped into categories, and subsequently into themes such as parental evening strategies,
29 perceptions of normal sleep, maternal emotions and self-confidence, family conflict, family structure,
30 family lifestyle, parent-child interaction, maternal attitudes towards sleep. The final analytical step was
31 to describe connections between the categories. Here we specifically discuss the themes of parental
32 evening strategies and parent-child interaction.

33 A follow-up online single-question survey was conducted in 2020 via social media to gain insight into
34 parental motivation surrounding one specific sleep-related practice that was identified during the
35 previous fieldwork. The question: "For those who are helping children to fall asleep, what is your
36 motivation to do that?" was posted on an open online forum for parents who wished to share
37 information about infant sleep. Anonymous respondents on the social media forum were mostly
38 mothers with children aged 0-3 years who were seeking information about infant sleep without sleep
39 training.

40 Historical and medical literature in CR was also consulted to inform a better understanding of the
41 history of infant sleep practices in CR in comparison to those in the Anglosphere.

42 43 **Results**

44 45 Fieldwork results

46
47 In focus groups and interviews participants recounted how they managed the sleep onset of their
48 babies and children by passive or active involvement in the child's transition to sleep. Active sleep
49 onset management involved helping the child to fall asleep via rocking, feeding, patting, talking, or

1 reading to the child (e.g., fairy tales), or by holding the child's hand; passive management involved
2 lying down with the child and waiting in silence until they closed their eyes and fell asleep.

3
4 The Czech language has a specific term—*Uspávání*--for parents' practices used to initiate and maintain
5 the sleep of their infants and young children. It is conceptualised by parents as the provision of
6 emotional and/or physical support for the child during their journey to and through sleep. In analysing
7 interviews, group discussions and fieldnotes, this term was mentioned across the whole study and was
8 widely used in conversations between Czech mothers and professionals. *Uspávání* appeared in all
9 discussions about sleep experiences and practices, both in community focus group discussions and
10 within families.

11 Interestingly the term *Uspávání* is derived from the Czech word for sleep which is *Spánek*. The -u
12 prefix is used to express different meanings, some of which are well linked to baby sleep. For instance,
13 this prefix is used in words which can have similar meanings of “coming to an end” or also “creating
14 calmness”.¹⁵ ‘Creating calmness’ also has other synonyms: *utišit, uklidnit, umírnit, ukonejšit,*
15 *uchlácholit, ukolébat*. These are also used in relation to infants and children and their journey to
16 sleep.¹⁶ The similarity of all these words is that they are linked to actively helping a child into calmness
17 or calm help to achieve the end of activity or fussiness.

18 *Uspávání* and its meaning are also used in an emotional way to express spending night-time with the
19 child by relaxing and supporting him to fall asleep peacefully; it therefore has positive connotations of
20 closeness and calmness, and does not bear any resemblance to the self-soothing, self-settling, and
21 self-regulating techniques that are prominent in discussions of infant sleep in the Anglosphere, nor
22 does it relate to teaching children to sleep alone and/or become independent. Commonly Czech
23 parents do not expect infants and young children to self-regulate from an early age; it is generally
24 recognised that parental regulation of infants and children by means of *Uspávání* can be an important
25 component of the family system.

26 We were unable to find an English equivalent for *Uspávání*, which is used in either parent-talk or sleep
27 science, and which would refer to all the meanings and original context of this term.

28 Historical findings

29
30 We found that the term *Uspávání* appeared in the Slovak Czech-Latin-German-Hungarian dictionary
31 which was written by Anton Bernolák between the years 1787 – 1808 and published in 1825¹⁷ and in
32 the Czech dictionary¹⁶ of 1937. This is therefore not a recently invented term or concept.

33 The term *Uspávání* was widely used in Czech literature including folk and fiction stories, poetry, and
34 folk lullabies from the 18th and 19th century, confirming that this word was used in everyday spoken
35 language for at least 200 years. In literature and lullabies it is pictured as parental support for helping
36 the crying or fussy child to sleep or to calm a baby and bring him pleasant dreams. *Uspávání* is
37 described in literature from history as part of the everyday experiences of maternal life.^{18–20} In some
38 of the historical writing we found that older siblings helped their younger ones to fall asleep using
39 *Uspávání*.²¹ Historical literature sometimes offers *Uspávání* as a suggestion for mothers to calmly bring
40 their baby to sleep.

41 Online survey

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43 Having identified the concept of *Uspávání* during fieldwork we wished to further explore the attitudes
44 of parents to the concept of *Uspávání* in families using this practice and understand their motivation
45 to help their children to fall asleep. To be able to fully explain and describe this term, we conducted an
46 online survey on a public social media page for Czech mothers interested in supporting their child's
47 sleep without sleep training. We asked one single question: *For those who are helping children to fall*

1 *asleep, what is your motivation to do that?* LM analysed and categorised the 468 comments received
2 and identified several commonly expressed motivations for practicing *Uspávání*.

3

4 ***Instinctual behaviour:*** The primary motivation highlighted in responses was the naturalness of helping
5 the child to fall asleep sleep if he cannot do that by himself. It was commonly expressed as a natural
6 reaction to an infant's crying and fussiness.

7 *"I have never thought about Uspávání as something that I should decide about. It seems to me natural*
8 *to help my child fall asleep and react to his cry."*

9 ***Intergenerational emotional transition – both negative and positive:*** These motivations came from
10 positive or negative memories from the mothers' own childhoods. Their mother, father, grandmother,
11 or grandfather used to help them fall asleep. The emotion linked to that experience was so strong that
12 they wished to provide the same secure feeling to their children. Other parents remembered their
13 fear from being alone at night and their desperate wish to have their parents close by. The feeling of
14 loneliness was so strong that they wanted their children to have better memories and to never
15 experience such feelings.

16 *"I help my son to fall asleep because I do not want him to feel fear and insecurity from the night. I want*
17 *him to feel safe, comfortable, loved. My parents did not want to help me to fall asleep when I was a*
18 *child. I can still feel that loneliness and fear from my memories. I don't want him to experience the*
19 *same thing."*

20 *„...Ever since I remember from childhood, I always had someone close by me to fall asleep with – either*
21 *my mum, my father, my brother, or grandparents. I could tell them what was bothering me and*
22 *peacefully fall asleep. When I needed to make sure I was not alone at night, they were always nearby.*
23 *Seems natural for me to provide this feeling of security to my child too."*

24 ***Bidirectional feeling of relaxation in the evening:*** Interestingly many mothers mentioned that helping
25 children to fall asleep helps them unwind too. They take it as their time to slow down, relax, and calm
26 down after a busy day at home or at work.

27 *"I help my children to fall asleep because it is a nice habit for me, our moment of closeness, cuddles,*
28 *time of saying how we love each other. It is also my time."*

29 ***Solution for difficult child temperament or sleep:*** Mothers also described that *Uspávání* is the only way
30 to help their active or very sensitive child sleep enough, so he is not overtired. Surprisingly *Uspávání* as
31 the reaction to child sleeplessness was less common with most of the mothers indicating *Uspávání* as
32 something linked both to their and child's emotional needs.

33 *"Uspávání is the only way to get my fussy and hyperactive child to sleep which he needs."*

34 ***Parental conviction and meeting children's needs:*** Others indicated that meeting the child's needs is
35 part of their parental goal. *"My presence helps my daughter to calm her thoughts and body and*
36 *peacefully fall into sleep. It is beautiful to see how something so basic as my presence can help create*
37 *a feeling of security and love. It only confirms to me that it is the right way for us."*

38 Interestingly the words "security, safety and closeness" appeared frequently in the comments
39 analysed. As we previously noted feeling secure is the emotion which was mostly linked to sleep, and
40 which is often mentioned in psychological and anthropological research (both biological and
41 sociocultural) as a prerequisite or necessary condition for sleep.^{2,4,5,8,22-24}

42 **Discussion**

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1 Via ethnographic fieldwork with mothers of young children in the Czech Republic we have
2 documented a widespread practice, *Uspávání*, for helping infants and children achieve calmness at
3 bedtime and transition to sleep. *Uspávání* appears to occupy an important place in certain languages
4 that reflect a shared cultural and historical heritage, as some linguistically and geographically close
5 neighbours of the Czech Republic have similar words. For example, Slovakia has the same term
6 *Uspávanie* with the same meaning. Polish has the similar term *Usypianie*. The Russian language has
7 multiple words for helping children to sleep; similar to *Uspávání* is the Russian term *Usypljät'*.

8 But other countries which are not so geographically close to the Czech Republic also have similar
9 words for emotional and physical support of children during their journey to and through sleep.
10 Lithuanian parents use the word "Užmigdyti" to express parents' presence during the time their child
11 is falling asleep. It includes for example reading a book, telling stories, snuggling with the child etc, and
12 when Latvian parents want to calm down children for sleep by singing, rocking, or cuddling, they name
13 it "iemidzināt". Japanese parents also have special terms for explaining the child's closeness during the
14 evening and sleep. One of them is "nekashitsuke" which describes the different rituals to calm down
15 the child and help him sleep. For example, by reading books, telling stories, singing lullabies etc.
16 Although some of these behaviours for helping a child to unwind before sleep have been incorporated
17 into the concept of the 'bedtime routine', within the Anglosphere parents are advised to leave their
18 infant or child to fall asleep alone at the end of such a routine, rather than remaining present and
19 soothing them into sleep.²⁵

20 During the 20th century in CR expert opinions and books by paediatricians offering parenting advice
21 became very popular. Sleep was not a major topic in these books, but it was briefly suggested that a
22 child should sleep on their own surface and parents should implement a strict regime to maintain a
23 good night's sleep.²⁶ In the late 20th century Czech paediatrician Dr. Švejcar published a book in
24 which he suggested infants should sleep in the same room as parents for the first year of life and that
25 sleep may differ according to the needs of individual children.²⁷ At the same time, he advised not
26 reacting to evening crying and night waking indicating that some of these paediatric experts were
27 providing guidance reminiscent of popular US and UK authors.^{26,27}

28 In contrast psychologist, researcher, and popular Czech author of books for parents, Zdeněk Matějček,
29 argued that the feeling of separation anxiety at night may be so intense for some children that they
30 need parental support to handle it.²⁸ He described that *Uspávání* may be beneficial for psychological
31 development and the child's internal feeling of security late into childhood.²⁹ Matějček's guidance
32 supported the parental decision to take their child into the parental bed if the child needed it, and
33 added that a child's need for parental presence would disappear when the child was ready to handle
34 the frustration from the night on his own.²⁸ He argued this was a natural process that was also linked
35 to child temperament. It is possible, therefore, that widespread implementation of the practice of
36 *Uspávání* in ČR stems from its popularisation in the late 1980s via these publications – however its
37 continued popularity 30 years later, and cognate terms found in other languages, suggests *Uspávání* is
38 an embedded cultural phenomenon described by Matějček rather than a recent 'fashionable'
39 parenting fad.

40
41 Another contextual factor relevant to the widespread importance of *Uspávání* in CR may be the length
42 of paid parental leave. The Czech Republic family social support system is strikingly different to that of
43 many Anglophone countries. Since 1980 parents in the Czech Republic are allowed to take paid
44 parental leave of up to 3 years for each child. Official statistical data indicate that only 6% of mothers
45 in CR go back to work before the child is 2 years old.³⁰ Most parents take the full length of parental
46 leave for three years. The ČR paid parental leave is one of the longest in the EU.³⁰ Parental working
47 activity can be one of the essential factors influencing parental approaches to infant and child sleep.
48 Work, family regime and sleep training of babies to achieve uninterrupted parental sleep are often
49 mentioned together in the English language infant sleep literature from the 19th and 20th century.⁸

1 With longer parental leave parents may feel less pressure to implement strategies to promote self-
2 regulation or suppress the night-time disruption of their children³¹, and local researchers may consider
3 the role of infant self-regulation and maternal availability at bedtime in different ways than they are
4 conceptualised in the Americentric paradigm of family systems research.

5
6 The practice of soothing a child or baby to sleep by patting, stroking, and physical contact is, of course,
7 familiar to most parents around the world, however, it seems this practice is hidden in some cultures
8 where there is no term to name it. Previously social scientists have criticised the field of sleep
9 medicine for its focus on defining norms and creating sleep pathologies to treat, instead of focusing on
10 understanding the variability of sleep patterns within individuals, societies, and environments.³² Here
11 we have contributed new data on one small aspect of that variability, namely *Uspávání*. Although the
12 English language contains many words to explain different responsive evening strategies such as
13 rocking to sleep, soothing, comforting, calming, reassuring, regulating etc, we were unable to find any
14 concept equivalent to *Uspávání*, which describes a parental approach to quiding children to and
15 through sleep with emotional or physical support. Perhaps, as Mol and Law⁷ suggest, this may be a
16 consequence of the dominant discourse of infant sleep in the English language being focussed on the
17 creation of independent infant sleep habits emphasising concepts such as self-soothing and solitary
18 sleeping.

19
20 We acknowledge this is a preliminary and partial report of night-time parenting in CR and that there
21 are multiple limitations associated with this research. The data collected rely on parental reports of
22 their bed-time practices rather than direct observations. More observational data about evening
23 interactions between parents and children who use *Uspávání* may help to explore this widely used
24 practice more in depth. This research was also limited by focussing primarily on mothers' perceptions
25 of *Uspávání* and it would be valuable to conduct comparative research about perceptions of *Uspávání*
26 by mothers, fathers, and other family members. Quantitatively representative data about the number
27 of parents who practice of *Uspávání* in the Czech Republic are missing and would help future
28 researchers interpret how widespread *Uspávání* is as a Czech parenting strategy. Interrogation of the
29 pitfalls or negative consequences of *Uspávání* would also help provide a more balanced picture by
30 exploring parents' motivations for not supporting their child to fall asleep. Objective data comparing
31 child sleep outcomes following the use of *Uspávání* vs. independent sleep onset would be helpful in
32 understanding the costs and benefits of these different approaches.

33 34 **Conclusion**

35 Parental presence during an infant or child's transition to sleep can be an important part of a family
36 bedtime routine. In the Czech Republic focus groups and interviews at three geographically dispersed
37 mothers' groups found that soothing a child to sleep (*Uspávání*) was a well - known parental strategy
38 considered as usual and normal. Within the Anglosphere sleep researchers have argued that solitary
39 sleeping infants and children who have the ability to self-soothe are both the norm, and a pre-
40 requisite for good quality sleep, but by focussing on these culturally desirable traits they may have
41 failed to examine other behaviours that are widespread among parents and children around the
42 world. As anthropologists have encouraged researchers to consider the words they use to think with,
43 we bring this suggestion to the attention of infant and child sleep researchers.

44 Anthropologists who originate from different parts of the world than those where sleep science has
45 developed are aware that English terminology is currently insufficient to describe the breadth of sleep
46 in the family system, and thereby limits the research possibilities being explored. We argue in this
47 article that essential information about infant and parental behaviour can be hidden under the
48 languages we use to talk about sleep, and in which we conduct research, which may limit appreciation
49 of the full-range of parental practices, motivations, and experiences.

1 Acknowledgement

2 We would like to thank all participants who took part in this multimethodological ethnographic study,
3 as well as to our colleagues from different parts of the world, who brought us interesting equivalents
4 to the word Uspávání in their native language.

5

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