# Just about time! How to tell the clock in Czech

Imagine a boy at the train station, on his own for the first time. His phone says it's 4:20 PM, the "departures board" is full of numbers that look more like basketball scoreboards than time signal and all three people that he asked, told him that the train would leave *v půl pátý*. Can you see the confusion in his little frightened eyes? Czech time expressions can seem a little messy at first, but it’s only a different system that takes a while to get used to. Or two systems, actually.

The three Czechs who talked to our boy used a 12-hour clock system that is similar to English with one huge difference – where English “adds” halves to an hour, Czech subtracts them. If we translate *půl druhé* word for word, we get *half two*. But don’t get too excited, the direct translation isn’t of much help here - English *half two* is still 2:30, whereas Czech *půl druhé* means something along the lines of “half of the second hour” – so 1:30 on your phone. So if you express time in Czech, never forget to subtract one hour, otherwise, you’ll end up being late all the time.

Just like many other languages in continental Europe, Czech also uses a 24-hour system or “military time”. It takes some maths at first but, on the other hand, deletes the confusion between AM and PM, which might come quite in handy, for example when one sets up their alarm clock, right? To figure out what time it is, you just need to subtract twelve from the afternoon hours, so 18:00 becomes 6 o’clock in the afternoon.

So why on earth do Czechs need two ways to tell time? That’s hard to tell, but we can say that there is a slight difference in usage: we generally use “military time” in written language and the 12-hour system in spoken. It is also true that the 24-hour system is used in a more formal context; you rarely hear people agreeing to meet up for a beer around the 19th hour. Also, don’t be surprised if you hear *o půl druhý* instead of *v půl druhé* – Czech speakers, especially those from the Bohemian regions, tend to go “rules schmules” with their language and almost never use the standard word endings in informal conversation.

For those who wonder what happened to the boy and his train – it took him quite some time to find someone who spoke English well enough to guide him to the right train. But he made it – as the doors closed behind him, the conductor remarked: “Tak to bylo za pět dvanáct, mladíku.” (which is a Czech idiom that means something like “just in time”). Or should he rather have said: “Tak to bylo jedenáct padesát pět?”