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"The Fifth Element" : a remark on the FSP factors

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A Remark on the FSP Factors

Abstract

It has become canonical when listing the factors signalling Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) to name four of them: linear modification, semantic structure, context and (emphatic, contrasting, and focusing) intonation. The paper argues for the inclusion of one more candidate for the status of a potential FSP indicator – typography or punctuation – to cover cases where FSP-relevant intonation is marked by typographic devices, such as italics, boldface, small capitals, etc., in written text. Acknowledgement of punctuation marking FSP-relevant prosody in writing, however marginal and discretionary, as a potential contributory factor – the 'fifth element' – in decoding FSP would be methodologically sound and consistent. It would also be a useful antidote to the widespread practice of using self-supplied intonation in the FSP analysis of written communication, which, strictly speaking, somewhat presumptuously amounts to confusing two different modes of language and oversteps the boundary between the writer and the reader of the text.

Key words

FSP factors; potentiality; intonation; punctuation; emphasis

Information structure or Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) – as developed by Firbas (1992) and referred to in this paper – is essentially about a special type of meaning which words acquire in text/sentence, a meaning relevant to what is being communicated and integral to the import of the message. It is this meaning that Leech (1981: 19–20), in his outline of seven types of meaning, calls "thematic meaning" and lists alongside conceptual and associative meanings. Thematic meaning is described there as "what is communicated by the way in which a speaker or writer organizes the message, in terms of ordering, focus, and

emphasis". Cruse (2006: 181) goes on to add that "the two main dimensions of thematic meaning are topic vs comment and given vs new information."

Quite clearly, thematic meaning with an information-structure indicating function is not an inherent feature of linguistic units. It has to be generated each time anew with every new text/context. It arises from speaker-hearer interaction and is in principle calculable from the text. Such a description, of course, falls straight into the realm of pragmatics and, although FSP theory came into being long before and independently of the emergence of pragmatics, the investigation of information structure is nowadays subsumed under this field of study. So, for example, Horn and Ward's (2004) *The Handbook of Pragmatics* devotes two chapters to FSP issues. Both of them mention Firbas (though not his comprehensive monograph), but only the second one, Gundel and Fretheim's Topic and Focus, gives due credit to the extent of research into this field in Czech linguistics (175–176): "Work of the Czech linguist Mathesius in the 1920s (e.g. Mathesius 1928) initiated a rich and highly influential tradition of research in this area within the Prague School that continues to the present day (see Firbas 1966, Daneš 1974, Sgall et al. 1973, Sgall et al. 1986, inter alia)."

In the Brno approach to FSP the distribution of thematic meaning in the sentence is viewed in terms of communicative dynamism (CD) conveyed by the sentence elements with varying degrees of CD. The pragmatic functional load, i.e. the degree of CD, carried by sentence elements is computed primarily from three FSP factors, the linear modification, context and semantic structure of the sentence. (The semantic factor broadly speaking refers to Leech's other types of meaning, conceptual and associative.) In the spoken language, the interplay of these factors is extended by a fourth factor, intonation (prosody). To quote Firbas (1992: 218), "Intonation, which is absent from the inventory of the means of the written language, indeed reflects the CD distribution as determined by the interplay of the non-prosodic FSP factors".

Thus, decoding FSP in a written sentence, according to Firbas (1992: 219), goes by the signals provided by the (i) syntactic implementation of a given sentence element and its relations to other elements, which activates its semantic content and character, and/or its (ii) linear position, and/or (iii) the element's relation to the immediately relevant context. As regards intonation, Firbas explains that "[it] asserts itself in its specific contributory way if it effects prosodic intensification, non-reevaluating or re-evaluating, and thereby raises the degree of CD already assigned to the element by the non-prosodic factors". Hence, he rejects claims that CD can be equated with prosodic prominence (PP): "As a participant in the interplay of FSP factors, intonation cannot operate independently of the other FSP factors." Firbas is said (Adam 2007: 35) to have likened it to a running attitudinal commentary on the content of the utterance, capable of changing the overall distribution of CD, even causing the theme to become the bearer of the highest degree of CD.

The standard description of the role of intonation as an FSP feature, i.e. the relation between the degrees of communicative dynamism and those of prosodic

prominence (PP), appears in Chamonikolasová (1995, 2007, 2010) and Adam (2007: 35–7). There are three types of relation between CD and PP – perfect correspondence, selective non-reevaluating intensification and reevaluating intensification. Perfect correspondence means that the intonation copies the information structure emerging from the non-prosodic factors with the rhematic element receiving the nuclear stress. Selective non-reevaluating intensification affecting the thematic element represents a deviation from the CD signalled by the non-prosodic factors. However, the thematic element, though prosodically intensified, remains thematic and thus the PP distribution does not reevalute the CD distribution (e.g. 'His wife is okay, but *he* seems to have troubles' – with 'he' contrastively intensified, but 'troubles' remaining prosodically most prominent). Finally, and most importantly, reevaluating prosodic intensification defeats, as it were, the non-prosodic factors, alters the theme-rheme sequence they would signal in the absence of the intensification, and produces an emotionally marked information structure ('I think she is wrong. – Well, but *she* doesn't.'). Accordingly, it is maintained that intonation becomes an important FSP factor only when it endows a sentence element with a marked emphasis.

The central idea of the present paper is very simple. Since thematic meaning or FSP has to be calculated, i.e. worked out on the basis of the FSP factors, and since written text offers only three such factors for FSP analysis, analysts may sometimes come up against ambiguities and potentialities and need further help in FSP inferencing. Actually, it is common practice in the FSP analysis of written data to have occasional recourse even to the fourth factor, prosody, as a means of disambiguating the theme-rheme distribution. It is interesting that the test by intonation is used by researchers who are non-native speakers of English and they report having no doubts about the correctness of their assignment of intonation to the written sentence. Methodologically, however, the use of self-supplied prosody in the analysis of a written text is somewhat tricky.

On the other hand, while it is generally recognized that prosody is at least partly, though crudely, reflected by orthographic means, i.e. punctuation, there seems to have been no systematic study to find out what the punctuation practice relevant to theme-rheme distribution in English is like. It is not difficult to imagine that the above CD-PP typology could easily be applied to the relation between CD and 'typographic prominence'. Such a typology would again include perfect correspondence (typographically unmarked), selective non-reevaluating intensification (typographically marking the thematic element without backgrounding the other non-prosodic factors) and finally reevaluating intensification (typographically re-evaluating a thematic element into rhematic).

Such a study could settle the issue to what extent punctuation and FSP are correlated, in what way, and which punctuation marks are actually used for this purpose and how often. It could resolve such questions as to whether punctuation marks are used only in the two cases mentioned above of 'selective non-reevaluating intensification' with no effect on FSP and 'reevaluating prosodic intensification', resulting in emotionally marked information structure and outweighing the

non-prosodic factors, or whether there are instances, for example, where punctuation (typographic prominence) coincides with the other FSP factors and produces a typographically extra marked rheme.

Certainly the information provided in the standard accounts of English punctuation is not very helpful in this respect, as a look at the two largest authoritative grammars and a sprinkling of others shows. While Appendix I in Quirk et al. (1985) is described as surveying "a set of prosodic devices that help to communicate grammatical and other distinctions in spoken English", Appendix II is said to "examine the visual devices that perform a similar role for written English". The question is to what extent prosodic marking in speech is matched by visual marking in writing. Obviously, there are limits to what typography/punctuation can do as well as limits determined by the prevailing conventions as to the use of the existing punctuation marks. A section in Appendix I called 'Prosodic marking compared with punctuation' (1606) points out that conventional punctuation is in many respects inadequate to deal with important aspects of prosody, "… although we can indicate emphasis in written English (usually by means of italics in print and underscoring in typescript or handwriting), we cannot distinguish emphases of radically different sound and value" as in 'You shouldn't give her *any* flower'; and it indicates how prosodic notation can represent these differences ('You |shouldn't give her ↑ÀNy flowers'|). It also shows how prosodic marking helps to identify focused items in cases like these:

> |John could only SÈE his wife from the doorway|
> |John could only see his WÌFE from the doorway|
> |John could only see his wife from the DÒORway|

In Appendix II punctuation marks are described as serving two purposes, the separation of linguistic units and the specification of a grammatical, semantic, or pragmatic function. It is the latter purpose that appears to be potentially relevant for FSP. Punctuation used for specification includes quotation marks which may "match a heavy prosodic marking in speech" (p. 1635), but the appendix mentions only their use to indicate "a hesitation or apologetic introduction of a doubtful or discordant item" or "doubtful validity". To mark emphasis, the Appendix says, italics, underlining, wriggle underlining and occasionally capitals, bold face and small capitals are typically used ('I told him that his 'wife' had come and let him know by the way I said that I didn't think she really *was* his wife.').

There is no explicit mention of the focusing function in Huddleston et al. (2002). However, in their chapter on punctuation, they introduce some interesting terminological innovations. They call punctuation marks "and the other devices that fall within the domain of punctuation" punctuation indicators. Those indicators which are potential candidates for FSP marking, i.e. italics, capital letters, bold face, and small capitals, are classified as non-segmental and viewed as 'modifications' of the default form, i.e. ordinary lower-case roman. Unfortunately, no examples of punctuation indicators used as signals of emphasis are given.

By contrast, Truss's (2003) popularizing book on punctuation, without mentioning the focusing function either, contains several accidental examples in just a few pages (105–126), illustrating a wide range of focusing devices, such as capitals (Crocodile Dundee's famous repartee: 'Call that a knife? THAT's a KNIFE.'), quotation marks ('… remember she said the comma was "servile"'?), colon (a quote from G.B. Shaw: 'I find fault with only three things in this story of yours, Jenkins: the beginning, the middle and the end.'), and italics ('The main reason people use it, however, is that *they know you can't use it wrongly.* – And we have *you* to thank, Special Policeman Semicolon.').

Finally, Trask (1997: 107–118) in his brief guide on punctuation explicitly mentions and demonstrates the use of punctuation marks to indicate emphasis or contrast. He starts with a specific brand of quotation marks, and it is worth noticing that in his description he employs two more devices, italics and boldface. "What the writer is doing here is *distancing* himself from the term in quotes. … Quotation marks used in this way are informally called **scare quotes**." His example is:

The Institute for Personal Knowledge is now offering a course in 'self-awareness exercises'.

Speaking of italics, he has this to say: "Most commonly, italics are used for emphasis or contrast – that is, to draw attention to some particular part of a text." Here are some examples:

> The Battle of New Orleans was fought in January 1815, two weeks *after* the peace treaty had been signed.
> According to the linguist Steven Pinker, 'Many prescriptive rules of grammar are *just plain dumb* and should be deleted from the usage handbooks' [emphasis added].
> Standard English usage requires '*insensitive*' rather than '*unsensitive*'.
> Lemmings have, not two, but *three* kinds of sex chromosome.

"The first two examples", he explains, "illustrate emphasis and the last two illustrate contrast. This is the standard way of representing emphasis or contrast …" Describing boldface letters ('A colon is **never** followed by a hyphen or a dash'), he says "they are sometimes used to provide very strong emphasis, as an alternative to italics", and concludes by a note on small capitals, "Very occasionally, small capitals are used for emphasis, but it is usually preferable to use italics for this, or even boldface."

The only quantitative study focusing on a punctuation mark and its uses (with possible relevance for FSP) that I have come across so far is Douglas's (2009) conference paper 'Encoding Intonation. The Use of Italics and the Challenges for Translation'. In it he examines the distribution of italics in two English fiction texts (Henry James's *What Maisie Knew,* Frank O'Connor's *The Complete Stories*, including the total of 278 000 tokens) and two Italians texts and analyzes the functions of this punctuation mark and the way it was dealt with in the respective translations into Italian and English. He distinguishes between uses

due to punctuation conventions (designation of titles, quotations, foreign bor-
rowings, onomatopoeia, representations of dialect, narrative prominence, embed-
ded quotations) and the use marking prosodic effects, i.e. tonic prominence. He
finds a significant proportion of tonic-prominence uses (357 tokens/102 types in
James, 51/36 types in O'Connor). The twenty most common italic types denoting
tonic prominence, which account for 63.8 per cent of the total, include the follow-
ing words (in descending frequency order): *me, you, I, is, her, him, she, can, that,
are, have, will, with, would, do, he, us, was, must, now.*

Unfortunately, the author does not examine these italic uses denoting tonic
prominence from the FSP perspective and focuses on translation issues. Among
other things, the findings of the paper suggest that the number of italicised items
in texts may be far greater than might be expected, on the other hand their use
is idiolectal and may vary greatly from author to author. Next, the number of
tonic-prominence cases is conspicuously high compared to convention-based
uses. Finally Douglas's list of the twenty most frequent italicised words bearing
tonic prominence seems to confirm the impression obtained from FSP studies that
italics and intonation centre frequently co-occur in personal pronouns in cases
where the FSP structure is not unambiguously indicated in the written language,
i.e. in cases of potentiality. It is also clear that punctuation marks such as italics
are multifunctional and instances unrelated to FSP have to be filtered out and that
FSP-related punctutation marking is optional.

However, there is no doubt that written language does have certain systemic
means whereby it can substitute for the prosodic FSP factor when the occasion
arises. The relation between written and spoken language and their respective
norms was of great interest to Vachek (1973, 1989). He speaks of their functional
specificity and complementariness and the existence of compensatory means in
either of them (1989: 108–9). "One should only realize that opposed to the rich
scale of melodic and expiratory means available to the spoken norm its written
counterpart has at its disposal only a much poorer inventory of punctuation and
other differentiating means (e.g. italics, bold types, spaced print, etc.)." At the
same time he stresses that the written norm and its range of devices are not infe-
rior, but simply different.

Speaking of style, Vachek (1989: 45–7) also draws attention to the fact that
written stylistic norms and the use of punctuation may differ across languages
and even across different stages of one and the same language. Among the par-
allels he mentions the "use of the italic symbols, signalling the emphatic and/
or emotional quality of the words or word-groups …" and quotation marks that
may signal emotion and even carry a special colouring (irony or even sarcasm) in
addition to other things. In Russian and other languages using Cyrillic, he notes,
italics are used to signal only emphasis or emotion, but not foreign words (as is
common in English). In hand-written utterances, he observes, underlining can
be used exclusively to signal emphasis. Finally, he mentions one other device
signalling emphasis, the spacing out of graphemes which appears to be common
in Czech and German, but is rarely used in English. (The list of typographic de-

vices available to signal emphasis and contrast also includes capitalization, font size, wriggly underlining, quotation marks, coloured highlighting, and possibly others.) Firbas (1954), in his article on English sentence punctuation, observes that one of the differences between English and Czech is the fact that in the English punctuation practice the emotive-volitional factor is far more prominent, although even here it is subordinate to the grammatical factor.

To sum up, we started by pointing out the pragmatic nature of the FSP meaning which is inferred from text by considering its linear arrangement, context and semantic structure, and in the case of spoken language, by considering its (emphatic, contrasting, focusing) prosody. At the same time, it is taken for granted that in writing intonation relevant for FSP may be, if partially, denoted by punctuation (italics, etc.) or other typographic means. It was also pointed out that it is common practice to use self-supplied intonation in the FSP analysis of written communication, thus mixing up two different modes of language and blurring the distinction between the producer and the recipient of the text. Yet, punctuation, a feature specific to writing, is never mentioned as a potential contributory factor in decoding FSP at all. It is therefore argued, for the sake of methodological consistence and completeness, that punctuation marking FSP-relevant prosody in writing, however marginal and optional, should be listed among the four FSP factors as the 'fifth element' from which FSP may be inferred.

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