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On FSP functions of the first syntactic element in the English sentence

ON FSP FUNCTIONS OF THE FIRST SYNTACTIC ELEMENT IN THE ENGLISH SENTENCE

Eva Golková

The present paper is a contribution to the study of the themes in the functional perspectives of the English and the Czech sentences. It continues the researches of Vilém Mathesius as they have been developed by Jan Firbas and Aleš Svoboda. The former has laid down the delimitations of the theme (Firbas 1986) and the latter has established the functions that can be performed by the components within the theme (Svoboda 1981, 1983). Svoboda's concept of diatheme has been of particular importance for my inquiry.

The purpose of this paper is to establish the relative degree of communicative dynamism ($=$CD) of the first syntactic element within the English sentence, i.e. to determine whether it operates as theme proper (Th_p), diatheme (Th_d), transition proper (Tr_p), transition (Tr), rheme (Rh) or rheme proper (Rh_p). Sentence beginnings in English have already been investigated from the point of view of FSP (esp. in Firbas 1956 and ·Masaryková 1977), but the research has been based on excerpts drawn from fiction only. To discover any possible differences in different functional styles, I decided to investigate the FSP value of the first syntactic element in 2,500 sentences/clauses from fictional prose and 2,500 sentences/clauses from factual, non-fictional prose.[1]

The term 'syntactic element' in my research excludes conjunctions (except those causing inversion) but includes the traditional categories of subject, predicate (or a part of it), object, adverbial of time, place, manner and cause, sentence adverb, existential *there,* and complement. Although the elements may be simple, expanded and multiple, they are interpreted as one unit (the attribute being only a dependent part of a unit). The sentence/clause in my research does not contain more than one predicative nexus,[2] i.e. it may be either dependent or independent, but is not complex (cf. Uhlířová 1967.67 and 1969.360).[3]

In discussing my material I shall proceed from the least frequent sentence beginning to the most common, giving at least one illustrative example for each of the types. In each case, the heading introducing the example(s) and the comment will state the FSP function of the first syntactic element as well as the frequencies of the function in fictional prose and in non-fictional prose. The words expressing the first syntactic element will be italicized.

$Tr_p + Rh_p$: fiction 0.52%, non-fiction 0.04%, TOTAL 0.28%.

1. /When they came within sight of the house Betty whispered,/ 'That's it.' SH 45,12·

The least frequent type; one of the types where Tr_p is combined with another FSP function. In my non-fiction corpus of 2,500 sentences/clauses there is only one sentence of this type.

Tr_p: fiction 1.60%, non-fiction 0.20%, TOTAL 0.90%

2. *Does* Elizabeth come into it? PB 37,16

The auxiliary *does/do*, introducing a general question, is the temporal and modal exponent of the finite verb and as such performs the function of transition proper (Firbas 1965.174−5). Questions are more frequent in fiction than in non-fiction; hence the higher percentage of Tr_p at the beginning of the clause in fiction.

$Th_d + Tr_p$: fiction 1.88%, non-fiction 0.44%, TOTAL 1.16%

3. /Now you've had some talk with Mr. Ackworth,/ *who's* our wool buyer − and a very good one too. PB 35,12

The relative pronoun refers to the rheme proper of the preceding sentence and makes it the centre of the scene from the viewpoint of the whole relative clause, operating as its diatheme (cf. Svoboda 1981.50). It is combined with transition proper. More frequent in fiction than in non-fiction.

Part of Tr_p: fiction 1.64%, non-fiction 1.40%, TOTAL 1.52%

4. /The Prime Minister affectively appoints the other ministers and may also require them to resign,/ though *in fact* the resignations of ministers are always arranged so as to appear to be voluntary, . . . BL 21,10

Sentence adverbs *in fact, in practice, in reality, actually, indeed, of course, at any rate, apparently, somehow, perhaps, most probably, certainly, (un)fortunately, after all, for example, please, just* and *now* (with imperatives), *in general,* and other qualify the sentence as a whole, modifying its modality; some scholars call them modal particles (cf. Šmilauer 1966.401). The very modal character of the sentence adverb makes it part of transition proper.[5]

Tr_p with an ellipsis of Th_p
(or Tr with an ellipsis of Th_p and Tr_p):
fiction 2.16%, non-fiction 1.64%, TOTAL 1.90%

5. /They were polite/ but *couldn't* conceal a certain blankness. PB 9,26
6. /I wish we lived in the olden times, said David, and then we could do deeds of bravery,/ and *rescue* maidens in trouble. SH 49,10

Th_p of the sentence interpreted in 5 *(they)* can be left out because it has been expressed in the preceding co-ordinate sentence. In 6 even two elements have been left out (*we* − Th_p and *could* − Tr_p), so that the sentence begins with the transition *(rescue)*.

$Th_p + Tr_p$: fiction 3.80%, non-fiction 0.12%, TOTAL 1.96%

7. /Joe said/ *he'd* do his best for you. PB 28,11
8. *'Let's* hurry,' /or perhaps we'll be too late,' said Betty./ SH 45,7

This type actually comes into existence through the use of contracted grammatical forms and is therefore conspicuously more frequent in fiction, with its numerous dialogues, than in non-fiction.

Rh/Rh_p: fiction 6.32%, non-fiction 2.04%, TOTAL 4.18%

9. /. . . this does not alter the point, which is/ that *two distinct operations* are involved in studying an author's language: identifying and describing the salient linguistic features of his utterance, and the evaluating their effect on the reader. CW 8,18
10. *A two-party system* developed, /and politics were dominated by . . ./ BL 17,5
11. /'I heard Nikish do the Strauss, he shouted at us./ *Much better. More guts. More tangle and tingle. More diablerie.* /Nikish is full of diablerie./ PB 50,17
12. /There was a youth, perhaps a year or two older/ than *I* was, . . . PB 25,20

In 9 the subject of the sentence *two distinct operations* is more dynamic than the predicate *are involved* or the adverbial *in studying an author's language*

(which is contextually dependent), but less dynamic than the specification *iden-tifying ... reader.* The sentence thus has a rhematic beginning, but its rheme proper is placed at the very end.

The subtype represented by 10, whose first syntactic element operates as Rh_p, is more frequent. The indefinite article signalizes the novelty of the idea conveyed by the (expanded) noun it accompanies *(two-party system),* the verb *developed* implying the notion of 'emergence on the scene' and in this way receding into the background, drawing the reader's attention to the very object that is 'emerging on the scene' (Firbas 1957).

Much better in 11 (as well as *More guts, More tangle and tingle, More diable-rie*) is the only syntactic element in what Svoboda calls initially-final position (Svoboda 1984). This element constitutes a verbless sentence, serving as its rheme proper. (Cf. Firbas' view that sentences without a rheme are not sentences in the full sense of the word — Firbas 1982.291.) As this subtype often expresses evaluation, agreement or disagreement *(Yes. No. Of course.),* thanks *(Thank you.)* and wishes *(Good morning.),* it is much more frequent in fiction than in non-fiction.

Subtype 12 can be considered marginal. If occurring together, *I* and *was* are usually exceeded in CD by another element or other elements. In the absence of such elements *I* has come to convey rheme proper, because it expresses the item towards which the comparison is oriented. *(Than* introduces it as the second, more dynamic member of the comparison.) Structures of this type (... *as I do., ... after I did., ... than he does.,* etc.) are more common in fiction than in non-fiction.

The beginning of the German sentence has been investigated from the point of view of FSP by Eduard Beneš in two papers (1959 and 1971). Neither gives any statistics, but both enumerate and discuss in detail various beginnings of the German sentence. The first, drawing material from non-fiction, characterizes the rheme-theme perspective as rare but possible, especially if the author wants to enliven his style (Beneš 1959.214). .

$Tr + Tr_p$: fiction 8.08%, non-fiction 1.44%, TOTAL 4.76%

13. /He then folds the paper, so that nobody can see how he has marked it,/ and *puts* it folded into a large box. BL 34,23
14. '*Give* Billy his top, Fred,' *said* Peter. SH 30,7

The predicate *puts* in 13 combines two FSP functions: that of transition (performed by the notional component of the verb) and that of transition proper (performed by the temporal and modal exponent *-s*). It has come to be the first syntactic element after the ellipsis of theme proper *he.*

The predicative nexus *said Peter* in 14 does not appear to be as independent as *Peter said,* but it is a type of clause, *said* operating as Tr and Tr_p.

Apart from the functions of Tr and Tr_p *Give* also performs that of Th_p (as all imperatives normally do). It is especially this subtype that accounts for the difference between fiction and non-fiction as far as the frequency of the $Tr+Tr_p$ type is concerned.

Th_p: fiction 38.28%, non-fiction 21.60%, TOTAL 29.94%

15. *There* are some advantages in being fifty and an old hand. *I* went upstairs to my room to work, and *I* did work. /*Bruddersford and the Alingtons and Uncle Miles and the rest* might be clamouring for my attention — as *indeed*/ *I* knew /they were —/ but *I* made them wait. /*The scenes*/ *I* wrote /were neither better nor worse than those/ *I* had done during the morning or the day before; *they* required rather more effort, a sharper edge of attention, /*that* was all./ PB 12.2

The English sentence mostly begins with a thematic element, so that the most

frequent perspective is theme — rheme (Mathesius 1924, Firbas 1956, Masary-ková 1977). In my research I have adopted Svoboda's subtler segmentation of thematic elements into theme proper and diatheme, the former covering the theme-proper oriented themes as well, and the latter the diatheme oriented themes (Svoboda 1981, 1983). In clauses with only one thematic element, I follow Svoboda in interpreting this element either as a diatheme or as a theme proper according to what functional features it displays (Svoboda 1981.6).

The extensive example, No. 15, taken from fiction, contains twelve sentences/clauses. In one of them the first syntactic element operates as part of transition proper *(indeed)* and in three as diatheme (expressed by the remaining italicized words in brackets). The remaining eight (i.e. two thirds of all the clauses) begin with theme proper. Seven of the opening elements are grammatical subjects; one element is represented by the existential *there*, which is to be regarded as a formal filler of the subject position and in fact performs the function of a grammatical subject as well.

In all my material there were 1,497 first syntactic elements operating as themes proper; out of them 1,380 were grammatical subjects (practically all expressed by personal pronouns[6]) and the remaining 117 were cases of the existential *there*. TABLE 1 shows that in non-fiction the frequency of the existential *there* is higher than in fiction:

TABLE 1

THEME PROPER		Subject		Existential *there*	
	Total number	Number of instances	Per cent	Number of instances	Per cent
Fiction	957	921	96.2	36	3.8
Non-fiction	540	459	85.0	81	15.0
Total	1497	1380	92.2	117	7.8

As can be seen from the last column of TABLE 1, the existential *there* constitutes 15 per cent of all the themes proper in non-fiction and only 3.8 per cent of those in fiction.

But whereas theme proper is the most frequent beginning of the sentence/clause in fiction (the 38.28 per cent established by the present research bearing out the findings presented in Firbas 1956), it is not a typical beginning of the sentence/clause in non-fiction (this type accounted for only 21.6 per cent of all the sentence beginnings in my material drawn from non-fiction).

It is the following type that prevails in non-fiction:

Th_d: fiction 35.72%, non-fiction 71.08%, TOTAL 53.40%

16. *Modern methods of cooking, by electricity or gas,* were accepted long ago, and *few people* would now favour the old type of coal-fired grate; but *the new cookers* still produce the same roast beef and Yorkshire pudding on Sundays. *For the business of heating houses* most English people remain strongly attached to the open coal fire, although *it* causes much work and *adds* to the pollution of the air, and *sometimes* pours smoke into the room *which* it is heating. BL 5,34

According to Svoboda (1984.24), the diatheme implements at least one of the three following basic functions:
(i) It conveys a completely new piece of information.[7]
(ii) It transfers a piece of information that has just been introduced into the

immediately preceding context (and in this sense is new and of immediate concern) into the theme of the new sentence and uses it for the first time as a point of departure in the further development of the information.

(iii) It foregrounds a context dependent element, putting it in contrast with another element (not necessarily explicitly expressed); this contrast is to be regarded as a new piece of information.[8]

If we apply Svoboda's conception of diatheme to 16, we find only one case of theme proper in the passage *(it)* and one case combining the functions of transition and transition proper *(adds),* all the other first syntactic elements operating as diathemes. The rate of 6 diathemes : 2 non-diathemes in our passage roughly corresponds to the rate 71.08 per cent of diathemes : 28.92 per cent of non-diathemes in all my material taken from non-fiction.

In fictional prose, diathemes occur as sentence/clause beginnings about half as frequently (constituting 35.72 per cent of all the beginnings in my fiction material).

Thus we can conclude that the sentence/clause beginnings in non-fiction are communicatively more dynamic than those in fiction.

It is interesting to compare this with Beneš's observations on the beginning of the German sentence and the results of Uhlířová's research into present-day Czech journalistic prose.

Beneš 1959 distinguishes two basic types of thematic beginning of the German sentence in non-fiction (Germ. 'Sachprose'):

(i) an expression of minimal or small communicative value

(ii) an expression of higher communicative value than other thematic elements following it; it may be an expression of place, time, condition, purpose, cause, etc.

The type (ii) sentence beginning is in fact front-projected; it provides a close and sharply drawn link with the preceding context, and achieves a condensation of the line of thought. It is these two functions that make the front-projected theme a frequently used sentence beginning in non-fiction.

Beneš 1971 considers the front-projecting to be the result of planned, forethoughtful segmentation of the text, which makes the reader's orientation in the text easier. Out of all the notional elements which could stand at the beginning of the (usually comparatively long) sentence in non-fiction, that element is chosen which preserves logical continuity in the most effective way.

Uhlířová 1983, like Beneš, interprets the themes in her material as displaying a high functional (communicative) load. The theme often expresses information which is either completely or at least partly new, not mentioned in the immediately preceding text. The beginnings of the texts, or paragraphs, as well as the beginnings of utterances in the middle of texts are communicatively rather dynamic and substantially contribute to the further development of the communication. This is mainly due to the character of journalistic style, which aims at persuasiveness and informativeness (Uhlířová 1983.292—4).

Before offering a comparison of the FSP in Czech fiction and the FSP in Czech non-fiction, let us adduce a survey of the functions of the diatheme in the English sentence/clause and of the parts of speech by means of which the diatheme is expressed (see TABLE 2).

As can be seen from TABLE 2, the conspicuosly most frequent grammatical function of the diatheme is the subject (this holds good for fiction and non-fiction alike). The second most frequent function (though in fact much less frequent than that of the subject) is that of the adverbial of time.

TABLE 2

DIATHEME IN FICTION (1st line) IN NON-FICTION (2nd line)	Expressed by											Total	
	pronoun				noun		adverb of				gerund/infinitive /participle/subject clause	Number of instances	Per cent
	personal	demonstrative	relative	indefinite	simple	expanded/multiple	place	time	manner	cause			
subject	29	36	146	18	174	181	—	—	—	—	4	588	65.8
	1	59	285	43	320	604	—	—	—	—	15	1327	74.7
object	—	—	29	—	—	3	—	—	—	—	—	32	3.6
	—	—	67	—	1	3	—	—	—	—	—	71	4.0
adverbial of place	—	—	3	—	9	17	37	—	—	—	—	66	7.4
	1	1	15	—	8	39	24	—	—	—	—	88	4.9
time	—	1	—	—	12	42	—	105	—	—	4	164	18.4
	1	—	10	—	8	61	—	102	—	—	3	185	10.4
manner	—	—	—	—	—	8	—	—	14	—	—	22	2.5
	1	—	12	—	5	23	—	—	19	—	—	60	3.4
cause	—	—	—	—	—	5	—	—	—	3	—	8	0.9
	1	—	—	—	1	16	—	—	—	15	2	35	2.0
complement	—	—	4	—	1	—	—	—	1	—	7	13	1.4
	—	—	9	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	11	0.6
Total — Number of instances	29	37	182	18	196	256	37	105	15	3	15	893	
	5	60	398	43	343	746	24	102	19	15	22	1777	
Total — Per cent	3.2	4.1	20.4	2.0	22.0	28.7	4.1	11.8	1.7	0.3	1.7		100
	0.3	3.4	22.4	2.4	19.3	42.0	1.4	5.7	1.1	0.8	1.2		100

The most frequent part of speech used for expressing the diatheme is the noun (accounting for 50.7 per cent of diathemes in fiction and 61.3 per cent of diathemes in non-fiction). The table also shows that while in fiction the percentages of simple nouns and expanded nouns are approximately the same (22.0 and 28.7 per cent), in non-fiction the expanded noun greatly outnumbers the simple noun (746 cases, i.e. 42.0 per cent of all the diathemes in non-fiction are expressed by means of expanded nouns, but only 343, i.e. 19.3 per cent, are expressed by means of simple nouns). This leads us to the conclusion that the diatheme as the beginning of the English sentence/clause is not only more frequent in non-fiction than in fiction, but that in the former it is also communicatively more dynamic.

Is there a similar difference in Czech fiction and non-fiction?

To be able to give an answer to this question, I made a tentative probe into 250 Czech fictional prose sentences/clauses and 250 non-fictional sentences/clauses (which amounts to only one tenth of my English material), interpreting the FSP functions of their first syntactic elements.[9] The results are given in TABLE 3.

TABLE 3

SENTENCE BEGINNINGS IN WRITTEN CZECH		Fiction		Non-fiction	
		Number of instances	Per cent	Number of instances	Per cent
Th_d	simple	75	30.0	75	30.0
	expanded	34	13.6	118	47.2
Tr_p		13	5.2	8	3.2
Part of Tr_p		12	4.8	3·	1.2
$Tr + Tr_p$		65	26.0	35	14.0
$R_p + Tr_p$		10	4.0	–	–
R		17	6.8	4	1.6
Other FSP functions		24	9.6	7	2.8
Total		250	100.0	250	100.0

The table shows that in the Czech sentence the most frequent FSP function of the first syntactic element is that of diatheme. This applies both to fiction and to non-fiction, but the percentage of diathemes in non-fiction is much higher than that in fiction (77.2 per cent : 43.6 per cent). Another important difference is the fact that while the majority of fiction diathemes are simple expressions, the majority of non-fiction diathemes are expanded expressions.[10]

TABLE 4, summing up the interpretation of the English corpus, may be found useful for further comparison.

Comparing TABLE 3 and TABLE 4, we find that the category of initial theme proper, quite common in English fiction, is absent from the survey of the sentence beginnings in Czech. This is because theme proper virtually never occurs at the beginning of the Czech sentence; in most cases it is only expressed

TABLE 4

SENTENCE BEGINNINGS IN WRITTEN ENGLISH	Fiction		Non-fiction		TOTAL	
	Number of instances	Per cent	Number of instances	Per cent	Number of instances	Per cent
Th_p	957	38.28	540	21.60	1497	29.94
Th_d	893	35.72	1777	71.08	2670	53.40
Tr_p	40	1.60	5	0.20	45	0.90
Tr_p (with an ellipsis of Th_p)	54	2.16	41	1.64	95	1.90
Part of Tr_p	41	1.64	35	1.40	76	1.52
$Th_p + Tr_p$	95	3.80	3	0.12	98	1.96
$Th_d + Tr_p$	47	1.88	11	0.44	58	1.16
$Tr + Tr_p$	202	8.08	36	1.44	238	4.76
$R_p + Tr_p$	13	0.52	1	0.04	14	0.28
R	158	6.32	51	2.04	209	4.18
Total	2500	100.00	2500	100.00	5000	100.00

by the verbal ending (in *Věděla to /Knew-she it/, She knew* it, e.g., the theme proper is the ending *-a*). The quite common verbal beginning of the Czech fictional prose sentence is especially reflected in the comparatively high percentage of the category $Tr+Tr_p$ in TABLE 3.

We may conclude that, as far as the communicative load of the first syntactic element in the English sentence/clause is concerned, the differences between the styles of fiction and non-fiction are quite striking. While in English fictional style the most typical sentence beginning is theme proper expressed by a personal pronoun, English informative and concise non-fictional style prefers diathematic sentence beginnings, the diathemes being implemented mostly by grammatical subjects expressed by expanded noun phrases.

As for Czech, the function of the first syntactic element is mostly diathematic both in fiction and in non-fiction. But as in English, diathemes in non-fiction are usually more expanded and thus communicatively more dynamic than their counterparts in fiction.

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O FUNKCI ANGLICKÉHO PRVNÍHO VĚTNÉHO ČLENU VE FUNKČNÍ VĚTNÉ PERSPEKTIVĚ

Cílem výzkumu bylo zjistit, jaká je výpovědní dynamičnost anglických větných začátků. Za větný začátek považovala autorka první syntaktický větný člen ve větě hlavní nebo vedlejší. Interpretovala celkem 5000 anglických a dodatečně ještě 500 českých větných začátků, z nichž polovinu tvořil vždy materiál z beletrie a druhou polovinu materiál z literatury odborné.

V anglické beletrii začínala věta nejčastěji vlastním tématem, fungujícím jako podmět a vyjádřeným osobním zájmenem. V anglické odborné literatuře však stálo na začátku věty výrazně nejčastěji (v 71 %) diatéma, tedy prvek s nejvyšší výpovědní dynamičností v tematické sféře věty. Častěji než adverbiálním určením bylo diatéma podmětem věty a nejčastěji bylo vyjadřováno rozvitou nebo několikanásobnou substantivní vazbou.

V českém materiálu bylo diatéma nejobvyklejším větným začátkem v beletrii i v próze odborné, avšak v beletrii tvořilo jen 43,6 % všech větných začátků, v odborné próze 77,2 %. Podobně jako v angličtině, i v češtině bylo diatéma v odborné literatuře daleko rozvitější, a tedy výpovědně bohatší než v beletrii.

Značné funkční zatížení větného začátku v odborném stylu plyne v angličtině, stejně jako v jiných jazycích, z charakteristiky tohoto stylu: chce informovat přehledně, ale zároveň hutně a přesně.

1   The following works have been used (the first two representing fictional prose, the second two representing non-fictional prose):
    SH — *Happy Stories for the Tiny Folk,* ed. by Herbert Strang (Oxford University Press, London, n. d.);
    PB — J. B. Priestley, *Bright Day* (Heinemann, London 1946); excerpted from pp. 1—50;
    BL — Peter Bromhead, *Life in Modern Britain* (Longman, London 1971); excerpted from pp. 3—53;
    CW — David Crystal, *What is Linguistics?* (Edward Arnold, London 1971); excerpted from pp. 1—18.

2   (with the exception of the complex sentence where the subordinate clause expresses the subject or an undeletable complement)

3   Unlike Uhlířová and myself, Masaryková also takes into account the subordinate clause as a syntactic element, but has 'not a sufficient number of examples to make any valid conclusions' (p. 71); the 27 subordinate clauses make up only 1.6 per cent of all the initial position elements in her English material (TABLE 1, p. 121).

4   I shall use abbreviations for the books quoted (see note[1]) and in each case add numbers indicating the page and line where the example begins.

5   Masaryková does not consider sentence adverbs to be real sentence beginnings, taking only the elements standing after them as initial (Masaryková 1977.78). In my research I only regard as initial sentence adverbs not separated from the rest of the sentence (by a comma in writing, most probably representing a pause in speaking). As to the interpretation of sentence adverbs, Masaryková says: 'They are mostly semantically weak and from the point of view of FSP they usually approach transitional elements.' (Masaryková 1977.76)

6   There was only one sentence in my material where theme proper was expressed by a noun, and that was in baby language, where *Sis* in fact meant *I.*

7   Diatheme is, of course, still a thematic element; the new information it brings may be conceived of as new information of secondary importance (in relation to information conveyed by rhematic elements). (Svoboda 1983.64)

8   An English paraphrase of the passage referred to.

9   To have a statistically more representative corpus, I obtained the 500 sentences from 10 different books (using the first 50 sentences of Chapter I of each of the books). The first 5 books are fiction, the remaining 5 non-fiction:
    Svatopluk Hrnčíř — Eva Průšková, *Kamarád z planety Haf*
    Zdeněk Pluhař, *V šest večer v Astorii*
    Marie Kubátová, *Legenda o Bílé paní*
    Miroslav Skála, *Uvěřitelné příhody doktora Papula*
    Ota Dub, *Doktorské a jiné příběhy*
    Senta Radvanová, *Manželství a rodina v ČSSR*
    Vilém Mathesius, *Čeština a obecný jazykozpyt*
    Stanislav Trojan, *Tělověda*
    Jaroslav Charvát, *Světové dějiny*
    Štěpán Vlašín a kol., *Literatura pro IV. ročník středních škol.*

10 This fact holds good for both adverbial and subject-object diathemes. Like my English material (see TABLE 2), the Czech material has also provided more subject-object than adverbial diathemes.