

# Linearity in functional sentence perspective: the strength of the weak factor

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## ABSTRACT

When the theory of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) is applied to English, the *linear arrangement* of clause constituents is considered the weakest of the four factors indicating the distribution of communicative dynamism over a sentence, following the *contextual factor*, the *semantic factor* and, in spoken language, the *prosodic prominence*. The relative weakness of linearity as an FSP factor results from the limited positional mobility of clause constituents in English, where the position of an element in the sentence primarily indicates its syntactic function.

However, the linear distribution of clause constituents may sometimes override the other factors and become the principal indicator of FSP. In such cases, the importance of linearity is signalled by the choice of an arrangement that is normally dispreferred because it conflicts with the usual word-order principles. These deviations from the usual word order include, for example, movement of a constituent from its usual position and instances of flouting the principle of end-weight.

This paper explores the range of structures where linearity overrides the other FSP factors and the conditions under which it can assert itself as the leading indicator of FSP.

## KEYWORDS

Functional Sentence Perspective, word order, theme/rheme indication

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When the theory of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) is applied to English, the *linear arrangement* of clause constituents is considered the weakest of the four factors indicating the distribution of communicative dynamism over a sentence, following the *contextual factor*, the *semantic factor* and, in spoken language, the *prosodic prominence*. The relative weakness of linearity as an FSP factor results from the limited positional mobility of clause constituents in English, where, owing to the absence of inflectional clues, the position of an element in the sentence primarily indicates its syntactic function, rather than its information status. The basic grammatical linear arrangement of clause constituents (sometimes referred to as SVOMPT) therefore has little bearing on the FSP structure since it must allow the rheme to occur in any position, while the identification of the rhematic function results from the interplay of the remaining FSP factors. To demonstrate the inherent neutrality of canonical word order in English with respect to FSP, let us consider the somewhat artificial example below.

- (1) *Sally published two novels in the 1990s.*
  - (a) *What did Sally do?*
  - (b) *What did Sally publish in the 1990s?*
  - (c) *How many novels did Sally publish in the 1990s?*
  - (d) *When did Sally publish two novels?*



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- (e) *Who published two novels in the 1990s?*  
 (f) *Did Sally translate two novels in the 1990s?*

A response in the form of (1) could be elicited by any of the questions (a) — (f). This, of course, only holds true for written language; in spoken language the separate variants of (1) would be distinguished by prosodic means, namely by the position of the intonation nucleus on the respective rhematic element. Admittedly, this is a rather extreme example, since in actual use, constituents that are thematic owing to having occurred in the preceding question would not be repeated in the response in full, but rather ellipted or substituted with proforms. So, for example, question (d) would probably produce answers like:

- (2) *In the 1990s.*  
 (3) *She did that in the 1990s.*

Still, if the writer, for one reason or another, chooses to respond in full, one and the same written form of (1) may serve as a response to any of the questions above.

## 2. INFORMATION PACKAGING CONSTRUCTIONS

Cases where the linear distribution of clause constituents overrides the clues provided by the other factors and becomes the principal FSP indicator are rare and have to be sought among sentence structures deviating from the canonical grammatical word order. Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 1366) give a list of nine essential information-packaging constructions, whose function is to organise the information presented in the sentences in a particular way. These constructions are related to their canonical, syntactically more basic variants given in brackets.

- preposing: *This one she accepted.*  
(*She accepted this one.*)
- postposing: *I made without delay all the changes you wanted.*  
(*I made all the changes you wanted without delay.*)
- inversion: *On board were two nurses.*  
(*Two nurses were on board.*)
- existential: *There is a frog in the pool.*  
(*A frog is in the pool.*)
- extraposition: *It's clear that he's guilty.*  
(*That he's guilty is clear.*)
- left dislocation: *That money I gave her, it must have disappeared.*  
(*That money I gave her must have disappeared.*)
- right dislocation: *They're still here, the people from next door.*  
(*The people from next door are still here.*)
- cleft: *It was you who broke it.*  
(*You broke it.*)
- passive: *The car was taken by Kim.*  
(*Kim took the car.*)

Compared to their canonical counterparts, the first three of these involve a mere re-ordering of the same semantic and syntactic constituents within what is essentially one and the same syntactic pattern, while the remaining six employ realignment of semantic and syntactic elements (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002, 1367). It should be noted that the term *canonical* here refers solely to the relative syntactic complexity of the constructions in question; in terms of frequency, the non-canonical information packaging construction may significantly outnumber the syntactically simpler ones, as in the case of the existential construction and extraposition.

It would be erroneous to assume that an information packaging construction alone invariably renders the FSP unambiguous, even when it involves relatively major deviations from the usual grammatical word order such as change of position of a constitutive clause element. This has already been shown by Quirk et al. (1985, 1377), who distinguish between thematic and rhematic fronting (an equivalent term for preposing in Huddleston and Pullum); the thematicity or rhematicity of the fronted (preposed) constituent cannot be judged without the other factors, especially the context, being taken into account:

- (4) *An utter fool* (Rh) *she made me feel*.  
 (5) *Most of these problems* (Th) *a computer could take in its stride*.

Building on the hypothetical example in (1), it is easy to imagine contexts (given in brackets) where the same construction serves to propose a thematic and rhematic element, respectively:

- (6) (When did Sally last manage to publish two novels in a single decade?) *Two novels* (Th) *Sally published in the 1990s* (Rh).  
 (7) (Sally didn't do much as a writer in the 1990s, did she?) (On the contrary.) *Two novels* (Rh) *Sally published in the 1990s* (Th).

It may seem that owing to the absence of an article in *two novels*, the object seems to be better disposed to perform the rhematic function (7) than the thematic one (6); however, since it is the number of novels that matters, not their actual identity, the capacity to fulfil both functions remains unaffected. Conversely, the use of the definite article alone does not necessarily render the object thematic if the identity of the novels has been established or if they are the only two novels Sally has written:

- (8) (When did Sally write her [two] novels?) *The two novels* (Th) *Sally published in the 1990s* (Rh).  
 (9) (Sally didn't do much as a writer in the 1990s, did she?) (On the contrary.) *The two novels* (Rh) *Sally published in the 1990s* (Th).

The above may be interpreted as confirmation of the weakness of word order alone as an indicator of FSP structure. However, the importance of linearity seems to increase with the degree to which a particular word order is unusual, particularly in terms of frequency. Some sequences of clause constituents are normally dispreferred because they contradict additional word-order principles. A case in point is the position of the subject.

### 3. SUBJECT POSTPOSITION AND EXTRAPOSITION

Subjects in the form of a noun phrase show a very strong adherence to the canonical initial position, not only when they are thematic, as is usually the case, but even when they constitute the rheme of the sentence as in the following example. In the initial position, their rhematicity results from the interplay of factors, with the contextual and semantic factors overriding linearity.

- (10) *August 1914: it must have been a very strange sensation for the French. An invasion force of British troops (Rh) was streaming across the Channel, but not (for once) to rape and pillage.* (Clarke, 2010, 510)

The rhematic subject in (10) could be moved from the initial position to postposition in the following ways:

- (11) *Across the Channel was streaming an invasion force of British troops (Rh), but not (for once) to rape and pillage.*  
 (12) *Streaming across the Channel was an invasion force of British troops (Rh), but not (for once) to rape and pillage.*

Whether initial or postposed, rhematic subjects are most commonly found in sentences implementing the presentation scale. However, the very possibility of an NP subject postposition is in itself a very strong indication of its rhematicity, a signal of the presentation scale semantics (introducing onto the scene a phenomenon represented by the subject), as well as an indication that the predicate verb is intransitive. Postposed NP subjects are usually, though not necessarily, context independent, but virtually always the most dynamic elements in the sentence. While in the three sentences above, the subject is invariably the rhematic element in its respective clause regardless of the position, linear arrangement plays a key role in the following two examples.

- (13) *Everyone in Maurois's book is getting rich except for the troops whose priority was much more basic — to stay alive. And amongst the richest of all were the mesdemoiselles (Rh).* (Clarke, 2010, 518)

The final subject, despite the definite article suggesting context dependence, is rhematic. However, the same does not apply if the subject is moved into the canonical initial position, as demonstrated below.

- (14) *And the mesdemoiselles were amongst the richest of all (Rh).*

Although the last two examples represent, strictly speaking, *ascriptive* copular clauses, they are close to *specifying* clauses (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002, 266–268), in that they are reversible; specifying copular clauses are reversible as a rule (see also *characterisation versus identification*, Quirk et al., 1985, 741–742).

- (15) *Kevin is my brother — My brother is Kevin.*

As Quirk et al. point out, only identification attributes with the copula *be* normally allow reversal of subject and subject complement without affecting the semantic relations in the clause. However, in the absence of formal indicators other than the order of the two nominal constituents, it is difficult to say whether the second linear sequence represents a case of Cs-V-S inversion, with the syntactic roles of the two respective NPs remaining constant, or whether the syntactic functions of S and Cs were reassigned, and the distribution of clause constituents observes the usual S-V-Cs progression. What is clear, though, is that the order of the two NPs is crucial with respect to FSP; in the vast majority of similar cases the final constituent is interpreted as rhematic, and the linear distribution of CD is the principal factor determining the choice of the sequence.

A completely different picture is found in subjects in the form of a finite *that*-clause. In terms of frequency, extraposition of the subject is the norm and can therefore be regarded as the unmarked variant, whereas instances of the formally canonical initial position are extremely rare. Although most extraposed subject *that*-clauses tend to be more dynamic than their matrix clauses, their position after the matrix clause primarily seems to be the result of their structural weight rather than their rhematic status, since sentences where the rheme is found in the matrix clause followed by the extraposed *that*-clause are by no means exceptional.

- (16) *It's little wonder that most of the characters seek shelter (Rh).* (The Guardian, June 1999, 10)
- (17) *In the mysteries written in the 1930s you always called the Yard, but now it's very rare (Rh) in real detection that the Yard is called in.* (Browne, 1985, 47)

On the other hand, the rare instances of initial subject *that*-clauses invariably convey thematic, though not necessarily context dependent information. Such sentences formally follow the basic arrangement of clause constituents but often break the principle of end-weight, having a structurally heavy initial element.

- (18) *That they could make incalculable fortunes at the same time was not unattractive.* (Armstrong, 1991, 92)

It seems that the choice of word order in a sentence like (18), with a structurally heavy initial subject and a light postverbal element in the matrix clause, is motivated by the need to indicate unambiguously the rhematic status of the latter, in this case the subject complement, since an extraposed version of the same sentence would be equally acceptable, and, as long as it was used in the same context, the FSP structure would remain unaffected.

- (19) *It was not unattractive that they could make incalculable fortunes at the same time.*

The effect of unambiguously indicating the final position of the rheme grows stronger with the increasing disproportion between the length of the initial subject clause and the matrix clause, as is clear from a comparison of two sentences: (20) being a shortened version of sentence (21). In the latter of these, it is difficult to imagine any reason for the initial subject position other than that of final rheme indication. An ex-

traposposed variant of (21) would probably be interpreted as carrying the rheme on the *that*-clause.

- (20) *That the sun should have less influence is at first surprising.*  
 (21) *That the sun, with a mass 27 million times that of the moon, should have less influence over the tides than a small satellite of the earth is at first surprising.* (Carson, 1961, 143)

Rarer still than non-extraposed subject *that*-clauses are postposed subject *that*-clauses, but when they do occur, they definitely rank among structures where the FSP is primarily signalled by the unusual word order: the postposed *that*-clause invariably contains the rheme of the whole sentence.

- (22) *Among the more surprising findings of the past decade is that weight training can reverse some effects of aging.* (Time, 2001, 48)

The acceptability of postposed subject *that*-clauses depends to a large extent on how they connect to previous discourse. The matrix clause typically contains an initial element constituting an anaphoric cohesive link with the previous text (in this case the comparative *the more surprising*), and the choice of subject clause postposition may well be governed by a desire to maximise the cohesive effect by means of proximity: by bringing the cohesive elements as close to each other as possible. The difference in acceptability is clear from the comparison of two modified versions of (18), where (23) is significantly less felicitous than (24), precisely because of the missing cohesive link.

- (23) *Not unattractive was that they could make incalculable fortunes at the same time.*  
 (24) *Also/similarly/equally not unattractive was that they could make incalculable fortunes at the same time.*

#### 4. PREDICATION FRONTING

On the whole, it seems that postponement is a more powerful FSP indicator than fronting, but it must be borne in mind that postponement and fronting are mutually related and typically operate at the same time: subject postposition (inversion) is accompanied by fronting of another element to fill the vacated initial slot in the sentence. In this respect, one type of fronting is of importance in indicating the FSP structure, namely predication fronting.

- (25) *They have promised to finish the work, and finish it they will.* (Quirk et al., 1985, 1378)

In sentences like (25), the predication verb is repeated, the fronted lexical component of the predicate is therefore context dependent, and the rheme falls on the auxiliary in the final position. Owing to the context dependence of all elements in the second clause including the lexical verb, the auxiliary is the only item bringing in new infor-

mation (a tense contrast), and the FSP structure would therefore remain unchanged in the more usual, non-fronted version of the sentence:

(26) *They have promised to finish the work, and they will finish it.*

The repetition of the lexical verb need not take place in the same sentence, but across sentence boundaries (and sometimes even paragraph or chapter boundaries, as shown in the following example), yet the effect is the same.

(27) *With a little help from 250,000 British troops, the French army and its taxi drivers had halted the German advance. Paris would not be occupied, and the fighters could stay out in the countryside and dig in for a few years of trench warfare. (end of chapter)  
**The French turn beer and wine into water** (headline of a new chapter)  
And dig they certainly did, because by the end of 1914 there was a 700-kilometre line of trenches ... (Clarke, 2010, 515)*

A slight difference may be identified between structures such as the above and those employing an auxiliary other than *do*, *does* and *did*, as manifested below.

(28) *And dig they certainly would, ...*

Auxiliaries other than *do* are constituent parts of the regular, non-fronted versions of the sentences, and the placement of the intonation nucleus on the auxiliaries therefore results solely from the contextual and the semantic factor, whereas *do*, *does* and *did* in positive declarative sentences are invariably stressed, making even the non-fronted version clearly marked by devices other than the word order.

(29) *And they certainly would dig, ...*

(30) *And they certainly did dig, ...*

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The search for sentences in which word order alone can be relied on to override all other FSP factors as a theme/rheme indicator has proved to be difficult: they are extremely rare and rather elusive, since they cannot be easily identified in electronic corpora by regular search tools. Their scarcity also makes them difficult to process quantitatively. Additionally, it is fair to say that even the structures described in this paper could theoretically be found in contexts where their FSP interpretation was different from that suggested above, for example, if they were used as cases of second instance (Firbas, 1992, 111).

The strength of the weak factor is therefore limited; linearity only overrides the other FSP factors in a narrow range of syntactic constructions, which tend to be rare. Yet, a few relatively safe assumptions can be made.

Such sentences are almost certainly more common in written than in spoken language. In written language the choice of unusual word order substitutes for prosodic



marking of the rheme, whereas in spoken language the rheme is sufficiently signalled by the placement of the intonation nucleus, even when it contradicts the non-prosodic indicators. In other words, linearity can override the other two non-prosodic factors (context and semantics), but it is difficult to imagine it overriding prosody. Unusual word order in prepared spoken language (public speeches, etc.) may be used to create a special stylistic effect (rhythm, parallelism, etc.), whereas in unprepared spontaneous talk it would most likely be interpreted as an imperfection resulting from processing-time constraints.

The effect of linear indication of FSP grows with the degree to which a particular linear arrangement of clause constituents is unusual. Subject *that*-clauses can be used to show that while the common case of extraposition has negligible effect as an FSP indicator, the much rarer initial position virtually always renders the *that*-clause thematic, and the extremely rare subject *that*-clause postposition must be interpreted as a signal of rhematicity.

Even in written language, unusual word order is most likely a polyfunctional device; its FSP indicating function cannot be strictly separated from other, particularly stylistic, effects. Instances of predication fronting are a good example of this.

Last but not least, it has to be borne in mind that the leading role of word order as an FSP factor as described in this paper must be understood strictly from the interpretation point of view, in terms of the occasional capacity of word order to be a sufficient, albeit not the only, signal of the thematic or rhematic status of a constituent. The FSP of a given sentence is always a product of an interplay of all of the factors, and word order can only operate within the framework set by this interplay. The choice of unusual word order is therefore not the cause, but merely an important symptom of a particular FSP.

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