# Functional Sentence Perspective in Written and Spoken Communication. FSP and Intonation

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**Abstract:** This article explores Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP), a core concept developed by the Prague School of Linguistics, as a framework for analyzing the organization of information in both written and spoken communication. Emphasis is placed on the distinction between theme and rheme, and how their progression contributes to textual cohesion and coherence. The study examines how FSP operates differently across modalities—while written discourse relies on syntactic structures and punctuation to guide information flow, spoken discourse employs intonation, stress, and rhythm to signal communicative intent. Drawing on the works of Firbas, Mathesius, and Daneš, this paper illustrates thematic progression patterns and the role of communicative dynamism in advancing discourse. Practical implications for language teaching, translation, and discourse analysis are discussed, highlighting how awareness of FSP enhances clarity, emphasis, and coherence in academic and everyday communication.

**Key words:** Functional Sentence Perspective, intonation, communication, theme, rheme, writing, text, spoken language.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) is a theoretical framework developed within the Prague School of Linguistics to explain how information is hierarchically organized within a sentence and across texts. Originally conceptualized by Vilém Mathesius and later significantly elaborated by Jan Firbas, FSP shifts analytical focus from purely syntactic elements to the communicative roles played by sentence components (Firbas, 1992; Mathesius, 1975).

At the heart of FSP lies the dynamic relationship between **theme** and **rheme**—the two fundamental units that govern information flow. The **theme** represents the point of departure or what the sentence is about, typically consisting of known or contextually presupposed information. The **rheme**, in contrast, delivers new, informative, or unpredictable content that advances the communication (Firbas, 1992). These elements are not determined by grammar alone; rather, their distribution and communicative effect are shaped by a range of factors.

Jan Firbas identified four key factors influencing the structuring of information within FSP:

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- **Linear modification**, or the word order and position within the sentence;

- **Contextual dependence**, distinguishing given from new information;

- **Semantic content**, referring to the inherent informational value of elements;

- **Prosody**, particularly intonation in spoken discourse (Firbas, 1992).

The interaction of these factors determines the **communicative dynamism (CD)** of sentence elements—how strongly a word or phrase contributes to the advancement of discourse. Elements with higher CD (typically rhemes) carry the weight of the message, while those with lower CD (typically themes) provide the background or starting point (Daneš, 1974).

One of the most significant variables affecting FSP in **spoken language** is **intonation**. Prosodic features such as pitch movement, stress, and rhythm play a pivotal role in marking theme–rheme boundaries and influencing how listeners interpret the distribution of information (Brazil, 1997; Wells, 2006). In this respect, spoken discourse differs substantially from written communication, where such functions are often fulfilled by syntactic structures, punctuation, or discourse markers.

This article draws on foundational and contemporary scholarship to explore how FSP operates in both written and spoken communication. It pays particular attention to the role of intonation as a prosodic tool that guides the listener's perception of communicative dynamism. Through this dual lens, the paper examines how FSP contributes to textual coherence, thematic progression, and effective information delivery.

## 2. FSP IN WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

In written discourse, Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) serves as a powerful tool for organizing information logically and coherently across sentences and paragraphs. Unlike spoken communication, where prosody supports real-time adjustments, written texts rely heavily on **syntax, punctuation, and contextual cues** to guide the reader through the thematic and rhematic structure of discourse (Halliday, 2004; Firbas, 1992).

A well-written text often begins sentences with **themes**—elements that present familiar or previously introduced content—and follows with **rhemes**, which carry new or elaborative information. This thematic–rhematic arrangement enhances **coherence** by creating predictable patterns of information development. As Firbas (1992) emphasized, coherence in writing is not simply a matter of grammar but of how information is staged to guide the reader's understanding.

One of the most influential contributions to FSP at the textual level comes from **František Daneš**, who outlined several **thematic progression patterns** that contribute to textual unity:

- **Linear progression**, where the rheme of one sentence becomes the theme of the next;

- **Constant theme progression**, where a single theme is maintained across multiple sentences;

- **Split rheme progression**, where complex rhemes introduce multiple new elements, each developed in subsequent clauses or sentences (Daneš, 1974).

These progression types structure the discourse in meaningful ways. For example:

- *Linear*: *The industrial revolution changed labor patterns. These changes affected family structures.*

- *Constant theme*: *The city is facing a crisis. It suffers from poor infrastructure. It also lacks green spaces.*

- *Split rheme*: *The reforms introduced tax reduction and educational investment. Tax reduction encouraged business. Educational investment improved access to schools.*

Such patterns not only improve **local coherence** within paragraphs but also contribute to **global coherence** across larger units of discourse (Halliday, 2004).

In academic and formal writing, FSP supports reader comprehension by **incrementally introducing information**—a process aligned with the communicative principle of moving from known to new. Writers often manipulate syntactic tools to enhance FSP-based structure, including:

- **Cleft sentences** (e.g., *It was the government that imposed the tax*),

- **Passivization** (e.g., *The results were analyzed by the team*),

- **Fronting and topicalization** (e.g., *This issue, we must address immediately*).

Such structures allow writers to **highlight or background** information strategically, maintaining emphasis and coherence.

**Cohesion** in written texts is closely linked to how themes and rhemes are reinforced. Cohesive ties often include:

- **Lexical repetition** and **synonymy** (e.g., *economy → financial system*),

- **Referential devices** (e.g., pronouns, definite noun phrases),

- **Logical connectors** (e.g., *however, moreover, in contrast*) that indicate relations between propositions (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

In translation, awareness of FSP is particularly useful. Translators often need to adapt **theme–rheme structures** to match the communicative norms of the target language while preserving the intended emphasis and meaning. For instance, a sentence that begins with the rheme in English might require fronting the theme in another language to align with its natural information flow. FSP thus provides a **principled approach** to such adjustments (Firbas, 1992; Halliday, 2004).

Moreover, in **language teaching**, especially in the context of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), introducing learners to thematic progression enhances their ability to structure arguments logically. Many second-language learners struggle with organizing ideas clearly in writing; teaching FSP can

equip them with **a framework for coherence**, improving not only sentence structure but also overall textual flow.

## 3. FSP IN SPOKEN COMMUNICATION

In spoken language, Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) manifests dynamically through **prosodic features** such as intonation, stress, and rhythm. These auditory signals function as real-time cues that help listeners interpret the **information structure** of an utterance—particularly the distribution between **theme** and **rheme**. Unlike written texts, which rely on visual cues such as punctuation and word order, spoken discourse depends heavily on **phonological elements** to convey communicative intent (Brazil, 1997; Wells, 2006).

**Intonation**, the variation in pitch during speech, plays a central role in signaling **communicative dynamism**—the degree to which an element contributes to advancing the message (Firbas, 1992). Sentences with the same grammatical structure can convey entirely different meanings based on which element receives prosodic emphasis. For example:

- *I saw the doctor yesterday.* (stress on *doctor* emphasizes the identity of the person)

- *I **saw** the doctor yesterday.* (emphasizes the action itself)

- *I saw the **doctor** yesterday.* (reinforces known information vs. something new)

These shifts illustrate how **intonational stress** can assign rheme status to different parts of a sentence depending on discourse context and speaker intention.

Prosody includes not only pitch movement (rising, falling, or level) but also **rhythm**, **pauses**, and **stress placement**, all of which work together to guide the listener's comprehension. In Firbas's model, **nuclear stress**—the most prominent prosodic emphasis in an utterance—typically marks the **rheme**, while unstressed elements are perceived as **thematic** (Firbas, 1992).

**Theme–rheme segmentation in speech** is often indicated by:

- **Rising or level pitch** for backgrounded or introductory (thematic) information,

- **Falling pitch** at the end of declarative utterances to mark the rheme,

- **Stress contrast** to highlight shifts in focus or introduce new information (Crystal, 1975).

For instance:

- *As for the meeting yesterday (theme – level pitch), it was a complete success (rheme – falling pitch).*

Moreover, intonation is instrumental in **distinguishing new from given information**. Known or presupposed elements are frequently spoken with lower pitch and reduced stress, while new, unpredictable information is typically stressed and pronounced with heightened pitch variation. This aligns closely with the FSP principle of **communicative dynamism**, reinforcing the function of rhemes as the primary carriers of new content (Brazil, 1997).

**Examples in dialogue** further illustrate this dynamic:

- Q: *Who did Mary invite to the party?*

- A: *She invited* **PETER** *to the party.*
  Here, **Peter** becomes the rheme, emphasized through nuclear stress, while the rest of the utterance constitutes the theme, presupposed by the question.

In real-time communication, speakers also use **pauses**, **repetition**, and **intonational shifts** to manage listener expectations and restructure information. Spoken discourse is inherently more fluid and interactive than written text. It allows speakers to **renegotiate theme–rheme boundaries** based on listener feedback and contextual changes.

This flexibility makes spoken FSP a more complex phenomenon, as it is often influenced by pragmatics, shared knowledge, and discourse management strategies. Nevertheless, intonation remains the key organizing mechanism, shaping how utterances are received and interpreted.

From a pedagogical perspective, teaching learners to recognize and use **intonational cues** enhances both their **listening comprehension** and **speaking fluency**. Awareness of how intonation signals information flow supports better pronunciation, clearer emphasis, and more coherent speech production. Activities such as **intonation drills**, **shadowing**, and **discourse role-plays** can help learners internalize prosody-based FSP, improving both their receptive and productive oral skills (Wells, 2006).

In applied fields such as **natural language processing (NLP)** and **speech synthesis**, integrating FSP principles—particularly intonation patterns—contributes to more natural and intelligible voice outputs. Systems trained to simulate human prosody can better replicate theme–rheme structures, enhancing the user experience in AI-driven communication tools.

## 4. PEDAGOGICAL AND APPLIED IMPLICATIONS

The application of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) extends beyond theoretical linguistics into several **practical domains**, including language teaching, discourse training, and technological innovations such as natural language processing (NLP) and speech synthesis. Understanding how theme–rheme structures and communicative dynamism function in discourse allows both educators and engineers to design more effective communicative tools and learning experiences.

### 4.1 Language Teaching in ESL/EFL Contexts

In second-language instruction—especially English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL)—FSP provides learners with a **framework for organizing ideas logically**. Many L2 learners struggle with coherence in both spoken and written production. By teaching thematic progression and theme–rheme relations, instructors can help students better structure sentences and paragraphs according to communicative intent rather than merely syntactic accuracy (Halliday, 2004).

In **academic writing**, learners benefit from understanding how to present known information first (theme) and introduce new ideas gradually (rheme). This enhances the **coherence and clarity** of essays, reports, and research papers. Instruction that emphasizes cleft structures, passivization, and thematic fronting as tools for emphasis and coherence can dramatically improve learner writing (Firbas, 1992; Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

In **spoken English**, integrating FSP with **intonation training** allows learners to improve their pronunciation, fluency, and listener-oriented speech. Activities such as **contrastive stress drills**, **theme–rheme identification in dialogues**, and **prosody-based role-playing** help students internalize information structuring in real-time communication. Teaching communicative dynamism through prosodic cues supports both receptive (listening) and productive (speaking) fluency (Wells, 2006; Brazil, 1997).

### 4.2 Discourse Training and Intonation Awareness

Beyond general language skills, FSP contributes to **advanced discourse training**, especially for learners and professionals involved in academic speaking, presentations, or public speaking. Raising awareness of how intonation functions as a marker of informational status allows speakers to manage listener expectations more effectively. Speakers trained in identifying and using **nuclear stress, pitch movement, and rhythm** can structure their speech more persuasively and clearly, especially when responding to questions or constructing arguments in real time (Crystal, 1975).

Moreover, cross-linguistic training in FSP can assist learners in **avoiding negative transfer** from their L1 when it comes to sentence structuring and emphasis placement. This is particularly relevant in translation and interpretation programs, where mastering the rhetorical norms of the target language is essential.

### 4.3 Relevance to Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Speech Synthesis

In technological domains, FSP is increasingly relevant to the development of **speech-enabled systems**. In **text-to-speech (TTS)** applications, understanding theme–rheme organization helps machines generate more **natural-sounding, listener-friendly output**. Prosodic elements such as pitch contours and stress placement can be informed by FSP principles to reflect human-like intonation patterns (Brazil, 1997).

Likewise, in **automatic speech recognition** and **dialogue systems**, modeling communicative dynamism improves the interpretation of emphasis, question–answer patterns, and ellipsis in conversation. Integrating FSP insights into NLP algorithms enables more contextually aware and responsive machines, improving user interaction in educational, assistive, and commercial AI tools.

Thus, the pedagogical and technological applications of FSP are not only extensive but mutually reinforcing. A deep understanding of how information is structured and signaled through language benefits learners, educators, and engineers alike—making FSP a highly relevant framework for 21st-century communication.

### 5. CONCLUSION

Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing how information is structured, delivered, and interpreted in both written and spoken communication. Rooted in the traditions of the Prague School, particularly the work of Jan Firbas and Vilém Mathesius, FSP enables linguists, educators, and discourse analysts to move beyond surface-level grammar and examine the deeper communicative intent embedded in language.

Through its core principles of **theme–rheme structuring** and **communicative dynamism**, FSP explains how speakers and writers manage the flow of information, balancing what is known with what is new to achieve coherence and clarity. In written texts, this manifests through syntactic arrangement, lexical cohesion, and paragraph-level thematic progression. In spoken discourse, the same organizational principles are signaled through **intonation, stress, and rhythm**, allowing speakers to negotiate meaning interactively and responsively.

The article has also highlighted the practical implications of FSP. In **language teaching**, awareness of theme–rheme relationships supports the development of coherent writing and fluent, listener-aware speech, especially in ESL/EFL contexts. In **translation**, FSP offers a principled guide to preserving emphasis and meaning across languages. In **technology**, particularly NLP and speech synthesis, incorporating FSP-informed prosodic features leads to more natural and context-sensitive communication systems.

Ultimately, FSP bridges theory and practice by showing how linguistic form interacts with communicative function. Recognizing the differences between written and spoken implementations of FSP deepens our understanding of discourse and enhances our ability to teach, translate, and technologically reproduce human language. As communication continues to evolve across modalities and platforms, FSP remains a vital lens for exploring how information is meaningfully conveyed.

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