

Pavel Dubec

**Syntactic and FSP Aspects
of the Existential Construction
in Norwegian**

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Pavel Dubec

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List of Abbreviations

CD – Communicative dynamism
DiaTh – Diatheme
Foc – Focalizer
FSP – Functional Sentence Perspective
NegFocA – Negation focus anticipator
NP – Noun phrase
NS – Notional subject
PP – Prepositional phrase
QFocA – Question focus anticipator
Rh – Rheme
RhPr – Rheme proper
Th – Theme
ThPr – Theme proper
TME – Temporal and modal exponent
Tr – Transition
TrPr – Transition proper
TrPrO – Transition proper oriented element

1. Introduction

The theories studying the information structure of an utterance are today explored by various linguistic schools and from multiple perspectives. The father of the communicative approach is believed to be Henry Weil, a French linguist who came with the idea that an utterance has a part which serves as a starting point for the communication, and a part which represents the main point or the purpose of the communication. In other words, Weil pointed out that individual parts of an utterance have different importance with regard to the message communicated¹. The theory was further elaborated by the members of the Prague linguistic circle. This group of literary scientists and linguists enriched the contemporary structuralistic theories with a functional approach. In addition, the group focused on exploring various aspects in multiple languages such as Czech, English, Russian, German and French. One of the most prominent members of the school, Vilém Mathesius, studied the structural differences between English and Czech and came with a notion that each sentence contains two fundamental elements. One of them was a statement and the other one represented the element about which the statement is made. The statement was understood as a starting point or basis of the utterance, while the other part was called nucleus and included the most important information of the utterance. Based on this concept, Mathesius analysed sentences from two different points of view – a formal sentence perspective (the basic units being the subject and predicate), and a functional sentence perspective (the basic units being the basis and the nucleus). The reason for this dichotomy rests in the fact that the subject is not always the basis and the predicate is not always the nucleus of an utterance. The assumptions and findings of Mathesius were further explored and developed by various scholars. In British linguistics, the most influential works were written by M. A. K. Halliday² and R. Quirk, S. Greenbaum, G. Leech, and J. Svartvik³. In addition, the most recent representative grammar written by R. Huddleston and G. K. Pullum needs to be taken into consideration⁴. In the American linguistic tradition, the most prominent scholar is perhaps W. Chafe⁵. In Prague, yet another significant concept has been developed at the Institute of Formal and Applied Linguistics of the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics.

¹ Summarized in Weil 1984.

² Mainly Halliday 1985.

³ Especially their collective work Quirk 1985.

⁴ Huddleston, and Pullum 2002.

⁵ Especially Chafe 1994.

The main representatives of this approach, P. Sgall and E. Hajičová⁶ are closely associated with a broader tradition of generative grammar.⁷

The present monograph refers to the approach introduced by the Prague linguistic circle and elaborated, in the first place, by Jan Firbas, one of the key persons in the field of functional sentence perspective. Firbas introduced the concept of communicative dynamism which ascribed each element of a sentence a relative degree of importance by which the element contributed to the purpose of the communication. In addition, Firbas defined the factors that influence the functional sentence perspective. Besides the word order (or linearity in Firbas' terminology) introduced by Mathesius, Firbas presented the role of context, semantics, and intonation (applying to the spoken language only). Another important contribution to the communicative theories was the concept of static and dynamic semantics. The static semantics refers to syntactic functions and semantic roles of the clause elements irrespective of the context. The dynamic semantics is related to the role a clause element acquires in the act of communication and is closely connected to the degrees of communicative dynamism carried by individual clause elements. The work of Jan Firbas represents an essential part of the functional sentence perspective theory and his approach is sometimes also referred to as 'Brno school'. The followers of Jan Firbas have recruited from both Charles University in Prague (the leading scholar being L. Dušková who has studied the theory of functional sentence perspective with regard to syntax, stylistics and textual linguistics) and Masaryk University in Brno (for instance, by A. Svoboda who elaborated the concept of dynamic semantics or M. Adam and J. Chamonikolasová who among other things elaborated the presentation and quality scales). The theory of functional sentence perspective has been attested to multiple languages such as Czech, English, German, Russian, French, Italian or Spanish. The present monograph will, among other things, attempt to attest its applicability yet to another language – Norwegian, and thus demonstrate its universal nature, at least in the field of Indo-European languages.

⁶ Sgall et al. (1973).

⁷ For a deeper comparison of the individual approaches see the unpublished PhD thesis written under supervision of Libuše Dušková, cf. Rohrauer (2015).

2. The subject matter

The subject matter of this monograph is the syntactic and FSP analysis of the existential construction (presenteringskonstruksjon) *det er* in Norwegian⁸. The inspection of both levels is crucial because the syntactic analysis may to a considerable extent influence the FSP analysis. The analysis is based on two stylistically different types of text – fiction and academic prose and will thus observe the application of the FSP theory to real texts. Exploring the relevant aspects of the construction the main aim of the monograph will be to determine the central function of the construction along with its peripheral instances both from the syntactic and FSP points of view. The analysis is intended to bring new findings in the study of the Norwegian existential construction, but it is also hoped to clarify some FSP aspects in general. In addition, the analysis is carried out with regard to practical application and its results are therefore hoped to prove helpful in the area of translating and language teaching.

⁸ The dialect form *der er* will also be considered as it is allowed in bokmål and still appears in modern literary works.

3. Methodology

The analysis is based on a sample of 1000 instances of the existential construction that were excerpted from two stylistically different types of text – fiction and academic prose (500 instances from each type). The books excerpted represent items of modern Norwegian fiction, or scientific studies respectively. That means that the individual books were chosen from the period of the last 50 years as this time span is usually considered suitable for synchronic linguistic exploration. From each book, the first fifty instances of existential construction were excerpted. The excerption was exclusively focused on authors' monologues in order to obtain a homogeneous sample. Passages with direct speech were intentionally left out, the main reason being the fact that direct speech is regarded as a spoken language in which case prosodic features (like intonation) are involved as one of the FSP factors. The present analysis is, however, carried out on a sample of written language and prosodic features will therefore serve only as a supportive test of the FSP analysis. Each of the books was written by a different writer in order to obtain instances that would best characterize the general use of language, and simultaneously to eliminate specific writing styles of the authors. Particular attention was paid to the choice of the academic texts in order to include various branches of science, both natural and human. The branches of science represented in the sample are 1. Economy and Politics (Østerud, 1996), 2. Sociology (Fyrand, 1994), 3. History (Seip, 1997), 4. Philosophy (Skirbekk, 2000), 5. Religious studies (Nordby, 1999), 6. Medical studies (Bondevik, 2009), 7. Biology (Røskaft, 2010), 8. Psychology (Vigeland, 2006), 9. Linguistics (Kulbrandstad, 1998), and 10. Law (Langfeldt, 2009). The Norwegian sentences illustrating various aspects include also a literal English translation which is intended to demonstrate the Norwegian sentence structure⁹. Instances without any reference to literature are the author's own examples.

In addition, the Norwegian sentences were also compared against the corresponding Czech translations. The translations of the literary texts were published ones and served only as a supportive test for the FSP analysis. Since the Czech language, unlike Norwe-

⁹ Even though both English and Norwegian are generally considered as analytic or isolating languages, there are particularly two main syntactic differences that need to be pointed out: 1. Norwegian is a so-called V-2 language, which means the finite verb is always placed as the second element in the main clause, cf. *Per var i Oslo i går* [Per was in Oslo yesterday], *I går var Per i Oslo* [Yesterday was Per in Oslo]. 2. A certain type of adverbials (the so-called 'setningsadverbial', see below in chapter 5.1.4) is placed after the finite verb in the main clause, but before the finite verb in the subordinate clause, cf. *Per spiller ofte tennis* [Per plays often tennis] vs. *Per sier at han ofte spiller tennis* [Per says he often plays tennis].

gian, has a movable word order, it reflects better the FSP structure¹⁰. Since the literary texts were translated by professional translators, it is expected that the interpretation of the FSP structure is correctly reflected in the translations, cf.

- (1) *Hun levde alltid i den tro at en ny leilighet eller et nytt hus kunne bringe far og henne sammen. Det ble mye flytting i min barndom.* (Alnæs 1963, 21)
 [She lived always in the belief that a new flat or a new house could bring father and her together. There was a lot of moving in my childhood]
V mém dětství bylo mnoho stěhování. [In my childhood was a lot of moving]

In the existential construction in example (1) the most dynamic element is the notional subject (*mye flytting*) and therefore it is placed finally in the Czech translation. Simultaneously, the adverbial of time (*i min barndom*) representing the least dynamic element occurs initially. On the other hand, in several instances the Czech translation does not follow the FSP structure of the original sentence due to a possible misinterpretation of the FSP structure, cf.

- (2) *Jeg har aldri fortalt Diane hvilket hotell jeg bor på. Likevel er det hun som leder meg opp Oxford Street og videre opp Bayswater Road. [...] Jeg skjønner ikke hva hun driver med. Jeg ser etter mygg. I den grad det eksisterer mygg i London sentrum.* (Egeland 2007, 150)
 [I have never told Diane which hotel I am staying at. Nevertheless, it is her who is leading me up Oxford Street and further up Bayswater Road. [...] I don't understand what she is doing. I am looking for mosquitoes. To the extent there exist mosquitoes in London centre]
Nechápu, co dělá. Asi komáři. Pokud vůbec můžou komáři žít v centru Londýna.
 [I don't understand what she is doing. Perhaps mosquitoes. If can mosquitoes live in the centre of London]

The Czech translation in example (2) suggests that the most dynamic element of the existential construction is the final locative adverbial. However, considering the given context it is obvious that the degree of CD carried by the adverbial is rather low since its meaning is indicated by the streets mentioned previously (cf. Oxford Street and Bayswater Road). Searching further for the most dynamic element the notional subject must be excluded as well since it is also mentioned previously. It is the verb here that carries the highest degree of CD and should therefore be placed finally in the Czech translation (cf. *Pokud vůbec komáři v centru Londýna žít mohou*). [If mosquitoes in the centre of London live can].

Unlike fiction where the official translation is usually easily available, the academic prose was translated by the author of the monograph since it is rather impossible to find Norwegian-Czech parallel texts. However, in case of difficulties or uncertainties, the

¹⁰ In terms of operation of word order principles, Norwegian lies typologically very close to English which “employs word order primarily to indicate grammatical functions; on the other hand, in inflectional Czech the grammatical principle plays a secondary role, syntactic relations being indicated by grammatical endings. Hence Czech word order is free to perform other functions among which indication of the FSP functions of the clause elements ranks highest.” (Dušková 2015a, 14)

Czech translations were discussed with J. Vrbová, a prominent translator of Norwegian literature, and P. Štajnerová, an experienced translator and interpreter from Norwegian to Czech. The translation of academic texts thus reflects the FSP interpretation of the author of the monograph.

Modern Norwegian has currently two official written forms, bokmål, which was derived from the Danish language, and nynorsk, which originated on the basis of various Norwegian dialects. Both forms are legally equal and respected by the Norwegian society. However, bokmål has become a dominant written form and is preferred by a clear majority of Norwegians. Nynorsk, on the other hand, has become more or less marginal in terms of language use¹¹. The analysis in this monograph is therefore based entirely on the dominant form bokmål.

¹¹ According to Statistics Norway (Statistisk Sentralbyrå) only 12 % of elementary school students chose nynorsk in 2016.

4. The Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP)

4.1 The communicative dynamism (CD)

The analysis in this monograph is carried out within the Firbasian theoretical concept of functional sentence perspective¹². The concept is based on the notion that the individual elements in a sentence play a more or less important role in the act of communication. That implies that some elements may be considered as very essential because they contribute most to the development of the communication, on the other hand, some elements may be perceived as less important for they do not play an important role in the act of communication, but carry only background information, cf.

- (3) *Den ene etter den andre har satt sitt preg på husværet hans, det er myke puter og pledd, det er flere bilder på veggene, og på badekarkanten står det til og med et par telys-taker (riktignok nokså støvete).* (Uri 2006, 29)

[One after another have left her mark on his household, there are soft cushions and rugs, there are more pictures on the walls, and on the side of the bath stand there even a pair of tea candlesticks (of course rather dusty)]

Example (3) contains three instances of existential construction the communicative function of which is to introduce a new phenomenon into the flow of communication. The presented phenomena, in this example syntactically realized by notional subjects, play the most important role in the act of communication, which means that the communication is perspectived to them. On the other hand, the adverbials of place in the second and third existential construction carry only background information which is not so essential in the flow of communication. The existential verbs in these constructions seem to serve as connective elements between the two parts. Generally, Firbas speaks about communicative dynamism by which he understands “a quality displayed by communication in the development (unfolding) of the information to be conveyed and consisting in advancing this development.” (Firbas 1975, 48) Each element in a sentence conveying

¹² “By FSP (sometimes also referred to as actual sentence analysis, actual sentence division, or contextual organisation of the sentence) we understand the arrangement of sentence elements as it is viewed in the light of the actual situation, i.e. in fact in the light of context, both verbal and situational.” (Firbas 2010e, 126–127)

meaning can become a carrier of a certain degree of communicative dynamism (CD) which is “the relative extent to which the element contributes to the development of the communication, to which, as it were, it ‘pushes’ the communication further.” (Firbas 1975, 48) It must be pointed out that the degree of CD is relative and must be considered in relation to the other elements that take part in the process of fulfilling the communicative purpose¹³. It is further important to realize that the term ‘development of communication’ is not necessarily a mere linear notion. Linearity is, of course, involved as well. However, the linear arrangement does not always have to correspond to the gradual rise in CD in the flow of communication, cf.

(4) *Han er alvorlig og dybt og grenseløst forelsket. Kanskje for første gang. Det har vært mange kvinner i Pål's liv.* (Uri 2006, 30)

[He is seriously and deeply and foolishly in love. Perhaps for the first time. There have been many women in Pål's life]

Example (4) contains an existential construction where the most dynamic element (the notional subject) is followed by an adverbial element which serves only as a background in the flow of communication and therefore carries a lower degree of CD than the subject.

The elements carrying the lowest degree of CD constitute the thematic section, while the elements with the highest degree of CD form the rheme. The remaining elements that serve as a sort of mediation between the two sections are called transition. Thus, an interpretative arrangement can be outlined indicating increasing degree of CD: Theme (Th) – Transition (Tr) – Rheme (Rh).

4.2 The communicative field

When analysing the FSP structure of a certain stretch of communication it is necessary to determine the boundaries of that stretch, in other words, we must define the basic unit of communication which would serve as basic space for the FSP analysis. Before doing so, it is important to realize what layer within the system of language the analysis of communication appertains to. A. Svoboda (in Svoboda 1968) distinguishes three layers or systems of language: 1. Grammatical system, 2. Semantic system, and 3. Functional system. The grammatical system operates on the layer of morphology, which means that the analysis is focused on morphemes and words. A sentence is regarded as a field of grammatical relations and the most important relation between the units is a dependency. This is reflected in the system of formal syntax where the basic clause elements (subject, object etc.) are determined. Within the semantic system, the semantic relations are dominant, the most important one being predication. A sentence is regarded here as a semantic field. This corresponds to the system of semantic syntax where special

¹³ “It should be emphasized that the degree (amounts) of CD do not constitute multiples of some basic unit or quantity of information. They are to be understood in terms of the mutual relations of the elements in regard to CD within a distributional field.” (Firbas 2010d, 105)

attention is paid to semantic roles of clause elements, for instance, agent, patient etc. In the functional system, a sentence is regarded as “a field of relations presenting the results of a communication (communicative field), the most important relation being here the interrelation between the thematic and the rhematic section.” (Svoboda 1968, 55) All the three systems are separate and can be approached individually in terms of constituents and internal relations. On the other hand, they are all interconnected and especially the cooperation of the first two influences the outcome of the third. Based on this system division Svoboda defines the basic unit of communication which is the communicative (or distributional) field. It is “provided by the independent sentence based on verbal predication.” (Svoboda 1968, 57) The notion of sentence and field is, however, a relative term and there can be difficulties in determining the exact borders between two sentences or fields, cf.

(5) *After the row, he went to bed and slept. Fast and soundly.* (Firbas 1992, 16)

In example (5) Firbas points out that the adverbials *fast* and *soundly* constitute a separate communicative field even though they are not a part of a sentence. They represent a clause element which is separated from the rest of the clause. By this parcellation, the clause element acquires even a higher degree of CD¹⁴. In writing the parcellation is signalled by punctuation and capitalization that serve here as a division line between two communicative fields. In spoken language intonation and pauses are employed. The analysis presented in this monograph follows this approach and that is also why the following two sentences are analysed differently, cf.

(6) *Det er noe med det gule glimtet i de altfor lyse øynene hennes, noe med svaien i nakken.* (Uri 2006, 50)

[There is something about the yellow gleam in the always bright eyes, something with the curve on the neck]

(7) *Det er noe annet ved Nanna. Noe helt eget.* (Uri 2006, 81)

[There is something else about Nanna. Something completely peculiar]

Example (6) is considered as a single communicative field as it can easily be regarded as a simple sentence with a multiple notional subject (the two phrases are coordinated *asyndetically*). On the other hand, example (7) is analyzed as two separate communicative fields due to the punctuation and capitalization.

¹⁴ “By separating the clause elements/parcellation, those elements are actualized and become a part of the nucleus of the utterance; the utterance then has a more complicated structure of the nucleus: He is going to the backyard (basis) for chicken (nucleus). He is going to the backyard (nucleus). – For chicken (nucleus)”. (Čechová 2000, 262) (Translated by P. Dubec)

4.3 Carriers of CD (communicative units)

A communicative field is constituted by linguistic elements that are able to carry a certain degree of CD. These elements are called communicative units. “Any linguistic element – a clause, a phrase, a word, a morpheme or even a submorphemic feature (e.g. the vowel alternation *sing, sang, sung*) – can become a carrier of CD on account of the meaning it conveys” (Firbas 1992, 17), cf.

- (8) *Det oppsto større sosiale motsetninger.* (Skirbekk 2000, 24)
[There arouse bigger social differences]

In example (8) there are three different communicative units: the existential subject (*Det*), the predicate (*oppsto*) and the notional subject (*større sosiale motsetninger*). Sometimes a communicative unit can be represented by a linguistic element that does not have a formal realization, cf.

- (9) *Peter stayed in London, and Paul decided to go to Edinburgh.* (Firbas 1992, 17)

Firbas claims that the contrast between the names *Peter* and *Paul* and between the cities *London* and *Edinburgh* in example (9) constitutes a separate communicative unit because it provides additional information and thus raises their degree of CD.

4.4 Communicative subfields

It has been mentioned previously that the communicative unit is provided by the independent sentence. An independent sentence may include one or more subordinate clauses that besides constituting a communicative unit within the major distributional field provide a separate communicative field on their own, cf.

- (10) *Her er det tre områder som vies særlig oppmerksomhet [...].* (Vigeland 2006, 13)
[Here are there three areas that deserve particular attention]

The sentence in the example (10) includes a postmodifying relative clause that within the major communicative field (i.e. provided by the whole sentence) constitutes one communicative unit together with the notional subject. The major communicative field thus consists of the following communicative units: the locative adverbial *her*, the predicate *er*, the existential subject *det*, and the notional subject *tre områder som vies...* In addition, the postmodifying relative clause serves as a communicative field on its own and is to be understood as a subfield in relation to the major communicative field. This communicative subfield includes the following communicative units: the subject *som*, the predicate *vies*, and the direct object *særlig oppmerksomhet*. Strictly speaking, even the noun phrase *særlig oppmerksomhet* forms a communicative subfield, its communi-

cative units being the head word *oppmerksomhet* and its premodifier *særlig*. Particular attention is paid to the predicative verb which is regarded by many as a single communicative unit. Firbas, however, points out, that the predicative verb combines two communicative units, one being the lexical component of the verb (i.e. the semantic content), the other being constituted by the so-called categorial exponents. Firbas defines the categorial exponents of the verb as “formal signals conveying such indications as those of tense, mood, modality, person, number, gender, voice, aspect, polarity.” (Firbas 1992, 18) Based on this definition Firbas distinguishes an exponent of person (PE), an exponent of number (NE), or jointly exponents of person and number (PNEs), an exponent of tense (TE), an exponent of mood (ME), or together exponents of tense and mood (TMEs).

It must be emphasized at this point that every communicative field and subfield has its own functional perspective, and in every field, the communication is perspectived to the most dynamic element. Thus, in example (10) the communication in the major field is perspectived to the notional subject (including its postmodification), and simultaneously the communication of the subfield provided by the subordinate clause is perspectived to the direct object as the most dynamic element. Finally, in the field provided by the noun phrase *særlig oppmerksomhet* the most dynamic element is constituted by the premodifier. Based on this notion of communicative fields and subfields it can be assumed that one communicative unit may carry more degrees of CD than one and may, therefore, be regarded as heterogeneous concerning CD (cf. the degree of CD of the noun *oppmerksomhet* in the two subfields in the example (10)).

4.5 The FSP factors

The distribution of CD in the communicative field is influenced by four main factors the interplay of which is decisive for determining the FSP functions. These factors are 1. Linearity, 2. Context, 3. Semantics, and 4. Intonation.

4.5.1 Linearity

Linear modification of a sentence presupposes that the communicative units of a certain communicative field are arranged according to the gradual increase in CD. That means that “[d]en delen av et utsagn som inneholder ny informasjon, blir i regelen plassert mot slutten av setningen”¹⁵. (Vinje 1987, 228) That means that elements carrying the lowest degree of CD come first in the field, while elements with the highest degree of CD are placed finally. “I vanlige fortellende setninger er det i regelen et definnitt ledd som står først. Det kan være et substantiv i bestemt form (*soldaten*), et egennavn, et substantiv med påpekende pronomen eller en genitiv foran (*de mennesker, Astrids bil*), et definnitt

¹⁵ “The part of an utterance that includes new information is regularly placed towards the end of the sentence.” (Translated by P. Dubec)

adverb (*da, nå, i går, hit, derfor*) eller et preposisjonsuttrykk med styring i bestemt form”¹⁶ (Ibid.) This arrangement is also referred to as the basic distribution of CD, cf.

(11) *Per kom for sent.*
[Per came late]

(12) *Denne jenta jobber som lege.*
[This girl works as a doctor]

In adduced examples (11) and (12) the most dynamic elements (*sent, lege*) are situated at the end of the respective communicative field, while the least dynamic elements (*Per, denne jenta*) are presented initially. Linearity “makes the speaker/writer arrange the linguistic elements in a linear sequence, in a line, and develop the discourse step by step.” (Firbas 1971, 138) The basic distribution of CD may thus be perceived as being “in harmony with the character of human apprehension.” (Ibid.) Such arrangement is, however, primarily achievable in languages where the word order is governed mainly by FSP (cf. for example the Czech language that has a movable word order and tends to situate the rhematic section towards the end of the communicative field). The word order in Norwegian, on the other hand, is relatively fixed and the linear modification is often overridden by grammatical rules, cf.

(13) *Marie møtte Astri hos friserdamen i går.* (Rinnan 1983, 51)
[Marie met Astri at hairdresser’s yesterday]

If we consider the two women (*Marie* and *Astri*) in example (13) as the only retrievable information in the flow of communication, the most dynamic element is constituted by the locative adverbial (*hos friserdamen*). However, it is not situated at the end of the communicative field. The final adverbial of time carries a lower degree of CD and creates a sort of background; nevertheless, its final position is required by grammatical rules. It is therefore obvious that linearity is not a decisive factor in determining the FSP functions.

4.5.2 Context

The contextual factor deals mainly with retrievability and irretrievability of a piece of information in the flow of communication. “Retrievability implies the actual ‘tangible’ presence of a piece of information in the text. The moment a piece of information actually appears in the flow of communication, it becomes retrievable from it.” (Firbas 1995, 18) If such piece of information is not repeated, it gradually loses its retrievability in the so-called immediate relevant context. By this term, Firbas refers to a stretch of text in the

¹⁶ “In common declarative sentences a definite clause element is usually placed initially. It can be a noun with the definite article (*the soldier*), a proper noun, a noun with a demonstrative pronoun or a genitive (*those people, Astrid’s car*), a definite adverb (*that time, now, yesterday, here, therefore*), or a prepositional phrase with a noun with the definite article (*in the forest*).” (Translated by P. Dubec)