

Pavel Dubec

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

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<b>List of Abbreviations</b> .....	7
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	9
<b>2. The subject matter</b> .....	11
<b>3. Methodology</b> .....	12
<b>4. The Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP)</b> .....	15
4.1 The communicative dynamism (CD) .....	15
4.2 The communicative field .....	16
4.3 Carriers of CD (communicative units) .....	18
4.4 Communicative subfields .....	18
4.5 The FSP factors .....	19
4.5.1 Linearity .....	19
4.5.2 Context .....	20
4.5.2.1 Signals of context-dependence .....	23
4.5.2.2 The operation of context over a communicative field .....	26
4.5.3 Semantics .....	27
4.5.3.1 The verb and its successful competitors .....	28
4.5.3.2 Presentation scale and Quality scale .....	28
4.5.4 Intonation .....	31
<b>5. The existential construction ('presenteringskonstruksjonen')</b> .....	32
5.1 Syntactic aspects .....	32
5.1.1 The grammatical subject 'det' .....	33
5.1.1.1 Prop (empty) "det" .....	33
5.1.1.2 Anaphoric "det" .....	33
5.1.1.3 Anticipatory "det" .....	34
5.1.1.4 Existential "det" .....	34
5.1.2 The Verb .....	35
5.1.3 The notional subject .....	36
5.1.3.1 The position of the notional subject .....	36
5.1.3.2 The structure of the notional subject .....	37
5.1.3.2.1 Discontinuity in postmodification .....	39
5.1.3.3 Semantics of the head noun .....	41
5.1.4 Adverbials .....	42
5.1.4.1 Adjuncts .....	42
5.1.4.2 Disjuncts .....	45

5.1.4.3	Conjuncts	48
5.1.5	Potentiality in syntactic analysis	48
5.2	The FSP aspects	50
5.2.1	Theme	50
5.2.2	Rheme	53
5.2.3	Transition	55
5.2.4	Multiple adverbials performing various FSP functions	58
5.2.5	FSP patterns	58
5.2.6	Potentiality in the FSP analysis	62
<b>6.</b>	<b>Summary</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>7.</b>	<b>Analysis</b>	<b>65</b>
7.1	Syntactic analysis and static semantics	65
7.1.1	The position of the notional subject	65
7.1.2	The structure of the notional subject	67
7.1.2.1	Simple NP	67
7.1.2.2	Complex NP	67
7.1.2.2.1	Discontinuity in postmodification	73
7.1.2.3	Compound NP	74
7.1.3	Semantics of the head word	75
7.1.4	The Verb	80
7.1.5	Adverbials	83
7.1.5.1	Adjuncts	83
7.1.5.2	Disjuncts	87
7.1.5.3	Conjuncts	87
7.1.6	Potentiality in the syntactic analysis	89
7.1.7	The conclusion of the syntactic analysis	91
7.2	FSP analysis	92
7.2.1	The FSP functions of NS	93
7.2.2	The FSP functions of the verb	98
7.2.3	The FSP functions of adverbials	99
7.2.3.1	Diatheme	100
7.2.3.2	Transition proper oriented element	104
7.2.3.3	Rheme proper	105
7.2.3.4	Instances with multiple adverbials	108
7.2.4	The FSP patterns	112
7.2.4.1	Th-Tr-Rh	112
7.2.4.2	Th – Tr/Rh	116
7.2.4.3	FSP patterns with a rhematic adverbial	117
7.2.5	Potentiality in the FSP analysis	122
7.2.6	Summary of the FSP analysis	124
<b>8.</b>	<b>The final conclusion</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>9.</b>	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>135</b>

# List of Abbreviations

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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

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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 communicated<sup>1</sup>. 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. Halliday<sup>2</sup> and R. Quirk, S. Greenbaum, G. Leech, and J. Svartvik<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the most recent representative grammar written by R. Huddleston and G. K. Pullum needs to be taken into consideration<sup>4</sup>. In the American linguistic tradition, the most prominent scholar is perhaps W. Chafe<sup>5</sup>. In Prague, yet another significant concept has been developed at the Institute of Formal and Applied Linguistics of the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics.

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<sup>1</sup> Summarized in Weil 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Mainly Halliday 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Especially their collective work Quirk 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Huddleston, and Pullum 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Especially Chafe 1994.

The main representatives of this approach, P. Sgall and E. Hajičová<sup>6</sup> are closely associated with a broader tradition of generative grammar.<sup>7</sup>

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.

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<sup>6</sup> Sgall et al. (1973).

<sup>7</sup> 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

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The subject matter of this monograph is the syntactic and FSP analysis of the existential construction (presenteringskonstruksjon) *det er* in Norwegian<sup>8</sup>. 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.

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

### 3. Methodology

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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 structure<sup>9</sup>. 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-

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<sup>9</sup> 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 structure<sup>10</sup>. 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

<sup>10</sup> 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)