

Information Structure Across Languages: Rheme Identification among Czech and Slovak English Learners and Native English Speakers

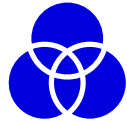
Mgr. Emma Jackovičová

Masaryk University, the Czech Republic

Overview



FSP: Theoretical
Framework



Cross-linguistic
Contrasts



Study Design &
Method



Key Findings



Implications for
L2 Learning

Functional Sentence Perspective

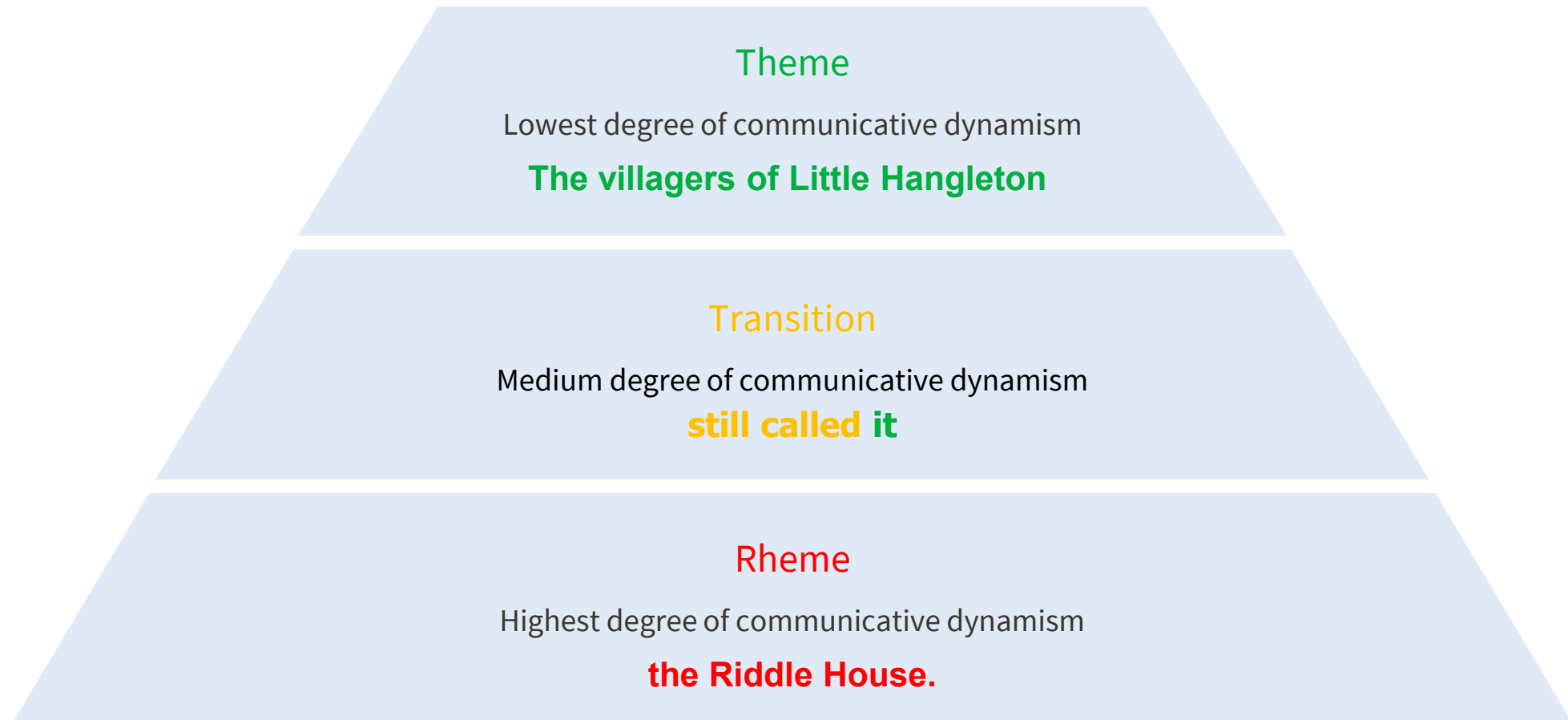
- information structure / flow within a sentence
- how information is distributed and conveyed to the listener / reader
- the communicative function of different sentence elements
- Theme → Transition → Rheme

Functional Sentence Perspective

Communicative Dynamism

- Measures how elements drive the message forward
- **Theme** = lowest CD → usually known (context dependent)
- **Rheme** = highest CD → new, important (context independent)

Functional Sentence Perspective



Czech & Slovak vs English

Word Order Principles

- **English**: rigid SVO → The leading word order principle is **the grammatical principle**
 - English permits non-final rhemes
- **Czech & Slovak**: flexible word order → The leading word order principle is **the linearity principle**
 - Czech does not typically permit non-final rhemes

Czech & Slovak vs English

- Czech: rheme in final position
- English: rheme may shift also to non-final position

Rheme in final position

The Little Hangletons all agreed
that the old house was
"creepy."

Všichni z Malého Visánku **svorně**
tvrdili, že starý dům jim nahání
husí kůži.

Rheme in middle position

Half a century ago, **something**
strange and horrible had
happened...

Před půl stoletím se stalo **něco**
podivného a hrůzného...

Rheme in initial position

...**a man called Frank Bryce**
had just been arrested.

... policie právě **zatkla Franka**
Bryce.

Research Questions

1. Do Czech and Slovak students tend to identify the sentence-final unit as the rheme by default?
2. Do non-native speakers of English perceive the information structure of an English text differently from native speakers?
 1. If so, are these differences due to L1 influence?
 2. Does rheme placement systematically affect interpretation?

Participants & The Source Text

No participants were trained in or acquainted with FSP theory

Answers aligned with FSP theory were categorized as **Convergent**

Answers deviating from FSP were labelled as **Divergent**

Two Non-Native Surveys

108 participants, Czech and Slovak first-year university students of English Language and Literature

One Native Survey

151 native English speakers

Survey Content

Excerpt of first paragraph from Chapter 1 of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* by J.K. Rowling

Participants & The Source Text

Survey for Doctoral Research on Language Comprehension

Dear Respondents,

I am a doctoral student at the Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Czech Republic. I would like to ask you to fill out my questionnaire, which aims to assess your understanding of a written text. The survey should take no more than 10 minutes to complete. Please note that this research is focused on native English speakers only.

Your responses will be anonymous. By participating in this questionnaire, you agree to the use of the survey data. The data will be used only for research purposes in my doctoral studies. I would like to thank everyone who takes the time to fill out this questionnaire – your participation is of utmost importance for my research.

In the survey, you will be presented with a passage from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Please note that minor adjustments have been made to the original text.

After reading each passage, you will be asked to choose the most important language units in individual sentences. Multiple and complex sentences will be divided into simple clauses for easier analysis.

Before you start, please answer the following two questions about yourself:

emma.tomori@googlemail.com [Switch account](#)



Not shared

* Indicates required question

(1) The villagers of Little Hangleton still called it “the Riddle House,” *

- ☐ The villagers of Little Hangleton
- ☐ still
- ☐ called
- ☐ it
- ☐ “the Riddle House,”

(2) even though it had been many years since the Riddle family had lived there. *

- ☐ even though
- ☐ it
- ☐ had been
- ☐ many years
- ☐ since the Riddle family had lived there.

Participants & The Source Text

Below is the first passage of the chapter called *The Riddle House*. Please read the passage:

The villagers of Little Hangleton still called it “the Riddle House,” even though it had been many years since the Riddle family had lived there. It stood on a hill overlooking the village, some of its windows boarded, tiles missing from its roof, and ivy spreading unchecked over its face. Once it was a fine-looking manor, and easily the largest and grandest building for miles around; however, the Riddle House was now damp, derelict, and unoccupied. The Little Hangletons all agreed that the old house was “creepy.” Half a century ago, something strange and horrible had happened there, something that the older inhabitants of the village still liked to discuss when topics for gossip were scarce. The story had been picked over so many times, and had been embroidered in so many places, that nobody was quite sure what the truth was anymore. Every version of the tale, however, started in the same place: Fifty years before, at daybreak on a fine summer’s morning, a maid had entered the drawing room and found all three Riddles dead.

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. New York: Scholastic, 2002.

Below, the passage that you have read is divided into separate sentences, clauses and smaller language units. In each sentence or clause, please choose the language unit that you think is the most important and most relevant for the development of the whole story.

Please note that some language units occur twice in the survey because they are members of a subordinate clause that is in itself a member of the main clause.

Next, you will read the continuation of the text. Please follow the same instructions as above, i.e. in each sentence or clause choose the language unit that you think is the most important and most relevant for the development of the whole story.

The maid had run screaming down the hill into the village and roused as many people as she could. “Lying there with their eyes wide open! Cold as ice! Still in their dinner things!” The police were summoned, and the whole of Little Hangleton had seethed with shocked curiosity and ill-disguised excitement. Nobody wasted their breath pretending to feel very sad about the Riddles, for they had been most unpopular. Elderly Mr. and Mrs. Riddle had been rich, snobbish, and rude, and their grown-up son, Tom, had been, if anything, worse. All the villagers cared about was the identity of their murderer — for plainly, three apparently healthy people did not all drop dead of natural causes on the same night. The Hanged Man, the village pub, did a roaring trade that night; the whole village seemed to have turned out to discuss the murders. They were rewarded for leaving their firesides when the Riddles’ cook arrived dramatically in their midst and announced to the suddenly silent pub that a man called Frank Bryce had just been arrested.

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. New York: Scholastic, 2002.

Data

Non-Native Surveys

Range: 12-38 points (of 43)
Average: 26 points
Median: 26 points
23 Convergent, 20 Divergent answers

Non-Final Rheme

Divergent: 61% vs Convergent : 39%

Final Rheme

Divergent: 36% vs Convergent : 64%

Native Survey

Range: 13-34 points (of 43)
Average: 25 points
Median: 26 points
22 Convergent, 21 Divergent answers

Non-Final Rheme

Divergent: 67% vs Convergent : 33%

Final Rheme

Divergent: 36% vs Convergent : 64%

Data

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
Survey A (English)	C	D (NF)	D (NF)	C	C	D (NF)	D (NF)	D	C	C	C	C (NF)	D	C (NF)	D (NF)	D (NF)	C (NF)	C (NF)	C	D (NF)	C	
Survey B (Czech)	C	D	C	C	C	D	D	D	C	C	C	C	D	D	D	C	C	C	D	D	C	
Survey C (English)	C	D (NF)	D (NF)	C	C	D (NF)	D (NF)	D	C	C	C	C (NF)	D	C (NF)	D (NF)	C (NF)	C (NF)	C (NF)	D	D (NF)	C	
	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43
Survey A (Czech)	D	D	D	D	D	C	C	D	C	C	C	D	C	D	D	C	C	D	D	C	C	C
Survey B (English)	D	D	C	D	C	C (NF)	C	D	C (NF)	C	C	D	C	D (NF)	C (NF)	C	D (NF)	D	D	C (NF)	C	D (NF)
Survey C (English)	D	D	C	D	C	C (NF)	C	D	D (NF)	C	C	C	C	D (NF)	D (NF)	C	D (NF)	D	D	D (NF)	C	D (NF)

Table 1. Convergent vs. Divergent Responses by Survey Section

Survey	Convergent (Total)	Divergent (Total)	Convergent (English Text)	Divergent (English Text)	Convergent (Czech Text)	Divergent (Czech Text)
Survey A	23	20	12	9	11	11
Survey B	24	19	12	10	12	9
Survey C	22	21	-	-	-	-

Table 2. Answer ratio in Surveys A, B and C

Fig. 1. Convergent and divergent identification of ratio in final rhyme sentences in Surveys A, B

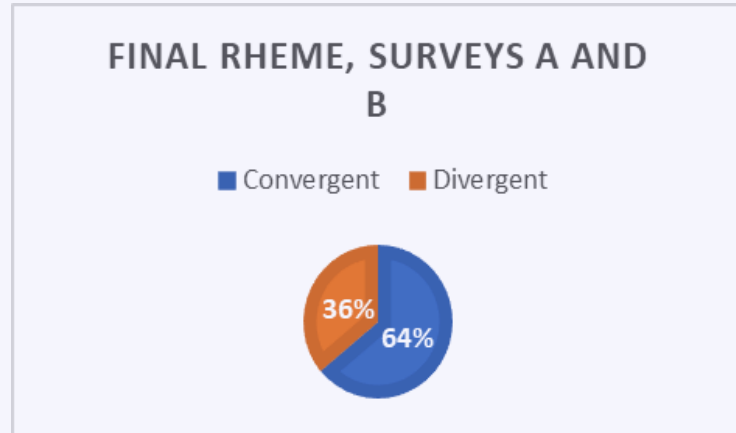


Fig. 2. Convergent and divergent identification of ratio in final rhyme sentences in Survey C

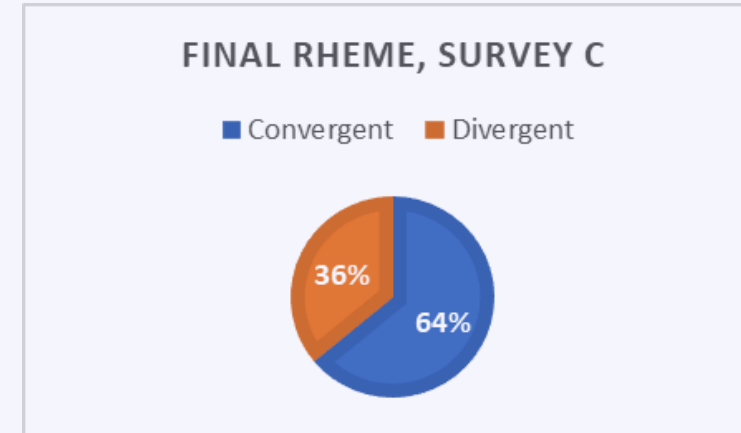


Fig. 3. Convergent and divergent identification of ratio in non-final rhyme sentences in Surveys A, B

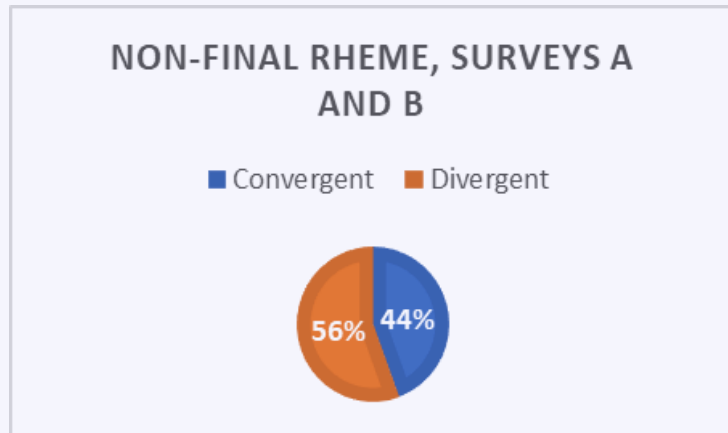
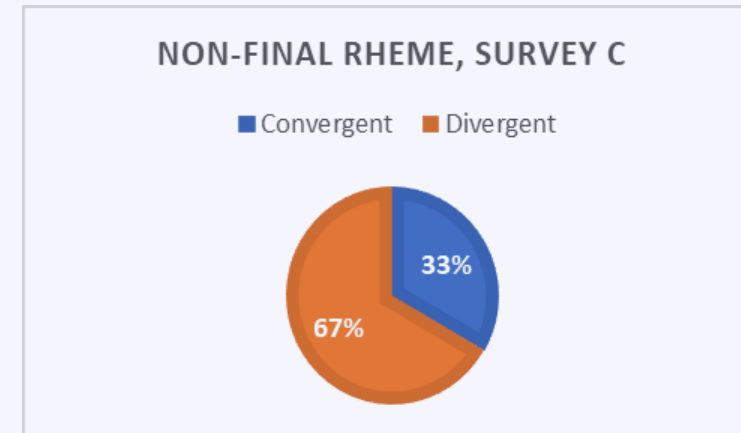


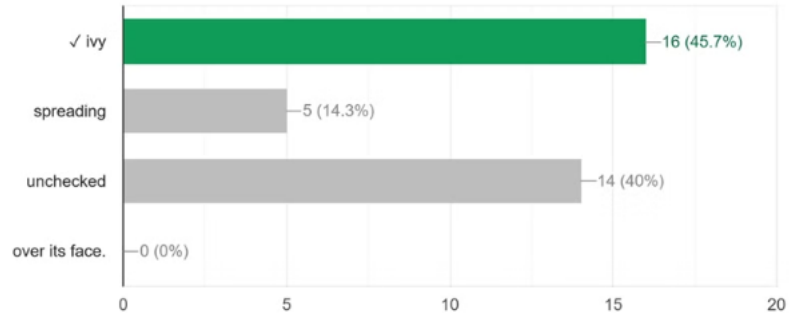
Fig. 4. Convergent and divergent identification of ratio in non-final rhyme sentences in Survey C



NON-NATIVE

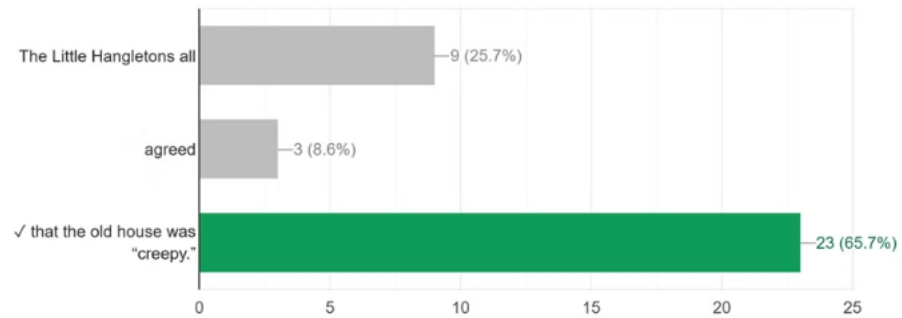
(7) and ivy spreading unchecked over its face.

16 / 35 correct responses



(10) The Little Hangletons all agreed that the old house was "creepy."

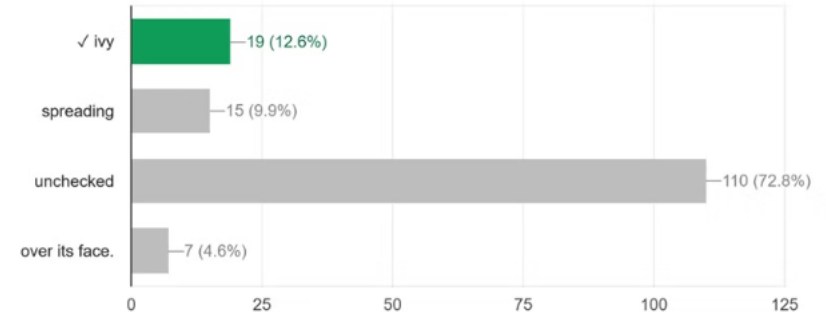
23 / 35 correct responses



NATIVE

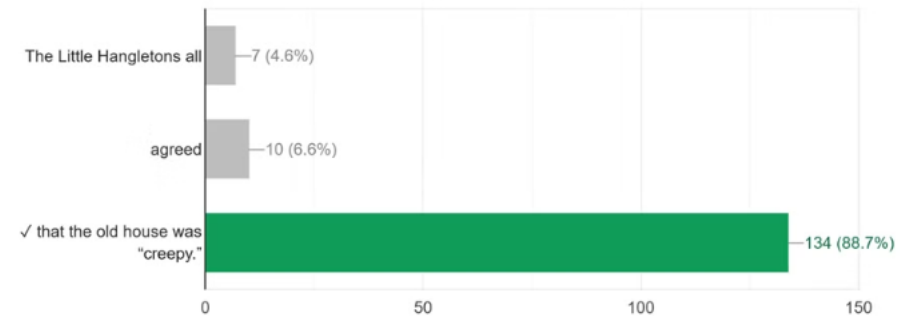
(7) and ivy spreading unchecked over its face.

19 / 151 correct responses



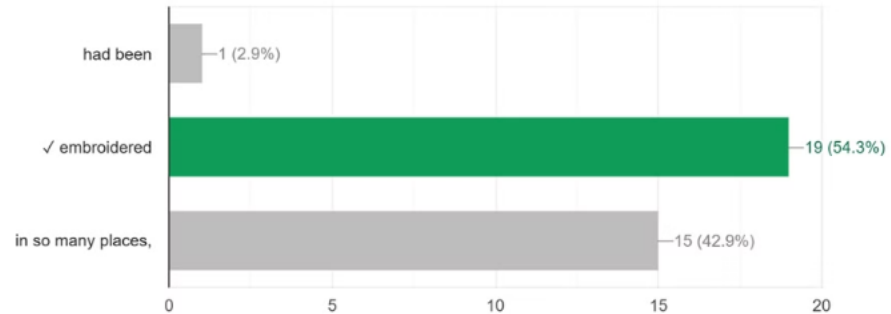
(10) The Little Hangletons all agreed that the old house was "creepy."

134 / 151 correct responses

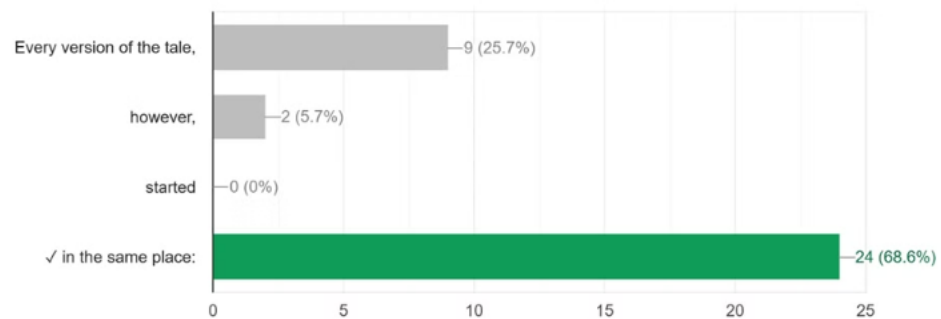


NON-NATIVE

(16) and had been embroidered in so many places,
19 / 35 correct responses

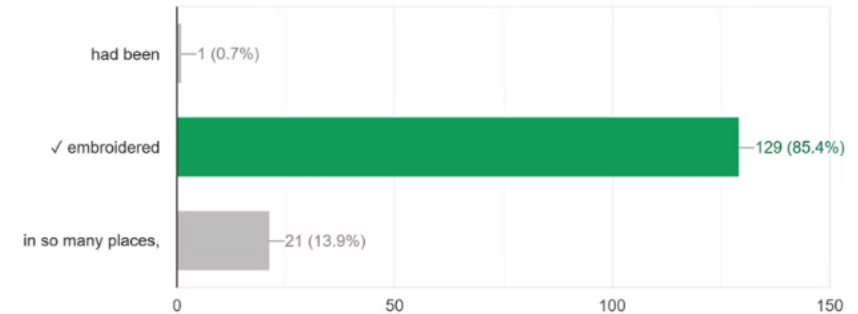


(19) Every version of the tale, however, started in the same place:
24 / 35 correct responses

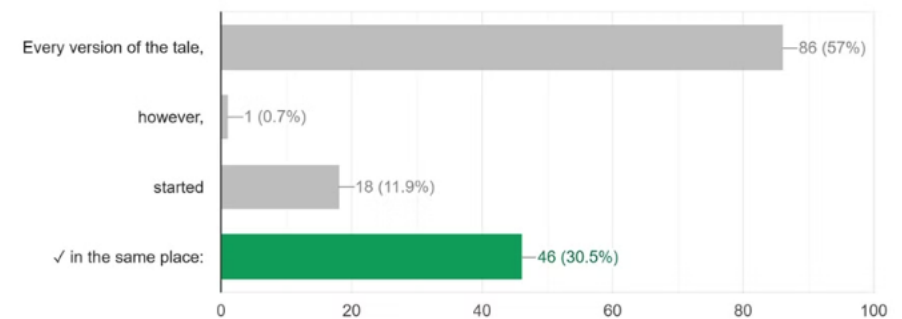


NATIVE

(16) and had been embroidered in so many places,
129 / 151 correct responses



(19) Every version of the tale, however, started in the same place:
46 / 151 correct responses



Results

Comparable performance of Czech & Slovak speakers in both languages

The assumption that L2 students would perform better when identifying the rheme in Czech sentences was **not confirmed** (they performed similarly in both languages)

Comparable ratios between both language groups

The ratio of convergent and divergent answers was similar across both the non-native and native English surveys

1

1.1

2

2.1

Final position preference

Over 64% of all participants selected the rheme convergently when it was in **the final position**

X

From 56% to 67% of all participants selected the rheme divergently when it was in **the non-final position**

Troubles with detecting rheme in initial & middle sentence positions

Out of 13 non-final rheme sentences that received divergent evaluation, 8 had the rheme positioned in the middle

Pedagogical Implications

Innovations in L2 Learning

- Raise L2 awareness of sentence focus
- Contrastive teaching: English vs Czech & Slovak
 - textual structures
 - communicative focus
- Highlight non-final rhemes explicitly
- discourse-oriented model of language learning

Summary

Both native and non-native speakers struggle with non-final rhemes

Final-position rhemes are identified correctly more often

Native language plays a surprisingly small role

Non-final rhemes are harder to detect regardless of L1

Enhance learners' awareness of rheme positioning and the role of context and its communicative focus

Thank You For Your Attention!

I would be happy to address any questions

Mgr. Emma Jackovičová
PhD student, Department of English and American Studies
Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University
Brno, Czech Republic