



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

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Abstract

This study explores how native and non-native English speakers identify rhematic elements in sentences, using Functional Sentence Perspective theory [8]. While Czech and Slovak typically place the rheme sentence-finally, English relies on SVO order with more flexible information structure [7]. Three surveys were conducted: two bilingual (English/Czech) administered to 108 Czech and Slovak university students, and one monolingual (English) completed by 151 native English speakers. Participants read excerpts from Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire [15, 16] and selected the most informative sentence units. Responses were labeled “convergent” if they matched the FSP-predicted rheme, and “divergent” if not. Sentence-final rhemes were widely recognized, while non-final ones were more challenging, yielding 67% divergent responses. Surprisingly, participants' native-language background had minimal impact, suggesting similar rheme identification strategies across groups. These findings offer insights for second-language pedagogy, translation studies, and contrastive linguistics, affirming FSP's value in language learning.

Keywords: Czech and Slovak learners of English, Cross-linguistic comparison, Functional Sentence Perspective, Rheme, Information structure, L2 acquisition

1. Introduction

This study uses the Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) framework to explore how information is perceived in sentences and broader communication. FSP divides utterances into thematic and rhematic elements, with a transitional component linking the two, each with varying degrees of Communicative Dynamism (CD). The rheme, which carries the highest degree of CD, typically appears in the final position of a sentence, following the end-focus principle. While sentence elements generally follow the theme-to-rheme progression in Czech and Slovak, these two languages demonstrate some degree of word order flexibility. As Dušková [7] emphasizes, Czech syntax is shaped by a dynamic interplay between communicative function and grammatical structure, allowing rhemes to appear in non-final positions depending on discourse context. Chamonikolasová [5] further underscores this flexibility by showing how prosodic features in Czech dialogues also contribute to the signaling of information structure, complementing syntactic positioning. In contrast, English primarily adheres to a grammatical SVOA order, but it too permits variation, particularly when prosodic or discourse-driven factors motivate the placement of rhemes outside the canonical final position [7].

The research investigates the perception of rhemes among native and non-native English speakers, focusing specifically on written discourse. Participants included (1) native English speakers and (2) Czech or Slovak speakers with comparable levels of English proficiency. Given the structural similarities between Czech and Slovak, it is anticipated that these non-native groups will exhibit similar interpretations of FSP-related features in English texts. However, differences are expected when contrasting native and non-native respondents, particularly in their ability to identify rhemes positioned outside the sentence final position.

Drawing on questionnaire responses in which participants were asked to identify the most important information units for the development of the story (= the rheme) from J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* [15], this study aims to assess whether first language influences rheme perception in English, and whether non-native speakers perceive rheme differently in Czech and Slovak versus in English texts. The central hypothesis posits that non-native English learners are more likely to select the final sentence element as the rheme, compared to native speakers. Additionally, it is hypothesized that native English speakers will outperform non-natives in recognizing rhemes in non-final positions. By examining these dynamics, the study seeks to determine the extent to which linguistic background impacts the comprehension of information structure, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of cross-linguistic information organization.



2. Functional Sentence Perspective Theory

Functional Sentence Perspective is a functionalist approach to language that emphasizes the communicative role of sentence structures. It analyzes the sentence level, focusing on how information is distributed within utterances. A central tenet of FSP is the notion of Communicative Dynamism, which allows for the assessment of how individual sentence elements contribute to the gradual development of the communicative act [6, 8]. The key elements are theme, transition, and rheme, each with varying degrees of CD, which interact in specific ways and are realized to different extents by syntactic structures and word order. Important FSP factors include the contextual and semantic factors, the linearity principle, and intonation or prosodic prominence in spoken communication [8].

2.1 Communicative Dynamism

In FSP analysis, each utterance is assessed based on its semantic contribution to the overall message, with the principal concept of communicative dynamism (CD) guiding this evaluation. The theme, transition, and rheme correspond to different degrees of CD, with the theme carrying the lowest CD and the rheme carrying the highest CD.

2.2 FSP Factors

CD is determined by four factors: *linear modification*, *the contextual factor*, *the semantic factor*, and *prosodic prominence* (in spoken language) [4]. Linear modification refers to the interplay between word order and CD. The contextual factor concerns “retrievability and irretrievability from the immediately relevant context,” creating the contrast between context-dependent and context-independent items [8]. The semantic factor concerns the roles and meanings of linguistic units, which are represented by theme, transition, and rheme.

The notion of a retrievability span describes the segment of text within which information remains accessible without the need to be re-expressed. Based on the hierarchy of activation model proposed by Hajičová and Vrbová [10], a discourse element generally retains its thematic status only if it is reactivated, typically through re-expression or anaphoric reference, within approximately seven clauses of its initial mention.

2.3 Theme, Transition, Rheme

CD is distributed across communicative units, ranging from the least to the most dynamic elements: from thematic to non-thematic elements. Every clause element corresponds to one such informative unit. While thematic units bear a lower level of CD, non-thematic units (transition and rheme) demonstrate higher degrees of CD [8]. The theme provides the groundwork for the conveyed message, making the smallest contribution to its CD. The transition serves as a bridge to the rhematic part of the sentence, elaborating on the information supplied by the theme. The rheme itself then carries the greatest communicative load, introducing new or predominantly irretrievable information within the current context [9], making it the most dynamic element in the structure and the one with the highest degree of CD. Typically, the rheme (marked in **bold**) appears in the sentence-final position, as in:

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

However, the rheme can also occur in non-final positions, either mid-sentence:

(12) *Half a century ago, **something strange and horrible** had happened there,*

or at the sentence-initial position:

(7) *...**ivy** spreading unchecked over its face.*

Although these positions deviate from the canonical end-focus principle, they still carry the rhematic function, illustrating that information structure is sensitive to discourse and grammatical factors.

2.4 Contrasting FSP Structures in English and Czech

There is a clear difference in how word order principles are prioritized in Czech and Slovak versus English [7]. Studies show that Czech and Slovak prioritize word order based on the FSP linearity principle as its primary organizing principle, whereas English emphasizes grammatical ordering [8].



In inflectional Czech and Slovak, word order primarily indicates the FSP structure. In neutral (non-emotive, non-emphatic) sentences, the rheme generally occupies the final position, with the theme occurring before the verb.

“In English, the leading word order principle is the grammatical principle; an English sentence first has to satisfy the requirements of ordering individual sentence elements in accordance with their syntactic functions (subject – verb – complement – object – adverbial)” [5]. Because English is an analytic language, grammatical roles figure prominently in determining element placement, relegating the FSP function to a subordinate position. Nevertheless, the principle of end-focus – positioning the rheme at the end – still holds in English [7]. In fact, although the rheme most often appears at the end of the sentence, thematic elements also occur in that position with some frequency (rhematic position: 62.2%, thematic position: 13.8%) [6].

2.5 Potentiality

FSP analysis usually provides a clear interpretation of sentence structure. However, in some cases, FSP allows multiple plausible interpretations, introducing a degree of potentiality into the process [1].

3. Material and Method

3.1 Context of the Study

This study takes an applied research approach. In total, three online surveys were administered – referred to as Survey A, Survey B, and Survey C. Over a two-year period, 116 first-year English Language and Literature students from the Faculty of Arts at Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic, participated by completing either Survey A or Survey B. Each survey presented a text characterized by clear continuity, cohesion, a well-defined sequence of events, and relatively straightforward vocabulary. Survey C, meanwhile, gathered 151 responses from native English speakers.

The text used in these surveys was extracted from the opening section of the first chapter of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* by J. K. Rowling [15]. All participants read and evaluated the same passage across the three survey versions. Survey A presented the first half of the passage in English and the second half in Czech, while Survey B reversed this order, beginning with Czech and continuing in English. These two bilingual versions were tailored for non-native English speakers. Survey C, intended for native English speakers, featured the entire passage in English. Each survey was completed by a separate group of students to ensure response independence and eliminate bias. The surveys were administered via Google Forms and included introductory instructions that encouraged participants to reflect on their personal interpretations and evaluations of the passage. To preserve the authenticity of their responses, no reference was made to Functional Sentence Perspective or any associated theoretical constructs. Participants were also informed that there were no correct or incorrect answers, in order to minimize any pressure to provide strategically “correct” responses. For analytical purposes, the complete text was first presented in its entirety, after which each sentence in both language versions was systematically numbered and segmented into communicative units. After reading the passage, participants were asked to identify the language unit in each sentence or clause that they considered most important for the progression and coherence of the narrative, as phrased in the instructions:

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.

In Survey A, students initially saw the first two paragraphs of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* [15] as a whole text and were subsequently asked to respond to questions based on segmented sentences and smaller linguistic units. The second half of the Survey A text also came from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* [15], following immediately from the first section, but was presented in Czech (taken from the Czech translation, *Harry Potter a Ohnivý Pohár* [16]). Below, you will find the texts used in Survey A:

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 [15].

S vrískotem běžela dolů do vesnice a cestou zburchovala kdekoho. „Oni tam všichni tři leží s otevřenýma očima! Jsou studený jako led, tak jak se oblíkli k večeři!“ Zavolali policii a šokovaný Malý Visánek ovládla zvědavost a špatně skrývané vzrušení. Nikdo se nenamáhal předstírat, že by Raddleovy nějak zvlášť litoval, poněvadž byli víc než neoblíbeni. Staří manželé Raddleovi byli bohatí, povýšení a hrubí, a o Tomovi, jejich dospělém synovi, to platilo dvojnásob. Vesničany zajímalo jediné – kdo je zavraždil. Bylo jasné, že během jednoho večera nemohli tři očividně zdraví lidé zemřít všichni přirozenou smrtí. V místním hostinci U Oběšence bylo ten večer nabit. Celá vesnice se sešla, aby ty mordy náležitě probrala, a nikdo nelitoval, že nezůstal sedět doma. Znenadání mezi ně přiběhla kuchařka od Raddleů, a když všichni ztichli, jako když utne, oznámila jim, že policie právě zatkla Franka Bryce [16].

Survey B followed the same design but reversed the language order: participants first encountered the excerpt in Czech translation, followed by the second half in the original English:

Lidé z Malého Visánku tomu stavení dosud říkali Raddleův statek, i když od časů, kdy tam Raddleovi opravdu žili, uplynula spousta let. Stál na kopci nad vesnicí, několik oken měl zabedněných, na střeše chyběly tašky a po průčelí se nezadržitelně rozrůstal břechťan. Kdysi to býval krásný panský dům, nejspíš největší a nejhonosnější budova na míle daleko; teď však byl vlhký, zpustlý a neobydlený. Všichni z Malého Visánku svorně tvrdili, že starý dům jim nahání husí kůži. Před půl stoletím se tam stalo něco podivného a hrůzného a starší vesničané to pořád s oblibou přetřásali, když neměli o čem jiném tlachat. Tu starou událost tolikrát probírali a v tolika věcech ji vylepšili, že už nikdo s určitostí nevěděl, jak to vlastně bylo doopravdy. Všechny ty historky ovšem začínaly stejně: před padesáti lety za úsvitu jednoho krásného letního dne vstoupila do salonu služebná a našla všechny tři Raddleovy mrtvé [16].

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 [15].

Survey C, created for English-speaking participants, included both paragraphs from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* [15] (the same ones used in Surveys A and B), presented entirely in English.

3.2 Participants

Surveys A and B were administered to two distinct groups of respondents in order to avoid response bias that might result from participants reading the same text in both English and Czech. It is assumed that both non-native groups—those who completed Survey A and those who completed Survey B—shared comparable levels of English proficiency and communicative competence, thereby ensuring the reliability and comparability of their responses.

A total of 116 native Czech and Slovak speakers participated in Surveys A and B. All were first-year students enrolled in the English Language and Literature program at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. These students were invited to participate on two separate occasions over a two-year period, with each round involving different cohorts from two first-year classes. Recruitment was carried out via email and in person during lectures and seminars, and each survey remained open for one month. Eight respondents indicated that their first language was not Czech or Slovak and were excluded from the analysis, resulting in 108 valid responses—52 in Survey A and 56 in Survey B. These participants had no prior exposure to FSP as a theory. Their responses may therefore be considered as reflecting intuitive linguistic judgments rather than acquired theoretical knowledge.

Survey C was administered under different conditions. It targeted native English speakers over the age of 18, without requiring formal proof of language proficiency. The survey was distributed with the assistance of the researcher's family in Canada and shared through social media platforms, including Harry Potter fan groups on Facebook. A total of 151 individuals completed Survey C. No further demographic criteria (such as education level) were imposed, assuming adult native speakers would naturally comprehend the English text.

Across all three surveys, only participants' age and first language were recorded. No additional personal data were collected, and all responses remained fully anonymous.

4. Research Questions



4.1 Question 1

With respect to Surveys A and B, a central question is whether Czech and Slovak students tend to identify the sentence-final unit as the rheme by default, regardless of its actual information value, relative communicative dynamism, or importance within the discourse structure. Such a tendency could lead to misinterpretations, particularly in English sentences where the rhematic element does not occupy the final position. This hypothesis rests on the assumption that participants' judgments are influenced by the communicative norms of their native language—Czech or Slovak—where rhemes are conventionally placed at the end of the sentence in accordance with the principles of Functional Sentence Perspective.

Jasinskaja and Šimík [11] observe that in free word-order languages like Czech or Slovak, rhematic constituents are typically aligned with sentence-final stress. Newmeyer [13] similarly notes that in Czech, the element of greatest communicative importance is systematically placed at the end of the clause, contrasting with grammatical ordering in English. These findings are echoed by Rohrauer [14], who shows that Czech speakers strongly favor sentence-final positions for new or dynamic information, even when translating into English.

This cross-linguistic interference suggests a systemic influence of L1-based discourse strategies on L2 sentence processing and interpretation.

4.2 Question 2

With respect to Survey C, the central question is whether non-native speakers of English perceive the information structure of an English text differently from native speakers—and, if so, to what extent these differences can be attributed to conventions rooted in their first languages. More specifically, does the placement of the rheme (final vs. non-final) elicit systematically different interpretations from native and non-native participants?

Furthermore, to what degree might the syntactic and discourse-organizational patterns characteristic of Czech or Slovak, where rhematic elements tend to occur sentence-finally [6, 8], influence how non-native speakers perceive, identify and interpret rhematic elements in English sentences?

Recent studies confirm that such cross-linguistic transfer affects both comprehension and translation of information structure, that speakers of Slavic languages often transfer their native FSP strategies when processing English texts. Adam [2] observed consistent shifts in rhematic focus during Czech–English translation, often favoring final-position placement regardless of contextual appropriateness. Křen [12] similarly reports that Czech learners of English tend to rely on linear ordering rather than prosodic cues to identify focus. Extending this cross-linguistic trend, Cetnarowska [3] demonstrates that Polish learners show parallel tendencies in placing rhematic elements at the end of the clause, even when English information structure would not license such positioning.

5. Data

For the purposes of this analysis, respondents' assessments of the most important information unit were evaluated against Firbas's theoretical framework of FSP. Responses that matched the rhematic structure predicted by FSP—that is, responses that converged with FSP predictions—were classified as *convergent*, whereas those that did not were labeled *divergent*. In cases where the rheme occurred in a non-final position, this was explicitly marked as (*NF*) to distinguish it from conventional end-focus patterns.

The coding process was carried out manually. All information units were pre-evaluated prior to survey creation and distribution to determine their rhematic element. For purposes of the final analysis, an answer was classified as *convergent* when over 60% of participants identified the true rhematic unit; conversely, if over 60% selected a non-rhematic unit, the answer was labeled *divergent*. This qualitative coding served as the basis for both descriptive and statistical analysis, as the cross-linguistic study aimed to explore both quantitative patterns and qualitative insights. A statistical significance test was conducted on relevant datasets.

Performance across the three surveys was relatively consistent. In Survey A, convergent responses ranged from 19 to 38 (out of 43), yielding an average score of 26.83 and a median of 27. Survey B recorded scores between 12 and 33, with an average of 25.59 and a median of 26. Survey C, completed by native English speakers, showed a range of 13 to 34 convergent answers, with an average of 25.13 and a median of 26. Interestingly enough, these closely clustered results suggest minimal variation in overall comprehension of rhematic structure across participant groups.

These results underscore the interpretive challenge posed by certain sentence structures, particularly those in which the rheme occurs in a non-final position. In fact, participants selected divergently for the majority of non-final rheme units, with 56% of non-native English speakers and 67% of native speakers identifying these units divergently from the FSP-predicted rheme, highlighting the interpretive challenge of non-final positions.

Moreover, the similarity in scores across all three surveys implies that participant variables, such as age or native language, did not meaningfully influence rheme identification. In terms of native language distribution, Survey A included 37 Czech and 15 Slovak respondents; Survey B included 44 Czech and 12 Slovak respondents; Survey C was completed by 151 native English speakers. Despite differences in group size, score averages remained consistent across all language groups. In Survey A, both Czech and Slovak speakers scored an average of 27.2 (median 26.5 and 28, respectively). In Survey B, Czech speakers achieved an average of 26.2 (median 27.5), while Slovak speakers averaged 25.3 (median 25.5). Notably, the average score among native English speakers in Survey C (25.13; median 26) was similar to that of the non-native participants. These results suggest that native language had minimal influence on participants' ability to identify rhematic elements.

6. Results

Participants' selections for each sentence's rhematic unit were categorized as either convergent or divergent according to FSP theory. *Convergent* responses were those in which over 60% of participants selected the rhematic element predicted by FSP. *Divergent* responses occurred when over 60% of participants selected a different element. Table 1 presents these results, showing the frequency of convergent and divergent responses for each rhematic unit in the English texts and their corresponding Czech translations across all three surveys.

	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

C = convergent

D = divergent

(NF) = non-final rheme position

The table above visualizes convergent vs. divergent responses across each survey section. Survey A and B were split between English and Czech versions of the text, while Survey C remained fully in English. The numbers represent individual sentences, or separate clauses, into which the text was divided; participants were asked to identify the rhematic element within each sentence or clause.

As can be seen below, Survey A had 12 convergent and 9 divergent items in its English section, and 11 convergent and 11 divergent in its Czech section. Survey B also reflected a near balance: 12 convergent vs. 10 divergent in English, and 12 convergent vs. 9 divergent in Czech. Survey C, with all items in English, produced 22 convergent and 21 divergent judgments, again indicating a roughly even split.

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



Only nine instances revealed differing evaluations between the English sentence and its Czech counterpart across Surveys A and B. In just twelve cases did all three surveys disagree on the classification, with a unit judged *convergent* in one survey and *divergent* in another. Overall, while these discrepancies are the most pronounced within this subset, the differences remain moderate. The majority of these differing evaluations showed a gap of approximately 20-25%; in only three cases did the gap exceed 30% (specifically, 32.9% in unit (16), 32.7% in unit (19), and 36,3% in unit (41)). The analysis also confirms that the most challenging clauses for participants were English sentences with non-final rhemes, where convergence frequently fell below the 60% threshold and divergence was most pronounced.

Interestingly, non-native participants outperformed native speakers in identifying non-final rhemes in three sentences (the rheme is marked in **bold** for the reader):

(30) ... to feel **very sad** about the Riddles, ...

(36) The Hanged Man, the village pub, did **a roaring trade** that night;

(41) **the Riddles' cook** arrived dramatically in their midst,

whereas native speakers only outperformed non-natives in one sentence:

(16) and had been **embroidered** in so many places.

In the rest of non-final rhematic sentences, all groups performed similarly.

Overall, the distribution of convergent and divergent responses remained largely consistent across all three surveys, with a slight (not statistically significant) predominance of convergent answers.

As expected, non-final rheme placement is associated with increased divergence in responses. Among 18 English sentences featuring a non-final rheme, only 8 were predominantly identified convergently by non-native speakers, and 6 by native speakers. This indicates that detecting the rheme is more challenging when it does not occur at the sentence-final position, for both native and non-native readers. Even in sentences with predominantly convergent responses, up to 30% of participants still selected the final sentence element, highlighting persistent interpretive variability.

To confirm that identification of non-final rhemes poses greater difficulty, these results were compared with sentences in which the rheme occupies the sentence-final position. In Surveys A and B, 16 of 25 English sentences with a final rheme were predominantly answered convergently, while 9 were predominantly divergent. Survey C showed a similar pattern: 16 of 25 English sentences with final rhemes elicited mostly convergent responses, and 9 were classified as divergent. Thus, the response patterns for English sentences in Surveys A and B closely matched those observed in Survey C.

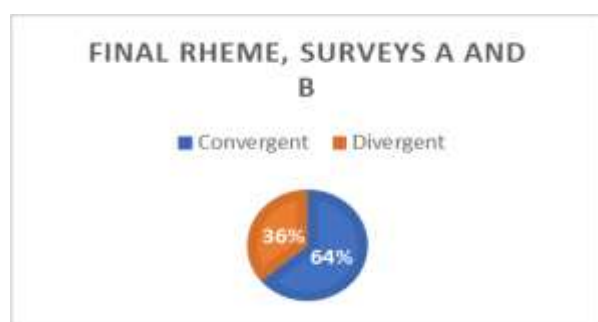


Fig. 1. Convergent and divergent identification of ratio in final rheme sentences in Surveys A, B

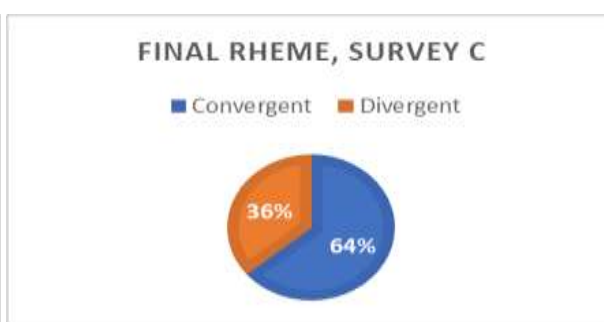


Fig. 2. Convergent and divergent identification of ratio in final rheme sentences in Survey C

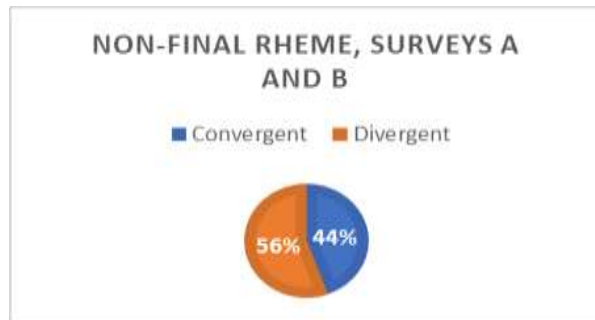


Fig. 3. Convergent and divergent identification of ratio in non-final rheme sentences in Surveys A, B

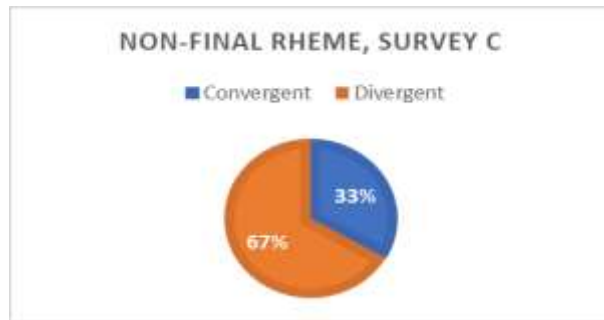


Fig. 4. Convergent and divergent identification of ratio in non-final rheme sentences in Survey C

As the data reveal, native and non-native English speakers alike demonstrate comparable response patterns: in both groups, identifying a rheme in non-final position proves more challenging than recognizing a final-position rheme. Put differently, the balance of convergent versus divergent answers shifts noticeably between sentences that place the rheme at the end and those with a non-final rheme.

The shift in the balance of convergent versus divergent responses between final and non-final sentences indicates that these difficulties are not solely due to participants' non-native status, as Czech and Slovak learners performed similarly to native speakers. Overall, response patterns remained relatively aligned across groups and often corresponded with FSP-based predictions, suggesting that variations from FSP-based predictions reflect complicated sentence structure and non-final rheme position rather than native-language differences. Interestingly, non-native learners outperformed native speakers in some non-final sentences, which may indicate either coincidence, greater attention to rhematic cues or a tendency to analyze sentence structure more consciously when processing L2 texts.

7. Discussion

7.1 Answer 1

The empirical results confirm that Czech and Slovak students often select the final sentence unit regardless of its communicative function, resulting in increased error rates for English sentences with a non-final rheme. The prediction that participants would favor the sentence-final element over non-final rhemes was supported. Using the 60% convergent/divergent threshold, non-final rhemes were correctly identified in only 44% of instances for non-native participants and 33% for native speakers, illustrating the challenge posed by non-final positions. By contrast, the assumption that students would perform better when identifying the rheme in Czech sentences was not confirmed, since their performance was almost the same in both languages.

However, this final-unit preference cannot be explained solely by native language influence, as native English speakers exhibited similar difficulties with non-final rhemes. In both groups, sentence-final rhemes were predominantly identified convergently, while non-final positions elicited more divergent responses. These findings indicate that non-native speakers' comprehension of English sentence structure is not strongly determined by their L1.

The relatively high proportion of divergent responses for some sentence-final rhemes suggests that factors beyond syntactic position influence participants' judgments. At the discourse level, respondents may have considered certain non-rhematic elements to be more significant to the broader narrative, overriding structural and informative cues.

These findings suggest that L2 instruction could benefit from targeted exercises that draw learners' attention to non-final rhemes and the interaction between sentence structure and discourse context, helping students develop more accurate comprehension and information structuring strategies in English texts.

7.2 Answer 2

The data indicate that non-native and native English speakers perceive the information structure of English texts in largely comparable ways. Overall, non-native speakers performed slightly better, achieving a 1.1% higher accuracy rate (though not statistically significant) than native speakers,



suggesting that interference of their first language does not decisively affect the identification of rhematic elements.

Both groups struggled notably with sentences featuring a non-final rheme. Out of 18 such sentences, native speakers classified 12 as divergent, while non-native speakers classified 10 as divergent. This pattern indicates a shared expectation that the rheme typically occurs in sentence-final position. When the rheme appeared elsewhere – at the beginning or middle of the sentence – it was substantially harder to recognize.

These results suggest that structural complexity, extra-textual factors and other influences, rather than native-language conventions, primarily drive errors in rheme identification. For final-position rhemes, over 64% of participants in both groups responded convergently, and for non-final position rhemes, around 62% of participants in both groups responded divergently, demonstrating a robust expectation that the most informationally rich element occurs at the sentence end.

Differences between groups were most pronounced in a few sentences (rheme is marked in **bold** for the reader):

(7) and **ivy** spreading unchecked over its face.

(10) The Little Hangletons all agreed **that the old house was “creepy.”**

(16) and had been **embroidered** in so many places,

(19) Every version of the tale, however, started **in the same place**:

Interestingly, in questions 19, 30 (NF), and 41 (NF), non-native speakers outperformed native speakers, potentially reflecting heightened (un)conscious attention to sentence-level dynamics due to their L1 background, or due to chance:

(19) Every version of the tale, however, started **in the same place**:

(30) ... to feel **very sad** about the Riddles, ...

(41) when **the Riddles’ cook** arrived dramatically in their midst

The greatest difficulties arose in sentences with mid-sentence rhemes. Among 13 divergent non-final rheme sentences, 8 featured a rheme positioned in the middle of the sentence:

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

(3) ... since the Riddle family **had lived** there.

(15) The story **had been picked over** so many times,

(16) and had been **embroidered** in so many places,

(20) Fifty years before, at daybreak on a fine summer’s morning, **a maid** had entered the drawing room

(30) ... to feel **very sad** about the Riddles, ...

(35) — for plainly, three apparently healthy people did not all drop dead **of natural causes** on the same night.

(36) The Hanged Man, the village pub, did **a roaring trade** that night;

Two sentences (15 and 16) represent ambiguous cases of potentiality, complicating rheme identification even for the author (potential rheme is underlined).

8. Rhematic Challenges in L2 Learning

These findings open important pathways for innovation in L2 instruction. They present the need to integrate information structure into language learning, particularly the recognition of non-final and mid-sentence rhemes, structures that are often underrepresented or overlooked in current teaching practices. By incorporating insights from FSP, educators can help learners become more sensitive to how meaning is shaped not just by grammar and vocabulary, but by the dynamic placement of information. Contrastive approaches that explore how different languages organize communicative focus can be especially effective for learners from free word-order backgrounds. This research thus supports a broader, discourse-oriented model of language learning, one that prepares students to navigate complex textual structures and develop context-aware comprehension in English.

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