

# Some problems of FSP of a religious text

Martin Adam

*Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno*

## **(I) Introduction**

The aim of my paper is to discuss some special aspects of the thematic and rhematic layers which are established by the interplay of factors working within functional sentence perspective, on the material of a religious text. I will focus on the function of the layers in the development of communication and try to provide a stylistic characteristics of a religious text from the point of FSP. The paper is based on my research carried out for the purpose of PhD dissertation.

The concept of the thematic and rhematic layers was first introduced by Professor Jan Firbas and is connected with the theory of functional sentence perspective. A thorough survey of previous works on the topic is presented in *Functional Sentence Perspective in Written and Spoken Communication* (Firbas 1992). For the purpose of this study I chose two extracts from the *Contemporary English Version* of the New Testament, namely a part of Chapter 2 from ‘The Acts of Apostles’ (2:1-4), and the ‘Parable of the Good Samaritan’, which is found in the Gospel of Luke 10:30-34.

Let me at least briefly describe the process of the development of a layer within the text in theory; a layer (track) is created by all members of the thematic or the rhematic elements in a text. These result from the interplay of the factors involved in the distribution of degrees of communicative dynamism (CD)—linear modification, context and semantic structure. Each communicative unit carries a different degree of communicative dynamism, the gradual rise of which is reflected in the interpretative arrangement, i.e. the order in which they are presented. The interpretative arrangement need not coincide with the actual arrangement of the elements in the sentence.

## **(II) The dynamic-semantic homogeneity**

Now, I would like to present the analysis of the passage of ‘The Coming of the Holy Spirit’ from the point of view of FSP (see Chart 1). Let me examine one of the essential characteristics of the layers—the dynamic-semantic homogeneity—the existence of which has been first demonstrated by Firbas in 1995. Until recently, the FSP theory has dealt predominantly with the functional analysis of separate clauses of various kinds; however, an overall study of a higher level of a text (a paragraph or a chapter) is capable of showing many significant features of a passage.

Let me now draw your attention towards the handouts containing the FSP analysis of the text under discussion – see Chart 1; in it, I have traced the dynamic-semantic strings both in the thematic and in the rhematic layers (thematic elements are to be found in Columns 3, 4, 5 and 6, the non-thematic elements in Columns 7, 8 and 9). The New Testament passage

covers one of the significant events following Jesus crucifixion, in the days of the original church and the first Christians. First of all, I will present the stretch of text in full:

On the day of Pentecost all the Lord’s followers were together in one place. Suddenly there was a noise from heaven like the sound of a mighty wind! It filled the whole house where they were meeting. Then they saw what looked like fiery tongues moving in all directions and a tongue came and settled on each person there. The Holy Spirit took control of everyone and they began speaking whatever languages the Spirit let them speak. (Acts 2:1-4)

Chart 1  
The Coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4)

Verse	Clause	TrPr (conj)	ThPr (Set/B)	DTh (Set/B)	TrPr/Tr (Q/Pr)	RhPr (Q)	Rh/RhPr (Sp/FSp)	RhPr (Ph)	Scale
2:1	1			On the day of Pentecost <sup>1</sup> <u>all the Lord’s followers</u> <sup>2</sup>	were <sup>3</sup>		<u>together</u> <sup>4</sup> <u>in one place</u> <sup>5</sup>		Q
2	2		there <sup>2</sup>	<b>Suddenly</b> <sup>1</sup>	was <sup>3</sup>			<i>a noise</i> from heaven like the sound of a mighty wind <sup>4</sup>	Pr
	3			It <sup>1</sup>	filled <sup>2</sup>		the <b>whole</b> house where they were meeting <sup>3</sup>		Q
3	4		they <sup>2</sup>	Then <sup>1</sup>	saw <sup>3</sup>		what looked like <i>fiery tongues</i> moving in <u>all</u> directions <sup>4</sup>		Q
	5	and <sup>1</sup>		a tongue <sup>2</sup>		came <sup>3</sup>			Q
	6	and <sup>1</sup>	there <sup>4</sup>	^	settled <sup>2</sup>		on <u>each</u> person <sup>3</sup>		Q
4	7			of <u>everyone</u> <sup>3</sup>	took control <sup>2</sup>			<i>The Holy Spirit</i> <sup>1</sup>	Pr
	8	and <sup>1</sup>	they <sup>2</sup>		began <sup>3</sup>		speaking <u>whatever languages</u> the Spirit let them speak <sup>4</sup>		Q

In the extract, it is easy to follow the process of a piece of information entering the flow of communication. When context-independent, and if no elements of a higher degree of CD are present, the piece of information manifests itself in the rhematic layer—e.g. ‘a noise from heaven like the sound of a mighty wind’. When re-expressed in the flow of the text, it passes from the rhematic to the thematic layer—in our case in the form of the personal pronoun ‘it’. Within it, it moves ‘through its diathematic and theme proper (sub)layers and eventually establishes itself in the hyperthematic (sub)layer’. Apart from this type of

information creating the thematic layer, only temporal and local settings that establish a scene can be found in the track (Firbas 1992:80-1). In other words, this is how the scene sets the necessary background for the participants (actors), and, at the same time, enables the rhematic elements to be highlighted.

To be more specific, the thematic layer of the extract comprises a set of elements referring to the Apostles (i.e. ‘all the Lord’s followers’, ‘they’, ‘everyone’—in the chart, these units are italicized) and elements that entered the communication as rhematic and gradually moved to the thematic layer (e.g. ‘a noise from heaven...’ /Rh/ → ‘it’ /Th/).

I would like to say a few words about the rhematic layer of the text. As has been already mentioned, this is the particular place where the piece of information enters the flow of communication for the first time. Thus, an outline of what the text is about is presented to the reader. This layer should, in the ideal case, manifest the direction or perspective of the whole text. To be more specific, the Ph- and Sp-elements (italicized and in bold) that constitute the crucial part of the rhematic layer are represented by ‘a noise from heaven like the sound of a mighty wind’; ‘fiery tongues moving in all directions’; and ‘The Holy Spirit’. The first two notions show respectively the auditory and visual perception of the Holy Spirit’s coming, and the presentation of the phenomenon culminates in ‘The Holy Spirit’ itself. Even the rhematic ‘languages’ in the Sp-element shows its correspondence with this layer to a certain extent, being the first consequence and manifestation of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Evidently, we can observe semantic unity or *homogeneity* of the rhematic layer. This semantic homogeneity is present in every thematic and rhematic layer; however, the degree of homogeneity differs, depending on how the text is perspectived and how the layers are allowed by the author to assert themselves.

The rhematic layer shows a high degree of semantic homogeneity, and perspectives thus the flow of communication to the most prominent element of the layer—it is usually the closing member of the dynamic-semantic string that conveys the information towards which the development of communication is directed (‘The Holy Spirit’). The remaining rhematic elements move the development of communication a little further, always ‘preparing the way’ for the final member (Firbas 1992:82). From this point of view, the rhematic layer represents the most dynamic part of the text—mediating the high point of the message, it ‘fulfils the narrator’s communicative purpose’ (Firbas 1995:64). Given these circumstances, the rhematic layer comprises two sets of elements (these can be followed in the chart):

- Rh: 1) a noise from heaven like the sound of a violent wind → fiery tongues... → The Holy Spirit → languages
- 2) (all) together → in one place → the whole house... → in all directions → (on) each person → whatever

By the way, it is clear that semantic homogeneity is displayed in the thematic layer as well (italics). Apart from others, the thematic layer contains the following set of elements that are homogeneous:

- Th: all the Lord’s followers → they → (of) everyone → they

It has become evident that a simple enumeration of the members of the rhematic layer *tells the story*; it summarizes the most important events of it, introducing the participants and

describing their acts. From the semantic point of view, it is another example of the layers being homogeneous. Let me put it in a different way: both the interpretative arrangement of the thematic and the rhematic layers and the tendency towards semantic homogeneity suggest that the text is written effectively – the author was able to convey the message to the reader, and, having done so, fulfilled his/her communicative purpose.

Looking closer at the rhematic elements, we can observe, apart from the dynamic-semantic string of the Holy Spirit, another instance of significant notional homogeneity of the layer. It is the idea of the apostles' unity, or as I call it, *togetherness* in various senses of the word (all the units bearing the meaning of a unity are in bold print and underlined in the charts). The layer conveys the notions of '(all) together', 'in one place', 'the whole house', 'in all directions', '(on) each person' and 'whatever'. Apparently, this idea of togetherness corroborates the above-mentioned dynamic-semantic string of the Holy Spirit, His coming and acts. Thus, the two ideas are connected and result in highlighting the message of the text and, at the same time, the communicative purpose of the author.

### (III) Retrievalability vs. Deducibility

Now, let me draw your attention to another topic appearing within the theory of FSP: the concept of *retrievalability*. I will not deal with the thematic and the rhematic layers as such, but with one of their roles within FSP—they provide a significant basis for the distribution of CD within different communicative units of a distributional field. The distribution of the DSFs and a proper interpretation of the degrees of CD carried by the units is tightly connected with the concept of retrievalability; this category plays an important role in regarding a piece of information as context-dependent, or context-independent. Information is given 'if it is present in, and hence retrievable from, the immediately relevant context and/or if the referent suggesting it is present in, and hence retrievable from, the immediately relevant situational context' (Firbas 1992:37-8). The actual, physical presence of the piece of the information in the immediately relevant context is emphasized, as opposed to the condition that the speaker assumes 'that the information is present in the addressee's consciousness' (Firbas 1992:37).

Let me illustrate the concept of retrievalability by discussing a passage from Luke 10:30-36 ('The Parable of the Good Samaritan'), see Chart 2. As the question of context-dependence and retrievalability is quite a complex one, the reader is referred to Firbas 1992 for more information on the topic. I will restrict myself to analyzing the text, suggesting possible interpretations of the problem that arise using exclusively the outcomes based on the properties of the thematic and the rhematic layers (for more details on other signals of context dependence see Firbas 1992:31-40). First of all, I will present the passage in full. Later on, you can follow the analysis as presented in Chart 2.

As a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho robbers attacked him and grabbed everything he had. They beat him up and ran off, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road. But when he saw the man, he walked by on the other side. Later a temple helper came to the same place. But when he saw the man who had been beaten up, he also went by on the other side. A man from Samaria then came traveling along that road. When he saw the man, he felt sorry for him and went over to him. He treated his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put him on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. (Luke 10:30-34)

Chart 2  
The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-34)

Vers e	Clau se	TrPr (conj)	ThPr (Set/B)	DTh (Set/B)	TrPr/Tr (Q/Pr)	RhPr (Q)	Rh/RhPr (Sp/FSp)	RhPr (Ph)	Scale
10:30	1			As a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho <sup>1</sup> him <sup>4</sup>	attacked <sup>3</sup>			<i>Robbers</i> <sup>2</sup>	Pr
	2	and <sup>1</sup>			grabbed <sup>2</sup>		everything he had <sup>3</sup>		Q
	3		him <sup>3</sup>	They <sup>1</sup>		beat...up <sup>2</sup>			Q
	4	and <sup>1</sup>				ran off <sup>2</sup>	leaving him half dead <sup>3</sup>		Q
31	5			down the same road <sup>3</sup>	happened to be going <sup>2</sup>			<i>A priest</i> <sup>1</sup>	Pr
	6			But when he saw the man <sup>1</sup> he <sup>2</sup>	walked by <sup>3</sup>		on the other side <sup>4</sup>		Q
32	7			Later <sup>1</sup> on the same place <sup>4</sup>	came <sup>3</sup>			<i>a temple helper</i> <sup>2</sup>	Pr
	8			But when he saw the man who had been beaten up <sup>1</sup> he <sup>2</sup> also <sup>3</sup>	went by <sup>4</sup>		on the other side <sup>5</sup>		Q
33	9			then <sup>2</sup> travelling along that road <sup>4</sup>	came <sup>2</sup>			<i>A man from Samaria</i> <sup>1</sup>	Pr
	10		for him <sup>4</sup>	When he saw the man <sup>1</sup> he <sup>2</sup>		<u>felt sorry</u> <sup>3</sup>			Q
34	11	and <sup>1</sup>	to him <sup>3</sup>			<u>went over</u> <sup>2</sup>			Q
	12		He <sup>1</sup>		treated <sup>2</sup>		<u>his wounds</u> <sup>3</sup> with olive oil and wine <sup>4</sup>		Q
	13	and <sup>1</sup>		them <sup>3</sup>		<u>bandaged</u> <sup>2</sup>			Q
	14		he <sup>2</sup> him <sup>4</sup>	Then <sup>1</sup>	put <sup>3</sup>		<u>on his own donkey</u> <sup>5</sup>		Q
	15	and <sup>1</sup>	him <sup>3</sup>		took <sup>2</sup>		<u>to an inn,</u> where he <u>took care</u> of him <sup>4</sup>		Q

In addition to being an evidence of the rhematic layer telling the story (see the bold and underlined units), this passage provides us with an instance of the layers functioning as an

interpretative tool in FSP. The case is found in clause (12). In the distributional field of ‘He / treated / his wounds...’, it is necessary to establish the DSFs of all its communicative units. The notion of ‘wounds’ seems to be, at first sight, clearly context-dependent, as the man was attacked by the robbers (1) and beaten up – clauses (3) and (8). In other words, one could deduce from the preceding action that the man could have been wounded (and he was, in fact). However, this fact cannot be retrieved from the immediately relevant context, and so the element is not retrievable. Of course, ‘a piece of information may be retrievable from a wider context and in that sense dependent on it, but at the same time irretrievable from the immediately relevant context and in that sense independent of this narrow contextual sphere’ (Firbas 1992:23-27). Although the existence of ‘the wounds’ seems to be quite logical, deducible, or corroborated by one’s experience, in the field of dynamic-semantic and syntactic relationships it is necessary to consider ‘the wounds’ from the viewpoint of the immediately relevant context and treat the element as irretrievable.

A very similar case can be observed in (14)—‘He / set / him / on his own donkey’. Even if the notion of ‘his own donkey’ seems to be logically or empirically present on the scene (a donkey was a very frequent means of transportation in those days), the expression is found in the text for the first time. Even if it is deducible, it remains irretrievable from the immediately relevant context. We could speak of semantic affinity; nevertheless the piece of information, though deducible, is irretrievable from the immediately relevant context. For this case, I have coined the term *deducibility* (Adam 2000), in contrast to the well-established *retrievability* (the Czech counterparts being *vyveditelnost* vs *vyvoditelnost*).

At this point, we come to the interpretative function of the dynamic-semantic layers that are capable of creating *functional pressure*. The interpretation offered above is supported by the character of the rhematic layer: in it, a dynamic-semantic string is formed; it contains the elements denoting the acts of the Samaritan – ‘/felt/ sorry’ (10), ‘went over’ (11), ‘/treated/ his wounds’ (12), ‘bandaged’ (13), ‘on his own donkey’ (14), ‘to an inn’ (15), ‘took care’ (15). The homogeneity of the rhematic string speaks clearly in favour of the approach that has been presented. It is apparent that the pressure of the layer can tip the scales in distinguishing which direction a clause is perspectived. Again, it is the point where the phenomenon of the dynamic-semantic homogeneity comes in.

#### (IV) Conclusion

In this study, I have analyzed the extracts from the point of view of the whole paragraph. I have illustrated one of the features operating within both the thematic and the rhematic layers, i.e. the dynamic-semantic homogeneity. It has been suggested that the recognition of the semantic homogeneity allows the appropriate interpretation of separate clauses and that it reduces uncertainty in the analysis of borderline cases

Generally speaking, the dynamic-semantic layers appear to play a significant role as far as a piece of information acting within the flow of communication is concerned. Examined from the point of view of a higher level of the text, the functional picture of the text becomes more plastic.

So far, the existence of the features described (i.e. the dynamic-semantic homogeneity and the functional pressure of the layer) has been traced in many extracts, predominantly taken from religious texts (Firbas 1995, Adam 2000) and seems to be characteristic of such texts; however, whether the tendencies apply to every (religious) text in general, is still to be shown and is the subject of my further research, the results of which are supposed to be presented in my PhD dissertation next year.

## **References**

- Adam, M. (2000). *Some Problems Concerning the Thematic and the Rhematic Layers in the Text* (an unpublished final-year thesis), Brno: Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University.
- Firbas, J. (1992). *Functional Sentence Perspective in Written and Spoken Communication*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Firbas, J. (1995). 'On the thematic and the rhematic layers of a text' in *Organization in Discourse: Proceedings from the Turku Conference, Anglicana Turkuensia 14* (Warwik, Tauskanen and Hiltunen (eds.):59-72.
- Kohlenberger, J. R. (ed.) (1997). *The Contemporary Parallel New Testament*, New York: Oxford University Press.