

FUNCTIONAL SENTENCE PERSPECTIVE & COMMUNICATIVE DYNAMISM

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ABSTRACT

Functional Sentence Perspective and Communicative Dynamism are two significant concepts in the functional theory of modern linguistics. The theory of FSP was first developed by Velim Mathesius who gave the 'order of ideas' the name of FSP or theme/rheme structure and dubbed what comes first in the sentence the starting point, point of departure, theme or topic; and the idea that follows it the nucleus, rheme, comment, focus, i.e.

The essence of this conception is that every act of communication is structured in two different ways: the grammatical pattern of the sentence, and the information-bearing structure of the utterance. In English, the theme—rheme sequence is the normal, unmarked word order while the rheme—theme sequence is the marked word order. Communicative Dynamism is viewed as a process of gradually unfolding meaning, each part of the utterance contributing dynamically to the total communicative effect.

These concepts, however, have not received due attention, as the correspondence holding between the order of words and the order of ideas and the role of context in the sentence/utterance and sentence/discourse distinctions are still not fully clarified.

Yet, these two concepts can be manipulated not only at the sentential level, but also beyond the sentence, i.e., within the framework of discourse analysis. Their significance can be shown in terms of thematic ties linking parts of the text or discourse together. Thus, the rheme in one sentence becomes the theme in a following sentence. Further, there is also a thematic organization of the paragraph. The first

sentence of a paragraph is also the theme of that paragraph (topic sentence), whereas the following sentences have a rhematic value.

INTRODUCTION

Functional Sentence Perspective (henceforth FSP) and Communicative Dynamism (henceforth CD) are two fundamental concepts in modern linguistics. Halliday's work, as he himself acknowledges, is influenced by the functional concepts of the FSP and CD which can account for how discourse develops and how the use of different surface forms alters the relative prominence of the items of information which are conveyed. He (1974: 43-53) goes further to define FSP as the textual component in the grammar of the sentence, and adds that the interest in FSP springs from its being an integral part of the understanding of the processes of speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

The different parts of the utterance are conceived of to contribute dynamically to the total communicative effect. Some parts will have little to add to the meaning as they reflect only what has already been communicated (theme). These thematic aspects would as such have the lowest degree of CD. Rheme, by contrast, has the highest degree of CD as it unfolds new information.

Although these two functional concepts were proposed some seventy years ago, their feasibility and effectiveness can still be retained. And from the standpoint of discourse and text analysis they still sound conspicuously modern. The FSP and CD, however, have received scant attention, as there are still some who doubt the correspondence holding between the order of words and the order of ideas.

The aim of the present study is to re-evaluate these two functional concepts so as to gauge their ultimate significance as a tool in the analysis of sentence and text and discourse analysis as well.

Functional Sentence Perspective

The modern notion of FSP goes back to the Prague Linguistic Circle. In his papers (Mathesius 1939, 1941a, b), Vilem Mathesius introduced the idea that the formal analysis of a sentence into subject /

*predicate should be distinguished from the functional analysis of a sentence into theme / rheme. What is being talked about, or the point of departure, is the **theme**, and what is being said about it, or the core of the message, is the **rheme**. Theme is what is known or grasped from the context. Rheme is what is new or not known at the moment of communication. The natural way is to proceed from the known to the unknown information, so the linear sequence theme-rheme is a natural way of developing the discourse.*

This notion, however, dates back to 1844 when Henri Weil observed that,

There is then a point of departure, an initial notion which is equally present to him who speaks and to him who hears, which forms, as it were, the ground upon which the two intelligences meet; and another part of discourse which forms the statement (l'énonciation), properly so called. This division is found in almost all we say. (Weil 1844: 29)

The ideas of Weil were followed up by the Prague circle of linguists, notably Mathesius, Daneš and Firbas, among many others. The theme is the carrier of the lowest degree of CD – an element that contributes least to the development of discourse. Such elements are typically retrievable from context and carry given information. Contextually independent elements, however, may also be thematic, provided they are foundation-laying in function. These include elements which establish the setting (time or place) of the discourse or bear some quality to be expressed by the clause (Firbas, 1996: 66).

Mathesius regarded the sequence theme—rheme as the objective, normal, unmarked word order and the sequence rheme—theme as subjective, emotive, marked word order. He focused his attention primarily on sentence word order and sentence stress (or emphasis).

In his account of English word order, Mathesius (1975: 157) states that

In English ... the grammatical principle asserts itself especially with regard to the expression of the relation between the subject and the finite verb. The usual word order of the English sentence, viz. subject – finite verb – object cannot be changed at will. Hence in such a case the grammatical word order fails to comply with the principle of functional sentence perspective ... English resolves this conflict by resorting to the passive At home I am helped by Father / Zu Hause hilft mir der Vater.

Moreover, Mathesius gave the “order of ideas” the name of FSP or ‘contextual sentence’, ‘utterance organization’, or theme / rheme structure and called the idea that comes first in the semantic structure of a sentence the starting point (theme or topic, what the sentence is about) and the idea that follows it the nucleus (rheme, comment, focus, what is said about the theme). The essence of Mathesius’ conception is that every act of speech is structured not in one but in two different ways: one structuring is given by the grammatical pattern of the sentence; the other is provided by “the information-bearing structure of the utterance.” Mathesius describes the difference between the two types of structuring as:

The information-bearing structure of the sentence should be considered in opposition to its formal structure. Whereas the formal structure concerns the way in which a sentence is composed of grammatical elements, the information-bearing structure concerns the way in which a sentence is integrated into the factual situation during which it was produced. The basic elements of the formal structure of the sentence are the grammatical subject and the grammatical predicate, the basic elements of the information-bearing structure are the foundation of the utterance, and the core of the utterance. (1939: 171ff)

The terms 'foundation' and 'core' have come to be replaced by the classical terms 'theme' and 'rheme' respectively. This functional system which is the theme/rheme relationship lays the bases for the topical structure analysis by first distinguishing theme from enunciation. Mathesius used the term theme to identify 'what the sentence is about' and the term enunciation to refer to 'what is said about' the theme. Mathesius, as Daneš (1974: 106) states, maintained that the theme of a sentence announces "what is known or at least obvious in a given situation and from which the speaker proceeds in his discourse," while enunciation adds new or unknown information to the discourse, a distinction that has also been cast in terms of given and new information. Firbas views theme as carrying the lowest degree of communicative dynamism within a sentence, (1972:77-90, 1974: 24).

The other part, the rheme, consists of the essential information transmitted by the given sentence-utterance and subsequently enriches the listener's knowledge. Rheme is the conveyor of the new information, and unless certain special effects are aimed at, theme precedes rheme so that "the peg may be established in the hearer's mind before anything new has to be hung on it." (Sampson, 1980: 104) Over time the term enunciation gave way to rheme, and rheme to comment. The term theme, meantime, changed to topic. American linguists came to use the terms 'topic' and 'comment' though not from a functional stance. The Prague linguists used the theme/ rheme distinction to analyze utterances in terms of their information contexts.

Firbas helped to develop Mathesius's idea of the Theme-Rheme analysis of the sentence into a complex theory of FSP. He came to the conclusion that while in Czech, markedness is caused by the deviation from the theme→rheme sequence, in English, markedness is caused by the deviation from the grammatical word order.

It is important to take into account that the carriers of CD need not only be single words. He (1974: 25) suggests that "the segmentation of the sentence on the level of FSP is tripartite of theme-transmission-and rheme." Thus, every element that conveys meaning pushes the communication forward and is therefore a carrier of CD.

The degrees of CD are relative and are determined by the interplay (interaction) of the factors of FSP in the very moment of communication. Thus, instead of simple bipartition (theme-rheme), Firbas introduced tripartition (theme-transition-rheme), and pluripartition in FSP as shown below:

THEMATIC		NON-THEMATIC			
THEMATIC		TRANSITIONAL		RHEMATIC	
THEME PROPER	DIATHEME	TRANSITION PROPER	TRANSITION	RHEME	RHEME PROPER

Firbas (*ibid*) came to the conclusion that apart from linearity (word order), context (verbal, situational, experiential), and intonation (prosodic features), there is another factor – **semantics** (dynamic semantic scales) – which plays an important role in FSP. In spoken discourse, the relative degrees of communicative dynamism of the respective thematic, transitional, and rhematic units are given by the result of the interplay of all the four factors: linearity, semantics, context, and prosodic features.

In written discourse, the result of the interplay seems to be influenced by mere three factors: linearity, semantics, and context. It is the interplay of these four factors that determines the relative degrees of CD carried by separate elements, and – in the end – determines their thematic, transitional, or rhematic character.

Libuše Dušková (2005: 1) believes that to do the aspect of FSP full justice, the name of Josef Vachek should be included. Firbas was of course familiar with and inspired by the works of Mathesius from his previous studies, but it was Vachek who suggested FSP as a promising line of research, and this suggestion became seminal for further development of the FSP theory. However, more detailed treatment of the FSP aspects of most of these points is lacking. Libuše Dušková (2005: 2)

The use of the FSP and CD in the analysis of texts poses no problem in the case of inflected language since “we simply put the grammatical subject at the end of the sentence,” (Sampson, 1980:105). However, in the case of non-inflected language such as English, there is a problem for English relies on grammatical relations of subject and

object. Yet, since the ultimate purpose of communication is to state the action and/or its goal, not the agent, “the sequence of elements in the clause tends to represent thematic ordering rather than action-actor goal. Thematization assigns to the clause a structure in terms of the functions theme and rheme.” (Beaugrande, 1991: 240)

Beaugrande (1992: 12ff), in a survey of FSP research, examines how sets of terms can be aligned with the basic complementarity of thematic and rhematic. He lists 26 pairings for thematic-rhematic and their dimensions.

THEMATIC	RHEMATIC	DIMENSION
1. EARLIER	LATER	TIME/POSITION
2. FREQUENT	RARE	STATISTICS
3. STATIC	DYNAMIC	COMMUNICATIVE DYNAMISM
4. CONTEXTUAL	NON-CONTEXTUAL	CONTEXT
5. KNOWN	UNKNOWN	KNOWLEDGE STATE
6. GIVEN	NEW	NOVELTY
7. PRESUPPOSED	ASSERTED	PRESUPPOSITION
8. EXPECTED	UNEXPECTED	EXPECTATION
9. UNINFORMATIVE	INFORMATIVE	INFORMATION
10. DETERMINATE	INDETERMINATE	DETERMINACY
11. DEFINITE	INDEFINITE	DEFINITENESS
12. CONSTANT	VARIABLE	VALUE
13. SCHEMATIC	NON-SCHEMATIC	COGNITION/MEMORY
14. OBJECTIVE	SUBJECTIVE	EPISTEMOLOGY
15. GROUND	FIGURE	PHENOMENON
16. BACKGROUND	FOREGROUND	DEPTH
17. ORDINARY LANGUAGE	NON-ORDINARY LANGUAGE	REGISTER
18. UNMARKED	MARKED	MARKEDNESS
19. NON-EMPHATIC	EMPHATIC	EMPHASIS
20. NON-EMOTIONAL	EMOTIONAL	EMOTION
21. NON-FOCUSED	FOCUSED	PERCEPTION
22. AUTOMATIC	ATTENTIONAL	PROCESSING RESOURCES
23. UNSTRESSED	STRESSED	INTONATION/PROSODY
24. NON-CONTRASTIVE	CONTRASTIVE	DIFFERENCE
25. SPEAKER-ORIENTED	HEARER-ORIENTED	PARTICIPANT
26. QUESTION	ANSWER	DISCOURSE MOVE

The first pair is EARLIER versus LATER: in the spoken language

the dimension is time; in written language the dimension is position. The second pair, FREQUENT versus RARE, is concerned with how often an element occurs in discourse. The third pair, STATIC versus DYNAMIC, is important because the FSP itself serves to indicate dynamic functioning of the semantic and grammatical sentence structures in communication, hence the concept of CD or degree of an element's contribution to the development of the discourse.

The fourth pair, CONTEXTUAL versus NON-CONTEXTUAL is problematic because of the utterance / sentence distinction. As for the dimension of KNOWN versus UNKNOWN, the greater part of every message is known, and the extent of the unknown is comparatively minor.

The GIVEN versus NEW distinction implies adding new things to old ones. The pair PRESUPPOSED versus ASSERTED concerns the difference between what is being stated and what is being implied. The EXPECTATION distinction is related to INFORMATION distinction as expectations would apply to each level as well as to their correlations and would contribute to the dynamism of discourse.

The pair DETERMINATE versus INDETERMINATE indicates that elements rated low in CD are those for which a high determinacy is attainable from context and situation; the converse obtains for those rated high in CD. The DEFINITE and INDEFINITE pair can be matched with determinate and indeterminate. The pair CONSTANT versus VARIABLE can be relevant both to definiteness and to knowledge organization at large. Variables are likely to enhance CD.

As for the pair SCHEMATIC versus NON-SCHEMATIC, schematic knowledge will be available to support the thematicity of certain elements, whereas rhematicity will apply to knowledge which is either unrelated to the schema or contradicts it. The pair OBJECTIVE versus SUBJECTIVE is a contrast between external versus internal access to knowledge.

For the pair GROUND versus FIGURE, perception must be organized by selective distribution of focus simply because everything cannot be focused all at once. For the pair BACKGROUND versus FOREGROUND, explicit intention is more prominent. The foreground is set against the background of stored but not activated knowledge. In

respect to the pair of *ORDINARY* versus *NON-ORDINARY*, *FSP* and *CD* can of course apply to language use which does not depart from the ordinary at all.

Some means for *FSP* are more ordinary than others. The pair *UNMARKED* versus *MARKED* implies that the marked draws its effectiveness from contrasting with the unmarked. Markedness is closely related to the dimension of *EMPHASIS*. The deviation from unmarked order creates emphatic word order. The principle of emphasis might be replaced with the principle of *EMOTION*.

The dimension of *FOCUS* stipulates that information seems more content-oriented whereas focus seems more speaker-oriented. *AUTOMATIC* versus *ATTENTIONAL PROCESSING*. The attentional type is operationally defined as that which consumes resources and competes with the performance of other such processes; the automatic type is non-competitive.

STRESS is the most tangible factor of intonation, allowing the latter to be distinguished more easily than other dimensions of *CD*. Rheme is most naturally signalled by the nucleus. Demonstrations often suggest that any word can be stressed in any position, provided a special motive applies. The best known motive is *CONTRAST*.

In the *SPEAKER-ORIENTED* and *HEARER-ORIENTED* pair, thematizing is the speaker's acknowledgement of what has far been established as topic, and rhematizing is the speaker's request for the hearer to acknowledge something not previously established.

In the last pair of *QUESTION* and *ANSWER*, *FSP* can be a strategic consideration for selecting a focus: A yes/no question may have as focus the whole statement, while a *wh*-question focuses only on certain elements.

These pairings can be adapted in a way to be usefully manipulated as dimensions in the analysis of texts and discourses. Thus instead formal analysis, a functional analysis in terms of time, position, context, novelty, expectation, determinacy, value, depth, register, markedness, emphasis, and discourse moves can be thoroughly applied to texts to approach texts from a functional perspective.

Communicative Dynamism

CD is the division of the communicative structure of the sentence into two areas (theme—rheme) or more precisely into three (theme—transitional zone—rheme). The division of the sentence into three segments of structure— grammatical (subject—predicator—object), semantic (agent—action—patient) and communicative (theme—transitional zone—rheme) — has been a feature of the research conducted by this linguistic school since Mathesius.

The fundamental concept in this theory is the CD whereby an utterance is seen as a process of gradually unfolding meaning, each part of the utterance contributing dynamically to the total communicative effect. It evolves the contextual interplay of the given and the new information. In other words, the CD is defined by means of contextual dependence which implements two types of dependence: horizontal (linear) and vertical (cross reference) constituted by the occurrence of identical and/or closely related elements.

According to Fries (1983: 117) Firbas's theory of CD refers to characterization of various Theme-Rheme approaches, the most 'combining' in the literature: the 'communicative orientation' of the utterance is seen to result from the interplay not only of word order and intonation, but also of context dependency and semantic function. The systematic and internally coherent integration of the first three factors already secures Firbas a unique position in research on Theme-Rheme. Research into Theme-Rheme / Given-New distribution cannot dispense with seriously considering Firbas's proposals— the most developed articulation of FSP theory

Tranka (1974: 33) is inclined to regard the basic distribution of the CD as a suitable point of departure. This entails that it is not on the level of grammatical structure, but on the level of FSP that the communicative purpose of an utterance is determined. For Vachek (1983: 123) the basic distribution of CD seems to be a more suitable starting point for word order than a primary grammatical sentence pattern.

The concept of FSP and CD can also be manipulated within the framework of discourse analysis. Daneš showed that topics of successive sentences can be identified in relation to what Daneš called a

"hypertheme," in effect a discourse topic, which may or may not be explicitly stated in the text. The discourse topic is what the text, taken as a whole, is about. He (1974: 106) confirms that "the relevance of the functional sentence perspective of the organization of discourse (or text) is beyond doubt." He also maintains that "FSP is concerned with the organization of the sentence as a message: with how the grammatical and semantic structures function in the very act of communication." (ibid.)

This theory refers to the analysis of utterances in terms of the information they contain and the role each utterance part being evaluated for its semantic contribution to the whole. According to Firbas (1974: 12) a sentence contains a point of departure 'an initial notion' and a goal of discourse. Consequently, "the movement from the initial notion to the goal of discourse reveals the movement of the mind itself." Therefore, the point of departure is equally present to both the speaker and the hearer. The goal of discourse presents the very information to be imparted to the hearer.

CONCLUSIONS

The two notions of Functional Sentence Perspective and Communicative Dynamism have not been fully manipulated in the analysis of English texts. While these notions were first suggested to analyse language at the sentential level, they were not fully adopted in the analysis of language stretches beyond the sentence due to the conviction that the order of words does not necessarily correspond to the order of ideas.

The theme / rheme distinction can be manipulated in the analysis of texts and discourses as well as they are can be used to organise the information in the text. Thus, throughout communicative dynamism, the rheme in one sentence becomes the theme in a following sentence.

The FSP can be employed to solve problems of structure and function. Since the theme/rheme relationship is not to be equated with the subject/predicate relationship, the utterance must be analyzed in terms of units other than those of syntax. Since the theme-rheme distinction has to do with the thematic organization of information in the

semantic structure of sentence or text, it proves useful especially to solve problems of structure and function.

These pairings listed by de Beaugrande can be adapted in a way and used as functional dimensions in the analysis of texts and discourses. Thus, a functional analysis in terms of time, position, context, novelty, expectation, determinacy, value, depth, register, markedness, emphasis, and discourse moves can be thoroughly applied to texts to approach texts from a functional perspective.

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