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Introduction

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1 Introduction

1.1 Subject of the Study

The subject of the present study is a comparison of two registers of contemporary written English from the viewpoint of the theory of *Functional Sentence Perspective*, elaborated by the followers of Vilém Mathesius, one of the founding fathers of the Prague Linguistic Circle and a pioneer in the scientific study of language phenomena related to FSP.¹

Generally speaking, several aspects of the FSP theory will be taken into consideration in the present study, including the now widely-known concept of *Thematic Progressions*. A brief outline of the FSP framework and the concept of thematic progressions will be provided in one of the following sections. For the moment, I will discuss a short example below to illustrate that the operation of FSP is not something that is usually concealed from the eyes of a common speaker of language. On the contrary, the example will clearly show that despite their being unconsciously in operation during verbal and also possibly non-verbal communication, the inner workings of FSP can at any moment be brought to the surface of the ongoing process of communication and can even be made the goal of the communication.

1.1.1 Functional Sentence Perspective

The following example is to document, in very broad terms, speakers' awareness of the existence of FSP phenomena. The example is a transcription of a short stretch of conversation from a 1976 movie *Taxi Driver*, directed by Martin Scorsese. The setting is an electoral office in which Tom, an aide in an election campaign, is complaining on the phone to the other party (PT2),² most probably a representative of a manufacturer, about a flawed design of election campaign buttons. The space separating the words in this transcription signi-

¹See Beaugrande (1991a and 1991b) for a concise introduction to the main concepts of the FSP theory, its history and relation to other schools of linguistics. More recently, a brief overview of the FSP theory can be found in Chamonikolasová (2007: 24-37).

²Please note that the PT2 turns in the transcription are, in fact, just chunks of silence (marked by three dots) since only Tom's turns can be heard in this part of the movie.

fies the relative length of pauses between the words. The | symbol marks the placement of intonation centre in Tom's speech.

TOM: |yes?

PT2: ...

TOM: well you delivered |two boxes

I |think it's a total of |five thousand campaign buttons

now

|all the ones we had |before and our slogan is

we are the |people and |are is underlined

these new buttons have |we underlined

PT2: ...

TOM: that reads |we are the people

PT2: ...

TOM: well I |think there's a difference

we |are the people is not the same as |we are the people

The main point of dispute in the conversation is, of course, the difference in meaning between two mutually contrasting slogans of the same wording. The contrast between the slogans is achieved by means of a typographical feature. The typographical feature, in this case an underscore, is reflected in Tom's speech by the placement of stress at the words *we* and *are*. In both written versions of the slogan, *We Are The People* and *We Are The People*, the underscore performs the function of the core of the message.

It is reasonable to suppose that the intended core of the message of the election campaign slogan was to distance the political party for which Tom is campaigning from another political party that uses the very same slogan, but without the typographical feature of underscore. Thus, what we are dealing here with are three contrasting campaign slogans:

1. *We Are The People*
2. *We Are The People*
3. *We Are The People*

Under general contextual conditions, the core of the message (the *rheme proper* in FSP terminology) of the first slogan can be identified with the word *The People*, i.e. the meaning of the slogan could be easily paraphrased as *We represent you, the ordinary men and women of our country; we are the same people as you.*

The context for the second slogan is changed, however. The slogan presupposes the existence and electorate's knowledge of the first slogan. Under these contextual conditions, the meaning of the slogan with Are underlined can be paraphrased as *We truly are the same ordinary people as you.* The modality becomes the core of the sentence and in this way allows to present a different message to the electorate, one that rivals the values of the opponent.

In the third version of the political slogan, the core of the message is placed on the pronoun We. The underscore is used here to produce a sharp contrast — *It is not them but us who are the same ordinary people as you.* — to the meaning of the original, unmarked, slogan *We Are The People*. Tom's last line in the telephone conversation is thus a reflection on this change of the meaning which is essentially a change in the functional perspective of the sentence.

1.1.2 Thematic Progressions

For the purpose of this introductory chapter, I shall use the very same dialogue to reconstruct at least one thematic progression present in the dialogue. At this point, however, I shall make no attempt to determine the type of the progression.

By definition, the term *thematic progression* refers to

“...the choice and ordering of utterance themes, their mutual concatenation, as well as their relationship to the hyperthemes of the superior text units (such as the paragraph, chapter, ...), to the whole text, and to the situation.”

(Daneš 1974: 114)

In the above telephone conversation, an element that can be assigned a thematic function is ‘Tom’ via the use of the pronoun *I* in two utterances: *I think it's a total of five thousand campaign buttons* and *I think there's a difference*. The thematic nature of the two pronouns *I* is rendered by the interplay of sentence linearity, Firbasian semantics, and context – the three main factors determining the functional sentence perspective of written texts. It would be quite tempting to conclude now that one of the participants of this telephone conversation, the speaker named Tom, is represented twice in a thematic progression running through the dialogue:

Nevertheless, a difficulty may arise in determining whether to include into the thematic progression the element *we* occurring in the utterance *these new buttons have we underlined*. It is very likely that in this case the pronoun *we* does not directly refer to the participants of the context. Rather, it serves a meta-textual function allowing us to rephrase the utterance by saying *in these new buttons it is the first word that is underlined*. Thus, the pronoun *we* in the utterance *these new buttons have we underlined* cannot be considered a node of the thematic progression.

There are two additional instances of *we* which cannot be treated as nodes of the thematic progression. They occur in the sequences *that reads we are the people* and *is not the same as we are the people*. In both cases they form the intonation and information focus of these parts of Tom's speech. Occurring before the line *well I think there's a difference*, the former effectively breaks⁴ the progression depicted in Figure 1.2 into two separate thematic progressions. The first consists of the following four nodes,

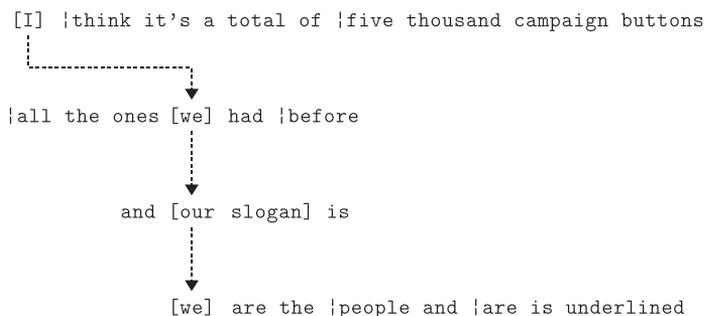


Figure 1.3: A four-node part of a broken heterogeneous thematic progression

and the second consists of only two nodes:

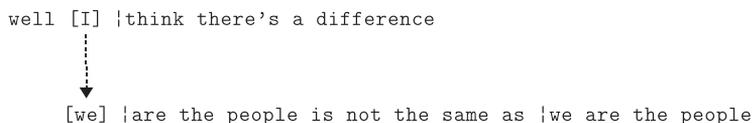


Figure 1.4: A two-node part of a broken heterogeneous thematic progression

⁴Cf. Svoboda (1981a: 152) regarding the positions of rhemes proper within hyperthematic strings.

The purpose of the above analysis was, once again, to introduce the subject of this study in general. In the following section, I shall delineate the research aims of this study in more detail and outline how the following chapters are organised.

1.2 Aims of the Study

This study can be considered a follow-up to my earlier attempt to discover and characterize patterns of information flow in English news articles from the point of view of the FSP theory (Drápela 2000). More appropriately, though, it is to be treated as a response to a proposition and a hypothesis put forward by two foremost researchers in the area of FSP, Jan Firbas and František Daneš:

“...the laws of the interplay of means of FSP are flexible enough to make room for differences between separate languages (English, German, Russian and Czech, for instance) or for differences between different standards or substandards of one language, or for stylistic differences within one of such standards or sub-standards.”

(Firbas 1974: 32)

“...AČ má přece relevanci textovou, včetně (a to asi především) slohové. [After all, FSP is textually and, probably in the first place, stylistically relevant.]”

(Daneš 1985: 188; translated by M.D.)

Narrowed down to the concept of thematic progressions, a similar hypothesis can be found in an article by Peter H. Fries:

“1. different patterns of thematic progressions correlate with different genres, i.e. patterns of thematic progression do not occur randomly but are sensitive to genre ...”

(Fries 1995: 7)

Nonetheless, in the very same article Fries concludes:

“Subsequent work on thematic progression has only weakly supported hypothesis 1. ...A re-examination of the data linking thematic progressions to the structure of the text or to information types ... may prove more fruitful.”

(Fries 1995: 8)

The ideas expressed in the three quotations are particularly attractive for future FSP research, because their verification, or as Fries suggests – “re-examination”, may advance our understanding of not only the specific FSP factors affecting the processes and outcomes of stylistically-minded text composition, but also memory-related processes involved in text production and reception in general.

The aims of the present study follow the propositions and hypotheses made by Firbas, Daneš and Fries in two ways. First, the assumptions made by Firbas and Daneš form the general orientation of my investigation. The aim is to present the results of FSP analysis of texts representing different registers of contemporary written English, with particular attention paid to

1. general characteristics of the individual registers in terms of the occurrence of *communicative units and communicative fields*,
2. differences between the registers in regard to the realisation of the *FSP Linearity Principle*,
3. *dynamic semantic scales and broad and narrow scene dynamics*.

The hypothesis suggested by Fries forms the basis for the second set of aims centred around the concept of *thematic progressions*. The task is to present the results of FSP analysis examining the occurrence of

4. *simple linear thematic progressions*,
5. *thematic progressions with continuous (constant) theme*, and
6. *thematic progressions with derived themes*

in the very same set of texts. The registers covered in this study are the news register and the register of academic prose. The texts representing these two registers are described in Section 3.1 below.

The above delineated aims of my research cannot, of course, fully exhaust the possibilities provided by the present state of the FSP framework for the analysis and comparison of texts representing various registers, or in Firbas’ terms, “standards or sub-standards” of one language, in this case English. Nor can the results offered in the present study be considered as emblematic of the registers analysed. The just described research aims together with the results offered below will, hopefully, help encourage further investigation in the area of register-based FSP analysis of English and other languages.

1.3 Organisation of the Study

The subsequent chapters of this study are organised in the following way:

Chapter Two sets the theoretical background of the present study, namely

- a brief description of the theory of functional sentence perspective and its subdiscipline – the concept of thematic progressions, two key theoretical frameworks underpinning the whole study,
- a discussion regarding the relations between the terms *register* and *functional style*, with an application to the types of texts analysed, and
- a review of selected literature associated with the above stated research aims.

Chapter Three presents a methodological overview of the procedures adopted for this study, in particular,

- a description of the analysed texts,
- the research method employed, and
- the system of labelling used in the analysis.

Chapter Four constitutes the core of the present study, providing the results of the implementation of the chosen research method, with descriptions and discussion of the main FSP characteristics of the texts in terms of

- their information contour,
- the occurrence of communicative units and fields,
- deviations from the FSP Linearity Principle,
- the occurrence of dynamic semantic scales,
- differences in the dynamics of broad and narrow distributional scenes, and
- findings related to the types of thematic progressions.

Chapter Five provides a short summary of the analysis and offers some suggestions for further research in the field.

These chapters are accompanied by a list of references. A lengthy appendix, which originally formed the final part of the dissertation (Drápela 2008), with FSP-tagged texts constituting the examined language corpus can be accessed⁵ on the Internet under the following URL:

http://is.muni.cz/th/68378/ff_d/martindrapela2008dissertation_appendix.pdf

⁵Link valid as of 28 February 2011.