MARTIN ADAM

# SOME SPECIAL ASPECTS WITHIN
# THE TH- AND THE RH-LAYERS

## I Introduction

The aim of the present study 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 (FSP). I will focus on the function of the layers in the development of communication and their possible position in the process of FSP interpretation. The paper is based on the research carried out in my M.A. dissertation (Adam 2000).

The concept of the thematic and rhematic layers was first introduced in Firbas (1961) 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); all the concepts and terms used or referred to in this paper can be found there. 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 (Acts 2:1-4) and the PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN (Luke 10:30-36).

Now, 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. From the point of view of FSP, Firbas distinguishes two different arrangements of a sentence (Firbas 1995.63). These result from the interplay of the factors involved in the distribution of degrees of communicative dynamism (CD) (Firbas 1992.7-8)—linear modification, context and semantic structure (Firbas 1992.14-16). The sentence is 'a field of semantic and syntactic relations that in its turn provides a distributional field of degrees of CD' (Firbas 1986.47) and its elements perform different dynamic-semantic functions (DSFs) (Firbas 1992.66-9). It is then possible to constitute two basic scales—*Quality Scale* [Q] with the DSFs of Bearer of Quality (B), Quality (Q) and Specification (Sp), and *Presentation Scale* [Pr] implementing the DSFs of Setting (Set), Presentation (Pr) and Phenomenon to Be Presented (Ph) (Firbas 1992.69). Each communicative unit carries a different degree of CD, the gradual

rise of which is reflected in the interpretative arrangement (Firbas 1995.63), 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. The least dynamic DSFs are represented by the thematic elements (Set, B), while the non-thematic elements, manifesting a higher degree of CD, are occupied by the DSFs of Q, Pr, Sp, FSp and Ph. The DSFs then establish the thematic and the rhematic layers of the text; the layers are formed by all the thematic and all the rhematic elements of the text, respectively.

## II The dynamic-semantic homogeneity

In this section, I will analyze the passage of THE COMING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT (Acts 2:1-4) from the point of view of FSP. Having established the DSFs, I will examine one of the essential characteristics of the layers—the dynamic-semantic homogeneity—the existence of which has been first demonstrated by Firbas (1995.59-72). 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, a chapter) is capable of showing many significant features of a passage. Firbas demonstrated the potential function of the dynamic-semantic homogeneity working throughout the text in 1995.59-72.

In the following extract, I will trace the dynamic-semantic strings both in the thematic and in the rhematic layers (thematic elements are italicized, rhematic elements are in bold).

(1) *On the day of Pentecost (Th, Set) all the Lord's followers (Th, B)* were (Tr, Q) **together (Rh, Sp)** in **one place (Rh, FSp)**.    [Q]

(2) *Suddenly (Th, Set) there (Th, Set)* was (Tr, Pr) **a noise from heaven like the sound of a mighty wind (Rh, Ph)**!    [Pr]

(3) *It (Th, B)* filled (Tr, Q) **the whole house where they were meeting (Rh, Sp)**.    [Q]

(4) *Then (Th, Set) they (Th, B)* saw (Tr, Q) **what looked like fiery tongues moving in all directions (Rh, Sp)**    [Q]

(5) /and/ *a tongue (Th, B)* **came (Rh, Q)**    [Q]

(6) /and/ settled (Tr, Q) **on each person (Rh, Sp)** *there (Th, Set)*.    [Q]

(7) **The Holy Spirit (Rh, Ph)** took control (Tr, Q) *of everyone (Th, Set)*    [Pr]

(8) /and/ *they (Th, B)* began (Tr, Q) **speaking whatever languages the Spirit let them speak (Rh, Sp)**[Q].    [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' (Firbas 1995.64, see also Svoboda 1981.4-6). 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'*) and elements that entered the communication as rhematic and gradually moved to the thematic layer (e.g. **'a noise from heaven...'** /Rh/ → *it* /Th/).

Let me now turn my attention to 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 that constitute the crucial part of the rhematic layer are represented by **'a noise from heaven like the sound of a mighty wind'** (2); **'fiery tongues moving in all directions'** (4); and **'The Holy Spirit'** (7). 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'** (7) itself. Even the rhematic 'languages' (8) 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:

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...** → **(on) each person**

Semantic homogeneity is displayed in the thematic layer as well. 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 (see also Svoboda 1996). 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. The layer conveys the notions of **'(all) together'**, **'the whole house'** and **'(on) each person'**. 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 (for further details, see the comments on the passage in Adam 2000.18ff).

## III Gradation

Another characteristic feature functioning within the rhematic layer is gradation. I will restrict myself to the rhematic layer only, as the phenomenon of gradation is best seen in this part of the text, which is, due to its communicative content, much more dynamic than its thematic counterpart. Let me demonstrate this aspect on the extract of Acts 2:1-4 again. For this purpose, allow me to recall the simplified outline of the rhematic elements as they occur in the rhematic layer.

**Rh: a noise from heaven ... → fiery tongues... → The Holy Spirit → ...languages...**

Within the rhematic layer, a remarkable gradation takes place. It is actually opened by the Ph-element of (2)—'**a noise from heaven...**', goes on with the rheme proper of (4)—'**...fiery tongues ...**', and culminates, as it were, in (7) '**with The Holy Spirit**'. To be exact, this gradation closes with '**...languages...**' in (8); this element represents a consequence or result of the

gradation. As I see it, it is a natural part of the dynamic-semantic string of the Holy Spirit. Looking closer at all the rhematic elements creating the gradation string, we find that they represent the most important part of the text that conveys the high point of the message. The coming of the Holy Spirit is described as it was seen from different angles, as its manifestation in the last basic distributional field.

It is worth noting that the notion of the Holy Spirit itself is neither mentioned in the beginning of the dynamic-semantic string, nor as the opening member of the gradation string proper. The reader finds the expression of **'the Holy Spirit'** only in (7), almost at the end of the passage. In my opinion, this fact strongly contributes to the overall gradation within the rhematic layer. In other words, it is as if both the preceding elements of the gradation string (**'a noise'**, **'fiery tongues'**) prepared the way for the climax. The two members describe the action in two different ways—the former from the acoustic, and the latter from the visual point of view. Only after the phenomenon has been characterized does the notion itself enter the flow of communication. Through this gradation the rhematic layer effectively serves the narrator's communicative purpose: to introduce the Holy Spirit into the flow of narration (Firbas 1995.67-8)—the rhematic layer perspectives the text towards the notion of the Holy Spirit, and the gradation effect of the text is thus maintained.

## IV Retrievability vs Deducibility

In this section, 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 assigning DSF to 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 retrievability; 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 on Chafe's approach 1992.37 and 1987d.54).

Let me illustrate the concept of retrievability by discussing a passage from Luke—10:30-36 (THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN). As the question of context-dependence and retrievability 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 an analysis of the passage.

(1) *As a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho (Th, Set)*, **robbers (Rh, Ph)** attacked (Tr, Pr) *him (Th, Set)*    [Pr]

(2) /and/ grabbed (Tr, Q) **everything he had (Rh, Sp)**.    [Q]

(3) *They (Th, B)* **beat (Rh, Q)** him (Th, Set) up    [Q]

(4) /and/ **ran off (Rh, Q), leaving him half dead (Rh, FSp)**.    [Q]

(5) **A priest (Rh, Ph)** happened to be going (Tr, Pr) *down the same road (Th, Set)*.    [Pr]

(6) *But when he saw the man (Th, Set), he (Th, B)* walked by (Tr, Q) **on the other side (Rh, Sp)**.    [Q]

(7) *Later (Th, Set)* **a temple helper (Rh, Ph)** came (Tr, Q) *to the same place (Th, Set)*.    [Pr]

(8) *But when he saw the man who had been beaten up (Th, Set), he (Th, B) also (Th, Set)* went by (Tr, Q) **on the other side (Rh, Sp)**.    [Q]

(9) **A man from Samaria (Rh, Ph)** *then (Th, Set)* came (Tr, Q) *traveling along that road (Th, Set)*.    [Pr]

(10) *When he saw the man (Th, Set), he (Th, B)* felt (Tr, Q) **sorry (Rh, Sp)** *for him (Th, Set)*    [Q]

(11) /and/ **went over (Rh, Q)** *to him (Th, Set)*.    [Q]

(12) *He (Th, B)* treated (Tr, Q) **his wounds (Rh, Sp)** **with olive oil and wine (Rh, FSp)**    [Q]

(13) /and/ **bandaged (Rh, Q)** *them (Th, Set)*.    [Q]

(14) *Then (Th, Set) he (Th , B)* put (Tr, Q) *him (Th, Set)* **on his own donkey (Rh, Sp)**    [Q]

(15) /and/ took (Tr, Q) *him (Th, Set)* **to an inn, where he took care of him (Rh, Sp)**.    [Q]

In addition to being an evidence of the rhematic layer 'telling the story', this passage provides us with an instance of the layers functioning as an interpretative tool in FSP. The case is found in (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 (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.

## V Conclusion

Now, let me summarize the analyses, looking more generally at the function of the thematic and the rhematic layers.

As has been already mentioned, the overall character of a text is more apparent when studied at a higher level (taking into account the FSP of separate clauses). In this study, I have analyzed the extracts from the point of view of whole paragraphs. 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. I have also discussed the gradation effect and its impact on the message conveyed.

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 gradation effect) has been traced in many extracts, predominantly taken from religious texts (Firbas 95.59-72, Adam 2000.11-36) and seems to be characteristic of such texts; however, whether the tendencies apply to every (religious) text in general, is still to be shown.

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