MARTIN ADAM

FSP ANALYSIS OF A DISTRIBUTIONAL MACROFIELD

Introduction

Functional sentence perspective (FSP) has been understood primarily as a phenomenon operating on the level of a clause or a sentence. The principles adopted in FSP can be, however, applied in an analogical way to other hierarchical levels of discourse. In this context, let me recall Svoboda's study on the distributional microfield as created by the syllable in the framework of FSP (Svoboda 1996). In his conclusion, Svoboda indicates that "syllables are non-communicative distributional microfields, which follow the same structural principles as their (hierarchically) higher communicative counterparts…" (Svoboda 1996: 200).

  Similarly, the principles of functional (sentence) perspective theory can be used for higher levels of text, e.g. paragraphs or chapters. It is particularly the thematic and rhematic layers established within the text that serve as evidence of the functional perspective theory working at higher levels of text structures. Firbas made this valuable observation in his study on thematic and rhematic layers (1995). He deals with the dynamic-semantic functions of separate clauses, thus forming tracks that are capable of showing the perspective of a section of a text. He shows the process of a piece of information acting in the flow of communication. It seems that such an analysis depicts the characteristic features of the text, such as gradation, coherence or semantic unity. Following the discussion of layers, the reader is able to perceive the message the author is communicating. A thorough survey of FSP is presented in Firbas' *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.

Analysis

In the present study – based on research carried out for the purpose of my Ph.D. dissertation (Adam 2003) – I propose to look at the text from a higher-level point of view. I set out to investigate the area of a chapter, as an integral piece of text. Deriving from detailed analyses of separate clauses (that represent basic distributional fields), I will go on examining whole paragraphs (chapters), i.e.

distributional macrofields. I owe this term to Aleš Svoboda (1989: 9), who illustrated the application of the FSP theory in two new dimensions: distributional micro- and macrofields. I will focus on how a piece of information proceeds within a text and how the communicative purpose of the whole text is fulfilled. For the purpose of the FSP analysis I will use an extract from the Gospel according to St. Luke (Lk 2:1–20) as offered by the New International Version of the Bible (Kohlenberger 1997).

The question may be stated as follows: does a piece of information behave the same way at a higher level of text (a macrofield) as it does within a clause? Presumably, having analyzed a longer section of text, I will be able to draw conclusions concerning the role of the thematic and rhematic layers, as well as the function of the information moving in the flow of communication.

First, let me present the whole extract that will be analyzed. Due to space limitations, I cannot offer here the full chart of FSP analysis; the reader is referred to Adam 2003, pp. 57–58.

> In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.
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> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."
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> Suddenly a great company of heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone to the heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."
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> So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But

Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

(Lk 2:1–20, NIV; Kohlenberger 1997)

Examining the FSP analysis of Luke 2:1–20, we can disregard the whole rhematic track, which is constituted by all rhemes proper. The outlines of RhPr elements themselves, as it were, narrate the story; the most dynamic information conveyed by the rhemes proper of all the clauses – joined into one vertical line of narration – is able to depict the core of the message. A mere enumeration of the RhPr-layer members is capable of expressing the author's communicative purpose.

RhPr: a decree → a census → the first census → to his town / to register → Joseph / to Bethlehem → to register → with Mary → to be married → a child → the time for the baby to be born → to her firstborn, a son → in cloths → in a manger /because there was no room for them in the inn → shepherds keeping watch over their flocks at night → An angel of the Lord → the glory of the Lord → terrified → not afraid → good news of great joy → for all the people → a Savior → Christ the Lord → a sign → a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger → a great company of heavenly host praising God → [the shepherds] to Bethlehem → and see this thing that has happened… → [hurried] off → Mary and Joseph and the baby… → the word concerning what has been told them about this child → at what the shepherds had said to them → [treasured] up → [Mary] in her heart → [the shepherds] returned / glorifying God…;

As has been noted already, Svoboda interprets syllables analogically to communicative units at the level of a clause (Svoboda 1996). The research into FSP has proved that the theory works at different levels of text units, whether lower or higher (for further details on the hierarchy of units in FSP, see Svoboda 1968 and Firbas 1992: 16ff). The following discussion applies an analogical approach to the material of a functional macrofield, i.e. within larger units of text. The idea is in harmony with Firbas' conclusions in terms of the function of the thematic and rhematic layers in a text. He showed that the dynamic-semantic tracks run through individual distributional fields and convey meaning not only in the clauses proper, but create a string of a higher level, which is across the layers (Firbas 1995).

Distributional Macrofield

The FSP analysis of the passage of Luke 2:1–20 has inspired me to a more or less experimental approach towards the text. The dynamic flow of communication may be traced literally throughout all basic distributional fields, going vertically (paradigmatically) "downwards" (for details see Adam 2003, p. 161–164). It seems that particular sections of the text have similar qualities, as the elements

within clauses do; the structure of the text resembles the theme-rheme structure in a sentence. I admit I deal with a hypothetical issue that is in its initial stage of research and needs to be examined more thoroughly.

The text of Luke 2:1–20 offers an illustrative example of a higher-level unit in which the functional perspective is reflected in a similar way as within a clause. I will try to show that the passage describing the birth of Jesus Christ contains inner dynamism that is capable of distributing the degrees of communicative dynamism over higher hierarchical units. As has been mentioned, I will focus on functional units within the RhPr layer, in which the most dynamic development of communication takes place.

It is worth noting that the passage of Lk 2:1–20 represents a self-contained text. In other words, it is not extracted from a larger section of text and thus is not decontextualized. On the contrary, the beginning of the passage coincides with the real beginning of the whole chapter as offered by the Gospel according to St. Luke. Also the end of Lk 2:1–20 is identical with the actual end of the story narrated in the Bible.

Looking at the rhematic elements, we find a remarkable phenomenon in the initial part of the passage: the first distributional fields, as it were, set the necessary contextual background for the action to come in the following verses. In the first clause, we get to know about 'a decree' that was issued in the Roman Empire in the first century AD. We also know that this act was done by 'Caesar Augustus'. Thus, the basic scene is set – we get the information of *when* and *where* the future action will take place and *who* will perform it. In the next distributional field, a fact concerning the decree is further specified: 'a census / of the entire Roman world / should be taken.' The facts in terms of the census are completed by the information that 'This / was / the first census'. The last bit of information giving the reader the "props" is found in the clause 'And / everyone / went / to his own town / to register.' Apparently, the scene of the story is – within the first three distributional fields – introduced.

From the functional viewpoint, this opening part of the passage acts like a dynamic-semantic element performing the Setting-function. By its nature, it introduces something context-dependent (the Roman world, the person of the Emperor, etc.). It may be argued, of course, that this kind of information is not retrievable from the immediately relevant context; in this case, it will be beneficial, however, to deal with a wider understanding of context. Let me recall here Chafe's concept of context in human communication. In the discussion on the concept of given and new information, Chafe's approach differs to a certain extent from the Firbas' concept of the immediately relevant context.

Chafe (1994: 71–92) describes the distinction between given and new information in terms of activation cost which is determined by "the amount of mental effort that the discourse participants have to employ in order to activate an idea in their consciousness". If the speaker thinks that a certain idea "is already active in the listener's consciousness at the moment of utterance, the idea is identified as given" (Chamonikolasová 2000: 3). If he/she thinks it is inactive and has to be activated, it is identified as new. According to Chafe (1994: 78–79), givenness

may be established both by linguistic and nonlinguistic means. A previously in-
active idea which was introduced linguistically into discourse usually remains
active, i.e. given, for a certain period time and then "recedes into the semiactive
state" (for further details on Chafe's approach, see Chamonikolasová 2000).

To summarize, also in the light of Chafe's activation cost theory, the introduc-
tory section of the text under examination provides the reader undoubtedly with
the least dynamic pieces of information. As the elements in question do not ap-
pear exclusively in the thematic sphere, but at the same time form the scenic
background of the story, I would regard them, similarly as in the FSP of a
clause, *a diatheme* of the macrofield. This interpretation is actually in harmony
with Firbas' approach: due to their irretrievability, these elements cannot be con-
sidered themes proper, but diathemes.

Let me proceed to the next section of the passage where a whole set of indi-
vidual participants of the communication enters the story, one by one. The first
one is 'Joseph', and then his fiancée 'Mary', followed by the main character of
the narration – the baby Jesus, who comes to the stage. Then, having been born,
he is visited by the shepherds. At the moment of the visit, another "actor" ap-
pears on the scene: 'an angel of the Lord', later followed by 'a great company of
the heavenly host…'. These elements, which in the actual distributional fields
perform the Ph functions, may be seen from a different perspective within the
scope of the whole passage; together with the "props" of the opening section,
they delimit the scene. In them, the reader is given information concerning the
participants of the communication. Viewed from this angle, they are thematic,
performing a function analogical to that of a Bearer of Quality. Of course, due to
their higher degree of communicative dynamism (CD) (they convey more dy-
namic information then the Set-elements) they are higher on the scale of CD.
Nevertheless, they are part of the *diatheme*.

In FSP terminology, the high point of the message is presented in the moment
when the angel announces to the shepherds the 'good news of great joy / that
will be / for all the people: a Savior / has been born / to you'. It is the message
that came to be referred to as *gospel* (or *ευαγγελιον* in Old Greek, i.e. "good
news"); it represents the absolute climax of the passage and in it, the communi-
cative purpose is fulfilled. Hence this peak (culminating in 'a Savior') may be
considered as the *rheme proper*, performing the corresponding dynamic seman-
tic function of a Phenomenon. The same is reflected by the clause 'He / is /
Christ the Lord' (i.e. the Messiah).

The information conveyed by the Ph-element is further developed in the fol-
lowing verses – the angel speaks of the 'sign' and thus the shepherds are given
the clue that they 'will find / a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger'.
From the view of FSP something is said about the "subject", and hence is speci-
fied by an element of a higher degree of CD. In this way, the units found within
the above mentioned distributional fields might be regarded as Sp-elements.

It may be rightly asked whether a transitional layer is also functioning in the
higher-level approach within the passage. In my opinion, it is the section dealing
with the angel coming to the shepherds that performs the role of *transition*.

Within the clauses describing this situation, we may observe information of transitory character: apart from carrying a clear notional content it connects – similarly to the temporal and modal exponents of verbs – the theme and the non-theme. I would say that the shepherds' fear and investigation is a context-independent carrier of meaning, but in the presence of a successful competitor ('a Savior'), it is not rhematic. Also from the thematic point of view it is clear that this section represents a natural transition between the exposition (the census, Joseph, Mary) and the climax of the story (the birth of Jesus Christ).

To summarize the discussion of the distribution of degrees of CD over the whole passage as seen "from above" (from the viewpoint of a higher level of text), it is possible to conclude that the Rh-layer implements a kind of Combined Scale of FSP interpretation. In other words, the high point of the message is presented as context-independent, and, at the same time, the idea of the Savior's birth is further developed; the subject then performs the combined dynamic semantic function of a Ph- and B-elements.

In the conclusions he draws in his article on the syllable as a microfield, Svoboda says that "in Indo-European languages, the distributional fields of clauses display the tendency to place rhemes proper at or towards the end of the clause (Svoboda 1996: 199). He goes on by saying that "deviations from this tendency may have different […] reasons, but they are (nearly always) motivated and have their place in the system" (Svoboda 1996: 199). In the case of Lk 2:1–20 the rheme proper is placed rather in the middle of the story. I would compare it to the structure implemented in classical drama: exposition – collision – <u>crisis</u> – peripeteia – catastrophe. The roles performed by individual sections as well as their corresponding dynamic semantic functions are shown in the following chart (the individual relations between the roles are approximate):

exposition		collision	crisis	peripeteia	catastrophe
(DTh)	*DTh*	*Tr*	*RhPr*	*RhPr*	*RhPr*
(Set)	B	Q/Pr	Ph	Sp	FSp
(Roman empire)	a census Augustus Joseph Mary	an angel shepherds good news	a Saviour a baby Christ the Lord	sign baby in a manger	heavenly host praising God

I am aware of the fact that the results derived from FSP principles applied to a higher level of text may seem farfetched. I admit the suggested interpretation is a simplification to a certain extent; its overall structure, however, proves it is well founded on the solid base of a functional and systemic approach to language. It seems that the functional approach applied by the theory of FSP need not be restricted to the level of individual clauses, but can be applied to the hierarchical level of paragraphs and chapters.

Conclusions

Examining the passage of Lk 2:1–20, I suggested that the functional structure of the passage becomes more stratified if it is studied from the point of view of a higher level of the text. The function of the thematic, the transitional and the rhematic tracks appears not to be restricted to the level of individual clauses, but to exceed them to operate on the suprasentential level of a **communicative macrofield**. The dynamic-semantic layers seem to play a significant role within the whole flow of communication in its entirety. Having analyzed a number of religious texts (see Adam 2003) and drawing on Svoboda (1996), I am now ready to define a **paragraph (a chapter) as a communicative distributional macrofield, which follows the same structural principles as their lower communicative counterparts (a clause, a noun phrase)**.

The whole passage may thus be viewed as one communicative macrofield with the degrees of CD distributed to the extent to which it contributes to the development of communication in the functional macrofield. By means of illustration, I tried to assign the dynamic-semantic labels of a Th, Tr and Rh to particular parts of the passage of Lk 2:1–20. It is apparently the narrative that can be naturally divided into an initial part, the body and a closing part of the story, and, also analogically transformed into the functional outlook of the Th – Tr – Rh structure.

Whether this perspective may be adopted on a larger scale, is still to be shown. Nevertheless, the above interpretation seems to suggest that the functional approach is not confined to the boundaries of clauses, but exceeds it into the domain of paragraphs and chapters.

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