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## INTERPRETATIVE POTENTIALITY AS A NATURAL PHENOMENON WITHIN THE THEORY OF FUNCTIONAL SENTENCE PERSPECTIVE

### **Abstract**

Within research carried out in the field of the theory of functional sentence perspective (FSP), the question of potentiality in interpretation seems to play a marginal role. The paper deals with the treatment of the issue from a synchronic point of view, focusing on the position of potentiality in FSP analysis. The author draws above all on the findings presented by Mathesius and Firbas and presents the results of his own investigation into the issue of potentiality in FSP. The discussion is illustrated by authentic examples of cases of potentiality in functional interpretation (namely in the biblical passage of Matthew 5:1–12) and by suggested solutions.

### **Key words**

*Potentiality; FSP; Firbas; Mathesius; Beatitudes; oscillation*

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### **1. Introduction**

The phenomenon of potentiality within the system of language has been discussed (even if rather exceptionally) for many decades (in the framework of functional syntax most notably by Firbas 1992: 8–9; 108–110 and Svoboda 2005: 221–228). Strictly speaking, potentiality is not a purely linguistic term; it may be associated with other scholarly disciplines apart from linguistics, such as sociology or philosophy; language and human thinking are inevitably and inseparably interconnected (Černý 1996: 445–447). Wilhelm von Humboldt, the true philosopher of language, claimed as early as 1836 that “it is after all the continual intellectual effort to make the articulated sound capable of expressing thought” (Humboldt 1971 [1836] in Heidegger 1971: 116; see also Urbanová 2005: 120). Some of

Humboldt's followers, above all representatives of neo-Humboldtism and language relativism (namely Sapir and Whorf), confessed to a belief that different language communities perceive the surrounding world differently and that the use of language is, therefore, potential (Černý 1996: 405–407 or Whorf 1956).

The present paper deals with the treatment of the issue of linguistic potentiality (i.e. the possibility of equivocal understanding or linguistic interpretation) from a synchronic point of view, focusing on the position of potentiality in the theory of functional sentence perspective (FSP). In the initial stage of the discussion of the phenomenon of potentiality in language (and especially FSP), it would be beneficial to define the notion of potentiality itself. Restricting the area of my interest to that of linguistics, I may draw on a general definition of the term as offered by Čermák (1994: 223; translated into English by M.A.): “Potentiality is the possibility to use a unit of language in a non-systematic way.” It follows that potentiality in language indicates a certain oscillation between following a fixed rule and using a linguistic item in an inappropriate or non-standard way.

For the purpose of this paper, it will be necessary to narrow down the above-mentioned understanding of potentiality, emulating the concept elaborated by Firbas; his approach will be crucial in the discussion to follow. In Firbas' view, which is obviously tightly connected with the theory of FSP, potentiality represents a situation when – within the functional analysis of a clause – one cannot interpret the distribution of the degrees of communicative dynamism (CD) unequivocally. Such an interpretation does not lead to one clear conclusion (Firbas 1992: 8–9).

After exploring the findings offered by renowned linguists such as Humboldt, Mathesius and Firbas, the results of the author's own investigation into the issue of potentiality in FSP will be presented. The discussion will be illustrated by authentic examples of cases of potentiality in functional interpretation. Towards the end of the discussion, conclusions together with possible solutions to the problem will be suggested.

## **2. Vilém Mathesius: Oscillation**

Before Firbas' concept of potentiality is presented, let me recall some of the thoughts of the first pioneer of the functional approach towards language, the founder of the Prague School of linguistics, Vilém Mathesius.

Mathesius defined potentiality as static oscillation in language; such oscillation may operate on two levels: first, as static oscillation among individuals inside the language community, and, second, as static oscillation within the individual's language (Mathesius 1982 or Vachek 1970). Mathesius illustrated linguistic oscillation by examples from phonetics, morphology, syntax and semantics, making use of different languages. In the field of syntax, for instance, he described potentiality in his own use of enclitic pronouns in Czech, commenting on the “normative” and “marked” word order (Mathesius 1982).

In a certain sense, it is Mathesius' work that perfectly connects two contradictory approaches of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: that considering language an objective phenomenon (Grimms, Schleicher, Humboldt) and that viewing language as purely individual (Kruzsewski, Jespersen). In Mathesius' view, generalisations can be dangerous and lead to excessive simplifications and "flat interpretations of language phenomena" (Urbanová 2005: 120–121). He argues that language, in its abundant richness, cannot be approached exclusively as a fixed system of rules; one must critically judge what is constant and what is potential (Mathesius 1982). As Urbanová puts it in her treatise on current trends in linguistics, quoting Mathesius' understanding of potentiality, "language elements are subject to re-evaluation and can be (and are) to some degree ephemeral" (Urbanová 2005: 121).

Mathesius' insightful and prophetic views on language phenomena set one of the major milestones for the linguistic research to come.

### 3. Jan Firbas: Potentiality

As has been mentioned above, for Jan Firbas, an authentic descendent of Mathesius' (and Vachek's) legacy, the notion of potentiality was inevitably associated with his theory of FSP.

Firbas views a sentence as "a field of semantic and syntactic relations that in its turn provides a distributional field of degrees of communicative dynamism (CD)" (Firbas 1992: 7–8, 1986: 47). By a degree of CD Firbas understands "the relative extent to which the element contributes towards the development of the communication" (Firbas 1964: 270). The degrees of CD are determined by the interplay of FSP factors involved in the distribution of degrees of CD: linear modification, context and semantic structure (Firbas 1992: 14–6). In spoken language, intonation (i.e. the prosodic factor) is added to the interplay of these factors.

In most cases, the distribution of the degrees of CD is unambiguous and individual communicative units may be ascribed an appropriate dynamic-semantic function (according to their prominence); the FSP interpretation of a sentence is thus transparent. Nevertheless, a functional analysis occasionally does not lead to more than one interpretation; Firbas speaks then of a certain degree of potentiality (Firbas 1992: 8).

In his key monograph (Firbas 1992), Firbas mentions the phenomenon of potentiality several times. He argues that in written discourse real cases of potentiality are extremely exceptional and that an equivocal, unclear FSP interpretation is often rooted either in an inappropriate understanding of FSP principles in general or in the fact that one does not consider all three factors operating in FSP (their interplay). To recall the author's own experience, Firbas was very cautious about using the term 'potentiality' even in dubious cases of interpretation and was reluctant to provide premature judgements. The situation is somewhat different in spoken discourse, where he regards intonation as a decisive tool: "By eliminating potentiality, intonation disambiguates the FSP function of an element and

frequently also the perspective of the entire distributional field. As it does not create a ‘discrepancy’ between the two distributions, elimination of potentiality contributes towards the establishment of perfect correspondence between them” (Firbas 1992: 114). Firbas demonstrates how intonation removes potentiality by deciding whether an adverbial is performing the dynamic-semantic function of a Setting or a Specification (Firbas 1992: 193ff).

On the other hand, Firbas admits that there exist genuine cases of potentiality. Below are three of his examples as an illustration; in the sentences, it is not clear which of the communicative units is given prominence and is thus rhematic (Firbas 1992: 196ff):

*The tide was in.*

*The teams are coming out.*

*The inevitable thing happened.*

When exploring the above examples, Firbas labels the sentences as ‘borderline cases’, as uncertainty arises as to the status of the subjects. The subjects may be regarded either as context-dependent (and so thematic) or as context-independent carriers of the high point of the message (and so rhematic). Without the help of intonation (reflected e.g. in phonemic annotation) that would remove the potentiality, it is not easy to distribute the degrees of CD over the individual units. Instead, the role of the immediately relevant context (Firbas 1992: 23–25) must be taken into consideration, and also the potential possibility to view the verbs as expressing the existence or appearance on the scene with “explicitness or sufficient implicitness” (Firbas 1995: 65), which may lead to a correct solution. Here is Firbas’ own conclusion of the problem: “If these observations are correct, the uncertainty as to the adequate assessment is due to the referents occurring in the borderline area between the immediately relevant portion and the rest of the situational context... This leads to potentiality, which in spoken language is removed by the placement of the intonation centre either on the subject or on the verb” (Firbas 1992: 196–197).

Firbas contrasts the above cases of potentiality with several examples of sentences in which the FSP analysis is clear even though it may not seem to be at first sight:

*In every country, dogs bite.*

*Extremes meet.*

*Old vessels must leak.*

The unambiguous character of these sentences is “due to the proverbial character of the information conveyed” (Firbas 1992: 197); a quality is ascribed to a phenomenon. The interpretative arrangement naturally places the context-independent characterization after the phenomenon to be characterized” (Firbas 1992: 197). Obviously, the subjects are thematic whereas the qualities ascribed

are highlighted and thus rhematic. Firbas concludes that such a perspective of the sentences is actually in harmony with the common role of proverbs – to recall an experience “well known and generally accepted as valid” (Firbas 1992: 197).

To close the section devoted to his concept of potentiality existing in the area of FSP, another Firbas’ quote will be used. To exemplify the claim that the phenomenon of potentiality is actually extremely rare, Firbas typically remarked (on account of the basic FSP factors) that “further research into these factors may reveal that what has so far been considered a case of potentiality may be accounted for by their unequivocal interplay” (Firbas 1992:198).

#### 4. One more example of genuine potentiality in FSP: Matthew 5:1–12

To illustrate the occurrence of equivocal interpretation in the theory of FSP, another practical instance of genuine potentiality will be discussed.

In Adam (2006), the results of research into potential interpretations of the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13) were presented (the complete data obtained during the research are available in Adam 2003: 119–126). For the purpose of the present discussion, an extract taken from the New Testament will be used again, namely the full text of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12). It will be crucial to state clearly that my research actually draws on the findings within the area of FSP elaborated by Jan Firbas and so my understanding of potentiality is identical to his. First, an analysis of the text based on FSP interpretation will be presented and then commented on it in greater detail.

This short passage represents an essential part of the so-called “Sermon on the Mountain” where Jesus Christ preaches on the very basic principles that should be applied in one’s life. The Beatitudes represent the opening part of the Sermon and introduce the whole section of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. The traditional heading of the passage – the Beatitudes – comes from Latin root *beatus* (=blessed, blissful, sainted) and anticipates the core of the text. Christ opens his sermon by saying who is blessed in the kingdom of heaven and why; this seemingly simple statement, as will become clear later, is a little ambiguous.

First of all the text in full will be shown and then an FSP analysis of the passage presented in the table. The text of the Beatitudes contains several cases of potentiality and so the analysis will be done in two versions (Version B will be presented only after Version A has been discussed).<sup>1</sup>

*5<sup>1</sup>Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, <sup>2</sup>and he began to teach them, saying: <sup>3</sup>“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup>Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup>Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup>Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. <sup>7</sup>Blessed are the merciful, for they will be*

**Table 1** FSP analysis of Mt 5:1–12 (Version A)<sup>2</sup>

Verse	Clause	TrPr (conj)	ThPr (Set/B)	DTh (Set/B)	TrPr/Tr (Q/Pr)	RhPr (Q)	Rh/RhPr (Sp/FSp)	RhPr (Ph)	Scale
5:1	1		he3	Now1 When he saw the crowds2	went up4		on a mountainside5		Q
	2	and1	^			sat down2			Q
	3		to him3		came2			His disciples1	Pr
2	4	and1	he2		began3		to teach them, saying: "..." <sup>4</sup>		Q
3	5				blessed are1		<i>for theirs is the kingdom of heaven</i> <sup>3</sup>	the poor in spirit <sup>2</sup>	PrEx
4	6				blessed are1		<i>for they will be comforted</i> <sup>3</sup>	those who mourn <sup>2</sup>	PrEx
5	7				blessed are1		<i>they will inherit the earth</i> <sup>3</sup>	the meek <sup>2</sup>	PrEx
6	8				blessed are1		<i>for they will be filled</i> <sup>3</sup>	those who hunger and thirst for righteousness <sup>2</sup>	PrEx
7	9				blessed are1		<i>for they will be shown mercy</i> <sup>3</sup>	the merciful <sup>2</sup>	PrEx
8	10				blessed are1		<i>for they will see God</i> <sup>3</sup>	the pure in heart <sup>2</sup>	PrEx
9	11				blessed are1		<i>for they will be called the sons of God</i> <sup>3</sup>	the peacemakers <sup>2</sup>	PrEx
10	12				blessed are1		<i>for theirs is the kingdom of heaven</i> <sup>3</sup>	those who are persecuted ... <sup>2</sup>	PrEx
11	13		you2		blessed are1		when... <sup>3</sup>		Q
	13a			people1 against you3	insult, persecute and say <sup>2</sup>		falsely all kinds of evil <sup>4</sup> because of me <sup>5</sup>		Q
12	14				Rejoice and be glad <sup>1</sup>		because... <sup>2</sup> for... <sup>3</sup>		Q
	14a			your reward in heaven <sup>3</sup>	is <sup>2</sup>		great <sup>1</sup>		Q
	14b		they1	the prophets who were before you <sup>4</sup>	persecuted <sup>2</sup>		in the same way <sup>3</sup>		Q

*shown mercy.* <sup>8</sup>*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.* <sup>9</sup>*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God.* <sup>10</sup>*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* <sup>11</sup>*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all*

*kinds of evil against you because of me. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

(Kohlenberger 1997: 683)

The principal question of potentiality in interpretation can be best examined in clauses (5) to (13). In Version A, the passage was interpreted in the following way: in the basic distributional field *Blessed / are / the poor in spirit / for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (5), the whole clause is perspectived towards the subject (*the poor in spirit*) and thus the unit is rhematic, performing the dynamic-semantic function of a Phenomenon. The fact that these people (*the poor in spirit*) are *blessed* is context-independent, yet less dynamic than the Ph-element. Jesus actually introduces the Phenomena entering the communication for the first time. The very fact that such people are blessed can be viewed as something implied or even taken for granted.

Also from the perspective of the wider context of the Bible, the act of blessing itself is not entirely unknown. In Mt 5:1–12 Jesus is paraphrasing an Old Testament passage from Psalm 119 (Kohlenberger 1997: 526); it reads *Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, those who live according to the Law of the Lord. Blessed are those who stick to His testimonies, those who ask about his will with whole their hearts*. In the context of this quote, Christ apparently specifies who is blessed and why in the New Testament times. In this interpretation, the verbal expression (*are blessed*) constitutes the transition (Tr) only and may be considered to be merely a verb suggesting “existence or appearance on the scene with sufficient implicitness” (Firbas 1992: 88–9).

Within the same distributional field (5), another potential problem arises in the communicative unit of *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. The question is whether this unit presents just an additional piece of information or an important reason *for the poor in spirit* to be blessed. Analogously, the same approach can be applied in the analysis of all the following distributional fields, i.e. clauses (6) to (13). The people Jesus is talking about are introduced on the scene by means of saying that they are blessed. A reason for that (or, paradoxically, a future consequence of the fact that they are blessed) always follows – e.g. *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (5). At first sight it seems that the clauses implement the classical type of Presentation Scale; the rhematic sphere, however, is occupied – apart from the Ph-elements – by a set of additional Specifications. Apparently, it is a specific kind of Presentation Scale, the core of which lies in a double rheme.<sup>3</sup> Its existence and structure were first described in Adam (2003) within an FSP analysis of biblical discourse (in the study, such sentences are, in accord with Chamonikolasová’s later conception (2005), denoted as presentation sentences containing a double rheme), and elaborated systematically in Chamonikolasová and Adam (2005). Some of the above distributional fields display a considerable degree of potentiality, which creates difficulties in the interpretation of dynamic



semantic functions. The structure of sentences implementing this type of interpretative scale actually corresponds very closely to the Presentation Scale, differing only in the presence of the Specification, which is not a part of the pure Presentation Scale as defined by Firbas.

It should be noted that the Sp-elements (e.g., *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*) – presented in italics in the table – convey even more dynamic information than the Ph-elements (e.g., *the poor in spirit*) do. For that reason, they represent the RhPr, whereas the Ph-elements represent the Rh. Since no Quality is being ascribed to the subjects, the sentences have to be interpreted as implementations of the Presentation Scale, in which the context independent subjects perform the Ph-function. Since the sentences also contain adverbial clauses of reason, which are most often rhematic when occurring in final positions, the sentences have to be considered as implementations of the Extended Presentation Scale (PrEx) (Chamonikolasová and Adam 2005). In the table of analysis, the column containing Specifications should ideally be therefore placed only after the column of Ph-elements. The FSP picture of the clauses implementing an Extended Presentation Scale is the following:

Set – Pr – Ph – Sp

In the distributional fields (6) to (13), one can find a set of eight such analogical statements of this double-Rh pattern – e.g., *for they will be comforted* (6) or *for they will inherit the earth* (7). These clauses are therefore interpreted in the same way as clause (5).

To further support the interpretation offered by Version A, let me present the original text of the Beatitudes. The Greek original offers a clue to the interpretation – the linear arrangement of the Greek clause reflects the analysis presented by Version A. Old Greek had a more-or-less free word order and so an element found towards the end of a sentence is characterized by a higher degree of CD. An English literal translation of verses 3–4 will be also adduced (individual units in English are translated word for word below the Greek expressions):

<i>Μακάριοι</i>	<i>οἱ πτωχοί</i>	<i>τῷ πνεύματι</i>
<i>Blessed (are)</i>	<i>the poor</i>	<i>in spirit.</i>

<i>Ὅτι αὐτῶν</i>	<i>ἐστίν</i>	<i>ἡ</i>	<i>βασιλεία</i>	<i>τῶν οὐρανῶν.</i>
<i>Because of them</i>	<i>is</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>kingdom</i>	<i>of heaven.</i>

<i>Μακάριοι</i>	<i>οἱ</i>	<i>πενθούντες</i>
<i>Blessed (are)</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>(ones) mourning;</i>

<i>Ὅτι</i>	<i>αὐτοί</i>	<i>παρακληθήσονται.</i>
<i>because</i>	<i>they</i>	<i>shall be comforted.</i>

(Green 1996: 10)

To conclude Version A, it is important to point out that all of the above-mentioned arguments have their weak points; almost each step of interpretation may easily be attacked and disproved. As evidence of potential heterogeneity of the text, let me present another variant of interpretation of the same text – Version B – in the following table.

**Table 2** FSP analysis of Mt 5:1–12 (Version B)

Verse	Clause	TrPr (conj.)	ThPr (Set/B)	DTh (Set/B)	TrPr/Tr (Q/Pr)	RhPr (Q)	Rh/RhPr (Sp/FSp)	RhPr (Ph)	Scale
5:1	1		he3	Now1 When he saw the crowds2	went up4		on a mountainside5		Q
	2	and1	^			sat down 2			Q
	3		to him3		came2			His disciples1	Pr
2	4	and1	he2		began3		to teach them, saying: „...“4		Q
3	5			the poor in spirit2	blessed are1		for theirs is the kingdom of heaven3		Q
4	6			those who mourn2	blessed are1		for they will be comforted3		Q
5	7			the meek2	blessed are1		for they will inherit the earth3		Q
6	8			those who hunger and thirst for righteousness2	blessed are1		for they will be filled3		Q
7	9			the merciful2	blessed are1		for they will be shown mercy3		Q
8	10			the pure in heart2	blessed are1		for they will see God3		Q
9	11			the peacemakers2	blessed are1		for they will be called the sons of God3		Q
10	12			those who are persecuted because of righteousness2	blessed are1		for theirs is the kingdom of heaven3		Q
11	13		you2		blessed are1		when...3		Q
	13a			people1 against you3	insult, persecute and say2		falsely all kinds of evil4 because of me5		Q
12	14				Rejoice and be glad1		because...2 for...3		Q
	14a			your reward in heaven3	is2		great1		Q
	14b		they1	prophets who were before you4	persecuted2		in the same way3		Q

Based on the analysis presented by Version B, it has become clear that the interpretation offered by Version B is a pure opposition to that offered by Version A. Both interpretations are based on the principles of FSP. This does not mean that there are shortcomings in the theory of FSP; it rather seems that the potentiality in interpretation has to do with the character of the texts themselves and so the FSP approach is only applicable here to a limited degree. So far, there have not been enough examples to prove this conclusion or to reveal the real roots of the problem.

In Version B, the reason for the people to be blessed, expressed by adverbial clauses such as *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (5), is seen as the high point of the message; among others, there are the following elements: *for they will be comforted* (6), *for they will inherit the earth* (7) and *for they will be filled* (8). These adverbial clauses of reason are, in this version, considered to be rhematic. In other words, Version B is in harmony with Version A in this respect. The adverbial clauses then perform the dynamic semantic functions (DSFs) of Specifications.

The verbal elements, again in accordance with Version A, constitute the transitional layer and are ascribed the DSF of a Quality. The rest of the basic distributional fields (clauses 13a-14b) are analyzed analogously to Version A. The subjects (e.g., *the poor in spirit*), however, display different DSFs. All of them are Bearers of Quality. The subject elements are thematic and the clauses are perspectived away from them.

To throw some more light on the issue of potentiality in Matthew 5:1–12, research monitoring the “folk intonation” of Matthew 5:1–12 was carried out. The research was done among 24 subjects, each of which was given a Czech translation of the text containing the Beatitudes divided into individual distributional fields (always arranged as a section of text on one line). In each section, the respondents were to mark the word or a word group (actually a communicative unit) they would emphasize most when uttering or reading the text. The elements marked most times by the respondents are underlined; the notions marked less frequently (but more than once) are italicized. The exact statistical data resulting from the research are presented also in the table below the text itself.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Blessed are those who mourn, *for they will be comforted.*

Blessed are the meek, *for they will inherit the earth.*

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, *for they will be filled.*

Blessed are the merciful, *for they will be shown mercy.*

Blessed are the pure in heart, *for they will see God.*

Blessed are the peacemakers, *for they will be called the sons of God.*

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

(Kohlenberger 1986: 683)

**Table 3** “Folk” interpretation of Mt 5:1–12

Responses	Number of respondents	
Those reflecting Version A	18	75%
Those reflecting Version B	6	25%
Total	24	100%

The results presented in the table suggest that the respondents perceive the Ph-elements as crucial to the message of the text. Eighteen out of 24 (75 per cent) feel the sentences are perspective towards the grammatical subjects, e.g. the poor in spirit, whereas the communicative units such as *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* are regarded as additional information. In other words, the interpretation provided by most respondents is in harmony with Version A.

To sum up, it would be beneficial to recall that both of the two interpretations have been carried out according to FSP principles. The results obtained, however, vary to a large extent; sometimes the elements are even ascribed opposite dynamic-semantic functions. I find it necessary to note that it is not FSP theory as such that fails here; rather, as has been mentioned earlier, the root of the problem probably lies in the character of the text under examination.

## 5. Conclusions

### 5.1 Version A vs. Version B

By means of a conclusion, a few questions may be asked. Which of the two possible interpretations (A or B) is the appropriate one? Which of the two tables reflects the real distribution of CD over the units? Does the present discussion mean that neither of the two interpretative analyses follows the functional approach? Or, on the contrary, that both the suggested versions are appropriate? I am personally convinced that the question of which of the tables presents best the reality is not possible to solve in an unequivocal way.

Personally, I feel inclined to accept Version A, as it does show, in my opinion, the true picture of the dynamic structure of the message and the distribution of the degrees of CD, emphasizing the crucial notions. At the same time I am aware of apparent drawbacks in this interpretation, especially in the standard FSP methods. That is why I consider the FSP interpretation of Mt 5:1–12 potential in the true sense of the word.

I find it necessary to note that it is not FSP theory as such that fails here; the root of the problem probably lies in the character of the text under examination: its extremely fixed character, the role of tradition and the high degree of ritualization. Generally speaking, potentiality in FSP interpretation seems to appear more frequently in religious texts than in other types of texts, such as narratives or dialogues. Research has shown the following: the more a text is formally and

culturally fixed (ritualized in its use), the less it is analyzable by means of FSP methods and the more cases of potentiality it tends to have (see Adam 2003).

In the context of a discussion of the applicability of FSP principles, let me recall the phenomenon of so-called folk intonation; this concept has been described in connection with the way people read/utter ritualized religious poetic texts. It has been suggested that the crucial criterion for intonation is not the content of the passage or the message conveyed, but the deep-seated tradition of uttering the texts and prosodic features, such as rhythm. Both believers and non-believers seem to stress the elements that are stressed traditionally; the real functional picture of individual clauses is not taken into consideration at all. We may thus speak about a ritualized, fixed way of reciting the poetic texts. Such a text thus fulfills a sacred function and its linguistic content is secondary. A remarkable mechanism of communication is at work in poetic religious texts: the texts do not primarily fulfill a communicative function, but a ritual one; the theory of FSP is, nevertheless, designed primarily for the purpose of analyzing genuine communication.

## ***5.2 Potentiality***

It has become clear that potentiality does have a place in the system of language, including the theory of FSP. On the one hand, it does not violate rules or set principles, but on the other, it represents a natural tendency of language towards exceptions. Language cannot be mathematically measured (and if so, to a limited degree); it is not a fixed phenomenon. It is a living organism, a subject to changes. In connection to oscillation, to characterize the basic quality of language, Mathesius coined the term “flexible stability” (Mathesius 1982).

Whether one calls these exceptions to the rule “oscillation” or “potentiality”, it just proves the above characteristics of the system of language that is by no means homogeneous. This is, incidentally, one of the benefits brought by the functional approach to language as a kind of opposition to purely structural concepts. As a digression, let me add that it was the Prague School of Linguistics – represented by both Mathesius and Firbas – that succeeded in connecting both the principles.

To conclude, I will recall the words of Vilém Mathesius, which will serve as a decent epilogue in terms of the topic under discussion – potentiality. In his article titled ‘*Krásy jazyka*’ [The Beauty of Language], in which he was outlining three basic qualities that must be fulfilled for language in the functional sense, Mathesius formulates the first quality as follows: “Language must be rich and formative enough to provide sufficient discretion to every individual’s purposes” (Mathesius 1945: 118; translated into English by M.A.).

## Notes

- 1 Please note that the *superscripts* mark *verse* numbers in the texts of the Bible. In the tables in the analyses, the numbers attached to individual communicative units mark the real sequence of the basic communicative units, i.e. the actual linear arrangement of the clauses.
- 2 TrPr=transition proper; conj=conjunction; ThPr=theme proper; Set=setting; B=bearer of quality; DTh=diatheme; Tr=transition; Q=quality; Pr=presentation; RhPr=rheme proper; Rh=rheme; Sp=specification; FSp=further specification; Ph=phenomenon; Scale: Q=quality Scale; Pr=Presentation Scale.
- 3 It may be argued that a distributional field containing both Ph- and Sp-elements implements the Combined Scale (see Firbas 1992: 67). The Combined Scale would, however, include an elliptical Presentation element that would be directly specified by a Quality or Specification element. In the case of a double rheme within the Presentation Scale (i.e., the Extended Presentation Scale), both the rhematic notions (Ph and Sp) are present.

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