

Svoboda, Aleš

## Introduction

In: Svoboda, Aleš. *Diatheme : a study in thematic elements, their contextual ties, thematic progressions and scene progressions based on a text from Aelfric*. Vyd. 1. V Brně: Univerzita J.E. Purkyně, 1981, pp. 1-7

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/121668>

Access Date: 21. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The present study is meant to be a contribution to the theory of functional sentence perspective (FSP) based on a detailed and comparatively extensive analysis of concrete language material. In order to make the analysis as consistent as possible, we have deliberately chosen only two theoretical sources, which are well in accordance with each other: Firbas' theory of FSP (perfectly summed up in Firbas 1979) and Daneš' conception of thematic progression (as presented in Daneš 1974). This is not to say that when evaluating partial results and drawing conclusions, we did not take full advantage of works by other scholars, especially those adhering to the Linguistic School of Prague (Mathesius, Trnka, Vachek, Poldauf, Nosek, Beneš, Hausenblas and others). Their influence, however, can mainly be felt in the field of method, and for this reason we adduce them in the Bibliography, but do not refer to them in the course of the analysis.

For a detailed treatment of the phenomena of FSP, we refer the reader to the above two sources and references therein. In the following subsections, we shall briefly introduce only such concepts as are of major importance in the course of the subsequent analysis.

## 1.1 COMMUNICATIVE DYNAMISM AND THE MEANS OF FSP

The basic idea of the theory of FSP is that the separate elements of the sentence (clause) do not contribute to the development of discourse in the same way. Some are communicatively more important than others: they — as it were — push the communication forward with greater force and may be regarded as communicatively more dynamic. Hence the degree of com-

municative dynamism (CD) is the relative extent to which the sentence element contributes to the further development of the communication (cf. Firbas 1971, 1979.31). The degree of CD of an element (always relative to the degrees of CD of other elements of the same sentence) is determined by the result of the interplay of three factors, or — as they are frequently called — three means of FSP: linearity, semantics and context. Generally speaking, these three means of FSP can be hierarchically ordered: semantics is superior to linearity, and context is superior to both linearity and semantics.

### 1.1.1 LINEARITY

At the level of the sentence, the study of linearity can be practically identified with the study of word order. In Indo-European languages, there is a tendency to put the most dynamic sentence element (the element conveying the highest degree of CD) at or towards the end of the sentence. In some languages (e.g., Czech), the tendency is so strong that it becomes the leading word-order principle (cf. Mathesius 1941). In such languages, the word order (in one sentence) with the most dynamic element at the end is considered to be normal, neutral, unmarked, while the word order with the most dynamic element at the beginning is regarded as special, emotionally or otherwise “coloured”, marked. In comparison with Czech, the above tendency in English is much less pronounced and the word order with the most dynamic element at the beginning cannot be regarded as marked. Firbas (1964) has convincingly shown that it is the deviation from the order required by the grammatical principle that renders the English word order marked (cf. also 1979.49).

### 1.1.2 SEMANTICS

The degree of CD conveyed by a sentence element may depend on its semantic content taken alone or taken in relation to the semantic contents of other sentence elements. Thus, owing to its semantic content, the temporal and modal exponent of the finite verb (the formal signal of temporal and modal indication) conveys a medial degree of CD irrespective of its word-order position within the sentence unless context (as a superior means of FSP) determines its degree of CD otherwise. (See Firbas 1965.) At a high level of abstraction, the semantic contents of the separate sentence elements can be arranged according to the (relative) degree of CD they convey if context does not act against this. Reflecting the gradual rise in CD, there are two — what we shall call — Firbasian semantic scales (cf. Firbas 1979.50), which can eventually be fused into one (as indicated by the graphical arrangement below):

A-scale

Q-scale

SCENE (settings)



APPEARANCE/EXISTENCE



PHENOMENON  
appearing/existing on  
the scene (and possible  
prospective quality  
bearer)

QUALITY BEARER



QUALITY  
(permanent/transient)



SPECIFICATION



FURTHER SPECIFICATION(S)

### 1.1.3 CONTEXT

We can distinguish three basic kinds of context (see Firbas 1979.31):

- (i) experiential (the context of general experience)
- (ii) situational (the ad-hoc context of immediate experience)
- (iii) verbal (the ad-hoc verbal context preceding the sentence).

As to the relevance for determining the degrees of CD of sentence elements, (ii) is superior to (i), and (iii) is superior to both (ii) and (i). In addition to that, the immediate communicative concern (purpose) of the speaker (writer) may either "confirm" or "change" the contextual conditioning at the very moment of utterance. The (resulting) contextual conditioning at the very moment of utterance is called the narrow scene (see Firbas 1979.32, 1966.246). (The phenomenon of narrow scene will be touched upon in 2.4.1.3 and dealt with in detail in 2.4.6.1.) The general contextual conditioning given by the three kinds of context creates what may be called the broad scene (Firbas' term). (The concept of broad scene is the main topic of subsection 2.4.6.2.)

According to contextual conditioning, a sentence can function (cf. Firbas 1979.45)

- (i) at the basic instance level if all its elements are context independent (the degrees of CD are determined solely by semantics and linearity)
- (ii) at one of the ordinary instance levels if one or more elements are context dependent (all the three means of FSP are in play)
- (iii) at the second instance level if all the elements are context dependent but one, which appears in heavy ad-hoc contrast as momentary context independent (semantics and linearity are out of play).

In our contextual analysis (2.4), the vast majority of sentences function at the ordinary instance levels.

## 1.2 COMMUNICATIVE UNITS

The sentence (clause) is a communicative (or distributional) field, in which the grammatico-semantic structure provides conditions for various degrees of CD to be distributed over the sentence elements. Any sentence element (from the zero morpheme to the whole clause) may be regarded as a conveyer of CD. The conveyers of CD appearing at the same hierarchic level are called communicative units (see Svoboda 1968). At the level of the clause, the communicative units mostly coincide with the syntactic units (subject, object, adverbial, complement (no matter whether expressed by one morpheme or the whole subordinate clause)) except for the predicative verb, which splits into two communicative units: one is expressed by the notional content of the finite verb and the other by its temporal and modal exponent(s) (see Firbas 1961). Statistically, the communicative unit expressed by the temporal and modal exponent(s) of the finite verb is the most stable of all the units, as it conveys the medial degree of CD in relation to the other units of the same clause (for details see Firbas 1968). This unit is called transition proper and represents a dividing line between units with a lower degree of CD (thematic units) and units with the same or a higher degree of CD (non-thematic units). Instead of speaking about thematic communicative units and non-thematic communicative units, we shall — for the sake of brevity — use the less cumbersome terms thematic and non-thematic elements.

## 1.2.1 NON-THEMATIC ELEMENTS

Transition proper ( $Tr_p$ ) is the least dynamic (conveying the lowest degree of CD) of all the non-thematic elements (cf. Firbas 1965). More dynamic than transition proper is transition (non-proper) ( $Tr$ ), frequently expressed by the notional part of the verb (cf. Firbas 1959a, b, 1961, 1968). Transition proper and transition constitute the transitional sphere of the communicative field (clause). Elements conveying a higher degree of CD than transition are called rhemes ( $R$ ), and constitute the rhematic sphere of the clause. The most dynamic element within the clause is rheme proper ( $R_p$ ). (See Firbas esp. 1959, 1966, 1979.) In contradistinction to transitions proper and transitions, rhemes and rhemes proper are expressed by the most varied syntactic (and also semantic) units. Although some syntactic elements display a tendency to perform the function of rheme or rheme proper more often than others, there is no permanent connection between certain syntactic elements and rhemes or rhemes proper.

## 1.2.2 THEMATIC ELEMENTS

Elements conveying a lower degree of CD than transition proper are called themes ( $T$ ) and constitute the thematic sphere of the clause. (See Firbas 1964b, 1966.) The least dynamic element of the thematic sphere is theme proper ( $T_p$ ). From the viewpoint of the degrees of CD, theme proper is the only thematic element that has been given a special name.

### 1.2.2.1 Diatheme

As early as 1939, Mathesius (1939, 1947.238—9) wrote about a thematic element called the centre of the theme, by which he meant a thematic element that appeared — according to the present terminology — to be more dynamic than any other element of the thematic sphere. We shall call this element diatheme.

Diatheme is the most dynamic element of the thematic sphere. The aim of the present study is to examine diatheme from the grammatical, the semantic, and the contextual points of view. The examination includes the relations of diathemes to other thematic and non-thematic elements and is meant to become part of a more extensive study of the thematic elements in English in the course of their historical development. This is also the reason why we analyze an Old English text first and why the analysis exceeds the scope of diatheme.

### **1.2.2.2 Diatheme and theme proper**

If diatheme is defined as the most dynamic and theme proper as the least dynamic element of the thematic sphere of the clause, clauses containing only one thematic element should have both diatheme and theme proper fused into one. In theory, it is tempting to regard the function of diatheme and that of theme proper (in such cases, of course) as neutralized. In practice, however, even a sort of preliminary analysis of clauses containing two or more thematic elements clearly shows that the grammatical, semantic and contextual features of diathemes considerably differ from those displayed by themes proper. A similar analysis of clauses containing only one thematic element shows that this element rather distinctly displays either the features of diathemes or those of themes proper found in clauses with more thematic elements. Hence in clauses with only one thematic element, we label this element either as diatheme or as theme proper according to what features it tends to display.

## **1.3 THEMATIC PROGRESSION**

What is meant by thematic progression is "the choice and ordering of utterance themes, their mutual concatenation and hierarchy, 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). The idea of thematic progression is made the key concept of our contextual analysis, and is also applied to the narrow and the broad scene (scenic progression) and to the Firbasian scales.

### **1.3.1 HYPERTHEME**

Hypertheme is an element which remains within the thematic sphere of two or more clauses without its extralingual reference (semantic content) being changed. In other words, hypertheme consists of two or more thematic elements that display contextual ties. These elements create contextual strings which will be called hyperthematic strings. The members of one hyperthematic string may perform different thematic roles (diatheme, theme proper) within their respective clauses and may be expressed by different formal means (noun, pronoun, etc.). Being always contextually tied, ellipted themes (i.e., thematic elements not expressed explicitly, but signalled by the structure of the clause) are always members of hyperthematic strings.

The above hypertheme slightly deviates from Daneš' term hypertheme, which is based on the idea that "not only particular utterances but also the sections of text, as paragraphs, etc., and the whole text have 'themes' of their own ('hyperthemes'), . . ." (Daneš 1974.109). The deviation only rests in two points, necessitated by the rather strict requirements of the statistical analysis: (i) two successive clauses are already considered to be a section of text, (ii) only expressed and ellipted elements (i.e. the members of the grammatico-semantic structure of the clause) are taken into account. As is to be shown in 2.4.6.2, the analysis of these "overt" hyperthemes has thrown more light on the "covert" hyperthemes, stretching over the paragraph (and standing probably closer to Daneš' original conception).



