

Adam, Martin

## Poetic religious text and FSP

*Brno studies in English*. 2003, vol. 29, iss. 1, pp. [43]-49

ISBN 80-210-3346-0

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104374>

Access Date: 06. 12. 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.

MARTIN ADAM

## POETIC RELIGIOUS TEXT AND FSP

### I Introduction

The research in the field of the theory of functional sentence perspective has dealt predominantly with narrative and dialogic texts so far (e.g. Firbas 1992 and 1995). In the present paper, I would like to throw some light on the poetic text and the function of the thematic and the rhematic layers established in this text type. I also propose to examine the issue of applicability of FSP principles to the analysis of poetic texts.

The paper is based on the research carried out for the purpose of my Ph.D. dissertation and so draws on the results derived from the FSP analyses of religious texts. Namely, a short passage from the Gospel according to St. Matthew—The ‘Lord’s Prayer’—will be discussed in this article. (The edition used is Kohlenberger 1997: 8.)

### II General Characteristics

First it will be necessary to provide an explanation of what I mean by a *poetic text*. During the research it became apparent that within the range of texts found in the Old and the New Testaments (narratives and dialogues) there is still another kind of writing; the passages show different characteristics not only from the stylistic point of view but also from the formal one (see also Douglas 1982: 401). To cover this area and to complete thus the whole scale of text varieties, I decided to include this category, though in some cases the term *poetic* might seem to general.

To be more specific, this category—comprising prayers, prophecies, songs, doxologies, hymns or psalms—differs from other genres in several ways. The first and most apparent difference concerns the graphic outlook: the texts are usually indented from sides, similarly to poems. Another feature that should be taken into consideration is its establishment and position within the whole context of Bible, and, in a broader sense, in the context of Christian rites and liturgi-

cal activities. The first crucial feature is connected with the use of the texts in practice: they are usually rather fixed, definitely to a larger extent as compared with other genres. Based on strong tradition, the texts represent a well-established, frequently cited source of both liturgical and personal use of believers. The powerful oral tradition is sometimes so powerful that the texts are, without a special need to be memorized on purpose, literally recited by some people. In consequence, there is a relatively strong tendency to recite the texts without much awareness of what is being said. Apart from that, the poetic passages, especially chanted prayers or doxologies, are uttered collectively, which makes the issue even more topical (this fact asserts itself most in the field of prosodic features, such as intonation). What has just been said is to be examined from the point of view of functional syntax later in the paper.

It is necessary to note that I owe the idea of analyzing the 'Lord's Prayer' in regards to the FSP principles to Aleš Svoboda, who once shared his suggestions concerning this issue with me.

### III Text Analysis

The text of the 'Lord's Prayer' (Matthew 6:9–13) is by far the most popular text from the Bible. It is used literally every day by millions of people all around the world, it is recited, chanted, whispered or even sung. It is known to both Christians and non-Christians. In it, Jesus explains to the crowds and his followers what it means to pray and what an appropriate prayer should look like (Douglas 1982: 629–630).

'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,  
 your kingdom come,  
 your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
 Give us today our daily bread.  
 Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.  
 For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.  
 Amen.'

During the analysis of the passage an interesting problem arises: in some of the verses it is not easy (or even possible) to interpret the right distribution of the degrees of communicative dynamism over individual units. Only some of them are, in fact, analyzable in an unequivocal way. For this reason, I decided to present two possible interpretations and also charts of the FSP analysis in two versions. A more detailed treatment of the issue will be provided below the charts.

Table 1 Matthew 6:9-13 VERSION A

Verse	Clause	TrPr (conj)	ThPr (Set/B)	DTh (Set/B)	TrPr/Tr (Q/Pr)	RhPr (Q)	Rh/RhPr (Sp/FSp)	RhPr (Ph)	Scale
6:9	1			Our father in heaven	bc	hallowed		your name	Pr
10	2							your kingdom	Pr
	3		on earth as it is in heaven		bc	done		your will	Pr
11	4			us	give		our daily bread		Q
12	5		us	our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors		forgive			Q
	6	And	us		lead		not into temptation		Q
13	7	but	us		deliver		from the evil one		Q
	8	for		the kingdom and the power and the glory	is		yours forever		Q

Table 2 Matthew 6:9-13 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
6:9	1			Our father in heaven	bc	hallowed		your name	Q
10	2			your kingdom				your will	Q
	3			your will	bc	done	on earth as it is in heaven		Q
11	4			us	give		our daily bread		Q
12	5		us	as we also have forgiven our debtors		forgive	our debts		Q
	6	And	us		lead		not into temptation		Q
13	7	but	us		deliver		from the evil one		Q
	8	for		the kingdom and the power and the glory	is		yours forever		Q

Let me have a closer look at the analysis offered by the charts, comparing Version A (Table 1) and Version B (Table 2). As early as the first distributional unit is the place where potentiality comes in for the first time: the question is whether the clause ‘Our father in heaven, your name be hallowed’ (1) is perspectived towards or away from the subject (‘your name’). Seen strictly from the point of view of semantics and logic of the clause, it is apparent that something new is said about the subject and, thus, the unit of ‘your name’ must be thematic, performing the dynamic-semantic function of a Bearer of Quality; this interpretation is reflected in Version B. However, there is something even more important that has to be taken into account: the functional pressure of the thematic and the rhematic layers respectively. Looking at the individual dynamic-semantic tracks, one can come to the following conclusions:

- All the verbs in clauses (1) to (8) can be regarded as transitional (at least to a certain extent, perhaps with the exception of ‘be hallowed’ and ‘deliver’), with a reduced or even zero notional component.<sup>1</sup>
- The notions connected with God are of a crucial importance to the message of the text under discussion; there is a whole string of these: ‘your name’ → ‘your kingdom’ → ‘your will’ → ‘yours is the kingdom’. This dynamic-semantic track culminates, as it were, in clause (8)—‘yours / is / the kingdom and the power and the glory / forever’. In this clause, the possessive pronoun ‘yours’ is clearly rhematic, highlighting the sovereignty of God. We can thus conclude that, within the whole passage, the concept of *godliness* plays a substantial role. And, as a result, all the other units containing semantic elements of the same kind should be rhematic, in this case performing Ph-function. The notions of ‘your name’, ‘your kingdom’ and ‘your will’ are presented here as ultimate concepts, the sovereignty of which does not depend on the process they are involved in (‘be hallowed’, ‘come’ and ‘be done’).
- The same can be said about the particular places where the process should be realized (the scene): e.g. in (3) ‘on earth as it is in heaven’ is not rhematic and performs the dynamic-semantic function of a Setting (in the prayer the believer is not commanding God where his will should be done, but referring to what is obvious).
- Taking into consideration one more of the main principles of FSP—linear modification—we find out that the word order of clause (8) rather corroborates Version A; the idea of possession is emphasized (‘...for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory / for ever.’).

All that has been noted in the four remarks is reflected in Version A of the chart. Nevertheless, more or less similar comments may be made concerning the interpretation offered by Version B. In it, the very process is highlighted, and so the

verbs are not transitional and are found in the rhematic sphere (being Sp- or Q-elements).

Let me point out that Version B does not represent a 'less acceptable' variant; on the contrary, it seems even more logical in a way. The person who is reading or uttering the 'Lord's Prayer' may be thinking in the following way: 'It is clear that God has his name, and I want it to be hallowed. I know his kingdom exists, and I want it to come...' and so forth. In consequence, the processual verbs are emphasized. Version B reflects the interpretation where context-dependent elements of 'your name' etc. are ascribed the dynamic-semantic function of a Quality or a Specification in the rhematic track.

At this point, naturally enough, a very important aspect of FSP analysis should come in: *prosody*. The prosodic features of a text represent the fourth principle governing the realm of FSP. While the first ones—immediately relevant context, semantic content and linear modification—assert themselves in all kinds of verbal communication, prosody plays its role, of course, only in spoken language. The research done in the scope of my dissertation deals, however, exclusively with written communication. Speaking of potentiality within FSP interpretation it seems to me inevitable, however, to at least touch this area of linguistics.

I am not going to analyze the 'Lord's Prayer' from the point of view of prosody now in detail; nevertheless there is an area falling into the category of prosodic features that might clarify the question of potentiality: stress and intonation. Having gone through my previous experience and observing many people's performances on several occasions, I found out that the way believers utter the 'Lord's Prayer' is universal, with almost no exception. During my research, I have seldom been present at someone saying (or reading) this particular piece of text in a manner different from the following (the stressed units are underlined):

'Our father in heaven,  
 your name be hallowed,  
 your kingdom come,  
 your will be done in heaven...'

In other words, the subject elements are stressed and thus emphasized. All the speakers seem to perceive those notions are central to the message and so all the basic distributional fields are perspectived towards them. At the same time it is important to be aware of the fact that such perspective need not coincide with real distribution of the degrees of communicative dynamism; we should rather speak of a "folk functional perspective". As mentioned above, the pressure deriving from a strong oral tradition brings about a relatively fixed way of reading the text.

I have also carried out a survey on how the 'Lord's Prayer' is treated in the Czech context, whether read out loud or chanted. And again, there was not a single case that would violate the above-mentioned tendency (i.e. the rhematicity of

the subject-elements). On the top of that, in the Czech translation the factor of linear modification—which is the most powerful tool within the linguistic analysis of communication in the Czech language—asserts itself fully: the units containing a characteristic aspect of God and followed by the possessive pronoun stand invariably at the very end of the clauses. It is then obvious that these elements are rhematic. This is, of course, only corroborated by the intonation factor, especially sentence stress (the emphasized units are underlined):

‘Otče náš, jenž jsi v nebesích,  
posvět’ se jméno tvé,  
přijď’ království tvé,  
bud’ vůle tvá jako v nebi tak i na zemi...’ (*Bible* 1989: 15–16)

To sum up this section it is possible to say that the prosodic features “tip the scales” unequivocally towards the FSP interpretation shown in Version A. However, considering the analysis irrespective of prosody, we come to the conclusion that Version B is—from the point of view of FSP and logic—acceptable in the same way as Version A. Version B, apart from being more logical (in the sense of commonly shared knowledge), manifests more consistency in applying the FSP principles, especially in the clauses where it is necessary to decide whether the clause is perspectived towards or away from the subject. In Version A this essential principle (used by Firbas as a starting point in FSP interpretation of a distributional field!; Firbas 1987) is violated. It has already been noted that in clauses (1), (2) and (3) something new (and hence context-independent) is said about the subject, and so the whole clause is perspectived away from it. The subject should be then thematic and perform the dynamic-semantic function of a Bearer of Quality; see Version B (Table 2).

#### IV Conclusions

By means of a conclusion, let me first ask a few questions. Which of the two possible interpretations (A or B) is the correct one? Which of the two charts reflects the real distribution of communicative dynamism 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 neither of the statements is true; nevertheless, the question which of the charts presents best the reality is not possible to solve in an unequivocal way.

I find it necessary to note that it is not the 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: its extremely fixed character, role of tradition, high degree of ritualization, and also—in comparison with narratives—density in expression.

Personally, I feel inclined to accept rather Version A, as it does show, in my opinion, the true picture of the dynamic structure of the message, the distribution of the degrees of CD and emphasizes the crucial notions. At the same time I am aware of apparent drawbacks of this interpretation, especially in the standard FSP methods. That is why I am leaving the question open to further discussion.

### Note

- <sup>1</sup> As Firbas and others have noted several times (see for example Firbas 1961), the English verb has a tendency towards transitivity, irrespective of other FSP functions they may perform, serving as TrPr. They provide a link between the subject and the predicate, between the language event and the extralinguistic reality, and also a link between the thematic and the non-thematic elements. On the top of that, in the theory of FSP the verb consists of two principal parts: *categorical exponent* (denoting grammatical categories of person, number, tense etc.), and *notional component* (semantic content). For further details see e.g. Firbas 1992: 88.

### Works Cited

- Bible. Písmo svaté Starého a Nového zákona.* (1989) Praha: Ekumenická rada církví.
- Douglas, J. D. (1982). *New Bible Dictionary*. Leicester: InterVarsity Fellowship.
- Firbas, J. (1961). 'On the communicative value of the English verb'. *Brno Studies in English* 3: 79–104.
- Firbas, J. (1987). 'On two starting points of communication'. In Steele and Threadgold (eds), vol. I, 23–46.
- Firbas, J. (1992). *Functional Sentence Perspective in Written and Spoken Communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Firbas, J. (1995). 'On the thematic and the rhematic layers of a text'. *Organization in Discourse: Proceedings from the Turku Conference, Anglicana Turkuensia* 14. Warwik, Tauskanen and Hiltunen (eds) 1995: 59–72.
- Kohlenberger, J. R., ed. (1997). *The Contemporary Parallel New Testament*. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP.



