The article presents the results of a short parallel analysis of information structure of a stretch of an English folk tale. The analysis, carried out within the framework of functional sentence perspective (FSP), was designed in order to verify a claim made about the rhematic track (layer) of the stretch by Jan Firbas in a paper published in 1981, and was oriented towards finding a degree of annotator agreement in places of FSP potentiality. The results seem to confirm Firbas’s claim that a reader’s awareness of the phenomenon of semantic homogeneity may contribute to a more accurate reading of the message of the text.

The present article is a small-scale case study designed within the framework of the theory of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP). I will attempt to present below the results of a parallel annotation of functional perspective of the message in a text. The inspiration for this study came from two interesting articles on FSP written by Jan Firbas (1981, 1999a) and from recent trends to verify the results of text translation or the results of algorithmic annotation of language corpus by employing parallel translations of the same text or parallel annotation of a corpus sample carried out by human annotators. The common denominator between the two articles by Firbas and the present case study is the phenomenon of potentiality, which may sometimes surface during the process of determining the functional perspective of a sentence (clause).

In very general terms, the phenomenon of potentiality in FSP can be described as follows: “An equivocal outcome of the interplay of the FSP factors creates the phenomenon of potentiality and opens the door to two or more potential interpretations.” Firbas (1999a, 9). In his 1992 monograph, Firbas provides and comments on a number of examples of potentiality in FSP. While a great many of these are due to the ambiguous signalling of context dependence (cf. esp. Firbas 1992, 31 ff.), others can only be identified by paying careful attention, for instance, to the stylistic effect produced by the text, especially in texts of fiction. A stylistic effect of a particular interest for the present case study is the so-called semantic homogeneity in FSP.

As regards the former type of potentiality, i.e. the one that is rooted in insufficient or ambiguous signalling of context dependence, Firbas (1999a) describes it extensively using a well-known underground notice

**DOGS MUST BE CARRIED ON THE ESCALATOR**

In the case of this notice, the basis for potentiality stems from different interpretations of the ordinary (predictable) and the actual (non-ordinary) contextual conditions present at the moment of decoding the message conveyed by the notice. Without extending the discussion about the FSP potentiality of this notice further, it may be valuable to reiterate Firbas’s explanation of, on the one hand, the ordinary perspectivisation [OP] of this notice, and, on the other, the non-ordinary perspectivisation [NP] which generates the pun effect:

[OP] “… the notice, appealing to the public using the escalator, has general validity. The context-dependent adverbial on the escalator serves as a Setting. Neither dog nor carried conveys information that is retrievable from the immediately relevant context. The context-independent carried is not a verb that
expresses appearance or existence explicitly or with sufficient implicitness. ... In regard to the further development of the communication it says something about the dogs. In consequence, *Dogs* performs the B-function and the notice is perspectived to *carried.*” (Firbas 1999a, 13)

[NP] “The interpretation offered by the cartoon is a different one. Its comment runs: ‘Getting caught on the escalator without a dog’. It reflects the man’s interpretation who finds himself on the escalator without a dog. ... He is worried by the fact that while each of the other users of the escalator carries a dog, he carries none.[]The presence or absence of a dog or dogs on the escalator plays a decisive role in his interpretation. ... Under these circumstances, the verb, carry, which — statically speaking — does not convey appearance or existence on the scene — has come to perform the Pr-function in the dynamics of the communication. ... the notion of ‘appearance or existence on the scene’, in fact, tips the scales in favour of the subject, *Dogs.* Perspectiving the sentence structure *Dogs must be carried on the escalator to Dogs ...*” (Firbas 1999a, 13-14)

In order to illustrate the latter type, i.e. potentiality involving cases of semantic homogeneity, we may conveniently turn our attention to Firbas’s monograph on the FSP theory at a number of places, but an ample example of it can be found in his analysis of a short passage from the introductory chapter of Katherine Mansfield’s story ‘At the bay’. The passage runs as follows:

*The breeze of morning lifted in the bush and the smell of leaves and wet black earth mingled with the sharp smell of the sea. Myriads of birds were singing. A goldfinch flew over the shepherd’s head.*

and the key point is that “the subject *the smell of leaves and wet black earth... Together with the other three subjects, ... forms a rhematic layer stating what features appeared on the morning bay scene.*” Firbas (1992, 110, emphasized by M.D.). A semantically homogeneous string of features appearing on the scene can be schematically represented as the following chain (or thread) of informationally most salient elements of this passage:

```
the breeze of morning
↓
the smell of leaves and wet black earth
↓
myriads of birds
↓
a goldfinch
```

However, a potentially different functional assessment of the verb *mingled* may effectively alter this chain in such a way that its homogeneity will be interrupted by an element which no longer “appears” on the scene, but rather presents a quality (and specification) being ascribed to the subject *the smell of leaves and wet black earth*. Thus, the following items would represent the most salient elements of this passage:

```
the breeze of morning

mingled with the sharp smell of the sea

myriads of birds

↓
a goldfinch
```

Firbas explains this re-evaluation of the functional perspective in the following way:

“In the second sentence, *the sharp smell of the sea* is context-independent and interpretable as a specification. If this interpretation is chosen, the notional component of mingled is
assigned the Q-function and perspectives the communication away from the information conveyed by the subject. In this case, the most important piece of information presented is not the emergence of the smell of the leaves and wet black earth, but the merger of this smell (coming from the bush) with the sharp smell of the sea.” (Firbas 1992, 110)

It is arguable whether the resultant sequence of these rhematic units forms a semantically homogenous track.

A similar case of potentiality in FSP was brought up by Jan Firbas in an article written in 1981, in which he claims that an FSP analysis of a short stretch of a folk tale called Dick Whittington and His Cat may potentially yield two different perspectives in clauses numbered 3a/b and 4a/b showed below in a very rough FSP annotation:[8]

In the reign of the famous king Edward III, there was a little boy called Dick Whittington, whose father and mother died when he was very young. As poor Dick was not old enough to work, he was very badly off; he got but little for his dinner, and sometimes nothing for his breakfast; for the people who lived in the village were very poor indeed, and could not spare him much more than the parings of potatoes, and now and then a hard crust of bread.

1. [In the reign of the famous king Edward III]T, [there]T [was]R, [a little boy called Dick Whittington, whose father and mother died when he was very young]R.
2. [As poor Dick was not old enough to work]T, [he]T [was]R, [very badly off];
   b. and [sometimes]T [nothing]R [for his breakfast]R;
5. for [the people who lived in the village]R, [were]R, [very poor indeed]R,
7. and [now and then]T, [a hard crust of bread]R.

In both of the clauses, either the final or the penultimate element can potentially be interpreted as the most salient unit, i.e. the rheme (focus) of the message. The final position of the contextually independent adverbials for his dinner and for his breakfast invites the b versions of the annotation, in which these communicative units function as rhematic elements, i.e. the foci of the respective clauses. However, Jan Firbas was in favour of the a perspectives and provided the following explanation on why he would prefer them:

"Are we to interpret for his dinner of 4 [3, corrected by M.D.] and for his breakfast of 5 [4, corrected by M.D.] as settings or specifications? ... By throwing little and nothing into relief, we bring out a semantically homogeneous stretch of rhematic layer constituted by the notion of Dick's helplessness as a child..." (Firbas 1981, 64-65)[9]

According to Firbas, then, of the following two possible realizations of the rhematic track, it is the latter one that “...should not escape the notice of the careful reader.” (Firbas 1981, 65):

**FSP Interpretation Disregarding Semantic Homogeneity**

a little boy called Dick Whittington, whose father and mother died when he was very young

↓

very badly off

for his dinner
In order to verify this, I asked a group of PhD students of English linguistics to analyse the very same extract from the point of view of FSP again after, of course, the students were made familiar with the FSP theory and FSP analysis. The results of their analyses of this extract can be summed up as follows.

The average agreement in the annotation of the functional status of the individual communicative units in the clauses of this extract reached 87 per cent. In only the first clause there was a perfect agreement with the analysis provided by Firbas. The differences in the six remaining clauses were of varying nature, which I will briefly state below, but the main point in question, i.e. the existence of FSP potentiality in clauses 3 and 4 was - it appears - confirmed in the parallel analysis: Five student annotators out of nine in total came up with a solution that is identical with the one proposed by Jan Firbas (the JF row in the figure below), i.e.

\[
\text{[he]}^\text{T} \ [\text{got}]^\text{T} \ [\text{but little}]^\text{R} \ [\text{for his dinner}]^\text{T}
\]
\[
\text{and [sometimes]}^\text{T} \ [\text{nothing}]^\text{R} \ [\text{for his breakfast}]^\text{T}
\]

Two annotators (rows A5 and A6) presented the \(b\) versions,

\[
\text{[he]}^\text{T} \ [\text{got}]^\text{T} \ [\text{but little}]^\text{R} \ [\text{for his dinner}]^\text{R}
\]
\[
\text{and [sometimes]}^\text{T} \ [\text{nothing}]^\text{R} \ [\text{for his breakfast}]^\text{R}
\]

and finally, two annotators (rows A1 and A9) fused \text{but little} with \text{for his dinner} (and similarly \text{nothing} with \text{for his breakfast}) into a single extensive rhematic unit:

\[
\text{[he]}^\text{T} \ [\text{got}]^\text{T} \ [\text{but little for his dinner}]^\text{R}
\]
\[
\text{and [sometimes]}^\text{T} \ [\text{nothing for his breakfast}]^\text{R}
\]

The degree of annotator agreement for communicative fields 3 and 4 is displayed by the following two figures:

FSP Readings of the Communicative Field No 3

FSP Readings of the Communicative Field No 4
As for the rest of the clauses, in clause number 2, the initially positioned subordinate clause was left unrecognised as a separate functional (thematic) unit by the majority of the annotators (7 out of 9). In clause 5, there was almost 100 per cent agreement with Firbas's analysis except for one annotator who placed the intensifier indeed outside the adjectival phrasal frame and assigned it a separate communicative function in the clause. In clause 6, the analysis of five annotators agreed with the solution given by Firbas. Three annotators nevertheless failed to register that him is a contextually dependent communicative unit in this clause and assigned it a rhematic value, and one annotator assigned thematic function to could not spare. The agreement with Firbas's analysis would be perfect in the case of the last, seventh clause but for one annotator who didn't (probably forgot to) tag the communicative units now and then and a hard crust of bread with any type of FSP function.

Conclusion

The present article presents the results of what is believed to be one of the first attempts to carry out a parallel FSP analysis, and to verify in this manner the existence of a potentially ambiguous spot in a message of short stretch of text, specifically, in the opening paragraph of a folk tale called Dick Whittington and His Cat. The communicatively ambiguous spot was first identified by Jan Firbas in his very fine FSP analysis mainly due to the attention he paid also to the stylistic aspect of the message. The parallel FSP analysis appears to have verified the legitimacy of Firbas's solution to this case of FSP potentiality. The results of the parallel analysis also indicate that general inter-annotator agreement in FSP analysis may reach 87 per cent. However, further research will be necessary in this direction since the number of communicative fields subjected to the analysis in the present case study is far from sufficient. Finally, and more importantly, the results of the analysis further show that it will be absolutely essential to develop an FSP tagging guide or manual in order to improve the consistency of any form of extended FSP analysis in the future.

Notes


[4] In research on FSP, the investigation of this phenomenon has had a relatively long history. The first account of this issue - sometimes also referred to as the phenomenon of multifunctionality - is to be found in Firbas (1957), reprinted in English as Firbas (1966), and appearing most recently as Firbas (2010, 281-298). Cf. also Adam (2008) for a contemporary contribution to the topic.


[7] The potentiality present in the interpretation of the notice has received much attention in a lengthy and amusing discussion on Language Log (Mark Liberman: “Dogless in Albion”, 12 September 2011, http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=3424), and also on John Wells's
A limited repertoire of FSP tags was used for the purpose of the present study: \(T\) - thematic unit, \(tr\) - transitional unit, \(R\) - rhematic unit. See Drápela (2011, 55-58) for an expanded scheme of FSP tags. In the two figures appearing further below, the thematic units are represented as green boxes, the transitional units are the grey ones, and rhematic units are red.

This solution suggests that the semantic homogeneity could be looked upon as another factor in FSP analysis, a view which was most recently advocated for in Drápela (2012).

I would like to thank the following students for their analyses of the extract: Hana Čechová, Barbora Charvátová, Jarmila Dezortová, Miroslav Ježek, Veronika Kloučková, Eva Málková, Jiří Petrů, Lenka Stehlíková, and Alena Vašíčková.

References


Hajičová, Eva (2012) “What we have learned from complex annotation of topic-focus articulation in a large Czech corpus”, *Écho des études romanes* VII/1: 51-64.


An FSP annotated corpus will provide a powerful tool for the analysis of the information structure of discourse across genres. References. homogeneity of the rhematic track. through parallel annotation of information. structure (A case study in FSP potentiality). philologica.net [online], 2013–12–30. Accessible from: http://philologica.net/. Structural-semantic classification of compound sentences which allowed speaking of the models of compound sentences belonging to the language system which as well as the structural schemes were calculable and regularly repeatable in speech. Thus, the overall picture of the syntactic concepts acquired the known perfection and harmony. The following hierarchy of the language syntactic models and the parallel hierarchy of speech manifestation of these models were formed: Word-group — syntagma. Structural scheme of a simple sentence — simple sentence.