ON THE *SUGGESTIVE SEMANTIC CLUE* IN FUNCTIONAL SENTENCE PERSPECTIVE

[Sur l'indice suggérant sémantique dans la perspective fonctionnelle de la phrase]

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Abstract (En): In the Brno approach to the theory of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP), four factors have been identified to work in mutual cooperation in rendering the final functional perspective of an utterance: actual linear arrangement of sentence elements, their dynamic semantic functions (the semantic factor), context, and – in spoken discourse – prosodic features. In a discussion of the semantic factor, Jan Firbas briefly describes in his monograph of 1992 the operation of the so-called *suggestive semantic clue*. Since this term has received little attention elsewhere, the author of the present paper attempts to show that it represents one of the fundamental concepts in FSP analysis in that it is not only closely attached to the important concept of *semantic homogeneity*, but also an FSP signal (or an FSP factor?) capable of contributing significantly to the correct resolution of the communicative functions of sentence elements.

Résumé (Fr): Dans la lignée de l'approche de Brno sur la théorie de la perspective fonctionnelle de la phrase (FSP), quatre facteurs ont été identifiés pour travailler en coopération mutuelle avec l'objectif de restituer la perspective finale fonctionnelle d'un énoncé : le réel arrangement linéaire des éléments de la phrase, leurs fonctions sémantiques dynamiques (le facteur sémantique), le contexte, et – dans le discours parlé – les caractéristiques prosodiques. Dans une discussion sur le facteur sémantique, Jan Firbas décrit brièvement, dans sa monographie de 1992, le fonctionnement de ce qu'on appelle les *indices sémantiques suggestifs*. Depuis, ce terme n'a reçu que peu d'attention ailleurs, l'auteur du présent document tente de montrer qu'il représente un des concepts fondamentaux de l'analyse FSP en ce qu'il est non seulement étroitement attaché à la notion importante de *l'homogénéité sémantique*, mais également qu'il s'agit d'un signal FSP (ou un facteur FSP?) capable de contribuer de manière significative à la résolution correcte des fonctions communicatives des éléments de la phrase.

Keywords (En): Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP); semantic homogeneity; suggestive semantic clues

Mots-clés (Fr): perspective fonctionnelle de la phrase (FSP); l'homogénéité sémantique; indices sémantiques suggestifs

In his 2005 article on dynamic (Firbasian) semantic scales, Professor Aleš Svoboda expressed the following assessment of the status of research on the semantic factor in the Brno approach to the theory of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP):

> "Out of the factors of functional sentence perspective, the dynamism of semantics is probably the least researched area."
>
> (SVOBODA, 2005: 228)

Seen against the vast number of especially his own and Jan Firbas' contributions to the topic of semantics in FSP, the statement seems rather controversial: The origin of the semantic factor can be traced back to Firbas' 1957

studies[1] and research by Jan Firbas into the semantic factor continued steadily, culminating approximately two decades later in his 1979 study, in which he presented a very detailed account of the factor.[2]

The very substance of the semantic factor was outlined by Jan Firbas in the form of a reply to an article by Robert de Beaugrande:

> "How have I arrived at the dynamic semantic functions? In determining the distribution of degrees of CD over the syntactic constituents (communicative units) of the sentence structure, I found that the sentence is 'perspectivised' either towards the subject or away from it. In the former case, the subject carries the highest degree of CD and in consequence conveys the high point of the message (acts as the 'operative word/element'). In the latter case, another constituent than the subject takes over as conveyor of the high point of the message. This entails different relations between the constituents in regard to the dynamics of the communication expressed. Whereas in the former case the subject completes the development of the communication reflected by the sentence structure and nothing more is said about it in the sentence, in the latter case the communication offers some information about the subject.
>
> All this entails different dynamic semantic functions (DSFs). In the former case, the subject performs the DSF of expressing a Phenomenon to be presented, animate or inanimate, concrete or abstract, real or imaginary. In the latter case, it performs the DSF of expressing a Bearer of quality. (Quality is to be understood here in a wide sense of the word: anything ascribed to the subject by the verb, or after a copula by an adjective or noun, is regarded as a quality, permanent or transient.)"
>
> (Firbas in BEAUGRANDE, 2000)

By making use of a new system of DSF mark-up tags[3] described in DRÁPELA (2011: 55), the following two sentences exemplify the two types of perspectivisation:

Orientation towards the Subject (Presentation Scale):
`P[Many manifestos] A[had been published].`

Orientation away from the Subject (Quality Scale):
`B[I] q[am] Q[a great admirer of Marshall].`

These two semantic scales represent the two most elementary scales within the system of DSF scales that, as it is now acknowledged in FSP literature, also comprises the *Combined Pr/Q Scale* and the *Bi/Multifunctional Pr/Q Scale*:[4]

Pr(esentation)-Scale
`P[A dog] A[barked] s[in the distance].`

Q(uality)-Scale
`B[His lecture] Q[took] S[two hours].`

[1] The semantic factor was termed *semantic-contextual means* in the studies, see their reprints in FIRBAS (2010), pp. 84-87 (281-298) and 88-116.
[2] Cf. also FIRBAS (1992: 41 ff.).
[3] The meaning of the tags is as follows: *s = Setting, A = Appearance/Presentation of Phenomenon, P = Phenomenon to be Presented, B = Bearer of Quality, q = Ascription of Quality, Q = Quality, S = Specification, F = Further Specification.*
[4] Research into Firbasian semantic scales, however, continues and the system of semantic scales has recently seen some fresh modifications, for example, from CHAMONIKOLASOVÁ (2010).

Combined Pr+Q Scale
s[Once upon a time] s[there] A[was] P[a mother pig]
B[who] Q[had] S[three little pigs].

Bifunctional or Multifunctional Pr/Q-Scale
P/B[Raindrops] A/Q[tapped] s/S[on the tin roof].

(after SVOBODA, 2005)

In the process of determining the type of scale and the dynamic semantic functions of its constituents, the degrees of contextual dependence and the semantics of sentence elements play a crucial role. Nevertheless, a special case of this process is documented in a 1981 study by Jan Firbas titled *Scene and Perspective*. Faced with a challenging task to decide on DSF functions of elements of one specific sentence, Jan Firbas sought recourse in the so-called *suggestive semantic clue*, a phenomenon derived from the concept of *Semantic Homogeneity* in FSP.[5] The recourse to the *suggestive semantic clue* is very unusual since it is, to my knowledge, one of only a very few well-documented cases when the phenomenon was actually used in its FSP-determining function. In most of the other instances of its occurrence in FSP literature, the phenomenon is usually mentioned merely as a stylistic feature or outcome of textual composition.

In order to fully understand the difference, I consider it absolutely essential to briefly re-introduce the concept of Semantic Homogeneity at this point. I shall do so by using the same example and commentary that Jan Firbas used to introduce the concept in his 1961 FSP analysis of K. Mansfield's *A Cup of Tea*:

[20] There was a cold bitter taste in the air, and
the new-lighted lamps looked sad.
[21] Sad were the lights in the houses opposite.
[22] Dimly they burned as if regretting something..

"[...] the rhematic *dimly* further develops the trend of thought conveyed by the rhematic elements *sad*, repeatedly found in [20] and [21]. All these expressions belong to what might be termed the rhematic layer (47) of the English version of the extract. (It will be noted that the corresponding section of the Czech rhematic layer, made up by the elements *smutně, i světla v protějších domech, plápolala*, lack such semantic homogeneity.) (48)"

(FIRBAS, 1961: 94)[6]

It appears to be evident from the commentary that the concept of Semantic Homogeneity was conceived of as an observed feature of the text – "trend of

[5] Taking inspiration in studies by BOOST (1949) and BEČKA (1957), Brno FSP researchers have paid considerable attention to the concept of Semantic Homogeneity, cf. namely FIRBAS (1961, 1981, 1992, 1995a, 1995b, 1999, 2000), ADAM (2000, 2003, 2006, and more recent studies, especially 2009 and 2010), SVOBODA (2005, 2006a, 2006b), LINGOVÁ (2008), TILLHONOVÁ (2009), WACHSMUTHOVÁ (2009).

[6] The relevant text of endnotes marked by note numbers 47 and 48 in the commentary goes as follows: "(47) In our opinion, the study of the thematic, transitional and rhematic layers of context would disclose further facts about the lexical, grammatical and FSP systems of language. […] (48) Even the question of semantic homogeneity of the rhematic layer invites further research, as it might again throw some light on the interrelations between language, thought and reality." (FIRBAS, 1961: 100).

thought", surfacing only after the communicative functions of the sentence elements were determined in the process of reading/interpreting/analysing the given stretch of text.[7]

In Firbas' FSP analysis of K. Mansfield's *At the Bay* (FIRBAS, 1992: 56ff), the concept of Semantic Homogeneity is brought a step forward: It is thought not only to emanate from the functional perspective of successive clauses, but to *aid* the reader in perspecting the individual sentences (clauses):

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Dazzling white the picotees shone;
the golden-eyed marigold glittered;
the nasturtiums wreathed the veranda poles in green
 and gold flame.
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"[...] each sentence is perspected towards the visual impact produced by the flower: *dazzling white, glittered, in green and gold flame*. [...] the Czech version […] places all the three corresponding expressions in end position and is in full harmony with linear modification."

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Hvozdíky svítily oslnivou bělí
zlatooké měsíčky přímo sálaly;
řeřišnice ovíjela sloupky na verandě zeleným a
 zlatým plamenem.
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"[...] the semantic homogeneity of the trio aids [...] in expressing the information towards which the communication is oriented. A less careful reader may miss this clue ... In doing so the reader would misinterpret the communicative intention of the author."

(FIRBAS, 1992: 58)

The crucial element in the second commentary is the presence of the word *clue*. The use of this descriptor, in fact, allows Jan Firbas to view Semantic Homogeneity also in an FSP-determining function. This way of looking at the concept of Semantic Homogeneity is also present at another place of Jan Firbas' monograph:

"The thread of suggestive semantic clues ... producing the rhematic layer described is present in the text."

(FIRBAS, 1992: 110 (underlined by M.D.)).

In my opinion, we can thus see a certain kind of conflict in FSP analysis: Are we to consider the phenomenon of *suggestive semantic clue* a result or rather an instrument of FSP analysis?

There is no straightforward answer to this question. The phenomenon will definitely require further investigation, mainly because it is so far not quite clear which level in the process of FSP analysis it actually belongs to. Firbas' 1981 study mentioned above, nevertheless, suggests that if conceived of as another FSP-determining signal derived from the concept of Semantic Homogeneity, the phenomenon of *suggestive semantic clue* operates within the process of

[7] The wording "[...] both the Czech and the German translations preserve the perspectives creating the gradation effect: [...]" in FIRBAS (1995b: 68 (underlined by M.D.)) further confirms, in my opinion, the original nature of the concept of Semantic Homogeneity, realized in the form of a *gradation* effect in this case.

determining the DSF functions, i.e. within the semantic factor of FSP. Below is a relevant part of the study which clearly shows that Jan Firbas used the concept of Semantic Homogeneity as a *clue* to identify dynamic semantic functions of sentence elements. The sentence elements in question have been underlined:

1 s[In the reign of the famous king Edward III],
 s[there] A[was] P[a little boy called Dick
 Whittington, whose father and mother died when he
 was very young].
2 s[As poor Dick was not old enough to work], B[he]
 q[was] Q[very badly off];
3 B[he] Q[got] ?[but little] ?[for his dinner],
4 and s[sometimes] B[he] Q[got] ?[nothing]
 ?[for his breakfast];
5 for B[the people who lived in the village]
 q[were] Q[very poor indeed],
6 and B[they] Q[could not spare] S[him] F[much more
 than the parings of potatoes],
7 and s[now and then] B[they] Q[could not spare]
 S[him] F[a hard crust of bread]

> "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... This stretch of the rhematic layer should not escape the notice of the careful reader."
>
> (FIRBAS, 1981: 64-65)

The FSP-determining function (the clue) of Semantic Homogeneity was last brought up by Jan Firbas in BEAUGRANDE (2000). In this instance, Jan Firbas speaks of *enhancing* the rhematic character of a clause element. Again, the relevant clause elements have been underlined for clarity:

(22) She taught her music and painting and saw to it that every week a long composition was written.

> "The subject *a long composition* evidently conveys irretrievable information. So does *written*. But the verb *write* indicates the usual way a composition comes into existence. In the presence of a context-independent subject expressing the product of writing, *write* merely expresses the production process, contributing less towards the further development of the communication. It performs the Presentation function, the subject performing that of expressing the Phenomenon to be presented. Under these circumstances the indefinite article can effectively co-signal rhematicity. [...] The rhematic character of the subject is enhanced by the dynamic semantic homogeneity of the rhematic layer expressing what the person was teaching. Those are the rhemes proper: *music*, *painting* and *a long composition*."
>
> (Firbas in BEAUGRANDE, 2000)

In my opinion, the statement "The rhematic character of the subject is enhanced by the dynamic semantic homogeneity of the rhematic layer" points to an intriguing fusion of both potentials of the phenomenon of *suggestive semantic clue*. Further research will be necessary to ascertain whether such a fusion is feasible for real FSP analysis.

Conclusion

In FSP analysis, the phenomenon of *suggestive semantic clue* appears to have a twofold property. On the one hand, it may appear as an observed result of the analysis – as a characteristic feature of the thematic/transitional/rhematic layers (tracks) of the analysed text. In this case it forms a part of the communicative intention of the author of the text. On the other hand, the phenomenon may also probably function as a convenient aid to an FSP analyst or, in general, a recipient of a message in the process of determining the high point (rheme) of the message in communicative fields showing a very high degree of potentiality. In this way the FSP analysis becomes essentially a multi-pass analysis including both the preceding communicative fields and the following communicative fields relative to the analysed sentence (clause).

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