

A BRIEF SURVEY OF JAN FIRBAS'S FSP ANALYSES

Martin DRÁPELA

Université Masaryk, Brno, République tchèque

RÉSUMÉ

L'École de Prague telle qu'elle s'est développée à Brno est étroitement liée au nom de Jan Firbas et à la théorie de la perspective fonctionnelle de la phrase : cette approche communicative orientée vers la structure informationnelle de la langue, a été mise au point par Jan Firbas et ses disciples à partir des travaux de Vilém Mathesius, l'un des fondateurs de l'École de Prague. Jan Firbas a présenté les principaux aspects de la théorie de la perspective fonctionnelle de la phrase dans sa célèbre monographie de 1992, parue aux Presses de l'Université de Cambridge ; mais si Firbas a illustrée cette théorie par un grand nombre d'exemples, écrits comme oraux, il peut sembler au lecteur d'aujourd'hui que le corpus linguistique sur lequel Firbas a travaillé n'est pas clairement défini, eu égard aux tendances ou aux exigences actuelles de la recherche linguistique basée sur corpus. Ainsi, le présent article est plutôt d'ordre historiographique : on y donne un aperçu historique des types et des caractéristiques quantitatives des textes sur lesquels Firbas a travaillé, sachant que cet aperçu peut contribuer à une analyse plus approfondie de la structure informationnelle de la langue.

ABSTRACT

The Brno branch of the Prague Linguistic School is inseparably connected with the name of Jan Firbas and the theory of Functional Sentence Perspective, a communicatively oriented approach to the information structure of language, developed by him and his disciples from the ideas of Vilém Mathesius, one of the founders of the Prague School. Jan Firbas presented key aspects of the theory of Functional Sentence Perspective in his well-known monograph of 1992 published by Cambridge University Press, and even though he documented the workings of the theory on a number of examples taken from both written and spoken communication, it may appear to the reader of the monograph that the language corpus he worked with in it is less clearly defined, compared especially with the requirements and research trends set by present-day corpus-based approaches to the investigation of language communication. Thus, the present article will be rather of a historiographical nature. In the article the author will try to provide a historical overview of the types and quantitative characteristics of texts Jan Firbas worked with in his analyses of the phenomena of Functional Sentence Perspective. The author of the article believes that this overview can contribute to a more extensive survey of studies dealing with the information structure of language.

INTRODUCTION

Research into the phenomena of *Functional Sentence Perspective* (FSP) carried out especially by Jan Firbas (1921-2000), a Brno anglicist of world renown, quite undoubtedly constitutes one of the cornerstones of the Czech(oslovak) structural and functional school of linguistics known as the Prague School.¹ The importance of the FSP line of research within the Prague School is echoed, for example, in the following two quotations:

“One of the most important legacies of this school’s studies, particularly associated with the names of Mathesius, and later Firbas, is that concerning **functional sentence perspective (FSP)** and the concept of **communicative dynamism (CD)**.” (Taylor 1998: 15)

“The Prague School tradition is associated with two fundamental notions: communicative dynamism and the theme-rheme articulation.” (Fried 2009: 291)

In the context of these quotations it should be stressed that it is Jan Firbas who is to be credited with the introduction of the term *functional sentence perspective* into linguistics:

“Believing myself to have been the first to use the term (in an English summary of a paper written in Czech, Firbas 1957: 171–3), I feel responsible for it and propose to demonstrate that it does convey some meaning after all. I hasten to add, however, that I am aware that I must not adorn myself with borrowed plumes. I must say that, in a private communication in 1956, the term was actually suggested to me by Professor Josef Vachek, prompted by Vilém Mathesius’s (1929) use of the (unexpanded) German term *Satzperspektive*.” (Firbas 1992b: 167-168)

The second term, *communicative dynamism*, together with its Czech original *výpovědní dynamičnost* and its early Russian translation *динамичность высказывания* (cf. the more common variant *коммуникативный динамизм* used later on) first appeared in an English summary of Firbas’s first article on FSP (Firbas 1956: pp. 106-107).² It is interesting to observe

¹ The results of Jan Firbas’s FSP research are summarized in his widely known monograph (Firbas 1992a, 2006, 2009, 2011), which was recently published in a Chinese edition (Firbas 2007). The importance of his work can also be corroborated by the fact that it has already been reviewed not less than eleven times: Cabrillana Leal (1994), Chafe (1994), Daneš (1994), Dušková (1993), Geluykens (1994), Goutsos (1994), Huumo (1995), Sgall (2000), Uhlířová (1993, 1994), and Yoon (1995). For an account of Jan Firbas’s life and work, see for example Davidse & Joseph (2000), Chamonikolasová (2001), but especially Svoboda (2003), reprinted in Firbas (2010).

² As is stated on page 105 of this article, its manuscript was submitted for publication in March 1955. However, it can be inferred from the introduction to Firbas (1962: 3) that he began his research in FSP as early as 1952.

that in this summary Jan Firbas used the term *statement* (*statement elements*, *statement proper*) instead of *rheme* (*rhematic elements*, *rheme proper*):³

“Contrary to the formal sentence analysis, which is concerned with what is generally called parsing, actual sentence analysis examines the semantic structure of the sentence with regard to the actual situation. Viewed thus, those sentence elements which convey something already known or something that may be taken for granted are referred to as the *theme* of the sentence, whereas those sentence elements which convey the new piece of information, as the *statement* of the sentence. Needless to say, the thematic elements are, in the given situation, less important, communicatively less dynamic (because contributing nothing or very little to the development of the discourse) than the statement elements. Elements belonging neither to the theme nor to the statement form a kind of *transition*. Between the comparatively least important element, the theme proper, and the comparatively most important element, the statement proper, a long gamut of degrees of varying importance, of varying communicative dynamism, may be observed.”

The passing away of Jan Firbas in the year 2000 seemed to represent an important juncture for future development of the theory of FSP and its applications, for it was approximately at the turn of the new millennium when a significant change was already taking place in the way linguists look at and work with language data: heavy reliance on language data stored in large electronic corpora. The seeds for this methodological transition were, of course, sown long before the year 2000 and, for example, the publication of *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber *et al.* 1999) can be taken as a very successful example of this transition.

What is more important, though, is that this trend did not leave the research field of information structure (IS) of language unaffected. Thus, the first decade of the new millennium has already seen several IS-oriented publications based on data from computerized language corpora, for example:

- Veselá – Havelka (2003); Mikulová *et al.* (2006): topic-focus articulation in the Prague Dependency Treebank;
- Calhoun *et al.* (2005): a corpus of telephone calls;
- Baumann *et al.* (2004); Brunetti *et al.* (2009): corpora of non-canonical constructions;
- Paggio (2006a); Paggio (2006b): a corpus of spoken Danish;
- Götze *et al.* (2007): a corpus of typologically different languages;
- Ritz *et al.* (2008): a corpus of German texts of different types, written and transcriptions of spoken texts;
- Cook – Bildhauer (2011): a corpus of German newspaper texts.

³ N.B. also the use of the term *actual sentence analysis* here before the introduction of the term *functional sentence perspective* in the summary of the study published a year later (Firbas 1957: 171).

As regards the Firbasian approach to IS, which could be called an *FSP-Strict* approach if we decided to narrow the spectrum of contributions to the FSP theory to those written only by Jan Firbas and his close collaborators and senior followers (such as Aleš Svoboda, Libuše Dušková, František Daneš, and Jana Chamonikolasová), there is, unfortunately, less room for optimism, because the not unnoticeable drift towards using computerized tools in linguistic analysis has left virtually no mark on the way IS is handled in the FSP-Strict approach today. The identification of reasons for such an adverse state of affairs would certainly help “modernize” the FSP-Strict approach,⁴ but since this falls outside the scope of the present paper, suffice it to add – to the positive side of the Firbasian approach – that even the authors of the above mentioned English grammar conclude that

“... automatic computational tools cannot provide reliable analyses of the informational characteristics of noun phrases (e.g. ‘given’ v. ‘new’ information; ‘anaphoric’ or ‘exophoric’ reference; and the distance from a previous co-referent if anaphoric).” (Biber *et al.*, 1999: 37)⁵

Keeping these constraints in mind, it is no wonder that the individual studies on FSP produced by Jan Firbas and his followers must be treated as qualitative studies rather than large quantitative corpus studies, especially if the following observation is taken into consideration:

“Discourse studies of language use have usually been quantitative, and in more recent years, they have been carried out on large text corpora using the techniques of corpus linguistics; these studies often compare the linguistic characteristics of discourse from different spoken and written registers. Studies of the second type have usually been qualitative and based on detailed analysis of a small number of texts; these studies usually focus on the internal structure of a few texts from a single genre, such as scientific research articles. [...] Surprisingly, few studies have attempted to combine these two

⁴ See Drápela (2011a, 2011b) for the first attempts to bring the FSP-Strict approach a step closer to tagged electronic language corpora.

⁵ The difficulties connected with annotating IS have been brought forward also by several other authors, for example Dipper *et al.* (2007: 24): “Given the fact that annotating IS is an inherently-subjective task in many respects, e.g., due to differing world knowledge, inter-annotator consistency is hard to achieve.” Even though the methodology of IS-annotation cannot be discussed here extensively, I would not entirely concur with a comment from one of the reviewers of the present paper that the above quotation by Biber can be refuted simply by considering the apparatus of tectogrammatical annotation within Prague Dependency Treebank (namely Chapter 2 (Sub 3) available as <<http://ufal.mff.cuni.cz/pdt2.0/doc/pdt-guide/en/html/ch02.html#a-layers-tecto>>). It appears that the statement by Biber can actually be supported by the IS-annotation procedure adopted by the developers of PDT because in PDT the assignment of tfa-values is based on the assignment of values of contextual boundness and as we can learn from Section 2 of Chapter 10 in the Annotation Manual to PDT, “the actual decision about the contextual boundness of an expression is left to **the language awareness of the annotator.**” (Mikulová *et al.*, 2005, emphasis by M.D.).

research perspectives. On the one hand, most corpus-based studies have focused on the quantitative distribution of lexical and grammatical features, generally disregarding the language used in particular texts and higher-level discourse structures or other aspects of discourse organization. On the other hand, most qualitative discourse analyses have focused on the analysis of discourse patterns in a few texts from a single genre, but they have not provided tools for empirical analyses that can be applied on a large scale across a number of texts or genres. **As a result, we know little at present about the general patterns of discourse organization across a large representative sample of texts from a genre.**" (Biber-Connor-Upton 2007: 10-11, emphasis by M.D.)

Despite the obvious shortcomings of the current computer-free methodology of the FSP-Strict approach it is still possible to discern a clear corpus-like character of Jan Firbas's studies on FSP. Throughout his life Jan Firbas authored⁶ more than 100 scholarly articles on FSP, some of which were translated also into other languages, namely German, Italian, and Polish. The following general characteristics can be offered as a common denominator for most of them:

- mainly fiction and religious genres were analysed, but there are also many articles based on analyses of transcribed spoken conversations;
- some of the analyses are massively parallel, especially those using texts extracts from the Bible;
- a small but not insignificant number of articles provide a thorough FSP analysis of a single utterance functioning under different contextual conditions.

Even though a more detailed study of Jan Firbas's publications would be needed in order to fully grasp the nature and development of his linguistic thought, let the following list serve as a brief sketch characterizing the language corpus he worked with. For exact bibliographic data of the individual items in the list I kindly refer the reader to Golková's (2003a, 2003b) bibliography of Jan Firbas's publications (reprinted also in Firbas 2010).

⁶ As a matter of fact there are only very few publications where Jan Firbas appears as a co-author, for example in a preface written together with František Daneš to *A Tentative Bibliography of Studies in Functional Sentence Perspective 1900-1970*, or in *An Analytical Bibliography of Czechoslovak Studies in Functional Sentence Perspective 1900-1972*, which Jan Firbas compiled jointly with Eva Golková. Cf. also Drápela (2015).

THE SURVEY

1950s

- 1956: *Poznámky k problematice anglického slovního pořádku z hlediska aktuálního členění větného* [Some notes on the problem of English word order from the point of view of functional sentence perspective]
 – D. H. Lawrence: *Sons and Lovers*
 – 400 English sentence units and their Czech counterparts from Chapter One
- 1957: *K otázce nezákladových podmětů v současné angličtině: Příspěvek k teorii aktuálního členění větného* [On the problem of non-thematic subjects in contemporary English: A contribution to the theory of functional sentence perspective]
 – Czech and English versions of
 John Galsworthy: *The Forsyte Saga*
 Katherine Mansfield: *The Garden Party and Other Stories*
 Karel Čapek: *Krakatit* [An Atomic Phantasy], *Anglické listy* [Letters from England]
 – a comparison of several older and modern language versions of sentences from the Bible (*St Matthew 4.24*).
- 1957: *Some thoughts on the function of word order in Old English and Modern English*
 – a comparison of seven English versions of the Gospel according to *St Matthew* (OldE and ModE versions).
- 1959: *Thoughts on the communicative function of the verb in English, German and Czech*
 – parallel corpus of 400 utterances of English, German, Czech texts:
 John Galsworthy, *The Forsyte Saga*, Heinemann, London 1922
 John Galsworthy, *Die Forsyte Saga* (transl. by Luise Wolf and Leon Schalit), Paul List Verlag, Leipzig 1957
 John Galsworthy, *Bohatec* (transl. by B. Kubertová-Zátková), Melantrich, Prague 1935
 John Galsworthy, *Bohatec* (transl. by Z. Urbánek), SNKLHU, Prague 1957
 Karel Čapek, *Anglické listy*, Borový, Prague 1947
 Karel Čapek, *Letters from England* (transl. by P. Selver), Geoffrey Bles, London 1945
 Karel Čapek, *Seltsames England* (transl. by Vincy Schwarz), Bruno Cassirer, Berlin 1936
 Anna Seghers, *Das siebte Kreuz*, Aufbau-Verlag, Berlin 1951

1960s

- 1961: *On the communicative value of the modern English finite verb*
 – detailed analysis of 22 parallel examples (English and Czech) from Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield

- 1966: *Non-thematic subjects in contemporary English* (Reprinted again in 1972)
 – examples drawn from the following books:
 Karel Čapek: *Krakatit* [An Atomic Phantasy], *Anglické listy*
 [Letters from England]
 John Galsworthy: *The Forsyte Saga*
 Katherine Mansfield: *The Garden Party and Other Stories*
 The New Testament of The Moffatt Translation of the Bible,
 Hodder & Stoughton London 1953
 The New Testament in Modern Speech by R. F. Weymouth, J.
 Clarke & Co., London 1948
 The New Testament, Sheed & Ward, New York 1944
 Nový zákon, translated by F. Zilka, Kalich, Prague 1951
- 1968: *On the prosodic features of the modern English finite verb as means of functional sentence perspective: More thoughts on transition proper*
 – a corpus of 419 finite verb forms
- 1969: *On the prosodic features of the modern English finite verb-object combination as means of functional sentence perspective*
 – analysis based on "... 323 collected finite verb-object combinations ..."

1970s

- 1975: *On "existence / appearance on the scene" in functional sentence perspective*
 – opening sentence types occurring in *English Fairy Tales*, collected by J. Jacobs, and in an English version of Grimm's *Tales*
 – 120 clauses [Jacobs], 110 clauses [Grimm]
- 1975: *On the thematic and the non-thematic section of the sentence*
 John Wain: *The Contenders*
 – a detailed analysis of 29 basic distributional fields, 26 subfields and 12 semifields
- 1976: *A study in the functional sentence perspective of the English and the Slavonic interrogative sentences*
 – 71 examples of questions drawn from a study by Helena Křížková entitled "Kontextové členění a typy tázacích vět v současných slovanských jazycích [Contextual Organization and Types of Interrogative Sentence in Contemporary Slavonic Languages]", *Slavia* 41, 1972, pp. 241-262

1980s

- 1980: *Post-intonation-centre prosodic shade in the modern English clause*
 – 58 examples from phonetic readers:
 Arnold, G. F. and O. M. Tooley: 1972. *Say it with rhythm*, 3.
 London: Longman
 Lewis, J. W.: 1977. *People speaking*. London: Oxford University Press
 MacCarthy, P. A. D.: 1956. *English conversation reader*. London: Longman

- 1981: *Scene and perspective*
 – first three paragraphs of an English fairy tale, *Dick Whittington and His Cat*, published in Joseph Jacobs's *English Fairy Tales*, Frederick Muller, London, 1942, pp. 128–39
 – 15 basic distributional fields
- 1985: *Thoughts on functional sentence perspective, intonation and emotiveness*
 – tonetically transcribed conversations, IC-based analysis of about 150 utterances
- 1986: *A case study in the dynamics of written communication*
 – twenty-two versions of *Mt 14:8b* and their parallels of *Mk 6:25b*
- 1986: *On the dynamics of written communication in the light of the theory of functional sentence perspective*
 – an explanation of basic FSP notions using 43 example sentences;
 – detailed FSP analysis of 3 short texts
- 1987: *On two starting points of communication*
 – parallel analysis of a *New Testament* passage (7.24-27) in OldEn, ModEn, ModGer, and ModFr versions
- 1987: *Thoughts on functional sentence perspective, intonation and emotiveness, Part Two*
 – continuous stretch of conversation, 82 distributional fields
- 1989: *Interpreting Psalm 91 from the point of view of functional sentence perspective*
 – first seven verses of *Psalm 91* in four versions: 2 English, 1 German, 1 French

1990s

- 1990: *Degrees of communicative dynamism and degrees of prosodic prominence (weight)*
 – detailed analysis of a randomly chosen, tonetically transcribed text, taken from J.D. O'Connor's *Advanced Phonetic Reader*
 – 116 distributional fields, 95 finite, 21 nonfinite
- 1992: *Translation and functional sentence perspective: A case study of John 1.1-2*
 – FSP analysis of biblical texts, namely the opening passage of *the Gospel according to John* as presented in almost 20 different versions (translations)
- 1993: *Can the functional perspective of a spoken sentence be predicted from that of its written counterpart?*
 – a comparative FSP analysis of 2 (J.D. O'Connor's and R. Kingdon's) tonetic transcriptions of Abraham Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*
 – 37 distributional fields

- 1995: *On the thematic and the rhematic layers of the text*
 – English, French, German, Czech and Slovak versions of Luke 8–14;
 – the beginning of Boris Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago* in the Russian original and its English, German, French, Dutch and Czech counterparts;
 the rheme proper layer of the third paragraph of the opening chapter
- 1995: *Retrievability span in functional sentence perspective*
 "The inquiry is based on analyses of 18 texts of Modern English fiction prose... their average length amounting to 37 sentences. With one exception, the analyses were carried out under my direction by students who attended my seminars on FSP. (Modern English fiction prose and that analyses of non-fiction prose remain pending)" (page 26)
 – approximately 650 sentences
- 1996: *A case study in linear modification: On translating Ap. 21.6b*
 – English [36], German [30] and French [13] versions (translations) of *Apoc. 21.6b* and its Greek and Latin counterparts
- 1996: *Mobility of clause constituents and functional sentence perspective*
 – a comparison of 17 German, 18 English and 8 French of *Eccl. 11.9b*
- 1999: *On dynamic semantic homogeneity in functional sentence perspective*
 – analysis of 7 French versions of a short Old Testament passage, the eleventh verse of the ninth chapter *The Book of Amos*
- 1999: *Translating the introductory paragraph of Boris Pasternak's Doctor Zhivago: A case study in functional sentence perspective*
 – detailed analysis of an opening paragraph of Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*; Russian original, and 2 English, 1 Dutch, 2 German and 1 French translations

The following are examples of papers by Jan Firbas in which he presents in-depth FSP analyses of single utterances. The utterances in question are set in bold capital letters here.⁷

- 1999: "Dogs must be carried on the escalator". *Brno Studies in English* 25: pp. 7-18.
DOGS MUST BE CARRIED ON THE ESCALATOR
- 1999: "On the conditions of the occurrence of the intonation centre on the final sentence constituent". In: O. Fujimura, B. Joseph and B. Palek (eds): *Item Order in Language and Speech*. Prague: Karolinum Press. pp. 111-123.
WHO DID YOU TALK TO LAST NIGHT?
- 2000: "Notes on some basic concepts of the theory of functional sentence perspective". In: A. Klégr and J. Čermák (eds): *The Tongue is an Eye: Studies Presented to Libuše Dušková*. Prague: Charles University, pp. 21-32.
JAN HAS COME TO THE DINING ROOM.

⁷ The article *On the conditions...* is not listed in Golková (2003).

It should be noted that it was especially the last utterance *Jan has come to the dining room* which very often served as a core example sentence for Jan Firbas in the introductory parts of a number of his articles and also in many talks on FSP he delivered during his academic career.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we attempted to provide an outline of the language corpus that Jan Firbas worked with and which allowed him to develop and finetune the theory of Functional Sentence Perspective to the state we know it today. Seen from the perspective of contemporary trends in linguistic research and especially of corpus linguistics, the language corpus of Jan Firbas may appear to be of truly miniscule proportions, but will still have to be treated as the finest example of IS analysis we may encounter today and build on in the future.

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