

Firbas, Jan

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ON SOME BASIC ISSUES OF THE THEORY OF FUNCTIONAL SENTENCE PERSPECTIVE

II

ON WALLACE L. CHAFE'S VIEW ON NEW AND OLD INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIVE DYNAMISM

Jan Firbas

Problems of functional sentence perspective (FSP) have interested scholars for quite a long time. Henri Weil, who published his important monograph on word order as early as 1844 (Weil 1844), may rightly be regarded as the forerunner of FSP theorists (cf. Firbas 1974.11–2). It would be interesting to establish to what extent and in what way he was developing findings and thoughts expressed by scholars before him.

In any case, European scholars have been aware of FSP phenomena for a considerably longer time than their colleagues across the Atlantic. The interest of American scholars in problems of FSP is comparatively recent (although they would not as a rule use the term 'functional sentence perspective'), but it has already significantly widened the range of languages subjected to FSP analysis and enriched our knowledge of FSP phenomena. This is borne out, for instance, by the collection of papers entitled *Subject and topic*, edited by Charles N. Li and published in 1976 (Li 1976). The book contains a comprehensive list of references. Perusing them, however, a Continental scholar may wish that more attention had been paid to the work done on FSP in Europe in the past. Weil's name does not appear on the list. A Czechoslovak scholar will miss such prominent names as Vilém Mathesius, František Daneš, Eduard Beneš and others. The bibliography adduces only three Czechoslovak items – Sgall, Hajičová and Benešová 1973, and Firbas 1964 (mistakenly dated 1966) and 1966. My own approach is dealt with in Wallace L. Chafe's (Chafe 1976.27–55) contribution to the volume (Chafe 1976.33).

Chafe appreciates the importance of the investigation into FSP phenomena. Discussing new and old information – one of the basic issues in the theory of FSP – in his monograph *Meaning and the structure of language*, he explicitly emphasizes the 'unusual importance' of this problem to 'our understanding of how language works' and voices the opinion that 'once it is more fully understood, it promises to explain a number of significant facts which are now obscure' (Chafe 1970.210). He adds that 'it is a subject that has been seriously neglected by the mainstream of linguistics' (ibid.).

Apart from the brief discussion of my approach in Chafe 1976, Chafe has devoted attention to it in a paper published in *Language* (1974). Chafe is un-

doubtedly one of the leading linguists at the present time and his interest in the work done in Brno is more than encouraging. It is therefore regrettable that it is with such great delay that a response to his views is presented here, I trust, however, that even a belated response will contribute to a clarification of the concepts involved and also clear up some misunderstandings that I find in Chafe's interpretation of my approach.

GIVEN INFORMATION AND CONTEXT DEPENDENCE; DEGREES OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND DEGREES OF COMMUNICATIVE DYNAMISM

Chafe holds that a piece of information can be assumed to be either present in or absent from the addressee's consciousness. In his approach, presence in or absence from the addressee's consciousness is the criterion of the givenness or the newness of a piece of information. Since the criterion offers these alternatives, an element can only be established as conveying either given or new information. Chafe does not think it possible that a piece of information can be assumed to be partly but not completely present in the addressee's consciousness and concludes that an element cannot be partly given and partly new. This induces him to say that 'it is hard to see from the Czech writings that the notion of degrees of consciousness, or a gamut of communicative dynamism, is supported by linguistic evidence' (1974.120).

In his 1976 paper, Chafe comes to the same conclusion when he says: '... it appears from the examples provided by Czech linguists that CD has more in common with the given-new distinction than with the other statuses we will consider. That being the case, it is interesting that CD is said to be a matter of degree, and not a binary distinction. If we identify a low degree of CD with givenness and a high degree with newness, the question arises as to whether there are intermediate degrees of given and new. The implication would be that the speaker can assume something to be in the addressee's consciousness to a greater or lesser degree. This psychological implication would be of considerable importance if it could be established. For the moment, however, it is necessary to say that the examples cited by the Czech linguists for the scalarity of the distinction are unconvincing, and that it has not been demonstrated that given vs. new is anything more than a discrete dichotomy'. (Chafe 1976.33.)

It is important to note that Chafe actually equates three dichotomies: (i) that of given vs. new, (ii) that of being assumed to be present in, vs. being absent from, the addressee's consciousness, and (iii) that of low degree of CD vs. high degree of CD.

In the first place, let me emphasize that in my approach an element can be either context-dependent, i.e. conveying given information, or context-independent, i.e. conveying new information. A context-dependent element carries a lower degree of CD than a context-independent element and continues to do so irrespective of sentence position and semantic character. It also carries lower prosodic weight than a context-independent element. Against the background of this, a context-dependent element can be presented as context-independent and vice versa, but the dichotomy of context-dependence and context independence remains valid. It does play an essential role in my approach.

A context-dependent element carries a lower degree of CD than a context-independent element, but the dichotomy of context dependence and context in-

dependence is not the only factor that determines the dynamics of the communication. The gamut of CD is not solely controlled by the mere dichotomy of context dependence and context independence. True enough, context-independent elements are always communicatively more important than context-dependent elements and therefore carry higher degrees of CD than context-dependent elements. But they themselves differ in degrees of CD owing to (i) the operation of linear modification and (ii) the operation of semantic structure, or to be exact, the characters of semantic contents and the characters of semantic relations into which the semantic contents enter. These two factors assert themselves with particular force within the sphere constituted by the context-independent elements of the sentence.

The three factors participating in the interplay at the level of the written language can be briefly described as context, linear modification and semantic structure. At the level of the spoken language, a fourth participant joins the interplay – that of intonation. The interplay of the factors determining the degrees of CD has been the main concern of all my writings on functional sentence perspective. These writings offer ample illustrations of this interplay, which induces the elements of a sentence to carry more than two degrees of CD.

Let me recall that the notion of CD is essentially based on the idea of the development of the communication. The communication is not a static phenomenon; it develops from a starting point to a communicative goal. (This development need not necessarily coincide with the linear arrangement of the sentence elements.) It can be shown that context-dependent elements are not embedded in the immediately preceding context to the same degree and that not every context-independent element conveys the very piece of information towards which the communication is oriented. All these facts point to a greater number of degrees of CD carried by a sentence structure.

Under normal conditions, for instance, the notion of the speaker, i.e. the producer of the communication, is even more firmly established in the immediately relevant situational context than the notion of the addressee; less firmly established will be any other retrievable element; *Je vous en prie, Ich bitte dich darum, Prosim tē o to, May I ask you for it*. Under normal conditions, the relationship between the degrees of CD carried by the elements expressing the three context-dependent notions will remain the same irrespective of sentence position. It is, however, not without interest to note that in the examples adduced they are actually arranged in accordance with the gradual rise in CD reflecting the degrees to which they are established in the immediately relevant context: *Je – vou – en; Ich – dich – darum; -m – tē – to; I – you – it*.

The difference in degrees of CD carried by context-dependent elements may be comparatively slight. Rises in CD are more apparent within the context-independent section of the sentence. For instance, the highest degree of CD within this section is carried by the element that is communicatively most important, i.e. the one to which the entire communication within the sentence is perspectived. Each of the capitalized elements in the examples adduced in Chafe 1974 is a carrier of the highest degree of CD within its respective sentence; cf. *Yesterday I had my class disrupted by a BULLDOG. I'm beginning to DISLIKE bulldogs* (see Chafe 1974.125), in which neither *a BULLDOG* nor *DISLIKE* is the only context-independent element within the sentence. Elements that convey the most important piece of information bring the communication within the sentence to its completion and exceed in CD other context-independent elements if such are present as well as the context-dependent element(s) that more

often than not concur. This further corroborates the assumption that the sentence can display more degrees of CD than two.

As has been emphasized the distribution of degrees of CD is not determined solely by the dichotomy of context dependence and context independence, but by an interplay of factors. It is the laws of the interplay of these factors that has been the main concern of my inquiries into FSP. An outline of the results of these inquiries has been presented in Firbas 1986.

Coming back to context-dependence and context-independence, let me emphasize that my criterion of given or new information is to be looked for in the context. In fact, it is to be looked for in the immediately relevant preceding written/spoken and/or the immediately relevant situational context. This involves a difference of criteria, for Chafe's criterion of given or new information, on the other hand, is to be looked for in the speaker's assumption of the state of the addressee's consciousness. According to my approach, givenness, i.e. context-dependence, is conditioned by the presence of the information and/or its referent in the immediately relevant context (see, e.g., Firbas 1986.54–6); according to Chafe's approach givenness is conditioned by the assumption of the speaker that the information is present in the addressee's consciousness.

My criteria of CD and Chafe's criteria of givenness cannot therefore be equated. The gamut of CD cannot be equated with the two degrees of consciousness understood as presence in or absence from consciousness. Moreover, the degrees of CD are determined by an interplay of factors. This interplay induces the elements of a sentence to carry more than two degrees of CD.

It is, however, hard to believe that neither the speaker nor the addressee would be conscious of the development of the communication. As early as 1844 Henri Weil aptly spoke of the point of departure and the goal of the communication and the movement of thought from the former to the latter. But this movement does not consist merely in two steps, one being the point of departure and the other the goal of the communication. In other words, the movement of the thought cannot be reduced to two steps one of which is constituted by mere context dependence (givenness) and the other by mere context independence (newness). This development is a psychological fact. Should the criterion of presence in or absence from the addressee's consciousness prove not to be an adequate psychological tool to verify the development (dynamics) of the communication, some other criterion would have to be found for this purpose.

It is regrettable that in interpreting degrees of CD only in terms of given and new and applying as criterion the speaker's assumption of whether a piece of information is present in or absent from the addressee's consciousness, Chafe does not inform his readers of the interplay of factors that determines the degrees of CD carried by the sentence elements. True enough, Chafe's wording 'If we identify a low degree of CD with givenness and a high degree with newness, the question arises . . .' (Chafe 1976.33; see here p. 52) should warn the reader that the degrees of CD may not be interpreted solely in terms of givenness and newness, but perhaps not every reader will notice the comparatively inconspicuous *if* occurring in Chafe's critique and ask what factors actually determine the degrees of CD.

Chafe's interpretation of the degrees of CD (offered in Chafe 1974) is, for instance, accepted – without any mention of my inquiry into the interplay of factors determining the degrees of CD – by Helas Contreras in his valuable and thought-provoking monograph on Spanish word order (Contreras 1976.16).

It is gratifying to find that Contreras's observation and analyses corroborate the interplay of (i) sentence linearity (linear modification), (ii) the semantic sentence structure (strictly speaking the semantic character of the sentence elements and the character of the semantic relations into which they enter) and (iii) context dependence/independence, i.e. the three factors that in the written language determine the distribution of the degrees of CD over the sentence elements. It is disappointing, however, that he tells his reader nothing of my inquiries into this interplay, nor of my inquiries into the relationship between the distribution of degrees of CD as determined by this non-prosodic interplay and the distribution of degrees of prosodic weight. In this way, the reader is in fact deprived of references to linguistic evidence bearing out the degrees of CD.

ELEMENTS OF SEMANTIC STRUCTURE AND ELEMENTS OF SURFACE STRUCTURE

Chafe finds that the postulation of multiple degrees of CD may have 'resulted from a confusion of various factors, but especially from a failure to distinguish clearly between elements of semantic structure and elements of surface structure' (1974.120). Before commenting on Chafe's criticism concerning the confusion of factors or levels, I think it relevant to recall that I subscribe to Daneš's three-level approach to syntax (Daneš 1964).

Following Daneš, I hold that the function of the sentence in the act of communication can be successfully interpreted if three levels are kept separate: that of semantic structure, that of grammatical structure and that of FSP (cf., e.g., Firbas 1964.137; 1972.81; 1974.15). In consequence, I distinguish between functions performed at the semantic level, functions performed at the grammatical level and functions performed at the level of FSP. (It is at the FSP level that the interplay of FSP factors takes place.) I distinguish between these functions very clearly, but in order to account for the way a sentence operates in the act of communication I consider it legitimate and necessary to ask to what extent and under what conditions the functions may coincide. If they do under certain conditions, they enter into relationships that cannot be overlooked by the analyst. For instance, agency at the semantic level, subjecthood at the grammatical (syntactic) level and thematicity caused by low CD at the FSP level tend to coincide. To determine the conditions under which this coincidence (or congruence) of functions and other cases of functional coincidence (congruence) take place is one of the main concerns of the FSP approach. A problem of particular importance is that of the relation of the finite verb to the three levels. In fact, Chafe illustrates the 'failure to distinguish clearly between elements of semantic structure and elements of surface structure' by referring to my treatment of the finite verbs.

He points out that 'one of the oldest notions' in the FSP approach 'seems to be that finite verbs are often (though not always) transitional elements with respect to CD'. He suspects 'that this notion would not have arisen were it not for the fact that verbs are most often pronounced with low pitch even if they carry new information'. He concludes that 'one might on this basis be led to interpret the low pitch as reflecting a lower degree of "communicative dynamism" in verbs; but that would be attaching undue semantic importance to a surface phenomenon' (1974.120).

The tendency including the finite verb to perform the transitional function is indeed one of the oldest notions in the FSP approach. It is, however, not cor-

rect to assume that the notion would not have arisen were it not for the tendency inducing the finite verb to bear comparatively light prosodic weight. It was on the basis of analyses of written texts (Firbas 1959, 1961, 1965) that I came to the conclusion that because of its semantic character and the character of the semantic relations into which it enters the finite verb tends to perform a transitional function at the level of FSP. The purpose of the inquiry into the prosodic features of the finite verb, undertaken later, was to establish to what extent this interpretation, offered in regard to the written language, corresponds to the situation in the spoken language. This purpose was explicitly stated in the introduction to my study on the prosodic features of the modern English finite verb: 'Whereas our previous papers confined themselves to the study of the non-prosodic means (i.e. those used by the written language) of FSP, the present paper endeavours to proceed a step further and cover also its prosodic means' (Firbas 1968.11; spaced out in the source quoted from). The study corroborated the findings arrived at in regard to the written language: it has shown that the tendency inducing the finite verb to perform the transitional function tallies with the tendency inducing the finite verb to carry comparatively light prosodic weight. The distribution of prosodic weight in the spoken language is ultimately controlled by the distribution of degrees of CD determined by the interplay of non-prosodic FSP factors. The tendency inducing the finite verb to carry comparatively light prosodic weight is a reflection of the tendency inducing the finite verb to perform a transitional function. I certainly do not claim that it is the other way round. It cannot therefore be maintained that undue semantic importance has been attached to a surface phenomenon.

The weaker the verbal semantic content, the more effectively it performs the transitional function at the FSP level. Provided that in *George/He was very rude*, *George/He* conveys retrievable information and *very rude* irretrievable information, *was* serves as a link (transition) between the theme *George/He* and the rheme *very rude*. It does so through the temporal and modal indications it expresses. Supplying this link, it starts building up the communication upon the foundation provided by the theme and introduces the most important piece of information, conveyed by *very rude* (cf. Firbas 1965.172). Viewed in this light, *George/He* carries the lowest degree of CD and *very rude* the highest degree of CD, *was* ranking between them. Chafe, on the other hand, holds that 'if one takes *rude* to be the verb in the semantic structure of this sentence, with the verb *be* introduced semantically in order to provide a surface vehicle for the past tense, the question of assigning a degree of CD to *was* does not arise' (1974.120).

Though comparatively weak in semantic content, *was* is by no means devoid of meaning. In ascribing a temporary quality to *George* and expressing the temporal relationship as well as presenting the ascription of quality as a fact (implementing the indicative mood), it conveys information that participates in the development of the communication. Under the circumstances, it is on account of such information that it becomes transitional. (Simultaneously it serves as an exponent of person and number. On account of this information, it is thematic.) Any linguistic element — or vehicle for that matter — conveying some item or items of meaning participates in the development of the communication and hence becomes a carrier of a degree of CD. This necessarily raises the question of what degree of CD is to be assigned to *was*.

In my approach, *rude* would not be interpreted as a verb in the semantic structure of the sentence under examination. I simply regard the notion of

'rudeness' as implemented by the adjective *rude*, which performs the syntactic function of a subject complement. In reference to the semantic level I do not use any morphological or syntactic concepts. In my approach such concepts are consistently linked with the actual formal implementations. In this point, Chafe's approach is evidently not identical with mine. In terms of the three-level approach to syntax, I do not think that I can be accused of failing to distinguish clearly between the semantic level and the grammatical level.

Chafe further finds that the relation of the temporal and modal exponents of the verb (or the inflexion of the verb, in his terminology; cf. Chafe 1970.167-84) to the assumption a speaker makes about what is in the addressee's consciousness is a matter of some interest (1974.120). Intentionally refraining from going into detail, he suggests 'that there is no reason to believe that tense or aspect information is something of which the addressee can be assumed to be partly but not completely conscious' (ib.). He proposes 'that tenses in themselves never carry anything but given information; new information regarding temporal orientation is conveyed by adverbs' (ib.). He concludes that 'in general, it is hard to see from the Czech writings that the notion of degrees of consciousness, or a gamut of communicative dynamism, is supported from linguistic evidence' (ib.).

It must be borne in mind that in Chafe's approach the givenness of a piece of information is due to the speaker's assumption that this piece of information is present in the addressee's consciousness. In my approach, however, givenness is to be understood in terms of retrievability from the immediately relevant context, i.e. in terms of context dependence. In these terms, the temporal orientation expressed by the verb may indeed be present in the immediately relevant context and hence retrievable from it, but it may also be absent from it and hence irretrievable, the verb initiating a change in temporal orientation. With due alterations, the same applies to modal orientation. Adverbial elements may or may not co-express irretrievable temporal or modal orientation, the finite verb being capable of serving as sole conveyer of such orientation.

In essence, however, the transitional function consists in establishing a link between the thematic and the non-thematic information within a sentence or clause. Under the conditions stipulated, the ultimate communicative purpose to be fulfilled by the structure *George/He was very rude* is to inform the addressee that George was very rude, not — for instance — that the rude person was George. Under the conditions stipulated, the core (rheme) of the information, 'extreme rudeness', is built upon the foundation (theme), provided by the information named 'George'. The ascription of rudeness to George — in other words, the linking of 'George' with 'rudeness' — is irretrievable information. The establishment of the link between the thematic information and the non-thematic information is an act of communication that is unique and exclusively performed by the sentence structure used at the moment of utterance and/or perception. Viewed in this light, *was* is a vehicle of information and conveys irretrievable information even if the temporal and modal indications expressed by it were repeated from the immediately relevant preceding context.

The discussion of one possible use of the sentence structure *George/He was very rude* in the act of communication (under the conditions stipulated) has shown that sentence elements do not contribute to the development of the communication in an equal way. The element that completes the development of the communication within the sentence by expressing the piece of information towards which the development is oriented contributes more to this develop-

ment than the element that merely provides the foundation upon which the communication develops. The element performing a mediatory role naturally ranks between the two, for it neither starts nor closes the development of the communication within the sentence or clause. This corroborates the assumption that the sentence can display more degrees of CD than two.

By way of closing my notes, I feel I should remind the reader that Mathesius deliberately avoided the terms 'psychological subject' and 'psychological predicate', replacing them by terms that he considered purely linguistic. This is what he says in a paper that is regarded as a programmatic declaration of the problems and aims of the inquiry into functional sentence perspective: '... excessive proximity of terms psychological subject and psychological predicate to terms grammatical subject and grammatical predicate by no means adds to clarity in distinguishing the two things which are basically different. Moreover, psychological coloring of the two terms contributed, it seems, to the fact that the whole question was pushed aside from the realm of official linguistics. This is to be regretted since the very relationship between the information-bearing structure and formal analysis of the sentence is one of the most characteristic traits of a language' (Mathesius 1975:468). I am not referring to Mathesius' dictum in support of a refutation of Chafe's observation on the speaker's assumptions concerning the state of addressee's consciousness. Linguistic and psychological phenomena objectively co-exist and enter into mutual relationship. Heuristically speaking, however, they have to be kept separate if their relationship is to be adequately interpreted.

The present notes have concentrated on Chafe's critique of the theory of FSP. It is to be regretted that a comparison of Chafe's approach and that of the theory of FSP has been outside the scope of the present paper. Such a comparison would have to concentrate mainly on such concept as givenness, contrastiveness, definiteness, subjecthood and topicality, concepts that are of paramount importance not only to the approaches of Chafe and the theory of FSP, but to functional linguistics in general.

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K NĚKTERÝM ZÁKLADNÍM OTÁZKÁM FUNKČNÍ PERSPEKTIVY VĚTNÉ (aktuálního členění větného)

II

K POJETÍ STARÉ A NOVÉ INFORMACE A VÝPOVĚDNÍ DYNAMIČNOSTI U WALLACE L. CHAFA

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