

# FSP and the essence of a text

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper presents the results of a small-scale research aiming at the exploration of the potential of FSP for a text content description. The research task here was to look at how the carriers of the theme and the rheme capture the essence of a text, or in other words, how much they “tell” what the text is about. The results of the FSP analysis were compared to the text content description achieved by the use keywords. The initial hypothesis that a set of theme and rheme carriers captures the content of a text more precisely than a set of keywords was confirmed.

## KEYWORDS

FSP, text content description, keyword, thematic track

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Jan Firbas’s seminal publication of *Functional Sentence Perspective in Written and Spoken Communication* (1992) triggered a great variety of spin-off studies ranging from hyper-syntax over to overall textual analysis.

FSP research has spun off in various directions. It gave rise to the so-called Brno School represented among others by Svoboda (1981, 1987), who substantially contributed to the elaboration of Firbas’s theory, and most recently there have been inspiring studies written by Chamonikolasová (2005, 2010), Chamonikolasová and Adam (2005) and Adam (2011, 2013). In the Department of English Language and ELT Methodology of the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, various aspects of Firbasian theory have been elaborated in the works of Dušková (1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2005, 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2015) and her pupils.

The present paper was intended as a pre-sequel to a more extensive study looking at how FSP can be useful in automated descriptions of text content in order to make search engines more effective. The research task here was to look at how the carriers of the theme and the rheme capture the essence of a text, or in other words, how much they “tell” what the text is about. The results of the FSP analysis regarding the theme carriers and the rheme carriers were then compared to the set of keywords assigned to the texts under examination. The initial hypothesis predicted that the set of theme and rheme carriers would provide a more accurate picture of the text content than the set of keywords.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology unwound from the aim of the study, i.e. to compare two potential methods of text content description: keywords and theme/rheme carriers. Five short texts from quality online newspapers were selected, each of about 360 words in length. The topics varied from art, technology, cooking, and science, to social issues.

The FSP analysis of each of the texts followed. A twofold examination of each sentence, viewed as a basic communicative field, was performed. The sentence elements were assessed as carriers of FSP functions onto which the dynamic semantic functions were mapped in the next step. As for the latter, two scales of dynamic semantic functions were considered, the Presentation Scale and the Quality Scale. The analysis aimed at detecting sets of theme carriers and sets of rheme carriers; thematic tracks were identified as well as one-time themes, and rhematic parts of sentences were scrutinized in order to isolate the rheme proper carriers.

The second part of the experiment ensued in addressing five linguists with the experience of identifying keywords in texts, i.e. having a history of publishing their own material wherein isolating the keywords is part of the process. Their task was to isolate five keywords in each of the texts under examination. The outcome (incorporating the answers of all five linguists and the author of the study) was evaluated into a representative set of keywords for each text.

Finally, the present writer compared the set of rheme (proper) and theme carriers to the set of keywords in each of the texts.

## 3. RESULTS

The texts under examination altogether consist of 91 basic distributional fields, some of them very complex, and 43 subfields, i.e. fields of second and lower ranks. The example below illustrates a frequent type of a complex sentence functioning as a basic distributional field with an embedded clause functioning as a distributional field of a second rank (in italics), which required a further analysis (cf. example 1a).

- (1) The researchers (Th, B) say (Tr, Q) *IVF is a powerful tool to help endangered species of dog such as the African wild dog (Rh, Sp).*
- (1a) IVF (Th-1) is (Tr-1, Q) *a powerful tool to help endangered species of dog such as the African wild dog (Rh, Sp).*

In the brackets the standard abbreviations of FSP and semantic dynamic functions (DSFs) respectively, are adduced. The dynamic semantic functions reflect the type of scale implementing them, i.e. the Quality Scale with the DSFs of Setting (Set), Bearer of Quality (B), Quality (Q), Specification (Sp), and Further Specification (FSp). The Presentation Scale then implements DSFs of Setting (Set), Presentation (Pr) and Phenomenon to Be Presented (Ph), see also Adam (2002). The FSP functions within a dis-

tributional field of a second rank are indicated with -1 and each rank lower is accordingly indicated, i.e. FSP functions within a distributional field of a third rank are indicated with -2, a fourth rank with -3, etc.

In sum 134 distributional fields were analysed (on average 27 distributional fields per text), out of these there were 4 presentation sentences (which amounts to 3%), which are presented below, the rhematic part in italics (the square brackets indicate a part of the sentence left out due to its irrelevance):

- (2) [...] but all of the products (Th, Set) contained (Tr, Pr) *an identical amount of the same active ingredient, ibuprofen lysine (Rh, Ph)*
- (3) *A separate court hearing (Rh, Ph)* will be held (Tr, Pr) *to determine if the company may face fines (Rh, Sp).*
- (4) *Frozen embryos (Rh, Ph)* were implanted (Tr, Pr) in a female dog (Th, Set) *using techniques similar to those used in human fertility clinics (Rh, Sp).*
- (5) *The world's first "test tube" puppies (Rh-1, Ph)* have been born (Tr-1, Pr) after years of attempts (Th-1, Set), [say (Tr, Q) scientists in the US (Th, B)].

Example 2 implements the Presentation Scale with locative subject (Dušková 1998), examples 3 and 4 implement the so-called Extended Presentation Scale (Chamonikolasová and Adam 2005) where first a phenomenon is presented onto the scene, and then it is extended by Specification (Sp), i.e. an additional piece of information carrying a higher degree of communicative dynamism than the presented phenomenon itself. Interestingly, examples 3, 4, and 5 contain a presentation verb in the passive voice. As Firbas (1992: 63) observes, "The sentences with verbs in the passive demonstrate that the meaning of appearance/existence on the scene is also conveyed by transitive verbs. Bringing a phenomenon into existence (causing it to appear on the scene) is unmistakably implied by sentences expressing production and a goal affected by it. An effected goal is an outcome (result, consequence) of a production process: it has been brought by it into existence."

### 3.1 KEYWORDS

Table 1 below illustrates the first step in assessing the acquired data. It presents a working table with all the keywords which were identified in the text '*Banksy uses Steve Jobs artwork to highlight refugee crisis*'. The keywords are organized in accordance with the actual input by the addressed linguists (Subjects 1 — 6), i.e. the first keyword identified appears as keyword *a* (KW<sub>a</sub>), the second keyword identified as key word *b* (KW<sub>b</sub>), etc.

Further on the present writer worked with the schemes introducing the results of evaluating the data according to the frequency of occurrence with the most frequently identified keyword in the KW<sub>1</sub> slot and the least frequent one(s) in the KW<sub>5</sub> slot, cf. Table 2 below. In the rest of the text only this summarizing part of the tables, i.e. the representative set of keywords for each particular text is adduced.

	KWa	KWb	KWc	KWd	KWe
Subject 1	graffiti	Banksy	refugee crisis	Calais	Dismaland art project
Subject 2	migrant	refugee	crisis	Banksy	graffiti
Subject 3	refugee crisis	graffiti	migrant	Banksy	Steve Jobs
Subject 4	migrant	refugee crisis	Banksy	graffiti	Calais
Subject 5	artwork	crisis	refugee	migrant	graffiti
Subject 6	Steve Jobs	refugee crisis	migration	migrants	graffiti

**TABLE 1:** Keywords identified in the text *Banksy uses Steve Jobs artwork to highlight the refugee crisis*

KW1	KW2	KW3	KW4	KW5
Graffiti	Refugee crisis Refugee Crisis	Migrant	Banksy	Calais, Steve Jobs, artwork, Dismaland art project, migration

**TABLE 2:** Table 1 re-evaluated according to the frequency of occurrence of the keywords identified in the text *Banksy uses Steve Jobs artwork to highlight refugee crisis* (301 words)

### 3.2 KEYWORDS AND THE THEME CARRIERS

In the next step the representative set of keywords was compared with the set of theme carriers in each of the texts. Two schemes are adduced for each text, one presenting the isolated keywords ranging from the most frequently isolated keyword (KW1) to the least frequent one(s) (KW5). The other scheme then presents the identified theme carriers in relation to their dynamic-semantic function, i.e. either as Quality Bearer (in the Quality Scale) or Setting (both in the Presentation Scale and in the Quality Scale). The slots reflect the chronology of appearance in the text under examination, i.e. the first theme carrier in the table (One-time Theme 1) appeared first in the text, etc.

Texts 2, 3, 4, and 5 display themes organized into thematic tracks. In case a theme carrier appeared as a part of a thematic track, the slot is divided into more cells, each presenting a unit within the track, see Table 7 where one of the thematic tracks runs as follows: *Australia's consumer watchdog — The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) — the ACCC — ACCC chairman Rod Sims*.

The ordering reflecting the chronology of appearance in the text under examination applies here as well, thus thematic track 1 starts with an item appearing first in the text, thematic track 2 with an item appearing second, etc.

#### 3.2.1 TEXT 1 BANKSY USES STEVE JOBS ARTWORK TO HIGHLIGHT REFUGEE CRISIS (301 WORDS)

Looking at the two sets, i.e. the keywords (cf. Table 2) and the theme carriers (cf. Table 3), we can see that there is a considerable overlap between the two sets of words. In fact, except of “migration” and “refugee crisis”, which appear in the set of the carriers of the rheme, all keywords appear in the set of theme carriers. On the other hand, the set of theme carriers mediated the following additional information:

- a) word play, viz. *bemusement park*, the *Dismal aid* project
- b) localization in time and space: this summer, September, on the closing night of Dismaland, Weston-Super-Mare

Theme carriers									
<b>Quality Bearers</b>	Banksy	The artist	His temporary „bemusement“ park in Weston-Super-Mare	The „Dismal aid“ project	The work	The graffiti	Migration	Steve Jobs	Apple
<b>Settings</b>	In his hand	During his trip to Calais	This summer	On the closing night of Dismaland	Since the park closed in September	The camp			

**TABLE 3:** Theme carriers organised according to the chronology of appearance in the text *Banksy uses Steve Jobs artwork to highlight refugee crisis*

### 3.2.2 TEXT 2 FOR THE FORAGER OR FRANCOPHILE, A DANDELION SALAD (336 WORDS)

Here relatively many keywords do not find their counterpart in the set of the theme carriers, viz. *salad*, *folk medicine cure-all*, *Francophile*, *the forager*, *spring tonic* and *green*. As well as in text 1, the analysis showed that all these units are found in the set of the carriers of the rheme. It is worth mentioning that a good deal of these rheme carriers (three in this text, viz. *green*, *spring tonic*, and *Francophile*) are found in the last slot KW5, which displays the greatest variety both lexically and in terms of FSP function.

In comparison to the set of keywords, the set of theme carriers in this text mediated the following additional information: details about the usage of dandelion in cuisine as well as details about the achieved taste of the meal as the outcome of the recipe, and the information about time and space:

- a) details: soups, tinctures, wine; the garlicky, mustardy vinaigrette
- b) localization in time and space: spring (foods), farmers' markets, supermarkets

KW1	KW2	KW3	KW4	KW5
Dandelion Dandelion salad Salad	Forager Foraging	Folk medicine Folk medicine cure-all	Healthy diet Health	Recipe Cooking Food Spring tonic Fresh taste Francophile Green

**TABLE 4:** Keywords reflecting the frequency with which they were identified in the text *For the Forager or Francophile, a Dandelion Salad*

Quality Bearers	Thematic track 1	Thematic track 2	One-time theme 1	One-time theme 2	One-time theme 3	One-time theme 4	One-time theme 5	One-time theme 6
	The poor dandelion	Tender dandelion leaves	Modern science	The briefest research on the topic	Farmers' markets	Supermarkets	This recipe	The garlicky, mustardy vinaigrette
	dandelion	Larger leaves						
Settings	Among celebrated spring foods like ramps, nettles, green garlic. Asparagus, sorrel and rhubarb	Used in soups or tinctures or made into wine	If you love foraging		Should you prefer to forage the urban way			

**TABLE 5:** Theme carriers organised according to the chronology of appearance in the texts *For the Forager* or *Francophile, a Dandelion Salad*

3.2.3 TEXT 3 NUROFEN OWNER RECKITT BENCKISER ORDERED TO STOP SELLING ‘MISLEADING’ TARGET SPECIFIC PAINKILLERS (399 WORDS)

KW1	KW2	KW3	KW4	KW5
Painkiller	Nurofen Nurofen owner	Court action Court ruling Court Australian court	Ibuprofen Ibuprofen pills	ACCC Mislead Trick Product Pain products Pain relief Market withdrawal Australia Advertising

**TABLE 6:** Keywords reflecting the frequency with which they were identified in the text *Nurofen owner Reckitt Benckiser ordered to stop selling ‘misleading’ target specific painkillers*

The overlap between the two sets identified in this text is significant; except for *mislead*, *trick*, and *market withdrawal*, which appear in the set of the carriers of the rheme, all the keywords find their counterpart in the set of theme carriers. At the same time all the keywords from the set of the rheme carriers are found on the fifth position in the grid (KW5), which demonstrates the variability in FSP function of the words classified as keywords least frequently.

In the set of keywords isolated for this text, information crucial for the content of the text is missing, specifically the name of the company which represents the

Theme carriers									
Quality Bearers	Thematic track 1	Thematic track 2	Thematic track 3	Thematic track 4	Thematic track 5	One-time theme 1	One-time theme 2	One-time theme 3	One-time theme 4
	An Australian court	British consumer goods company Reckitt Benckiser	Australia's consumer watchdog  The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC)	Each of the four painkillers  None of the four products  All Nurofen products	Nurofen  A Nurofen spokesperson  Nurofen spokeswoman Montse Pena	Justice James Edelman	The case	Truth in advertising and consumer issues in the health and medical sectors	Any representations which are difficult for a consumer to test
<b>Settings</b>	In Australia	consumers							

**TABLE 7:** Theme carriers organised according to the chronology of appearance in the text *Nurofen* owner Reckitt Benckiser ordered to stop selling 'misleading' targeted specific painkillers

hypertheme of the text. Moreover, the set of theme carriers includes additional information regarding the names of the key characters in the report, viz.

- a) crucial information: Reckitt Benckiser
- b) details: Justice James Edelman, Nurofen spokeswoman Montse Pena

### 3.2.4 TEXT 4 WORLD'S FIRST IVF PUPPIES BORN TO SURROGATE MOTHER DOG (415 WORDS)

KW1	KW2	KW3	KW4	KW5
in-vitro fertilisation	Puppies IVP puppies Dog	Dog breeding Rare breeds	Endangered species Endangered species conservation	Genetics Technique New techniques Medicine Veterinary medicine Embryos Significant benefit Cornell University Surrogate mother Beagle-Spaniel Study

**TABLE 8:** Keywords reflecting the frequency with which they were identified in the text *World's first IVF puppies born to surrogate mother dog*

Looking at the two sets, we observe that four units identified as keywords, namely *endangered species conservation*, *genetics*, *surrogate mother*, and *significant benefit*, are missing in the set of theme carriers. They are all found among the rheme carriers. Moreover, except for the unit *endangered species conservation*, all these units appear on the fifth position in the grid (KW5).

In comparison to the set of keywords, the set of theme carriers mediated additional information as the name of the key character, the name of the journal quoted as a source of information adduced in the text under examination, and a hint that the process of freezing embryos poses a problem, viz.

- a) details regarding the names: Lead researcher Dr Alex Travis, the journal PLoS One
- b) additional details: problems with freezing embryos



Theme carriers						
Quality Bearers	Thematic track	Thematic track	Thematic track	Thematic track	One-time theme	One-time theme
	Scientists in the US	The in-vitro fertilisation success	The seven beagle and cross-bred beagle-spaniel puppies	Problems with freezing embryos	Techniques	The research published in the journal PLoS One
	researchers at Cornell University		The puppies			
	the group	IVF	Their existence			
	Lead researcher Dr Alex Travis, form Cornell college of veterinary medicine					
	The researchers	In-vitro fertilisation	all but one			
	Dr Travis					
<b>Settings</b>	In the past	Since the mid-1970s	Now	A female dog		
				In medicine		

**TABLE 9:** Theme carriers organised according to the chronology of appearance in the text *World's first IVF puppies born to surrogate mother dog*

### 3.2.5 TEXT 5 CYBERBULLYING INSURANCE? THAT'S A REAL THING ONE COMPANY IS OFFERING IN THE UNITED KINGDOM (351 WORDS)

KW1	KW2	KW3	KW4	KW5
Cyberbullying	Trolling Online trolling	Harassment Online harassment	Insurance Chubb insurance	United Kingdom Victims Coverage Threat Swatting

**TABLE 10:** Keywords reflecting the frequency with which they were identified in the text *Cyberbullying insurance? That's a real thing one company is offering in the United Kingdom*

Here, three of the keywords — all of them occupying the fifth position in the grid (KW<sub>5</sub>) — do not find their counterpart in the set of theme carriers, namely *the United Kingdom*, *coverage*, and *threat*. They all are present in the set of the carriers of the rheme; *the United Kingdom* as a postmodification within the rhematic noun phrase *some customers in the United Kingdom*.

In comparison to the set of keywords, the set of theme carriers in this text mediated additional information regarding the names of some of the key characters in the report, viz.

*Tara Parchment, UK and Ireland private clients' manager and Amy Stater, the victim of a sustained campaign of online harassment apparently linked to her son's online activities.*

### 3.3 KEYWORDS AND THE THEME CARRIERS – SUMMARY

Comparing the set of keywords and the set of theme carriers in each of the texts, we have seen a significant overlap between the two sets. We have also seen that the set of the carriers of the theme contained additional information (e.g. names of other participants in the story), word play, and localization in time and space. Moreover, in text 3, key information regarding the text content description was missing in the set of keywords (Reckitt Benckiser), but it was conveyed by one of the theme carriers.

Interestingly, some of the information perceived as crucial was expressed in the rhematic parts of the distributional fields. Mostly, the information is denoted by the keywords on the fifth position in the grid representing the isolated keywords (KW<sub>5</sub>), i.e. there was no consent among the linguists about the significance of these keywords in the description of the content of the particular article.

### 3.4 KEYWORDS AND THE RHEME CARRIERS

Often the rhematic part of a distributional field was very long and complex, as is exemplified by the first two opening sentences in the article on Banksy's new graffiti below (the rhematic part in italics):

- (6) Banksy has revealed *a new artwork, sprayed on a wall in the Calais refugee camp called "the Jungle", intended to address negative attitudes towards the thousands of people living there.*

Theme carriers						
Quality Bearers	Thematic track	One-time theme	Thematic track	One-time theme	One-time theme	One-time theme
Online trolling	A harasser	The victim	insurer	This new insurance benefit	The internet	73 percent of American adults
Some of its most extreme forms like swatting	Amy Stater, the victim of a sustained campaign of online harassment apparently linked to her son's online activities	Chubb insurance				
cyberbullying		The company				
trolling		Tara Parchment, UK and Ireland private clients' manager				
the harassment						
<b>Settings</b>	Earlier this year					

**TABLE 11:** Theme carriers organised according to the chronology of appearance in the text *Cyberbullying insurance? That's a real thing one company is offering in the United Kingdom*

- (7) The work depicts *the late Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, with a black bin bag thrown over one shoulder and an original Apple computer in his hand.*

Typically, the rhematic parts of sentences were informationally packed. However, we have also seen this trend in the thematic parts of sentences, just as in example 8 below (the thematic part underlined):

- (8) [“I feel helpless,”] Amy Stater, the victim of a sustained campaign of online harassment apparently linked to her son’s online activities, told *Fusion* earlier this year.

The tendency to pack sentences with information is probably related to the space-information tension in newspaper reporting, which is then reflected in the effort to provide as much information as possible in limited space.

Due to the very heavy rhemes it was difficult to say what type of information the rhemes mediate in comparison with the keyword, the variety of information provided in the rhemes being very wide. However, one type of information stood out. It was the reference to sources as in examples 9 and 10 below (the square brackets mark the distributional subfield preceding the one comprising the rheme in question which is adduced in italics):

- (9) [*“In vitro fertilisation is a really powerful tool to help preserve endangered species of dog,”*] he told the *BBC*.
- (10) [*“I feel helpless,”*] Amy Stater, the victim of a sustained campaign of online harassment apparently linked to her son’s online activities, told *Fusion* earlier this year.

Such examples reflect the fact that referring to sources is an important part of news reporting.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The present writer hopes to have shown that the set of theme carriers captures the content of the text more accurately (e.g. key information fell out from the set of keywords, more details provided) which is in accordance with the initial hypothesis. In complementation with the set of rheme carriers a more accurate description of the text content is still to be supplied. In future it will be interesting to look at the extensive rhematic parts, examine them and classify the types of information they mediate.

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