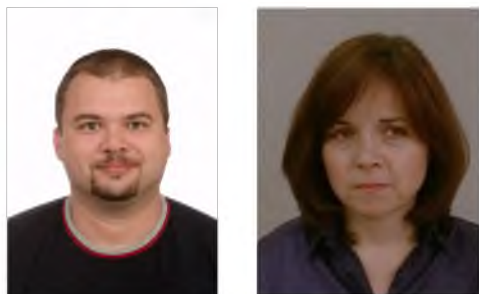


Dynamic and Static Semantics of the English Verb in Motion Events: An Attempt at an Integrated Approach

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Abstract:

The Firbasian theory of functional sentence perspective (FSP) seems to have vindicated its firm place in the area of theories of information structure. Advocating a dynamic approach to the semantic analysis, FSP represents a logical counterpart of what is usually referred to as static semantics. Innovatively enough, the present paper looks at the role of the English verb acting in motion events from the point of view of both dynamic and static semantics. The authors believe that such an approach may reveal more about the functional character of the transitional verbs operating in Quality and Presentation dynamic semantic scales respectively. To be more specific, the research corpus is made up by sentences containing self-agentive locomotion verbs found within selected narrative and dialogic texts from the New Testament.

Key Words:

Dynamic semantics; static semantics; FSP; self-agentive locomotion verbs; dynamic scales.

Introduction

In the framework of the Firbasian theory of functional sentence perspective (FSP) the English verb nearly prototypically tends to be the mediator (i.e. transition) between the theme and the rheme. The present paper discusses the semantic characteristics of the English verb operating in the transitional sphere of the clause, with special regard to **self-agentive locomotion verbs**. The theory of FSP – applying naturally above all dynamic semantics – will be amended by the corresponding insights deriving from the area of static semantics of the verb. Current research has shown that outcomes of dynamic semantic analysis may be organically and fruitfully complemented by its static counterpart; as a result, the overall picture of the language under examination is more coherent. The paper aims to show that static semantics – more specifically, verbal semantic content – plays an important role in shaping the resultant dynamic semantic scale of a sentence (the term is used in the Firbasian sense, see e.g. Firbas 1992). The semantic aspects of verbs operating in sentences implementing the Presentation or Quality Scale respectively are examined and exemplified by means of statistical and FSP analysis of a sample corpus based on religious discourse.

1 The Sample Corpus

The sample corpus consists of the following integral, predominantly narrative passages of *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (hereafter abbreviated *NIV*): six chapters from the *Gospel According to St. Matthew* (sections Mt 1:18-4:25; 5:1-12; 6:9-13); three abridged

chapters of the *Gospel According to St. John* (verses J 1:1-9.14; 1:19-28; 3:1-18; 4:1-42); two extracts from the *Gospel According to St. Luke* (Lk 2:1-20; 10:30-34); and, finally, two passages from the *Book of Acts of the Apostles* (Acts 2:1-4; 4:31-35). To sum up, the analysis explores 167 biblical verses containing altogether 404 distributional fields. This makes up a sample corpus of over 4,200 words (for the corpus in full, see Adam 2009).

2 FSP

The theory of FSP – rooted in the functional-structural teaching of the Prague School and especially of its Brno branch – explores the information structure of utterances and the relationships between the units of information in the utterance in the immediately relevant context. Thus it approaches a piece of language from the dynamic perspective. According to Firbas, who elaborated the theory into its fully-fledged and renowned shape (summarised in Firbas 1992), the sentence is a field of semantic and syntactic relations that in turn provides a distributional field of degrees of communicative dynamism (CD), which is defined as “the extent to which the element contributes towards the development of the communication” (Firbas 1964: 270). The degrees of CD are determined by the interplay of FSP factors: linear modification, context and semantic structure, which are joined by intonation in spoken discourse (Firbas 1992: 14-6). In accordance with the distribution of the degrees of CD, each sentence constituent corresponds to one communicative unit. Units carrying a lower degree of CD form the thematic part of the sentence and those carrying a higher degree of CD form – together with so called transition – the non-thematic part of the sentence.

Every sentence implements one of the dynamic semantic scales, which functionally reflect the distribution of communicative dynamism and operate irrespective of word order. In principle, Firbas distinguishes two types of the dynamic semantic scales: the Presentation Scale and the Quality Scale. In contrast with a static approach towards semantic functions of sentence constituents (e.g. affected participant, agent, instrument etc.), the dynamic semantic functions may change in the course of the act of communication; the same element may thus perform different functions in different contexts and under different conditions. The **Presentation Scale** (Pr-Scale) includes three basic dynamic semantic functions: firstly, there is a scene (Setting) of the action, i.e. typically temporal and spatial items of when and where the action takes place. Secondly, the existence or appearance on the scene is typically conveyed by a verb (Presentation of Phenomenon) and, thirdly, the major, most dynamic element (Phenomenon) is literally ushered onto the scene. The **Quality Scale** (Q-Scale) represents, in essence, an opposite in comparison with the Presentation Scale. Something new, context-independent (Specification) is said about the subject (Bearer of Quality). The verb usually performs the transitory DSF of Quality. Naturally, all actions typically have a scene and happen at some time and in some place (Setting).

3 The English Verb and FSP: Static & Dynamic Approach

From the point of view of dynamic semantics (as adopted by FSP), the English verb tends to have a relatively empty meaning and serves as a mediator between the subject and other sentence elements. Firbas sees the English verb to be also a transition between the theme and the rheme. Under circumstances, the verb either ascribes a quality to the subject, bridging its specification, or presents something new on the scene if it expresses the existence or appearance on the scene with “explicitness or sufficient implicitness” (Firbas 1995: 65; cf Adam 2009: 92-4). Elaborating on the dynamic character of FSP treatment of semantics, Firbas claims that “through the interplay of FSP factors, FSP determines the positions of communicative units, i.e. their degrees of CD, in the development of the communication that takes place within the sentence” (Firbas 1991: 89). Also Vachek, observing an analogous tendency of the English verb, argues that “in English the old Indo-European function of the

verb i.e. that of denoting some action has been most perceptibly weakened” (Vachek 1995: 23). Apart from that, being a part of an analytical language, “the English finite verb form appears to be much less dynamic in character (...) and frequently ceases to be the unmatched instrument of predication, being often reduced to something that very closely resembles a copula” (Vachek 1976: 342).

As has been mentioned above, from the point of view of dynamic semantics (in the Firbasian sense), verbs typically represent transitional elements (cf., e.g., Firbas 1992 and Adam 2009) in that they are endowed with the function of linking the thematic and the non-thematic section of the sentence (Firbas 1992: esp. 91, and Adam 2009: esp.92-94). From the point of view of static semantics, verbs represent the main organising elements in the formation of the sentence (it is well known that they shape the sentence in that they play a decisive role in determining participant roles).¹ It may be argued that this formative function of verbs in the static semantic structuration of the sentence runs counter to their (prototypical) transitional status (in terms of the degrees of communicative dynamism as placed on them). This discrepancy between static semantics and dynamic semantics is, however, imaginary only. It can be reconciled by appealing to the fact that the formative function of the verb subsumes the verb’s mediating (transitional) role (meant here in terms of static semantics) – in other words, that the verb plays a mediating role both in the dynamic semantic structuration of the sentence and in its static semantic structuration. An explanation may be offered. As mentioned, in the theory of FSP verbs have (in the majority of cases at least) a mediating position. This position of verbs in the dynamic semantic structuration of the sentence is, in actual fact, in accord with their position in the “static” semantic structuration of the sentence. Let us recall that verbs play a crucial role in determining the type of participant roles. It should be realised that, in doing so, they also determine the nature of the relations holding between the participants (this is only natural because the type of a participant role is constituted also by its relation to the other participants in a sentence). That is, verbs provide the link between the participants and, in this respect, they fulfil a mediating role. It should be added that verbs bring into mutual relationship both participant roles (arguments) and non-participant roles (adjuncts). That is, their mediating role is not confined to participant only but covers also non-participants, which are, as aptly formulated by Frawley (1992: 148), “less structurally attached to the verb”. In the case of motion situations, verbs co-specify (together with spatial prepositions) the relation between the moving entity and some spatial point, i.e. they specify the entity’s (changing) position. The spatial point in question may be a source or a goal of a motion, or the entity’s position on the path.

Before looking into the formation of dynamic semantic scales, a description of the verbs’ lexico-semantic content with special regard to their use in biblical texts will be offered.

4 Self-Agentive Verbs and their Use in Biblical Texts

Self-agentive locomotion verbs are commonly classified into two groups, manner of motion verbs and path verbs (Asher and Sablayrolles 1996, Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1992, Miller and Johnson-Laird 1976, Rosen 1984, Talmy 1985, *inter alia*). **Manner of motion verbs** lexicalise the physical modality of motion (*walk, run, swim, dance, strut, wander, stagger*, etc.) but, in contrast to the so-called **path verbs**, are mute about the direction of motion unless they combine with a path phrase (as in *John walked into the room, John ran to the park, John swam towards the shore*). Path verbs have a largely different lexico-semantic content. They

¹ It should be added at this point that what also comes into play is the meaning of a given construction. Syntactic constructions are not mere realizations of certain components of verbal semantic structure but are endowed with their own semantic potential. The resultant meaning of the sentence is thus an outcome of the interaction between the meaning of the verb and the meaning of the construction (on this see esp. Croft 2003 and Goldberg 1995).

do not encode information about a manner of the motion but lexicalise “the configuration and position of the path, often specified in relation to the direction of motion” (Matsumoto 1996: 190), cf. *John came/ left/ went/ arrived/ returned/ appeared*.²

In the biblical texts under analysis (both narrative and dialogic texts) the overwhelming majority of self-agentive motion verbs are those that belong to the category of path verbs. This fact is undoubtedly part of the encoder’s narrative strategy. An explanation will now be offered.

As mentioned, manner of motion verbs lexicalise the physical modality of the mover’s displacement. This means that the change in the mover’s position is presented as a result of a concrete type of his physical activity (when one walks, for example, one changes location by means of manipulating his body in a specific, concrete way). This fact has an important ramification in the distribution of the semantic weight as placed on the mover and the movement. More specifically, the presence of meaning components expressing the concrete physical modality of motion distract, to a certain degree, the decoder’s attention from the simple fact of the mover’s change of location to the physical attributes of the motion, i.e. to how the movement is carried out (on this see also Kudrnáčová 2008: 45). For example, in the motion situation expressed in *John walked to the park* the attention is allocated between the mover, his displacement (including its goal) *and* the manner of the displacement.

In addition, the manner in which the motion is executed may be indicative of the mental and/or physical state of the mover. For example, when one runs somewhere, one may be in an aroused state of mind (the verb *run* may thus be used in situations in which no “running” is carried out). Certain manner of motion verbs are, in this respect, clearly indexical, i.e. they are endowed with the function of pointing to the inner self of the mover (cf. “strutting to a place” or “wandering about a place”). From this it follows that in situations grasped by means of manner of motion verbs it is not only the identity of the mover that is part of the motion scenario but, potentially, also the mover’s inner state.

Path verbs, by contrast, are mute about the concrete physical modality of motion and profile the motion as a bare change in the moving entity’s localisation. In other words, the change in the mover’s position is stripped of aspects of meaning that express the physical modality of motion (and that may also point to the state of the mover’s self). This fact has an impact on the distribution of semantic weight as placed on the entity and its displacement. More specifically, the absence of manner components makes it possible to place semantic weight on the identity of the mover (not on his inner characteristics) and on the path of a given movement (including the goal of the movement and/or its source).

At this point in the discussion, a remark concerning the use of path verbs is in order. As mentioned, path verbs present motion as a simple change of location abstracted from components of meanings that characterise the moving entity, including the entity’s causal role with respect to the occurrence of the motion.³ Path verbs are thus well suited to designate abstract movements. Cf. the following two illustrative corpus examples with the verbs *appear* and *enter*, in which no real, physical movement occurs (in ex. [1] the event of appearance occurs in one’s inner vision):

² This strict partition between manner of motion verbs and path verbs has led some writers (e.g., Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1992:252) to the conclusion that ‘manner of motion’ is in complementary distribution with ‘direction’.

³ By this it is meant that, as opposed to situations grasped by means of manner of motion verbs, the mover is not causally related to the occurrence of the movement. One outcome of this fact is the impossibility of forming reflexive constructions (cf. **John went himself to the door* vs. *John walked himself to the door*) and causative constructions (cf. **John went Mary to the door*, **Mary was gone to the door* vs. *John walked Mary to the door*, *Mary was walked to the door*).

[1] *But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, /.../."* (The Birth of Jesus Christ, Matthew 1:20)

[2] *"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"* (Jesus Teaches Nicodemus, John 3:4)

In view of the differences between path verbs and manner of motion verbs as discussed thus far, it does not come as a surprise to learn that in the biblical texts under analysis what is typically expressed is not the manner of motion but the simple fact of translocation – hence the overwhelming use of path verbs mentioned above (see also section 4.2 below). This observation only corroborates the findings deriving from recent research into genre specifics of religious discourse: a biblical narrative / dialogue is not a genuine one but a rather stylised text with didactic and theological flavour. As such, it does not primarily depict the characters' qualities or their feelings and experiences, but focuses on the mere fact that they have arrived on the spot and are there; thus, they foreground their existence / appearance on the scene (cf. Adam 2008: 46-47).

4.1 Presentation Scale

Quite expectedly, then, in motion situations that are instantiations of the presentation scale only path verbs are resorted to. Being mute about the concrete physical realisation of the movement, these types of verb help to direct the decoder's attention to the identity of the mover. Cf. the following examples with the path verbs *come*, *appear* and *follow*:

[3] *When a Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?"* (Jesus Talks with a Samaritan Woman, John 4:7)

[4] *The woman said, "I know that Messiah (called Christ) is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."* (Jesus Talks with a Samaritan Woman, John 4:25)

[5] *Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John.* (The Baptism of Jesus, Matthew 3:13)

[6] *The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."* (The Temptation of Jesus, Matthew 4:3)

[7] *Then the devil left him, and the angels came and attended him.* (The Temptation of Jesus, Matthew 4:11)

[8] *Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.* (Jesus Heals the Sick, Matthew 4:25)

Naturally, a prototypical presentation scale is implemented by means of the verb *appear*. This verb renders the path as strictly bipolar, which means that the processual part of the movement is completely pushed into the background. The upshot is that the mover's 'appearance on the scene' (in the Firbasian terminology) has as a markedly contrastive value (cf. Kudrnáčová 2006). This makes it possible to place the greatest semantic weight on the mover, i.e. on the 'phenomenon appearing on the scene'. Cf.:

[9] *Suddenly a great company of heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests."* (The Shepherds and the Angels, Luke 2:13-14)

[10] *An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.* (The Shepherds and the Angels, Luke 2:9)

[11] *Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.* (The Visit of the Magi, Matthew 2:7)

From the point of view of FSP, it follows that the transitional verbs found within the Pr-scale (Pr-Verbs) present something new on the scene; this property is defined as an expression of “the existence or appearance on the scene with explicitness or sufficient implicitness (Firbas 1995: 65). Research clearly shows that all the Pr-verbs manifest – to a different extent – at least one of the two qualities examined: existence or appearance. The varying degree of the property is partly reflected by the fact that the property in question may be actually expressed either with explicitness or different degrees of implicitness. The Pr-verbs then, in accordance with their tendency to recede to the background, perform the presentation function, ushering the phenomenon on the scene of the communication. In this way, the observations made from the point of view static semantics are in full harmony with the conclusions drawn in the dynamic semantic realm of FSP.

4.2 Quality Scale

In this type of scale, both path verbs and also manner of motion verbs are used. In the analysed texts, the following path verbs are used: *come, go, appear, escape, leave, withdraw, return, follow, hurry off* and *enter*. Cf.:

[12] *They came out of the town and made their way toward him.* (The Disciples Rejoin Jesus, John 4: 30)

[13] *Now he had to go through Samaria.* (Jesus Talks with a Samaritan Woman, John 4: 4).

[14] *As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water.* (The Baptism of Jesus, Matthew 3:16)

[15] *“Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. /.../.”* (The Escape to Egypt, Matthew 2:13)

[16] *So he got up, took his child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod.* (The Escape to Egypt, Matthew 2:14-15)

[17] *Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth.* (The Return to Nazareth, Matthew 2:22-23)

[18] *When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee.* (Jesus Begins to Preach, Matthew 4:12)

[19] *At once they left their nets and followed him.* (The Calling of the First Disciples, Matthew 4:20)

[20] *So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.* (The Shepherds and the Angels, Luke 2:16)

[21] *Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. /.../.”* (Jesus Teaches Nicodemus, John 3:5)

Related to the semantic prominence given to the directionality of motion in these motion situations is the possibility of profiling the purpose of the motion Cf. the use of a final clause

in the following example (in FSP terminology, the infinitive non-finite clause performs a dynamic semantic function of a Specification of the verb):

[22] “/.../ *We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.*” (The Visit of the Magi, Matthew 2:2)

As has already been mentioned, manner of motion verbs are resorted to much less frequently in the biblical texts under analysis. In actual fact, only five (sic!) such verbs can be found within the total of 404 basic distributional fields, namely, *get up* (three times), *throw oneself down* (once), *run off* (once), *walk* (twice) and *sit down* (once) – as can be seen, the number of occurrences is very low. Cf.:

[23] *So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.* (The Return to Nazareth, Matthew 2:21)

[24] “*If you are the Son of God,*” *he said, “throw yourself down. /.../.”* (The Temptation of Jesus, Matthew 4:6)

[25] *They beat him up and ran off, leaving him half dead.* (The Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:30)

[26] *But when he saw the man, he walked by on the other side.* (The Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:31)

[27] *Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well.* (Jesus Talks with a Samaritan Woman, John 4:6)

Interestingly, manner of motion verbs only occur in the narrative biblical texts (the only exception is the verb *sit down*, cf. ex. [27] above). Their virtual absence in dialogic biblical texts may be taken as further evidence of the argumentation presented above, namely, that the presence of manner of motion components in the verbal semantic content induces allocation of the decoder’s attention between description of the manner of motion (which may potentially carry information about the state of the mover’s self) and the description of the directionality of the motion (on this see also Kudrnáčová 2006). In dialogic texts, what receives prominence is where the interlocutors move and what they say, not in which way they move (and in what kind of state they are). Symptomatically, in these texts motion situations are expressed predominantly by means of path verbs. The reason is quite obvious: path verbs are relatively empty (semantically light), hence they profile the identity of the interlocutors and their displacement, in this way help to direct the decoder’s attention to the content of the dialogue. Cf. two illustrative examples:

[28] *Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?” They came out of the town and made their way toward him.* (The Disciples Rejoin Jesus, John 4:28-30)

[29] *He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. /.../.”* (Jesus Teaches Nicodemus, John 3:2)

At this point in the discussion it should be added that although dynamic quality scales can be implemented by both by path verbs and manner of motion verbs, the two types of verb present motion situations in somewhat different ways. In motion situations rendered by means of path verbs, the relative emptiness of the verb’s semantic content ensures that what comes to the

fore is the mover and the path of the motion (recall that path verbs carry information about the properties of the path, not about the concrete physical modality of the motion). Cf.:

[30] *After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.* (The Visit of the Magi, Matthew 2:9)

[31] *When he saw the man, he felt sorry for him and went over to him.* (The Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:33-34)

In motion situations grasped by means of manner of motion verbs, the presence of meaning components expressing the concrete physical modality of the motion brings it about that the decoder's attention is allocated between the concrete physical realisation of the motion and its direction. In other words, manner of motion verbs necessitate the re-distribution of semantic weight as placed on these individual aspects of a motion situation. Cf.:

[32] *As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew.* (The Calling of the First Disciples, Matthew 1:18)

Conclusion

The present article focuses on the English verb (and its semantics) operating on the background of the Presentation and Quality Scale respectively. It has become clear that the application of both the dynamic and static semantic approach to the analysis can be fruitful and revealing, and opens vistas to new dimensions of research into the realm of FSP. Both these approaches appear to be complementary and their simultaneous application sheds more light on the interaction between dynamic semantics and static semantics.

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