On Some FSP Aspects of the Internet Chat
(With Special Regard to Presentation Scale Sentences)

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Abstract:
In the framework of the theory of functional sentence perspective (FSP) – summarised in Firbas 1992 – every sentence principally implements one of the so-called dynamic semantic scales, which functionally reflect the distribution of communicative dynamism and operate irrespective of word order. Generally speaking, Firbas distinguishes two types of the dynamic semantic scales: the Presentation Scale, in which a context-independent subject is presented on the scene, and the Quality Scale, where a specifying quality is ascribed to the subject. The present paper, focusing on the Presentation Scale sentences, sets out to discuss those that appear within the register of the Internet Chat. It strives to throw some light on their structure, function and their syntactic typology, with special regard to the textual qualities of this highly specific genre. The analysis offered deals with an authentic sample corpus of ca 6,300 words.

Key Words:
Presentation; Scale; FSP; Firbas; Internet; Chat;

Introduction

The present paper proposes to shed light on the operation of basic principles of the Firbasian theory of functional sentence perspective (FSP) within the sub-genre of the Internet Chat. In today's globalised and digitalised world, electronic communication seems to have taken over a substantial part of human interaction, supplying thus some of the "natural" communication channels. The language of on-line Internet chatgroups then occupies a somewhat specific place, being definitely a register *sui generis* (Crystal 2001: viii-ix). As such, it has been proven to manifest a number of highly peculiar graphical, syntactic, lexical make-up; for the sake of conciseness, only the most typical features of Internet chatting are enumerated here: use of abbreviations, emoticons, puns, playful spelling and orthography, capitalisation, intentional "errors", illogical sequences, use of interjections and expletives and other emotionally coloured lexical netspeak features, information value of consonants as opposed to vowels, problematic turn-taking, "spoken-written" character, intimate or even taboo topics discussed etc. (Crystal 2001; Hurtová 2010)

The principal topic of the present paper is the FSP analysis of a sample corpus of an Internet on-line chat-room, conducted with special regard to some typical aspects of the given sub-genre in terms of the theory of functional sentence perspective. Especially, the way phenomena are presented into communication (communicated via the so-called Presentation

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Scale sentences) will be discussed in greater detail, including a preliminary semantic syntactic typology of Presentation sentences.

1   Research Corpus

The FSP analysis will exploit the sample corpus of a chat-room on-line discussion, covering about 6,300 words and their FSP analyses, creating thus a body of ca 1000 basic distributional fields, i.e. basic interpretative units in FSP, which are technically counted as finite clauses. The data were collected on 21st March 2008 from 4 o'clock p.m. to 5 o'clock p.m. in the chat-room titled *'Talkcity – 20s'* on www.talkcity.com. It will be worth noting that the expression 'room' means here a virtual space that is bounded just by the number of logged-on participants who share the same need to communicate. For the sake of transparency, individual entries of participants (chatters), i.e. contributions were numbered successively 1-1000. Within every entry, the first expression in bold stated after the number is the nickname of the contributor; what follows is the contribution itself. All language phenomena were, of course, kept in their original form, including emoticons, taboo language or errors. Below is a sample, and randomly selected part of the corpus under investigation:

538. **AllyKay:** *give a BIG HUG to ((((((((((Joop))))))))))*
539. **CHARM300000:** *listening to pink floyd*
540. **elisa3:** *it wasnttttt my fault*
541. **april:** *nooo when you gotta you gotta* :o)
542. **elisa3:** *yes thats right*
543. **AllyKay:** xRobotx, why did you ignore me?
544. **xRobotx:** *It was determined by my   programming*
(…)

In harmony with Crystal's classification (2001), the corpus data can be characterised as a synchronous group, which is happening in real time; the participants typically use nicknames, and there is no moderator. Unlike asynchronous groups, in which the time of communication "is postponed" (Crystal 2001: 11), the communication moderated, and the purpose if which is perceived as more-or-less serious and, partly, didactic (ibid. 130-133), the main advantage of the synchronous groups is celerity. Participants simply enter a chat-room and they are able to communicate with other users straight away. The message, or data, is "sent to the specific address, which function is the same as of the middleman, and then the message is sent on the screen which is permanently refreshing" (ibid. 130). This process happens within milliseconds. It means that all the participants are able to see the sent message in a very short time. It follows that these interactions are "the cause of most radical linguistic innovation" (Crystal 2001: 130) such as abbreviations and emoticons mentioned above.

A vital quality of synchronous groups is that the participants – both to remain anonymous and to better express their (dis)likes / e-identity – do not commonly use their real names but their nicknames. Incidentally, according to Bechar-Israeli, the latter reason for using nicks only is shared "by almost half of a population of Internet chat users" (qtd. in Crystal 2001: 161).

2   FSP

It has been generally accepted that from the point of view of information processing, the sentence is the field of syntactic semantic relations, and, as such, is co-governed by the degrees of communicative dynamism (CD) distributed over its individual elements (see Firbas

1992, 1995, Svoboda 1989, Halliday & Matthiessen 2004, Adam 2009). Combining the approaches adopted both by structuralist and functionalist approaches, the theory of FSP draws on the findings presented by the scholars of the Prague Circle. Representing one of the branches of linguistics dealing with information processing, it explores how a piece of information is produced in the act of communication, and also how different elements are given different communicative prominence, i.e. are foregrounded or backgrounded to achieve the author's communicative intention.

First, it will be necessary to outline the basic fundaments and terminological *terminus a quo* of the theory of FSP. As has been hinted above, the core of Firbas' theory of FSP lies in the functional approach towards sentences; they are viewed as phenomena operating at the very moment of utterance (Firbas 1992: 118). Firbas claims that every meaningful element of communication is a carrier of communicative dynamism and hence pushes the communication forwards. By a degree of communicative dynamism of an element, he understands its relative communicative value within the utterance in the act of communication. In other words, the sentence is "a field of semantic and syntactic relations that in its turn provides a distributional field of degrees of communicative dynamism (CD)" (Firbas 1992: 7-8). According to FSP, sentence elements serve as communicative units with different degrees of CD. The degrees of CD are determined by the interplay of FSP factors involved in the distribution of degrees of CD. The FSP factors (formative forces) are (1) linear modification, (2) context, and (3) semantics. In spoken language, the interplay of these factors is logically joined by a fourth factor – intonation (Firbas 1992: 14-16). According to the different degrees of CD, one may divide a distributional field into two basic parts: theme and non-theme (which is subdivided into transition and rheme); the theme is not necessarily associated with the initial position in the sentence.

As early as the initial stages of his FSP research, Firbas came up with the idea of the so-called dynamic semantic scales that are implemented in sentences (thoroughly treated in Firbas, 1992: 109-110). In the framework of FSP every sentence implements one of the dynamic semantic scales: Presentation Scale (Pr-Scale) or Quality Scale (Q-Scale) respectively, which functionally reflect the distribution of communicative dynamism and operate irrespective of word order. It follows that the phenomenon of presentation, which is under investigation in the present paper, is projected into the so-called Presentation Scale. The Presentation Scale includes three basic dynamic semantic functions. Firstly, every act of communication is set by the scene (the dynamic semantic function (DSF) of a Setting; abbreviated as Set) 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; Pr) and, thirdly, the major, most dynamic element (Phenomenon; Ph) is literally ushered onto the scene. Cf. a prototypical sentence implementing the Presentation Scale in its interpretative arrangement, i.e. from the least to the most dynamic elements:

(1)   *And now* (Set) *a very curious thing* (Ph) *happened* (Pr).

Setting	Presentation of Phenomenon	Phenomenon Presented
(Set)	(Pr)	(Ph)
theme	transition	rheme
And now	*happened*	*a very curious thing*

Fig. 1 Structure of Presentation Scale

3 Syntactic-Semantic Classification of Pr-sentences

It should be noted first that at times the research results apparently manifest a considerably limited FSP applicability within the sub-genre. Such a claim is due to the following syntactic semantic qualities of the Internet chat: (i) formal lack of "sentences" as proper distributional fields; (ii) somewhat chaotic verbal and situational immediately relevant context; and (iii) fragmental character of communicative units, including units with opaque semantic content. Cf. contributions 147-153, for instance:

> 147. **Mama:** *lol*
> 148. **sugastiletto:** *weeeeeeeeeeeee!*
> 149. **OzeJames:** *lol*
> 150.**CHARM300000:** *wait a sec*
> 151. **Mama:** *a bay bay*
> 152. **CHARM300000:** *is she here?*
> 153. **malibu25:** *!smooch Oze*
>
> (...)

Admittedly, it was possible, nonetheless, to carry out a full-fledged FSP analysis. The corpus data were processed in terms of different syntactic subtypes (cf. Adam, 2010 and Dušková, 1998, 2008) and, as a result, four separate syntactic patterns were identified and labelled as Subtypes 1-4 (see below). Out of all 1000 basic distributional fields in the corpus, 21 instances of sentences that implement the Presentation Scale were identified, which represents 2.1 percent (vs. 979 occurrences of Q-scale). Obviously, the incidence of Pr-sentences in the corpus under investigation is – due to stylistic qualities – extremely low. In comparison with other text registers studied in terms of the occurrence of Pr-scale sentences in other corpora, the Internet chat definitely ranks among the sub-genres with the lowest incidence of Pr-sentences:

(Sub-)genre	Incidence in %	Reference Sources
Internet chat	1-2	Adam 2011
E-mails	2-3	Hurtová 2010
biblical poetic text	3-6	Adam 2009
fiction narrative	5-8	Adam 2006, 2010; Hurtová 2010; Řezníčková 2009
biblical narrative	9-12	Adam 2010
technical text	> 30	Řezníčková 2009

Fig. 2 Incidence of Pr-sentences across genres

3.1 Subtype 1: Existential construction

By far the most frequent subtype of Pr-Scale sentences is typically represented by the existential construction (in fiction narrative usually ca 60 percent). The existential *there*-clauses represent a somewhat specific phenomenon in the area of FSP interpretation. Firbas speaks of "permanent obviousness" (permanent presence) of the *there*-constructions in the immediately relevant context (Firbas, 1992: 24). He argues that this construction, "though semantically very weak, is not totally stripped of all meaning, ...and acts as an indicator of a scene expressed by a genuine adverbial of place" (Firbas, 1992: 24). It follows that the existential construction explicitly indicates existential predication, which is a constitutional component of the syntactic-semantic structure of the Presentation Scale (cf. Dušková, 2008).

Consequently, the existential *there* is invariably assigned the Set-function and is entirely context-dependent.

It is also worth mentioning that the existential *there*-clauses are specific in their linear modification, i.e. word order arrangement: unlike most sentences that implement the Pr-scale, in the existential clauses the notional subject is invariably postponed towards the end of the sentence. In other words, the Phenomenon is not presented in the initial part of the sentence, but on the contrary, it actually represents the culmination peak of the information structure; the English grammatical principle requiring the SVO wording is thus overridden by the linear modification FSP factor.

In the corpus under examination, three occurrences of a classical existential construction ere detected. Cf. examples 2 and 3 below (NB: the presentational verb phrase is underlined and the subject presented – the Phenomenon – is in bold; the number in parentheses behind the quote refers to the item in the corpus; if there is no specific reference, the example is taken form Adam 2010):

(2)   <u>there was </u>**an episode about her being googled** (780)
(3)   <u>There are</u> **three wires.** (976)

In example (3), for instance, the notional subject (*three wires*) is context-independent and conveys the information towards which the communication is perspectived. Thus, it carries the highest degree of CD and performs the Ph-function. The verbal element is then transitional and mediates between the theme and the non-theme. In the corpus data, the classical *there+be* construction is never realised as *there*+verb other than *be* as is sometimes the case in narratives. Cf. example 4:

(4)   *Out of the hair* <u>there stuck</u> **two horns**.

3.2   Subtype 2: Rhematic subject in preverbal position

The second most recurring subtype of the Pr-Scale sentence pattern within narrative texts may be described as that with a rhematic subject in initial, preverbal position (usually scoring ca 20%); it is undoubtedly the prototypical, "canonical" type connected with the Presentation Scale:

(5)   *And now* **a very curious thing** <u>happened.</u>

In it, the initial sentence element is typically represented by a context-independent subject, which is only then followed (in concord with the requirements of the English word order principles) by the verb, which expresses existence or appearance on the scene. The sentence may be also opened with a scene-setting temporal or spatial thematic adverbial.

Expectedly, this syntactic configuration was not detected in the corpus at all, the reason being most probably the stylistic marking of formality and purely written register of English. The point is that the word order of this subtype actually violates the end-focus principle observed in English. If fully implemented, linear modification induces the sentence elements to manifest a gradual rise in CD in the direction from the beginning to the end of the sentence. It should be recalled at this point that while e.g. in Czech the FSP linearity principle represents the leading power governing the syntax of sentences (i.e. the further an element is in the sentence the more prominence it carries), in English the prominent word order principle

is the grammatical one. The English sentence has to satisfy the requirements of ordering the individual sentence elements in accordance with their syntactic functions.

3.3 Subtype 3: Fronted Adverbial & S–V Inversion

In this subtype, an adverbial is fronted and the subject is highlighted following thus the principle of end-focus (unlike Subtype 2); as a result, subject-verb inversion takes place. The subject is, of course, context-independent and the verb fulfils the role of presentation on the scene.

(6) *Behind them <u>were</u> coats hanging on pegs.*

Such presentation constructions are usually used in literary style and, therefore, their incidence in the corpus is considerably low (2 occurrences). Cf.:

(7) *<u>Here are</u> the 5 most recent ones* (694)
(8) *<u>heres</u> my another favorite song* (856)

Both the sentences in 7 and 8 exemplify the use of the fronted adverbial *here*. At first sight, it may seem to perform an analogous role to the existential *there*; however, it is not so grammaticalised and carries without any doubt locative meaning.

3.4 Subtype 4: Locative Th-subject & Rh-object

By far the least frequent subtype of Pr-Scale sentences (1% in the corpus) is modelled by a peculiar transitive construction that – at least at first sight – seems to implement the Quality, rather than the Presentation Scale, displaying a thematic subject and a rhematic object. Nevertheless, such an approach would adopt only a surface stance. In its deep structure (stipulated both by FSP and its semantic roles), "the scene-setting nature of the subject (the theme) finds expression in adverbial construction, while the phenomenon appearing on the scene (the rheme) assumes the syntactic function of a subject" (Dušková, 1998: 40).

(9) *The road <u>carried</u> a lot of traffic.*
(10) *The banner <u>bore</u> a red rampant lion fluttering in the breeze.*

This interpretation may be corroborated by two other corresponding syntactic variants of (9), cf. Dušková 2008:

(9a) *~ There was a lot of traffic on the road.*
(9b) *~ On the road there was a lot of traffic.*

Symptomatically enough, the corpus findings offer no example of the subtype featuring the locative Th-subject with Rh-object. This fact may be explained by means of a high degree of informality as well as the dual, spoken-written nature of the Internet chat; though written, it is obviously highly informal. Generally speaking, the relative incidence of the four subtypes typically occurring in texts appears to be dependent on the text genre and register. Whereas the corpus under discussion – the Internet chat – prototypically manifests a very low number of Pr-sentences with a considerably limited variety of semantic syntactic subtypes, the fiction narrative, for instance, displays totally different numbers. E.g. religious written discourse

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generally displays higher percentage of Pr-Scale sentences, such as ca 12% in New Testament gospels (see Adam, 2010). On top of that, there is a apparent difference between genres in terms of individual subtypes: whereas the fiction narrative prefers the existential construction (64%), other text types manifest preference of the rhematic subject in preverbal position (e.g. in biblical narratives with theological load it is ca 76% vs. 21% of existential constructions; see Adam 2010).

4   Specific FSP Features of Internet Chat

As has been noted above, the sub-genre of the Internet chat features, on the other hand, other characteristic qualities and specific presentation strategies (techniques) of its own. Apart form stylistic markers, also presentation on the scene is expressed in additional ways that are not observed in other genres under the author's investigation. Below is a tentative outline of the genre-specific (and potentially presentational) techniques detected within the Internet Chat in the corpus under investigation.

4.1   Ellipsis

Especially in the subtype 1, i.e. the existential constructions, the existential phrase as such (i.e. the thematic and the transitional section) is frequently implied (elliptical) and, as a result, we observe cases of grammatical ellipsis. Sometimes, such ellipsis is manifested within interrogative sentences (see example 11):

> (11)   *Any ladies in brooklyn ny here?* (604)   [= Are there any…]
> (12)   *BREAKING NEWS!!!!!!!!!!* (3)   [= There / Here is…]
> (13)   *too many hot chicks!!!* (259)   [= There / Here are…]

Altogether, the corpus contains 13 occurrences of an elliptical version of the existential construction. A special sub-category of Subtype 1 with grammatical ellipsis is represented by single-rheme sentences in which both he Pr-verb and all thematic elements in the sentence are ellipted (see also 12 and 13). This, basically due to the principle of language economy, often happens when a new chatter enters the discussion, often fostered by means of emoticons (as in 14):

> (14)   **malibu25:** :o)) (166)   [= malibu25 is entering the discussion]
> (15)   **OzeJames:** *malibu*   (168)   [= here's malibu25!]

In such a highly informal, hasty, playful and down-to-earth genre, the information presented in an elliptical form may of course be recovered from the immediately relevant situational and also experiential contexts (cf. Hurtová 2010 on ellipsis and FSP in e-mail communication). Hurtová claims that in electronic mail, "the fact that the writers tend to use more straightforward language, writing briefly and to the point, means that from the viewpoint of FSP, certain distributional fields can be considered defective" (Hurtová 2010: 26). The communicative units of transition proper and the theme are thus only implicit. And it is usually possible to "deduce or infer such items" (ibid.). It is in full compliance with the fact that the only mandatory communicative unit that must be inevitably present in every distributional filed is the rheme.

4.2   Emoticons

Emoticons (i.e. the functional blend of emotion + icon) are another characteristic feature of personal (and thus subjective) and informal interaction observed in the Internet chat (and

other recent digital way of communication such as Skype, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter and the like). Graphically, co-signalling modality in the broad sense, they actually substitute real verbally non-conveyed emotions (such as sadness, happiness, surprise, expectations, excitement or even ambiguity), facial expressions and mood of the addressers (Kunc 2008; cf. Hurtová 2010: 28). They traditionally consist of punctuation marks such as colons, semi-colons, commas, and parentheses, but recently also animated emoticons have been favoured by the Internet users. It may be of interest that out of 48 emoticons in the transcript male contributors used emoticons nearly twice as much as females; in the on-line communication under discussion, men generally tend to be more visually oriented than women who prefer verbal expression. On top of that, emoticons can completely change (re-evaluate) the meaning of a sentence; see for instance the following model dialogue:

(16)   **A:** *Hello, how are you?*
         B1: *I am fine* :o)   [= I am really fine, I mean it]
         B2: *I am fine* :o([= I ma not fine, I am being ironical]

Apart from pure evaluating the sentence or the surrounding context of situation, emoticons are capable of giving a full answer or reaction (see 17; cf. section 4.1):

(17)   **hotmale4u25:** *hey ladies* (203)
         OzeJames: *i cant keep up* (204)
         OzeJames: :o((205)

Sometimes, in harmony with Hurtová's (2010) observation concerning e-mail communication, emoticons "suggest the way in which the sentence should be perceived and the notional content of the verb (and other elements) should be interpreted" (ibid. 28). See e.g. 18 in which surprise or ironical demur:

(18)   **april:** *thats weird, she didnt waste time getting remarried* (581)
         courtney_29: *yeah i couldnt get around it* (582)
         elisa3: *ya 3 months after the divorce* (583)
         courtney_29: :O)) (584)

4.3   Capitalisation
In addition to the classic use of capital letters in proper names, acronyms or the nominative form of the singular first-person pronoun *I* along with its contractions (capitalised just occasionally), capitalisation serves in chatting as a means of emphasis. The contributors stress what they consider to be crucial. The emphasis in the following extract (quoted in Kunc, 2008: 39), for instance, suggests that the contributor, apparently a deployed American soldier in Iraq, has not drunk for a long time, but he "has a certain desire to do so in order to repose" (ibid. 39):

(19)   **Frozen_Insane:** *well im off .to go start drinking...* (70)
         Frozen_Insane: *later people* (71)
         ArmyGuy05: *Must BE NICE* (72)

Compare one more example, in which an element of the message is intensified, yet not entirely reevaluated (the terminology is intentionally corresponding to that used by Firbas in relation to prosodic prominence in spoken discourse):

(20)   **xRobotx:** *AllyKay give a BIG HUG to ((((((((((Joop)))))))))))*   (549)

Thus, intensification through capitalisation carries certain additional meaning. It provides emotive markedness to sentences and so otherwise semantically neutral elements may be given extra emotive load, such as ironical or equivocal character.

Apart from the added emphasis, from the point of view of FSP it seems crucial to note that capitalised items can act as powerful rhematizers par excellence. Rhematizers are items that are capable of reevaluating the distribution of CD (for details on rhematizers – or focalizers – see above all Firbas, 1964, 1992 and, for summary, Hajičová, 2010). In other words, through such reevaluating intensification an element may acquire a totally different prominence and though being e.g. thematic, can become the rheme proper of the field. Cf. the following extract, in which the participant nicked **Mama** poses a rather ambiguous question with the taboo content implied only; the functional re-evaluation is achieved via capitalisation (NB: the data were collected three days before Easter). Incidentally, in order to underscore the meaning of her question, she uses in the next line an emoticon, which could be interpreted also as mischievous and frivolous (cf. Kunc, 2008: 39-40):

(21)   **Mama:** *so Charm where are you hiding YOUR eggs this year?* (233)
        Mama: :o)   (234)
        CHARM300000: *lol Mama* (235)

Though under neutral conditions and in the given context, the communicative unit *you* would be the carrier of the highest degree of CD (to differentiate the addressee from the previous one), by capitalisation the contributor stresses *YOUR* within the communicative unit *your eggs*. Thus, the distribution of CD over the units and the aforementioned lewd (though riddling) meaning is achieved.

Conclusion
To conclude, research has shown that presentation as such is in the Internet chat extremely limited; rarely only is there an explicit presentational construction, usually manifesting the existential phrase. Other ways of presentation are implicit, vague, and one can identify them rather between the lines. Typically, Internet chat contributions display single rhemes, whereas the themes and transitions tend to be elliptical. Intensification as well as re-evaluation is achieved through substitutive items, such as emoticons, punctuation, capitalisation, etc. Such elements serve as additional communicative units or evaluative items. The reasons for the aforementioned features consist in both stylistic and pragmatic nature of the register of the Internet chat, namely dense information structure, language economy, the fact that presentation taken for granted. Verbal presentation is rather neglected since it is believed to be a "waste of time"; its function is partly taken over by mere entering the discussion, such as in the laconic "presentational" information contributed by **Frozen_Insane:** *back* (10). That is also why the Quality Scale is strongly preferred – in the post-modern hasty pace of life the communication is entered *in medias res* and so no explicit introduction is needed.

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