

SECONDARY RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE: SERMON AS A DISTRIBUTIONAL MACROFIELD

Martin Adam

Abstract

For more than two decades, research into the theory of functional sentence perspective (FSP) has dealt with the text material of religious discourse (Firbas, Svoboda, Adam). In contrast with the existing writings that discuss primarily biblical texts, the present paper explores sermons as a secondary religious discourse. After a brief introduction into the sociolinguistic and stylistic aspects of the realm of sermons, the paper looks at scripted homilies in terms of distributional macrofields (highest level of FSP analysis) and traces typical dynamic-semantic features of the text, including a theme – transition – rheme structure at the textual level.

1 Introduction

The domain of the theory of functional sentence perspective (FSP) has been explored mostly at the sentential level, i.e. in the area of the basic distributional field created by the clause. Recently, however, attention has also been paid to the functional picture of higher hierarchical levels of text. This research has shown that an FSP analysis of a distributional macrofield is a promising step in the study of FSP and that it can reveal significant characteristic features of a whole text (cf. Adam 2004, 2006, Pípalová 2005, Firbas 1995, Svoboda 1996).

The present paper attempts to trace the theme-rheme structure (as described on the clausal level) at the textual level, namely that of scripted sermons. In other words, the whole distributional macrofield of a sermon will be examined from the point of view of its functional perspective. For a thorough treatment of the theory of FSP, the reader is referred to Firbas (1992).

1.1 FSP and its role within text linguistics

Text linguistics has played a crucial role in the development of discourse analysis. It views texts as elements strung together in definable relationships (see e.g. van Dijk 1985 or de Beaugrande & Dressler 1981), dealing with the analysis of the ‘surface’ structures that unify the text on the one hand and the ‘deep’ semantic relations between the elements on the other. These concepts are basically derived from the British discourse analysis approach represented by Halliday (Halliday & Hasan 1989). Text linguistics treat the text material from different perspectives; it is, however, unified by interest in describing language from a higher-

level, the suprasentential perspective as well as in the role of context and communicative approach. Text grammarians take into consideration concepts such as hypersyntax, standards of textuality and text types (de Beaugrande & Dressler 1981: 3ff), discourse topic and the representation of discourse content (proposition) (van Dijk 1977 or Kintsch 1974), cohesion and coherence (e.g. Halliday & Hasan 1989), schemata or macro speech acts as “higher-level complex knowledge structures” (van Dijk 1981: 141ff), context, “text-world” as a network of relations between elements (de Beaugrande & Dressler 1981), etc.

Closely related to this study in the field of text linguistics (and information structure) is the theory developed by the Prague (and Brno) School of Linguistics, most notably by Jan Firbas – the theory of functional sentence perspective (FSP). Generally speaking, it explores the theme-rheme structures and the relationships between the units of information in the utterance. The theory of functional sentence perspective and its analytical methods have been considered one of the prominent tools of discourse analysis and information processing. Combining the approaches adopted both by formalists and functionalists, the theory of functional sentence perspective draws on the findings presented by the scholars of the Prague Circle. The founder of FSP, Jan Firbas, drew on the findings of his predecessor, Vilém Mathesius. As early as 1911, Mathesius noticed the language universal of every utterance having a theme (topic) and a rheme (focus/comment), and formulated the basic principles of what was to be labelled FSP only later.

According to Firbas, the sentence is a field of semantic and syntactic relations that in turn provides a distributional field of degrees of communicative dynamism (CD); Firbas defines a degree of CD as “the extent to which the element contributes towards the development of the communication” (Firbas 1964: 270). The most prominent part of information is the ‘high’ point of the message, i.e. the most dynamic element; other elements of the sentence are less dynamic (have a lower degree of CD). The degrees of CD are determined by the interplay of FSP factors involved in the distribution of degrees of CD: linear modification, context and semantic structure (Firbas 1992: 14-16). In spoken language, the interplay of these factors is joined by intonation, i.e. the prosodic factor.

It is the continuum of degrees of CD along with the interplay of the basic FSP factors that make FSP specific within the field of text linguistics. One is able to analyze and interpret a clause making use of specific criteria. CD operates on the level of the clause; the individual thematic and non-thematic elements – when viewed from the level of a macro-structure – then form thematic and non-thematic strings. In other words, the theory of FSP transcends the

domain of text grammar, enriching it with the approach adopted by the study of information processing.

1.2 FSP analysis of the clause

Since the pioneering work of Jan Firbas into the theory of functional sentence perspective, the interpretative analysis of the clause has been the cornerstone of FSP. Indeed, it is the FSP analysis of a basic distributional field (clause) that is the basis of the functional interpretation.

The very Firbasian notions connected with the functional and dynamic approach towards text derive from the functional analysis of the clause; Firbas claims that the central position in FSP interpretation “is occupied by distributional fields provided by independent verbal sentences” (Firbas 1992: 11-12). He views a clause as “a field of relations” (syntactic and semantic above all) that determine the distribution of communicative dynamism over individual communicative units of the clause. Units carrying a lower degree of CD form the thematic part of the clause and those carrying a higher degree of CD form – together with so called transition – the non-thematic part of the clause (Firbas 1992: 80-81). Through the interplay of FSP factors (context, semantics and linear modification), it is then possible to identify the degrees of CD carried by the communicative units: according to the gradual rise of CD, it is theme proper (ThPr) – diatheme (DTh) – transition proper (TrPr) – transition (Tr) – rheme (Rh) – rheme proper (RhPr).

1.3 Distributional macrofield

The phenomenon of the distributional macrofield (as a higher level of functional analysis of text, such as paragraphs or chapters) has been discussed predominantly in relation to narrative discourse, especially in terms of the process of establishment and development of the thematic and the rhematic layers within a text. In recent publications (Adam 2005, 2006), I presented the idea of higher levels of text functioning as distributional macrofields; it seems that such a macro-structural approach may reveal – among other things – essential syntactic-stylistic characteristics of a text.

As was mentioned, research has shown that the Firbasian principles adopted within the FSP analysis on the clausal level (cf. especially Firbas 1992) are similarly applicable to higher levels of text. A piece of information enters the flow of communication in the same way within a paragraph as it does in a clause and thus may be also viewed as dynamic. Daneš's conception (1995), as far as the dynamic view is concerned, introduces three basic assumptions in regard to a multi-layered structure: (1) minimal communicative text units, (2)

“hyper-sentential relationships between the units (such as Th-Rh bipartition, given-new information), and (3) global structures defining “stylistic class” (text patterns) or superstructures (Daneš 1995: 185). The present paper focuses on the two latter categories and discusses both the development of so called dynamic-semantic tracks in the text and their function within the framework of the text as a whole.

Within text linguistics, especially van Dijk’s understanding of ‘macro-structures’ is in harmony with the domain explored by the FSP on the textual level. Van Dijk considers macro-structures accounting “for the ‘global meaning’ of discourse such as it is intuitively assigned in terms of the ‘topic’ or ‘theme’ of a discourse or conversation. The assumption is that these notions cannot be accounted for in terms of current logical, linguistic, and cognitive semantics for isolated sentences or sequences of sentences” (van Dijk 1977: 3). It follows that “in disciplines such as rhetorics and narrative theory, macro-structures may constitute the semantic basis for specific categories and rules” (ibid.). In van Dijk’s opinion, macro-structures represent a natural and inherent quality observed on the textual level, being “available when it is necessary to explicitly summarize a text (...). The macro-structure is also the basis for recall of the discourse immediately after presentation” (van Dijk 1977: 27-8). In this respect, van Dijk’s theory of macro-structures not only serves as a solid basis for, but also is in harmony with the functional analysis offered by Firbas’ theory of FSP.

1.4 Religious discourse

The theory of FSP has been applied on different discourses; it is not restricted to any specific text types (Firbas 1992). Nevertheless, my research into the area of FSP principles adopted on the textual level has predominantly dealt with the text material of religious discourse as offered by the Old and the New Testaments of the Bible. The biblical texts have proved to be suitable for the purpose of the research in FSP and thus have supplied a syntactically rich source of discourse analysis studies (most notably Firbas 1992, 1995, Svoboda 1983, Adam 2004, 2006, Chamonikolasová & Adam 2005). Especially the later studies published by Firbas dealt with a number of Old and New Testament texts (Firbas 1989, 1995, 1996). Apart from its linguistic value, the Bible is particularly interesting thanks to its canonical, and thus fixed character and variety of translations that are available.

Whereas existing research into the distributional macrofields formed by religious writings has been exclusively preoccupied with primary religious discourse, especially with biblical texts, the present article is actually examining texts of secondary religious discourse

(namely sermons) for the first time. In this respect, the paper represents a new development within the scope of FSP.

2 Sermons

In *Registers of Written English*, Webster's quote describes a text as "part of the enacted discourse of a socially defined group, a culture or speech community" (Ghadessy 1988: 65). Socio-culturally speaking, this can be applied to Christian believers, who form an ideologically distinctive community with its own culture, system of signs, and way of communication.

By definition, a sermon (also known as homily) is "discourse from a pulpit" (*The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*). It is a religious speech delivered typically in a church building, usually from a pulpit or an ambo. The expression comes from a Middle English word, which was derived from an Old French term, which in turn came from the Latin word *sermō* (= discourse). As a matter of fact, it literally meant conversation as early sermons were delivered in the form of question and answer (Wikipedia).

2.1 The discourse of homilies

Within Halliday's systemic understanding of register (Halliday 1978), register is an aspect of the context of situation. Thus, speaking of the register of religious text, we come to the following: the church setting forms the field, the speaker and the audience represent the level of tenor, and the mode is usually spoken (formal, polite). The characteristics of the religious language in the light of different literary genres are discussed by Crystal and Davy in their *Investigating English Style* (Crystal & Davy 1969: 148-9). They claim that not all religious genres fall into the category of the language of the liturgy. For example the language of sermons has, according to Crystal and Davy, stylistically more in common with other varieties of public speaking. The language of theological character might be treated along with other examples of learned descriptive or discursive narrative. Of course there are "overlaps between all of these areas: obviously they will share a great deal of vocabulary.... But when one considers the whole range of ... liturgical language, it becomes clear that the differences which exist between this and the other kinds of religious language are more striking than the similarities" (Crystal & Davy 1969: 149).

Apart from non-prosodic linguistic characteristics, there is an entire set of prosodic features determining the style of religious discourse, such as pitch, tone, loudness, duration, pausing, etc. Obviously, this category concerns exclusively the spoken form of language –

reading, sermons, and oral prayers. The prosodic characteristics contribute to further distinction of genres or modalities of discourse, and are even able to identify group membership. Thus it is prosody that makes the style of spoken English so prominent in religious discourse.

2.2 FSP analysis of sermons as distributional macrofields

As mentioned above, the research into FSP has proved that the theory works at different levels of text units, whether lower or higher (for further details on the hierarchy of units in FSP, see Svoboda 1968 and Firbas 1992:16ff). The following discussion applies an analogous approach to the material of a functional macrofield, i.e. within larger units of text. The idea is in harmony with Firbas' conclusions in terms of the function of the thematic and rhematic layers in a text. He showed that the dynamic-semantic tracks run through individual distributional fields and convey meaning not only in the clauses proper, but create a string of a higher level, which is across the layers (Firbas 1995).

The dynamic flow of communication may be traced literally throughout all basic distributional fields, going in the vertical (paradigmatic) direction (for details see Adam 2006: 72-73). It seems that particular sections of the text have similar qualities, as the elements within clauses do; the structure of the text resembles the theme-rheme structure in a sentence. This once hypothetical phenomenon was traced within limited narrative passages in the Gospel according to St. Luke (Adam 2004). It was demonstrated that the passages under examination contained inner dynamism that is capable of distributing the degrees of communicative dynamism over higher hierarchical unit. The focus was on functional units within the rheme proper layer, in which the most dynamic development of communication takes place. The whole communicative macrofield implemented, in that case, a Combined Scale.

Now this treatment will be applied to the analogous dynamic semantic tracks in the text of a scripted sermon. The text under examination is taken from the Internet series *Crucial Questions* administered by Calvary Memorial Church in Oak Park, Illinois, US, and is titled *Why is there so much suffering?* It was delivered by Pastor Dr. Ray Pritchard on September 4, 2005 and examined the topic of suffering in the world. Even if the sermon was primarily meant to be a spoken one, it had been written in advance and also published. Within the FSP analysis, the sermon will be approached from the point of view of a written text, disregarding its prosodic features. Also its extralinguistic, pragmatic context will not be taken into

consideration as the theory of FSP understands context in the narrow sense of the “immediately relevant (verbal) context” (Firbas 1992: 21-40).

Firstly, an example of the rhematic track will be presented and, secondly, the whole macrofield will be examined from the point of view of its dynamic semantic functions. Below is, as an illustration, a simplified outline of rhematic elements of the first three paragraphs (§ 1-4) of the text under analysis. It is remarkable how this plain enumeration “tells” the story; even an uninformed reader – without previously reading the text in full – can follow the main gist of the message.

§1 *Why... so much suffering? → none [question is greater] → to good people → in other ways → why ... to good people? → why [the wicked]... prosper? → not use → very personal → why... leave? → why... my daughter to die in a car wreck? → my closest friend suddenly have a heart attack?*

§2 *a survey on this topic → “Why is there pain and suffering in the world?” → not surprised → “the question mark that turns like a fishhook in the human heart”*

§3 *thinking about this issue / in very personal terms → an email that contained... a “dangerous prayer” → my personal prayer for 2005 → to pray that prayer → during our trip to China in January → to go to China as well → this summer → right now → totally unexpected → grateful to God / for putting China in the middle of our family’s personal agenda*

Obviously, at a mere glance, one may decipher what the initial part of the sermon is about. The rhematic elements follow certain semantic patterns, creating sets of key words: the speaker deals apparently with the issue of suffering (*pain; suffering; scary word; hit in the face*) as well as its particular manifestations (*to die in a car wreck; heart attack; breast cancer*). He treats the topic as a rather personal matter (*personal* is used four times within the four paragraphs). Another set of key words is related to the possible solution to the problem – a prayer (*prayer; God*). Finally, the speaker introduces the ways of medical treatment (*two surgeries; radiation treatments; chemotherapy; total cure; follow-up treatment; regular check-ups*). Last but not least is the conspicuous recurrence of *why* – within the first illustrative paragraph only it is repeated (together with the question mark) five times. Not in vain does the speaker overload the initial section with such questions; it helps trigger the topic of his sermon. Even if the text fraction is short and lacks details (transitional and thematic elements), it has a clear structure and evokes the essential threads of reasoning.

All the rest of the sample text may be analyzed likewise, of course. Due to space limitations, it is necessary to build on the results derived from the research. Based on the analysis of the rhematic tracks, one may proceed to the study of the functional macrofield.

With regard to the main topics of the passage (as derived from the preliminary FSP analysis), the following functional sections may be identified:

2.2.1 Paragraphs 1-3

Looking at the rhematic elements, we find a remarkable phenomenon in the initial part of the passage: the first distributional fields, as it were, set the necessary contextual background for the action to come in the following verses. In the first clause, we learn the topic of the sermon. The speaker introduced it by means of citing people's possible questions and survey results (this section was analyzed in terms of rhematic elements above). The speaker also mentioned the personal side of the issue, including a potential aid – prayer. Thus, the basic scene is set – we are given the information of *what* the talk is going to be about. Apparently, the scene of the story is – within the first three distributional fields – introduced. From the functional viewpoint, this opening part of the passage acts like a dynamic-semantic element performing the **Setting-function**.

To summarize, the introductory section of the text under examination provides the reader undoubtedly with the least dynamic pieces of information, setting the necessary background that will be later talked about. Functionally, they should be regarded, similarly as in the FSP of a clause, **a theme proper (ThPr)** of the macrofield. Interestingly enough, one usually refers to the real topic of a text using the expression theme; in this sense, we deal with a theme proper.

2.2.2 Paragraphs 4-11

This set of paragraphs actually comprises two integral parts, both of which deal with similar topics but are not identical. For that reason, these will be treated separately as Parts A and B.

At the beginning of section A (§ 4-7) the speaker explores the issue of suffering in the light of his personal experience, namely Marlen's breast cancer, its treatment and consequences. The key rhematic elements of this initial subsection are the following: *breast cancer; hit in the face; a scary word; two surgeries; radiation treatments; chemotherapy; follow-up treatment and regular checkups*. Another major issue of the passage in question is the fact that experiencing an illness like cancer personally is quite different from theoretical knowledge: *learned a lot; a lot different on the other side of the pastor's desk; almost every week; what to say and how to pray; different from the other side of the desk; rediscover your own humanity* etc. The final section of the passage also conveys expressions of the speaker's hope and spiritual attitude: *many evidences of God's goodness; his grace in abundance of small things; felt stronger; for the deepening of our faith; good for us*.

Part B (§ 8-11) communicates the same message, although it is derived from a different experience: Hurricane Katrina. The key RhPr elements evoke the gist of the passage again: *on a much larger scale; glued to the TV screen; to watch the scenes of destruction, death, sorrow and loss...; the greatest natural disaster in American history; “our tsunami”; “apocalyptic scenes” of devastation*. The speaker concluded this section by a series of appealing questions, the rhemes of which are for instance *Where...God?; destroyed?; Why?; lives?; dies?; “Lord, where are you?”; to the heavens; “Why me? Why now?”* etc.

Even if these paragraphs convey a significant message, they still are leading to the main part of the sermon. The two particular examples (cancer and natural disaster), form two basic ‘pillars’ of the words still to come and equip the reader with a necessary starting point. The two personal experiences (being introductory, preparatory examples) provided the foundation for the major message of the sermon. That is why I regard this whole section – from the point of view of FSP – to be **Bearer of Quality** (BofQ1 and BofQ2). Seen from a different perspective within the scope of the whole passage, as this Bearer is not contextually bound (or context dependent), and, at the same time, carries much more dynamic information than the initial part of the macrofield (Setting), it definitely belongs to the **Diatheme (DTh)**. Together with the ‘props’ of the opening section, they are purely thematic and delimit the scene.

2.2.3 Paragraphs 13-20

The passage of Paragraphs 13-20 naturally represents (even in the graphical sense) a connection between the introductory and the final parts of the sermon. It follows that its main topics actually look for possible answers to the above-mentioned questions raised in terms of the issue of suffering in the world. The passage opens with the speaker’s summarizing statement that the problem is a peculiar one, which manifests itself in the following set of major themes: *What answer?; wrestled; not in one sermon; the heart of the Christian response*.

Two answers are introduced in the passage. Firstly, the speaker communicates many people’s explanation of suffering rooted in the belief in mere chance, bad luck or inevitable fate. This idea is labelled as entirely inadequate: *terrible things; bad stuff; chance, luck or fate; hopeless philosophy; nothing; no explanation for the suffering we see*.

Secondly, the speaker throws some light on a “partially-adequate answer”, based on a theological concept of God’s free will – God is the supreme being who can do whatever he wants to do, including diseases, disasters and the like; there is then hardly any space for our intervention. The author says that although this is partly right, it is not a sufficient solution.

The section closes with a statement that this answer is very useful but needs an additional comment. Here is the set of the key rhematic elements: *freewill argument; [God created] this way; pain and suffering; didn't come from God; ...messed; human sin; tendency toward hatred, unkindness, lust, critical spirit, selfishness, greed...; biblical and true and useful; useful; to be added.*

Deriving from what has been said about the content of Paragraphs 13-20, it may be rightly asked what dynamic semantic function does the passage in question perform in the higher-level approach? Apparently, in FSP terminology, the section represents a **transition (Tr)**, performing a dynamic semantic function of a **Quality (Q)**. The passage (dealing with the two potential answers to the key question of suffering) presents information of a transitory character in several respects: apart from carrying a clear notional content it connects – similarly to the temporal and modal exponents of verbs – the theme and the non-theme. One can certainly speak neither of a pure theme (the theme has been set by the introductory paragraphs), nor of a climax of the sermon (which is yet to come in the form of the rheme proper). I rather say that it is literally something in-between, a transition in the true sense of the word. From the thematic point of view this section obviously represents a natural transition between the exposition (topic of the sermon, its exemplification and personal introduction), and the high point of the message (see below).

2.2.4 Paragraphs 21-26

In FSP terminology, the high point of the message is presented in Paragraphs 21-26. In it, the speaker presents the ideal answer to the crucial question of suffering – he basically says that any solution to the problem that excludes God from human suffering cannot possibly be right. What follows is a few rhemes proper which will illustrate this position presented in the opening part of the section: *must not miss; God; in the midst of worst things*. This explanation is labelled as “an answer you must not miss” in the sermon. What follows in the course of the sermon is a series of four major points the speaker offers. These will be presented in a simplified outline of rhematic elements:

- A. *[God] ...prosperity; disaster; Lord of all things; his divine permission; amazing grace; boundless love toward the worst of sinners;*
- B. *[God] ...personal responsibility for physical disabilities; depend upon God; not his natural abilities; glory;*
- C. *[God] ...movements of the oceans; many questions regarding Hurricane Katrina; Why?; Why not west?; no certain answers; God; boundaries of the oceans; directed; determined; who – the Lord God himself;*
- D. *[us] accept both good things and troubling things he sends to us; for the roses; for the thorns; for his blessings; for the hard times he sends our way;*

The whole set of major rhemes represents a real culmination of the sermon – the speaker gives the addressee an answer he considers right and appropriate. That is why Paragraphs 21-26 create, in my opinion, the true high point of the message, finally revealing the sought-after solution. Functionally speaking, this section forms the **Rheme (Rh)** of the sermon macrofield performing the dynamic semantic function of **Specification (Sp)**. Only now does the author specify what is behind the entire issue of suffering in the world. It is the correct explanation that must be definitely regarded as the absolute climax of the sermon. In it, the communicative purpose is fulfilled.

2.2.5 Paragraphs 27-38

The rhematic section above (though being the climax) is not, however, the end of the sermon. The information conveyed by the macrofield Sp-element is further developed in the following lines that dealt with the real conclusion of the sermon. These are the introductory rhemes of the section: *all still hurting; a death-sentenced generation living in a sin-cursed world; every day; sufferings of humanity; with pain and sadness; no escape*. The speaker further offers *two choices* people face in this hopeless issue of suffering – one can either suffer *with God* or *without God*.

The speaker goes on to explain that to suffer with God is the right answer as God himself went through such suffering in the human form. The rest of the sermon is then related to Christ as the ultimate solution: *one final piece; God can do that; at the cross!; the final piece of the puzzle; left the glories of heaven; ... entered the world of woe; joined; became one of us; where we live; in our sorrows; in our pain; our humiliation; what we suffer; to save sinners; Calvary; your only hope of safety not a sermon or a theory; a Person; Jesus; Son of God; free; embrace; to Jesus with all your heart; Amen*.

Apparently, this part of the sermon is communicatively even more dynamic than the Sp-section of the macrofield (Rh); that is why this must be labelled **Rheme Proper (RhPr)**. Presenting the final and crucial amendment of the message, it functionally performs the climatic function of a **Further Specification**. It denotes a superstructure that finalizes the concept tackled in the preceding section. While the rhematic part (Paragraphs 21-26) reveals the answer to the major question of suffering in a theoretical way, the Rheme Proper of Paragraphs 27-38 provides the practical application in a Christian life.

2.3 Summary of the macrofield analysis

To summarize the discussion of the distribution of degrees of CD over the whole macrofield, it is possible to conclude that the whole rhematic track of the text implements a **Quality scale** with rising degrees of communicative dynamism:

| ThPr | DTh | Tr | Rh | RhPr |
|------------|---------------|----------|-----------|------------|
| <i>Set</i> | <i>B1, B2</i> | <i>Q</i> | <i>Sp</i> | <i>FSp</i> |

Table 1: The Quality Scale implemented in the sample sermon

In the conclusions Svoboda drew on the syllable as a microfield (1996); he noted that “in Indo-European languages, the distributional fields of clauses display the tendency to place rhemes proper at or towards the end of the clause” (ibid.: 199). In the case of the sermon under analysis, the rheme proper is placed rather at the end of the macrofield. Similarly as in the case of the macrofield analysis of St. Luke’s gospel (Adam 2004), I would compare it to the structure implemented in classical drama. Namely, it would be *exposition* (induction into the problem; introduction) – *collision* (the problem exemplified) – *crisis* (failure to solve the problem satisfactorily) – *peripeteia* (solution found, though not sufficient) and – *catastrophe* (the climax, final solution). It seems that such a gradual development is typically traceable both in narratives and sermons. The roles performed by individual sections as well as their corresponding dynamic semantic functions are shown in the following chart (the individual relations between the roles are approximate):

| exposition | collision | | crisis | peripeteia | catastrophe |
|---|----------------------------|----------------------|--|-----------------------------------|---|
| ThP | DTh | | Tr | Rh | RhPr |
| <i>Set</i> | <i>B1</i> | <i>B2</i> | <i>Q</i> | <i>Sp</i> | <i>FSp</i> |
| the topic set background (survey) | Marlene’s breast cancer | hurricane Katrina | inadequate answers (fate / God’s freewill) | right answer (God included) | suffering with God who underwent the same suffering |

Table 2: The functional structure of the sample sermon

3 Conclusions

Having examined a sample sermon, I suggest that the functional image of the passage becomes crisper if it is studied from the point of view of a higher level of the text. The

function of the thematic, the transitional and the rhematic tracks appears not to be restricted to the level of individual clauses, but to exceed them to operate on the suprasentential level of a communicative macrofield. The dynamic-semantic layers seem to play a significant role within the whole flow of communication in its entirety. Having analyzed a number of religious texts (see especially Adam 2006) and drawing on Svoboda (1996), I now can define a paragraph and a chapter as communicative distributional macrofields, which follow the same structural principles as their lower communicative counterparts (a clause, a noun phrase). The whole passage may thus be viewed as one communicative macrofield with the degrees of CD distributed to the extent to which they contribute to the development of communication in the functional macrofield.

I admit the suggested interpretation is a simplification; its overall structure, however, proves it is well founded on the base of a functional and systemic approach to language. It seems that the functional approach applied by the theory of FSP need not be restricted to the level of individual clauses, but can be applied to the hierarchical level of paragraphs and chapters.

Earlier research showed that narrative can be naturally divided into an initial part, the body and a closing part of the story, and, also analogically transformed into the functional outlook of the Th – Tr – Rh structure. The analysis presented in this paper suggests that an analogous approach may be readily applied also within a functional analysis of secondary religious discourse. Whether this perspective may be adopted on a larger scale, is still to be shown. Nevertheless, the above interpretation seems to insinuate that the application of FSP is not confined to the boundaries of clauses, but exceeds it into the domain of paragraphs and chapters.

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