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**Sámuel Brassai and Jan Firbas:**  
**The concept of the sentence**  
**through the prism of two great minds of linguistics**

**Abstract**

Anchored in the framework of functional linguistics, the paper attempts to present and compare two renowned linguists who, in their days, both researched what is now labelled information structure and who succeeded in elaborating revealing concepts of the sentence, viz. Hungarian scholar Sámuel Brassai and Czech scholar Jan Firbas. Even though the paper focuses on their understanding of the sentence, above all the topic-focus articulation, it also pays attention to the wider context of their careers and work. On top of that, by means of his modest contribution to the present volume, the author wishes to pay tribute to the Hungarian and Czech achievements in linguistics.

*Keywords:* Brassai, Firbas, sentence, information, structure, FSP

**1 Setting the Scene**

Sámuel Brassai and Jan Firbas: two renowned scholars whose lives and careers are separated by a century. The former fully anchored in the days of the Hungarian Kingdom, later united by the House of Habsburg in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire (1797–1897), the latter experiencing the challenges of World War II, the Communist regime, and the post-totalitarian years in Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic (1921–2000). The one, a long-time distinguished member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences – and the other, doctor honoris causa of the Universities of Leeds, Leuven, and Turku. On the one hand, ‘the last Transylvanian polymath’, ‘the teacher of the nation’, and the apostle of the information structure of the Hungarian sentence – and, on the other hand, a faithful follower of the Prague School, polyglot, and above all the father of the theory of functional sentence perspective. So different in one sense, yet their impact on linguistics remains in many respects unsurpassed. And, perhaps in many more respects, they are strikingly similar.

The present volume appears to be a fitting setting for a tentative contrastive comparison of these two great figures of world linguistics. The paper endeavours to juxtapose Brassai and Firbas only in terms of their linguistic, namely syntactic, thoughts. More specifically, it sets out to contrast how they understand the sentence, whether Hungarian, English, or in general. Besides, it would be virtually impossible to compare all of the areas the two scholars pursued; Sámuel Brassai’s visionary work especially is literally multifaceted, encompassing a number of other disciplines, such as pedagogy, teaching methodology, mathematics, botany, philoso-

phy, and others (Molnár 2008: 2–3). Jan Firbas also explored other realms than just linguistics, such as biblical theology, literature, translation, and – as a young student – medicine.

In a sense (perhaps a slightly allegorical one), this paper is meant to express the author's gratitude for and to pay a humble tribute to the friendly relationships attested over the years between the Hungarian and Czech Anglicists, namely the Pécs and Brno English departments. Therefore, and also owing to the author's engagement in the topic discussed, here and there a more personal tone will inevitably – and non-academically, I must admit – resonate between the lines.

## **2 The common ground: preliminaries**

As anticipated, the paper is going to explore primarily the syntactically oriented research carried out by the two respective linguists. To be precise, it is functional syntax that is going to provide the common grounds for the present discussion, above all the area of what is currently labelled theories of information processing or information structure. Though each of the theories falling into this domain is unique and autonomous, they, as a rule, deal with the distribution of information over different communicative units (Quirk et al. 1985: 1356–1377, Chafe 1994, Halliday 1994, Sgall, Hajičová & Panevová 1986). The point is that both the authors under scrutiny in fact adopted an analogous approach towards the study of sentences: with a certain degree of simplification it is legitimate to claim that both Brassai and Firbas understood the sentence (Hungarian, English, Czech and actually any other) as a basic communicative, and, what is even more, a dynamic unit. In other words, rather than a static sequence of different elements, they both saw the sentence as an intricate space of syntactic relations, the final arrangement and semantic load of which is dependent on the context, on the communicative intention of the speaker, on the word order principles governing the given language, and on many other aspects. This common denominator – the dynamic understanding of the sentence – is to be examined more closely in the following sections of the paper.

As a matter of fact, the rough introductory comparison of the two scholars above lacks one aspect: although their scholarly achievements in syntax have proved to be literally far-reaching and truly inspiring, their names are far from being widely known, especially against the background of some famous names in western linguistics. This partly relates to the countries of origin of both the authors, which, due to their political status, were in their days rather marginalized and not foregrounded. Katalin É. Kiss, a Hungarian author who meritoriously devoted some of her papers to Brassai, does not even hesitate to say that Brassai's name is “unknown abroad and forgotten in Hungary” (É. Kiss 2008: 23). Sadly, this is even more so among Czech linguists. Incidentally, as far as I know, neither Mathesius nor Firbas seemed to be acquainted with Brassai's works, both actually repeatedly referring to Henri Weil as the instigator of the theory of structure. (I myself must admit I actually learned about Sámuel Brassai and his achievements in Hungarian syntax long after obtaining my doctoral degree). Kiss claims that Brassai's linguistic – and other – thoughts were actually “ahead of his time by a hundred years in several aspects and (...) despite their originality, most of Brassai's ideas soon sank into oblivion” (É. Kiss 2008: 24) for several reasons: their relative novelty, their exclusivity and practical availability in Hungarian only, and also because Brassai as the most universal scientist in the true sense of the word was “looked upon not so much as a linguist but as a polyhistor, so his linguistic theory may simply not have been considered seriously enough by his contemporaries” (É. Kiss 2008: 24–25). My hope is that the present paper will be able to contribute to Brassai's scholarly and moral rehabilitation.

Analogously, Firbas's scholarly merit was harshly diminished and his academic career hindered due to the Communist oppression. For Jan Firbas, his Christian faith was fortunately not a theoretical issue; the contrary is the case. Many a time he had a chance to testify – “with trembling knees”, as he used to say – of his firm Christian beliefs when facing political threats and moral dilemmas under the Communist regime. With regards to his research, one should be aware of the fact that it was virtually practicable only with the wind of change in 1989 to publish texts on religious discourse; the Velvet Revolution in the Czech Republic made it possible for Professor Firbas to deal with such topics freely and with no restrictions. Not to mention the fact that even though he had earned prestige and scholarly recognition in at least some linguistic circles (especially at western universities) in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, he was only granted full professorship at his alma mater after the Revolution of 1989. No one is a prophet in their own land, after all. May this homage paper be a promotion of Jan Firbas's heritage, boosting awareness also amongst the Hungarian linguistic community.

To sum up, even if they were living and working in different contexts, places and times, neither Brassai nor Firbas enjoyed due respect and appreciation over decades in a similar sense. Yet it is more than obvious that in the end they were both able to find their way to the spotlight, being given a prominent place in linguistic at least in some treatises, and being studied and cited by a few renowned scholars. They undoubtedly do deserve appropriate attention.

It goes without saying that neither Brassai's nor Firbas's works came to existence in a vacuum. Their linguistic thoughts logically appeared in the context of other authors, schools and trends. Some of these circumstances, including other linguists, will be mentioned in the passages below in relation to Brassai and Firbas. For further details on Henri Weil, Anton Marty, Georg von Gabelentz, Vilem Mathesius, Josef Vachek, Frantisek Danes and the like, the reader is referred e.g. to Adam (2017) and É. Kiss (2008: 29–33).

## ***2.1 Sámuel Brassai: A century of the life of an exceptional intellectual***

Sámuel Brassai was born into a clerical, educated family in what was then Transylvania (Romania). Soon, as a boy, he developed a distinct liking for many areas of human culture: reading, music, Hungarian as well as a number of foreign languages (above all Latin, German and French), pedagogy, fauna and flora, and, last but not least, Christian faith – incidentally, a passion he shared with Jan Firbas (Molnár 2008: 2–3). At the age of 24, Brassai finished his studies at a Unitarian boarding school and began his career as a private tutor in several families in Kolozsvár, a literary centre at that time. Apart from dealing with a respectable variety of other areas (including e.g. politics or technologies), he gradually focussed more and more on languages and teaching methodology, referring to the motto, ‘The nation lives through its language’ (Molnár 2008: 3). Meanwhile, after the revolutionary year 1848, he took an active part in some political issues and also started to give lectures and publish newspaper articles on a regular basis. After that, Brassai began to teach philosophy and linguistics at university.

Having gained fame and reputation, in the 1870s Brassai held the chair of the vice-rector and rector of Kolozsvár University. After his retirement, he devoted much time to studying Sanskrit, other classical languages, poetry, and philosophical treatises, spending his days taking notes. Having shared many a clever word, logical reasoning and advice as well as having spread culture and enlightenment, the ‘armed Goliath of science, wit, and logic’, *praeceptor Hungariae*, died at the age of 100 in 1897 (Molnár 2008: 4).

## **2.2 Remembering Jan Firbas: A personal digression**

One significant fact must be added to the introductory mosaic of the paper. On a more personal note, I should like to confess that I was lucky indeed to have known Jan Firbas personally – first as my teacher at the English Department at Masaryk University, later as my diploma thesis supervisor and, finally, also as my dearest mentor and perpetual inspirer. (Though Jan Firbas is one of those who faithfully followed the structuralist-functional principles set by the Prague School, both his life and professional career were closely connected with the city of Brno.) To this day I remember how enchanted I was both by his pedagogical performance during the classes as well as by his ingenious insights into functional linguistics and exemplary erudition; his approach to us was both professional, and, at the same time, friendly and humble. His approach to matters of the English language may be with no exaggeration characterised by two words: love and enthusiasm.

Jan Firbas was an ordinary, humble man, anchored in his Christian beliefs; at the same time, he was an extraordinarily gifted teacher and a highly esteemed linguist of true fame. It is a rare combination.

## **3 Sámuel Brassai: a magyar mondat<sup>1</sup>**

Paradoxically enough, the most well-known names usually related to the genesis of the theories of information structure – such as Weil, de Gabelentz, Marty – do not represent those who really first (meant chronologically) explored the topic. The true pioneer in the area of information processing was most probably Sámuel Brassai himself, even though his name – instead of being proudly presented on the pages of western textbooks of linguistics – fell into a latent limbo.

### **3.1 The visionary**

Without any doubt, Sámuel Brassai was the first to notice the word order differences between Hungarian on the one hand, a Finno-Ugric language (Uralic language family), and on the other hand several Indo-European languages known to him. Among other things, Brassai revealed that word order in Hungarian sentences is based on a division between the topic and a comment. He studied, among other things, the word order principles of the Hungarian language, comparing them to other Indo-European languages.

Unfortunately, to the knowledge of the author of the present paper, none of Brassai's writings have yet been published in English; therefore most facts on Brassai presented below will exclusively build on the few papers written in English and so, in a sense, conveyed by proxy. Among the crucial English-written studies on the information structure of the Hungarian sentence as viewed by Brassai are those published by three renowned Hungarian scholars, viz. Katalin É. Kiss, and Ferenc Kiefer (both professors at the Research Institute for Linguistics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest) as well as Erzsébet Molnár (Department of English Linguistics and Literature, University of Miskolc), who has mapped the life and work of Sámuel Brassai in a representative way. (For Brassai's original papers in Hungarian see e.g. Brassai 1860, 1863–1865, and 1885.)

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<sup>1</sup> The Hungarian sentence; the original in Hungarian refers to the title of two key treatises by Sámuel Brassai and, at the same time, depicts the core of his linguistic endeavours.

### 3.2 *The sentence*

As has been made clear above, the paper is focused on the area of information processing and, especially, the concept of the sentence as such. For Brassai, it is the sentence that stands out among all other linguistic units and concepts; in 1852 he wrote, “The sentence is the person of the language. Words are only necessary members of the sentence” (Molnár 2008: 15). Kiefer (2005: 259) aptly summarizes the most significant of Brassai’s findings within this domain as follows:

- (i) Brassai argued convincingly that the word order rules in Hungarian cannot be formulated in terms of grammatical subject – grammatical predicate, word order is determined by topic-comment articulation;
- (ii) the topic can be identified by means of the question test (the common element of the question and the corresponding answer belong to the topic);
- (iii) the boundary between topic and comment is determined by stress: the first stressed element in the sentence is the first element of the comment;
- (iv) typically, the topic occupies the sentence-initial position and it is followed by the comment.

Logically enough, all that has been said has much to do with the very linguistic nature of the Hungarian language. Hungarian generally follows the neutral *ordo naturalis* of subject–verb–object. As a topic-prominent language, nevertheless, the Hungarian word order is not only dependent on syntax as such but also on the topic-comment structure of the sentence (for details see e.g., Törkenczy 1999, Szita & Görbe 2009); the Hungarian sentence generally has the following order: topic, comment (focus), verb and the rest of the sentence elements. Whereas the topic part sets the subject of communication (and may be empty), the focus presents the new, typically unknown information to the listeners or a piece of information that needs specification, correction, and the like (cf. Kenesei, Vago & Fenyvesi 1998). It follows that the word order is relatively free; yet it must be taken into account that alterations in the Hungarian word order are always functional and are neither limitless or absolutely free in the true sense of the word: different realizations of word order in specific contexts are thus generally not interchangeable, and the neutral order is not always the best choice (Szita & Görbe 2009). In other words, the characteristic features of Hungarian made it possible for Brassai to see that there is another level of government over the purely syntactic and lexically semantic make-up of the sentence: its information structure. He appears to have been the first to actually see a sentence as a dynamic phenomenon that is inevitably dependent on the immediately relevant context.

É. Kiss (2008) also comments on Brassai’s attempts to describe Hungarian syntax and to establish the universal characteristics of the sentence on the basis of a set of genetically unrelated languages. Brassai distinguishes “French-type languages that realize a constrained version of this universal structure, requiring the topicalization of the grammatical subject” (É. Kiss 2008: 23). It is of importance to recall again that Hungarian, being a Finno-Ugric language, analogously to Czech for instance manifests a more or less free word order, even if more in the sense of its semantics than pure syntax. Basically, the order of sentence elements is arranged from general to specific; the Hungarian sentence thus prototypically follows the end-focus principle.

### 3.3 *The verb*

Furthermore, looking at this universality of the sentence, Brassai arrives at the conclusion that it “is not built on the dichotomy of the subject and the predicate, but only has a single supporting pillar: the verb” (É. Kiss 2008: 26, cf. Adam 2013: 162–166). Advocating the pivotal role of the verb, Brassai is convinced that language “was born for the coordination of collective human activities, and serves primarily for the denomination of events, actions, happenings, so it is the verb (...) that must play the central role in it” (É. Kiss 2008: 27). It is not without interest that analogously, in the framework of Firbas’s functional sentence perspective theory, the verb has a key role; “in the syntagmatic plan the verb is a central unit, i.e. a sort of pivot pin, around which the sentence can be ‘pivoted’, turned either away from or towards the subject, perspectiving thus the sentence as Presentation or Quality Scale. The decisive determinant is the transitional verb; the semantic syntactic content of the verb determines the perspective the sentence implements” (Adam 2013: 164). In Brassai’s opinion mediated by É. Kiss, “linguists assign to the subject such an outstanding role only under the influence of logic. (...) If the subject is, indeed, an indispensable basic unit of the sentence, why can it so often be omitted e.g., in Hungarian (...)?” (É. Kiss 2008: 26).

Being fully aware of the fact that the supremacy of the verb need not be applicable to all languages and so be truly universal, Brassai asserts that this “deep structure” of the sentence can legitimately have different syntactic realizations in different languages (É. Kiss 2008: 27). He goes on to offer a set of features that ought to be taken into consideration when assessing the specifics of every individual language, such as, *i.a.*, the presence or absence of complements, the word order of sentence elements (pinpointing the principal role of the verb and its mutual position with other elements), the use of the copula, the syntax and function of non-finite verb forms, prosody, agglutination versus flexion, etc. (É. Kiss 2008: 27). On the basis of these aspects manifested, one should be able to see the universality of the sentence structure principles described by Brassai.

### 3.4 *The topic-focus articulation*

As É. Kiss (2008: 28) rightly says, in the scope of the whole array of multifarious linguistic ideas pursued and researched by Brassai,

it is perhaps his prophetic exploration of word order that contains the most ingeniously novel ideas, some of which are revelations even today. Seeking an answer to the question as to whether there is some common feature which may be generalized inductively in the different sentence types of the known languages, Brassai reaches a positive conclusion. Both fixed and free word order languages display a sentence structure which begins with one or more complements carrying already known information.

In terms of the information structure of the sentence that is virtually common to all languages (understanding the sentence structure to be universal), Brassai noticed that practically all the languages he studied displayed a sentence structure which began with one or more elements carrying information already known. These items “practically lay a basis for the meaning of the sentence in the listener’s mind, i.e. they are calling attention, and pointing forward, connecting the mental activity of the listener with that of the speaker” (Brassai in É. Kiss 2008: 28). Brassai labelled this initial part of the sentence as “introduction” (or, later on, an “*inchoativum*”, a “subject in a different sense” or “preparatory part”), while the second part of the sentence, including the verb, is labelled (according to the gradual development of Brassai’s terminology) the “predicate”, “bulk”, “message” or the self-explanatory term “prin-

cial part”. Brassai understands the latter section – the principal part – of the sentence as the one that conveys the “communication of an action, or a circumstance of an action that the speaker supposes to be unknown to the listener” (Brassai in É. Kiss 2008: 28). Outlining an intricate system of relations among individual sentence elements construed around the dichotomy of the *inchoativum* and the *bulk*, Brassai explains subtle nuances of possible scenarios of sentence arrangement (for details see É. Kiss 2008 27–29, Kiefer 2005, Molnár 2008: 14–15).

Needless to say, this concept, firstly, actually coincides with what Mathesius and Firbas adopt in their functional description of the sentence (theme-rheme articulation), and, secondly, it contradicts the idea of Gabelentz’s traditionally based idea of subject-predicate articulation deriving from logics, which gave rise to other related theories of information structure in years to come. Unfortunately, as Kiss points out with a shade of reproach, it was Gabelentz’s “imprecisely defined notions that became implanted in international linguistics, and continued to develop – sometimes in diverse directions” (É. Kiss 2008: 31). Mathesius himself argued that these two expressions (“psychological subject” and “psychological predicate”) “unduly tended to relegate the problems of FSP to spheres not treated by current linguistic research” and that a linguistic issue should be solved by linguistic methods alone (Firbas 1974: 11).

It is more than obvious that – unlike such psychologizing tendencies in the attempts to structure the sentence seen in those days – in his approach Brassai ingeniously depicts both the dynamic and context-dependent nature of the sentence and thus outdistances the current state of the art of linguistic investigation of his day. His concept of the information structure of the sentence is remarkably sensitive, sophisticated, and, last but not least, language-universal. It does seem realistic to claim that it was Brassai as well as the Prague school (especially Mathesius, Vachek and Firbas) that were able to tackle the issue and, instead of adopting the psychologizing interpretations pursued by Gabelentz, but also Marty and some other scholars (some of them actually going back to the inner speech form ideas presented by Wilhelm von Humboldt), focused on a purely linguistic approach, taking duly into account the role of context, word order principles and the specific features of the given language.

It will be apt to conclude the discussion on Brassai’s concept of the sentence by means of a couple of far-seeing lines in which Kiss evaluates Brassai’s notable legacy: “[Brassai’s] communicative sentence articulation proved to have a significance beyond creating text coherence and expressing pragmatic nuances and emphasis; it has proved to have a – sometimes decisive – role in the syntactic structure of sentences” (É. Kiss 2008: 31).

#### **4 Jan Firbas: functional sentence perspective**

Combining the approaches adopted by formalists and functionalists, the theory of functional sentence perspective (hereafter FSP) draws on the findings presented by the scholars of the Prague School of linguistics. The father of FSP, Jan Firbas, found his inspiration in the teaching of his predecessor, Vilem Mathesius, whose research was apparently instigated by the pioneering investigation presented e.g. by Weil, Paul, Marty and Gabelentz (for references and further details see Adam 2013 and 2017).

#### **4.1 *Mathesius's inspiration and legacy***

In the Praguian tradition that was born in 1910–1930s and flourished in the decades to come, Mathesius was a true initiator of the implementation of functional analysis of sentences. He viewed the sentence as a dynamic phenomenon developing in the act of communication (as opposed to the traditional formal analysis that considers a sentence a static body). Analogously to Brassai, in his far-reaching research Mathesius noticed the tendency of every utterance in Czech (and other languages under his scrutiny) towards having a theme and a rheme, and formulated the basic principles of what was to be labelled FSP only later (Mathesius 1975: 81). According to Mathesius's studies on the word order in Czech, the theme of a sentence represents the basis of the utterance (“the point of departure”), that is what is being talked about (and hence is retrievable from the context), while the rheme is connected with the core of the message, that is what is being said about the theme (most often something that is not known from the context of the act of communication) (*ibid.*). The natural, unmarked (objective) sequence of these segments of communication is theme – rheme; the reversed word order is a marked (subjective) one, usually signalling an emotive flavour to the message conveyed (Svoboda & Hrehovčík 2006).

Since the official establishment of the Prague Linguistic Circle in 1926, Mathesius represented a scholarly reaction to the linguistic principles and concepts pursued in Europe at that time. He convincingly showed in his research that the study of language as such can cope with the issue of sentence perspective without (up to that moment) expected psychologizing tendencies. As Vachek puts it, thus referring to his own revealing idea of seeing the alternative to psychologist as functionalist, “Mathesius's merit lies in the fact that by replacing the psychologicistic terms with those of functional linguistics, he made the whole conception really workable – it was to become an efficient tool in the comparative study of different languages or of different stages of one and the same language” (Vachek 1975: 89–90). Mathesius claims that in communication “the lexical and grammatical means of language are made to serve a special purpose imposed on them by the speaker at the moment of utterance, i.e., the very act of communication” (Mathesius in Firbas 1974: 14). In Mathesius's view, word order phenomena “constitute a system characterised by a hierarchy of word order principles; the hierarchy is determined by the extent to, and the manner in, which the principles operate” (*ibid.*: 15). In his insightful papers, Mathesius endeavoured to establish the essential principles with regard to word order; he “allots the leading role to the grammatical principle, ranking FSP only with factors of secondary importance” though (*ibid.*); further research into the position of word order in the English language showed that besides word order (and intonation in spoken language), semantic structure operates as an effective means of FSP. Yet Mathesius evidently viewed the sentence as a dynamic phenomenon developing in the act of communication (as opposed to the traditional formal analysis that considers a sentence a static body).

As suggested above, it is highly probable that Mathesius – being acquainted with and finding inspiration in the Henri Weil's writings – was not aware of the existence, let alone of the work of Sámuel Brassai. (Yet, in a sense, by extension he was a link between Brassai and Firbas.) Weil distinguished between “the movement of ideas”, i.e., actual word order, and “the syntactical movement”, i.e., terminations, claiming that speakers of languages express their ideas in the same order “whether they speak a modern language or use one of the ancient languages” (Firbas 1974: 11–12). Later on, it was evidently Weil's ideas that instigated Mathesius's research. Discussing Weil's observations to advocate the scalar understanding of degrees of communicative dynamism (CD), Firbas holds that such a strictly two-fold approach (i.e., the point of departure vs. goal of the discourse movement) “does not consist in

two steps only, one being the starting point and the other the goal. Other steps leading from the starting point to the departure can occur between the two. This observation corroborates the existence of a gamut of CD conceived of as a reflection of the development of the communication” (Firbas 1992: 107). Firbas’s everlasting merit and contribution to linguistics will always be that he not only adopted Mathesius’s scholarly achievements in the field of word order, the sentence structure and information processing in the wide sense, but also submitted the findings to a thorough investigation (starting in the 1950s), finally succeeding in elaborating the long-smouldering ideas into a full-fledged, systematic theory (with a culmination in the 1980s and 1990s).

In the early 1950s, Firbas started to investigate the principles of word order outlined by Mathesius; for instance he re-examined Mathesius’s claim that English seems to be “less susceptible to the theme-rheme articulation than Czech because of its relatively fixed word order (grammatical word order)” (Svoboda & Hrehovčik 2006). Firbas gradually elaborated and deepened the theory, making it more systematic. He labelled it “functional sentence perspective” (in Czech, the term runs “aktuální členění větné” – a term coined by Mathesius himself). In 1964, Firbas published a paper on functional sentence perspective, introducing the concept of communicative dynamism (abbreviated to CD). In his article, he defines the degree of CD as “the extent to which the element contributes towards the development of the communication” (Firbas 1964: 268). As has been proved many times, Firbas’s understanding of a sentence as a field of distribution of CD (accompanied by the factors of context and semantic structure) provides one of the most effective approaches towards the study of language.

#### **4.2 The basic coordinates of FSP**

Over the decades, the theory of functional sentence perspective has been understood as one of the major approaches to the study of information processing (Firbas 1992, 1995, Svoboda 1989, 2005, Dušková 2005, 2015, Chamonikolasová 2010, Adam 2013). The theory of FSP seems to have warranted a firm place in the area of functional linguistics and its analytical methods are considered one of the legitimate tools of discourse analysis.

As FSP looks at individual sentences from the point of view of their function in the relevant context, it manifests many features of text linguistics and definitely draws on some of its major methods. Text linguistics views texts as elements strung together in definable relationships, 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. In a nutshell, FSP 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 emphasised or made less significant to achieve the author’s communicative intention. In FSP, the very moment of utterance (or perception of a sentence) is thus a phenomenon of paramount importance. As Chamonikolasová (2000: 139) aptly notes, Firbas’s approach is “an approach of an independent observer who studies utterances without speculating about the process in the speaker’s or listener’s consciousness”.

In Firbas’s view, the sentence is a field of semantic and syntactic relations that in its turn provides a distributional field of degrees of communicative dynamism; in it, every meaningful element of communication is viewed as a carrier of communicative dynamism and hence pushes the communication forward. As a matter of fact, this is precisely what unifies the two great minds (Firbas and Brassai), although there is a span of a hundred years between them. 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 informa-

tion is the high point of the message (the rheme), 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 the notorious triplet 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 the degrees of CD along with the interplay of the basic FSP factors that make FSP specific within the field of text linguistics. CD basically operates on the level of a clause; the individual thematic and non-thematic elements form the thematic and non-thematic strings (see below). 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. In his summarizing monograph, Firbas (1992: 41–43) also introduced the idea of dynamic semantic scales that are implemented in sentences; they functionally reflect the distribution of CD and operate irrespective of word order. In principle, Firbas distinguishes two types of dynamic-semantic scales: the Presentation Scale (Pr-Scale), in which a context-independent element is introduced on the scene, and the Quality Scale (Q-Scale), in which a quality is ascribed to a subject (for further details see Firbas 1992).

### 4.3 *FSP analysis of the clause*

Analogously to Brassai, since the pioneering work of Jan Firbas's research 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 starting point 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" (1992: 11–12). He views a clause as "a field of relations" (syntactic and semantic above all) that determine the distribution of communicative dynamism (CD) 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 transition – the non-thematic part of the clause (Firbas 1992: 80–81). Through the interplay of the three FSP factors, it is then possible to identify the degrees of CD carried by the communicative units: *theme proper* – *diatheme* – *transition proper* – *transition* – *rheme* – *rheme proper* (here presented in the interpretative arrangement, i.e. according to the gradual rise in CD irrespective of the positions they occupy within the sentence (Firbas 1986: 47).

According to the degrees of CD, there are basically two directions in which the theme and the non-theme are arranged. It follows that every sentence has one of the two following perspectives: in the first variant, the sentence is perspectived (i.e., oriented) towards the subject, the subject being the high point of the message, and the verb – acting as a "tray" on which the new phenomenon is presented – introduces the subject on the scene. In the other variant, the sentence is perspectived away from the subject, in the process of which something is said about the subject and the verb mediates a quality/specification of the subject. The determination of the sentence perspective (presentation or quality scales respectively; Firbas 1992: 67) seems to be essential in the functional analysis of a sentence. All in all, CD is variation in the communicative value of different parts of an information unit. The common, unmarked distribution of CD follows the linear progression of an information unit and typically ranges from low information value at the beginning of the information unit to high information value at the end (cf. Adam 2013: 45–46).

#### **4.4 The verb in FSP**

As has been mentioned above, the semantic approach favoured in the theory of FSP is the dynamic one; ‘dynamic’ means here that the theory deals with the function of language at the very moment of utterance (Firbas 1992, 1995). FSP explores the information structure of utterances and the relationships between the units of information in the utterance in the immediately relevant context, i.e. at the very moment of utterance. Thus it approaches a piece of language from the dynamic perspective.

Likewise, the verb is seen primarily as a dynamic element in FSP. 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 sentences. It is in this manner that meaning acquires a dynamic aspect – that they become dynamic” (Firbas 1991: 89). It follows that from the point of view of dynamic semantics 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 also as a transition between the theme and the rheme, pointing out that it can “point in two directions” (Firbas 1992: 91). Furthermore, it has largely been taken for granted that – within the realm of FSP – the verb in English is usually semantically weak; it has a relatively empty meaning, and serves as a mediator between the subject and other sentence elements. 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).

Nevertheless, as Firbas maintains, the relative semantic weakness of the English verb does “not impair the communicative efficacy of the English sentence” (Svoboda et al. 2010: 210). In his insightful study (Firbas 1975) on the concept of existence/appearance on the scene, Firbas goes on in his defence of the functionality of the English transitional verb, saying that, “the very opposite is true: being semantically weak, the English verb may serve as a transitional element, allowing the rhematic nominal elements to come into prominence and so adding to the concreteness of English expression” (Svoboda et al. 2010: 210). In other words, the role of the verb seems to be unsurpassed in a way: through the intricate mycelium of syntactic-semantic relations to other sentence elements, it actually “decides” what perspective a sentence takes (cf. the primary role of the verb in the Hungarian sentence advocated by Brassai above). Under these 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: 92–94). 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). Finally, it is of course vital to take into account all the three basic FSP factors in their interplay; a semantic analysis of the verb, if applied in isolation, i.e. without considering the syntactic (word order) make-up of the sentences and/or the role of the immediately relevant context, would never be capable of providing a comprehensive and true picture of the issues under investigation.

Thanks to Firbas’s fruitful research, the FSP scholars following in his footsteps today may draw inspiration and make use of a number of concepts and terms that came into existence decades ago. In addition, thanks to its universally valid, highly practical and instructive

nature, FSP undoubtedly serves (though often veiled between the lines) as a muse and guide to learners, teachers, translators, professional as well as non-professional writers and speakers, and many more. After all, as Michael Halliday once said, “A semiotic system without FSP would not be a language” (Halliday 1974: 53).

## 5 Conclusions

Admittedly, the original idea of the present paper was to juxtapose the approaches adopted by Brassai and Firbas in their analysis of the sentence and its information structure, showing both common denominators and differences. The tentative comparison, nevertheless, revealed that there are actually no substantial distinctions between their concepts and the findings of the two respective scholars are, as a matter of fact, compatible. It appears almost incredible: the two researchers, who never met and never read the other one’s work, give the impression of being close collaborators, members of one think-tank, and colleagues with unprecedented mutual understanding, rather than two scholars whose lives, careers and cultures are separated by a century, let alone green-eyed rivals in the field of linguistics.

To illustrate what has been just said, I am presenting a concise – and inevitably simplifying – outline of major common features that can be traced in Brassai’s and Firbas’s investigation into the realm of the sentence and, more generally, into functional syntax:

- (i) **The sentence is viewed as a basic communicative unit of language. Furthermore, it is understood as a dynamic phenomenon** which is always dependent on the real-life situation, authentic act of communication, i.e. within the coordinates of the verbal and situational context. It is the speaker/writer who activates the sentence, breathing in life into it by using it in the context. Thus, the function prevails over the form (syntactic realization): as one of the major functionalist mottos of the Prague school says, it is vital to distinguish between the syntactic and information structures respectively – irrespective of the language under examination. Confessing this pioneering, if not heretic, thought, especially Brassai was most certainly ahead of time.
- (ii) Out of all the sentence elements, it is **the verb that fulfils the most important role in perspectiving the whole sentence**, giving it a “direction”. Reflecting the very nature of human action, the verb is semantically (both at the level of lexical and dynamic semantics) literally loaded with key information. It thus naturally creates the non-thematic part of the sentence, while the subject – though its role is overestimated at times – typically does not convey much new information and often can be omitted. Incidentally, recent research has also suggested that the syntactic semantic load of the verb has much more to say in the sentence perspective (cf. Adam 2013).
- (iii) **The theme – rheme articulation of the sentence operates irrespective of the position of individual items in the word order.** Unlike some other linguistic schools and trends, both Brassai and Firbas subscribe to the fact that it is not possible to automatically associate particular sentence elements with a deep structure function (such as subject equals the topic, etc.). As a rule, it is the topic → comment / inchoativum → bulk / theme → rheme sequence under neutral conditions, but this arrangement can be altered if a different perspective triggers the need. Firbas distinguishes between two types of sentence perspectives: the sentence can be oriented in its deep structure away from the subject (quality scale) and towards the subject (presentation scale).

- (iv) The striking aspect remains: as mentioned above, even though Brassai and Firbas cannot have been in any possible human touch with one another, **in most respects they describe language phenomena in an astonishingly congruent manner.** (What is more, their personalities, research and writings also seem to manifest a similar spirit: an insightful, enquiring, indefatigable, and, at the same time, humble style.) The only interpretation possible is as follows: although fully independent of one another, they both get to the very core of language as such, depicting it as it reflects the reality. Thus, in this sense, Brassai and Firbas touch upon a number of language universals.
- (v) Another common denominator identified is that **both Brassai and Firbas primarily draw on the principles governing their mother tongue** – on the minute and sensible observation of Hungarian and Czech respectively – only then purposefully reaching out to the other languages compared and contrasted. It was perhaps the special statuses of Hungarian and Czech, which both display a clear inclination towards a relatively free word order; this aspect of paramount importance may have lain at the root of their ability to see it against the background of other (including genetically unrelated) languages, especially those that follow a much stricter set of word order rules. It is remarkable that the genesis of two compatible theories of sentence structure will forever be related to scholars whose mother tongue “plays” with the position of elements in the sentence in such a (seemingly) labyrinthine and yet highly functional way.
- (vi) Last but not least, Brassai and Firbas produced not only impressive theories along with a number of inspiring papers, but they also **meritoriously left a promising legacy.** The point is that their work has not been abandoned; conversely, they have been a precious inspiration to many a scholar. To enumerate just a few representing the Hungarian and Czech linguistic traditions, here are the names that come to mind when discussing the information structure of the sentence as elaborated by Brassai and Firbas: Ferenc Kiefer, Katalin E. Kiss, Ales Svoboda, Libuse Duskova, etc. In their research, the once pioneering ideas find a fertile soil and a motivation to grow and develop.

It was Mathesius who once said to his students – and was repeatedly alluded to by Firbas – that “language is a fortress that must be attacked with all means and from all sides” (Vachek 1972: 69). Let me say in harmony with this metaphor that, for me, in their exemplary quest for a better understanding of language, in their devoted aspiration to grasp the sentence in its real context, and in their pioneering readiness to open new vistas come what may, both Brassai and Firbas will always be the most diligent, faithful and noble knights of linguistics and beyond, always prepared to do their best to conquer the fortress.

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