

## Towards an expanded definition of Focus in Functional (Discourse) Grammar

In a paper I published about twenty years ago (in Dutch[1]), I showed that the passive construction is mainly used to give a more prominent role, to give Focus, one may say, to the predicate. Very often, the reason for speakers and writers doing this, is that they want to add, as it is called in classical rhetorical terms, ‘amplification’ to the sentence, or, to use another classical term, to add ‘pathos’ to either the sentence or part of the sentence or more specifically to the action given by the predicate, or more generally to a larger part of the given information.

Now, reading again about Functional Grammar, it struck me that this grammar, in which the notion of Focus plays a substantial part, does not seem to give any attention to these reasons for giving Focus to the predicate. I think the main reason for ‘forgetting’ these reasons lies in the stressing of pragmatical reasons for a speaker’s choice between one or another syntactical construction: the speaker knows something and has an idea about what the listener knows and constructs his message in such a way that fills the gap between his knowledge and the supposed knowledge of the listener in the most effective way.[2]

However, when reasons like amplification or adding pathos are involved in the speaker’s choice for a specific syntax, the knowledge or information gap between speaker and listener hardly seems to play a role of any significance. To give just two examples, first a fragment of Virgil’s Aeneid, in which he describes the hasty preparations on the shore by Aeneas and his men in order to leave as quickly as possible, seen through the eyes of Dido:

quis tibi tum, Dido, cernenti talia sensus,  
quosve dabas gemitus, cum litora fervere late  
prospiceres arce ex summa, totumque videres  
**misceri** ante oculos tantis clamoribus aequor!

What did you feel, Dido, when you saw such things, how did you sigh, when you saw... the main **being filled** (lit.: ‘being mixed’) with loud cries!

Virgil doesn’t use the passive to fill an information gap of some sort. If that was the case, he could have used the active construction as well. In fact, he is using the passive to give pathos to the information, to make the picture of Aeneas’ hasty flight more vivid, more dramatical. In other words, there is Focus on the passive ‘misceri’, but not for any of the possible pragmatical reasons given in Functional Grammar related to the opposition between the knowledge of the speaker and his idea about the listener’s knowledge.

A second example is an expression of a colleague of mine at work, long time ago. He was about to go to the coffee and tea machine and thought about bringing something for me as well. He formulated his question in this manner (in Dutch):

'Koffie, qua thee?'

Translated in English he said something like: 'Coffee, regarding tea?' or 'Coffee, as for tea?'

Of course one may say that the pragmatical reason for formulating it like this is the Focus type of Restricting or Contrasting. But it is quite obvious, I think, that such an explanation doesn't adequately explain the underlying reason for choosing this construction. In this example again we seem to need the suggested additional Focus type of Amplification or Pathos.

In my survey of passive constructions mentioned above (in Dutch spoken texts and Latin written texts) I found that the passive construction is used in the majority of cases to place Focus on the predicate. However, in most of these cases the passive serves not a pragmatical goal as given in the theory of Functional Grammar. It doesn't serve to fill an information gap, but serves to add amplification or pathos, to the message.

Now, my thesis is that if the passive construction is for an important part used to serve these functions of pathos and amplification and not to fill an information gap of some sort, the conclusion may be that the definition of Focus should be expanded in order to make the Functional Grammar theory more adequate in explaining syntactical choices. This definition should not only incorporate information gaps and types of Focus like 'Questioning', 'Rejecting', 'Restricting' and so on [3], but also types of Focus which are not related to any information gap of some sort.

In a very recent (I think) piece by Hengeveld and Mclaughlin, about Functional Discourse Grammar (FDG), I found the following fragment about Focus ([http://home.hum.uva.nl/fg/working\\_papers/FDG.pdf](http://home.hum.uva.nl/fg/working_papers/FDG.pdf)):

'Every Communicated Content, no matter how brief, will have a Focused Subact, i.e. one that is communicatively salient. The Focus status will be reflected in the encoding of the Subact at the morphosyntactic and/or phonological levels. Communicative salience can be attributed to three different factors: the speaker's strategic selection of new information (New Focus); the speaker's desire that the addressee should attend particularly to a Subact (Emphatic Focus); the speaker's desire to bring out the particular differences and similarities between two or more Communicated Contents (Contrastive Focus).'

The notion of Focus belongs to the interpersonal level in FDG. Regarding this level Hengeveld and Mclaughlin, in the same paper, sum up so-called 'illocutionary primitives' that may influence the speaker's choice for a specific syntax:

DECLarative  
INTERogative  
IMPERative  
PROHibitive  
OPTATive  
HORTative  
IMPREcative  
ADMOnitive

CAUTIONary  
COMMISSive

Now, to come back to the first quote from this paper about FDG, the quote about Focus and communicative salience: in the two examples I have given above none of the three strategies mentioned seem to be involved. Adding pathos (or amplification), in these examples, has nothing to do with New Focus, nor with Contrastive Focus and not even with Emphatic Focus (as defined above). Adding pathos just has to do with adding pathos, nothing more, nothing less. And this adding of pathos may even have a non-communicative goal, that is, one in which the listener or addressee isn't involved. Compare it to a work of art, in which some elements may have a communicative function, elements by which the artist wants to tell us something, but in which many elements may not have this communicative function. They are just there because the artist likes them.

Therefore, maybe, instead of pathos or amplification, we can better speak of 'eloquence', in the broadest sense. Very often, I think, a speaker just wants to be eloquent. He doesn't want to declare, prohibit, admonish, contrast, and so on, he just wants to say things in a pretty way. It is what in ancient rhetoric is called 'delectare'. He wants to 'please', his audience or himself.

And so, we may conclude that *besides* this list of illocutionary primitives, we need another 'primitive' that often plays a dominant role in, among other things, syntactical choices. Maybe we should simply call it the 'delectative' primitive. This primitive may be present together with one of the other primitives, but not necessarily. It may also overrule other syntactic choices a speaker would have made if only one of the primitives in Hengeveld's list would have played a role.

Another conclusion we may draw from what is said above is that Focus should not be defined like: '...information which is relatively the most important or salient in the given communicative setting...'. It should be expanded, in order to incorporate the above mentioned functions of amplification and pathos, or, more generally, eloquence. For instance, to put it in a not very formal, but hopefully inspiring way:

*Focus is placed on part of a sentence in order to either articulate the most important or salient information in the given communicative setting, or to add 'an emotional or artistic thrill' to a sentence, part of a sentence or a larger part of the given information in a communicative or non-communicative setting.*

Both goals (salience and artistic thrill) can of course be present in one and the same expression. Then, both of these can work together in the choice of syntax or one of these overrules the other.

*Pierre Winkler*

---

[1] Pragmatische en stilistische functies van het passief (Pragmatic and stylistic functions of the passive), published in TTT, interdisciplinair tijdschrift voor taal- en tekstwetenschap, 1984

[\[2\]](#) Cf. Dik, 1997, The theory of Functional Grammar, p.326ff

[\[3\]](#) Cf. Dik, o.c., p.332