



FSP status of English verbo-nominal structures *Be + Prepositional Phrase*

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ABSTRACT

In the framework of the theory of functional sentence perspective, if a context-dependent subject is further specified, the sentence implements the Quality Scale. Under favourable conditions, however, the occurrence of a context-independent subject in the same kind of structure may lead to a presentational configuration (the Presentation Scale). The present corpus-based paper looks at English sentences featuring verbo-nominal structures with prepositional predications that follow the pattern *Be + Prepositional Phrase* (such as *be at stake*, *be on the move*, *be in full swing*, *be at hand*, *be in action*, *be at risk*, *be in sight*) in terms of their presentational potential. Taking into account their syntactic, textual and information structure, the analysis strives to determine whether and under what circumstances the predicates employed in such sentences express existence/appearance on the scene.

KEYWORDS

FSP, prepositional, presentation, quality, scale, verbo-nominal

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1 INTRODUCTION

Within the framework of Firbas's theory of functional sentence perspective (FSP), sentences are understood to implement either the Presentation Scale (Pr-Scale) or the Quality Scale (Q-Scale) (Firbas 1975: 45–70, 1992: 41–65, 77ff, 1995a; Svoboda 2005). Research has shown that — along with the immediately relevant context, linear modification and semantics — it is the English verb that determines the sentence perspective (Dušková 1999: 247ff; 2008; 2015: 256–268; Chamonikolasová 2010: 86–93; Adam 2013: 51–53, 157ff; 2014: 179–194; 2016: 9–15; Chamonikolasová et al. 2015: 9–18). Even though under favourable conditions English verbs generally appear to be capable of acting within both the dynamic semantic scales, thus determining the sentence perspective away from or towards the subject, it has become clear that certain verbs tend to operate in just one of the scales, mainly thanks to their syntactic and semantic properties (e.g., verb categories related to transitivity, complementation, subject-verb semantic affinity, etc.). Hence, for instance, verbs of existence and appearance manifest an obvious inclination towards presentation, *verba dicendi* prototypically ascribe a quality to a context-dependent bearer of quality, while others, such as verbs of motion, appear to be capable of acting within both the scales depending on their syntactic semantic configuration (Adam 2013: 33ff, 162–165).

In the course of research into the syntactic and semantic characteristics of the verb in the context of FSP, a number of specific structures have posed an analytical



problem in the FSP interpretation of sentences. One of such potentially ambivalent issues can be represented by verbo-nominal predications that follow the pattern Be + Prepositional Phrase (such as *be at stake*, *be on the move*, *be in full swing*, *be at hand*, *be in action*, *be at risk*, or *be in sight*), the principal question being their presentational potential, i.e. whether such structures are capable of introducing a context-independent subject on the scene, thus shaping the sentence as a presentational one.

The aforementioned interpretative uncertainties are triggered by the fact that, at the surface (syntactic) level, the prepositional phrases in question look similar if not alike (cf. *We are **on the move** most of the time* vs *Armies of people are **on the move*** or *The documents are **in order*** vs *Congratulations are **in order***); yet their FSP analysis does not seem to be so unequivocal. Although verbo-nominal prepositional structures generally tend to ascribe a quality to a context-dependent subject, hence logically implementing primarily the Quality Scale (*We are **on the move** most of the time*, *The documents are **in order***), in some syntactic-semantic configurations the verbo-nominal prepositional phrase is capable of presenting a context-independent subject on the scene (*Armies of people are **on the move***, *Congratulations are **in order***). The present corpus-based paper strives to examine these verbo-nominal prepositional configurations from the point of view of their syntactic, textual and information structures. To be more specific, the analysis seeks to determine whether and under what circumstances the predicates employed in such sentences express existence/appearance on the scene, and which of the structures under investigation favour the Presentation or Quality Scale.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The dynamic semantic scales (summarised e.g., in Firbas 1992) functionally reflect the distribution of degrees of communicative dynamism (CD) and operate irrespective of word order. In principle, Firbas distinguishes two types of dynamic semantic scales: the Pr-Scale and the Q-Scale. In these scales, each element is ascribed one of the dynamic-semantic functions (DSFs). In contrast with a static approach towards semantic functions of sentence constituents, the DSFs may change in the course of the act of communication; the same element may thus perform different functions in different contexts and under different conditions (cf. also Svoboda 2005: 221).

The prototypical Pr-Scale includes three basic DSFs; going in the interpretative arrangement from the least to the most dynamic element, the first position is taken by the thematic Setting of the action (Set), usually temporal and spatial items of when and where the action takes place. Second, the existence or appearance on the scene is typically conveyed by a verb by means of the Presentation of Phenomenon (Pr). Finally, the major, most dynamic element, Phenomenon to be Presented (Ph) is literally ushered onto the scene (Firbas 1992, cf. Chamonikolasová and Adam 2005): *A strange newcomer (Ph) appeared (Pr) on the platform (Set)*. Unlike the Pr-Scale, the Q-Scale sentences do not present a new phenomenon on the scene, but ascribe a Specification (Sp) through a quality verb (Q) to a typically context-dependent Bearer of Quality (B) as in *She (B) mentioned (Q) the secret that has never been revealed before (Sp)*.



Since the present paper deals with verbo-nominal prepositional phrases, first it will be necessary to comment on their syntactic as well as information structure in general. Syntactically, verbo-nominal structures with a prepositional element represent a relatively heterogeneous syntactic group; apart from the locative configurations typically featuring a locative or temporal adverbial (*He must be **at work***) and the configurations expressing an action (*John was **in love** with her*), it is especially the qualifying type of predication with a nominal or adjectival component (*They were still **in sight***, *He was **on the alert***) that deserves our attention in connection to its information structure (Dušková 2012: 412–413; cf. Quirk 1985: 402ff, Vachek 1994: 18–21). The prepositional qualifying predication, as a rule, allows for a nominal or adjectival periphrasis, such as *They were still visible* or *He was watchful* (Dušková 2012: 412–413). The grounds for our choice of such constructions for the purpose of the present research were as follows: (i) their verbo-nominal character featuring the verb *be* and a preposition + nominal element used as complement, and (ii) the existence of a figurative meaning of the phrase along with the literal one; the very selection of individual samples was partly random, albeit considering the numbers of hits available to make the selection representative. The features underlying the division of the constructions into three types is given below (see section 3).

As regards their FSP structure, the prepositional predications with the verb *be* (*be at stake*, *be at hand*, *be in order*, etc.) represent an ambiguous structure. Research (Chamonikolasová et al. 2015) has indicated that the principal interpretative question concerns their functional segmentation, namely the question of whether they operate as copular predications, i.e. as two separate communicative units, or as one unit of verbo-nominal character. Even though Firbas (1992, 1995a) himself applied the strictly syntactic approach, thus dividing complex verbo-nominal phrases into two communicative units (the verbal element being interpreted as transition and the nominal element as rheme), more recent investigations (Svoboda 2005; Adam 2013, 2016; Chamonikolasová et al. 2015) seem to be in favour of interpreting verbo-nominal structures as one unit (functioning as transition/rheme depending on the particular information structure constellation). This approach is based on the static semantic interpretation of the verbo-nominal prepositional phrases and their purely verbal/adjectival paraphrases: e.g., *be at stake* = be threatened, *be at hand* = be available, *be in order* = be relevant, appropriate, etc.). Research in FSP (see e.g., Firbas 1992: 66–69; Svoboda 2005: 221ff; Adam 2013: 44–46; Dušková 2020: 26) has convincingly demonstrated that only if seen at the interface with static (lexical) semantics, syntactic analysis along with the prism of dynamic semantics may reveal essential processes in the information structure of sentences and text. Thus, for instance, in Adam (2013: 159ff) complex verbo-nominal phrases ($V_{\text{trans}} + N$; or $V_{\text{prep}} + A$) are treated as single communicative units: *inch somebody's way*, *coil somebody's way*, *step into the spotlight*, etc.; the static semantic load of these syntactic configurations expresses analytically what can be conveyed by a single-word verb on other occasions, such as *come*, *go*, *appear* and the like. Quirk et al. (1985: 1150) also interpret such multi-word verbs as units that behave “lexically or syntactically as single syntactic constituent[s]”. Consequently, in line with the approaches brought up above, the present research will treat structures such as *be at hand* as single communicative units of a verbo-nominal prepositional nature.



In her systematic discussion on the syntactic constancy of English (and Czech) sentence elements, Dušková (2015: 107–108) observes that the qualifying type of predication with a nominal or adjectival component — being nominal in its character — prototypically tends to perform one FSP function, viz. that of the rheme; hence their inclination to fulfil the DSF of a Specification. She corroborates her conclusions by a reference to Uhlířová's (1974) statistical note on the English subject complement; in her data its operation in the rheme amounts to 90% (for other sentence structures featuring a nominal subject complement and their FSP roles see also Dušková 2015: 37, 239).¹

That being said, it is obvious that the present research should shed light on the FSP status of the selected verbo-nominal prepositional structures especially as regards their potential to operate in the Pr-Scale sentences.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

The question remains whether the sentences under discussion, i.e. those featuring verbo-nominal prepositional structures as predicates (*be at stake*, *be on the run*, etc.), implement the Presentation or Quality Scale. In other words, the analysis below is intended to throw light on their presentational potential and determine whether and under what syntactic and semantic circumstances these structures are capable of operating in both dynamic semantic scales. According to Firbas (1992), the ability of a predicate to present a context-independent subject (and so implement the Presentation Scale) is invariably associated with its capacity to express existence/appearance on the scene, either explicitly (verbs of existence or appearance), or with sufficient implicitness.

In order to narrow down the comparatively large area of research material and thus obtain more precise results of the analysis we subdivided the relevant verbo-nominal prepositional structures into three basic types (A, B and C) with respect to their static semantic interpretation and the kind of structures that could be used to paraphrase them; each of the types is then represented by two samples.

Type A: ***Be on the move***

This is the case of a deverbal prepositional phrase, converted directly from the verb (*to move*); the periphrastic equivalent would most likely contain the verb itself in active voice.

Type B: ***Be at stake***

The phrase denotes a state, and its paraphrase can be formed by a passive structure (e.g., *be menaced*, *be risked*, *be endangered*) with no direct relation to the original verb.

1 Not surprisingly, this FSP aspect of subject complements is reflected in the area of translation into other languages. Dušková (2018), for instance, describes a number of cases in which Czech predominantly verbal predications (Czech being a synthetic language with a relatively free word order) are translated by means of verbo-nominal predications into English and vice versa (see also Čermáková 1999: 112–113).



Type C: **Be at hand**

Unlike the previous two types, where verbal structures could be used for transformation, Type C would make use of a close adjectival synonym (e.g., *available*, *close*, *near*) with no lexical link to the original noun (the adjective *handy* refers to different qualities such as *convenient*, *useful* or *skilful*).

The research dataset was corpus-driven from the *British National Corpus* (BNC) and processed by the analytical tool *Sketch Engine*. For the purpose of the FSP analysis, sentences containing the existential *there*-construction were excluded from the concordance search results while the focus was on the other two types of presentation sentences, namely those with an initial rhematic subject and those with a fronted adverbial followed by subject-verb inversion (for more details on these, see e.g., Adam 2013; Dušková 2015), along with sentences implementing the Q-Scale. Altogether, the corpus contains 920 basic distributional fields (extracted from declarative and interrogative sentences alike), which were manually analysed with respect to the following aspects: their lexical meaning (this was consulted primarily in the *Cambridge Dictionary*, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* and *The Free Dictionary*²), syntactic features, and FSP (i.e. assessing the interplay of the context, linear modification and dynamic semantics).

4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 TYPE A

4.1.1 BE ON THE MOVE

The *Cambridge Dictionary*, in accord with *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, defines the verbo-nominal prepositional structure *be on the move* primarily as “to be physically active; to be going somewhere; to be travelling”; furthermore, the phrase may also denote “having a lot to do”, i.e. “be busy” (examples of this semantic variant were not detected in the dataset under scrutiny).

As far as the information structure is concerned, the *British National Corpus* under analysis yielded the total of 117 concordances which contain the lemma *be on the move*, i.e. 1.1 hits per million. This refined dataset provided 15 sentences that implement the Pr-Scale (12.8%), whereas the Q-Scale was represented by 102 hits, amounting to 87.2%, see Table 1 below.

Scales	Abs.	%
Pr	15	12.8
Q	102	87.2
Total	117	100.0

TABLE 1. Pr-Scale vs Q-Scale representation: *be on the move*

² *The Free Dictionary* was chosen as its content is based on American English and it aggregates information from other sources, e.g., *Collins Dictionary*.



When assessing the information structure of the sentences in the dataset, one has to take into consideration above all the triplet of Firbasian factors (Firbas 1992) that determine the distribution of the degrees of communicative dynamism over individual communicative units, i.e. the immediately relevant context, linear modification of the sentence as well as the semantics; these three basic determinants affect the functional sentence perspective in an interplay (*ibid.*). Thus, in the sentences that implement the Q-Scale in the dataset the verbo-nominal structures under discussion ascribe a quality to the context-dependent subjects and something new is said about the subject. The subjects operating within the Q-Scale predominantly take the form of personal pronouns, noun phrases or proper names (see examples (1)–(3) below). The predication is typically more expanded, the post-verbal section providing either the rhematic specification or additional setting. In some sentences the verbo-nominal prepositional phrase *be on the move* represents the most dynamic element and so constitutes the rheme proper (example (3)).

- (1) *Well, **we are on the move** most of the time.* [M1]³
- (2) *Curry and Jeremy Robinson could shortly **be on the move** to Sheff.* [M7]
- (3) *Our American sisters **are on the move** and (...).* [M59]

Interestingly enough, in 21 out of the total of 117 hits (i.e. 18%), *be on the move* is directly followed by the word *again*; this is, nevertheless, never the case in Pr-Scale sentences. The effect as well as the actual justification appears to be associated with the context-dependent subject: by the use of *again* its context-dependence is enhanced:

- (4) *Within ten minutes he **was on the move** again.* [M56]
- (5) *(...) that Richard Blake **was on the move** again.* [M23]
- (6) *Slowly but surely Carter **are on the move** again.* [M98]

Contrary to the perspective of Q-Scale sentences, the sentences that implement the Pr-Scale in the corpus manifest a different type of interplay of the FSP factors. Above all, they invariably feature a context-independent subject, be it singular or plural form; the occurrence of a context-independent subject in the initial position obviously violates the linear modification of individual communicative units in the field, placing the most dynamic element at the beginning of the sentence. This seeming inconsistency is covered by the remaining factors: the dynamic semantic load of the sentences, which is clearly presenting a new phenomenon on the scene, and, above all, the immediately relevant context. In examples (7) and (8) below, an extensive segment of preceding verbal context is given to illustrate. Thus in (7), migration is thematised and a number of countries are mentioned to demonstrate how many refugees are leaving their homelands, i.e. are “on the move”. Hence, the idea of being *on the move* is context-dependent. Finally comes the last sentence, in which the most dynamic element is *millions of people*, highlighting the fact that the phenomenon of

3 Please note that the code in square brackets at the end of each sentence refers to the name of the relevant subpart of the corpus and the item number.



migration is prominent and global; the existential transformation would be *There are millions of people migrating/on the move*.

- (7) (*Throughout history, there has been migration. Among the greatest migrants were the British, who populated Canada, Australia, New Zealand and large parts of Africa, often without so much as a 'by your leave' to the local population. The United States was created by migration and the modern world has been sculpted by migration.*) *In our strife-torn world, millions of people **are on the move**, in fear or in hope.* [M11]

The following example shows an analogous sentence perspective of a Pr-Scale: the context-independent subject is introduced onto the scene by means of the verbo-nominal predication *be on the move*. The appearance of the Phenomenon to be Presented is being gradually prepared by a series of descriptive sentences; only then does the phenomenon (*Werewolf*) come. Cf. the immediately relevant context of example (8):

- (8) (*Another 'combatant' suddenly appeared from the Orchard end of the course, hurrying towards the farm. Even at this distance I could see he was liberally spattered with yellow paint.*) *Werewolf **was on the move**.* [M17]

As mentioned above, if the predication is to have the capacity to present a phenomenon on the scene, it must — in Firbasian words — express “existence or appearance with explicitness or sufficient implicitness” (Firbas 1995a: 65). Within the actual manual analysis, this aspect is most evident against the background of the preceding verbal context, which can tip the scales in favour of quality (a context-dependent subject) or presentation (a context-independent subject). The existence on the scene is implied by the presentational meaning of the verbo-nominal prepositional phrases containing a verb of motion; apparently, the dynamic semantics of the sentence very much derives from the lexical semantics of individual elements, the predicate being no exception. Furthermore, in Pr-Scale sentences the *be on the move* element almost invariably takes the final position in the clause; this only testifies to its presentative role since typically no other specification follows (cf. examples (7)–(11)).

A closer scrutiny has indicated that Pr-Scale sentences with *be on the move* manifest a symptomatic use of a notion of amount in their subjects, whether expressed numerically or by means of partitives. This observation seems to reside in the fact that context-independent subjects — in comparison with context-dependent ones — as a rule need a rather detailed, specific and so relatively extended structure:

- (9) *Perhaps 800,000 animals **had been on the move**.* [M64]
 (10) *Armies of people **are on the move**.* [M30]
 (11) *Since 1914 millions of Russians **had been on the move**.* [M59]

To sum up, the verbo-nominal configuration *be on the move* seems to operate primarily within its lexical meaning denoting actual motion, be it physical movement or the start of an activity, and so its dynamic semantic load is logically above all predisposed to



the ascription of quality within the Q-Scale. Yet, as any other verb of motion, *be on the move* is capable of presenting a phenomenon on the scene under favourable conditions: such use is triggered by the presence of a context-independent subject and favourable immediately relevant context, which makes it possible for the predicate to present the subject on the scene. Finally, it should be recalled that the key aspect of the presentational capacity of a verb is definitely its ability to express existence or appearance on the scene with explicitness (typically verbs of existence or appearance), or with sufficient implicitness (Firbas 1992, 1995a); such implicit semantic load of presentation is clearly carried, for instance, by verbs of motion (including *be on the move*) and verbs that manifest a semantic affinity with the subject (Adam 2011, 2013, 2016, 2019).

4.1.2 BE ON THE RUN

The original result of the concordance search for the lemma *be on the run* was 69 hits (i.e. 0.61 per million); however, as there were three cases of an identical text being listed as separate entries, the total number of hits was finally reduced to 66.

According to the definitions in all three dictionaries, the lexical meaning of this verbo-nominal phrase denotes two basic actions: (i) hurrying or moving from place to place, or (ii) attempting to escape from pursuers, running from the police. Interestingly, it was the latter (figurative) of the two meanings that turned out to be prevalent in all the texts yielded by the search.

As can be seen in Table 2, the analysis of the dynamic semantics of the sentences identified a majority of Q-Scale implementation (53 concordances, i.e. 80.3%, see example (12)) compared to 13 hits (19.7%) of presentation sentences (example (13)).

Scales	Abs.	%
Pr	13	19.7
Q	53	80.3
Total	66	100.0

TABLE 2. Pr-Scale vs Q-Scale representation: *be on the run*.

- (12) He **had been on the run** a mere two days. [R16]
 (13) A convicted murderer **was on the run** last night. [R18]

The Q-Scale sentences in this subpart of the corpus generally ascribe a quality to context-dependent subjects; these are represented by personal or relative pronouns (altogether almost 72%), proper nouns or noun phrases with the definite article (see examples (14)–(17) respectively).

- (14) (That's why) I'm **on the run**. [R56]
 (15) (because ... Angel Alcalde,) **who was on the run** from the police (...) [R8]
 (16) White haired and florid, dumpy **John Hutt was on the run**. [R17]
 (17) Maybe **the boy was on the run**. [R21]



The presentation sentences, on the other hand, introduced context-independent subjects onto the scene, typically making use of the indefinite article (in ten out of the 13 hits) or a cardinal numeral (examples (18) and (19) below); the subjects — presenting the phenomena — are invariably placed initially, thus perfectly corresponding to the definition of Pr-sentence Type II, i.e. that with an initial rhematic subject (cf. Adam 2013: 66). The verbal predication is regularly followed by adverbials referring to time or place (cf. examples (20) and (21)), which perform the dynamic semantic function of a setting in the presentation sentences; they could be found in ten out of the 13 hits. Their occurrence, however, is typical not just of the Pr-Scale, as in the Q-Scale sentences their number amounts to 60% (i.e. 32 concordances out of 53) and they act either as the thematic unit of a setting or as the most dynamic rhematic element, specification. The adverbials, regardless of the type of the dynamic semantic scale, range from single-word expressions to multi-word phrases, such as *yesterday*, *ever since then*, *since/after escaping from prison*, *a mere two days*, *last night*, *after giving his guards the slip* or *from prison*.

- (18) *A prisoner **was on the run** last night after giving his guards the slip.* [R60]
- (19) *Four men **were on the run** last night (after ...)* [R49]
- (20) *A convicted murderer **is on the run** tonight.* [R6]
- (21) *(...) a man on bail for rape **is on the run** in the Midlands.* [R36]

Apart from the common use of post-verbal modification, there is another feature shared by both the Pr-Scale and the Q-Scale sentences, and this is the dominance of the figurative lexical meaning of the phrase *be on the run*, i.e. trying to escape from the pursuers/police (as stated at the beginning of 4.1.2). In most of the Q-Scale examples and all of the Pr-Scale instances, the phrase refers to a member of the semantic field of “a criminal”, in other words someone who has committed a crime and now finds themselves at some stage of the legal proceedings (see examples (20) and (21) above, and (22)–(24) below).

- (22) *A defendant on trial for a horrifying knife murder **was on the run** last night (...)* [R52]
- (23) *A suspected burglar **is on the run** (...)* [R39]
- (24) *Four remand prisoners **were on the run** last night (...)* [R61]

As proposed in section 4.1.1 with respect to the phrase *be on the move*, due to its lexical semantics the structure *be on the run* also tends to say something new about a context-dependent subject rather than denote the existence or appearance of an unknown phenomenon. There seems to be one exception to this tendency, however, and that is when used in media discourse. The style as well as the immediately relevant context of the presentation sentences of this particular dataset suggest that they were used for the most part as headlines or the first lines of lead paragraphs both in written and spoken media; this claim may be justified also by the occurrence of occasional capitalization of the subjects or broadcast-related notes (cf. examples (25) and (26)).

- (25) *Strangeways prisoners flee court. **FIVE** prisoners being tried in connection with the Strangeways riot **were on the run** last night (...)* [R48]
- (26) *Read in studio </s><s> A suspected burglar **is on the run** (...)* [R39]



4.2 TYPE B

4.2.1 BE AT STAKE

The dataset of texts containing the lemma *be at stake* proved to be the second largest of the six subparts of our research material, with 251 hits (i.e. 2.24 per million). Similarly to the previous phrase *be on the run*, the lexical meaning of *be at stake* can also be interpreted in two different ways: it either means that (i) something may be lost (or won, for that matter), or that (ii) something is menaced, endangered or threatened. Unlike the previous case, however, this time the difference in meaning seems to be reflected in the difference in the type of dynamic semantic scales implemented by individual sentences. The result of this is a rather balanced ratio of the Pr-Scale and the Q-Scale instances (see Table 3), and it appears that the lexical meaning (i) is mostly conducive to the Pr-Scale (see example (27)), while meaning (ii) tends to imply the Q-Scale (example (28)).

Scales	Abs.	%
Pr	106	42.2
Q	145	57.8
Total	251	100.0

TABLE 3. Pr-Scale vs Q-Scale representation: *be at stake*

(27) (*You'd think*) somebody's life **was at stake** (...) [S1]

(28) (*The Girls knew that*) their reputation for dancing for as one **was at stake**. [S242]

In the course of analysis there was a whole range of relevant findings in all three areas, i.e. lexical semantics, syntax and FSP, but due to the space limitations, only the most significant ones will be presented. To start with the semantics of the presentation sentences, there were four expressions (and their synonyms) which collocated with the verbo-nominal structure in more than 40% of all 106 instances, namely *much*, *life*, *interest* and *future* (Table 4, examples (29) and (30)). Out of these *much* takes a rather special place as this indefinite pronoun (and its synonymic equivalents) came up 17 times in the presentation sentences but never in the Q-Scale ones, thus ranking as the most frequent collocating lexical item in this part of the corpus.

Collocations	Incidence
<i>much/a lot/a great deal</i>	17
<i>life/survival</i>	12
<i>interest</i>	11
<i>future/destiny</i>	7

TABLE 4. Collocations with *be at stake*



- (29) *So much was at stake (that ...)* [S192]
 (30) (...) *if vital national interests were at stake.* [S184]

The following example (31) includes several distributional fields preceding and following the analysed structure to demonstrate that it was indeed necessary to take a close look at the immediately relevant context to decide cases of potentiality. On the level of spoken communication these could be otherwise resolved by identifying the intonation centre bearer.

- (31) (*'You stupid little fool!' he grated savagely. 'What we're talking about here is something infinitely more serious than the club.) People's lives could be at stake, (or at the very least their futures.)*) [S10]

Apart from the above-mentioned individual collocations, there were also several semantic fields from which the context-independent subjects were repeatedly recruited (see Table 5 and examples (32)–(34)).

Semantic fields	Incidence
financial aspects: <i>money, profit, asset, amount, etc.</i> exact sums/figures	19
abstract concepts: <i>matters, questions, forces, principle, etc.</i>	12
personal values: <i>love, pride, honour, self-respect, identity, etc.</i>	10

TABLE 5. Semantic fields collocating with *be at stake*

- (32) (...) *a recent £15 billion credit package was at stake.* [S165]
 (33) *Two separate questions are at stake here: (...)* [S215]
 (34) *Something like their national honour was at stake.* [S471]

The final note on the lexical semantics concerns the use of certain emphasising adverbs that — simply put — functioned as rhematizers in the sense that they emphasised the following noun phrases and shifted the focus onto them (cf. Dušková 2012: 473; Hajičová 2010: 58). There were six occurrences of the adverbs *quite, even, and the very* located directly before the context-independent subjects, thus enhancing their rhematic nature (and attracting nuclear stress to them, in terms of prosody) in the presentation sentences, while there was no evidence of their use in the Q-Scale sentences.

- (35) (...) *and even his self-respect could be at stake.* [S516]
 (36) *The very identity of the party and the movement was at stake.* [S170]

As to the syntactic properties of this dataset, the vast majority of both Pr-Scale and Q-Scale sentences display the same syntactic structure, finishing with the verb-nominal phrase itself and no more sentence elements to follow. In the course of the



analysis, however, we tried a little experiment and searched also for just the nominal part of the phrase, i.e. *at stake*, with the result of 519 hits in total. It is worth mentioning that among the numerous samples there were also several occurrences of marked word order. This is the case of 13 sentences⁴, implementing the Pr-Scale, where fronting is used, i.e. the linguistic device “used to emphasise what the speaker considers to be especially significant” (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 192), with the nominal part of the predicate, *at stake*, as the fronted element and followed by subject-verb inversion (examples (37) and (38)). It needs to be added, though, that in some cases (such as example (38)) the end-weight principle is to be taken into consideration.

(37) ***At stake*** were 12,600 seats in 439 municipalities. [S56]

(38) ***At stake*** is the leadership of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, (...) [S188]

On the FSP level, with respect to what has been said about the (almost) identical linear modification of either of the two types of sentences, it is then the contextual factor that proved crucial to the manual analysis. In order to identify individual communicative units and their actual arrangement and so be able to decide the dynamic semantic scale in question, the full immediately relevant context (as defined by Firbas 1992: 21–40) available for each entry in the concordance search results had to be disclosed and taken into account. Closely connected to this is the concept of “retrievability”, which “implies the actual, ‘tangible’ presence of a piece of information in the text. [...] The stretch of text throughout which a piece of information remains retrievable without re-expression constitutes the retrievability span of this information” (Firbas 1995b: 18). Examples (39) and (39a) illustrate the relevance of this aspect.

(39) *Jobs are at stake.* [S378]

At first sight this sentence looks like so many others that were identified as Pr-Scale sentences, introducing rhematic subjects such as *Destiny/Lives/Big reputations*, to name but a few. Yet, when the full context is unfolded, it provides an example of a co-referential string (see Firbas 1995b: 20–23) that consists of five members (underlined) referring to the same part of extra-linguistic reality.

(39a) *Michael Fallon, defending Darlington for the Tories, has repeated his warning of job losses at Rothmans despite claims of caremongering. He believes Labour’s commitment to banning tobacco advertising and sponsorship could lead to a reduction of Rothmans Employees in the North. Multi-nationals like Rothmans do not have to stay in the North-East. Any family with somebody working at Rothmans should think very carefully before voting in Darlington. (39) ***Jobs are at stake.*** [S378]*

The extra-linguistic reality introduced in the opening line refers to the possibility of job losses at a certain company, and from there on it appears repeatedly in the flow of

4 These instances were not included in the overall results of the analysis in question as the search deviated from the general method adopted for this research.



the text by means of repetition (full or partial) and synonymy. In this light, the subject *Jobs* in (39) cannot be interpreted as a rhematic unit (i.e. communicatively the most dynamic element) but as a thematic one (i.e. a context-dependent quality bearer), while *at stake* ascribes the quality to it in the role of rheme proper; in other words — contrary to the first impression — the sentence under discussion implements the Q-Scale.

4.2.2 BE IN ORDER

In terms of lexical semantics, the *Cambridge Dictionary* discriminates between two distinct meanings of the verbo-nominal prepositional phrase *be in order*. This structure either (i) denotes the fact that something is “correct, working, and right” and so is in compliance with some order or requirements or simply serviceable, or (ii) conveys the idea of appropriateness in a certain situation, in other words “right for the occasion, appropriate, apposite, pertinent or adequate”, the relevant Czech equivalent being “být na místě, patřičný, vhodný”.

In total, the dataset (the largest subpart of our corpus) provided 276 hits for the lemma *be in order*, which represents 2.47 hits per million (Table 6). Only a relatively low number of sentences (48 out of 276) implemented the Pr-Scale (17.4%); the majority of sentences (228 in absolute number, 82.6%) ascribed a quality to the bearer and so operated on the Q-Scale.

Scales	Abs.	%
Pr	48	17.4
Q	228	82.6
Total	276	100.0

TABLE 6. Pr-Scale vs Q-Scale representation: *be in order*

What makes the FSP analysis of sentences featuring *be in order* remarkable is the lexical semantics of the prepositional phrase. The point is that the two distinct meanings noted above actually determine the information structure of the distributional fields: to be specific, whereas meaning (i), i.e. that of something being correct or working properly, operates exclusively in the Q-Scale sentence, meaning (ii), i.e. the denotation of appropriateness and apposition, is exclusively associated with the Pr-Scale in the dataset. In sum, the static semantics of *be in order* seems to play a decisive role in the FSP status of the sentence under investigation and evidently determines the sentence perspective towards or away from the subject. Cf.:

- | | |
|--|----------|
| (40) A word of caution is in order . [O95] | Pr-Scale |
| (41) Congratulations are in order . [O24] | Pr-Scale |
| (42) The documents are in order . [O40] | Q-Scale |
| (43) The licence is in order , (we haven't had any trouble). [O162] | Q-Scale |

As apparent from the comparison above, in sentences (40) and (41), the subjects are context-independent and are presented on the scene; the *be in order* phrase is used



here as a vehicle of presentation of what is apposite in the given context. Existence/appearance on the scene is expressed in an implicit way: *is in order* actually equals to “should exist” or “should be here”. There are two other aspects that tip the scales towards the presentative interpretation: (i) intonation (presumably, the intonation centre would fall on the context-independent subject in spoken discourse) (Firbas 1992: 9), and (ii) a dynamic translation in a language which asserts linear modification more faithfully, e.g., Czech (*Na místě je slovo varování. [Apposite is a word of caution], Hodí se mu pográtulovat. [It is apposite to congratulate him]*). Obviously, Czech places a word of caution and congratulations in the final position and so sees these elements as rhematic. The verbo-nominal construction *be in order* then performs the DSF of Presentation. Conversely, examples (42) and (43) above present sentences in which something is said about the context-dependent subjects and so the prepositional phrase inherently ascribes a quality to the subject, not existence.

The role of static semantics is further enhanced by a specific use of certain keywords and collocations in the communicative fields. Unbelievable though it may seem, 34 out of all the Q-Scale sentences (which equals 15%) contain the word *everything* in the subject. In this respect, the expression *everything* represents a logical collocation of *be in order* and, within the information structure of the sentences, it semantically adds to the idea of totality as well as context-dependence of the subject (cf. the following examples).

- (44) *Everything was in order* down there. [O28]
 (45) Apart from that, *everything else was in order*. [O84]
 (46) (I won't be late) and *everything will be in order*. [O81]

Analogously, Pr-Scale sentences in the dataset also manifest certain semantic homogeneity within the subjects employed: the analysis shows that the phenomena presented on the scene as context-independent subjects prototypically feature abstract notions related to social communication, etiquette and phatic formulae:

- (47) *An apology would be in order*. [O73]⁵
 (48) *Congratulations are in order*. [O24]

Other examples contain notions such as *thanks, celebration, a point, a word of caution, a reprimand, a word of warning, a note, a little humouring*, etc. In other words, all these context-independent subjects represent abstract entities that are appropriate (i.e. expected ‘to appear/exist’) in a certain context. The semantic content is further supported by the linear modification of the sentences, including a relatively low number of words in the distributional field and *be in order* being placed finally in the sentence.

5 It may be argued that the verbo-nominal construction seems to have a modal meaning (that of obligation), which can be seen from the underlying paraphrase: *You should apologize*. This, however, does not contradict the presentational interpretation; on the contrary, it supports the idea of *apology* as the carrier of the most prominent degree of CD as well as the presentational role of *be in order*.



Needless to add, in spoken discourse, with a corresponding intonation, the nuclear tone would invariably fall onto the subjects.

4.3 TYPE C

4.3.1 BE AT HAND

The first sample of Type C of the prepositional verbo-nominal phrases under examination is *be at hand*. The dictionary entry typically gives two possible denotations of *be at hand*: (i) near in time or position, happening/present at this time, i.e. idea of special or temporal proximity; and (ii) available, at one's disposal, i.e. the connotation of readiness or access to something (*Cambridge Dictionary*).

Out of the total of 127 concordances of *be at hand*, 119 sentences (93.7%) implemented the Pr-Scale, which seems to be an unprecedented number in the corpus under scrutiny. The remaining 6.3% (8 distributional fields only) are examples of the Q-Scale. As is evident in Table 7, the overwhelming majority of hits containing *be at hand* speaks in favour of the presentational use of the phrase.

Scales	Abs.	%
Pr	119	93.7
Q	8	6.3
Total	127	100.0

TABLE 7. Pr-Scale vs Q-Scale representation: *be at hand*

- (49) *An opportunity is at hand.* [H25]
 (50) *Luckily, succour was at hand.* [H31]

In examples (49) and (50), out of the three FSP factors at play, it is only the dynamic semantic load and the immediately relevant context that testify to the presentative interpretation of the sentences. Conversely, the linear modification factor cannot assert itself fully as the English word order principles in sentences with an initial context-independent subject do not allow for its full realisation; linearity acts counter to the basic distribution of CD here.⁶ It follows that *be at hand* in these sentences expresses existence/appearance on the scene, occupying the final position. Apparently, it does so with sufficient implicitness: similarly to existential phrase, it actually conveys the existential meaning (*Luckily, there was succour*).

⁶ It should not be concluded that such an interpretation does not take into account the linear modification factor. It is of course considered even though this factor cannot assert itself fully. In this connection, Firbas (1992, 1995a) always speaks of an interplay of the three FSP factors, i.e. the necessity to assess all of them even if one factor is backgrounded in the given FSP configuration. At times, “if equivocal, the interplay of factors potentially leads to more than one interpretation” (Firbas 1992: 8).



Contrary to this, the sentences whose information structure patterns as the Q-Scale ascribe a quality to a thematic subject, namely the notion of a context-dependent entity being available and at one's disposal. Cf.:

- (51) *The war perhaps showed that this recovery **was at hand**.* [H73]
 (52) *But certainly it's **at hand** (when it's needed).* [H98]

The lexical-semantic analysis of the *be at hand* dataset yielded some interesting observations, too. Perhaps most remarkably, in 45 out of 127 hits, i.e. 35%, the subject contained an expression recruited from the semantic field “help”, *help* itself being the most prominent one. On top of this, all of those distributional fields implemented the Pr-Scale (other help-related subjects, always abstract notions, are for instance *assistance, rescue, helpers, remedy, relief*):

- (53) *But now help **is at hand**.* [H11]
 (54) *(Don't panic,) help **is at hand**.* [H63]

Especially in the Pr-Scale sentences, albeit not exclusively, the analysis revealed a relatively high incidence of subjects recruited from religious and biblical contexts (9%). Incidentally, this finding seems to be unrelated to the corpora examined as the BNC makes use of all different genres and text-types; nevertheless, the apparent semantic homogeneity of the preverbal part might be triggered by the static semantic load (imminence, urgency, closeness) of the phrase *be at hand*:

- (55) *His hour **is at hand**.* [H72]
 (56) *(Indeed for Paul), the Lord **was at hand**, (...).* [H60]

Consider the other biblical or generally Christian subjects traced in the dataset in association with *be at hand*: *our salvation, the Kingdom, the Last times, Kingdom of Heaven, the end of Christian society, the end of the world, religious utopias, etc.*

At the syntactic level, it is worth mentioning that a number of Pr-Scale sentences in the dataset are realised as Extended Presentation Scale (Chamonikolasová and Adam 2005), i.e. as a structure that contains both the phenomenon presented on the scene and, at the same time, its specification within the distributional field; the specification has a form of a full infinitive clause:

- (57) *Officers /Ph/ **will be at hand** to act as porters /Sp/. [H4]*
 (58) *(...), while prisoners /Ph/ **were at hand** to act as porters /Sp/. [H2]*

To conclude, it is possible to say that the verbo-nominal configuration *be at hand* operates, owing to its lexical-semantic characteristics, primarily within the Pr-Scale; its dynamic semantic load is literally predisposed to the expression of existence or appearance on the scene. Along with the other two FSP factors (immediately relevant context and linear modification) semantics appears to stand at the root of its predominantly presentational potential.



4.3.2 BE IN THE AIR

The last part of the research material, covering the phrase *be in the air*, was initially represented by 123 examples from the *BNC* (i.e. 1.1 hits per million) but the number had to be rounded down to 83 as the dataset included three samples of poetry, which is not a literary genre usually submitted to FSP analysis, ten sentences with the accidental combination *be in the Air Force*, and finally 27 instances of the literal meaning of the phrase. The last-mentioned occurrence was typical of contexts referring to movement (especially flying) or smell, where the verbo-nominal phrase changed into the lexical verb *to be* and the adverbial *in the air*; this — however — did not comply with the original idea to work with the figurative meaning of the phrase expressing the notion of something being close, noticeable and/or about to happen.

The final numbers of both types of scales are rather different, with the Pr-Scale strong in the lead by 20% (see Table 8 and example (59)). Example (60), providing also the immediately relevant context, represents the Q-Scale.

Scales	Abs.	%
Pr	50	60.2
Q	33	39.8
Total	83	100.0

TABLE 8. Pr-Scale vs Q-Scale representation: *be in the air*

- (59) *In Civic Forum, Czechoslovakia's largest political group, divorce is in the air.* [A46]
 (60) *(There is usually a bonding period of at least a couple of weeks between a player and a new instrument), but this time romance was in the air straight away (and ... what the hell... I think we're engaged...)* [A94]

The *Cambridge Dictionary's* example of the idiomatic use of the phrase under discussion suggests three typical nouns in the role of subjects, namely *love*, *change* and *spring*; indeed, two of them qualified as the most frequent collocations in the presentation sentences (*change* 7/50 hits, *spring* 6/50 hits), while rather unexpectedly the noun *love* came up only twice. Other lexical items collocating with *be in the air* and filling the position of context-independent subjects, thus performing the role of phenomena to be presented on the scene, were often members of two semantic fields that could be loosely labelled “relationships” (e.g., *sex*, *romance*, *weddings* or *marriage*) and “dramatic events” (e.g., *war*, *murder*, *apocalypse*, *death* or *drama*), see examples (61) and (62). The words in the positions of subjects of the Q-Scale sentences were quite miscellaneous and did not seem to share any particular typical feature.

- (61) *'Weddings seem to be in the air,' (she said ...)* [A7]
 (62) *Death was in the air too all around the scattered wreckage.* [A91]



Once again, the available dataset revealed a certain disposition of this verbo-nominal structure to appear in the favourable environment of media discourse for reasons which are quite obvious — the phrase is brief, eye-catching and especially in combination with a mono-syllabic word as the subject it becomes rhythmical whether you say it or read it, cf. examples (63) and (64) (the capitalization is original). In this regard it may not be surprising that this subpart of the corpus also produced some truly creative language samples in the form of a play on words where the text could be understood in the figurative as well as the literal sense of the phrase. In example (65), presumably a headline, the *Monday blues* may be *in the air* metaphorically but also literally as is clarified by the reference to air conditioning in the subsequent context.

(63) *LOVE was in the air* (when ...) [A8]

(64) *SPRING is in the air* (...) [A10]

(65) *Monday blues are in the air.* (*WORKERS have good reason to dislike Mondays ... but it's got little to do with returning to work and a lot to do with the air-conditioning, a researcher said yesterday.*) [A85]

Syntactically speaking, the sentences (be it the Pr-Scale or Q-Scale) featuring the phrase *be in the air* tend to be rather short, with the phrase itself placed as the very last unit and just exceptionally further extended by an adverbial in the role of a setting or a specification (e.g., *straight away, all the time, for half a minute* and some others).

Overall, the analysis of the structures *be at hand* and *be in the air* used as examples of Type C proved more than fruitful as it brought somewhat unexpected results in terms of their presentation potential. The former is almost a paragon of the Pr-Scale implementation due to its lexical semantics, and similarly, the latter demonstrates a strong capacity to present a context-independent subject as a new phenomenon.

5 CONCLUSIONS

To start with, it should be stated that the present research has produced conclusive proofs of the preliminary premise that at the level of FSP, prepositional structures such as *be at hand* or *be in order* behave as homogeneous verbo-nominal prepositional configurations (with a possibility of alternative verbal transformation) rather than a two-fold communicative unit comprising a copula (*be*) and a prepositional phrase.

As to their FSP status, as is obvious from the analysis above, the verbo-nominal prepositional phrases under scrutiny can affect the sentence perspective both towards and away from the subject. Contrary to the initial assumption concerning the type of scale implemented by individual configurations, the data have indicated that these phrases do not just ascribe quality to a thematic subject but can equally present a context-independent subject on the scene. Table 9 presents the summary of the results yielded by the analysis:



	Type A		Type B		Type C	
	<i>be on the move</i>	<i>be on the run</i>	<i>be at stake</i>	<i>be in order</i>	<i>be at hand</i>	<i>be in the air</i>
Pr-Scale (%)	4	20	42	17	89	60
Q-Scale (%)	96	80	58	83	11	40
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100
Tendency	Q	Q	Q/Pr	Q	Pr	Pr/Q

TABLE 9. Tendencies of individual types to implement Pr-Scale and/or Q-Scale

In accordance with the general criteria of the distribution of degrees of communicative dynamism, the FSP status of the verbo-nominal prepositional phrases under discussion is determined by the immediately relevant context, lexical semantics (which in some cases proved to be decisive) as well as their linear modification (albeit to a lesser degree). An interplay of these three iconic factors then determines the functional perspective of the sentences provided by the dataset.

Thus, three out of the six configurations examined (*viz. be on the move, be on the run, be in order*) showed a tendency to operate prevalingly within the Q-Scale. These structures evinced over 80% inclination towards specification of the subject; *be on the move* and *be on the run* most probably owing to their motional semantic load, and *be in order* thanks to its primary qualitative meaning that naturally seems to specify the context-dependent subject. Conversely, one configuration only (*be at hand*) displayed an indisputable preference for the Pr-Scale; it was in 89% of hits that this structure ushered a context-independent subject onto the scene. Admittedly, *be at hand* represents the only structure discussed that — again in connection to its lexical meaning — actually conveys an existential and hence presentative, lexical meaning; it is not surprising then that it is mostly employed as a means of presentation on the scene. The remaining two phrases, namely *be in the air* and *be at stake*, reveal a greater or lesser ability to operate in both directions under favourable conditions, i.e. to mediate presentation or qualification respectively. It follows that such a specific environment at the level of syntax, but especially that of lexical semantics (including key collocations and typical complementation patterns) can trigger different sentence perspectives. The analysis has cogently demonstrated that the lexical semantic load of the verbo-nominal prepositional structures eminently co-determines the FSP status of these phrases: each dictionary meaning shapes the sentence perspective in a particular direction. Furthermore, the analysis has demonstrated that a significant role is played by whether the particular verbo-nominal prepositional configuration is used in its literal meaning or in a figurative, metaphorical sense. As mentioned above, the syntactic features complete the mosaic of FSP status of individual phrases, but do not supply any new or unexpected observations in the present research. One of the syntactic determinants is, for instance, the relative length and complexity of pre- and post-verbal modification: in Pr-Scale sentences the post-verbal modification typically tends to be extremely short if not completely absent (cf. Adam 2013: 157ff; Dušková 2020). After all, research has repeatedly testified to the observation that “the more complex is the valency of the verb, the more likely it will perform the Q-function, and vice-versa” (Adam 2013: 165).



In conclusion, it should also be noted that the syntactic semantic types adopted for the purpose of the present analysis (the classification into Types A, B and C) proved to be somewhat heterogeneous since their representatives do not, as a rule, show a common pattern in terms of their preference of particular sentence perspectives. It is solely Type A (deverbal prepositional phrase with a periphrastic equivalent containing the verb itself in active voice) that evinces an apparent inclination towards the Q-Scale. Needless to add, to get a wider and more representational picture of the operation of verbo-nominal prepositional phrases within functional sentence perspective, future research should focus on a greater variety and number of representatives.

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