

STYLISTIC FOREGROUNDING

Definitions and concepts

- **Foreground** is a term usually used in art, having opposite meaning to **background**.
- It's a very general principle of artistic communication that a work of art in some way deviates from norms which we, as members of society, have learnt to expect in the medium used and that anyone who wishes to investigate the significance and value of a work of art must concentrate on the element of interest and surprise, rather than on the automatic pattern. **Such deviations from linguistic or other socially accepted norms are labeled foregrounding, which invokes the analogy of a figure seen against a background** (Leech, 1968: 57).
- In stylistics, the notion of *foregrounding*, a term borrowed from the Prague School of Linguistics, is used by Leech and Short (1981: 48) to refer to 'artistically motivated deviation'.
- The term foregrounding has its origin with the Czech theorist Jan Mukarovsky: it is how Mukarovsky's original term, *aktualisace*, was rendered in English by his first translator (Mukarovsky, 1932/1964). **It refers to the range of stylistic effects that occur in literature, whether at the phonetic level (e.g., alliteration, rhyme), the grammatical level (e.g., inversion, ellipsis), or the semantic level (e.g., metaphor, irony).**

- As Mukarovsky pointed out, foregrounding may occur in normal, everyday language, such as spoken discourse or journalistic prose, but it occurs at random with no systematic design. **In literary texts, on the other hand, foregrounding is structured:** it tends to be both systematic and hierarchical. That is, similar features may recur, such as a pattern of assonance or a related group of metaphors, and one set of features will dominate the others (Mukarovsky, 1964, p. 20), a phenomenon that Jakobson termed "the dominant" (1987, pp. 41-46).
- **Foregrounding** is the opposite of automatization, that is, the deautomatization of an act; the more an act is automatized, the less it is consciously executed; the more it is foregrounded, the more completely conscious does it become. Objectively speaking: automatization schematizes an event; foregrounding means the violation of the scheme. (1964, p. 19)
- The technique of art, including literature, is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (1917/1965, p. 12)
- Miall and Kuiken refer foregrounding to stylistic variation that evokes feelings and prolong reading time

- The immediate effect of foregrounding is to make strange (ostranenie), to achieve defamiliarization. Shklovsky saw defamiliarization as accompanied by feeling: he noted, more precisely, that stylistic devices in literary texts "emphasize the emotional effect of an expression" (Shklovsky, 1917/1965, p. 9). And, Mukarovsky concurs, "When used poetically, words and groups of words evoke a greater richness of images and feelings than if they were to occur in a communicative utterance" (1977, p. 73).
- Verdonk states that foregrounding is the psychological effect a literary reader has as s/he is reading a work of literature.
- There is some evidence that foregrounding in literary texts strikes readers as interesting and captures their attention. Hunt and Vipond (1985) investigated the effects of textual features that they, following Labov (1972), refer to as "discourse evaluations." These are described as "words, phrases, or events" that are "unpredictable against the norm of the text" and that convey the narrator's evaluations of story characters or events. Since discourse evaluations resemble foregrounding as discussed in the present report, Hunt and Vipond's findings are noteworthy. In a study with readers of a short story, they found that readers were more likely to report that story phrases "struck them" or "caught their eye" when presented with the original discourse evaluations than when those phrases had been adapted so that the same story events were described in relatively "neutral" terms.

Examples:

1. Sillitoe's text

Now you'd think, and I'd think, and everybody with a bit of imagination would think, that we'd done as clean a job as could ever be done, that with the baker's shop being at least a mile from where we lived, and with not a soul having seen us, and what with the fog and the fact that we weren't more than five minutes in the place, that the coppers should never have been able to trace us. But then, you'd be wrong, I'd be wrong and everybody else would be wrong, no matter how much imagination was diced out between us.

1. Foregrounding in Sillitoe's text

(α 1) Now you'd think, and I'd think, and everybody with a bit of imagination would think, that we'd done as clean a job as could ever be done, that (β 1) with the baker's shop being at least a mile from where we lived, (β 2) and with not a soul having seen us, (β 3) and what with the fog and the fact that we weren't more than five minutes in the place, that the coppers should never have been able to trace us. (α 2) But then, you'd be wrong, (α 3) I'd be wrong (α 4) and everybody else would be wrong, (β 4) no matter how much imagination was diced out between us.

1.1. Foregrounded features and stylistic effect

The impression the reader gets when reading this passage is that of a cleverly structured text which effectively recounts an experience. Its effectiveness and vividness are due in great measure to the following factors:

- a) The recursion of clauses, mainly through co-ordination, with similar or identical structure;
- b) The distribution of clauses in groups of threes, producing a striking pattern of parallelisms:

α 1 [Now you'd think]
| and I'd think |
[and everybody...would think]

that we'd done...as ever could ever be done
that

β 1 [with the baker's...lived]
 β 2 | and with not...seen us |

β3 [and what with the fog]

and the fact that...place
that the coppers should never...trace us
But then

α2 [You'd be wrong]
α3 | I'd be wrong |
α4 [and everybody...wrong]

β4 No matter...between us

Even the final arrangement is that of three blocks of clauses, realizing a symmetrical pattern where a contradiction is expressed between the two symmetrical elements (the clauses '*you'd think*', '*I'd think*', etc., and the clauses *you'd be wrong*, *I'd be wrong*, etc.). The contradiction is in a way made more prominent by the insertion of the group of subordinated clauses between them, having a stronger dramatic effect, which makes the reader try to anticipate what is going to be said.

- c) The third factor is lexical repetition in the co-ordinated units; the effect produced by the recursion on the syntactic level can be said to be reinforced by the repetition of the lexical items. This is particularly noticeable in the independent clauses ('*You'd think*', '*I'd think*', etc., and '*You'd be wrong*', '*I'd be wrong*', etc.), though it also appears in the subordinated clauses.

The text seems to present a contrast between features that characterize spoken, colloquial language on the one hand, and a complex structural pattern that is more typical of written, more formal varieties of language, on the other.

There are several features that characterize spoken versus written language: first, the use of co-ordination. Extensive use of co-ordination is usually said to be preferred in spoken language to subordination, since it ‘simplifies the planning of sentence structure’ (Leech and Short, 1981: 163). In the second place, we can notice other features, such as the first person narrative reinforced by direct address to the reader, with expressions such as ‘you’d be wrong’, ‘you know’, ‘to tell you the truth’, which are recurrent in the novel and which contribute to the conversational tone of the narration. Thirdly, there is the use of non-standard forms of the language, though no instances in the particular extract I am analyzing. Throughout the novel we can find examples such as: the use of ‘them’ for the demonstrative ‘those’; use of ‘was’ for ‘were’; use of ungrammatical past participles, as in ‘could have took’, etc.

These features seem to go well with the colloquial character of the passage, but are even more striking if we consider the parallel structures and the lexical repetitions that seem to be so carefully arranged in the text. Also, and in spite of the predominance of paratactic relations, the length of sentence 1 and the inclusion of several subordinate and embedded clauses make it difficult to imagine that the passage could have been realized in spoken form.

Its rhetorical elaboration reminds us of a prepared speech; it is not for the vocabulary used and the content of the text.

1.2. Mind-style and the social context

The apparently paradoxical character of the text can be better understood if the reader has some previous knowledge of the novel and its main character, who is also the narrator: a young boy who is sent to Borstal after the theft he has been narrating just before the passage I am analyzing. There is in the first page of the novel a sentence which I think is very significant for the understanding of the novel and this passage in particular:

cunning is what counts in this life, and even that you've got to use in the slyest way you can (17).

One thing he proves is that he actually *is* cunning, since, although hardly able to write, as he himself puts it (p. 13) he can handle language in a very effective way and successfully attract the reader's attention: it is the blending of the colloquial or conversational elements into a complex structure that makes the text so fascinating.

In general terms, and applying Fowler's notion to the mind-style of the narrator, we can describe it as being the instrument through which a 'world view' is given through the eyes of the narrator and main character from a social and personal perspective at the same time: it is the language and the world view of an uneducated young man, a potential criminal or outcast, who resorts to cunning as a means of protecting his integrity and individuality without giving in to external social pressures.

1.3. Analysis of Sillitoe's text

This passage consists of two complex sentences:

1. Now you'd think...trace us.
2. But then...between us.

Sentence 1 is realized by an independent clause followed by three dependent clauses: the structure can be represented as follows:

$$\alpha_1 \rightarrow \beta_1 + \beta_2 + \beta_3$$

α_1 is discontinuous, being interrupted by the three dependent clauses. Also, it presents a recursive SP pattern:

- A: Now
- + SP: You'd think
- + SP: (and) I'd think
- + SP: (and) everybody would think
- Od: that we'd done...ever be done
- + Od: that the coppers...trace us

The dependent clauses can be said to have the following structure:

- β 1- SPACs: with the baker's...lived
- β 2- SPOd: with not a soul...us
- β 3- S: what with the fog
- β 3- S: and the fact that...place

β 1 and β 2 are non-finite ING clauses with expressed subject, while β 3 is realized by verbless clause introduced by 'what with', co-ordinated with a finite 'that' clause, also introduced by an ellipited 'what with'.

Sentence 2 is realized by three independent clauses followed by a dependent one. The structure can be represented as follows:

$$\alpha_2 + \alpha_3 + \alpha_4 \rightarrow \beta_4,$$

where:

- α 2 - SPC: you'd be wrong
- α 3 - SPC: I'd be wrong
- α 4 - SPC: and everybody...wrong

- β 4 - SPA: no matter...us

We can conclude saying that the text presents a predominance of co-ordinated units, four of them being of the asyndetic type and five of

them syndetic. The distribution of the clauses can be expressed in the following way:

- 1) Sentence 1: realised by one independent α clause dominating three co-ordinated subordinate β clauses.
- 2) Sentence 2: realised by three independent α clauses dominating a subordinate β clause.