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## **The Concept of Foregrounding in the Wake of the Developments of Stylistics**

The concept of foregrounding occupied much of Jakobson's time stylistics. Through the influence of later and recent developments in the field of stylistics, this concept has undergone deep alteration and has been taken to a new level. This paper aims to discuss, on the one hand, its emergence and evolution. On the other, it endeavors to examine its validity from today's perspective.

**Keywords:** foregrounding; linguistic stylistics; cognitive stylistics.

### **1. Introduction**

The concept of foregrounding has attracted a vast amount of scholarly attention in the field of stylistics since its appearance.

Most commonly, the foregrounding theory is identified with the study of linguistic deviation from the norm and of the effective elements in the text, which possess the power of gaining special significance. Initially, the concept, introduced by the Prague structuralist, Jan Mukarovsky, was in part a modern version of the ancient rhetoric idea of style figures, and in part - a new version of Victor Shklovsky's famous concept of defamiliarization. Later and recent developments in the field of stylistics led to significant changes in the theory of foregrounding, and the concept started to be used in different senses. Presumably, these senses seem related, however, they are far from being identical.

This paper aims to discuss the concept of foregrounding and its variable implications in the wake of the rise and development of modern stylistics and endeavors to examine its validity from today's perspective.

### **2. The Forebears of Modern Stylistics**

The origins of stylistics can be traced back to the ancient world, approximately to the fifth century AD. Theorists usually recognize ancient rhetoric as a predecessor of modern stylistics. "The fundamental core of stylistics", notes Michael Burke, "lies in the rhetoric of the classical world" (Burke 2014 a, p.2; see also Bradford 2005, pp. 2-10; Simpson 2004, p. 50).

Etymologically, the word rhetoric is rooted in Greek *techne rhetorike*, “the art of speech.” The description of the power of persuasive speech can be met in the writings of the ancient Greek philosophers, among them Plato’s and Aristotle’s works. And Aristotle’s *Art of Rhetoric* can be said to be the “first systematic stylistics textbook on foregrounding” (Burke 2014, p.24). His description of rhetoric as an art and his analysis of the concept of style has been taken as an inspiration source for the theories of modern rhetoric and stylistics. Ancient rhetoricians named style (*elocution* in Latin and *lexis* in Greek) as the third canon of five-part rhetorical canons. The qualities of “good style”, according to them, had to be achieved through the special devices of the art of language, called “figures”, the number of which increased gradually. George Miller notes that by the sixteenth century, “the number of labeled figures had tripled to nearly 200” (Miller 1980, p. 75).

Another foundation on which modern stylistics is built is regarded ancient poetics. The first serious attempt at the theoretical description of what poetics is can be met in Aristotle’s famous work - *Poetics*. Burke is right when he emphasizes that “it is Aristotle who is thought to have written the first book-length work of critical literary theory in the ancient Hellenic world” (Burke 2014, p. 12). In contrast to Plato, who offers a negative description of the notion of poetic *mimesis*<sup>1</sup> by characterizing poetry as a simple imitation bringing damaging results to society, Aristotle defines poetry as an art and praises it for its benefits for society.

### **3. The Emergence of Modern Stylistics and its Foundational Concept of Foregrounding**

It is true that without rhetoric and poetics, “there would be no stylistics as we know today” (ibid., p.11) - both have influenced it, in particular, in terms of the foregrounding theory, but the rhetoric is usually named as a more important predecessor than poetics. This is fairly easy to explain. The study of foregrounded elements of a text, which appears to be part of much of the important stylistic work, “is very much a latter-day embodiment of traditional rhetoric”(Simpson 2004, p. 50). Simply put, the specific focus on stylistic devices, which was one of the major

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<sup>1</sup> Plato distinguishes between *mimesis* (“imitation”, “representation”) – when the authors speak in the voice of their characters; and *diegesis* (“narration”) – when the authors speak in their own voice. *Mimesis* is usually seen as the most controversial concepts in his theory.

concerns of so-called *stylistics of foregrounding* for several decades, can be easily compared to a special interest in figures of speech in traditional rhetoric.

However, despite the evident influence of rhetoric, modern stylistics is by no means a part of rhetoric; rather it is an independent linguistic discipline, which emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century. Its rise is directly related to *Russian Formalism*, in particular, to the name of Roman Jakobson – “the father of modern stylistics, at least in Western Europe” (Bloomfield 1976, p. 278). The major concern of Russian formalists was the study of poetic language and its differences from other uses of language. They vehemently rejected the psychological, religious, or sociological considerations of literary works and brought “literariness” – special use of language in literature - into sharp focus. Such use of language had defamiliarizing effects ( the concept of defamiliarization was initially introduced by Victor Shklovsky, who defined it as a method of “making strange” the ordinary language to draw the readers’ attention, as Burke and Evans put it, “to shake us out of everyday visual and cognitive lethargy” (Burke and Evans 2014, p. 36). And such defamiliarizing effects, according to Shklovsky, were achieved by stylistic devices – figures or tropes. Therefore, “the Formalists started out by seeing the literary work as a more or less arbitrary assemblage of ‘devices’... sound, imagery, rhythm, syntax, metre, rhyme, narrative techniques, in fact, the whole stock of formal literary elements”; and what all of these elements had in common was their ‘estranging’ or ‘defamiliarizing’ effect (Eagleton 2003, p.3). However, in later stages, in particular, in Roman Jakobson’s seminal work (Jakobson 1960), the specificity of poetic discourse is seen not in the use of stylistic devices, but as Richard Bradford points out, “in the way that these devices create patterns within a text that isolate that text from the normal cause-and-effect between language and its context – the ‘split’ (Bradford 2005, p.41).

Russian Formalism did not stay long on the critical scene, however, its theories turned out foundational for *Prague Structuralism*. Among many other important literary concepts, this theoretical orientation brought into being the concept of *foregrounding*, which very soon became the fundamental basis for twentieth-century stylistics and remained as such for several decades. As we see in the next section of this paper, although the concept is now associated with many theoretical problems, it still retains significance and attracts much scholarly attention. I have already indicated in the introductory part of this article that the concept, first introduced by Mukarovsky, was partly a modern version of the idea of style figures in traditional rhetoric, and partly - a new version of Shklovsky’ concept of defamiliarisation. According to Paul Simpson,

foregrounding comes in “two different guises: foregrounding as “deviation from a norm” and foregrounding as “more of the same” (Simpson 2004, p.50). The point of foregrounding as a stylistic strategy, as he sees it, is that it should acquire salience in the act of drawing attention to itself (ibid). It is worth pointing out that Simpson, like Russian Formalists and Prague structuralists, views foregrounding as motivated necessarily for literary-aesthetic purposes (ibid.). As he puts it, “if a particular textual pattern is not motivated for artistic purposes, then it is not foregrounding” (ibid.). Similarly, Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short call it “artistically motivated deviation” (Leech and Short 1981, p. 48). David Miall and Don Kuiken also characterize foregrounding as “the range of stylistic effects which 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” (Miall and Kuiken 1994, p.389). Willie van Peer and Hakemulder start the discussion of the notion of foregrounding in terms of its relevance for the aesthetic experience of literature. They write, “The term foregrounding refers to specific linguistic devices ... that are used in literary texts in a functional and condensed way. These devices enhance the meaning potential of the text, while also providing the reader with the possibility of aesthetic experience. According to the theory of foregrounding, literature – by employing unusual forms of language – breaks up the reader’s routine behavior: commonplace views and perspectives are replaced by new and surprising insights and sensations” (van Peer 2006, p.546). This kind of emphasis placed on the relatedness between the key stylistic concept of foregrounding and literary-aesthetic experience, is understandable since stylistics itself is an interdisciplinary field of study which, as Burke puts it, “confidently has one foot in language studies and the other in literary studies” (Burke 2014, p.2). Simpson is right in pointing out that “the preferred object of study in stylistics is literature, whether that be institutionally sanctioned “Literature” as art or more popular “non-canonical” forms of writing” (Simpson 2004, p.2) and that “the question “What can stylistics tell us about literature?” is always paralleled by an equally important question “what can stylistics tells us about language?” (Ibid. p.3). But herein lie a least two important problems that are worth pointing out. First, foregrounding works on different linguistic levels in many other kinds of texts apart from literary ones - most notable, perhaps, are advertising slogans. Second, and more important, as we see in the next section of the paper, the concept of foregrounding has been considerably changed in the wake of developments in the field of stylistics. This poses the question: Is it still a basic stylistic concept or there is a change in its status quo?

#### **4. New” Stylistics and the Concept of Foregrounding**

The Saussurean formalist linguistic assumptions about language did not take into account that language use was inseparable from language users and their intentions. Formalist stylistics, building on the basic premises of Saussure’s linguistics, was concerned with formal foregrounding and, thus, the stylistic analyses were carried out with the purpose of showing how foregrounding worked at different levels of language. The extension of the linguists’ scope beyond sentence level and the growth of interest in the study of language users and language use in context, brought new insights and advances in treating spoken or written pieces of discourse, including literary discourse. Discourse as linguistic communication was now seen as a transaction between the communicants (addressers and addressees) and their interpersonal activities “whose form is determined by its social purpose” (Leech and Short 1981, p.209). The studies of discourse became, as Randolph Quirk writes in the foreword of Geoffrey Leech’s and Michael Short’s seminal work “Style in Fiction”, “sufficiently developed to give promise of a far more insightful linguistic work on extensive prose texts than was conceivable a generation ago” (Ibid., p.v). The developments in the field of narratology proved to be extremely helpful for the study of these kinds of text. Such convergences of interests brought the need for the emergence of “a new stylistics” (ibid.), the area of study which attempted to bring together the fields of discourse analysis, modern narratology, pragmatic stylistics, and stylistics. The theory of foregrounding started to be taken to a new level – it was no longer limited to the study of the stylistic effects of stylistic devices (figures). Its scope extended to the study of various kinds of narrative effects which may produce foregrounding, such as thought and speech representation effects (Short 1989; Fludernik 1993), point of view effects (Simpson 1993), etc.

From the 1980s onward, stylistics began to respond quickly to the developments in the field of cognitive linguistics, which led to the rise of cognitive stylistics and eventually to neuro stylistics. Cognitive approaches to literature brought into sharp focus the study of literary texts as “the products of cognizing minds and their interpretations the products of other cognizing minds in the context of the physical and socio-cultural worlds in which they have been created and are read” (Margaret Freeman 2000, p.253).

Many important studies about the effects of foregrounding have been offered on the basis of schema theory. The latter is an important part of cognitive science, which is concerned with the

question of how knowledge is structured in a person's brain and how it gets activated (roughly put, how the past experience triggers current understanding). Among many others, Guy Cook's work is worth mentioning in this respect. He explains how literary texts may affect our schemata. He describes the notion of foregrounding (he uses it as an interchangeable synonym of defamiliarization) as a schema-refreshing property of a literary text. According to him literature "disturbs" (violates) the conventional seeing of the world (Cook 1994, see also, Stockwell 2010). Simpson points out that "Cook's general point is that because literary texts affect our schemata in special ways and on a number of levels, traditional stylistic concepts like foregrounding and defamiliarization are better located in a framework of cognition than in a framework of language" (Simpson 2004, p.90).

Through the influence of the developments in cognitive stylistics, the notion of foregrounding has been defined in terms of the readers' reactions to the foregrounded parts and their cognitive effects on discourse processing. This has required empirically grounded studies about the cognitive effects of foregrounding. Willie van Peer's works are particularly noteworthy contributions in this respect. After the appearance of his work "*Stylistics and Psychology as an Empirical Investigation into Foregrounding*," a number of experimentalist research studies have been offered (see for example, Miall and Kuiken 1994; Fialho 2007, Zyngier et al. 2007; Fialho 2012, etc.). In his article, van Peer writes, "If the growth of empirical studies of foregrounding continues at the present rate, it may be expected that in a few decades, the empirical evidence for the theory is going to look like that of a regular scientific theory" (van Peer 2007, p.99).

There are certainly many problems associated with the theory of foregrounding from today's perspective. Even its most ardent defenders acknowledge this (see, for example, van Peer 2006, p. 548-49). But the theory works and is very likely to be increased in scale. The question here is not whether the concept of foregrounding is outdated or not. We need to come to this question the other way around. As I have already indicated, it was a central concept in Jakobson's time stylistics. Does it retain its centrality? Or, is there a change in its status quo?

The fact that foregrounding theory started to look beyond the "assemblage" of stylistic devices in literary texts and directed the attention to various narrative effects and to the ways in which the foregrounded elements may affect the reading process, clearly indicates the growth of its scope and

to the measure in which it meets the demands of contemporary stylistics. The latter has now developed into a discipline, which successfully embraces a variety of independent sub-disciplines – narrative stylistics, discourse stylistics, corpus stylistics, pragmatic stylistics, cognitive stylistics, neuro stylistics, feminist stylistics, etc. All these branches, despite their differences, are more concerned with the readerly dimension of texts, of course, in particular with literary texts, the process of reading and the readers' reactions in this process.

The foregrounding theory, in response to the needs of contemporary stylistics, is very likely to move further in this direction. At the same time, it is likely that it will devote more attention to non-literary texts as well. This move is already noticeable in certain works in which theorists argue that foregrounding is not exclusively associated with literary texts and may occur in many other kinds of written or even spoken types of discourse. Among other works, Sylvia Adamson's study of the foregrounding effects of internal focalization in documentary journalism and history can be named as a representative example (Adamson 2007). Such research will bring many new insights into the differences in the ways in which mental processes are affected in reading or interpreting literary and non-literary texts. It does not follow from this that the stylistic theory of foregrounding will ever abandon the realm of literature. Again, I will re-emphasize that the question here is not whether the theory has lost its validity in dealing with literary texts. The present developments taking place in contemporary stylistics and in its parent disciplines – linguistics and literary theory, compel it to look beyond the formal side of literature and find an appropriate place for the concept of foregrounding among many other concepts relevant to the understanding of readers' mental processes involved in literary reading. If we come back to the question, of whether there is a change in the status quo of the concept, the answer is: yes, there is. It is no longer a central concept in stylistics. Despite this, it may seem a paradox, but the concept has been definitely taken not only to a new level but at the same time a step further by the latter.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have described the concept of foregrounding and explained what alternations it has undergone in light of the developments of stylistics.

It can be assumed that now the foregrounding theory is moving in three directions.

First, the range of its interest noticeably spreads over non-literary texts as well.

Second, it is now more preoccupied with the readerly dimension than solely with the formal textual properties and this may have only positive implications since the study of the formal

dimension of literature, taken separately, will not bring any new advances in understanding the latter.

Third, it takes impressively increased interest in empirically grounded studies about the cognitive effects of foregrounding.

Therefore, I have argued that the concept of foregrounding may not be as central now as in Jakobson's time stylistics, but it is still relevant and no less useful in many respects. The task of contemporary stylistics is finding more and more appropriate places for it among other important concepts relevant to the understanding of literary reading.

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