Summer Institute of Linguistics and
The University of Texas at Arlington
Publications in Linguistics

Publication 107

Language in Context: Essays for Robert E. Longacre

Shin Ja J. Hwang
William R. Merrifield
Editors

A Publication of
The Summer Institute of Linguistics
and
The University of Texas at Arlington
1992

Library of Congress Catalog No: 92-80356

ISBN : 0-88312-183-2

ISSN: 1040-0850

Cover design by Hazel Shorey

Copies of this and other publications of the Summer Institute of Linguistics may be obtained from

International Academic Bookstore
7500 W. Camp Wisdom Road
Dallas, TX 75236

[blank]

Foregrounding: An Assessment

Helen Aristar Dry
Eastern Michigan University

Since the pioneering work of Grimes (1975), Longacre (1976a, 1976b), Hopper (1979a, 1979b), and Jones and Jones (1979), the description of narrative foreground and background has been a focus of interest in the study of discourse. Foregrounding has been investigated in languages as diverse as Chechen (Nichols 1981), Inuktitut (Kalmar 1982), Indonesian (Rafferty 1982), and Old French (Fleischman 1986). And the term—originally drawn from the Prague school structuralists[1]—has made its way as well into the literature of cognitive psychology and computer science. Research on the topic is still characterized, however, by numerous conflicting claims and assumptions. Such a state of affairs is, of course, to be expected in an interdisciplinary research area; and many of the conflicts arise from different understandings of the term FOREGROUNDING itself. Work on narrative foregrounding, however, now seems diverse enough to merit (a) a review of the different approaches being taken and (b) an attempt to discriminate between mere conflicts in data and real issues of definition.

Although the review which follows makes no claim to be exhaustive,[2] it will, I hope, be adequate to support one conclusion—that the term FOREGROUNDING has become so diffuse in its application that it requires

[1]According to Van Peer (1986:5), Garvin (1964) introduced the term into the western literary criticism as a translation of the Czech *actualisace*. See Van Peer for a comprehensive review of the concept in literary criticism.

[2]Informative overviews of foregrounding are to be found in, for example, Fleischman 1985:857–62, Reinhart 1984:803–5, and Tomlin 1983:7–10, as well as in Tomlin 1987, an anthology of work on the concept.

redefinition, and that such redefinition would be furthered by clarifying the assumptions that different disciplines bring to the investigation.

1. Foreground

The term FOREGROUND has a long history of usage in literary criticism, but its use in discourse analysis seems to have come about through an accretion of ideas drawn from different directions of research. The most significant is certainly the description of the MAIN LINE or BACKBONE of a discourse, which began as an explanation of observed morphological marking in diverse languages (see, for example, Grimes 1975, Longacre 1976a and 1976b, and Jones and Jones 1979). These studies focused on the fact that there existed morphosyntax which could only be explained through reference to discourse phenomena.[3] BACKBONE and MAIN LINE were used to denominate the collection of phenomena marked by such morphosyntax, and it was not an objective of the research to define these terms in a syntax-independent way, although it was suggested that backbone clauses, taken together, constitute a plausible abstract of a story.[4]

The term BACKBONE was not limited to clauses positing temporally successive events, but was applied to important events narrated out of temporal sequence[5] and even occasionally to individuals (since certain of the particles marked prominent participants).[6] Foregrounding, however, has come to be associated with the set of clauses describing temporally sequenced events, as well as with gestalt theories of perception, in part perhaps in order to explicate ideas inherent in the characterization of main line. For example, what aspects of a narrative are the MAIN ones? And what are the perceptual concomitants of discourse PROMINENCE? The

[3]The name MYSTERY PARTICLES in Longacre 1976b is indicative of this emphasis, suggesting both the focus on the particles and the novelty of their function.

[4]Jones and Jones, for example, state that they "have deliberately not defined these levels in a rigorous way as it is our contention that they are established *emically* for each particular language and therefore may not correspond exactly to the comparable level in another language" (1979:7). By contrast, Tomlin (1983:7–10) asserts the desirability of a syntax-independent definition.

[5]For instance, several of the examples in Longacre 1976b are translated with the past perfect tense, indicating that the events are related OUT OF ORDER—i.e., in an order that is not iconic to their order of occurrence. Longacre also speaks of MAIN EVENT LINE as though there may be several event lines in a narrative (Longacre 1976b:474).

[6]Longacre notes, for example, that in the Cubeo language of Colombia, the backbone particle *'cari* can mark a MAIN CHARACTER if it is affixed to a NP but EVENT LINE if it is affixed to a verb (Longacre 1976b:470).

influential work of Hopper on tense and aspect and of Hopper and Thompson on transitivity is largely responsible for the association of foregrounding with transitive, temporally ordered clauses. Hopper also seems to have been the first to use the term FOREGROUND for the backbone of a narrative, thus inviting associations with the literary analyses offered in British and European stylistics.

Wallace (1982) and Reinhart (1984) linked the concept with gestalt theory, suggesting that the visual distinction between figure and ground is the analogue of textual foregrounding. And, at the same time, psycholinguists investigated textual foregrounding as part of memory research, defining foreground as the textual referents present in short-term memory.

Foreground is thus being studied by means of at least three different methodologies—linguistic, literary, and psycholinguistic—and the work is informed by a metaphor drawn from visual perception. Certainly, there is reason to believe that these approaches will lead toward complementary conclusions. The foreground of a literary text and the backbone of a folktale both constitute portions of a text perceived as prominent by a text-receiver, the psycholinguistic research focuses on the process of perception, and visual theories offer an analogue which may have more than metaphoric significance. However, the assumptions of each type of research differ.

The starting point for psycholinguistic research is not the text, but rather a definition of cognitive process, appropriately operationalized. In general, the foreground of the text is taken to be whatever is identified by the operationalization chosen. It is not clear that this is the same portion of the text as is marked by foregrounding morphosyntax.[7]

Literary thinking about foreground also differs from that in discourse analysis, in part because it has been stimulated by texts structured toward different kinds of interpretive strategies. As Culler (1975) and others have argued, skillful readers of belletristic texts employ strategies of interpretation which involve multiple levels of abstraction, metaphorizing, and generalization in order to MAKE structural features of the text cohere around a theme. Sanctioned by such strategies, literary texts can be less transparent than narratives designed for oral presentation, and the link

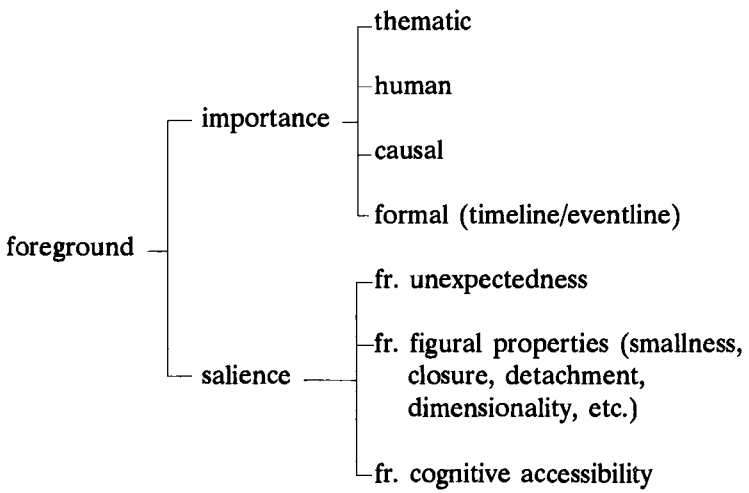
[7]It would, of course, be possible to test this by performing similar psycholinguistic experiments on texts in languages which mark foreground morphosyntactically. Then we could determine whether the morphosyntactically marked clauses or anaphoric structures were those singled out by frequency of report or speed of recall. To my knowledge, however, such a correlation has not been attempted. The experiment described in Tomlin 1985 reflects the spirit of what I am suggesting; but Tomlin uses English texts, and foreground is not unequivocally marked in English.

between structure and meaning effected by foregrounding can be less direct.[8] While we might hope that textlinguistics will eventually integrate assumptions based on both kinds of texts into a theory of foregrounding, a number of current disputes might be clarified by provisionally differentiating the two.

1.1. Definitions. Several concepts currently masquerade under the single term FOREGROUNDING. In the first place, the word is used ambiguously for both the cognitive process and for the textual phenomena that trigger that process. In addition, the word is applied to three different levels of analysis. FOREGROUND can thus refer to a prior conception of narrative prominence (such as SALIENCE), to the phenomena identified as prominent in texts in general (e.g., temporally successive clauses), or to specific instances in a given text. The concept is often left undefined or left to be defined only through extrapolation from examples cited. As a result, definitions multiply.

Two major definitions of narrative prominence are implicit in the research: importance and salience. But each of the two has several subdefinitions, as figure (1) is intended to suggest.

(1)



[8]A disclaimer may be in order here. In suggesting that belletristic texts generally exhibit greater syntactic and pragmatic complexity than oral narratives, I mean only to describe a tendency that has colored the thinking of the two disciplines. Obviously, numerous specific texts could be instanced as counter-examples to this generalization.

Five of the seven subcategories listed in (1) are insightfully discussed in Fleischman 1985, although not in the same arrangement; and many of Fleischman's comments are echoed in the summaries which follow.

(a) *Thematic importance*, or importance in terms of literary interpretation (see, for example, Reinhart 1984, Fleischman 1986). This definition ultimately derives from the Russian formalist tenet that literary language is foregrounded or made strange—a description explicated by the Prague structuralists as parallelism, contrast, and deviance from ordinary language. Thus the definition was originally intertwined with "salience because of unexpectedness within a particular context" ((e) below). But British stylistics clarified the concept by pointing out that not all stylistic deviance, parallelism, and contrast is important, but only that which coheres to suggest a theme.

In literary criticism, however, THEME usually refers to a universal truth or evaluative generalization (e.g. "The theme of Emma is that lack of self-knowledge leads to misunderstanding of others"). It is not the same thing as TOPIC in discourse analysis, since it is usually a proposition, not an argument, and one which, moreover, may never be expressed overtly in the text. It thus differs as well from the topicalized referent sometimes investigated as theme in psycholinguistic research. Though all three are, of course, related through the notion of centrality, extracting a theme from a literary text appears to involve more selective winnowing of initially salient passages (i.e., of those exhibiting parallelism, contrast, and deviance), as well as more elaborate metaphorizing from those deemed relevant.

(b) *Human importance*, or importance derived from the presumption that certain situations are intrinsically more interesting to human beings, as, for example, the kinetic, agentive, and voluntive situations that Hopper and Thompson (1980) have correlated with high transitivity. Thus, to adapt one of Fleischman's examples, killing a knight in chivalric combat has more intrinsic interest to human beings than sitting on a horse; and, as a result, the latter is typically backgrounded (Fleischman 1985:857–58).

(c) *Causal importance* is often interpreted as importance in terms of plot development. Some events seem more important than others because they trigger more succeeding events or have more significant consequences within the plot. Fleischman points out that this criterion is used to buttress arguments that negative predications can be foregrounded, since the non-occurrence of something expected can trigger other plot events.

Another kind of causal importance is discussed by DeLancey (1987) and Wallace (1982:206). DeLancey suggests that there is a cognitive category CAUSE/EFFECT which gives events fitting this prototype a natural salience. For this reason, the prototypical transitive clause, which can be analyzed as representing the event schema of "a volitional act on the part of the

agent, and a subsequent and consequent change of state on the part of the patient," is said to be a natural candidate for foregrounding (1987:61). And the various transitivity parameters (such as agentivity, kinesis, and perfectivity) cohere as they do because they reflect aspects of this CAUSE/EFFECT schema: perfectivity, for example, reflecting the fact that it is only completed events whose effects can be detected. According to DeLancey, "the natural basis for the transitivity prototype is the universal human understanding of the physical fact that events have causes" (1987:60). Causal importance can thus be seen as one kind of HUMAN IMPORTANCE, an attempt to provide specific explication of the claim that highly transitive situations are NATURALLY significant to human beings.

(d) *Formal or definitional importance*, as embodied in the sequence of temporally ordered clauses setting forth the events of the story. Labov and Waletzky (1967:22)[9] suggested that the defining property of narrative is that the clauses of a text are iconically ordered, in keeping with the temporal order of the events narrated. Many others have also emphasized temporal succession as one of several characteristics of foregrounded clauses (e.g., Labov 1972:360; Polanyi-Bowditch 1976:61; Hopper 1979a:39, 1979b:214; Hopper and Thompson 1980:281; Dry 1981, 1983; Thompson 1987; and Reinhart 1984; *inter alia*).

(e) *Salience because of unpredictableness or unexpectedness in a given context*. This definition of textual salience resembles the concept of ESTRANGEMENT or DEFAMILIARIZATION discussed in (a) above. Language may attract attention either because it deviates from ordinary language or because it violates norms established within a particular text. Fleischman notes that this definition "emphasizes the fact that foreground is contextually determined" and, more than any other, "captures the perceptual neutrality of the gestalt figure-ground opposition. Predictable grammatical correlates of grounding are still assumed, but, like markedness values, they are relative and potentially reversible" (1985:860).

(f) *Salience because of figural properties.* Wallace (1982) and Reinhart (1984) suggest that the manifestation of textual foreground and background "is the linguistic counterpart of the perceptual distinction between figure and ground proposed in the gestalt theory" (Reinhart 1984:787). Reinhart suggests, for example, that the criteria of punctuality, perfectivity,

[9]Labov and Waletzky defined the "displacement set of a clause" as "displacement set of clause c-: the set consisting of the clauses before which c can be placed without affecting the temporal sequence of the semantic interpretation, c itself, and the clauses after which it can be placed without changing the temporal sequence of the original semantic interpretation" (1967:22). This definition has led to the position that temporally ordered clauses are the defining property of narrative. See, for example, Schiffrin 1981, Szatrowski 1987.

and temporal succession correlate, respectively, with the characteristics of smallness, closure, and good continuation which distinguish figure from ground in gestalt theory (Reinhart 1984:803–5).

Wallace argues against the traditional subdivision of verbal semantics into tense, aspect, and mood by pointing out that, cross-linguistically, the foreground/background distinction cuts across the other verb classifications (Wallace 1982:212). He divides morphosyntactic phenomena into prominent and less prominent, correlating the more prominent with figural properties, such as those listed in figure (2) on page 447.

(g) *Cognitive accessibility.* This is the kind of salience predicated of referents and concepts stored in short-term rather than long-term memory. At any given moment, short-term memory is presumed to include not only those items most recently mentioned in the discourse, but also others which have been thematized and thus endowed with global relevance. Foreground, as the contents of short-term memory, is typically operationalized as that which is quickly and accurately recalled—for example, swift identification of a pronoun referent suggests that that referent has been foregrounded. Cognitive accessibility, then, characterizes a derived class whose members are selected partly for their recency, partly for their global importance.

1.2. Unrepresented assumptions. As a representation of the current use of the term FOREGROUNDING, figure (1) is somewhat misleading for two paradoxically opposed reasons. On the one hand, it still does not adequately reflect the conceptual diversity involved. For example, it does not allow for the multiple PLANES of the text on which importance and salience can operate: both are sometimes predicated of events, episodes, and characters, as well as linguistic constructions. It also omits many specific characteristics deemed relevant to identifying foreground in one text or another; e.g., whether or not the main character is present, or whether or not an event is the central event of a sequence (Hopper 1979b). And it does not represent the frequently-heard suggestion that foreground is a CLUSTER CONCEPT, commonly manifested as a collection of properties, not all of which need be present to identify any one passage as an instance of foregrounding (Wallace 1982, Reinhart 1984, and Hopper and Thompson 1980).[10]

Alternatively, figure (1) does not attempt to portray the many potential and assumed overlaps among categories, e.g., the coincidence of highly transitive

[10]This notion may remind us of the BAG OF TRICKS which Longacre (1983) identified as available to mark peak; and it has an appeal based on the recognition that most languages afford text-producers more than one option for achieving a given rhetorical effect. Most other treatments of foreground as a CLUSTER CONCEPT, however, seem to investigate only the cluster of features which mark transitivity.

and temporally successive clauses, or the crucial assumption—commonly held a priori in the literature—that importance and salience coincide.

Nor does figure (1) represent the several controversies currently linked to these definitions. Among the issues under dispute are (a) whether or not foreground is equivalent to temporally successive clauses, (b) whether the foreground/background distinction is best conceived as binary or continuum-like, (c) whether foreground is a relative or absolute determination, and (d) whether the application of the visual theory of figure and ground to textual foregrounding has more than metaphoric import.

The existence of these questions may be linked, albeit indirectly, to disciplinary differences, in that intradisciplinary assumptions inevitably color the terms in which (even interdisciplinary) discussion is framed. Thus a literary critic may speak AS THOUGH foregrounding were equivalent to thematic importance, or a discourse analyst may speak AS THOUGH the foreground/background distinction were binary, even when neither has the conscious aim of asserting this position.

2. Importance vs. salience

Definitions of foreground often couple importance and salience: e.g., "those elements of a narrative text which are marked somehow as salient or central to the meaning of that text" (Fleischman 1986:121), or "information which is more central or salient or important to the development of the discourse theme" (Tomlin 1985:89), or those units of text "that are most central and important, or which are major foci of attention, due to 'estrangement' devices" (Reinhart 1984:787). Thus it may be worth noting that importance and salience do not necessarily coincide. Of the four types of importance in figure (1), only human importance and causal importance (in the sense of DeLancey 1987) have any claim to global salience within a narrative. If it can be established that causality is a prior cognitive/perceptual category and transitivity a manifestation of it, then transitive clauses will necessarily unite importance and salience. But however intriguing the idea, at this point it remains primarily speculative.[11]

It is equally true that the properties associated with salience do not ensure centrality or importance. Cognitive accessibility, for example, is no

[11]And, as an explanation, it has a certain circularity—it is intended to account for the generality of transitive morphosyntax, but it seems also to be based partly on that generality, in that "the universality of the transitive prototype shows that it is somehow an extremely natural category, and not simply a cognitively economical one" (DeLancey 1987:60).

guarantee of global importance, since it may obtain of recently mentioned items, whatever their inherent significance. And the other types of salience—unexpectedness and figural properties—may characterize unimportant, as well as important, textual elements. In their study of the French simple past (SP), for example, Waugh and Monville-Burston point out that figural properites such as smallness and definition can be associated with backgrounding:

> Because it can be easily used in utterances meant to express precision and specification, SP is comparable . . . to figures which are sharply and clearly defined . . . This means that they may be of limited size . . . and . . . so SP has, in certain contexts, uses where precision and specificity are allied with lesser significance and secondariness (or even inconsequentiality). Thus SP often contributes to a sense of backgrounding . . . (1986:868)

The automatic coupling of importance and salience is partly a legacy from literary study, i.e., from the Russian formalists positing the significance of language MADE STRANGE through deviation from a norm. The kind of IMPORTANCE they originally defined, however, was a FORMAL or DEFINITIONAL importance—i.e., such language was asserted to be the primary formal device through which art achieves its function of presenting the world in a new way. Early structuralist attempts to identify all examples of such language in a text rapidly led to the conclusion that not all instances of contrast, parallelism, and deviance are thematically important. This, in turn, generated efforts to constrain the theory of literary foregrounding. So, for example, Leech (1970:123–24) proposed that FOREGROUNDING be confined to salient elements which COHERE; and Halliday (1971) made a distinction between PROMINENCE (or salience) and FOREGROUNDING, with the latter confined to salient features MOTIVATED by the VISION of the text.[12]

In literary texts, not only do many salient passages fail to have interpretive force, but the converse is equally true: many significant passages are not initally salient. Only after reflection and rereading does the thematic importance of many words, phrases, or higher-level units become manifest. The same may be asserted of causal importance, as this criterion is applied to plot events. That is, many plot events with numerous or conspicuous consequences are not conspicuous in themselves; indeed, a whole genre—that of the mystery novel—is rooted in the lack of salience of actions central to the plot. Only in relatively straightforward texts, structured for immediate understanding, are the most salient features likely to be also the most thematically or causally important.

[12]For a discussion of this point, see Van Peer (1986:15–16).

3. Temporally successive clauses

Text type also bears indirectly on the dispute concerning the importance of temporally successive clauses. The temporally successive clause analysis has the merit of identifying foreground with a clearly defined level of text structure, one which, moreover, frequently has morphosyntactic marking, e.g., the aspectual marking investigated by Hopper (1979b). There are difficulties, however, with this identification. Givón (1987:185) points out that its emphasis on tense and aspect markers limits its applicability to language families other than Indo-European, and numerous researchers have questioned the thematic importance of temporally successive clauses.

Temporally successive clauses may lay claim to one kind of importance—definitional importance—in that they constitute a necessary, perhaps a sufficient, condition for the identification of narrative. Since they are often highly transitive (because aspectually perfective), they may possess whatever human importance we wish to ascribe to transitivity (see (b) above); but whether or not they seem reliably associated with thematic importance may depend on the type of text studied.

In narratives without elaborated structure, the events usually convey content that is central to the POINT of the story;[13] but temporally successive clauses do not necessarily have more thematic importance than other narrative phenomena.[14] This becomes obvious when dealing with complex narratives and abstract definitions of theme. In literary narratives, for example, themes are inferred from characterization, commentary, symbol, and setting, as much as from narrative events; events are often so de-emphasized as to lack thematic import.

4. Relative vs. absolute categories

Literary texts may also lead toward a position that the determination of foreground is not absolute but relative. That is, many different kinds of structures may function as foreground, since structures become foreground,

[13]And, therefore, the ABSTRACT-FORMING criterion can be used to identify backbone or main line.

[14]Reinhart (1984:787), for example, notes: "Obviously, there is no reason to expect that the NARRATIVE temporal sequences should be more important, in this sense [i.e., thematically] than the nonnarrative units." And Thompson (1987:436) says that the TEMPORAL ORDERING criterion and the IMPORTANT EVENT criterion need to be sharply distinguished, adding that Kalmar (1982) for Czech and McCleary (1982) for Brazilian Portuguese have shown that "while sequentiality might be relevant to aspect marking, IMPORTANCE OR BACKBONE may not be."

not by virtue of possessing certain inherent qualities but rather by virtue of contrasting with an appropriate background.

In this way, foregrounding is said to be linked with point of view, in that a text-producer can choose to foreground anything s/he wishes by placing it against an appropriate background; and through the foregrounding choices of different narrators, a reader is made aware of the inherent relativity of the concept. Fleischman, for example, notes that the definition of foreground as unexpectedness ((e) above) integrates well with the idea that every narrative reflects someone's point of view (1985:860). That is, the fact that foreground is contextually determined reflects the filtering of events through some consciousness, which may promote some situations to importance and demote others.

The relative position seems most apparent when foregrounding is approached from the study of belletristic texts, in which the reshaping of material attributable to point of view is most conspicuous. Certain structural features frequent in literary narrative serve to highlight just this reshaping—e.g., (a) the framing of the main narration within another which comments upon it (cf. James's *The Turn of the Screw* or Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*); (b) the use of multiple narrators (often narrating the same incidents in a different way, cf. Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* or Scott's *Jewel in the Crown*); (c) the differentiation of a character's voice from that of the narrator, through devices like free indirect speech, interior monologue, and stream of consciousness narration (cf. Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* or Austen's *Emma*); and (d) devices which call attention to the creative role of the narrator, such as narrative intrusions (cf. *Tristram Shandy*, *Tom Jones*) or the use of alternate endings (cf. Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*). Although features can also be found in nonliterary narrative, they are so frequent in western literary narrative as to be impossible to overlook.

By contrast, an ABSOLUTE conception of foreground—although not universally espoused by any one group—may more frequently color discussions of discourse in which the foreground/background distinction is overtly marked. This is so because such texts suggest a more stable identification of foreground than those which ostentatiously manipulate point of view.

5. Other questions

Such texts may, however, foster a more consistent apprehension of the foreground/background distinction as continuum-like, rather than binary. Where foreground markers are identified, ways of speaking about this issue are influenced by the kind of marker found; and certain markers are

themselves inherently scalar rather than binary. Among these are repetition (similar *laisses*: Fleischman 1986), addition of adverbs (Nichols 1981:205), variation in length of units (Longacre 1983). Other markers would seem to be binary (e.g., an aspectual particle is either present or absent; foregrounding word-order either is or is not manifested). Where a language has more than one way of marking foreground, however, different combinations of markers allow for varying degrees of foreground. This is what gives the cluster-concept approach to foreground its scalar character.

The figure/ground metaphor, by contrast—although it may emphasize the relativity of foreground—summons up a binary conceptualization. In the kind of visual representation usually offered (i.e., a simple line-drawing), a given part of the picture is either figure or ground, not both. It is true that certain famous drawings can be seen in two ways, but the picture cannot be viewed both ways at once. Nor can the viewer discriminate different degrees of membership in the figure, or different figures which are more or less foregrounded. Such continuum-like discriminations are more easily made about textual importance than visual figure-hood.

Such differences acquire a measure of importance in the context of occasional statements which seem to imply that the visual metaphor of figure and ground has some substantive import (as opposed to illustrative force) when applied to text-reception. There seems to be such an implication, for example, in Reinhart's initial suggestion that foregrounding, like temporal deixis, is organized on a spatial model, or in Waugh and Monville-Burston's discussion of the French simple past:

> SP refers to a figure with clear-cut dimensions. This figure may be the speech event itself, the text as a whole, a major or minor subpart of the text, or even the verbal process. (1986:852)

Thus we may wish to ask whether the visual properties characteristic of figures correlate reliably with properties discernable in portions of a text.

A conclusive answer to this question would require an investigation of perceptual processes. Something preliminary might be learned, however, by listing the properties of textual foreground identified in the literature and attempting to discern whether they are analogous to figural properties. Figure (2) represents a preliminary attempt at such a correlation, listing some of the figural characteristics offered by Wallace (1982:214) and matching them with instances of textual foreground.[15] At best, however, such a chart can be only suggestive; and, in this case, the lack of definitional constraints on foregrounding inhibits our ability to integrate findings or make generalizations based on them.

[15]The correlations are not necessarily those of the authors cited.

(2)

Visual characteristic	Textual analogue
Well-defined:	dimensionality, as marked by the French simple past (Waugh and Monville-Burston 1986)
Bounded, enclosed:	completed events, perfective aspect (Reinhart 1984)
Small:	punctual events
Near:	present tense in Old French (Fleischman 1985); deictics (*here, now*)
Above, in front:	sentence topicalization; macrostructural cues (e.g., title)
Greater contrast:	deviance from ordinary language
Stable:	repeated material in overlays (Grimes 1972), similar *laisses* in OFr (Fleischman 1986)
Meaningful, familiar:	repeated material in overlays, *laisses*
Symmetric:	parallelism, contrast (cf., Prague structuralism).

Figure (2) suggests a possible correlation between visual and textual properties. It is admittedly limited in its usefulness, however, because of the potential ambiguity of the claim that "visual property *x* is analogous to textual phenomenon *y*." So many disparate textual phenomena have been identified as foreground that it is difficult to determine whether the relation "is analogous to" means the same thing in each case.

6. Conclusion

This is the major difficulty with the current multidisciplinary study of foregrounding. In the absence of an agreed-upon definition of the central concept, we may identify as foreground whatever textual feature strikes us as prominent. This, in turn, leads to a proliferation of implicit definitions extrapolated from such identifications and to differences of opinion deriving as much from a priori assumptions as from data conflict.

Certain disputes discussed above, for example, seem to derive from the fact that literary and linguistic approaches to foregrounding have been only partially integrated. Even though each approach grows logically from the type of texts which are its focus, unexamined differences between them may have contributed to dissent over the relativity of foreground, the importance of temporally successive clauses, and the occurrence together of importance and salience.

In literary texts, with their elaborated structures, written for readers willing to apply intricate interpretive procedures, importance and salience need not—and frequently do not—coincide. Nor are temporally successive clauses necessarily relevant to the type of importance central to literary study—thematic importance—since this is founded on a notion of theme which can be fairly far removed from plot events. Furthermore, as investigated in literary stylistics, foregrounding is inherently a relative, rather than an absolute determination, inextricably tied to point of view.

In discourse analysis, investigation can focus on morphosyntactic markers of foreground in oral or written texts whose simpler structure increases the likelihood that salience and importance will coincide. Many of the markers identified have aspectual meaning as well as pragmatic function, and this may bolster the identification of foreground with temporally successive clauses, while the identification of specific markers may lead away from conceptualizing foreground as relative.

Of course, no one would wish to argue against the eventual integration of insights from many disciplines into a single theory of textual foregrounding. Indeed, the importance of the concept is indicated by the fact that it evokes so much multidisciplinary interest. But effective integration may be furthered by first isolating disparate assumptions traceable to work with different text types.

References

Culler, Jonathan. 1975. Structuralist poetics. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

DeLancey, Scott. 1987. Transitivity in grammar and cognition. In Tomlin, 53–68.

Dry, Helen Aristar. 1981. Sentence aspect and the movement of narrative time. Text 1:233–40.

———. 1983. The movement of narrative time. The Journal of Literary Semantics 12(2):19–54.

Fleischman, Suzanne. 1985. Discourse functions of tense-aspect oppositions in narrative: Toward a theory of grounding. Linguistics 23:851–82.

———. 1986. 'Overlay structures' in the Song of Roland: A discourse-pragmatic strategy of oral narrative. Berkeley Linguistics Society 12:108–23.

Garvin, Paul. 1964. A Prague School reader on esthetics, literary structure and style. Washington: Georgetown University Press.

Givón, Talmy. 1987. Beyond foreground and background. In Tomlin, 177–88.

Grimes, Joseph E. 1972. Outlines and overlays. Language 48:513–24.
———. 1975. The thread of discourse. Janua Linguarum series minor 207. The Hague: Mouton.
Halliday, Michael A. K. 1971. Linguistic function and literary style. In S. Chatman (ed.), Literary style: A symposium, 330–68. London: Oxford University Press.
Hopper, Paul. 1979a. Some observations on the typology of focus and aspect in narrative language. Studies in Language 3:37–64.
———. 1979b. Aspect and foregrounding discourse. In Talmy Givón (ed.), Discourse and syntax, 213–41. Syntax and semantics 12. New York: Academic Press.
———, ed. 1982. Tense-aspect: Between semantics and pragmatics. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
——— and Sandra A. Thompson. 1980. Transitivity in grammar and discourse. Language 56:251–99.
Jones, Larry B. and Linda K. Jones. 1979. Multiple levels of information in discourse. In Linda K. Jones (ed.), Discourse studies in Mesoamerican languages 1, 3–28. Summer Institute of Linguistics and the University of Texas at Arlington publications in linguistics 58. Dallas.
Kalmar, Ivan. 1982. The function of Inuktitut verb modes in narrative texts. In Hopper, 45–64.
Labov, William. 1972. The transformation of experience in narrative syntax. Language in the inner city. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
——— and J. Waletzky. 1967. Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience. In June Helm (ed.), Essays on the verbal and visual arts, 12–44. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
Leech, Geoffry N. 1970. 'This bread I break'—Language and interpretation. In D. C. Freeman (ed.), Linguistics and literary style, 119–28. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
Longacre, Robert E. 1976a. The discourse structure of the flood narrative. In George MacRae (ed.), Society of Biblical Literature 1976 seminar papers. Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press.
———. 1976b. Mystery particles and affixes. Chicago Linguistic Society 12:468–75.
———. 1983. The grammar of discourse. New York: Plenum.
Nichols, Johanna. 1981. Transitivity and foregrounding in the North Caucasus. Berkeley Linguistics Society 7:202–21.
Polanyi-Bowditch, Livia. 1976. Why the what's are when: Mutually contextualizing realms of narrative. Berkeley Linguistics Society 2:59–77.

Rafferty, Ellen. 1982. Aspect in conversational Indonesian. In Hopper, 65–87.
Reinhart, Tanya. 1984. Principles of gestalt perception in the temporal organization of narrative texts. Linguistics 22:779–809.
Szatrowski, Polly E. 1987. "Pastness" and "narrative events" in Japanese conversational narratives. In Tomlin, 409-33.
Thompson, Sandra A. 1987. "Subordination" and narrative event structure. In Tomlin, 435–54.
Tomlin, Russell S. 1983. The identification of foreground-background information in on-line oral descriptive discourse. ms.
———. 1985. Foreground-background information and the syntax of subordination. Text 5:85–122.
———, ed. 1987. Coherence and grounding in discourse. Typological studies in language 11. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
Van Peer, Willie. 1986. Stylistics and psychology: Investigations of foregrounding. London: Croom Helm.
Wallace, Stephen. 1982. Figure and ground: The interrelationships of linguistic categories. In Hopper, 201–23.
Waugh, Linda R. and Monique Monville-Burston. 1986. Aspect and discourse function: The French simple past in newspaper usage. Language 62:846–77.