

GROUNDING:
Foregrounding & Backgrounding¹

1. *Introduction*

In the last fifteen or so years, the notion of foregrounding and backgrounding in narratives has garnered much attention, especially in the context of what has been called ‘Transitivity’. Hopper and Thompson (1980:280-81) give this characterization of foregrounding and backgrounding:

Users of language are constantly required to judge their utterances in accord with their own communicative goals and with their perception of their listeners’ needs. Yet, in any speaking situation, **some parts** of what is said is **more relevant** than others. That part of a discourse which does not immediately and crucially contribute to the speaker’s goal, but which **merely assists, amplifies, or comments** on it, is referred to as **BACKGROUND**. By contrast, the material which **supplies the main points** of the discourse is known as **FOREGROUND**. Linguistic features associated with the distinction between foreground and background are referred to as **GROUNDING** ... [There are] two most important defining characteristics of foregrounded clauses. First, the foregrounded portions together comprise the **backbone or skeleton** of the text, forming its basic structure; the backgrounded clauses **put flesh on the skeleton**, but are extraneous to its structural coherence ... Second, the foregrounded clauses ... are **ordered in a temporal sequence**; a change in the order of any two of them signals a change in the order of real-world events. Backgrounded clauses, however, are **not ordered** [Emphases mine, PWD] with respect to each other, and may be movable with respect to the foregrounded portions.

2. *Transitivity*

The formal correlates of Transitivity, which is in turn the diagnostic of foregrounding and backgrounding, are these (Hopper and Thompson 1980: 252):

	PARAMETER	HIGH VALUE	LOW VALUE
(1) (a)	Participants	Two or more	One
(b)	Kinesis	Action	Non-action
(c)	Aspect	Telic	Atelic
(d)	Punctuality	Punctual	Non-punctual
(e)	Volitionality	Volitional	Non-volitional
(f)	Affirmation	Affirmative	Negative

¹ © Philip W. Davis 1999.

(g)	Mode	Realis	Irrealis
(h)	Agency	A high in potency	A low in potency
(i)	Affectedness	O totally affected	O not affected
(j)	Individuation	O highly individuated	O non-individuated

Where you find high transitivity, you find foregrounding; and where you find low transitivity, you find backgrounding. Most of the properties in (1) are familiar. The telic : atelic character is described by Thompson (1983:62) in this way:

only atelic predicates can be followed with a clause like the following:

... and then subject stopped ____-ing ____

Thus, *buckled on his armor* is telic, but *read* (past tense) is not:

- (2) (a) ?He buckled on his armor, and then he stopped buckling on his armor.
 (b) He read, and then he stopped reading.

The sentences of (3) show that English aspect is relevant as well; since (3a) is acceptable, *was buckling on his armor* must be atelic:

- (3) (a) He was buckling on his armor, and then he stopped buckling his armor.
 (b) He was reading, and then he stopped reading.

And in the other direction (with respect to *read*), the presence of a direct object (cf. [1a]) changes the value for telicness ([4a] is now **unacceptable**), as does the choice of article (cf. [1j] in [4b]), which is acceptable, in contrast with [4a]):

- (4) (a) ?He read the book, and then he stopped reading the book.
 (b) He read books, and then he stopped reading books.

The observation that the properties of (1) are **interlaced** in this way and that they will **conspire** to work in one direction or the other, that is, to create high Transitivity by the multiple presence of high transitivity properties, or low Transitivity by their absence, is called the **Transitivity Hypothesis** (Hopper

& Thompson 1980.255):

If two clauses (a) and (b) in a language differ in that (a) is higher in Transitivity according to any of the features [in (1)] ..., then if a concomitant grammatical or semantic difference appears elsewhere in the clause, that difference will also show (a) to be higher in Transitivity

These criteria are applied to narrative texts such as the following from Hopper and Thompson (1980.295):

The fleet was ready for sea on 2 August 1492. *Every man and boy confessed his sins, received absolution, and received communion* at the Church of St. George in Palos. *The Captain General* (as we should call Columbus at this juncture) *went on board Santa Maria* in the small hours of Friday the third and **at break of day made signal to get under way**. **Before the run rose**, all three vessels were floating down the Rio Tinto in the morning ebb, with sails hanging limp from their yards, the men pulling on long ash sweeps to maintain steerageway. **As they swung into Saltés and passed La Rábida close aboard**, they could hear the friars chanting the ancient hymn 'Iam lucis orto sidere' with its haunting refrain, 'Et nunc et in pertuum, 'Evermore and evermore'...

On the first leg of the voyage, *Pinta's rudder jumped its gudgeons*, so *Columbus decided to send her into Las Palmas* for repairs while *Santa Maria* and *Niña* went to Gomera, westernmost of the conquered Canary Islands. **There he sent men ashore** to fill water casks, buy breadstuffs and cheese, and salt down native beef. *He then sailed to Las Palmas* to superintend *Pinta's* repairs and **with her returned to Gomera**. **By 2 September** all three ships were anchored off San Sebastián, the port of Gomera. *Columbus there met Doña Beatriz de Peraza y Bobadilla*, widow of the former captain of the island, a beautiful lady still under thirty. He is said by a shipmate to fallen deeply in love with her; nonetheless, he did not tarry. *Additional ship's stores were quickly hoisted on board and struck below*, and **on 6 September 1492** *the fleet weighed anchor* for the last time in the Old World. It has still another island to pass, lofty Ferro, or Hierro. **Owing to calms and variables**, Ferro and the 12,000-foot peak of Tenerife were in sight until the ninth, but **by nightfall that day** every trace of land had sunk below the eastern horizon, and the three vessels were alone on a uncharted ocean. *The Captain himself gave out the course*: 'West; nothing to the north, nothing to the south.'²

Hopper and Thompson *italicize* the portions which they consider to be foregrounded. I have **boldfaced** the portions which seem to be preposed to sentence initial position. In (5), I have extracted the foregrounded portions and

² The text is taken from Morison, Samuel E. 1974. *The European Discovery of America*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. 53-55.

represented them in isolation:

- (5) (a) *Every man and boy confessed his sins, received absolution, and received communion*
 (b) *The Captain General ... went on board Santa Maria*
 (c) *made signal to get under way*
 (d) *Pinta's rudder jumped its gudgeons*
 (e) *Columbus decided to send her into Las Palmas*
 (f) *he sent men ashore*
 (g) *He then sailed to Las Palmas*
 (h) *with her returned to Gomera*
 (i) *Columbus there met Doña Beatriz de Peraza y Bobadilla*
 (j) *Additional ship's stores were quickly hoisted on board and struck below*
 (k) *the fleet weighed anchor*
 (l) *The Captain himself gave out the course*

And in (6), I have extracted the preposed portions:

- (6) (a) **at break of day**
 (b) **Before the run rose**
 (c) **As they swung into Saltés and passed La Rábida** **close**
aboard
 (d) **On the first leg of the voyage**
 (e) **There**
 (f) **with her**
 (g) **By 2 September**
 (h) **on 6 September 1492**
 (i) **Owing to calms and variables**
 (j) **by nightfall that day**

3. *Grounding vs. Preposing*

The question now concerns the relation between the foregrounding in (5) versus the sentence-initial preposing in (6). Concerning the detached participial phrases of Thompson 1983, we may note that they are backgrounded and that they contain no preposed terms. By itself, this suggests that we may expect to find **no preposed elements in backgrounded clauses**. While it is true that preposed elements occur in foregrounded clauses, e.g.

- (7) ... and **at break of day** *made signal to get under way*.

it is also true that preposed elements appear in the background:

- (8) **Before the sun rose**, all three vessels were floating down the Rio Tinto in the morning ebb,

And if we look at the **small** sample of the text, we find that **five of the ten** examples of **preposing** occur in **backgrounded** clauses, and **five** are in **foregrounded**. The two marks seem to be randomly related or unrelated. And **if** preposing is tracking TOPIC, then TOPIC is **not significantly inter-related** with GROUNDING.

The properties cited in (1) suggest that backgrounding is ‘distancing’ from

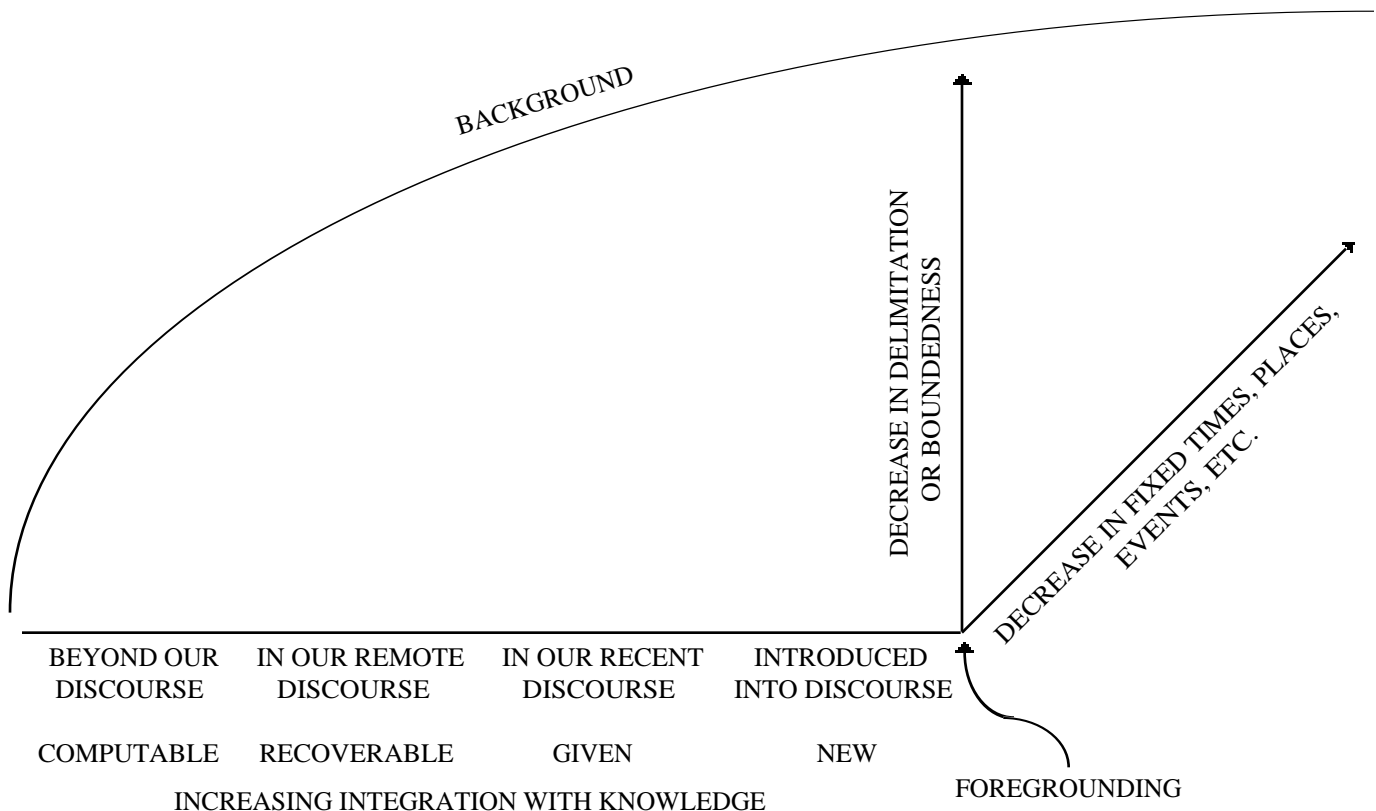


Figure 1: *The incorporation of ‘grounding’.*

the intersection of the dimensions in Figure 1. The values of Action, Telic, Punctual, Affirmative, and Realis can be seen to fall along the angled parameter of DECREASE IN FIXED TIMES but **toward** the point where the three parameters intersect.... Individuation and Total Affectedness can lie along the vertical dimension of DECREASE IN DELIMITATION, but again, **toward** the bottom. GROUNDING then is **not** the same as the tracking of TOPIC; but we may expect that a **change** in TOPIC would certainly render content FOREGROUNDED. Ramsey (1987) examines the properties of preposed and postposed *if* and *when* clauses in a mystery novel (*Death in the High C's* by Robert Barnard). For the *when* clauses, “a great majority ... used in initial position show verbs in the perfective/realis while most of those used in final position have verbs in the imperfective/irrealis (most specifically, the majority of them are in the habitual aspect). Thus preposed WC [*when* clauses, PWD] seem to have all the characteristics of ... ‘foregrounded’ clauses” (Ramsey 1987.403). Ramsey provides this example from the novel:

Some had removed their make-up already, some were still crudely overcoloured for their parts, and Jim McKaid was already costumed and made up for the part of Don Alfonso in *Cosi*, and looked the elderly cynic to the life.
When they saw that Hurtle was in the theatre, one or two went over to him to express sympathy. Nichols watched in amusement.

The final *when* clause “does not advance the main line of the narrative (it is not temporally sequenced either), it only completes the information given in the main clause. One can say that it looks like a parenthetical comment on the narration.” (Ramsey 1987.404).

Ramsey (1987.402) discovered that “the subject of an initial clause **tends** to be different from the subject of a main clause” while “final clauses exhibit a **very high referential continuity** [Emphases mine, PWD] with the main clause”. Although Ramsey finds a correlation between preposed clauses and FOREGROUNDING and change in subject (TOPIC), for the text above from Hopper and Thompson, these pairings occur:

	BACKGROUNDED	FOREGROUNDED
Same subject	3	2
Different subject	7	8

The count considers only ‘main’ clauses, omits subjects which are elided, and

counts the subject of the first sentence as ‘different’.³ These numbers show first that a **change** in subject (15 times) is the primary relation between clauses, not continuation (5 times); and second, there appears to be **no direct connection** between the status of GROUNDING and that of TOPIC (again taking subject to be one of the marks of TOPIC). If the continuation of a subject or its change is taken as a manipulation of TOPIC (to some degree), then that property shows **independence** from GROUNDING. The correlation between BACK-GROUNDING and continuation of TOPIC appears stronger in postposed clauses than in preposed ones.⁴

REFERENCES

- Hopper, Paul J. & Sandra A. Thompson. 1980. “Transitivity in Grammar and Discourse”. *Language* 56.251-99.
- Ramsey, Violeta. 1987. “The Functional Distribution of Preposed and Postposed ‘if’ and ‘when’ Clauses in Written Discourse”. In *Coherence and Grounding in Discourse*, ed. by Russell S. Tomlin, 383-408. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Thompson, Sandra A. 1983. “Grammar and Discourse: The English detached participial clause”. In *Discourse Perspectives on Syntax*, ed. by Flora Klein-Andreu, 43-65. New York: Academic Press.

[Version: October 4, 1999]

³ *The fleet* [DSB] ... *Every man* [DSF] ... *The captain General* [DSF] ... *all three vessels* [DSB] ... *they* [DSB] ... *Pinta’s rudder* [DSF] ... *Columbus* [DSF] ... *he* [SSF] ... *he* [SSF] ... *all three ships* [DSB] ... *Columbus* ... [DSF] ... *he* [SSB] ... *he* [SSB] ... *Additional ship’s stores* [DSF] ... *the fleet* [DSF] ... *it* [SSB] ... *Ferro* [DSB] ... *every trace* [DSB] ... *the three vessels* [DSB] ... *The Captain* [DSF]. If the subjects of two preposed clauses (*Before the sun rose* and *As they swung into Saltés and passed La Rábida close aboard*) are included, then there is one more different subject and one more same subject for the BACKGROUNDED clauses.

⁴ Cp. Ramsey’s “very high referential continuity” for postposed clauses and “tends” for preposed ones.