FOREGROUNDING

Walter Nash refers in his conclusion to **foregrounding**, pairings, contrasts and gradation being stylistic features enhancing the structure of a text.

What is foregrounding?

It is a key concept in Stylistics. Mick Short in *Exploring the language of Poems, Plays and Prose* illustrates this stylistic feature by referring to a painting since the term is borrowed from art criticism. The foreground is that part which is in the centre and the items in the foreground will appear more important than the rest.

M.A.K Halliday (as cited in Text and Discourse, 2002) defines it as *patterns of prominence in a poem or prose text, regularities in the sounds or words or structures that stand out or maybe brought out by careful reading; and one may often be led in this way towards a new insight, through finding that such prominence contributes to the writer's total meaning*(p.98)

Katie Wales (as cited in her *Dictionary of Stylistics, 2001*) explains that foregrounding is thus *the throwing into relief of the linguistic sign against the background of the norms of ordinary language. But within the literary text itself, linguistic features can themselves be foregrounded or ' highlighted ', made prominent 'for specific effect against the background of the rest of the text. It is on this internal foregrounding that critical attention is largely focused* (p.157).

To come back to Mick Short's notion of foreground and background in a painting, the foreground is that part of a painting which is in the centre and towards the bottom of the canvas and will appear large as opposed to the rest of the painting and will represent the subject matter of the painting. Mick Short highlights that *in language, the background is what is linguistically normal- the rules, norms and expectations which we associate with a particular kind of speaking or writing; the foreground is in large part, the portions of text which do not conform to these expectations. . Foregrounding is thus produced as a result of deviation from linguistic (and non linguistic) norms of various kinds.* (12)Foregrounded elements include **deviations** but also **repetitions** and **parallelisms** which authors will use for specific effect and communicative purposes. Let us illustrate parallelisms, repetitions and deviations using Mick Short's checksheet at the end of the first chapter of 'Exploring the language of Poems, Plays and Prose (p. 34-35).

READ CHECKSHEET 1: DEVIATION, PARALLELISM, AND FOREGROUNDING

Parallelism:

Let us look at the notion of parallelism in T.S Eliot's *The Hollow Men*. Try to work out the chain of inference which you have to go through to get to the meaning at which you intuitively arrive:

We are the hollow men

We are the stuffed men

(8 lines omitted)

Shape without form, shade without colour,

Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

(26 lines omitted)

This is the dead land

This is the cactus land…

(T.S Eliot,' The Hollow Men')

The parallelism rule: When readers come across parallel structures they try to find an appropriate semantic relationship between the parallel parts'. This is often a relationship of quasi-synonymy or quasi-antonymy, but other relations are also possible. This rule is not a hard and fast one. We can find parallel structures where it is not very easy to perceive the semantic relations I have been talking about. Rather what we are we are describing is *a processing tendency* on the part of readers. If a parallelism of a reasonably obvious kind exits, readers will try to find a semantic motivation for that parallelism. Parallelism is an important tool for the writer in excercising control over the reader: (i) it helps readers to perceive some associations and not others, (ii) it pushes readers towards perceiving semantic relations between words and phrases which do not exist as such in the language system as a whole, and (iii) by relating parts of a text together it acts as a powerful force in the cohesion of foregrounding

The **linguistic levels** at which deviations can occur are:

1) **Discoursal** Deviation: Texts should begin at the beginning of a sentence. The most notorious example of a text which deviates from this rule is James Joyce's Finnigans' Wake , which both begins and ends in mid- sentence. Indeed, the end can be joined

to the beginning as the novel ends as it begins in mid-sentence so that the novel goes round and round in a circle. From noticing this one deviant and hence foregrounded feature, we can begin to understand that Joyce is creating a work which has no beginning and no end. This observation is an important clue to the understanding of a novel where Finnegan observes his own funeral wake and tries to take part in it, thus blurring our commonplace distinction between life and death.

Another example: a political speech starting with 'And in conclusion…' is strange as one would end with the sentence 'First let me deal with Anglo-Soviet relations.

2) **Semantic** deviation: Mick Short gives the example of Dylan Thomas '*Light breaks where no sun shines'*
'Where no sea runs, the waters of the heart
Push in their tides.
We face a series of paradoxes that need to be resolved. Modern poets often lead their readers onto meandering paths that are cryptic and need to be resolved.

3) **Lexical** deviation:
When a poet makes up a word which did not previously exist. This is usually called neologism.

a) *The boys are dreaming wicked or of the bucking*
Ranches of the night and the jollyrodgered sea.

(Dylan Thomas, Under Milk Wood, p.1)

The jolly rodger is, of course, the name for the pirates' skull and crossbones flag. Here Thomas runs the two words together to make a compound noun jollyrodger. He then converts this new word into a participial adjective by adding –ed which modifies sea :'jollyrodgered'.

The result of this double invention is a sea which is imbued with piracy and the romantic associations attached to that notion. This process of converting a word from one grammatical class to another (functional convertion) is common in English.

b) Ex:

My heart in hiding

Stirred for a bird,-the achieve of, the mastery of the thing! (Gerald Manley Hopkins, 'The Windhover')

'Achieve' is used as a noun (because of the definite article, of the 'of' introducing a post-modifying

Prepositional phrase and the grammatical parallelism with mastery. Why does he use this 'word' instead of achievement'?

He is describing the flight of the windhover in all its miraculous splendor. By using the word 'achieve' as noun instead of a verb he foregrounds the extent of the achievement of the bird in flight and also increases the sense of physical energy which we associate with the windhover.

4) **Grammatical** Deviation:

The number of rules in English is large, and therefore the foregrounding possibilities via grammatical deviation is also very large. However, some deviations of word-order have occurred so often in the history of English poetry that they are now associated with our prototypical assumptions about poetry-what we might call 'poetic poetry' or 'Poetry with a capital' P'. This applies to, for example, to the word order inside noun phrases where in poetry, unlike the rest of modern English, the adjective can come after the noun:

Little enough I sought:

But a word compassionate (Ernest Dowson, Exchanges)

The poet did this inversion to adhere to the rhyme scheme but also to impart a poetic flavor to it.

Re-ordering are by no means restricted to the noun phrase. Re-sequencing of phrases inside the clause away from the normal subject-verb-object-adverbial order is also prototypical for our notion of poetry:

Then spake King Arthur to Sir Bedivere (Alfred Lord Tennyson,'Morte d'Arthur') l. 15)

Many grammatical deviations exist apart from the use of re-ordering. Let us consider list constructions in English: normally coordinated nouns are separated by commas except the last therefore:

Tulips, anemones and daisies is a normal English phrase but not: *Tulips and anemones and daisies*

If poets use this construction, they have a purpose to it: we must therefore construe a reason for them

breaking the rule. Here is another example:

He lurches here and there by guess

And God and hope and hopelessness. (Robert Graves 'Flying Crooked')

Normally, he should write: *by guess, God, hope and hopelessness.* But if he did, some of his effect *would be lost.* Interpolating the 'ands' between each noun helps us to notice the

nouns individually   like individual beads spaced out on a string. This gives them roughly equal prominence and enables us to perceive more easily the two pairs of oppositions between the nouns, which is also marked by the pairs of alliteration. 'Hope' and 'hopelessness' are opposites, and this helps us to see that 'guess' and 'God' can also be construed as opposites, 'guess' being connected with uncertainty and God with certainty. Graves seems to be saying that the butterfly gets where he is going sometimes by luck and sometimes by judgment. This also explains the phrase 'here and here' (instead of 'here and there') suggesting that the butterfly keeps turning up in unexpected places, and also for the awkward construction of the poem's last noun phrase:

Even the aerobic swift

Has not his flying crooked gift (Robert Graves, *Flying Crooked*)

   We would normally expect 'his gift of flying crooked'; in the manner of our best poets, Graves manages to have his cake and eat it. By re-arranging the word order within the last noun phrase he adheres to the poem's couplet rhyme scheme and also manages to enact syntactically the butterfly's awkward flight.

   We may have a writer using an opposite construction with on the opposite, no use of 'ands' such as in:

And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumors, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane. (Salman Rushdie, Midnight's Children, p.9)

   There are neither 'ands', nor commas. The effect of this deviation is the opposite of the previous one: Instead of being separated out, the items in the list can be read as 'pushed together' in a somewhat undifferentiated way. The effect of this list is also appropriate in the context, as we are told that the items in the list are densely intertwined.

5) **Morphological** Deviation:
One way of producing deviation at a morphological level is by adding an ending to a word it would not normally be added to:
Ex: perhapsless mystery of paradise (e.e Cummings, 'From spiraling ecstatically this)
We can add the suffix 'less' to nouns such as 'hopeless',' hatless', 'sunless' but 'perhaps' is not normally a noun but an adverb.
   Another example is the word 'museyroom' used by James Joyce in 'Finnegans Wake' , musey' is an invented morpheme which comes from 'to muse' to think a little and 'y' gives a diminutive connotation to a word as in 'doggy', potty' so a museyroom is one where one muses a little, a word which can be substituted for museum.
   Another morphological deviation is by not separating words as in
Ex: 'Oh, said Sheila 'of course you haven't met. Strange, isn't it, really?
   Nigeledwin Edwinigel (Anthony Burguess, The Doctor is Sick, p. 63)
   Sheila is introducing her husband to her lover. Running their names in this way, we infer either that Sheila feels unconcerned or is trying to get the confrontation over qs soon qs possible. We can even go on to infer as Mick Short states it that there

is little to choose between the two men. The same linguistic phenomenon can open up to different interpretations.

6) **Phonological and graphological** deviation

In Crow's First Lesson by Ted Hughes, God is trying to teach Crow to speak by getting him to pronounce the word 'love':

1 'Love', said God.' Say, Love'. (Stanza 1)
2 'No, no,' said God, Say Love. Now try it. LOVE.' (Stanza 2)
3 'A final try', said God. 'Now, LOVE'. (stanza 3)   (Ted Hughes, 'Crow's First Lesson').
4

The capital letter in the first three instances of the word *Love* indicates that it has to have some kind of special pronunciation. Given the teaching situation God is in, if we read the poem out loud we are likely to make the pronunciation very clear and deliberate. Then, when we come to the version of the word written in capitals we must give it an even more m and with a very wide pitch span. The repetition and the increasingly deviant *graphological* forms lead us to an interpretation with an increasingly marked phonetic form. This in turn leads us to infer a reason for the change:
God is becoming more and more exasperated at his unGodlike failure to cope with Crow's education.

Another example:
-Think you are in
Heaven?
Well- you 'll soon be
In H
　　E
　　L
　　L-　　　　　　　　　(Michael Horovitz,' Man-to-Man Blues')

Internal and External Deviation (distinction made by Lenn, 1965)

  So far we have been dealing with external deviation,that is deviation which is external to the text. Indeed, our examples have been almost exclusively related to one particular system of norms, namely the rule-system which constitutes the English language. Internal deviation is a deviation against a norm set up by the text itself. Very often, it is the reverse of parallelism. Suppose that a poem is written in rhyming couplets, but then the 5th couplet does not rhyme. The rhyme is a pattern of parallelism at the phonetic level, which is then broken at stanza 5. This stanza will thus be foregrounded as a result of the internal deviation.

An example:

1   The stranger lighted from his steed,

2   And ere he spake a word,

3   He seiz'd my lady's lily hand,

4   And kiss'd it all unheard.

5   The stranger walk'd into the hall,

6   And here he spake a word,

7   He kiss'd my lady's cherry lips,

8   And kiss'd them all unheard.

9   The stranger walk'd into the bower-

10   But my lady first did go,-

11   Aye hand in hand into the bower,

12   Where my lord's roses blow.

13   My lady's maid had a silken scarf,

14   And a golden ring had she,

15   And a kiss from the stranger, as off he went

16 Again on his fair palfrey.

(John Keats, 'Song')

Bower: lady's room.

Make remarks on lines 1 and 5; lines 2 and 6; lines 3 and 7, lines 4 and 8.

There are extensive parallels between them in terms of grammar and partial lexical repetition.

The above extracts are taken from Mick Short's first two chapters in *Exploring the language of Poems, Plays and Prose* (The book can be found in the library).

Illustration of **foregrounding** (parallelisms, deviations, and repetitions) with an extract from 'O Plimmoth Plantation' by William Bradford who is renowned as a historian and skilled writer.

Application of Walter Nash's approach on the same text ' Of Plimmoth Plantation'.

Hommage given to Ernest Hemingway on the 50th anniversary of his death on July 2nd, 2011. Students choose a short story of their choice and apply Walter Nash's approach on a passage they have selected to be presented to the class after 'Of Plimmoth Plantation'. On Tuesday, December 12th, one student in each group will present one of Hemingway's short stories or novels to the 5 groups in the amphitheatre focusing on one aspect of his work (5 students for the first section and 5 for the second section.)