

Global coherence, narrative structure, and expectations of relevance

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Abstract

A topic for both literary studies and discourse analysis is the global structure of texts. Studies of global text structure have largely been focused on narrative structure, where a major strand of research has been devoted to the role which grounding (sometimes called information staging or foreground-background articulation) has for discourse structuring. It is often claimed that grounding is an important aspect of the notion of global coherence, that the overt realisation of grounding effects in texts depend on their genre and that this is generally reflected in the verbal system of natural languages (e.g. Caenepeel 1995; Hooper 1998; Hopper 1979; Fleischmann 1985; 1990; Longacre 1983; 1989). However, the notions of foreground and background are notoriously vague. In this paper I will argue for an alternative account of grounding effects based on the relevance-theoretic claim that the fine-tuning of the addressee's expectations of relevance is an essential part of the on-line processing of complex ostensive stimuli such as texts (Unger 2001). Linguistic and non-linguistic clues can be used to point the addressee to gradations in information grounding within a text in ways which far extend the coding resources of natural languages. This account may provide an explanatory account for Gumperz' (1992) "contextualization clues" and thus open up a new line of interdisciplinary interaction of relevance-theoretic pragmatics with some strands of research in ethnomethodology. It also suggests the idea that the emergence of literary form may be facilitated by the relevance-orientedness of cognition and communication which suggests that the more clues the communicator can give for fine-tuning the addressee's expectation of relevance in complex stimuli, the better chance of successful communication he has, which in turn motivates the use of communicative clues far beyond the coding resources of given natural languages as well as adherence to cultural conventions regarding the form of texts.

1. The global structure of texts: grounding

Two important theoretical questions which are asked both in pragmatics (or discourse analysis) and literary studies are: (a) what makes a text more than a string of sentences, and (b) what makes a text into a good and effective one? These questions lie at the heart of research in "global coherence". This notion has been approached in number of different ways. In this paper I want to focus on that strand of research which regards as crucial differences in importance of the information conveyed in the sentences of a text, or in other words: distinctions in information grounding in text.

The basic idea behind these accounts are illustrated in examples (1) to (3):

- (1) We and my sister-in-laws family visited a relative in Võru.¹ The children played in the garden and ate berries. Then we visited a museum. After that we went to the lake.
- (2) Together with my sister-in-law's family we visited a relative in Võru. We arrived there at lunch time. Immediately, the children played in the garden and ate berries. Then we visited a museum. After that we went to the lake. The children enjoyed the water very much.
- (3) Together with my sister-in-law's family we visited a relative in Võru. When we arrived there at lunch time, the children immediately played in the garden and ate berries. Then we visited a museum. After that we went to the lake. The children had much fun playing in the water.

Intuitively, these three texts differ in acceptability: (1) sounds quite awkward even to the point where one wonders whether it should be regarded to constitute a text at all. (2) sounds better, and (3) even better still. (1) presents only a string of main events. In (2), some auxiliary information is given besides the string of main events: *We arrived there at lunch time* (2nd sentence), and *The children enjoyed the water very much* (last sentence). In (3), the non-event clauses are also presented in a more non-event-like manner: as a subordinate clause in the second sentence, and as a clause with a non-verbal predicate ('have fun') in the last sentence. Information

¹A city in southern Estonia. The author's visit to this city, which inspired this example, took place in July 2002.

grounding theories explain these intuitions roughly in the following way:

- (4) 1. Acceptable texts contain both foreground (i.e. more important, main line information) and background information (i.e. less important, auxiliary information). This is illustrated by the contrast between (1) and (2).
2. Good texts reflect the foreground-background modulation of information in its linguistic structure. This is illustrated by the contrast between (2) and (3).

These assumptions amount to the claim that global coherence - or at least that aspect of global coherence which is based on information grounding - has a linguistic reality. Within relevance theory, on the other hand, it has been claimed that the cognitive notion of relevance alone is sufficient to explain discourse and that a distinct linguistic notion of coherence (or whatever it may be called) is not needed. Clearly, an investigation of this topic within relevance theory is needed. In this paper I want to report one such investigation from Unger (2001).

2. Theories of foreground and background

First, we need to look at the notions of grounding, i.e. foreground and background, in more detail. At least eight approaches to defining the notions foreground and background can be traced in the literature.

- (5) *Approaches to grounding discussed in Unger (2001)*
 1. Foreground = storyline; i.e. events presented in iconic temporal order.
(Labov & Waletzky 1967; Labov 1972)
Advantage: seems to be a testable, objective criterion.
Problems: only adequate for narrative
 2. Foreground = 'what moves the discourse forward'
(Grimes 1975; Longacre 1989; 1990)
Advantage: seems to be generalisable to other discourse types
Problem: vague & intuitive
 3. Foreground = what is PRESENTED AS foreground, i.e. marked as such. (Hooper 1998; Hopper 1979; Reinhart 1984; Longacre 1989;

1990)

Advantage: seems objective, verifiable.

Problem: circular, depends on intuitive notion.

4. Foreground = what is most relevant to the speaker's goal at the current state of the talk-exchange.

(Hopper & Thompson 1980)

Advantage: thoroughly pragmatic, Gricean in spirit,
not tied to discourse types

Problem: relies on undefined notions of 'relevance',
'speaker's goal.'

H & T restrict themselves to narrative nevertheless

5. Grounding as a scalar notion derived from several criteria: there is a continuous scale from foreground to background, not distinct levels.

Fleischmann (1985; 1990)

Advantage: seems empirically well-founded; accounts for
nuances of grounding.

Problems: The parameters are from the above and inherit the
respective weaknesses.

In non-narrative discourse, there are only few and
vague criteria.

6. Foreground & background as pragmatic principles licensing the occurrence of certain semantic values (such as tense, aspect, mode) in clauses.

Hopper 1979; Hopper & Thompson 1980

Advantage: seems founded on many well-evidenced parameters

Problems: justification of this account works only for narratives
there are empirical counter-examples

7. Foreground & background determined by topic-constituting questions
Labov 1972; Klein & von Stutterheim 1987; von Stutterheim 1997;
van Kuppevelt 1995

Advantage: seems to be grounded on widely-felt intuitions

Problems: not applicable to every discourse type

(esp. not to poetry)

does not account for intuitions of graded grounding
values

8. Foreground and background as principles of perception: Gestalt theory
(Reinhart 1984)

Advantage: relates grounding to other psychological factors

Problems: works only for narrative, despite the appearance to

the contrary.
Gestalt theory principles are themselves in need of
explanation.

For reasons of time, I skip the critical discussion of these approaches and concentrate on the exposition of a relevance-theoretic alternative. (For a detailed discussion of these theories, see Unger 2001.) But to give at least one motivation for applying relevance theory to information grounding, let me quote from Hopper & Thompson (1980, 280):

Users of a language are constantly required to design 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 are 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.

This quote seems to suggest that an account of foreground and background should in the end be given in a framework of pragmatics following broadly Gricean lines. Notice that this account relies on undefined pragmatic notions such 'communicative goals' and 'relevance'. A clear account of the notion of 'relevance' would be crucial here, since 'foreground' is linked to that information which is 'more relevant than others' in the sense of contributing more crucially to the speaker's goal. Notice further that the notions of 'foreground' and 'relevance' are closely linked, if not equated. This in turn suggests that the notion of grounding may actually be subsumed under that of relevance. To see where this direction might lead let me now turn to the theory of relevance of Sperber & Wilson (1995), which gives a cognitive substance to the notion of relevance.

3. Complex stimuli and expectations of relevance

A central claim of relevance theory is that ostensive stimuli raise certain expectations

of relevance in the audience. These relevance expectations drive the familiar relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure:

- (6) a. Access the most easily accessible interpretation
- b. Check whether it satisfies the audience's expectations of relevance. If yes, stop. If no, continue with the next interpretation in order of accessibility.

As is well known, these expectations of relevance may be more or less specific, as in the case of indirect answers:

- (7) A: How did your trip to Võru go?
 B: The children enjoyed it very much.

A's question makes it manifest, that B must have intended his/her utterance to be relevant by achieving cognitive effects of the type *The trip went well/not so well/bad*.

Consider now the following example:

- (8) A: What were Chomsky's arguments for the claim that D-structure doesn't exist?
 B: Well, first...

A's question makes it manifest that B's answer will most likely extend over many utterances. In other words: at the point where B begins the answer, the expectations of relevance raised concern among others the complexity of the stimulus which is about to be produced.

Recall that the presumption of optimal relevance is communicated by ostensive stimuli. Ostensive stimuli can differ in terms of complexity: a single gesture or the utterance of a single word such as *Telephone!* may constitute an ostensive stimulus. However, if I want to explain to my son how to use a certain toy, I may say *This part goes on top of the other one like this* and demonstratively put the parts in place at the same time. This is a more complex stimulus involving verbal and non-verbal parts. Finally, consider the case of a master explaining to his apprentice how to exchange

the shock-absorbers of a car. In this case the complexity is not only that the stimulus contains verbal and non-verbal aspects, but also that from the beginning it is clear that it will extend over quite some time. My proposal is to view texts as complex ostensive stimuli in this sense.

Expectations of relevance are raised by ostensive stimuli as a whole. For ostensive stimuli that means that no single part of the stimulus has to meet strong expectations of relevance so long as the whole stimulus does. Applied to texts, this means that utterances which do not achieve a lot of cognitive effects, may be tolerated - so long as they do play a role in establishing the relevance of other parts of the text in an economic way. Furthermore, economy considerations of processing predict that some such low-effect utterances may even be necessary to enhance overall relevance, if placed in the right spot (Blass 1990).

Let us now say that foreground utterances in a text are those which mostly contribute to the recovery of (positive) cognitive effects. Background utterances are those that contribute to overall relevance way by making the recovery of cognitive effects of later utterances easier (e.g. by raising the accessibility of contextual assumptions or raising more determinate expectations of relevance for later utterances). This is a natural extension of Sperber & Wilson's 1995 account of foreground and background implications of sentences. Thus, the notion of grounding is no longer a theoretical primitive but a purely descriptive label for effects of processing a text for relevance.

In this way, relevance theory can account for the first claim of grounding theory given in (4) immediately: ostensive stimuli whose every parts are supposed to achieve lots of cognitive effects are likely to be hard to process, because it is likely that many different contexts will have to be accessed. The use of low-effect utterances at the right time can enhance the effect-effort balance of the whole stimulus.

Notice furthermore that this characterisation of foreground and background is a

continuous one: every utterance can contribute to cognitive effects or to the fine-tuning of relevance expectations in different degrees. This is in line with several points made in the literature to the effect that the foreground-background distinction is most likely not a binary one, (Van Kuppevelt, Longacre, Fleischmann) and may even be a continuous scale (Fleischmann). In this way we can account for differences in 'grounding depth' in examples such as (9):

- (9) Together with my sister-in-law's family we visited a relative in Vöru. It was a rather spontaneous trip. When we arrived there at lunch time, the children immediately played in the garden and ate berries. Then we visited a museum. After that we went to the lake. The children had much fun playing in the water. It was especially nice that the weather had cleared up more and more during the day and got nicer than we expected.

The second sentence seems to be more backgrounded than the first clause of the third sentence (less important). Similarly, the last sentence has more of an auxiliary flavour than the second last one.

4. Explaining the linguistic realisation of foreground and background information

Let us now turn to the question whether the suggested relevance-theoretic account of grounding can account for the connection of grounding to linguistic form (claim 2 of grounding theory in (4)).

On the inferential theory of communication as adopted in relevance theory, linguistic form is one piece of the evidence from which the audience is to infer the communicator's informative intention. Linguistic form can in principle contribute this evidence by coding some information. However, linguistic form may also be used to influence the audience's inference processes without encoding information (Wilson & Sperber 1993). Consider (10):

- (10) A: How did your trip to Vöru go?
B: It was a very, very beautiful day.

The repetition of 'very' does not in itself encode 'emphasis' or anything else. However, since the repetition of 'very' increases processing effort, the audience will be caused to look for some further cognitive effects that would offset the processing effort incurred. These can be found by assuming that the speaker wanted to convey his extraordinary satisfaction which he got from this trip (and for which there may be no resources available to encode it). The form of an utterance can interact directly with its pragmatic interpretation, not necessarily through the mediation of a level of coded representations.

Consider now examples (2) and (3). It is mutually manifest that the communicator is recounting something which happened to her in the past. So the audience's expectations of relevance will include the one that the communicator will describe events. Therefore an utterance which describes a past state rather than an event will not be taken to contribute directly to the relevance of the text. This is why the audience will take the last sentence in both examples as 'backgrounded.' But the difference is that in (3) this information is presented in a linguistic form which is standardly used to encode non-event predicates, whereas in (2) the linguistic form of the predicate is neutral with respect to predicate type. In other words: in (3), there are two properties of the utterance which lead the audience to interpret it as contributing to over-all relevance in ways other than achieving cognitive effects of the mainly expected type (past events): first, the semantics of the predicate, and second, the linguistic form of the predicate, and they lead to the same direction.

The following variant of example (3) shows another effect of linguistic form to grounding:

- (11) Together with my sister-in-law's family we visited a relative in Võru. When we arrived there at lunch time, the children immediately played in the garden and ate berries. Having been to a museum we realised that we had to do something more interesting for the children. We went to the lake. The children had much fun playing in the water.

In this case the event '*Our going to a museum*' might easily be taken as a main event, but it is intended not to be construed in this way. This 'backgrounding' effect is achieved by using a linguistic form which does not normally encode event-type predicates. Thus, the linguistic form points the audience in a different direction from what might be expected from the semantic content alone. Assuming that not all events in a narrative are likely to be highly foregrounded (an assumption that follows from the communicative principle of relevance), the audience can more easily process this utterance in the intended way than had this pointer not been used. Notice that the linguistic form of the verb does not achieve this interpretive effect by means of coding; it encodes only aspectual information. However, in a context where manifest expectations of relevance (recounting past events) highlight the importance of predicate-type or aspectual information for processing, linguistic forms relating to these features may be exploited by the communicator to help the audience finding the intended path of interpretation.

In other texts where the manifest expectations don't relate to the narration of past events, things will be different. When I am explaining relevance theory to an audience which is new to this theory, then the relative 'importance' of the utterances I use is not connected to predicate type or the like. Moreover, I can not expect my audience to reliably distinguish between main points and auxiliary assumptions. I will have to use more explicit pointers such as parenthetical comments: *X - and this is important - Y*. Or I can use a blackboard and point to items written on the blackboard while talking. In other words: just as features of linguistic form can be exploited to guide the audience to the intended interpretation with regard to the way the utterance is to contribute to the overall relevance of the text, so can be any other type of feature. Precisely which means are available and appropriate in a given instance of communication will depend on the kind of relevance expectations which are raised in it. While grounding is not encoded in language, linguistic forms may be exploited in various ways to aid the audience in the interpretation process. The variety of effects

on interpretation achieved in this way - and the means available - are far greater than the coding resources of natural languages allow.

This thoroughly inferential account of grounding indications has interesting parallels with Gumperz' (1992) account of 'contextualisation cues.' According to Gumperz (1992:232), these are verbal or non verbal signals which do not encode meaning, but point the hearer to a certain interpretation in context of what has been said. A characteristic effect achieved by these cues is the 'foregrounding or backgrounding of items of information'. He also notices that '[f]oregrounding processes, moreover, do not rest on any one single cue.' These cues may be linguistic or non-linguistic. (Basso (1992) illustrates some of the varieties of 'contextualization cues' available in narrative.) However, Gumperz' account lacks an explanatory theory of communication which could explain why certain cues achieve the effects they do. It seems that relevance theory can provide a bridge between theoretically oriented research on communication and certain strands in the ethnomethodological tradition.

5. Beyond 'background' and 'foreground': a literary example

Finally, let us consider a literary example where background information causes interesting effects. The example comes from the short story *Saunalaupäev* ('A sauna day') by the Estonian writer Mati Unt. Throughout the text, a contrast is built up between the quietness of nature and the noise of the men. This is achieved by the following means:

1. Utterances describing the scenery such as sentence 9 (line 10-11): 'The birch tree under which they sat was very high and with the arrival of dusk it's rustling became (stopped) quiet.'
Other utterances also describe quietness and use this word: 7th and 6th sentences from the end: line 50. *Oli täesti vaikne*. 'It was completely quiet.. 'Only the birch rustled high up in the darkness.'
2. By describing a rural scenery with indications that it took place on a nice Saturday in early-mid August ('As it stroke ten a clock and the sky turned dark read, ...' line 15). There is a lot of contextual knowledge which the reader must bring to bear on this text.

3. By describing a scenery which is very quiet: Tiina and narrator eating berries from the bushes. Here, the narrator talks 'very quietly'. Lines 20-25.

All these indications are woven into various places in the text. They cause the reader also to notice that the behaviour of the men is often described with specialised terms for noisy actions (*möirgama* 'bark'; *lõugama* 'shout loudly').

Notice that these descriptions of quietness are elements which would traditionally be called 'background' utterances. But notice further it is precisely these background utterances which cause the reader to realise that the text is more than the account of a funny event: that there is a 'literary flavour' to it. We can account for this as follows: the persistent use of utterances which give access to assumptions about the quietness of nature raises expectations that the text will yield lots of cognitive effects having to do with quietness. Since many of the contextual assumptions are made weakly manifest, a lot of the expected cognitive effects will be made weakly manifest as well. Still, a wide range of these can be found and yielding further effects when contrasted with these expressions that talk of the noisyness of the men - encouraging the reader to explore tenets of the behaviour of the men which contrast with the quietness of nature, and how these tenets may characterise real life rather than fiction. Thus the reader can derive a wide range of weakly communicated assumptions, encouraged in particular by the ever repeated description of quiet scenery. In other words: the 'background' material in this short story is actually essential to the literary interpretation of this text.

At this point the question arises whether talking of 'background' and 'foreground' in the sense of information 'more or less relevant or central to the speaker's goals' (such as in the quote from Hopper & Thompson above) makes sense at all. The relevance-theoretic explanation of these phenomena, on the other hand, is not concerned with inherent information status properties of utterances at all; rather, it relates these

phenomena to the way texts are processed for relevance and therefore does not give rise to these difficulties. It sheds light on the fact that so-called 'background' utterances may indeed be central to the rhetoric (or literary) effects of texts: by causing readers to expect relevance in virtue of a large range of weakly communicated effects. In this way, these rhetoric effects are not something that arise as a special property of literary texts, but rather something that is to be expected by the way communication works.

6. Concluding remarks

In this paper I have argued that grounding effects in discourse can be accounted for by the way in which ostensive stimuli are processed over time in the search for relevance. In ostensive stimuli, some parts (utterances) may contribute to over-all relevance by yielding cognitive effects which satisfy the expectations of relevance raised by the whole stimulus; others may modify such expectations and make the derivation of cognitive effects easier. To the extent that utterances contribute to the overall relevance of the stimulus in the former way, they are said to convey foreground information. Since grounding is a derivative notion, and a purely processing-based (functional) one, it is not encoded in language. However, various linguistic and non-linguistic means may be used to guide the hearer's path in utterance interpretation in subtle ways.

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Mati Unt (b. 1944): *Saunalaupäev*. Quoted from Moseley, Christopher 1994: *Colloquial Estonian. A complete language course*. London: Routledge. 151-153. (Working translation: Christoph and Külvi Unger)

Tõnu was indeed a very corpulent man. I was about nine years old and believed in my children's reckoning that he was indeed the most corpulent man in the world. I thought that the measure string would hardly reach around his waist. The men sat under a big birch tree and drank wine in honour of a miner's day. None of them were miners, but a day off is a day off. The neighbour's girl Tiina ran around, she didn't drink yet, she was still young, as young as I was. Of Tiina it was usually said that she were my bride. Now my talk started to be about Tiina, but it was meant to be about Tõnu. Right now, Tõnu, too, was sitting under the birch tree and father said that we will go into the sauna soon. The birch tree under which they sat was very high and with the arrival of dusk it's rustling became (stopped) quiet. Neighbour's Ivi, Tiina's older sister, called the cow home and Totsi roared back from the brushwood, but it still didn't come. Tõnu and the other men drank their wine and roared just as if neighbour's Ivi had called them. Tiina stroked Tommi's head. Tommi was our dog. Tiina stroked and Tommi didn't bite her or growled, he was an old dog, and died indeed a year later in the stable, but I didn't know that, and looked at Tiina and Tommi. As it stroke ten a clock and the sky turned dark read, Tõnu stood up and said that now we'll go to the sauna. Tiina stopped stroking Tommi, but mother told us to let the men go first. Tiina continued stroking Tommi until Tõnu pulled his trousers high up his belly and started to go. Our sauna was at the bottom of a high hill, and this hill was very steep. I also wanted to go, but mother advised not to - they might even trample me. So I didn't go. I watched how the men roll down the hill. Then mother said 'go and offer Tiina some currants.' The bushes were already read from berries and the time of the jay has not yet come. But we have already had lots of ghosts. [I.e. the children had already eaten many berries secretly] We ate those berries and Tiina's mouth was read from their juice. The cheeks also, by the way. I said very quietly: 'Your mouth is read.' She wiped it with her arm and continued eating. There between the bushes it was dim and warm. The sky still glowed from the direction of the park. There in the park were many burned German cars. Suddenly there sounded from the yard a terrible roaring. Quickly we left the garden and looked down the hill to the sauna. The men revolted in front of the sauna door, some were completely naked, and father shouted: 'Look that devil's barrel!' Then we understood that fat Tõnu couldn't get up the hill any more. Kravtshenko and Blumberg's son pushed from behind, father pulled from the front and Tõnu himself struggled, but it didn't help any. About a minute later Tõnu sat down on the fence and wiped away the sweat. 'The sauna steam was nice, but now I can't get up the hill any more,' he said. Then he fell down, and the fence with him. The men were very unhappy and didn't know what to do with Tõnu. Blumberg's son said: 'Calmness - life!' [Or: 'calmness is life!'] This is what the Forestbrethren used to say when they started their journey with the milk they stole from the Aravu dairy. Now Blumberg's son repeated this saying. He has never been a Forestbrother. It got completely dark, there was no moon, just stars, and Kravtshenko shouted over to the house that the housewife should bring a lantern. Mother came indeed at that moment outside with a lantern and laughed at Tõnu's mishap. Then she brought the light down and Tõnu realised that. He said: 'Excuse me, but I am naked.' At the same time I saw that Tiina was still standing there, and I thought that she might feel cold, because at that time mist was already going up from the river. But see, I didn't do anything, I could only think, because Kravtshenko was now demanding a string. With mother we took a string from the stable wall and brought it down. Tõnu was now much less aroused. He spoke again indecent words, but sat still on the ground, almost right on a nettle bush. When one sits down on nettles suddenly, then they burn. But when one sits down slowly then it might be that they don't burn. Father took the string and they bound it around Tõnu's belly. In doing so, Blumberg's son had to lift Tõnu up a little. And then came a violent pull. Tõnu puffed hard and said that he had a tickle. But the men pulled like the boatmen on the Volga, or like those who on one or another picture pull radish or beet out of the ground. Kravtshenko and Blumberg's son pushed from behind, we pulled from the front with the whole family. It took a whole ten minutes, then the man was up. He himself said that he surely couldn't do this every day, that would tire him out. A foreign boy had come there in the meantime, and he joined in to say that surely not every day is Saturday. With that, all became awfully quiet. Neighbour's Ivi came and mother went with the women into the sauna. Tiina also went. Tommi came to me and licked my hand. It was completely quiet. Only the birch rustled high up in the darkness. The foreign boy stood under the birch. He had a strange look on his face.