

FOREGROUNDING DEVICES
AND THEIR FUNCTIONS IN ARABIC AND ENGLISH
WRITTEN DISCOURSES

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1. Introduction

The syntactic, semantic and phonological systems of a language determine the range of structural options from which any language user can choose in order to convey what he wants to say in the most effective manner. The choice of one construction rather than another is usually determined by pragmatic factors related to the participants involved, degree of formality, topic, speaker's intentions and other contextual considerations.

In order to indicate the relative salience of a piece of information encoded in a constituent of a sentence, a writer may use an appropriate construction from those available in the language he is using such as clefting, pseudo-clefting, passivization, left-dislocation, or right dislocation. These are just examples of the various syntactic processes available in language to foreground certain elements in written texts.

Two or more languages may have the some syntactic processes but their rhetorical functions may not necessarily be identical. In other words, there is no absolute cross-linguistic correlation between syntactic structures and the rhetorical functions they serve in various languages.

2. Purpose of study

In this study an attempt is made to identify, compare and contrast the foregrounding devices and their rhetorical functions in both Arabic and English written discourses. Stated more specifically, this paper addresses the following two questions:

1. What syntactic foregrounding devices are available in Arabic and English discourses?

2. What rhetorical functions do these strategies serve in both Arabic and English?

It will also be argued that foregrounding strategies are stylistic choices that are motivated by the text producer's rhetorical motivations, and therefore, they ought to be interpreted as stylistic options rather than just syntactic processes.

3. Definition of foregrounding

The term foregrounding has been tackled by a number of linguists, literary critics and stylisticians. The distinction between foreground and background is the linguistic counterpart of the perceptual distinction between the terms "figure" and "ground" proposed in the Gestalt theory of psychology. The term "foregrounding" is analogous to the figure which causes some parts of a composition to be perceived as standing out as a figure against a less determinate background. A thorough discussion of these terms can be found in Koffka (1935:202) where he used the term "figure" to refer to "center" whereas the term "ground" is related to periphery.

The concept of foregrounding was first postulated by the Russian formalist Jan Mukarovsky in the 1930s in his attempt to identify the relationship between standard language and poetic language. He views foregrounding as "the violation of the norm of the standard, its systematic violation is what makes possible the poetic utilization of language; without this possibly there would be no poetry" (in Freeman 1970:40). According to Mukarovsky, everyday usage automatizes language and makes it conventional and devoid of its aesthetic potential. Therefore, poetry "de-automatizes" or foregrounds language by a number of devices.

Mukarovsky is not the only scholar who defines foregrounding in terms of deviation from the accepted linguistic norms. Roman Jakobson, a prominent figure in structuralism, agrees with Mukarovsky in his view of foregrounding as a matter of deviation from the norm, but he adds another aspect which he considers essential to the concept of foregrounding; it is the notion of parallelism or equivalence (in Peir 1986:9). Leech (1969:57) also defines foregrounding as the "deviation from linguistic or other social accepted norms".

In discussing the concept of theme in English expository discourse, Jones (1977) uses the term prominence to refer to the notion of foregrounding. She distinguishes three types of prominence and uses the terms theme, emphasis and focus to refer to referential prominences, phonological prominence and grammatical prominence respectively. She states that focus or grammatical foregrounding is a kind of "off-norm arrangement of the word or group of words" (Jones 1977:6). For example, in the sentence "Apples I don't like" the word 'apples' is foregrounded because it is not in the normal position of a direct object in English.

Along the same line, Fowler employs the term "defamiliarization" in lieu of foregrounding to refer to the process utilized in breaking the conventional coding of expressions and their meanings. For more details on the notion of foregrounding see (Chapman 1974; Threadgold 1988; Garvin 1964).

It has become evident that foregrounding is a process that involves placing a constituent of a sentence into the focus position so that it becomes more prominent than the other parts of the sentence. This process may be realized by regular operations where no deviation from acceptable norms occurs as it is manifested in the concept of parallelism proposed by Jakobson. Furthermore, foregrounding can be accomplished by linguistic devices that involve deviation from accepted linguistic norms. Deviation in this sense may be identified as the use of marked and less frequent construction rather than the use of unmarked and frequent ones. These devices include, among others, cleft constructions, leftdislocation and fronting.

4. Types of foregrounding

In this section, the major types of foregrounding devices utilized in English discourse are presented with special emphasis on the syntactic devices that involve deviation from accepted linguistic norms. The distinction between foreground and background is linguistically marked across languages. Various devices are available in language to mark foregrounded elements in discourse at the phonological, lexical and grammatical levels.

Phonological foregrounding may be realized by utilizing prosodic features such as intonation, and stress. Lexical foregrounding, on the other hand, can be realized in a number of ways. Traugott and Pratt (1980) mention various devices by means of which lexical foregrounding can be realized. These devices include the use of archaic or rarely used words, pun, homonymy, and the use of old lexical items in a new meaning (Traugott and Pratt 1980:114-116).

Grammatical or syntactic foregrounding can also be achieved in a number of ways. The following are the major syntactic devices that are utilized in foregrounding items in English discourse:

5. Foregrounding devices in English

1. Word order shifts:

In English discourse, word order is a device that is commonly used to bring certain items into the focus position so that they may stand out from the other items. This process involves moving a certain constituent from a certain position to another for the sake of drawing more attention to it. One can readily observe the difference in meaning between these two English sentences:

- (1) a. The man saw the boy with a telescope.
- b. With a telescope, the man saw the boy.

Most English native speakers would interpret the first sentence as ambiguous but not the second. Preposing the prepositional phrase in sentence (1b) disambiguates the sentence on the one hand and lays more emphasis on the prepositional phrase on the other.

In many cases, a shift in the order of words in a sentence may indicate a different

point of emphasis or perspective being adopted by the text producer. For example compare:

- (2) a. The man was driving the car quickly.
 b. The car was being quickly driven.
 c. Quickly, the car was being driven.

In (2a) the sentence is structured from the point of view of the man; it is about what the man was doing. In (2b) the perspective shifts to the car. It is about what was being done with the car. In (2c) the focus is on the manner in which the action was performed. This shows that, through shifting the order of words, a text producer can establish different points of focus or salience.

More striking examples that show the effect of shifting the order of words in sentences can be found in literary discourse. Consider the following example:

- (3) maiden still the morn is; and strange she is, and secret;
 Strange her eyes; her cheeks are cold as cold sea shells.
 (George Meredith, *Love in the Valley*) (in Chapman 1974:51).

This quotation shows how foregrounding can be realized through deviating from normal word order.

2. Passive constructions:

Passivization is another syntactic device that is frequently used in English to mark an item in a sentence as more prominent and salient. Passive sentences can be considered as foregrounding devices in comparison with the syntactically less marked and pragmatically more neutral active constructions. In passive constructions, the object of the transitive verb is moved to the position of the subject and thus it is brought into the focus of attention. Chu (1973:103) investigated the semantic functions of passive constructions in both English and Chinese. He came up with the conclusion that the major function of the English passive is to mark the object of the verb as the topic of the sentence. In his article "Passive in the World's languages", Keenan (1985:243) came to the same conclusion about passive constructions in English. Consider the following examples:

- (3) a. The teacher asked the students a difficult question.
 b. The students were asked a difficult question.

The topic of sentence (3a) is "the teacher" whereas the focus of attention becomes "the students" in sentence (3b). In this function, passive constructions are similar to the process of topicalization in which an element in a sentence is proposed to become its topic. This agrees with what Finegan and Besnier (1989:233) say about the choice of a passive sentence over its active counterpart. They say that this choice is determined by information structure and that agent passives are used "when a noun phrase other than the agent of the sentence is more prominent as given information than the agent itself."

3. Cleft and pseudo cleft sentences:

A cleft sentence is a grammatical device that enables the text producer to highlight a particular element in a sentence. Quirk et al. (1986:89) state that a cleft sentence consists of two major parts: an initial focal element that contains the highlighted or the clefted constituent and a second part which contains the "background structure". In the next example, sentence (4a) is the basic sentence from which the cleft sentence (4b) is derived.

- (4) a. Ahmad saw Ali at the meeting.
 b. It was Ali that Ahmad saw at the meeting.

In sentence (4b) the clefted noun phrase "Ali" represents new information and occupies the focus position or the foreground, and the part of the sentence following "that" represents the background or the given information.

Pseudo-cleft sentences are also grammatical devices available in English to serve almost the same pragmatic function with regard to information structure in sentences. The following sentence (4c) is the pseudo-cleft counterpart of sentence (4a) above:

- (4) c. What Ahmad saw at the meeting was Ali.

The first part of the sentence that precedes the verb to be "was" present the background or given information, whereas, the noun phrase following the verb to be represents new information and occupies the grammatically highlighted position. The differences between clefts and pseudo-clefts have been the focus of several studies. Prince (1978), for example, holds a comparison between Wh-clefts (pseudo-clefts) and It-clefts (clefts) in discourse. He discusses the functions and distributions of these two types of constructions in discourse. He states that Wh-clefts mark the information in the Wh-clause as given information whereas It-clefts mark the information in the that-clause as given.

4. Left-and right-dislocation:

Left dislocation is a movement rule that involves fronting a noun phrase in a sentence. The left-dislocated noun phrase is replaced by an appropriate pronoun. Sentence (5b) which is derived from (5a) contains a left-dislocated noun phrase, whereas (5c) illustrates right-dislocation.

- (5) a. I can't stand dogs.
 b. Dogs, I can't stand them.
 c. I can't stand them, dogs.

Sentence (5b) contains the left-dislocated element "dog" which is placed in the focus position or the center of attention.

Similarly, right-dislocation is a process that moves a noun phrase to the right of the sentence as it can be seen in sentence (5c). The function that right-dislocation serves is almost the same as that of left-dislocation.

5. Fronting (topicalization):

This is a process by means of which an element in a sentence is moved to occupy the topic slot as it can be seen in the following examples:

- (6) a. I like apples very much.
b. Apples I like very much.

Sentence (6b) is derived from (6a) which is grammatically less marked and pragmatically more neutral.

6. Extraposition:

This strategy is similar to the process of right-dislocation in the sense that it involves the postposing of a non-final sentence element to final position where it will be more prominent and more highlighted. The following example illustrates this process:

- (7) a. To study linguistics is not an easy job.
b. It is not an easy job to study linguistics.

In sentence (7b) the clausal subject of (7a) is postposed and removed to the end of the sentence. This position is what Quirk et al. (1976:1357) call the principle of "end-focus". In such a position, the postposed subject becomes more salient.

If we examine the above-mentioned grammatical devices, we can easily notice that each one of them serves one or more rhetorical functions. The selection of one strategy rather than another is primarily determined by what the text producer wants to convey to his audience and which element in the sentence he wants to place in the focus position.

6. *Foregrounding devices in Arabic*

The notion of foregrounding has not been given proper attention in Arabic grammar. However, one can find foregrounding devices discussed sporadically as syntactic processes in grammar books. In this section, these devices will be classified into two major categories as follows:

1. Operations that involve moving elements within the sentence:

Under this type, I will discuss the types of movement operations that involve shifting the position of a certain constituent to another position other than the initial. These strategies involve moving elements such as the following:

A. Moving the grammatical object in a sentence to a slot that immediately follows the verb and precedes the subject:

This means that a sentence of the VSO type becomes VOS. The following examples illustrate this point:

- (8) a. kataba Muhammadun risaalatan.
wrote Muhammad a letter

- b. kataba risaalatan Muhammadun.
wrote a letter Muhammad

Sentence (8a) is less marked grammatically and more neutral pragmatically than sentence (8b) in which the object has been moved to occupy a slot that immediately follows the verb of the sentence. In this new position the direct object becomes more salient and prominent. In his book "Al-Khasais" Ibn Jinni, states that the grammatical object in Arabic sentences is of paramount importance. This importance is manifested in two aspects. The first is proposing the object whereas the second lies in the deletion of the agent and the raising of the object to occupy the position of the subject as it is the case in passive constructions (cf. Hussein 1984:101-110).

B. Moving the predicate of the verb "Kaana" and its sisters:

The element occupying the predicate slot in a sentence introduced by "kaana" may be fronted to a position that immediately follows "kaana". This change can be manifested as follows:

kaana subj. pred. ----- kaana pred. subj.

The following examples clarify this point:

- (9) a. kaana Ahmadun musaafirun.
was Ahmad away
'Ahmad was away.'
- b. kaana musaafirun Ahmad.
was away Ahmad
'Ahmad was away.'

Sentence (9b) represents the marked word order pattern. This sentence is not only grammatically more marked but also pragmatically. Hussein (1984:101-110) states that this type of proposing lays more emphasis on the preposed element and makes it more focal in the sentence.

In the two above-mentioned operations, one can clearly notice that the grammatical status of the moved element whether it is an object or a predicate of "kaana" remains the same as it was before the movement process. This is actually a proof that this movement process does not serve any syntactic purpose since the grammatical functions of the moved elements remain unchanged. However, this movement operation is rhetorically motivated. That is to say, the syntactic process serves a rhetorical function that the text producer wants to achieve.

C. Passive constructions:

The word order in active sentences in Arabic is usually VSO. When a sentence of this word order is changed into the passive, the subject is deleted and the object assumes its position and case marking as it can be observed in these examples:

- (10) a. ʔakala ʔal waladu ʔaltuffaaʔnata.
ate the boy the apple-acc.
'The boy ate the apple.'
b. ʔukilat al-tuffaaʔnata
was eaten the apple-nom.
'The apple was eaten.'

Sentence (10b) is the passive counterpart of (10a) This sentence is structure from the point of view of what happened to the apple, whereas the active sentence is structured from the point of view of what the boy did.

2. Fronting or Topicalization:

This is a process that involves moving an element in a sentence to the initial position, and it includes the following types:

A. Fronting the grammatical object:

This process can be of two types. The first one involves fronting the object with its case marker i.e. the accusative case; as it can be seen in these examples:

- (11) a. ɖaraba Sami al-kurata.
kicked Sami the ball
'Sami kicked the ball.'
b. al-kurata darabaha Sami.
the ball kicked it Sami
'It is the ball that Sami kicked.'

In sentence (11b) the object has been fronted to the initial position with the same case marker it had in sentence (11a) It can also be noticed that the verb in sentence (11b) has a pronoun suffix attached to it. This case of fronting is similar in form and function to left dislocation constructions in English. Since the preposed object maintains its case, this process is not just a syntactic process, but it is rhetorically motivated. It actually particularizes the action to the object not to anything else.

The second process of fronting involves the preposing of the grammatical object to initial position but with a different case marker and without a suffix pronoun attached to the verb.

In his book *Al-Muhtasib*, Ibn Jinni states that the grammatical object can be topicalized with a nominative with a nominative case marker. He considers this topicalization process the strongest form of foregrounding (see Hussein 1984:101-110). Consider the following example:

- (12) a. ɖaraba Zaydun Amran.
beat-past Zaydun Amran (accusative)
'Zayd beat Amr.'

- b. Amrun ɖaraba Zaydun.
Amr-nom beat-past Zayd-nom.
'It is Amr that Zayd beat.'

In sentence (12b) object of (12a) is preposed to initial position but with a nominative case-marker. This foregrounding process has the effect of changing the sentence perspective. Sentence (12a) has an unmarked word order but sentence (12b) is written in the perspective of its new subject which was the object of sentence (12a).

B. Fronting the predicate in equation (nominal) sentences:

In equational Arabic sentences, the subject nominally precedes its predicate. However, in certain grammatically determined cases, the predicate must precede the subject (see Jurjani 1981:72-95; Dahdah 1987:152-8). Fronting the predicate in such cases is syntactically rather than pragmatically motivated. On the other hand, there are situations where fronting the predicate is optional and such a case fronting serves a rhetorical function. Abdul Azis Ateeq (1985:148-159) mentions two functions for the optional fronting of the predicate.

The first function is to the predicate and give it more rhetorical significance, whereas the second function is to show surprise or denial. The following example may illustrate the first function:

- (13) fi ʔaldaari Zaydun.
In the house Zayd
'Zayd is at home.'

In this sentence, the predicate prepositional phrase occupies the topic slot but it still has the grammatical function of predicate. Such cases corroborate the argument that this fronting process primarily serves rhetorical or pragmatic rather than syntactic purposes.

Surprise or denial as functions or fronting predicates may be illustrated in these examples:

- (14) a. ʔaʔanta qaabilun bihaada al-sart?
do you accept with this the condition?
'Do you accept this condition?'
b. ʔaqaabilunʔanta bihaada al-sart?
do accept you with this the condition?
'Do you accept this condition?'

Sentence (14b) is derived from the less grammatically marked and more pragmatically neutral sentence (14a) The optional fronting of the predicate in (14b) expresses the surprise and the denial of the speaker with regard to the action of acceptance.

C. Fronting the predicate of "kaana" and its sisters:

This operation involves the preposing of the predicate to a position that immediately precedes "kaana" itself, i.e.:

kana subj. pred. -----> Pred kaana subj.

Consider these sentences:

(15) a. kaana ?al waladu mari:dan
was the boy-nom. sick-acc.
'The boy was sick.'

b. mari:dan Kaana ?al waladu
sick-acc. was the boy-nom.
'The boy was sick.'

It can be noticed that the fronted predicate maintains its accusative case. This also supports the argument that this syntactic operation serves a rhetorical purpose rather than being just a movement process.

Unlike Arabic, English, in such a case, utilizes other devices such as stress and intonation to draw the receiver's attention to a specific piece of information in a sentence.

D. Fronting adverbials of place, time and manner:

This strategy involves preposing these adverbials without changing their grammatical functions or case markers. The mayor function of this device is the particularization of the fronted adverbial. Consider these examples:

(16) a. kharajtu ?ila ?amali: mubakkiran
went+I to work my early
'I went to my work early.'

b. mubakkiran kharajtu ?ila ?amali:
early went+I to work my
'I went early to work.'

The adverb of manner is fronted in sentence (16b) for the purpose of restricting the manner of leaving to the state of being early.

E. Preposing the agent:

This is another device that involves moving a constituent in a sentence to the initial position for the sake of foregrounding. In this process, the agent which usually follows its verb moved to occupy a position that immediately precedes the verb leaving an empty slot in its place. The rhetorical function that this operation serves is the particularization of the action to only the preposed agent and not to any other one. This process is very common in Quranic verses such as verse 26 of chapter 13. The verse reads:

"Allahu yabsutu ?alrizqa..."

God grants the sustenance.

The topicalization of the word "Allahu" in this verse particularizes or restricts the action of granting sustenance to Allah and only Allah, not to any other power. From a syntactic point of view, the word "Allahu" is no longer analyzed as the grammatical subject but it is the logical agent that occupies the position of the topic.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, the concept of foregrounding has been defined as a process that places a certain element in a sentence into the foreground or the focus position. This function can be realized through various grammatical devices that are not necessarily the same cross-linguistically.

It has been shown that English utilizes certain grammatical devices so as to make an element in a sentence more prominent. These devices, among others, include word order operations that move a particular element from its position to another position other than initial or final positions. These processes include the movement of adverbs and prepositional phrases. In contrast, Arabic has a freer word order that enables users of Arabic to have more freedom in moving constituents from their positions to other places. This freedom in moving constituents in Arabic sentences is due to the fact that Arabic, unlike English, is an inflectional language. This means that the grammatical function of any moved element remains intact as long as this element maintains its inflection that marks its case. Therefore, movement rules in Arabic are less restricted than they are in English.

The foregrounding devices that move constituents to initial positions are more frequent in Arabic than in English. The only devices that front elements to initial position in English sentences are fronting or topicalization and passivization. Arabic, on the other hand, has at least five operations that can prepose elements to initial positions. This implies that these devices serve more rhetorical functions in Arabic discourse.

Unlike English which has devices that can postpose certain elements in a sentence to final position (right-dislocation, extraposition), Arabic does not have such strategies. Furthermore, predicates or comments, in semantic terms, can be fronted in Arabic equational sentences or in "kaana" constructions, whereas in English, these strategies do not exist.

The major functions of foregrounding devices are almost similar in Arabic and English discourses. However, since Arabic is an inflectional language and has a freer word order, it utilizes more movement operations that more rhetorical functions.

It can also be validly concluded that all the grammatical devices used in foregrounding certain constituents are pragmatically rather than syntactically motivated. This conclusion indicates that these grammatical devices are stylistic options that text producers employ in encoding and highlighting pieces of information in

their text. Therefore, these devices have to be interpreted not only as syntactic processes, but also as rhetorically motivated operations. Any change in the structure of sentence is bound to imply a change in its meaning, and this is harmonious with what Arab rhetoricians say "extra structure, extra meaning".

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