

FRANK HAKEMULDER

Finding Meaning Through Literature: 'Foregrounding' as an Emergent Effect¹

Introduction

Recently a high school teacher in rural Holland invented a way to get his students to read. This is indeed something newsworthy – one national quality newspaper covered the story in a two-page article (Vinckx 2019). As so many other countries, Holland sees fewer and fewer new or young readers every year. The statistics show that literature is steadily losing ground to Netflix and Instagram (Baron 2015; Wennekers, Huysmans, and De Haan 2018). Contrary to these general trends, this teacher's students turned into fervent readers. His trick is as magical as it is simple: he carefully selects personalized recommendations for his students, telling them "this is just the book for you." It is crucial, he says, that one truly *sees* the pupils and that they *know* they are seen. Consequently, the books he gives them to read pertain to issues that really matter to them in their particular situation and the phase in their lives. The approach earned him – Matijs Lips – the honorary title of "Teacher of the Year." The jury report states that "he brings literature to life" (Vinckx 2019).

This statement seems to imply that the books in the library are just dead objects. It is when readers *do* things with these objects that they become literature. Lips spent the first part of his career reading lifeless book reports, until he discovered that they came straight from the internet. With his personalized approach, though, it all changed. His students interact with the books now. After their reading they are expected to 'give something back' to the books: the books give *them* new words, new insights, and a good time. In return, *they* make a poem about the books, a video report, a rap, or a series of photographs. Whether this approach would have the same effects everywhere remains to be seen, but it does seem likely that reading a book from that perspective – as being meaningful to you as an individual – could lead to greater levels of involvement. In turn, these greater levels of involvement could open up readers' minds further to personal relevance in what they read (cf. Oliver et al. 2017; Kuzmičová and Bálint 2019). However, personal relevance could perhaps also be found in non-literary narratives or self-help books or students might find it in the stories they exchange on Facebook or Instagram. Maybe the 'coming to life of *literature*' should be delimited to those responses elicited by literary aspects of the text. A literary novel may evoke all sorts of responses. But what are the ones that are specific to the genre?

This article presents a model aimed at understanding what happens in the interaction between the reader and those stylistic features of a text that we associate with literature. Central to the model will be the term 'foregrounding.' Considering the steadily declining reading habits, it would be good news if the effects of an individually tailored approach

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in literary education were generalizable. But it would certainly also be desirable if enhancing personal engagement could be reconciled one way or another with the core business of literary education, that is enhancing literary expertise. Potentially, there is a tension between a reader response approach and a more scholarly one. The time spent on a personal response is lost on learning about formal aspects of literature. To overcome this dichotomy, the present contribution will synthesize the ideas about what makes literary reading unique (because of the stylistic aspects) and *hence* valuable (meaningful in a personal way).

To study and effectively apply the power of style, we will need an interdisciplinary approach to foregrounding. That is why the second aim of this article is to show that there are several ways to approach the subject, and that, ideally, none of them should do without the other. What is required is a collaboration between literary studies and the social sciences, in other words, the empirical study of literature.

Textual Foregrounding: Stylistic Distortion

The term 'foregrounding' is associated with a respectable research tradition of studying stylistic features that are considered distinctive for literary texts. Understanding foregrounding brings us closer to understanding 'literariness,' or that which makes literature 'literature.' One definition runs as follows:

Foregrounding is essentially a technique for 'making strange' in language, or to extrapolate from Shklovsky's Russian term *ostranenie*, a method of 'defamiliarisation' in textual composition. [It] refers to a form of textual patterning which is motivated specifically for literary-aesthetic purposes [and] typically involves a stylistic distortion of some sort, either through an aspect of the text which deviates from a linguistic norm or, alternatively, where an aspect of the text is brought to the fore through repetition or parallelism. (Simpson 2004, 50)

Such distortions (deviation and parallelism) are assumed to be dominant in literary discourse, but they may occur in other genres as well (cf. Jakobson's analysis of the campaign slogan "I like Ike"; 1960, 357). It is with such distortions that audiences are informed about more than just the content; they are alerted to the informative intention of the communication (compare Relevance Theory; Sperber and Wilson 1986). It may be, however, that the workings of foregrounding devices are even less exceptional; it could be argued that humans are psychologically hard-wired to be alert to *any* deviation (cf. Boyd 2009). For example, babies are already surprised when their expectations are violated (Haidt 2012, 74). In an attempt at a comprehensive, integral view on foregrounding we will try to see how stylistic distortions are a special case of deviating objects.

To do this, we will first zoom out and start with the psychological premise about perception in general that foregrounding may occur for *any* feature. We will then gradually zoom in again on aesthetic devices in art, music, film, but focusing especially on literary style. This approach is facilitated by the fact that, essentially, foregrounding theory is a psychological theory (cf. Van Peer 1986; Short 1996, 11). The devices through which foregrounding is accomplished are assumed to draw our attention, make

us focus on how the message is formulated rather than just its contents, slow down or obstruct our processing, refresh our perception of the otherwise overfamiliar world around us, and produce aesthetic appreciation. These are of course psychological responses. To accommodate this aspect of the theory, the present article will suggest a processing model, starting with any deviating object and subsequently homing in on aesthetic objects.

The origins of the theory and study are generally located in the work of the Russian Formalists, in particular in that of Victor Shklovsky (2015 [1917]), and later elaborated upon by the Czech Structuralists, notably Jan Mukařovský (1964). It also plays an important role in British stylistics, such as in the work of Short and Leech (e.g. 2013). We do see an earlier interest in this particular aspect of literature, for instance in the thinking of Coleridge and Shelley (Miall and Kuiken 1994). Coleridge admires Wordsworth's poetry, especially his ability "to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances, which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar" (qtd. in Miall and Kuiken 1994, 391). As Shelley defines the effect of poetry, he says it "purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being" (qtd. in Miall and Kuiken 1994, 391). Van Peer et al. (in press) trace the roots of the concepts even further back in history, to Aristotle's emphasis on distinguished language use, that is "everything that deviates from the ordinary modes of speech" (qtd. in Van Peer et al. in press, 1). More recently the term has been used by various theorists in a variety of ways. Through a bird's-eye view, the presentation of the model attempts to bring those various views together.

The theory has a strong basis in the Humanities and developed through an intimate knowledge of literary style. What further adds to the power of the theory is that, among all literary theories, it is the one that is tested most often and that has found considerable corroboration in empirical evidence (see sections 3-5). We will critically evaluate the evidence to see where the model is supported and where it still needs work. While discussing the model, we will not restrict ourselves to literary examples. The relevance of foregrounding theory seems to go beyond literary studies. It plays a role in the study of music (e.g., Huron 2006; Schotanus 2015), visual art (e.g., Krampen 1996; Shklovsky 2015 [1917]) and film (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith 1997; Van den Oever 2009). Therefore, it seems there are good reasons to take a closer look at how aesthetic objects (e.g., some stylistic feature in a film or a novel) are processed, with the ambition to apply the insights not only to literature (as we see in the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature) but also in other domains such as music psychology (e.g., The Society for Music Perception and Cognition), the empirical study of the arts (International Association of Empirical Aesthetics), and media psychology (e.g., Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image).

Backgrounds

We start with the assumption that a deviation can only be a deviation thanks to its relation to a background of normality. In order to bring the various approaches to foregrounding together in one comprehensive framework, we will distinguish four ways in which we can conceptualize such a background. First, an object (i.e., an

element in a text) could be irregular in respect to a norm that is set by society (e.g., breaching moral rules), the world (e.g., violations of what we know about history), the universe (e.g., inanimate objects coming to life), or in other words, the environment in which the object occurs. Second, the background could be the text (e.g., a novel, or a film) in which the objects occur. Third, it could be the medium, for example the language it is rendered in. Or, finally, it could be a group of texts, for instance those that form a genre together, or a corpus of novels that are considered typical for a certain period in literary history, or the stories of a particular author. Approaching foregrounding by emphasizing its dependency on background(s) will hopefully make it clear how empirical studies of literature could add new dimensions to stylistics.

We will take a closer look at each of these four ways to define background. First, there is the deviation from the *environment*, in terms of a violation of reality. It is the first aspect of what Erlich (1973, 281) called *Differenzqualität*. Examples are supernormal objects (cf. Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999; Costa and Corazza 2006; Van Peer 2018) such as the grotesque, the hyperbole in prose and poetry, or anything else from the amoral behavior of a person to a disfigured body. Finally, an object can be placed in an unusual context, that is, in a place where we would not normally encounter it. A classic example is the "Fountain" by Duchamp, a urinal presented on a pedestal in a museum. Here, the object deviates from the norm set in the environment, that is the museum. In all these cases, the foreground-background distinction does not make much sense without the response of real recipients: their reaction, the shock they may feel, finding the deviation striking in some way. In a 21st-century exhibition dedicated to the *objet trouvé*, the Fountain will be less striking than it was in 1917 – except, of course, for visitors unfamiliar with this type of art; in their responses, we have a better chance of seeing a full foregrounding effect emerging.

In the second type of object-background relation, the norm set within the context of a work/text is violated. In this category, we find examples of internal deviation (e.g., Levin 1965), such as irregularities in a rhyme; the tempo in music; or a pattern of symmetrical composed shots (Bordwell 1985, 183). For a meaningful response to foregrounding we obviously need recipients to be aware of the regularities at some level in order for the violation to stand out.

Third, one can consider the object in relation to the background of the *medium*. This is Erlich's second aspect of *Differenzqualität*, and referred to by others as external deviation (e.g., Levin 1965). As mentioned in the introduction, Van Peer argues this aspect of literariness goes back to Aristotle's criterion, formulated in his *Poetics*, stating that the diction of the literary work should be 'distinguished.' It also plays a role in more recent definitions of foregrounding, for instance in Emmott's suggestion (2002, 93) that foregrounding is "stylistically marked." Examples are metaphors that one would not normally use in everyday language. The object can also be an unusual word, such as a low-frequency word (cf. Levin's 1963 'statistical deviation') or previously non-existing words (neologisms). Hence, expressions in which such words occur would deviate from the modal way of expressing things in the context of a certain language. This category also involves all deviations from linguistic norms, such as inversions of word order, or a "selection of an item that is not permitted in the normal range of available choices"

(Short 1996, 12; what Leech 1966 calls paradigmatic foregrounding) and the violation of grammatical rules (cf. Levin 1965, 226). Short (1996) presents a good overview of levels of linguistic deviation: phonetic, graphological, metrical, morphological, syntactic, lexical, discoursal, and pragmatic. The object can also break the rule of presenting or mentioning something only once (Short 1996, 14; see also Leech's [1966] syntagmatic principle). It pertains to the repetition of a selected linguistic element at different points in the linear organization of language, where one would under normal conditions expect a variation in the selection made. In these cases, the objects reveal parallelism which is often presented as a separate category of foregrounding, besides deviation. Here it is defined as a distortion, that is, a more than coincidental (more than normal) similarity. Obviously, readers need to have access to the rules of a language to enable the detection of these kinds of object-background incongruities. For someone who does not read Russian very well, a violation of a grammar rule in a Russian literary story will go by unnoticed.

The fourth and final relation between object and background is where the distortion pertains to a regularity in a group of texts, for instance one that is ruled by the same set of genre conventions. Under this category we find instances where a normal structure or code is violated (Erlich's third aspect of *Differenzqualität*; again, a form of external deviation). Also relevant for this particular way to look at background is Bordwell's (1985, 152) concept of 'prominence' in film studies. Examples are the long takes in *Citizen Kane* that are deviating from classical Hollywood norms of editing (Bordwell 1985, 153). This fourth conceptualization of background can also refer to the 'rules' set by the oeuvre of the authors themselves. Of course, it needs to be a perceived regularity for the development of a meaningful response: someone who has not read anything else by the author will not see the regularity and hence will be oblivious to the irregularity.

Perceived Foregrounding

The previous section made it sufficiently clear that being able to notice deviation requires recipients' awareness of the rule that the object is breaking. In other words, it entails the availability of the norms of the background. If during the reading the deviation is not perceived, there will be no foregrounding (cf. Harash 2019, 'failed foregrounding'). When it is, we may consider using the term 'perceived foregrounding' in order to distinguish it from 'textual foregrounding.' It is perceived by someone as pronounced, dominant, striking, and set against what he/she perceives to be the background (cf. Short 1996, 11). In other words, the deviant becomes 'noticeable' or 'perceptually prominent.' What happens here is suggested by Jakobson's term 'poetic function,' that is, where readers' attention is drawn to the message itself. It is similar to Mukařovský's idea of the 'aesthetic effect,' that is, readers' attention is concentrated on the linguistic sign itself and not on the communicative result. Finally, it bears strong resemblance to Bordwell's concept of 'salience,' 1985, 152; see figure 1).

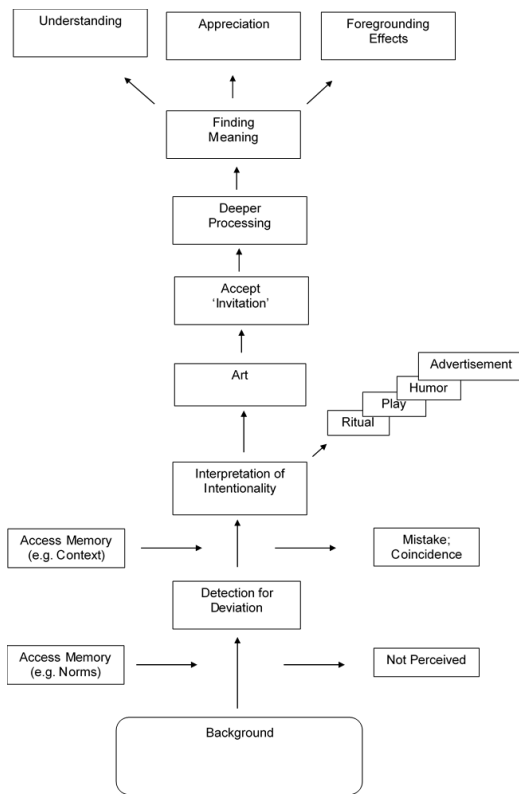


Figure 1: Responses to Deviation: A Model

of the four types of background described above. The degree of availability of background MOPs is variable, and hence also the perceived foregrounding, the experience of that foregrounding, and potential effects after reading. What is deviating for one reader may be normal or even a cliché to another. Beyond the individual level, this aspect of foregrounding theory is assumed to help explain developments in art and literary history. Because audiences and artists alike get used to foregrounding, each new generation will need to find novel ways of expression to maintain the defamiliarization effect of art (see, e.g., Tynyanov 1978; Martindale 1990; Jauss 1995).

Attention to Distortions

Let us now turn to the empirical foundation of the model. There are several studies that concentrate on testing assumptions about the noticeability of textual foregrounding. Ground-breaking in this respect are the studies of Willie Van Peer (1986). He selected several poems, from Wordsworth to e.e. cummings for a number of experiments. In a detailed analysis on the levels of sound, syntax, and semantics, he determined the degree of foregrounding in each line. Foregrounding was defined in terms of both

It is essential for the present argument to note that the distinction is *not* water-tight: to determine textual foregrounding one does need readers too, whether they be students of literature, literary scholars or non-experts – it remains a matter of perception. One could argue, however, that textual foregrounding could also be determined by the use of computer software (e.g., comparing levels of repetition or the occurrence of low-frequency words in various text corpora; cf. corpus stylistics, Mahlberg 2016). Results would pertain to textual foregrounding rather than perceived foregrounding; in other words, the two terms do need to be distinguished.

For human readers to perceive foregrounding, they must have access to their "memory organization packages" (MOPs, Schank 1982) preferably relevant to one

deviation (is the element unexpected in its context?) and parallelism (is the element repeated unusually?). The analysis distinguished both internal and external deviation. Based on the results Van Peer ranked the lines from most to least foregrounded.

In one study, Van Peer tested whether textual foregrounding leads to higher levels of memorability. To do this he had several groups of British students read the poems. One group consisted of students with training in stylistics. Moreover, they were familiar with foregrounding theory. A second group consisted of students who had taken courses in literature. A third group consisted of students with no training in literature. These were mostly students of science. All participants were asked to read the text twice. Then they were given another version of the text in which a number of words had been deleted (a cloze-type test). From all the lines an equal number of words had been removed. The participants were asked to try to recall the word that had been deleted and write it down. For three of the four poems that were used in this study, foregrounded sentences and words were remembered better than non-foregrounded ones. However, in the fourth poem it was the other way around, contrary to the predictions of foregrounding theory. Van Peer concluded that besides foregrounding, there must also be other factors involved causing memorability, like primacy and recency effects.

In another experiment, the participants were asked to read the text and then go back and underline parts they found 'striking.' Also, they were asked to rank the lines according to their importance. Finally, they were asked to imagine they were to teach the poem to a class of seventeen-year-olds and for that purpose rate the lines for 'discussion value.' Results indicated that the foregrounding analyses prior to the experiment reliably predicted participants' scores on all these variables. In other words, Van Peer found confirmation of the hypothesis that textual foregrounding is indeed something that stands out in the perception of readers. What is more, he did not find any systematic differences between the various groups of participants. The effects occurred irrespective of their level of expertise.

Van Peer's conclusions have been confirmed in other research using implicit measures. For instance, Hoorn (1997) used EEG's to investigate responses to literary metaphors. The results indicate a clear cognitive-energetic surprise effect for foregrounding. Similar findings can be found in the work of Jacobs (2015) and Auracher (2007). In short, perceived foregrounding is a real phenomenon. Based on precise stylistic analyses we can estimate levels of textual foregrounding that help us predict with some confidence which part of a text will stand out in the perception of readers.

Pragmatic Communication Situation

Ideally, this is the beginning of a process rather than the end. It can be argued that if some deviation or parallelism is noticed, the recipient then estimates its intention, with the help of his/her knowledge of the pragmatic context – again accessing memory. However, observing a deviation can also be interpreted as a mistake or as coincidence: the novelist simply misspells a word, the speaker makes a grammatical error, or when a poet uses a neologism, it is assumed that he/she does not know it is a non-existing word. A parallelism can be discarded as a coincidence: the reoccurrence of certain phrases in a text could be accidental rather than intentional.

More relevant for our model are those situations in which the pragmatic situation does suggest intentionality to the recipient. But still, a certain context can make an object seem part of a ritual or play rather than art. As Ellen Dissanayake's *What Is Art For?* (1988) argues, 'making special' is a common element in art, ritual, and play. A certain dance in a concert hall can be interpreted as art, while that same dance in a village deep in the Amazon might be seen as a ritual. Recipients' ideas of what the pragmatic context is may also determine that it is an attempt at humor (Wyer and Collins 1992). A sudden awareness of two things being incongruent might lead to it being perceived as humorous, provided the context facilitates such responses. Deviations are also utilized in marketing to draw consumers' attention. Consequently, seeing something in the context of television ads or in a newspaper section marked with the word "Advertisements" may again lead to another type of response (Gregoriou 2017); responses that will probably differ from those in other domains.

Finally, it may be that the pragmatic situation determines that readers see the object as art or literature. For instance, they understand that the author is prestigious, the publisher renowned. Or it says "Novel" on the cover. The art object is presented in a museum, rather than found in a dumpster. An inordinate lengthy silence occurs during the performance of a professional pianist rather than during a piano lesson for a reluctant student. The words of a poem on the page are arranged in a way that facilitates attention. Recipients can of course also reject the invitation to consider the formal aspects as something worth paying attention to (cf. the 'rejection of literary values' subscale of the Literary Response Questionnaire developed by Miall and Kuiken 1995; Harash 2019). In that case, shallow processing will make it unlikely that a foregrounding experience occurs. In sum, as illustrated in figure 1, the interpretation of the pragmatic situation determines what path the processing takes.

Deep Reading

We have arrived at the point marked as "Accept invitation" in the model. It should be stressed that the preceding steps described by the model may take place within milliseconds. It is also likely that these processes occur partly outside readers' consciousness. In any event, getting to this point, the recipient has had access to the relevant background in memory, perceived a deviation thanks to the availability of that background, interpreted the pragmatic situation as an aesthetic context (again accessing the relevant knowledge in memory), and was in the right mindset to accept the perceived 'appeal' or 'invitation.'

Researchers suggest two possible factors that could activate the 'appeal.' One pertains to socialization. Readers may have learned that it is considered worthwhile to pay close attention to the way literary texts are formulated. Relevant in this respect is a study by Zwaan (1993). Participants read texts section by section from a computer screen. Each time they finished a section they could push a button for the next. Thus, their reading pace was measured. All participants read the same texts. However, half of the sample was told they were to read a literary text. The others were informed it was a newspaper article. Of course, Zwaan preselected texts that could pass for either of

these genres. After the experiment participants' recollection of the exact formulation of the texts was assessed. The results showed that the first group, who believed they were reading literary texts, read significantly slower. Also, they scored better on a recall test. The combination of these results suggests that they paid more attention to the surface structure (i.e., the way something is represented). Hence, it could be proposed that this part of the model is ruled by convention; we cannot conclude that it is perceived foregrounding that caused Zwaan's participants to process the text deeper.

Other research suggests that convention can only be part of the explanation. Due to the research design, Zwaan had to select texts that could pass both as an excerpt from a novel and a newspaper clipping. It seems likely this has implications for the level of textual foregrounding in these texts. Results of a study by Miall and Kuiken (1994) did reveal the role of stylistic features in enhancing deeper processing. The researchers systematically coded sections of literary stories for the level of foregrounding ("The Trout" by O'Faolain 1945, "The Wrong House" by Mansfield 1920, and "A Summing Up" by Woolf 1944). When presenting the stories to readers on a computer screen (section by section, like in Zwaan's study), they found that the level of foregrounding correlated positively with reading time. Also, the participants self-reported more affect for sections high in foregrounding as compared to those lower in foregrounding (cf. Kuijpers and Miall 2011; Hakemulder, Fialho and Bal 2016, 28-31). Studies by Sanford and Emmott (e.g., 2012) also consistently show that foregrounding deepens the processing of certain parts of the text, while other parts are read in a much shallower way.

One possible outcome of the deeper processing is an increased appreciation. To examine this aspect of literary reading, some researchers have used the so-called rereading paradigm (Dixon et al. 1993). In this procedure, participants are asked to read a text twice. After their first reading, they rate the text on a number of scales assessing their appreciation. Then they are asked to read the text again, after which they rate it on the same scales as before. It is reasoned that the difference between the two measurements, what they call the depth of appreciation, is indicative of literariness.

Important in the present context is that some studies have directly linked depth of appreciation to foregrounding. Dixon et al. (1993) showed that this effect occurs in a text with a striking deviation in a story by Borges, "Emma Zunz" (1948). The narrator in this story makes clear that he does not really know what goes on in the main character's mind, nor where she is exactly, nor what she is doing. Readers of this story did reveal an increase in appreciation the second time around, but not for a version in which the researchers had neutralized all such instances of this 'ambiguous narrator.' It is important that this effect only occurred for a subsection of the sample, namely for those participants who had indicated that they were frequent readers. Hence, Dixon et al. suggest they found an empirical basis for literariness and defined it as an emergent effect. The assumption underlying this paradigm is that literary effects such as a depth of appreciation typically occur over time:

[C]haracteristic of literary effects is that they emerge over time. In other words, the hallmark of at least some literary effects is that they do not occur spontaneously on the first casual reading of the text, but are generated only later through study and reflection. [...] We refer to effects that are produced later, after the initial reading, as emergent

effects. Although all emergent effects are not literary effects and all literary effects are not emergent effects, our position is that the two tend to go together: Most emergent effects are literary and vice versa. (1993, 14)

Reflection, study, but also simply rereading a literary text could lead to new insights, for instance because cognitive resources were dedicated to understanding the story the first time, and are freed the second because the plot is already clear, and can now be allocated to formal aspects (Hakemulder 2008). This could lead to this increased appreciation. 'Literariness' *emerges* through an interaction between texts with certain stylistic deviations for a population of readers who have access to the relevant background.

Similar effects were found by Hakemulder (2004) using the poem "The Old Bridge" by Nabokov (1973). The researcher produced a version low in foregrounding. For example, "One night between sunset and river/On the old bridge we stood, you and I/" becomes "One night, around sunset, /We stood on the old bridge." In the experiment, participants read, evaluated, reread and reevaluated either the original or the manipulated version. An increase in appreciation was found for the original, but not for the version in which all unusual aspects had been neutralized (see also Van Peer et al. 2007). The effect was also found for re-screening movies. In a study by Hakemulder (2007), adaptations of Shakespeare plays were used. Participants either saw a standard production (e.g., the BBC's *The Tempest*, Gorrie 1980) or one with a high amount of deviation (Greenaway's 1991 *Prospero's Books*). Here too, an increase in appreciation was found from first to second screening of a scene, and only for the deviating productions.

It seems that the rereading paradigm holds some promises for the investigation of foregrounding experiences. It should be noted however that recent attempts to replicate these findings led to a different interpretation. Kuijpers and Hakemulder (2018) ran three rereading experiments, with one closely following the procedure of Dixon and colleagues. They examined the relationship between literariness, perceived comprehension, appreciation, and the mediating reading experience. The data revealed that appreciation was mainly related to an increase in perceived comprehension, independent of the level of literariness (see also Van Peer and Chesnokova 2018, who could not replicate the earlier findings either). Considering the mixed results of this line of research, it seems that more studies are needed to investigate when depth of appreciation *is* caused by foregrounding and when it is 'merely' an increase in comprehension from the repeated reading. Also, in these quantitative studies, it often remains unclear what role foregrounding plays in readers' personal experience of the narrative.

Foregrounding Experience

In the model, it is assumed that the search for meaning is integral to the processing of foregrounding. Remember that the introduction suggested that aspects of literary style can evoke personal resonance. To learn more in-depth about this aspect of the text-reader interaction Koopman (2016) conducted a qualitative study. She asked her participants to keep a reading diary while reading a novel, either Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), or Rebecca Hunt's *Mr Chartwell* (2010). In her analyses of the data,

Koopman showed that an interplay between stylistic features and personal experiences caused a dynamic of under-distancing (i.e., the narrative coming too close), and over-distancing (i.e., closing an emotional connection with the story). She also demonstrated how a literary device played a dominant role in participants' understanding of depression (i.e., a black dog as a symbol of depression in *Mr Chartwell*).

These findings were one of the incentives for an examination of the scope of how deviations are experienced, again using a qualitative approach. Bálint et al. (2016) conducted interviews with a number of participants. The theme of the interviews was self-selected books and films in which participants had had deeply absorbing experiences. For this particular study, the researchers concentrated on those places in the protocols where participants mentioned having noticed something striking or strange. The selection was based on explicit indications of deviation, such as, "not typical," "unique," "new," "weird," and "strange." For example, one participant says "I had never read anything quite that detailed about that type of situation before" (Bálint et al. 2016, 184). It was further examined how they labelled the deviation, and how they dealt with it. One major advantage of qualitative approaches is that one may come to new insights about a phenomenon. In this study, it was the wide range of perceived foregrounding features that triggered a foregrounding experience. Second, it became clear that some of these experiences were deeply absorbing: rather than ruining the immersion, participants reported just a brief break in the flow, followed by an even deeper investment in the text.

Let us take a look at the range of perceived-foregrounding types and the way recipients experienced them. Least surprising is maybe the category in which readers noticed a 'striking novelty' in the language. It closely resembles what classic foregrounding theory deals with. The typical experience was that of surprise and amazement. For instance, one participant, speaking about a film, *Scott Pilgrim vs the World* (Edgar Wright, 2010) said that the movie spoke to him in a different way, "unlike pretty much anything else," that it "tapped into me in a different way, it accessed a different part of my brain [...] it catches you off guard" (Bálint et al. 2016, 186).

A second profile of experiences associated with a particular form of perceived foregrounding pertains to moments in which participants ran into a deviation they labelled as an ambiguity. Such instances were seen as something that urged them to disambiguate the ambiguity. It required them, they sensed, to put in extra effort and focus their attention, leading to emotional insights, and prolonged mental connection with the narratives. One participant said about a book, *Canada* (Richard Ford, 2012) that because of some unexpected and unexplainable act of a character, it was "really difficult to be distracted," and that he had "a physical feeling of needing to be absolutely sure that I've read every word" (Bálint et al. 2016, 187).

A third type of deviation that the participants noticed were instances in which something in the text was seen as somehow symbolic. This stimulated them to interpret the symbol, often again leading to some emotional insight and self-reflection. A participant noticed a deviation in *25th Hour* (Spike Lee, 2002) as suddenly only the ambient sounds are heard, and not the voices of the characters: "[I]t makes you think that the rest of the world is quiet [...]. [I]t's like you have an insight, it's like a

revelation that everything goes on despite personal tragedies the rest goes on" (Bálint et al. 2016, 189).

A fourth type of perceived deviation is closely related to Iser's (1970) concept of the gap (*Leerstelle*). Participants say they find the narratives at these points "impressionistic," "half-described," and "lack[ing] of details" (Bálint et al. 2016, 190). The deviation is experienced here as a blank that has to be filled in, through the use of one's imagination. The experience is characterized by feelings of appreciation and deeper levels of absorption.

A fifth type of deviation seems associated with the Russian Formalist notion of obstruction (e.g., Shklovsky 1982): the text feature is seen as something that hinders the reception process. It leads to frustration. Participants report that they feel the urge to adapt their reading and for this, they need to put in extra effort. For example, one participant says about the lack of punctuation in *Blindness* (Saramago, 1997) how it is "a bit hard to read and so it takes a while to sort of get into the rhythm of the story and understand how he writes" (Bálint et al. 2016, 193).

A sixth profile of responses pertained to those instances in the text where readers experienced the deviation as an intense absorption, accompanied by a sense of lacking agency, and attempts to down-regulate the intensity of the experience. About *Austerlitz* (Sebald 2001) one of the participants says that "the story [...] flows and flows and flows [...] and it's very difficult to put down [...] I was slowing myself down a lot from finishing the book [...]. It doesn't feel like writing, it feels like someone telling a story" (Bálint et al. 2016, 193).

The seventh and final form of perceived foregrounding pertains to a force in the text that pushes the readers toward an engagement with a character, an involvement that is experienced as unpleasant or conflicting. Reporting on her experience of *The Ministry of Pain* (Dubravka Ugresic, 2006), one participant says, "I'd never read in such detail about somebody being attacked." And that it was a bit like "when you are scared you sort of curl up to protect yourself" (Bálint et al. 2016, 195).

Qualitative research can help to better understand certain phenomena. They do not allow generalizations though. More research is needed to explore whether there are more of such foregrounding experience profiles apart from the seven uncovered by Bálint et al. We do not know how often these profiles occur, either.

Foregrounding Effects

Effects may overlap with experience. It is hard to determine where the one stops and the other starts. However, for the present model, we will define effects as more or less permanent changes in the readers (excluding feelings of pleasure and appreciation right after reading). These may include changes in perception, in readers' schemata that are challenged by what they have read and that may undergo (lasting) modifications (see discussion in Jeffries 2001 and Semino 2001).

Not much is known about this yet. One attempt is that of Schrijvers (2019), who showed an effect of literary education on changes in self and other perception. A second example is that of Koek et al. (2019), whose results indicated a potential effect of

literary education on critical thinking skills. Both studies will help us answer the question of whether personal relevance can be reconcilable with the literary aspects of literary education.

Schrijvers (2019) found that students (average age sixteen) report changes in their insights into human nature. These include a change in understanding oneself, of understanding fictional characters, and of other people. The purpose of her studies was to see whether such effects can be strengthened. For this she conducted a literature review, evaluating intervention studies aimed at fostering students' insight into human nature. Based on the findings she formulated design principles that could help accomplish this aim in her own experiments. These principles were: first, select a text that is thematically relevant to the effects on self-other perception, i.e., it must pertain to social-moral themes; second, have students involved in a task activating personal experiences with the topic before reading, and write down or reflect on their reading experiences directly after reading; third, have students exchange experiences through dialogue with other readers. The intervention that was developed and tested was also aimed at an awareness of striking words, phrases or sentences, labeled by Schrijvers as 'aesthetic awareness,' with 'striking' coming close to our understanding of perceived foregrounding, and potentially leading to foregrounding experiences.

The results showed that the intervention did indeed have the predicted effects on insights into human nature. Important here is that these effects co-occurred with a significant effect on aesthetic awareness, and in addition to that, on scales assessing autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which can be interpreted as indicators for students' internal motivation for literary education.

Koek et al. (2019) explored the relation between skills developed in literary education and critical thinking. They argue that aspects such as reconsidering the familiar, the slowing down of thinking, and postponing one's judgement are prerequisites for critical thinking. Literary education typically stimulates pupils to question habitual worldviews and stereotypes (cf. defamiliarization, Miall 2006, 'dishabituation'). Also, learning activities are often aimed at refamiliarization, that is the attempts to come to a new and coherent insight about the significance of the foregrounded feature (Fialho 2007). On the basis of these and other similarities between critical thinking and literary reading, Koek et al. (2019) developed a curriculum that utilizes these similarities, and aimed at enhancing critical literary understanding, that is, "understanding the literary text in a reconstructive, de-automatized manner" (1). Students were stimulated to inhibit automatic processing of the texts, to attempt to reconstruct the meaning, and to engage in point-driven reading (cf. Vipond and Hunt 1984). In a trial of the curriculum, Koek et al. (2019) established that foregrounding did indeed play a role in students' responses, especially for those students who showed significant growth in critical thinking skills. For those who did not, they noted a resistance against defamiliarization.

One of the problems we have here is that we can see that reading literary texts has an effect on readers, for instance on their critical thinking, but that we cannot say whether this was actually due to the literariness of the texts, let alone whether it was foregrounding in particular. Schrijvers (2019) did combine learning about self and others with the literary aims of the curriculum; Koek et al. (2019) did make use of the

overlap between critical thinking and literary reading (focusing students on aspects of foregrounding). But because no comparison was made to a curriculum that dealt with low-foregrounded or non-literary texts, we cannot say for certain that it was the foregrounding experience that caused the effects; we can only say that they co-occurred.

One attempt to come closer to establishing such a causal relationship was undertaken by Koopman (2016). Her studies were aimed at examining whether literary texts can help readers to cope with suffering. She reasoned that foregrounding may play an important role in this, helping to reflect on the familiar in a different way (i.e., defamiliarization). Prompting aesthetic feelings would provide a space, the stillness, to reflect on the story's content (Hakemulder 2019; Koopman and Hakemulder 2015).

Participants in one of her studies were randomly assigned to read one of three versions of an excerpt from Anna Enquist's literary novel *Contrapunt* (2008). In her analysis of the story, she located instances of semantic, phonetic and grammatical foregrounding (cf. Miall and Kuiken 1994). Manipulating the text, she removed all instances of semantic foregrounding for one of the groups. For a second group semantic, phonetic and grammatical foregrounding were neutralized. A third group read the original text. Thus, "juicy meadows," for example, becomes "lush meadows," "the cold child" was transposed to "the dead child," and "Taking possession of the cemetery as an outside living room" was reduced to "She would go to the cemetery very frequently" (185). After reading the text, participants filled out a number of questionnaires. One of these questionnaires assessed 'empathic understanding,' that is, the degree to which they showed a felt understanding of what people in a similar situation like that of the character go through. Also, they were asked to underline those sentences in the text that evoked thoughts and feelings. Later they were asked to report which thoughts and feelings these had been. The results showed that the version with the highest level of foregrounding produced the highest level of empathic understanding. Also, analyzing the open responses, Koopman found that this version elicited the highest level of mixed emotions. Such bittersweet reactions are indicative of experiencing meaningfulness (cf., eudaimonic experiences, Bartsch et al. 2014). It seems plausible that these mixed emotional experiences explain the high level of empathic experience, Koopman argues, because "readers may have gotten a fuller sense of the experience of grief" (2016, 335). Although no effects were found on an implicit measure for empathy (donating to a fund for people like the main character), it does seem likely that Koopman's results suggest a direct relation between foregrounding and effect. It was the text version with the highest level of foregrounding that had the strongest impact on empathic understanding, independent of personal differences in for instance gender and trait empathy. So, is there indeed something in the way stories are told? Does style matter? Does it scaffold the search for meaning and would that indeed enhance involvement and motivation?

Conclusion

Foregrounding refers to devices that are typically dominant in literature. Literary scholarship aims at pin-pointing these in the text. However, if we are really curious

about how these devices function, we need to step out of the text and see how readers interact with them. It is here where the richness of literature becomes plentiful. In the field of the empirical studies of literature, as represented in the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature, foregrounding is one of the most fruitful domains of research. It seems likely that this is partly due to its unambiguous and testable predictions, but probably also because the issues involved are close to the heart of what we think literature is about. Thus, it is a good place to meet up for interdisciplinary collaboration. Results of the empirical study of foregrounding suggest that literature should be defined as a process, something that emerges in that interaction between text and reader (cf. Dixon et al. 1993), being dependent therefore on those devices, but also on readers: they need to have access to the right background in order to perceive that something is foregrounded. And from there on, literature comes to life.

The stages of the processing of foregrounding have already been the subject of quite some empirical work. This does not mean we can rest on our laurels. Many of the findings require further investigation. As with so many scientific disciplines, we have seen above how the empirical study of literature also has to find a way to cope with the recent calls for replication (cf. Kahneman 2014). For example, the studies pertaining to rereading revealed mixed results. Also, it is not clear whether reading experience plays a role; in some studies, it does (e.g., Dixon et al. 1993), in others, it does not (e.g., Van Peer 1986). One possible strand of future collaboration between literary scholarship and psychology could combine on the one hand careful analyses of texts, and on the other hand text manipulation, the rereading method, and eye-tracking studies (e.g., Harash 2019). Such efforts would uncover the conditions under which the emergent effects occur. Also, one should consider implications for curricula at various levels of education. We have seen examples of how the two aims of literary education discussed in the introduction (i.e., personal resonance and literary awareness) can be reconciled and can even supplement and reinforce each other. Given the fundamental role for background access in figure 1, it may become clear how essential it is that students (as all readers) are given the opportunity to get this access.

Another possible line of future work could be developed in collaborations between researchers in media psychology and media studies. Much of the work in the former that is conducted on eudaimonic media responses pertains to content factors (e.g., a sad ending, poor life-threatening situations, the portrayal of human excellence), rather than formal aspects (Hakemulder 2017). However, there is a reviving and growing interest among media scholars in foregrounding (e.g., Van den Oever 2009). Researchers in the two disciplines might make good use of this momentum and generate interdisciplinary studies examining the effects of foregrounding in movies and other media.

Remembering the school in rural Holland, where a teacher helps literature to come to life, and considering the empirical studies we have reviewed, we can conclude: literature is not just books, literature is something that happens. It arises in an interaction between reader and text. There is no perceived foregrounding if there are no readers with the relevant background in mind, against which the literary devices stand out. For research, this also means that we do need the books, an intimate knowledge of style, and our intuitions about what effects devices may have. This is what makes the empirical study of literature.

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