

ЛЕКЦІЇ ВІДОМИХ УКРАЇНСЬКИХ ТА ЗАРУБІЖНИХ УЧЕНИХ

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FOREGROUNDING THEORY: AN OLD MODEL FROM A NEW PERSPECTIVE

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The authors offer an overview of the theory of foregrounding from its origin in the philosophy of Aristotle and later development in the works of the Russian Formalists and then the Prague Structuralists. The focus is made on the benefits of Empirical Study of Literature that enables researchers to apply a more rigorous and accountable methodology in investigating both the content and the form of literary texts as well as readers' reactions to them.

Key words: theory of foregrounding, Empirical Study of Literature.

Віллі ван Пір, Анна Чеснокова

Теорія очуднення: новий погляд на стару модель

Автори розглядають теорію очуднення у її витоках із філософії Арістотеля і подальшій розбудові у працях російських формалістів і празьких структуралістів. Акцент робиться на перевагах емпіричного літературознавства, методологія якого уможливорює об'єктивний і контрольований підхід до вивчення як змісту, так і форми художніх текстів, а також реакції читача на них.

Ключові слова: теорія очуднення, емпіричне літературознавство.

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Теория остранения: новый взгляд на старую модель

Авторы дают обзор теории остранения в её истоках из философии Аристотеля и дальнейшей разработке в трудах русских формалистов и пражских структуралистов. Внимание акцентируется на преимуществах эмпирического литературоведения, методология которого делает возможным объективный и контролируемый подход к изучению как содержания, так и формы художественных текстов, а также реакции читателя на них.

Ключевые слова: теория остранения, эмпирическое литературоведение.

1. Introduction. Foregrounding in Literature

We must begin at the beginning. And about everything in Western culture takes its origin

in the philosophy of Aristotle. So also does the notion of “foregrounding”. In his *Poetics* (2013) Aristotle proposes that a piece of literature will

have more impact if the diction of the literary work is “distinguished”, and that this effect is arrived at through the use of unfamiliar terms, metaphor, strange words, or lengthened forms. Through the influence of Aristotle’s work from the Renaissance onward, this view of literature has gained a wide dissemination in Western thought, and in this light the theory of foregrounding can be seen as a more precise and more methodical elaboration of these ideas.

The first systematic exploration of this notion occurred at the eve of the Russian Revolution, in the years 1916 and 1917, both in Saint Petersburg and in Moscow. Especially the famous essay “Art as Technique” (“Iskusstvo kak priem”) by Victor Shklovsky (1917/1965), together with Roman Jakobson’s view on the poetic function (1981), laid the foundation of a theory, which was very old, but now is pursued in a much more organized way.

Basically, the notion of foregrounding was formed through deviations of a norm or parallelism, so that these two devices employed by authors created the “literariness” we recognize in literary texts. The Russian Formalists’ work was only processed in the West in the 1960s and later, but under the influence of British stylisticians, such as Geoffrey Leech (1969) and Roger Fowler (1966), the notion of foregrounding quickly got established in linguistically oriented work on literature. Following the introduction of the Formalists’ ideas (later those of the Prague Structuralists) in the West, a plethora of analyses of the devices of deviation and parallelism in a multitude of literary texts was undertaken, showing the ubiquity of foregrounding — which was then also claimed as the source of “literariness”.

What remained unclear, however, was whether those literary devices were there in the texts for the purpose for which the Formalists had held them

responsible. According to Shklovsky (1917/1965: 12), they are there to “refresh” our view of the world. In his own words:

“Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life, it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar”, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.”

Scholars did their best to argue (in their analyses) how those literary devices might indeed exert that kind of influence on readers. Only, in most cases this was just a “construction” of the analysts — and one remained in the dark whether their views indeed corresponded to the experiences of *real* readers. And that, precisely, was the next — important — step in the development of the theory: to empirically investigate the reactions of real readers, and see whether they corresponded to what the theory of foregrounding says about such literary experiences. But how do you do that? Fortunately, there are good models for such research in the social sciences. Let us look at such a widely used model first.

2. A General Model of Empirical Research.

The model in *Figure 1* above should be read from left to right: we start with a “theory”, which in our case, is the theory of foregrounding, as it was synthesized from its initial conception into the more elaborate construction it later became. The most important step in the model is the next one: treating the “theory” as a prediction, which will enable us to explicitly formulate a hypothesis based on predictions logically derived

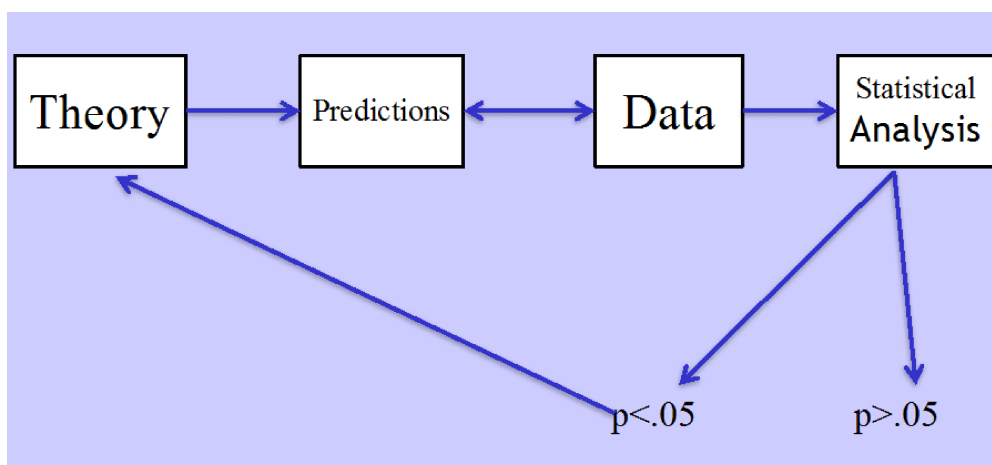


Figure 1: Theory testing model

from theoretical insights. This prediction can take the form of an *if — then* statement: *if* the theory is correct, *then* the following things should happen — and be observable. For instance, if the theory is correct, and deviations are observed in a literary text, these very deviations should cause surprise, or reflection, or other psychological experiences in the reader. So the evident next step in the model is precisely the following: collecting evidence for such psychological experiences. These are called *data*, and evidently they must be provided not by us, but by readers themselves. These data that have been acquired independently are then confronted by the concrete predictions that we derived from the theory at an earlier stage. Unless we do so, we will not deal with a real (scientific) theory, which demands that it can be falsified. The data should be in line with the predictions, but they may also contradict them, and that is the meaning of them being “independent”.

Subsequent thorough analysis of the data is then needed, and in many cases this will involve a statistical analysis so that we can answer the question how probable the results are and whether generalisation beyond the experimental sample is possible. In other words — how representative the data are for the world at large. In this way we will be able to find evidence in favour of the theory — but also to observe inaccuracies, which may later lead to revision of the theory concerned.

3. The Beginnings

The work that set it all in motion was the book *Stylistics and Psychology: Investigations of Foregrounding* (van Peer 1986). Highly detailed linguistic analyses were made of a number of poems, identifying all (or most) of the features of deviation and parallelism. On the basis of these extended analyses differences in density of foregrounding within different locations within the poem were made, allowing a hierarchy of density within each of the poems. Actual readers were then asked, among other things, to underline any (part of a) word that they found striking. Quantifying these reactions, averages for each of the lines of each poem were calculated and compared with the index of foregrounding density drawn up before. This then is the final stage of the model: calculating the statistical probability of the overlap between the two hierarchies by means of a statistical analysis, providing a method to decide whether the overlap was large enough to conclude that the two are related (or not).

The method applied by van Peer was later followed by numerous replications that used finer-grained methodology. The first — and maybe most inspiring one, was the study by Miall and Kuiken (1994), and later there were other investigations, with different respondents and materials, in different countries,

in different circumstances and under different conditions. All in all, one can now say that in most of these studies the claims made by the foregrounding theory have been corroborated by the data, though in reality we have come a long way from Shklovsky's initial formulation, and also a long way from the first empirical studies that established the validity of his claims.

Thus in a series of more recent experiments (Chesnokova and van Peer 2016; van Peer and Chesnokova 2017) the predictions discussed above were not confirmed, which in itself is quite puzzling, as most efforts at corroborating the foregrounding theory so far had been successful. Partly as a result of these experiments a breakthrough has been made in the field, and, by both quantitative and qualitative measures, a new, complementary model of the reading processes in foregrounding has been proposed. It is this model that we will detailise and explore in the proposed course.

4. Further developments.

Outline of the 2020 course

In the eight sessions of the course, we will make students familiar with the new model of the research on foregrounding. Additionally, apart from theoretical suggestions and insights, we will carry out some research to probe the validity and reliability of this new model. Below is the outline of the course:

- *Session 1.* Introductory lecture on foregrounding.
- *Session 2.* Experiment probing the validity of the new model.
- *Session 3.* Introduction to the new model: what are its ingredients and innovation?
- *Session 4.* Discussing the results of the experiment conducted in Session 2.
- *Session 5.* Students involve in group work, setting up similar experiments.
- *Session 6.* Discussion of the design of the experiments.
- *Session 7.* Toward a synthesis of the current standard model of foregrounding and the newly proposed “failed foregrounding model”.
- *Session 8.* Conclusion and outlook.

Thus we will make explicit the need for empirical methods in the pursuit of the emotional workings of literature and in testing the theory of foregrounding, in particular. The methodology we suggest provides reliable, insightful, but sometimes also counter-intuitive results, which can subsequently corroborate or falsify the theories and thus ensure further development in our understanding of literature, of the world at large, and of ourselves in the world.

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