

GROUNDING IN ENGLISH
AND ARABIC NEWS DISCOURSE

Pragmatics & Beyond

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AMSTERDAM/PHILADELPHIA



The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences — Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Khalil, Esam N.

Grounding in English and Arabic news discourse / Esam N.Khalil.

p. cm. -- (Pragmatics & beyond, ISSN 0922-842X ; new ser. 82)

Enlargement of author's thesis (Ph. D)--University of Amsterdam, 1999.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and indexes.

1. English language--Grammar, Comparative--Arabic. 2. Arabic language--Grammar, Comparative--English. 3. English language--Discourse analysis. 4. Arabic language--Discourse analysis. 5. Journalism--Language. I. Title. II. Series.

PE1130.A8 K484 2000

425--dc21

00-059870

ISBN 90 272 5101 0 (Eur.) / 1 55619 982 1 (US)

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John Benjamins Publishing Co. • P.O.Box 75577 • 1070 AN Amsterdam • The Netherlands
John Benjamins North America • P.O.Box 27519 • Philadelphia PA 19118-0519 • USA

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Preface

This book is a revised version of my Ph.D dissertation, which I submitted to the University of Amsterdam in February 1999. The study grew out of a long-standing academic and professional interest in the mass media, and in news in particular. My Master's study in mass communication concentrated on the written medium, and ended with an investigation of some aspects of the international flow of news. For example, the imbalance of that flow and the role of international news agencies in the dissemination of news. Many years of news editing, translating and reading the Arabic news on the Dutch Radio (Wereldomroep) in Hilversum, the Netherlands, also stimulated my interest in news. My subsequent interest and inquiry in the field of textlinguistics show the influence of this preoccupation, particularly in the choice of news as a rich source of data for a textlinguistic study. The existing theoretical studies in this area have also complemented my personal experience in investigating this type of media discourse and have provided me with the necessary tools to carry out my research.

Of the people who have helped me during the lengthy journey of my dissertation, I would like to thank, first and foremost, Professor Teun van Dijk of the University of Amsterdam. As a supervisor, I owe Teun a great deal; guidance, insight and his keen observations. He has always been extremely generous with his time, and his copious comments bear witness to that. To him is my greatest intellectual debt.

I would also like to express my thanks to the members of the dissertation committee: Professor Gisela Redeker of the University of Groningen, Dr. Mokhtar Ahmed of the University of Bielefeld, Professor Mushira Eid of the University of Utah, Professor Machtelt Bolkestein and Professor Manfred Woidich of the University of Amsterdam.

Various other people have also helped in different ways. Carine Kabbout, one of my former students, selected the random sample of Arabic texts. Salah Negm, then of the Arabic Department in the Radio Nederland Wereldomroep, read and checked the Arabic texts that I translated.

I am also grateful to my students throughout the years who inspired me in many ways.

I also owe a great deal to two reviewers whose comments, constructive criticism and suggestions helped to make the book better than it would otherwise have been.

My deepest thanks and appreciation go to Kathleen Callow of the Summer Institute of Linguistics who diligently read the whole manuscript and provided immeasurable help.

Needless to say, these and the other people who have helped me in one way or other cannot be held responsible for any remaining shortcomings.

Furthermore, my special thanks are due to Andreas Jucker, editor of the *Pragmatics & Beyond New Series*, for his enthusiasm in recommending the book for publication. I would also like to thank Bertie Kaal of *John Benjamins* for the editorial assistance she efficiently and generously offered me during the preparation of the book.

My special gratitude goes to my wife, Hanneke. Without her love, understanding and persistent encouragement — particularly whenever my confidence flagged — this work would not have seen the light of day.

Chapter 1

Overview

In this introductory chapter, I will briefly present the phenomenon of *grounding* and the main issues involved in its study. After explaining the goal of the present study and the data used to investigate the phenomenon, I will review the main work done in this field, show some of its shortcomings, and explain how the study presented here contributes to the investigation of *grounding* both theoretically and empirically. Since the data consist of short news items, the main features of this type of news discourse will be explained after a brief and general description of media discourse.

1.1 The Scope of the Study

This study deals with an elusive property of discourse, namely *grounding* or what is more popularly known as the *foreground* (FG)-*background* (BG) structure. I will account for grounding as one of the semantic properties of discourse, and examine manifestations of the FG-BG distinction in terms of schematic features (viz. the global organizers of the propositional content) and specific syntactic structures, namely markers that occur in sentence-initial position. This theoretical study of grounding will then be applied in an analysis of English and Arabic short news texts.

Earlier research that dealt with the theoretical notion of grounding has depended primarily on narrative and conversational types of discourse. More importantly, it has been quite unsystematic and sometimes confused. Various levels of description have been conflated, reflecting the lack of explicit, adequate, and independent criteria for the FG-BG distinction. Thus, semantic grounding has been discussed in terms of surface structure expression, i.e. *foreground* clauses or sentences, or in terms of the cognitive level of *informa-*

tion, i.e. *foreground* and *background information*. Grounding has also been conflated with *coherence* — another discourse semantic notion.

My major thesis is that grounding should be defined in terms of hierarchical relationships of semantic importance obtaining between propositions in a text. As a discourse semantic notion, grounding is distinct from other notions and levels of description. It should therefore be distinguished from other semantic properties of discourse such as local and global coherence. While global coherence organizes topics on higher and lower levels in discourse, grounding organizes propositions on a FG-BG scalar structure. Although there are relationships between *foreground* meanings and macrosemantically important meanings or topics, these notions are distinct from each other in their theoretical basis and discourse function.

Other theoretical distinctions will also be made. I will distinguish *grounding* from the more or less *prominent* ways it is signaled in surface structures. Since this distinction is important in the analytical description, I will use distinctive terms to characterize manifestations of grounding in text-structure. Thus I will use the term *prominence* to refer to surface structure and the term *salience* to denote a different way of organizing meaning, namely in terms of schemata i.e., the hierarchical order of text segments (e.g. headline, lead sentence). Similarly, I will distinguish grounding from the pragmatic notion of lesser or greater *relevance* of information for language users, and from the cognitive notion of more or less *importance* of information as represented in the mental models of language users. Such conceptual distinctions will allow not only the assignment of grounding values to propositions independent of surface structure realization, but also the examination of surface structure as one manifestation of the FG-BG distinction.

Another important feature of the present study pertains to the level on which the phenomenon of grounding is described. In contradistinction to many other treatments of grounding, where the individual concept or the single lexical item has been the major concern of writers, this study takes a text-level approach both to the phenomenon, by focussing on the grounding of the proposition, and to its surface structure manifestations, by focussing on certain entities or expressions that occur in sentence-initial position.

This brings us to the major thesis relating to the surface expression of grounding, namely that languages vary in (the explicitness of) marking relative grounding values at sentence-initial position and in the contribution of specific devices to the grounding-signaling function. The study suggests that

sentence-initial position is a potential locus for signaling the FG-BG distinction in text. English news discourse will provide evidence that certain linguistic markers that occur in sentence-initial position (mainly spatio-temporal and circumstantial expressions) perform important grounding-signaling functions and manifest text-level distinctions in the FG-BG structure of news texts. Arabic news discourse will also provide evidence for the importance to the grounding-signaling function of a certain class of markers that occur in sentence-initial position. It will show that signaling the appropriate grounding value of the proposition at sentence-initial position is a prerequisite for maintaining the (coherence of the) grounding structure of the news text and for recasting the intended meaning in a given communicative situation.

Apart from demonstrating that grounding is a fundamental property of text and that fine differences of meaning importance in texts can be crucial for comprehension and interpretation, the study contributes to the theoretical and empirical foundations of the field. The use of data from non-narrative discourse, namely short news texts that have rarely been studied from a discourse perspective, offers insights into the textual structures and linguistic properties of this type of news discourse.

Furthermore, the use of Arabic — a Semitic, non-Indo-European language — will increase our understanding of discourse grounding and its manifestations. The linguistic phenomenon of sentence-initial markers in standard Arabic has not as yet been accounted for within a theory of grounding. The book underscores the importance of this feature in Arabic linguistics and provides evidence that linguistic phenomena cannot be sufficiently explained by recourse either to sentence-level approach or to one level of analysis. In this regard, the book highlights the discourse approach to grammar — one of the themes that engage current linguistic research. It explains the behaviour of a number of tense-aspect entities in discourse and examines text-functional distinctions between VS and SV word-order variants. In addition, focussing on differences between Arabic and English in ways of expressing the FG-BG structure in sentence-initial position reveals patterns of communicating news in both languages and contributes to cross-cultural discourse studies or comparison. It also underlines textual problems involved in the process of translation and the need to consider structural features of different types of text.

After this brief survey of the study and its scope, mention should be made of the division of the book. My approach to the FG-BG structure as a textual phenomenon will be outlined in Chapter 2, where I describe a model of text-

production and present basic and relevant notions of discourse. Chapter 3 examines text-level organizational features by looking into some schematic manifestations of text-level grounding. Chapter 4 presents a detailed analysis of surface structure manifestations of text-level grounding in English news texts, exemplified by entities that occur in sentence-initial position. Two basic patterns of these entities will be explained and illustrated: constituents of the main clause such as noun phrases, and constituents that are marginal to the main clause, such as various kinds of adverbials. The latter constituents are referred to as strong providers of grounding signals at sentence-initial position.

In order to show one way in which Arabic news texts differ from English news texts in the explicitness of signaling the FG-BG distinction at sentence-initial position and its obligatoriness, I introduce in Chapter 5 a class of Arabic markers. By way of preparation for the analysis of these markers in Chapter 6, I examine the phenomenon of prefatory expressions in news texts, provide empirical evidence of its extent, and explain its significance. I will argue that the obligatory nature of these expressions is to be accounted for in terms of a communicative strategy and the writer's or the translator's purpose of performing successful acts. The interplay of these markers with main clause word-order and their influence on the grounding value will also be examined. Attention will be given to the consequences of the absence of markers from texts where markers should be present. Based on genuine examples from different samples of Arabic short news items, both translated and originally written in Arabic, a detailed description of eight markers is presented in Chapter 6. Constraints on the interchangeability of markers and cases where markers may neutralize other initial markers in English will be explored and illustrated. Finally, Chapter 7 presents a brief discussion of the major findings of the study and of some major issues, indicating a number of useful avenues for future research. Major concepts used in the study are briefly explained in an Appendix.

1.2 Goal and Data

The main goal of the present study is to account for *grounding* — the major theoretical notion of the study — in terms of the FG-BG structure and to examine specific manifestations of that structure in both English and Arabic news texts. In the vast literature (see 1.3), differing and sometimes conflicting

treatments have failed to dissipate the theoretical confusion about the concepts and notions involved. Definitions have been imprecise, levels of description confused and, above all, analyses have been rather limited in scope, for example in terms of individual lexical items or the topic-comment structure of the sentence.

To circumvent these shortcomings, I use various notions to describe distinct features and distinguish levels of analysis. Taking a text-level approach to grounding and its manifestations, I focus on propositions, examining the FG-BG structure in plausible discourse-semantic terms and its manifestations in discourse-pragmatic terms. It will be shown that grounding is essential to the nature of textuality. I present first the level of discursive manifestations — so-called ‘superstructural’ categories that occur in this type of news discourse and that are crucial in determining the way surface structure prominence signals the FG-BG articulation. For surface structure manifestations of grounding, I focus on entities that occur in sentence-initial position and examine their grounding-signaling function. In addition, I present and explain empirically-based observations about differences between English and Arabic news texts in entities in that position. Arabic news texts will therefore be used in order to explore and discuss in detail the influence of the FG-BG structure on surface structure expression. In this regard, it will be argued that grounding considerations account for the occurrence in these texts of ‘prefatory’ sentences: these sentences are a syntactic manifestation or marking of grounding at text-level. Thus a language-specific illustration will provide further evidence that not only the phenomenon of grounding but also its expression are crucial for textuality.

It has perhaps been noticed that I use the terms ‘text’ and ‘discourse’ interchangeably. This will be done throughout the book, since ‘discourse’ does not refer only to dialogue and conversation, and since a written text may also be a ‘monologue discourse’ (van Dijk 1977: 8). Now, in fact, ‘text takes on more of the interactive qualities of discourse’ (Garrett and Bell 1998: 2), and although important differences exist between spoken and written languages, both terms denote forms of linguistic expression.

The research reported in this book is based on authentic short news texts taken from the *International Herald Tribune* (IHT) and the international edition of the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram*. The Arabic data will be explained in Chapter 5. The English data consist of a sample of 100 short news items, randomly drawn from the section entitled ‘World Briefs’, which ap-

peared daily on the second page of the *IHT*, over a six month period (January-June 1985). The sample is assumed to be large enough to be representative of English-American news discourse, and to provide sufficiently accurate results for research purposes.

Other types of media discourse, such as news editorials, background features, and interviews are excluded (but see Chapter 5). The texts are limited to printed daily news; neither radio and TV news nor news in weeklies are considered. The limitation to one type of discourse and one medium has been made in order to ensure the homogeneity of the corpus. Practical reasons are also involved in the choice of short news items: they are easy to quote fully and to examine in more detail and depth. In addition, they have not as yet been studied — at least not in detail — as a special (sub-) genre, and on this ground alone they merit investigation. Furthermore, in a compact form they exhibit features of longer news texts which have been ‘globally’ studied, and they are also similar to other forms of short (summarized) news items such as those in TV news programs. More importantly, short news items are suitable because, as a result of their condensed nature, the sentences show the expression of different grounding values in close succession.

1.3 Earlier Work on Grounding

In the last three decades FG-BG structure has been the subject of numerous studies that vary substantially in approach and aim. Under a few rubrics, I present in this section a short survey of the main work done in that field. Since these studies customarily deal with more than one feature, a certain amount of overlapping and repetition between the various rubrics is unavoidable.

FIGURE-GROUND

An early linguistic characterization of the gestalt notions of ‘figure’ and ‘ground’ — which are linked to the discourse notions of foreground and background — has been provided by Longacre (1968). He uses the notions in a rather limited sense, reminiscent of the topic-comment division of the sentence: figure refers to the novel material of the sentence, and ground refers to repeated material in each sentence of a narrative. In this way the figure of each sentence becomes the ground of the succeeding one. In another study on figure and ground, Talmy (1978) focusses on subordinate and main clauses

and correlates figure with asserted events and ground with presupposed events. (On the figure-ground concept, see e.g. Rock 1975.)

EVENT-NON-EVENT

The type of activity (i.e. event or state) has received much attention in the literature. In their early study on story telling, Labov and Waletzky (1967) characterize background as information that describes states and is off the event-line. Similarly, Grimes (1975) — taking as a starting point the idea that ‘different parts of a discourse communicate different kinds of information’ (op.cit.: 33) — distinguishes information in oral narrative discourse along the lines of events and non-events. The latter characterize setting, background, evaluation, and collateral. He identifies background information in narratives as information that is not part of the event sequence (Grimes 1978). Similarly, Omanson (1982) considers events to be focal and to constitute the narrative proper, while descriptions of characters, setting, and previously depicted events and states that do not advance the plot as characterizing: ‘They describe what exists’ (op.cit.: 198).

SEQUENTIALITY AND TEMPORAL RELATIONS

Several studies have focussed on the contrast between ‘sequenced events’ and ‘non-sequenced states and actions’. Hopper (1983) illustrates this contrast with examples from traditional Malay narrative texts. Within this framework, Thompson (1987) also discusses the correlation between subordinate clauses in English written narratives and temporal sequencing: that most subordinate clause predicates are not on the time line. In the same vein, Thelin (1984: 229) — in his discussion of Slavonic narrative discourse — identifies foreground material as ‘material which supplies the main points of the discourse’, or ‘plot-advancing events vs. background conditions’, and maintains that background information ‘can be understood as either *abstracted or totally removed from the time axis*’ (op.cit.: 227). Also Flashner (1987: 155) uses the term foreground to refer to ‘the event clauses that move a story’s action forward’. And Fox (1983: 29) defines background discourse as ‘that portion which contains NONSEQUENTIALLY ORDERED events’. Similarly, Thompson (1983: 44) proposes that background information is ‘material that serves to further explicate, amplify, or elaborate what is in the main clause, or that represents an event occurring simultaneously with or providing a comment on or motivation for the event in the main clause’. (See also Longacre and Levinsohn (1978);

Fleischman (1985); Carlson (1987).)

The distinction between foreground and background in terms of temporal relations in narrative discourse has also figured in the study of Couper-Kuhlen (1989). For her, the temporal foreground in narratives answers the question: *And then what happened?* The temporal background has an adverbial function and answers the question: *And when did this happen?* She shows that sometimes background events also advance the story. In this regard, Fleischman (1990) points out that the FG-BG contrast is not necessarily synonymous with the distinction between events and description, and that not all temporally ordered events in narrative are of equal importance. Reinhart (1984) also examines narrative texts and suggests that the temporal sequences of the events form the foreground of the text. These temporally ordered events on the time axis acquire significance or interpretation as foreground only if we know the background such as preceding events or circumstances. According to her (op.cit.: 785), temporally ordered events within the background meet the conditions for foreground information, but these events are subsidiary foreground because they are outside the time axis of the main narrative.

BACKBONE-SUPPORT AND LAYERS OF FG-BG

According to Hopper and Thompson (1980), who correlate foreground with high transitivity and background with low transitivity, the most important characteristics of foreground clauses are that they comprise the backbone of the text and that they are ordered in a temporal sequence. Background material is material which ‘does not immediately and crucially contribute to the speaker’s goal, but which merely assists, amplifies, or comments on it’ (op.cit.: 280). Similarly, Jones and Jones (1984: 33) maintain that the crucial events together ‘form the content of a highly abstract, terse summary’ of the narrative, while the crucial background material is ‘the highly relevant background on which the main events of a narrative hinge’.

The idea of layers of foreground and background recurs in a number of studies. Thus Longacre (1981) likens the backbone of a narrative to a spectrum of elements, some of which are foregrounded and others have graded relevance to the main line of development. He also considers narrative material to possess a spectrum that ranges from the most dynamic information to the most static (depictive) information. And Jones and Jones (1979) present their ‘multiple-levels hypothesis’. The languages they examined marked three levels of information: background, events, and peak. The authors point out

that background information ‘is essentially elaboration or extra information, such as description of scene or characters, or minor events concurrent with major events’ (op.cit.: 9). Also, Neeley (1987), in her discourse analysis of the New Testament book of Hebrews, discusses information structure in terms of the distinction between ‘backbone’ and ‘support’ information. She refers to, though does not develop, a ‘prominence hierarchy’ of information in the discourse. She also suggests three levels of prominence:

1. Backbone sentences.
2. Subordinate or other supportive material within backbone sentences.
3. Support material.

Likewise, the approach of Fleischman (1985; 1990) is that foreground and background are patterned along a continuum and that they are not a dichotomous or binary distinction. Similarly, Tomlin (1985) divides a foreground-background continuum in narratives into three discrete levels:

1. Pivotal information: propositions which describe the most important events in the narrative.
2. Foreground information: propositions which describe successive events in the narrative.
3. Background information: propositions which elaborate pivotal or foreground propositions, or which perform any other function in the narrative.

The content of narratives has also been classified by Omannson (1982) as Central (describing the gist of a narrative), Supportive (adding detail that elaborates), and Distracting (adding detail that disrupts). And Reinhart (1984) considers narrative texts to have layers of foreground and background where background may itself have foreground and background.

EXPRESSION OF FG-BG DISTINCTION

Tense and Aspect

Several studies have taken the different forms of tense and aspect as a distinguishing feature between foreground and background information. The main thrust of these studies has been the discourse function of these two grammatical categories, that is, as discourse-pragmatic notions, rather than semantic, sentence-level phenomena (see Hopper, ed. 1982). Accordingly, verbs encode distinctions in information (e.g. Hopper 1979, Hopper and

Thompson 1980): perfective verbs express foreground events ('the actual story line'), and imperfective verbs express background information ('supportive material'). In this respect, Jones and Jones (1979) point out that in various languages, multiple levels of information might be marked by certain grammatical devices such as shift in tense and/or aspect as well as extra words. In another study (Jones and Jones 1984), they examine some features of the verbal morphology of various Mesoamerican languages in relation to their discourse context (their role in the semantics and structure of discourse), and suggest that one important function of tense-aspect in some Mesoamerican languages is to distinguish foreground from background information.

Longacre (1981) also discusses the correlation between information and verb forms: simple past tenses in English correlate with the foregrounded event-line; the past progressive pictures background activities that follow the event-line in importance; and statives come lower in information relevance. He adds (Longacre 1983: 16) that the 'English past tense not only characterizes the event-line but some of the supportive material as well'.

Among studies on tense in narration and its implications for information structure is the study of Fleischman (1985). She argues that tense switching in Old French functions as a strategy for 'narrative subordination' or 'grounding' in a story. Fleischman (1990) discusses the linguistic structure of narrative discourse and examines the pragmatic functions of tense and aspect, particularly the use of tense-aspect contrasts to mark levels of information salience, viz. grounding. She discusses (in part 1 of Chapter 6) textual functions: i.e. the use of tense-aspect morphology for discourse-pragmatic purposes relating to the structure of a text. She adopts a contextual approach to grounding: there is subjectivity in determining what is foreground and/or background.

Investigating the linguistic correlates of the foreground-background distinction in literary texts, Ehrlich (1987) shows that the English past progressive (imperfective aspect) assumes different discourse functions on the basis of its meaning in the local discourse context. Her point is: 'Because local discourse context is crucial to the interpretation of aspect, global discourse functions like foregrounding and backgrounding do not adequately account for aspectual alternations in these texts' (op.cit.: 363).

Wallace (1982) discusses how linguistic categories (tense, aspect, mode, voice) function with regard to the distinction between foreground and background. And Hopper (1983) examines grounding in Malay, with regard to the presentation of participants and events. He discusses the discourse role of the

passive with respect to background: 'It tends to denote states, customary actions, descriptions, and the like, and is used less often to denote actions which happen once or which provide a story line' (ibid: 71).

In her study of grounding in classical Greek, Fox (1983) examines the interaction of participles with aspect and voice categories. She concludes that the participle in Ancient Greek is one backgrounding device; it introduces background information and describes a stable or durative event. Similarly, Polanyi (1982) discusses types of information in stories (Event, Durative-Descriptive, and Evaluation), as well as their linguistic encoding. According to her, speakers explicitly mark exceptions to the time line in narrative discourse by, among other devices, 'specific flashback terms' (Polanyi 1982: 510), in order to make clear that certain sentences or segments are to be semantically interpreted as 'off the main time line'.

Particles also have been examined for their role in the structure of information. Thus, in his study of 'mystery' particles in the Cubeo language of Colombia, Longacre (1976) describes one particle which marks the main event line of discourse as opposed to subsidiary developments. And Neeley (1987) takes the use of particles as a criterion of backbone versus support material.

Word-Order

The role of syntax or word-order in marking the foreground-background distinction has also featured in the studies mentioned above. Thus, Hopper (1979) describes VSO or SOV as being characteristic of event line in Anglo-Saxon, with SVO used for supportive material. He shows (Hopper 1983) that in Old Icelandic Sagas, verb-initial syntax characterizes rapid successive events, while subject-verb clauses slow down the tempo and report background information. Similarly, VSO clauses in Biblical Hebrew (Longacre 1979a) mark the event line, while SVO clauses are reserved for supportive material. Material on the backbone of the Genesis Flood Narrative — as well as of other narratives in Biblical Hebrew — consists of verb-initial clauses; clauses off the backbone have verbs preceded by a noun or are verbless (see also Longacre 1983). In that language, tense, aspect and word-order are among the mechanisms used to distinguish main line from supportive material (Longacre 1982).

Birner (1994) discusses inversion, defined as the appearance of the logical subject in postverbal position in a sentence, while some other, canonically postverbal constituent appears in clause-initial position. She argues that

inversion serves an information-packaging function, 'allowing the presentation of relatively familiar information before a comparatively unfamiliar logical subject' (op.cit.: 234). She suggests the following information statuses (op.cit.: 242):

1. Hearer-old, Discourse-old-information which has already been evoked in the current discourse.
2. Hearer-old, Discourse-new-information which has not been evoked in the current discourse, but of which the speaker believes the hearer is aware.
3. Hearer-new, Discourse-new-information which has not been evoked in the current discourse, and of which the speaker believes the hearer is unaware.

Fox (1985) examines two continuity parameters (action continuity and participant continuity) in Tagalog — a verb-initial language of the Philippines — in order to see if inversion clauses are different from other clauses in the circumstances under which they are used. She talks about shift in narrated action and change in participants. She is primarily interested in the discourse conditions of using word-inversion in that language, and finds that the marked (inverted) word-order is associated with features of discontinuity in the text.

Other Linguistic Expressions

In an early study, Labov and Waletzky (1967) propose that subordinate clause predicates — or syntactically dependent clauses — are background narrative clauses. Similarly, Tomlin (1985) tests the hypothesis that independent and dependent clauses are used respectively to code foreground and background information in English discourse. The detached participle has also been examined as one manifestation of grounding in English. Thus, Thompson (1983) shows that it allows the writer to present certain material as background.

In a study on information structure of paragraphs, Giora (1983) shows that segment-final position correlates with foreground information. Jones (1977) analyzes surface structure manifestations of thematic prominence. She uses the term 'prominence' as a cover term for foreground, figure, theme, focus and emphasis. She follows others (e.g. Grimes 1975) in considering the theme (thematic ideas) as representing the 'backbone'. She discusses the thematic function of conjunctions (e.g. *moreover*), and considers them as road signs to thematicity that 'tell the interlocutor what he/she is to interpret as significant, and what is relatively less-important' (op.cit.: 215).

Bäcklund (1988) deals with how prominence in English expository texts is achieved. She demonstrates that what marks prominence in these texts is a combination of hierarchical organization, information dynamics, and grounding signals. She uses the term ‘grounding signals’ to refer to signals of hierarchical structure and the foreground-background distinction. Her findings include a distinction between three main categories of grounding signals in expository text:

1. Connectives: the coordinator *but* and the class of conjunctions (e.g. *finally, furthermore, of course, on the other hand*).
2. Syntactic devices: fronted adverbials that may serve the function of clarifying the structural organization of the text (besides a linking function). Fronting is regarded mainly as a foregrounding device.
3. Lexical items: not functioning as connectives: E.g. ‘problem’, ‘solution’.

Bäcklund suggests that information dynamics might also be part of the creation of relative prominence: if the information contained in a sentence is new and interesting, this may override the hierarchical organization of the text as far as grounding is concerned. According to her: ‘New and important information may be contained in a background part of the text; this in turn may make the reader interpret that part as prominent along with the foregrounded material’ (op.cit.: 57).

Virtanen (1992a,b) discusses the information structure of clause-initial adverbials of time and place, using Prince’s (1981) taxonomy of given-new information: given/evoked information, inferrable information, (brand) new, unused information. She uses the term *information structure* to refer to notions such as topic-comment, given-new that operate within the clause/sentence, and the term *information dynamics* to refer to the overall distribution of given and new — or thematic and rhematic — information in text. Virtanen (1992b: 321) notes that some temporal adverbials (e.g. of frequency or duration) begin backgrounded passages such as embedded descriptions, and that such adverbials ‘may signal, or add to, the backgroundedness of the textual unit that they initiate’.

Information structure has also been seen as a component of sentence grammar and a determining factor in the formal structuring of sentences (Lambrecht 1994). It is ‘the formal expression of the pragmatic structuring of a proposition in a discourse’ (op.cit.: 5). According to the author, information

structure is not concerned with the organization of discourse but with the sentence within a discourse. Lambrecht explores the relationship between sentence structure and the linguistic and extra linguistic context in which it is used. He suggests that the relationship between speaker assumptions and formal sentence structure is governed by the rules and conventions of grammar, in a grammatical component he calls information structure. According to Lambrecht, the most important categories of information structure are: (1) presupposition and assertion, (2) identifiability and activation, and (3) topic and focus (op.cit.: 6).

In her study of grounding in English narratives, Wårvik (1990) compares grounding distinctions in Old and Modern English narratives and concludes that in the Modern English system, backgrounding marking is preferred to explicit foreground markers. Brinton (1996, Chapter 2) examines the notion of narrative foregrounding and backgrounding and its linguistic expression. She discusses grounding as one aspect of textual organization in narratives which may be denoted by pragmatic markers.

Linguistic mechanisms that are employed by second language learners (of Italian) and that signal the FG-BG distinction have been identified in oral narration (Orletti 1994). The author finds that: 'The most common kind of background information is the one designed to provide a temporal framework for foreground events' (op.cit.: 183). Temporal background is expressed primarily by aspectual and temporal values of verbs, lexical expressions such as *one day*, and temporal subordination markers such as *when* (op.cit.).

CRITERIA FOR FG-BG DISTINCTION

A few authors have dealt in some detail with criteria for distinguishing foreground from background. I mention here two of them. The first is Reinhart (1984), who presents a number of 'content criteria'. They are:

1. Temporal criteria: foreground events show temporal continuity, punctuality, and completeness.
2. Functional-dependency criteria: material which explains temporal events is background, such as 'irrealis' statements of alternative modes of development. Also, the cause event functions as the background.
3. Culture-dependent criteria: a given culture foregrounds events that are considered more important than others.

The second is Fleischman (1985: 857ff), who suggests four identifying criteria:

1. The sequentiality criterion: the foreground of a narrative consists of a sequence of temporally ordered clauses. Thus, narrative clauses — which form the narrative foreground — have an iconic sequence. Most studies in the literature have followed this criterion (e.g. Hopper and Thompson (1980), Reinhart (1984), Thompson (1987)).
2. The importance criterion: foreground information is important information, such as about events or processes.
3. The causality criterion: foreground information is the element that serves to advance the plot, i.e. that contributes to its causal development (Kalmár 1982).
4. The unpredictability criterion: foreground information depends on the degree to which an element is unpredictable or unexpected in a given context. An element in a discourse can function as foreground through what the Russian Formalists have referred to as ‘defamiliarization’.

1.4 Critique of Earlier Work

Having presented a general review of relevant studies on the discourse notions of *foreground* and *background*, I will, while discussing the main trends of these studies, show a number of inadequacies that pose both theoretical and empirical problems in the analysis of grounding.

In general, studies on the phenomenon of grounding are inadequate on one or more of the following accounts:

1. The lack of explicit and independent criteria.
2. Restriction of the scope of grounding to the concept-level or the single lexical item.
3. Conflating the phenomenon with other discourse notions (e.g. coherence) and structures (e.g. the macro-micro structure).
4. Conflating the phenomenon with its surface structure expression.
5. Restriction of the field of investigation to narrative discourse and to linguistic markers of that discourse.

Indeed, there have been divergent approaches to, and definitions of, foreground and background notions. The term ‘foregrounding’ has become diffuse in its application: it has been studied by means of at least three different methodologies (linguistic, literary, and psycholinguistic) that differ in their

assumptions (Dry 1992). Thus, ‘foregrounding is used ambiguously for both the cognitive process and for the textual phenomena that trigger or express that process. In addition, the word is applied to three different levels of analysis. FOREGROUND can thus refer to a prior conception of narrative prominence (such as SALIENCE), to the phenomena identified as prominent in texts in general (e.g. temporally successive clauses), or to specific instances in a given text’ (ibid.: 438).

Linguistic studies depend on a variety of discourse features as a basis for the correlation and distinction between foreground and background. Chief among these are the following:

1. Tense/aspect: past tense/perfective verb is used to encode foreground, and present tense/imperfective verb and future, habitual or anterior past encode background.
2. Sequentiality: foreground is in-sequence: it consists of sequences of (time-line) events that move the story forward in time and form eventually a summary of it; background is out-of-sequence.
3. Event/State: foreground usually consists of events or event clauses, and background consists of states or non-event clauses that are scene-setting.

Studies on grounding have focussed more upon describing the FG-BG phenomenon and how it is (temporally) marked, than on providing a solid basis for the distinction in terms of explicit, systematic and objective criteria. They fail to establish the distinction on the basis of semantic criteria. Wald (1987) draws attention to the difficulty encountered in explicating the semantic distinction between foreground and background in precise terms.

The discourse features that have been taken as a basis for the distinction between *foreground* and *background* are a mere *expression* of an already existing distinction. To propose grammatical encoding as a criterion for the distinction is to neglect the fact that grammatical encoding is not a defining criterion but an expression of an earlier decision — on another (cognitive) level — about the importance of the information in question and subsequent mapping on a semantic level.

Tense in itself is no fixed marker of either FG or BG. In fact, it does not have a definite position on the FG-BG continuum even for narrative: in past tense narrative, imperfect is an index of BG; in present tense narrative, imperfect expresses both FG and BG (Chvany 1985). Besides, a feature such

as the punctuality of verbs is not typical of FG. The semantic representation underlying a sentence such as: *He arrived yesterday*, may be assigned a BG value or interpretation. Therefore, if the same linguistic structure, i.e. verb-tense, may signal two different functions, one as FG and the other as BG, then this feature does not provide a solid criterion for the distinction between both. It fails to distinguish grounding in texts where the same tense is maintained. Tense-maintaining, then, does not imply maintaining either foreground or background meaning. On the other hand, it is of course true that tense-switching may signal the FG-BG distinction, as in stories.

Several studies on FG-BG structure make a confusing association between that (discourse-semantic) structure and its surface-structure expression. In this regard it should be noted that many studies talk about foregroundedness of clauses (e.g. Wårvik 1990). They also suggest a correlation of *foreground* and *prominence* — a different property of discourse (e.g. Chvany 1985, 1990; Fleischman 1985; Kalmár 1982).

Since much of the work done on the grounding phenomenon has depended mainly on oral narrative and conversational discourse as sources of data, generalizations about the discourse notions of foreground and background have been made on the basis of these (oral) types of discourse. Other types, which may have different characteristics, have remained largely unexplored. Inevitably, this has led to a restricted view of grounding, and to problems when other types of discourse, such as news, are analyzed. For example, in a news text the present tense may occur in a sentence whose underlying proposition may have either a background or a foreground function or interpretation, depending on other factors. This also suggests that a background proposition does not refer only to past events encoded by flashback tenses. As will become apparent later on, a BG proposition in my approach may denote events that are simultaneous with those of a foreground proposition. So perfective and imperfective verb forms cannot necessarily be associated with either FG or BG meanings. A FG proposition, then, may be expressed in a sentence that denotes (recent) past, i.e. perfective, events as well as present (impending), or even future (still to come) ones.

Furthermore, contrary to what has been proposed, temporal sequentiality or main event-line is not an identifying criterion of FG in all discourse types. In fact, sequentiality is not always correlated with foregrounding, and temporally sequenced clauses do not comprise all crucial events (Kalmár 1982). (Information encoded in a temporal subordinate clause in the Past Perfect can

move us forward in narrative time (Couper-Kuhlen 1989).) Even if temporal succession works as a criterion for narrative discourse, and FG propositions describe successive events (e.g. Tomlin 1985), it is apparent that it does not apply to other types of discourse such as news, since that discourse does not manifest a sequentially organized summary or gist. Accordingly, features such as a summary, viz. ‘backbone’, or iconic order do not form a solid basis for identifying FG in news texts. It is apparent that there is a difference between *narrative foreground* and *news foreground*.

Apart from that, *news foreground* and *news background* are not organized — respectively — in terms of events and non-events. *Background* may also be about an event and not a state. It should be noted in this regard that a background function in news discourse is assigned relative to other grounding values and not relative to the macrostructure.

Nor are *news foreground* and *news background* organized in terms of (a mapping of) new and old information. A BG proposition may map new information. Besides, main participants are not the exclusive ‘property’ of FG. There are BG propositions that denote events involving main participants too.

That the criteria for the FG-BG distinction have been applied primarily and almost exclusively to narrative texts has led perhaps to the proposal that the FG-BG opposition should not be used for non-narrative texts. Reasons given for that are the absence of a clear criterion and the lack of FG-BG structuring in other types of text (Vetters 1992). But I have shown that the criteria — even for narrative discourse — are neither explicit nor solid. Furthermore, I do not share the restrictive view that FG-BG structure is absent in other types of text. News texts studied here — even those whose propositions are all subsumed under one macroproposition — do not consist of FG only. Therefore, one cannot lump together ‘main line’ events as representing solely FG. As will become apparent, the texts examined here demonstrate that in news texts a FG proposition refers to the main event and that the rest of what is traditionally called ‘event-line’ manifests another grounding value such as *midground*. This brings us to another important point, namely that although high-level (topical) information is one criterion for establishing FG, the macrostructure is not necessarily equivalent to FG. Not all propositions organized in a macrostructure are assigned FG interpretation. In this respect, my approach differs from other approaches that consider constituent propositions of a macrostructure as serving a FG function.

1.4.1 *The Contribution of the Present Study*

In what follows I highlight a few distinctive features of the present study.

The theory presented here proposes a clear distinction between on the one hand information structure in cognition and on the other hand the FG-BG propositional structure in semantic representations as well as the various production processes. The cognitive foundation of the model makes it possible to distinguish between the importance of information about facts and events, and its relevance to language users that may lead to *foregrounding* and *backgrounding* of meanings in the communicative situation. A *background* proposition may map *more relevant* information than other propositions having higher grounding values and mapping *more important* information. It may then be expressed more prominently. It is to be noted in this regard that the study highlights the relationship between the hierarchical structure of discourse constituents and information relevance — a relatively unexplored area (Longacre 1983).

In addition, my approach to grounding is that it is a phenomenon that exhibits a gradual scale. Among studies that support this approach are those of Reinhart (1984), Jones and Jones (1979), Longacre (1981) and Fleischman (1985, 1990). The assumption of a gradual scale — that each type of text encodes ‘progressive degrees of departure from the main line’ (Longacre 1989: 414) — makes it possible to distinguish degrees of grounding between textual propositions even where reference is made to events that are both sequentially arranged and tense-maintaining.

Since differential importance is assigned to information that is mapped on propositions, my approach to grounding is in terms of *whole* propositions and not single concepts that are part of propositions. Furthermore, the theoretical analysis of the grounding phenomenon is syntax-independent. The need for syntax-independent criteria for identifying foreground and background has been emphasized by Tomlin (1986), who tried to establish a connection between foreground and the significance of events ‘where significance is related to visual attention and where such attention can be determined independently of any text’ (op.cit.: 468).

Conceptually, the present study is close to a few other studies, primarily that of van Dijk (1984, 1988b), who considers information structure a separate structural dimension. My study extends this approach by examining the relation — similarity and difference — between FG-BG articulation and other