



**K. ISHIGURO'S *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY*:  
FOREGROUNDING AND OPENNESS OF MEANING**

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**Introduction: On *figure* and *ground***

It is common knowledge that the notion of figure and ground is a central concept in cognitive linguistics, which also means that it has been used to develop a detailed grammatical framework for close analysis, as well as very abstract ideas across whole discourses (see van Peer, 1993; also Short, 1996; also Stockwell, 2002 and 2003). It is also acknowledged that the phenomenon of figure and ground relates to the literary critical notion of *foregrounding*. The latter refers to how we perceive certain aspects of literary texts as being conspicuously more important or salient than others. This is being achieved at textual level by such devices as repetition, unusual naming, innovative descriptions, creative syntactic ordering, puns, rhyme, the use of creative metaphor, and so on. These devices are meant as attention attractors to some element, foregrounding it against the relief of the rest of the features of the text. The principles of prominence and newness work towards focusing attention on a particular feature/ character/ setting, within the textual space. According to Stockwell, there is a dynamic relationship between the processes of *figuring* and *grounding*, as elements of the text are thrown into relief in the course of reading or actualising the text. By a constant renewal of the figure and ground relationship, the text works against the *inhibition of return*, i.e. the loss of attention to static or unchanging elements (2002: 14-19). Still, we also think that any description of a text is one's personal option of choosing out of a multitude of details and textual interrelationships those that have been placed in the foreground of the text itself. We consider that a text can be unlocked with the key offered by the interplay of emphases amongst its parts and partial elements. This can become a guarantee of one successful decoding from the part of the reader that will make him go on reading the text. That is why our argument is meant to prove that the constant interplay at any given moment between openness of meaning and strategies of foregrounding represents a vital aspect of textuality.

Much debate has been given to the theory of foregrounding since its conceptualisation by the Russian Formalists and Prague Structuralists. Subsequently, it has developed into a systematic coherent theory with immediate relevance for the literary texts by describing the linguistic mechanisms involved in concrete cases of foregrounding.

Willie van Peer focuses in his study on foregrounding, upon the central characteristic of this notion, namely “the characteristics, typically encountered in literary texts of deviating from rules and habits, while at the same time displaying unusual regularity through partial repetition” (1993: 50), that is both *deviance* and *parallelism*. The former device refers to “deviation” as introduced in a text through neologisms, archaisms, metaphors, paradox, and hyperbaton – functioning as a disruption to the linguistic expectations we approach a text with. The latter device refers to “parallelism” such as syntactic symmetry, doublets, ellipsis, and semantic contrast – functioning as

reinforcement due to the degree of extra regularity brought in by means of repeated elements.

Foregrounding may occur at any level: phonological, grammatical, semantic and pragmatic. In each case, the effect is one of “heightened psychological attention” (Peer, 1993: 50) as a particular referent is established in the foreground of consciousness while other discourse referents remain in the background.

Hopper and Thomson have argued that foregrounded clauses are high in “*transitivity*, a complex notion involving verb tense or aspect, the number of participants in the clause and their case roles as well as other grammatical factors” (qtd. in Brown, 1983: 165).

We certainly do not profess that the reader should be baffled by theories and concepts to highlight her/his awareness of the text, since any moment in a text beyond the immediate beginning and close, can and must be read both prospectively and retrospectively.

However, it remains for us to prove that even beginnings tend to be open and to indicate significant emphases. This is readily apparent with the opening paragraph of K. Ishiguro’s novel *The Remains of the Day* — the winner of the 1989 Booker Prize.

### **Foregrounding and textual interrelationships: an exemplary beginning**

Our argument intends to demonstrate how through a technique of foreshadowing, the thematic hypersignification of the novel’s larger discourse discloses itself from the very first paragraph. In other words we will try to highlight how the very beginning of the novel may suggest the outcome of the novel, thus ensuring the structural and thematic unity of the whole.

It seems increasingly likely that I really will undertake the expedition that has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days. (1) An expedition, I should say, which I will undertake alone, in the comfort of Mr. Farraday’s Ford; an expedition which, as I foresee it, will take me through much of the finest countryside of England to the West Country, and may keep me away from Darlington Hall for as much as five or six days. (2) The idea of such a journey came about, I should point out, from a most kind suggestion put to me by Mr Farraday himself one afternoon almost a fortnight ago, when I had been dusting the portraits in the library. (3) In fact, as I recall, I was up on the step-ladder dusting the portrait of Viscount Wetherby when my employer had entered carrying a few volumes which he presumably wished returned to the shelves. (4) On seeing my person, he took the opportunity to inform me that he had just that moment finalised plans to return to the United States for a period of five weeks between August and September. (5) Having made this announcement, my employer put his volumes down on a table, seated himself on the chaise longue, and stretched out his legs. (6) It was then, gazing up at me, that he said: [...] (7) (Ishiguro, 1989: 3).

The “turbulence as immense as it is slow” (Rushdie, 1991: 34) lying below the understatement of the novel’s surface is envisaged through a masterful handling of foregrounding strategies. The very first extraposition of a clausal subject in the opening line signals a brilliant subversion of the fictional modes to which the novel seems to align. It further signals that the novel’s larger discourse will move back to a previous point in time to attempt to explain this present moment. The formal stiffness and stillness introduced through the phrase “It seems increasingly likely” (1) will become crucial both for understanding the narrator – narratee relationship and the major theme of the novel.

The existence of two subjects, which we may identify as the *postponed subject* (the clause which is notionally the subject of the sentence) and the *anticipatory subject* (“it”) pinpoints the coexistence of an *experiencing mode* and an *observing mode* within the narrative voice, the “I” – speaker, which is both narrator and participant.

The objectifying of the first person narrator through language on the syntagmatic axis [“my imagination” (1); “I will undertake *alone*”; “it will take *me*”; “may keep *me* away” (2); “suggestion put to *me* (3); “my employer” (4); “my person”; “to inform *me*” (5); “my employer” (6); “gazing at *me*” (7) ] is also apparent in the way the writer makes the speaker relate his own *centre* to the surrounding cognitive environment. This is controlled through a range of deictic elements encoding the spatio – temporal context and subjective experience of the encoder. The way mental proximity and distance is deictically encoded in the discourse event is another instance of foregrounding both grammatically and lexically [“the expedition” (1); “An expedition” (2); “now for some days” (1); “as I foresee *it*” (2); “The idea of *such a* journey” (3); “one afternoon almost a fortnight ago” (3); “On seeing” (5); “he had just *that* moment finalised” (5); “a period of five weeks” (5); “It was *then*” (7)].

The choice of words on the paradigmatic axis is also significant to the purpose of foreshadowing the central theme of the novel: the dichotomy appearance / reality, seeming / being, extrapolated from the real story of a man (Stevens, a butler well past his prime) destroyed by his own ideas upon which he has built his life, to the more serious issue of the end or at least passing of a certain kind of Britain and Englishness. The word “expedition” (1, 2), carries a connotation (exploration, warfare, purpose) which through foregrounding is immediately brought to the reader’s awareness; “journey” (3), its extensive doublet deters the former word’s meaning from becoming too conspicuous, exactly as all the big questions “preoccupying” the hero’s mind are deterred from getting the answers the hero feels his duty to give. The word “imagination” (1) is an instance of semantic contrast on the paradigmatic axis which together with the semantic charge embedded in the process verb “undertake” (1, 2) will point to the time and space of the action. Moreover, the right-branching of the foregrounded sentences beginning with the complement “expedition” (2), preceded by the indefinite article with anaphoric function could also be regarded like a deictic element in the multitude of textual interrelationships.

The complexities of modality, both epistemic and deontic are carried out at both paradigmatic and syntagmatic levels. At the paradigmatic level, through the choice of words pertaining to modality [“seems increasingly likely” (1); “really”; “will” (1); “should say”; “will”; “will” “may” (2); “should” (3); “presumably” ; “wished” (4)]. At the syntagmatic level, the interruptions caused in discourse through apparently overformal asides carry that supplementary deictic function of sharing experience, negotiating meaning between narrator and reader [“I should say” (2); “as I foresee *it*” (2); “I should point out” (3); “as I recall” (4)]. Further more, they ensure the coherence of the discourse, trapping the reader into a more active and imaginative engagement with the text, due to more implicit cohesive ties. The so far achieved congruence of the text is also a modality of increasing awareness as to the understatement of a perfectly smooth, not-important-type of narration.

The more immobile everything looks, the more devastating it is perceived by the experiencing narrator. The “time-hallowed bonds between master and servant, and the codes by which both live, are no longer dependable absolutes but rather sources of ruinous self deceptions,” opinions Rushdie (1991: 37).

Alongside with such cohesive devices as substitutions, repetitions, embedding, there are more overt connections used at the syntagmatic level: subordination [“that” (1); “which” (2); “when” (3, 4); “On seeing” (5); “Having made” (6)]; or conjuncts, “In fact” (4), indicating the connection between what is being said and what was said before.

Regarding the value of tense and aspect they may have relevance when speaking about *coding time*, *content time* and *receiving time*, but most of all with a view to foreshadowing the hypersignification of the larger discourse.

The staccato rhythm imposed by the paradigmatic choices as well as the hyperbaton cause – effect phenomenon of foregrounding, is also relevant for the textual interrelationships.

As “Still (or smooth) waters run deep”, there is a lot the reader has to ask himself after the first paragraph of the novel: Who is the “I” unfolding so neatly and conscientiously the ideas “preoccupying” his “imagination”? What is the real nature of “the expedition” which is thrown into focus by the anaphoric and cataphoric “It” beginning the sentence? Who is Mr. Farraday in whose Ford the speaker will undertake the expedition alone? What is their relationship? What does “Darlington Hall” represent to the narrator that he may feel kept away from it, be it only for five or six days? Why does the narrator have to foresee the finest countryside of England?

The verb tenses recede one by one into the past [“seems”; “will undertake”; “has been preoccupying”; “came”; “had been dusting”; “was”; “had entered”; “took the opportunity”; “had finalized”; “put”; “; “seated” “stretched”; “said”], inverting text order and story order and suggesting a sequence of conflicts prior to the present time temporal adverb “now” from sentence one.

All these details on both paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes are meant to open discourse up towards story and hypersignification, highlighting ways of opening meaning within the novel.

### **Concluding remarks**

“You see, I trusted [...]. I can’t even say I made my own mistakes. Really— one has to ask oneself — what dignity is there in that?” (Ishiguro, 1989: 243)

Is our argument together with *the expedition*, intensively and extensively foregrounded by the author, to acquire the same cruelly beautiful question/ answer conclusion?

The point is that we tried to show how Kazuo Ishiguro through an apparently obscuring surface, manages to disclose a complex of attitudes and emotions, thus opening meaning through technique; how through congruence amongst paradigmatic choices and syntagmatic and grammatical cohesion the author manages at once to conceal and disclose the implicit relationship between fallible narrator and self-deceptive narrate.

### **References**

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### **Abstract**

*In what concerns the literary text, the renewal of the dynamics of stylistic markers, the so-called attractors, represents the key to focusing the reader's attention and hindering the inhibition of return (Stockwell, 2002). What we used to call "literary competence" has become, according to the cognitive poetics, experimental learning of competency and assuming control over the way in which the reader's attention in the textual game between figuring and grounding is being achieved. Our present argument centers on how foregrounding strategies contributing to literariness are inductive of narrative hypersignification too.*

### **Résumé**

*Dans le cas du texte littéraire, le renouvellement de la dynamique des particularités stylistiques, ce qu'on appelle attracteurs (Stockwell, 2002), représente la clef du succès dans la focalisation de l'attention du lecteur et l'inhibition de la défocalisation. Ce qu'on appelait traditionnellement « compétence littéraire », les poètes cognitivistes appellent aujourd'hui apprentissage expérimental de la compétence et contrôle sur la manière de focalisation de l'attention dans le jeu textuel entre figure et arrière-plan. Notre travail se propose de démontrer que les stratégies de mise en évidence (foregrounding, ayant comme effet l'induction de la littérarité, aident à la construction de l'hypersignification roumaine.*

### **Rezumat**

*În cazul textului literar, reînnoirea dinamicii particularităților stilistice, așa numiții atractori (Stockwell, 2002), reprezintă cheia succesului în focalizarea atenției lectorului și inhibarea defocalizării. Ceea ce tradițional se numea „competență literară”, poeticienii cogniviști numesc acum învățare experimentală a competenței dar și control asupra modului de focalizare a atenției în jocul textual între figură și fundal. Demonstratia noastră își propune să dovedească că strategiile de evidențiere (foregrounding) ce au ca efect inducerea literarității ajută la construirea hipersemnificației românești.*