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Foregrounding, burying, and plot construction

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This article examines the way in which aspects of a story may be made more or less prominent for plot purposes through the use of foregrounding and burying devices. The normal expectation of readers is that foregrounding will be used to highlight significant information and that the relatively insignificant parts of a text will fall into the background. Nevertheless, for plot purposes, the reverse may often be the case. We explore this by looking at detective fiction, a genre where the intricacy of the plot is an important, or even *the* most important, part of reading. In detective fiction, the objective is to confuse the reader about the significance of information in both the foreground and background of a text, hence creating a puzzle which can subsequently be solved in a surprising way. We demonstrate how reader attention can be manipulated by foregrounding plot-insignificant items and burying plot-significant items in the background.

Foregrounding and depth of processing

The term "foregrounding" was first used in stylistics in Garvin's (1964) translation of the work of Havránek (1964) and Mukařovský (1964a/b). It generally refers to cases where the language is sufficiently deviant to draw attention to itself and thereby prompt an interpretation of extra meaning. Foregrounding is recognised as occurring at all linguistic levels, and common types are sound play, unusual graphical patterning, excessive lexical and pronominal repetition, unusual word choices, highly creative metaphors, parallelism, and breaches of the usual discourse structure. The functions of foregrounding can be various, including highlighting specific key points, producing thematic meaning, prompting an emotional response, and yielding iconic effects. Accounts of foregrounding are provided by many stylisticians including van Peer (1986), Douthwaite (2000), Emmott (2002), van Peer and Hakemulder (2006), van Peer (2007), Leech and Short (2007), Leech (2008) and A.J. Sanford and Emmott (in press).

For some stylisticians, foregrounding is particularly important as a means of prompting literary interpretations. Miall and Kuiken (1994: 390) argue (following Mukařovský) that although foregrounding is found in everyday language, it is more "structured" in literary texts. This is one notion of foregrounding, but nevertheless there are many non-literary texts that use extensive and "structured" linguistic patterning for rhetorical purposes, such as advertising language, political speeches and, as we will illustrate in this article, popular fiction. We use the term "foregrounding" here to cover any type of language use which may be assumed to prompt attention, regardless of whether it has literary value. Foregrounding in this

sense relates simply to whether an item is likely to be noticeable or not, and our interest is in whether it has rhetorical significance generally rather than literary significance specifically.

For the forms of foregrounding, we include not only those types of *deviant linguistic usage* that are the conventional domain of foregrounding studies, but also suggest that *standard systemic choices* (choices in the language system) are important if they have some impact in terms of noticeability. So, for example, it has been well-demonstrated in psychology that information that is not subordinated grammatically is more noticeable than information that is subordinated (e.g. Baker and Wagner, 1987; see A.J. Sanford and Emmott, in press, for a survey of relevant work). These systemic options may not be unusual as such, but may nevertheless direct attention towards one item rather than another.

The term "foregrounding" has a degree of ambiguity because it can apply either to the linguistic devices used to create prominence or to the effect of bringing parts of a mental representation to the forefront of attention. Psychologists have shown that foregrounding affects *depth of (semantic) processing*, the extent to which a reader fully engages with the semantic content of the information presented (e.g. A.J. Sanford, 2002; A.J. Sanford and Sturt, 2002; A.J. Sanford and Emmott, in press). Foregrounding, in this more general sense, may involve a broader range of strategies than making micro-level stylistic choices, whether deviant or systemic. Hence, a writer may manipulate attention by anticipating a reader's processing strategies more generally, as we describe in the remainder of this section.

Firstly, an item (e.g. an object such as an ornate pen or a smart attaché-case) may be given *narrative world salience* by virtue of the fact that it has apparent importance for one or more characters in the narrative world, regardless of whether

this is conveyed by unusual language. This may be simply due to the striking properties of the item, but may also be due to how the characters respond to it. So, for example, if a character in a story becomes particularly interested in an item, the reader may view that item as potentially more significant. This effect might also be enhanced if the character is deemed to be "reliable" (Booth, 1991; Zunshine, 2006), hence ensuring that their interest is taken more seriously.

Secondly, *text position* may be used to present information in ways that are not linguistically unusual, but which may nevertheless affect processing. For example, if a reader is expected to make an inference from two or more pieces of information, then placing these pieces of information close together may foreground their connection and hence facilitate the ability to make that inference – the opposite of this may be that it is less easy to draw an inference if the relevant information is separated. Another example of the possible influence of text position is that a reader might be more receptive to viewing information as relevant to a puzzle if that information is given after that puzzle has been presented, when the reader is in puzzle-solving mode – conversely, information might not be so readily used in puzzle-solving if it is presented too early.

A third way of controlling information processing is to prompt *selective focus*. Psychologists have shown that readers often focus on specific aspects of an item or scene, but not necessarily on *all* aspects (e.g. Barton and Sanford, 1993). Hence depth of processing can be highly differential, with the consequence that readers may not make certain inferences, particularly if they are distracted. Stylistic deviance and standard systemic choices can direct inferencing, but inferencing can also be controlled by the amount and nature of detail given before, during and after crucial points in a text. For example, Guéraud, Tapiero and O'Brien (2008) have shown that

if a reader is given different background information about a character before reading a passage, readers can make quite different inferences about the same reported action.

Burying

If some items are brought into the foreground, then other items are left in the background. The notion of background is little studied by stylisticians (apart from our own previous work, e.g. Emmott et al., in press), but has been of some interest to linguists (e.g. Givón, 1987; Thompson, 1987) and psychologists (Baker and Wagner, 1987; A.J. Sanford and Sturt, 2002; A.J.S. Sanford, Price and Sanford, 2009).

Possibly stylisticians have not been interested in background because placing information in the background is not usually viewed as a major strategic choice. Nevertheless, for plot purposes, deliberately burying information in the background of a text is highly strategic. By "burying", we mean that an item is placed in the background with the intention that it should not be easily found. It is well-known that some advertisements and contracts can hide unpalatable facts in the small print and that politicians might hide unpopular details in the less prominent parts of their speeches. Our interest here is in how information which will eventually be used to solve a puzzle in a detective story is hidden until it is revealed at the end of a story as a solution, hence enhancing curiosity until that point and creating surprise.

Some of the techniques for burying an item (or burying its significance) are as follows:

(i) Mention the item as little as possible.

(ii) Use linguistic structures which have been shown empirically to reduce prominence (e.g. embed a mention of the item within a subordinate clause).

(iii) Under-specify the item, describing it in a way that is sufficiently imprecise that it draws little attention to it or detracts from features of the item that are relevant to the plot.

(iv) Place the item next to an item that is more prominent, so that the focus is on the more prominent item. Hence, when foregrounding is used it may have an automatic effect of downplaying nearby items, like a spotlight that makes items around the light less noticeable.

(v) Make the item apparently unimportant in the narrative world (even though it is actually significant).

(vi) Make it difficult for the reader to make inferences by splitting up information needed to make the inferences.

(vii) Place information in positions where a reader is distracted or not yet interested.

(viii) Stress one specific aspect of the item so that another aspect (which will eventually be important for the solution) becomes less prominent.

This may also be done *after* the original description. Psychology research shows that inferences can be more short-lived if attention is subsequently directed elsewhere (e.g. Keefe and McDaniel, 1993). Moreover, research on real-life eye-witness testimony indicates that memory for events may be changed by subsequent re-tellings of a story (Loftus and Loftus, 1980).

(ix) Give the item a false significance, so that the real significance is buried.

(x) Get the narrator or characters in the story to say that the item is uninteresting.

(xi) Discredit the characters reporting certain information, thereby making them appear unreliable and giving less salience to the information they report.

We will explore these techniques in the following section.

Attention manipulation and plot construction in detective fiction

Strategies for information management in detective fiction

When attention is manipulated for plot purposes, foregrounding can be used strategically to misdirect the reader, accompanied by burying which is inherently

deceptive. In our discussion of detective fiction, we will distinguish between the handling of plot-significant and plot-insignificant items. By plot, we mean here the solving of a mystery, such as a suspicious death – we are using this definition simply for ease of exposition as clearly there may be other aspects of the plot apart from the main puzzle, even in detective fiction. A *plot-significant item* is important to the solution, such as a vital piece of evidence about how a suspicious death took place, whereas a *plot-insignificant item*, by contrast, has no such importance.

We propose that the key rhetorical strategies that can be found in detective fiction are as follows. These strategies make use of the techniques for foregrounding and burying already discussed:

- **Strategy 1: At the pre-solution stage – foreground plot-insignificant items**

    This is the classic "red herring" of detective fiction. An item may be made to seem significant at the time of presentation, but later it seems that there was a false trail and, at the solution stage, the item turns out to be plot-insignificant.

- **Strategy 2: At the pre-solution stage – bury plot-significant items**

    Detective writers need to introduce the items that will eventually contribute to the solution. If they did not introduce them at all, they would be accused of playing foul (Van Dine, 1928 [2012]). The skill lies in mentioning these items without drawing attention to them or to their

significance so that they are not suspected of being relevant to the solution.

- **Strategy 3: At the solution stage – foreground plot-significant details that were previously buried and make the solution seem credible.**

  As the solution is revealed, previously buried details are shown to have plot significance. Ideally this should be a surprise, but nevertheless a surprise which is apparently credible in retrospect. Foregrounding can heighten the sense of authority of the detective revealing the solution and add to the feeling that the solution is satisfactory.

- **Strategy 4: Throughout the text – manage the reversal in significance.**

  One important point about how these strategies work together is that they require a substantial reversal at some point in the story, as buried items are revealed and red herrings are abandoned. Not only must the solution seem credible in its own right (strategy 3) but the reversal must be either explained or glossed over (strategy 4). One option is that characters simply admit that they were wrong previously and/or take advantage of the appearance of new evidence. Throughout the text the author may also use rhetorical strategies to make the reversal plausible, such as taking care not to make too firm a commitment to a particular description at the pre-solution stage.

These four strategies can be argued to act together to form the essential schema of information management in detective fiction. An alternative to strategies 1 and 2 is the following:

- **Strategy 1-2-ALT: At the pre-solution stage – attach displaced or false significance to a plot-significant item.**

  This technique may involve both foregrounding and burying together, combining strategies 1 and 2 above. A writer can clearly identify an item (even foreground it), but draw attention to an aspect of it which is not the aspect that is relevant to solving the puzzle (displaced significance), or attach a false significance to the item. This may work if the reader is adequately distracted and/or is highly unlikely to see the real significance of the item. The item can serve as its own red herring, since some aspect or interpretation of it is misleading.

To examine these strategies, we look particularly at the work of Agatha Christie, the so-called "Queen of Crime" (e.g. Haining, 1990: 11f.). In previous studies of her work, we have focused mainly on how she presents characters and scenes (Emmott, 1997; Alexander, 2006; Emmott and Alexander, 2010; Emmott et al., 2010; Emmott et al., in press). In this article we look largely at objects. The stories we discuss have many different plot elements, so we are selective in our presentation below and are not aiming for a full exposition of the plots. (For a fuller explanation of a Christie story, see Emmott and Alexander, 2010.) Plot manipulations which might seem

obvious when discussed out of context may be very difficult to spot in the original texts where they are part of a much more complex plot structure.

Exploring strategies 1 to 4: The basic schema for information management in detective fiction

In this section, we demonstrate how Christie utilises the core strategies 1 to 4 to selectively emphasize certain parts of a scene (strategy 1-2-ALT will be examined in the next section). Christie often presents a list of items in which one or more of these items has plot significance, but the reader is left to infer which one from the description. Christie's trick is to use foregrounding to lead the reader down the wrong path at the pre-solution stage, but in a way that allows a subsequent very different interpretation of the scene at the solution stage. In "Murder in the Mews", the following list of items on a writing-bureau occurs when Hercule Poirot, Christie's famous detective, and Inspector Japp are in the process of examining a room in a house where a dead woman has been found.

(1a) Poirot strayed across to the writing-bureau. […]

There was a somewhat massive silver inkstand in the centre, in front of it a handsome green lacquer blotter. To the left of the blotter was an emerald glass pen-tray containing a silver penholder – a stick of green sealing-wax, a pencil and two stamps. On the right of the blotter was a movable calendar giving the day of the week, date and month. There was also a little glass jar of shot and standing in it <u>a flamboyant green quill pen. Poirot seemed interested in the pen. He took it out and looked at it but the quill was</u>

innocent of ink. It was clearly a decoration – nothing more. The silver penholder with the ink-stained nib was the one in use. His eyes strayed to the calendar.

"Tuesday, November fifth," said Japp. "Yesterday. That's all correct."

[Poirot and Japp discuss the time of death with the forensic expert.]

Poirot had turned back the cover of the blotter.

"Good idea," said Japp. "But no luck."

The blotter showed an innocent white sheet of blotting-paper. Poirot turned over the leaves but they were all the same.

He turned his attention to the waste-paper basket. [He finds various old circulars and standard letters.]

"Nothing there," said Japp. […]

Poirot still seemed fascinated by the writing-bureau and its appointments.

He left the room, but at the door his eyes went back once more to the flaunting emerald quill pen. (Christie (1964: 11-13), our underlining)

The description of the green/emerald quill pen as first "flamboyant" and then, at the end of the extract, "flaunting" gives this item apparent narrative-world salience. The attention of a character can control the way information is presented, and may thereby control the attention of the reader. In the second paragraph, we are told that "Poirot seemed interested" in the quill pen and we watch him examine it. At the end of this example, we learn that he "still seemed fascinated by the writing-bureau" and the one item that is then singled out is the quill pen, with Poirot's gaze reverting to it. The text position is important here, since this provides a conclusion to the scene and is also

placed right at the end of a chapter. All of these factors might be said to foreground the quill pen (using the term "foregrounding" in the general sense of making it prominent).

In fact, Christie is using strategy 1 here since the quill pen is really a red herring. By the solution stage, interest in the quill pen will need to be dropped as the real solution is revealed, and so in Example (1a) Christie allows herself some room for manoeuvre (strategy 4). When she mentions that Poirot "seemed" interested and fascinated this does not give full narratorial commitment to these descriptions. Either the narrator is mistaken about Poirot's interest, or, if the narrator is right, Poirot is interested in a red herring. In theory, this might not reflect well on his detective skills, but in practice there are ways round this potential difficulty in plot construction. In her books generally, Christie's detectives sometimes have revelations about the solution part-way through the story, so if their interpretation of an early scene is retrospectively seen to be unreliable it can be excused on those grounds (Poirot has a revelation of this type in "Murder in the Mews" (p. 40)). Moreover, Christie can rely on the fact that when a solution is provided many pages later, the reader may have forgotten exactly how information was initially presented (a text position factor) and is likely to be focusing on the solution rather than on the red herrings.

Prior to the solution, a red herring, by its very nature, diverts attention from other items in a story and may therefore make them less prominent. In the above example, Christie also uses the attention of the characters to close down interest in the other items. This is strategy 2. When the pen tray is first mentioned, the description immediately moves on to the items it contains, then the calendar. Later mention of the silver penholder is followed by Poirot's eyes straying to the calendar. Likewise, after

examination of the blotter, Poirot's attention again moves on. The waste-paper basket appears to have no interest due to Japp's conclusion "Nothing there".

Indeed, what eventually turns out to be of interest at the solution stage is, firstly, the absence of any used blotting-paper on the blotter or in the waste-paper basket, and, secondly, the relative position of some of the items on the writing-table. These factors turn out to be plot-significant because they provide evidence that the death was suicide and not murder (one of the characters has been framed for murder). The relevant plot information necessary to understand this part of the solution (and hence Example (1b) below) is as follows: The top sheet of blotting paper has been deliberately removed to avoid showing the evidence that a suicide note had been written. In addition, the relative position of the items gives evidence that the dead woman was left-handed, since the pen-tray is placed to the left of the blotter. Her left-handedness explains that she would have been able to shoot herself and thereby commit suicide, since the entry point of the wound is on the left of the head. This left-handedness is hidden from readers throughout the story since the gun was found in her right hand, supposedly making it impossible for her to commit suicide and therefore erroneously suggesting murder.

At the solution stage, Christie uses strategy 3 as Hercule Poirot reveals the solution, employing heavy foregrounding in Example (1b) to emphasize aspects of the scene which were not previously emphasized.

(1b) "[…] And now I come to something really interesting – I come, my friends, to the writing-bureau. […] That was really *very* odd – *very* remarkable! For two reasons. The first reason was that something was missing from that writing-table. […] *A sheet of blotting-paper,*

mademoiselle. The blotting-book had on top a clean, untouched piece of blotting-paper. […] *it was not in the waste-paper basket*. […] A curious little problem. I looked everywhere, in the waste-paper baskets, in the dustbin, but I could not find a sheet of used blotting-paper – and that seemed to me very important. […] But there was a second curious point about the writing-table. Perhaps, Japp, you remember roughly the arrangement of it? Blotter and inkstand in the centre, pen tray to the left, calendar and quill pen to the right. *Eh bien?* You do not see? The quill pen, remember, I examined, it was for show only – it had not been used. Ah! *still* you do not see? I will say it again. Blotter in the centre pen tray to the left – to the *left*, Japp. But is it not usual to find a pen tray *on the right*, convenient to *the right hand*?

   "Ah, now it comes to you, does it not? The pen tray on the *left* [… (Poirot here turns to speak to the accused woman) …] you find your friend there lying dead with the pistol clasped in her hand – the left hand, naturally, *since she is left-handed* and therefore, too, the bullet has entered on the *left side of the head*. […] You take the pistol, wipe it and place it in the *right* hand."
(Christie (1964: 51-2), Christie's italics)

The heavy foregrounding here not only offers a re-framing of the information, but also serves to suggest the authority of the detective and the supposed obviousness and hence credibility of the solution. All the italics are Christie's and these emphasise key points (see A.J.S. Sanford et al. (2006) for psychological evidence of the foregrounding properties of italics). Since this solution is revealed in direct speech the italics can be justified as reflecting the speech stress of the speaker. The initial statements ("really interesting", "*very* odd", "*very* remarkable!") are highly

evaluative, and this evaluation continues throughout Poirot's revelations ("A curious little problem", "that seemed to me very important", "a second curious point"). In addition, Poirot somewhat laboriously uses rhetorical questions to spell out Japp's discovery process as if no other option is possible, hence also guiding the discovery process of the reader ("*Eh bien?* You do not see?", "Ah! *still* you do not see?", "Ah, now it comes to you, does it not?"). There is heavy repetition ("pen tray to the left", "to the *left*", "The pen tray on the *left*", "the left hand", "she is *left-handed*") and Poirot even says "I will say it again" to emphasize this repetition. Adverbs such as "naturally" and "therefore" also stress the supposed inevitability of this explanation. The negative findings about the blotter and the waste-paper bin during the original search in Example (1a) ("But no luck", "innocent", "Nothing there") are re-framed as being key findings, since it is now viewed as significant that these findings were negative. This is an example similar to Sherlock Holmes' observation about "the curious incident of the dog in the night-time" (Doyle 1981: 347), where the curious incident is that the dog did nothing (Christie explicitly makes this inter-textual reference in this story, although in relation to another clue). In everyday life, things are generally of interest because they are present, but in detective stories, the absence of an item can be more relevant as evidence.

The general pattern here, therefore, is to detract attention from key factors in a scene, but then to highlight their importance later. A further set of examples from "Murder in the Mews" also follows this pattern, again using the listing technique. Hercule Poirot watches Chief Inspector Japp search a cupboard in the dead woman's house. The surviving resident, Jane Plenderleith, is also present and her body language suggests that the cupboard may contain something suspicious (e.g. "Poirot felt the girl at his side stiffen and stop breathing for a second", p. 34).

(2a) There was not very much in the cupboard. Three umbrellas – one broken, four walking-sticks, a set of golf clubs, two tennis racquets, a neatly-folded rug and several sofa cushions in various stages of dilapidation. On top of these last reposed a small, smart-looking attaché-case. (Christie (1964: 34))

Here, strategy 1 is used to foreground the attaché-case. It is stereotypically the most likely item to be associated with a mystery, giving it narrative world salience. Its description is placed in a separate sentence which psychologists have shown to have an enhancing effect (e.g. Kintsch and Keenan, 1973). It is also described using extra adjectives, which again have been found to raise attention levels (A.J. Sanford and Garrod, 1981). Conversely, strategy 2 is used to bury the real plot-significant item, the golf clubs. The mention of the golf clubs is placed in the middle of a list, plausibly surrounded by other outdoor equipment, and there is no extra description. As the story progresses, strategy 1 continues as the attention of the detectives focuses on the attaché-case, as in Example (2b) where the "something" is emphasised with italics then repeated and linked to the attaché-case. The last statement comes from Chief Inspector Japp who might be thought to provide a reliable opinion, but in fact is wrong here.

(2b) "What the – the hell was there in that cupboard? There was *something*."

"Yes, there was something."

"And I'll bet ten to one it was something to do with the attaché-case!"

(Christie (1964: 35), Christie's italics)

Subsequently, Japp moves from this bet to linking the girl's body language not with the items in the cupboard generally, but specifically with the attaché-case by presupposing its effect on the girl and also elevating the case (somewhat jokily) to title status.

(2c) "I'd like to know *why* she went all hot and bothered about that little attaché-case under the stairs [...] The Mystery of the Small Attaché-Case. Sounds quite promising!" (Christie (1964: 35), Christie's italics)

When the solution is revealed, as shown in Example (2d), foregrounding is used (strategy 3) to highlight the supposed inevitability of the new interpretation, the golf clubs now being recognised as plot significant since they provide additional evidence of the left-handedness of the victim. Christie makes use here of repetition and italicization as foregrounding devices, as in Example (1b).

(2d) "The golf clubs. The golf clubs, Japp. *They were the golf clubs of a left-handed person.* Jane Plenderleith kept her clubs at Wentworth. Those were Barbara Allen's [the dead girl's] clubs. […] She tries to focus our attention on the *wrong object* […] that, my friend, is the truth of 'The Mystery of the Attaché-Case.' " (Christie (1964: 54-5), Christie's italics)

The overall argument is made to seem more convincing by making several similar revelations at once (e.g. the left-handedness in Examples (1b) and (2d) above), whether or not explanations of specific clues are fully convincing. Poirot's delivery of

the solution moves on rapidly from point to point, giving the reader little opportunity to contemplate each stage of the explanation before the next piece of evidence is presented. In case the reader has any doubts, Christie may then show the guilty person admitting the crime, hence giving the solution a real status in the narrative world, whether or not it is a very credible solution technically.

Exploring strategy 1-2-ALT: Displaced and false significance

Even when an entity is clearly mentioned, it may be possible to give it a different significance from the one that it will ultimately have as part of the solution (strategy 1-2-ALT). Certain objects are important in detective fiction due to their function as evidence or to support a particular construction of events generally. However, their roles can be different depending on how their function is understood. Detective stories are exercises in lateral thinking (de Bono, 1967) or its failure, as items need to be judged specifically in terms of whether or not they have a role in the crime, which may sometimes be a very unorthodox use.

For strategy 1-2-ALT, the author describes an item which has plot significance in some detail, but in a way that distracts attention from its true relevance. In Example 3 below, again from "Murder in the Mews", Poirot draws attention to a wrist-watch that will ultimately be shown to be significant because it is on the right hand, a fact that might seem unusual if the wearer is right-handed, but makes more sense if the wearer is left-handed (further evidence of the left-handedness of the victim, as discussed above).

(3) [Poirot] was still staring down at the body.

"Anything strike you?" Japp asked.

The question was careless but his eyes were keen and attentive.

Hercule Poirot shook his head slowly.

"I was looking at her wrist-watch."

He bent over and just touched it with a finger-tip. <u>It was a dainty jewelled affair on a black moiré strap on the wrist of the hand that held the pistol.</u>

"Rather a swell piece that," observed Japp. "Must have cost money!" He cocked his head inquiringly at Poirot. "Something in that maybe?"

"It is possible – yes." (Christie (1964: 11), our underlining)

Although the characters draw attention to the watch itself, the fact that it is on the right hand is buried in the third post-modifying prepositional phrase, with the details under-specified (it is described as "the hand that held the pistol" not "the right hand"). Moreover, attention is diverted from the watch's position. The discussion of the characters centres on the expense of the watch, placing the focus of interest on the description of the watch given earlier in the noun phrase (its "jewelled" nature). Hence, the appearance of the watch seems likely to attract the greatest depth of processing, rather than its position. The lack of clarity about the location of the watch due to under-specification is also enhanced by text position. If the description of the watch had come directly after the description of the body (where it is made quite clear that the pistol is in the right hand) (pp. 10-11), then it might have been more evident, but Christie ensures that there is over two-thirds of a page of intervening text (including a dramatic disclosure) so that the inference cannot be so easily made.

Example (4a), from Christie's *Hallowe'en Party*, also shows displaced significance (strategy 1-2-ALT), this time in relation to an incident in which a vase is broken. This incident is described at length so is reasonably prominent in the text – the interest lies in which specific aspects of the scene are emphasized.

(4a) "[…] [Mrs Drake] was carrying a large vase of mixed autumn leaves and flowers. She stood at the angle of the staircase, pausing for a moment before coming downstairs. <u>She was looking down over the well of the staircase. Not in my direction. She was looking towards the other end of the hall where there is a door leading into the library</u>. It is set just across the hall from the door into the dining-room. As I say, she was <u>looking that way</u> and pausing for a moment before coming downstairs. She was shifting slightly the angle of the vase as it was a rather awkward thing to carry, and weighty if it was, as I presumed, <u>full of water</u>. She was shifting the position of it rather carefully so that she could hold it to her with one arm, and put out the other arm to the rail of the staircase as she came round the slightly shaped corner stairway. She stood there for a moment or two, <u>still not looking at what she was carrying, but towards the hall below</u>. And suddenly she made a sudden movement – a start I would describe it as – yes, definitely something had startled her. So much that she relinquished her hold of the vase and it fell, reversing itself as it did so so that <u>the water streamed over her</u> and <u>the vase itself crashed down to the hall below</u>, <u>where it broke in smithereens on the hall floor</u>."

"I see," said Poirot. He paused a minute or two, watching her. Her eyes, he noticed, were <u>shrewd and knowledgeable</u>. They were asking now his

opinion of what she was telling him. "What did you think had happened to startle her?"

"On reflection, afterwards, I thought she had seen something."

"You thought she had seen something," repeated Poirot, thoughtfully.

(Christie (1972: 70-1), our underlining)

Here, two aspects of the scene are highlighted in the subsequent discussion between Poirot and the witness reporting this incident (only the first few lines of this subsequent discussion are shown here, but it lasts for over a page and a half in the text). In the report of the incident, the witness suggests repeatedly that Mrs Drake sees something in the hall below and mentions that this may have startled her. Poirot then discusses this extensively in his questions since there is the possibility that she may have seen someone opening the door of the library, where the murder occurred. In addition, the consequence of the vase smashing (i.e. that the glass had to be swept up) is discussed. Again, these aspects of the story are red herrings. The key plot-significant fact is that Mrs Drake (who is in fact herself the murderer) was soaked with water since, as Poirot points out at the solution stage (p. 182), she drowned the victim and therefore may have needed to fabricate some alternative reason for being wet.

In this case, the main strategy is to emphasize other aspects of the incident, so that the reader may focus on those aspects and consequently give them greater depth of processing than the plot-significant aspect. The speaker's telling of the story is given greater credibility by Poirot himself since he views her as having "shrewd and knowledgeable" eyes – we have elsewhere termed this *reliability vouching* (Emmott and Alexander, 2010) since a supposedly reliable individual vouches for the reliability

of a witness, even though that witness is in fact mistaken in her interpretation of the scene. Also, in the witness's reported story itself, the plot-significant fact is only mentioned briefly and is somewhat buried in a list of consequences since it is followed by the dramatic breaking of the vase. In a later pre-solution re-telling of the incident by Poirot in Example (4b), the water element of the incident is entirely omitted. It may be that Poirot has not yet recognised its significance, but nevertheless his omission (and another lengthy discussion about the vase shattering and the possibility of being startled) serves to downplay that aspect of the scene until the solution is presented.

(4b) "But I understood that there was an accident. That the vase slipped out of your hand and it fell to the hall below and was shattered to pieces." (Christie (1972: 112))

By the time of the solution, the story is again re-framed, but this time with the emphasis on wetness (Example (4c)). The description of the soaking of Mrs Drake is placed alongside the description of the wetness of the murder, the words "wet" and "water" are foregrounded by repetition (strategy 3), and the extra details in the story are reduced so that the flooding of Mrs Drake has more prominence. This gives the argument a sense of inevitability, important if the reader is to see it as a credible explanation. This information was available from the prior story when the scene was first presented in Example (4a), but for that example Christie relied on the reader not making the connection when the wetness of the murder and the wetness of the vase incident were separated by several pages and not explicitly pointed out.

(4c) "Water. I wanted someone who was at the party and was _wet_, and who shouldn't have been wet. Whoever killed Joyce Reynolds would necessarily have got wet. You hold down a vigorous child with its head in a full bucket of water, and there will be struggling and splashing and you are bound to be wet. So something has got to happen to provide an innocent explanation of how you got wet. […] And so Joyce was killed and her murderer was fairly well soaked with water. There must be a reason for that and she set about creating a reason. She had to get a witness as to _how_ she got wet. She waited on the landing with an enormous vase of flowers filled with water. […] Mrs Drake pretended to start nervously, and let the vase go, taking care that it flooded her person as it crashed down to the hall below." (Christie (1972: 182), Christie's italics, our underlining).

In Example (4c), the argument is made more forceful by the use of a generic which sounds as if it is an unarguable law of nature ("You hold down a vigorous child […]") but may not always be true. The lack of speculative modal verbs such as "might" and "could", even though this is speculation, and the use of strong modal verbs such as "must" and expressions such as "so", "necessarily", "bound to", "has got to" and "had to", serve to reinforce the argument.

The above examples involve re-directing attention, so that the reader does not notice the important details. Another version of strategy 1-2-ALT is to quite blatantly foreground a clue, but to give it a false significance. In the following example from Christie's _Dumb Witness_, the dead woman, Miss Arundell, was present at a séance the night before her death and two witnesses describe an unusual manifestation over her head. This is foregrounded by italics and repeated mentions.

(5a) "[…] And you know we saw – we all three saw – *most* distinctly, <u>a kind of *halo*</u> round Miss Arundell's head."

"*Comment?*"

"Yes. It was a kind of <u>luminous haze</u>." She turned to her sister. "Isn't that how you would describe it, Isabel?"

"Yes. Yes, just that. <u>A luminous haze gradually surrounding Miss Arundell's head – an aureole of faint light</u>. It was <u>a *sign*</u> – we know that now – <u>a sign</u> that she was about to pass over to the other side. (Christie (1958: 96), Christie's italics, our underlining)

Later, the manifestation is again described by a third witness, although in somewhat different form, again with some repetition and italicization.

(5b) "[Ectoplasm] proceeds, you know, from the medium's mouth in the form of a *ribbon* and builds itself up into a *form*. […] On that evening I distinctly saw a *luminous ribbon* issuing from dear Miss Arundell's mouth! Then her head became enveloped in a luminous mist." (Christie (1958: 134-5), Christie's italics, our underlining)

Normally in a detective story evidence from three witnesses would be fairly conclusive, but the narrator repeatedly casts doubt on the credibility of this testimony as spiritualist nonsense. The narrator here is over-riding the foregrounding by *unreliability vouching*, by which we mean a supposedly reliable individual vouching for the unreliability of a witness (although in fact the speakers here are reporting a

real event, even though their interpretation is wrong). Later, the true facts are explained by Poirot (pp. 245-6), using expert knowledge – the dead woman was killed by phosphorus poisoning and this, we are told, can cause the breath to glow in the dark. Few readers are likely to have this knowledge, so are unlikely to consider this possibility.

Although Examples (5a) and (5b) are largely characterised by foregrounding, there may still be a small amount of burying linked to text position. The details of the luminous manifestation change somewhat between Examples (5a) and (5b). Poirot himself comments on this (p. 245) and dismisses it as just different versions of the same fact, but this change might be argued to have a rhetorical role. Possibly Christie strategically leaves the more explicit mention of the mouth in Example (5b) until this group of witnesses has been discredited, since there might be more risk of the reader linking a manifestation from the mouth with poisoning than a "*halo*".

Conclusion

The strategies discussed in this article reflect the core aspects of designing detective fiction plots, but also apply to plot construction in general. Writers of plots with surprise endings use foregrounding and burying to carefully direct readers in the hope of controlling their attention and thereby achieving rhetorical manipulation.

In addition to presenting a study of key strategies in creating plots in detective fiction, our article demonstrates the following points: (a) structured foregrounding is often discussed as a literary phenomenon but can be heavily used for rhetorical purposes in popular fiction, (b) in certain types of writing, the background of a text deserves study as well as the foreground, and (c) prominence may be achieved by a

wide range of means other than linguistic deviance. This may include standard systemic choices used for contrastive purposes, and such factors as narrative-world salience, text position, and the way in which inferences are controlled. In these respects, the view of foregrounding in this article differs somewhat from traditional accounts in stylistics, but fits in well with current psychological theories of attention control in text.

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