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SYNTAX and SEMANTICS

VOLUME 12
Discourse and Syntax

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ASPECT AND FOREGROUNDING IN DISCOURSE

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1. GENERAL PROPERTIES OF FOREGROUNDING

It is evidently a universal of narrative discourse that in any extended text
an overt distinction is made between the language of the actual story line
and the language of supportive material which does not itself narrate the
main events. I refer to the former—the parts of the narrative which relate
events belonging to the skeletal structure of the discourse—as FOREGROUND
and the latter as BACKGROUND. Swahili provides a typical and relatively
uncomplicated example of the distinction. We find that each narrative
episode begins with a verb having an explicit tense marker, usually the
preterite prefix *li-*. Subsequently, verbs denoting those events which are on
the main story line, that is, foregrounded events, are marked with the prefix
ka- (replacing *li-*). Events marked as subsidiary or supportive, that is,

backgrounded events, receive the prefix *ki-*. The example which follows is taken from a nineteenth century traveler's tale (Selemani 1965:119):

> *Tu-ka-enda kambi -ni, hata usiku tu-ka-toroka, tu-ka-safiri   siku*
> we   went camp to and night we   ran off we   traveled days
>
> *kadha, tu-ki-pitia   miji   fulani, na humo mwote hamna mahongo*
> several we   passed villages several, and them all   was-not tribute
>
> 'We returned to the camp, and ran away during the night, and we traveled for several days, we passed through several villages, and in all of them we did not have to pay tribute.'

The "meaning" of the prefixes *ka-* and *ki-* is not one of temporal deixis, since they have no tense value apart from the one established at the outset by the tense prefix (here, *li-*) on the initial verb. Nor are they "aspectual" in the usual sense of the word, that is, having an inherent value of completed or noncompleted view of the action; the action denoted by the verb *tukipitia* 'we passed' is just as much "completed" as that of *tukatoroka* 'we ran away'. There is, however, a real and very concrete distinction between the *ki-* verb and the *ka-* verbs in this passage. This distinction becomes clear if we arrange the events in the form of a flowchart, with the chronology of the events running from top to bottom, and events not on the main route indicated by a "shunt" or subroutine to the side:
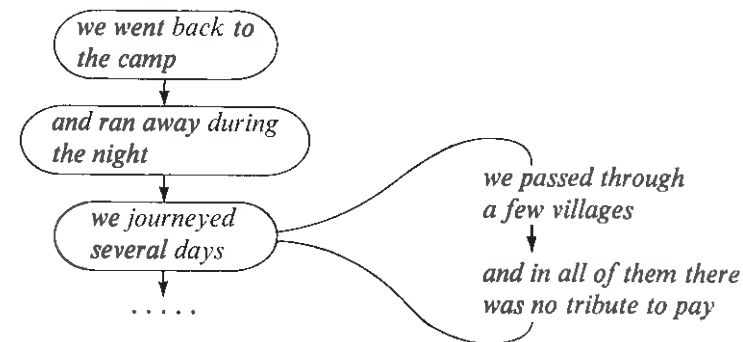
The difference between the sentences in the foreground (the "main line" events) and the ones in the background (the "shunted" events) has to do with sequentiality. The foregrounded events succeed one another in the narrative in the same order as their succession in the real world; it is in other words an iconic order. The backgrounded events, on the other hand, are not in sequence to the foregrounded events, but are concurrent with them. Because of this feature of simultaneity, backgrounded events usually amplify or comment on the events of the main narrative. The statement *We passed through a few villages* is not an occurrence separate from *We*

journeyed several days, but it serves to expand the latter. Significantly, it could be rendered in English with a nonfinite verb form:

> *We journeyed for several days, passing through a few villages.*

Furthermore, the two backgrounded clauses are not sequenced with respect to one another. This is another typical feature of backgrounding: Because the sequentiality constraint is lifted, backgrounded clauses may be located at any point along the time axis or indeed may not be located on the time axis at all. Consequently, the relationships among backgrounded clauses are often quite loose.

Because of the less strict connection between backgrounded clauses, one frequently, in fact typically, finds the following further characteristic, that the focus structure of the backgrounded clause is different from that of the foregrounded clause. In backgrounded clauses, there is a greater likelihood of topic changes and of new information being introduced in the preverbal position (i.e., indefinite subjects). In foregrounded clauses, on the other hand, it is unusual for completely new information to be introduced in the subject; more often, subjects are highly presuppositional, and the new material in the story is introduced in the predicate, either in the verb or in the combination of verb plus complement.

Because foregrounded clauses denote the discrete, measured events of the narrative, it is usually the case that the verbs are punctual rather than durative or iterative. This correlation can be stated as a correlation between the lexical, intrinsic AKTIONSART of the verb and the discourse-conditioned ASPECT. One finds, in other words, a tendency for punctual verbs to have perfective aspect (i.e., to occur in foregrounded sentences) and conversely for verbs of the durative/stative/iterative types to occur in imperfective, i.e. backgrounded, clauses. In the Swahili passage cited, two of the three *ka-*verbs are punctual (*went back*, *ran away*), and one is durative (*journeyed*). In the backgrounded part, one verb is iterative (*passed through*), while *hamna* 'there is not', insofar as it can be considered a verb, must be stative. Foregrounded clauses generally refer to events which are dynamic and active. Furthermore, the sequencing of these clauses usually imposes the constraint that a foregrounded event is contingent on the completion of a prior event. The tendency for foregrounded events to have punctual verbs follows as a probability from these two factors, but it is by no means a requirement.

I shall mention in this introduction one more property of foregrounded clauses. Strictly speaking, only foregrounded clauses are actually NARRATED. Backgrounded clauses do not themselves narrate, but instead they support, amplify, or COMMENT ON the narration. In a narration, the author is asserting the occurrence of events. Commentary, however, does not constitute the

assertion of events in the story line but makes statements which are CON-TINGENT and dependent on the story-line events. Typically, therefore, one finds in backgrounding those forms associated with a lower degree of assertiveness, and even forms designated as irrealis: subjunctives, optatives, other "modal" verb forms (including those expressed as modal auxiliaries), and negation. In the Swahili passage, for example, one of the background clauses is negated (*hamna* 'there was not').

The following table, adapted from my earlier paper (Hopper 1977), sums up the chief properties of the foreground–background distinction and forms the basis of the remainder of the chapter:

PERFECTIVE	IMPERFECTIVE
chronological sequencing	*Simultaneity or chronological over-lapping of situation C with event A and/or B*
View of event as a whole, whose completion is a necessary prerequisite to a subsequent event	*View of a situation or happening whose completion is not a necessary prerequisite to a subsequent happening*
Identity of subject within each discrete episode	*Frequent changes of subject*
Unmarked distribution of focus in clause, with presupposition of subject and assertion in verb and its immediate complements (or other unmarked focus)	*Marked distribution of focus, e.g., subject focus, instrument focus, focus on sentence adverbial*
Human topics	*Variety of topics, including natural phenomena*
Dynamic, kinetic events	*Statis, descriptive situations*
Foregrounding. Event indispensible to narrative	*Backgrounding. State or situation necessary for understanding motives, attitudes, etc.*
Realis	*Irrealis*

2. FOREGROUNDING THROUGH TENSE-ASPECT MORPHOLOGY

It is quite common for languages to realize the foreground–background distinction through a specialized verb morphology. Two well-known groups in which this strategy is found are Romance and Slavic. French provides a particularly convenient example, since it has been investigated from a point of view which corresponds quite closely to that adopted here. For example,

W. Reid's (1976) paper "The Quantitative Validation of a Grammatical System" presents detailed statistical information concerning the environments of the imperfect and past historic tenses. For Russian, we have the sophisticated treatment of aspect by J. Forsyth (1970).

French

The study by Reid (1976) shows that the past historic (passé simple, preterite), which is the foregrounding form of the verb in my framework, favors the following environments:

1. Actions as opposed to states
2. Affirmative as opposed to negative verbs
3. Human subjects as opposed to nonhuman subjects
4. First person subjects as opposed to third person (definite animate pronominal) subjects
5. Singular subjects as opposed to plural subjects
6. Main character of discourse as subject as opposed to secondary character as subject
7. Main clause as opposed to subordinate clause
8. Proper name subject as opposed to pronominal subject

Reid's statistics provide a picture of a distinction between what he calls HIGH FOCUS and LOW FOCUS of the verb. The terminology which I use here instead reflects my view that the foreground–background distinction is a universal of some kind, one that may be realized formally in a number of different ways, depending on the language concerned; in other words, I view aspectual distinctions such as that of French as DERIVING FROM discourse, rather than as ready-made devices "deployed" in discourse because they happen already to exist. Nonetheless, at one level of discussion the data which Reid has collected are equally relevant to the notion of discourse foregrounding. For example, actions (1) which are asserted (2), have human agents (3), who are singular persons (5), and are performed by the central character of the discourse (6) are more likely to figure in story-line episodes. The subjects of main-line verbs are, furthermore, higher on the agency hierarchy than subjects of backgrounded verbs; hence the preference for proper names and first person pronouns.

A further generalization which may be made is that in foregrounded clauses the subject of the verb is topical and highly presupposed. This assumption follows from the animate–definite property of such subjects and from the greater continuity of topic–subject in ongoing narration. Conversely, we may expect that the new actions which are predicated of these subjects will be expressed in the finite verbal predicate, that is, the main verb and its complements. This observation takes on especial significance in Russian, where according to the discussion in Forsyth's *A Grammar of*

Aspect the selection of perfective versus imperfective verb forms is conditioned not only by the discourse functions of foreground and background but also by the distribution of focus (i.e., new and old information) in the sentence.

Russian

It is clear that Russian aspect shares at least one important function with the French past tense systems. In the Russian past tense, the perfective aspect appears in contexts which closely parallel those of the past historic, and the imperfective aspect functions like the French imperfect. Forsyth's monograph (1970:9–10) contains an extensive example of this parallel. He illustrates the use of perfective verb forms for single, sequential events and the imperfective in clauses containing backgrounded material: descriptions of scenery and natural phenomena, subordinate events which are repeated (i.e., iteratives), and activities which are viewed as occurring simultaneously with the main events.

ASPECT AND SENTENCE FOCUS IN RUSSIAN

An especially striking correlation which exists in Russian is that between the aspect of the verb and the distribution of information in the sentence (focus structure). The perfective aspect is associated with an informational structure such that there is a high degree of topicality in the subject and the predicate of the verb is the focus of the sentence.

We have noted that the subject of the verb in foregrounded clauses in French has a tendency to be definite, human, and pronominal and to have the hallmarks of the oldest, most presupposed part of the sentence. In Russian it seems that imperfective aspect is elicited whenever this distribution is disrupted, that is, when the verb and its complements do NOT together represent the newly imparted information. Forsyth gives numerous examples of this phenomenon, for example:[1]

1. Subject focus:

   Kto pisal[i] "Voinu i mir" ?
   'Who wrote "War and Peace"?'

   -Tolstoi pisal[i] "Voinu i mir"
   -Tolstoy wrote "War and Peace".'

   Ya ubiral[i] komnatu vchera, a kto ubiral[i] segodnya ne znayu.
   'I cleaned the room yesterday, but who cleaned it today I don't know.'

---

[1] The superscript *i* indicates that the verb is in the imperfective form.

2. Focus on adverbial:

   V etoy porternoy ya obdumyval svoyu dissertatsiyu i napisal[p] pervoe lyubovnoe pis'mo k Vere. Pisal[i] karandashom.
   'In this tavern I pondered my thesis and wrote my first love letter to Vera. I wrote it in pencil.'

   Spuskayas' po lestntse, on muchitel'no pytalsya vspomnit', gde zhe on vstrechal[i] etogo cheloveka.
   'As he went downstairs he racked his brains trying to remember where on earth he had met that man.'

3. Other marked focus: Under this heading come several disparate phenomena which have in common the presupposition of the action itself and an assertion only that the action itself did (as opposed to "did not") take place. Among the examples of this found in Forsyth (1970:82–84) are common expressions like:

   Vy uzhe zakazyvali[i] ?
   'Have you already ordered?'

Two more examples (again from Forsyth) of the same thing:

   Vy chitali[i] "Voynu i Mir" ?—Chital[i].
   'Have you read "War and Peace"?'—'I have.'

   Chtoby ekhat' vdvoyom, nuzhny sredstva: k tomu zhe mne ne dadut prodolzhitel'nogo otpuska. V etom godu ya uzhe bral[i] raz otpusk.
   'We need funds to travel together; and besides, they won't give me a long holiday. Because I've already had leave this year.'

At the lexical or sentence level, this distribution is difficult to understand, but it perhaps becomes clear when discourse contexts are taken into consideration. The crucial difference between perfective and imperfective which leads to the choice of imperfective in these examples is surely that no new event is signaled; instead an old event (one that is presupposed) is as it were resurrected and commented on. Consequently, the examples discussed under (3) are of exactly the same type as those in (1) and (2).

3. FOREGROUNDING THROUGH WORD ORDER

The relationship between focus and aspect is a particularly important one from a cross-linguistic viewpoint, and it is therefore appropriate before continuing, to sum up some of the main ideas about the connection between the two. Aspect considered from a discourse perspective is a device or set of devices which exists in order to guide the language user through a text. Consequently aspect may take on one of a number of morphosyntactic forms, and the examples which I have been considering from Swahili,

French, and Russian show aspect in its morphological form, as a set of inflections or stem-forms on the verb. The aspects pick out the main route through the text and allow the listener (reader) to store the actual events of the discourse as a linear group while simultaneously processing accumulations of commentary and supportive information which add texture but not substance to the discourse itself. Aspect can therefore be likened to a "flow-control mechanism";[2] as such, it surely has significant psycholinguistic correlates.

Foregrounded sentences have a strong tendency to have an unmarked pragmatic structure; new events in the discourse tend to be introduced in the predicate, and the subject of the verb tends to be the central character or characters in the discourse and, hence, to be presupposed. In commentary, on the other hand (that is, in background), new events are not introduced so often as old already-related events are retold and amplified in some way. Frequently, therefore, what is asserted in a background clause is not the verb and its immediate complements but something else—the subject, an instrumental adverb, the tense of the verb, or even the direct object alone.

A common, indeed practically universal strategy for realizing focus is word order, and, since the perfective–imperfective distinction in Russian is evidently closely tied to the focus structure of the sentence, it seems that the possibility exists of a word-order strategy for foregrounding (perfective aspect). R. Hetzron has, in fact, brought to my attention (personal communication) the instance of certain African languages in which word order—specifically the order of verb and object—is crucially involved in the tense-aspect paradigms. Unfortunately no textual data are available; I shall therefore illustrate this strategy with Early Germanic materials, concentrating here on Old English.[3]

Old English[4]

FOREGROUNDED CLAUSES IN OLD ENGLISH

To illustrate first the structure of foregrounded clauses in (early) Old English, a typical passage from the Parker Chronicle for 870 A.D. is given:

[2] I owe this insightful metaphor to Talmy Givón.

[3] It should be stressed that the phenomenon is not restricted to Old English but is found, with some modifications, in other older Germanic dialects also, for example, Old Norse and Old High German. Cf. Hopper, 1977.

[4] Old English narrative prose will be illustrated with extracts from the Parker Manuscript of the *Chronicle*. This manuscript represents the best source for indigenous archaic prose with a minimum of contamination by Latin; for example, the Cynewulf story (755 A.D.) is probably almost contemporary with the actual events. I use only the earlier parts, up to the year 891 A.D., the last entry written by the "A" scribe.

The text used is the edition of Earle and Plummer, of which the Parker Manuscript has been transferred onto computer tape. A concordance and word-count were generated from this (Lehmann and Hopper 1966).

Her rad se here ofer Mierce innan East Engle ond winter setl namon æt þeodforda, ond þy wintre Eadmund cyning him wiþ feaht, ond þa Deniscan sige namon, ond þone cyning ofslogon, ond þæt lond all ge eodon.

'In this year (her) the army rode (rad) across Mercia into East Anglia, and took up (namon) winter quarters at Thedford, and that winter King Edmund fought (feaht) against them, and the Danes took (namon) the victory and slew (ofslogon) the king, and overran (ge eodon) all the land.'

The significant parameter here is the position of the verb with respect to the other constituents of the clause. In foregrounded patterns, the principle is that the verb is PERIPHERAL. This means that the verb either precedes the subject (VS) or follows its immediate complements (OV). The alternation VS/OV is itself governed by further discourse considerations: The OV pattern is found when a chain of events in the same episodic series follows a sequence-initial VS clause. In the entry for 870 A.D. quoted above, for example, we have:

1.	*her rad se here ofer Mierce innan East Engle*	VS
2.	*ond winter setl namon æt þeodforda*	OV
3.	*ond þy wintre Eadmund cyning him wiþ feaht*	OV
4.	*ond þa Deniscan sige namon*	OV
5.	*ond þone cyning ofslogon*	OV
6.	*ond þæt lond all ge eodon*	OV

The choice of VS rather than OV sometimes depends on factors which appear quite arbitrary. It is common for a lengthy narrative sequence to be broken up into a series of internal episodes, each of which is initiated by a VS clause. In the Cynewulf story, for example, we find basically OV syntax with a new minor episode beginning every three or four clauses—that is, a pattern:

VS–OV–OV–OV; VS–OV–OV–OV; VS–OV–OV . . . etc.

Sometimes there is a clear motivation for the break, that is, a distinct thematic shift of some kind. Just as often, however, the break seems to come as a sort of breathpause or, perhaps, an aesthetic effect: Possibly it was considered trite to maintain an unbroken series of OV clauses.[5]

[5] It should be noted at this point that in discourse work explanations and hypotheses are not obviously validated with every example. Apparent inconsistencies and irregularities often mean that a certain proportion of the data contradict the general hypothesis. As a rule of thumb, I take this proportion to be about 20%; that is, I expect my explanations to account for an obviously large majority of the data. The remainder are then assumed not to be contradictory or arbitrary but to REFLECT A SPECIFIC INTENTION OF THE AUTHOR. The exegesis of this remainder may be quite convincing, or it may be guesswork.

BACKGROUNDING IN OLD ENGLISH

The other basic syntactic type in Old English is the clause in which the verb immediately follows the subject—that is, the SV type. This type of clause is backgrounded in the same sense as I have described for the Russian imperfective aspect. SV clauses in Old English are found whenever the narrative material is part of the supporting or amplifying discourse rather than of the main story line. They are, therefore, found when preliminary actions, explanations, or lasting states are being presented. In the Cynewulf story (755 A.D.), SV syntax is confined to the introduction, which presents the prior history of the relationship between Cynewulf and Cyneheard:

> *Her Cynewulf benam Sigebryht his rices ond West Seaxna wiotan for unryhtum dædum, butan Ham tun scire; ond he hæfde þa oþ he ofslog þone aldor mon þe him lengest wunode; ond hiene þa Cynewulf on Andred adræfde, ond he þær wunade oþ þæt hiene an swan ofstang æt Pryfetes flodan; ond he wræc þone aldor mon Cumbran; ond se Cynewulf oft miclum gefeohtum feaht wiþ Bretwalum; ond ymb .xxxi. wint. þæs þe he rice hæfde, he wolde adræfan anne æþeling se was Cyneheard haten, ond se Cyneheard wæs þæs Sigebryhtes broþur;*
>
> *ond þa geascode he þone cyning lytle werode on wifcuþþe on Merantune, ond hine þær berad, ond þone bur utan be eode....*

> In this year Cynewulf and the West Saxon elders deprived Sigebryht of his kingdom for unrighteous deeds, except Hampshire; and he held that until he slew the alderman who stayed with him the longest. And then Cynewulf exiled him to the Weald, and he remained there until a herdsman stabbed him to death at Priffet's Flood, and he was avenging the alderman, Cumbra. And this Cynewulf often, in mighty battles, fought against the Cornishmen. And 31 winters after he took the kingdom, he resolved to exile a nobleman who was called Cyneheard, and this Cyneheard was Sigebryht's brother.
>
> And he [Cyneheard] found the king with a small band of men visiting a mistress at Merton, and surprised him there, and surrounded the hut outside....

The onset of VS/OV syntax coincides with the start of the actual events of the narrative (*ond þa geascode he* 'And he found....'), and the verb-peripheral sentence type is used consistently until the Ausleitung (coda), when we are told what happened AFTER the main events:

> *Ond se Cynewulf ricsode .xxxi. wint. ond his lic liþ æt Wintan ceastre, ond þæs æþelinges æt Ascan mynster, ond hiera ryht fæder cyn gæþ to*

> *Cerdice; ond þy ilcan geare mon ofslog Æþelbald Miercna cyning on Seccan dune, ond his lic liþ on Hreopa dune; ond Beornræd feng to rice, ond lytle hwile heold ond ungefealice; ond þy ilcan geare Offa feng to rice, ond heold .xxxviiii. wint. ond his sunu Egfer (þ) heold .xli. daga ond .c. daga. Se Offa was þincgferþing, þincgferþ Ean wulfing....*

'And this Cynewulf reigned 31 winters, and his body lies at Winchester, and that of the nobleman at Ashminster, and their paternal line goes back to Cerdic. And the same year was slain (lit.: one slew) Ethelbald, king of the Mercians, at Sedgedown, and his body lies at Reepdown. And Beornred came to the throne, and held it for a short while unsuccessfully. And the same year Offa came to the throne, and held it for 39 winters. Then his son Edgferth held it for 141 days. This Offa was a son of Thingferth, and Thingferth (was) the son of Eanwulf....'

The Einleitung (introductory, scene-setting part) and the Ausleitung between them contain 23 finite verbs, of which 17 are found in SV clauses. The types of backgrounding functions associated with this word order are the following:

1. There is a tendency for the subjects of the verbs to be relatively new and "unexpected," that is, nontopical. In the Einleitung, the subjects are composed in part of pronouns, but the full NP subjects are frequently either stressed (*se Cynewulf, se Cyneheard*) or are marked as being nontopical by complexity (*Cynewulf ... ond West Seaxna wiotan*) or by the indefinite article (*an swan*). In the Ausleitung, we also find stressed subjects (*se Cynewulf, se Offa*); furthermore, some of the subjects are inanimate (and hence automatically of reduced intrinsic topicality): *his lic, hiera ryht fæder cyn*, while others are completely new names introduced for the first (and sometimes the last) time in the text: *Beornræd, his sunu Egferþ*. Now although new characters can be, and often are, introduced in foregrounded narrative, it is usually with a view to a role of some kind in the narrative, which is then related immediately; the casual presentation of new personages is characteristic rather of backgrounded material.

2. Another facet of backgrounding that emerges in these examples is the distortion of the "normal" time-frame. The events of a typical foregrounded narrative occur in a regular, measured succession. Generally, in fact, the foregrounded events follow on one another's heels, with E_2 occurring immediately upon the completion of E_1. But stage-setting sequences require the ability of ranging over large time-spans. Whereas the foregrounded narration is bound by the sequentiality constraint, there is in backgrounding

the necessity for ACCESS to any point on the temporal line. The possibility of "wandering" up and down the temporal-deictic axis might be reflected linguistically in the use of compound tenses, including modal auxiliaries. In fact, Old English narrative as exemplified in the Parker Chronicle makes rather little use of such tenses, perhaps because the word-order difference between foreground and background adequately compensates for the lack of a more specific range of "past tense"; at any rate, the use of compound tenses seems to increase as SV word order becomes syntactically established.

3. There is a tendency to have verbs denoting states, processes, and descriptions rather than single dynamic events. It should be emphasized that this is a tendency, not a requirement. Punctual events can and do occur in background, just as verbs denoting some inherently drawn-out process can occur in foregrounding. But durative and iterative verbs are, statistically, associated with backgrounding. (It should be recalled that in Russian a punctual verb in the imperfective aspect of the past is ordinarily interpreted as an iterative.)

FOREGROUNDING IN OLD ENGLISH

The salient features of foregrounding are the converse of the features of backgrounding. In addition to the word-order properties I have discussed, we find:

1. High topicality of the subject, which is almost always either an anaphoric pronoun or a definite noun without focus. The characteristic "oldness" of the subject in foregrounding is, of course, a natural consequence of the tendency for narratives to be concerned principally with a small number of participants and, hence, to have continuity of topic-subject in the main story-line. In background, on the other hand, a variety of other topics can be introduced to support and amplify the story line.

2. The time frame is measured and unidirectional. There is no back-tracking or summarizing, no glances forward, no unasserted suppositions; the events are stated in immediate succession to one another.

3. Verbs show some tendency to be active and punctual.

In order to test the validity of the correlation between punctuality and foregrounding, I have made a count of the syntactic environments of presumed punctual verbs (e.g., *gefliemde* 'put to flight,' *ofslog* 'slew') and of presumed durative verbs (e.g., *ricsode* 'reigned,' *sæt* 'remained'). If the hypothesis that there is a correlation between the Aktionsart of the verb and the aspect of the sentence is correct, then we should find that durative verbs favor SV clauses and punctual verbs favor VS/OV clauses.

The first of these correlations is overwhelming, as Table 1 shows:

TABLE 1
COUNT OF DURATIVE VERBS IN THE THREE CLAUSE TYPES

Verb	Gloss	VS	OV	SV	Subtotal
ricsode	'reigned'	1	2	19	22
heold	'held (the throne)'	1	6	37	44
sæt	'remained'	1	2	9	12
liþ	'lies'	0	0	10	10
resteþ	'rests'	0	0	2	2
Total		3	10	77	90

Expressed as percentages, this means that 85% of durative verbs are in SV clauses.

A positive correlation of the opposite phenomenon, that is, of punctual verbs with VS/OV word order, is not so clear. Table 2 shows that even for punctual verbs there is still a high incidence of SV syntax:

TABLE 2
COUNT OF PUNCTUAL VERBS IN THE THREE CLAUSE TYPES

Verb	Gloss	VS	OV	SV	Subtotal
forþferde	'died'	6	0	32	38
ofslog	'slew'	1	23	16	40
feng	'came (to the throne)'	36	1	34	71
nam	'took'	4	20	5	29
onfeng	'received'	2	5	16	23
for	'went'	25	2	10	37
com	'came'	18	6	6	30
gefliemde	'put to flight'	3	14	0	17
sende	'sent'	6	1	3	10
Total		101	72	122	295

The proportion of punctual verbs in SV sentences, however, is only 41.4% of the number of punctual verbs overall; that is, durative verbs are more than twice as likely to occur in SV clauses as punctual verbs.

It should also be observed that very many of the punctual SV clauses occur in environments which are strictly speaking not truly narrative. For example, the verb *forþferde* 'died' occurs mainly (32 out of 38 times) in postsubject position; yet, often sentences of the form *X died* are not part of a narrative but are a means of marking a particular year by the formula *This was the*

year when X died. The same is true of the other principal TRANSITIONAL verb *feng (to rice)* 'came (to the throne).' Many of the calendrical entries in the Chronicle, in fact, consist solely (or almost so) of these verbs (and their arguments); for example:

> 640 A.D. *Her Edbald Cantwara cyning forþferde, ond he ricsode .xxv. wintr.*
> 'In this year Edbald king of the Kentishmen died, and he had reigned for 25 winters.'
>
> 616 A.D. *Her Æþelbryht Cont wara cyning forþferde, ond Edbald his sunu feng to rice.*
> 'In this year Ethelbriht king of the Kentishmen died, and his son Edbald came to the throne.'

The focus in such phrases is, inevitably, not on the event itself but on the personage involved. Consequently, there is subject focus, and such sentences are instances of backgrounding. Examples of this kind point up clearly the necessity to distinguish between lexical (sentence-level) AKTIONSART, and the discourse-level phenomena of ASPECT.

4. FOREGROUNDING THROUGH "VOICE"

I have thus far examined two types of foregrounding: (*a*) that represented by French and Russian, in which foregrounding is marked in the tense-aspect systems of the verb; and (*b*) the Germanic type (represented by Old English), in which aspectual distinctions are indicated by word order (verb-peripheral for foreground, SV for background).

There are several other strategies available for realizing aspect; for example, the use of sentence particles to mark either foregrounded or backgrounded clauses is quite common and may also be used as an ancillary device secondary to some other marker. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to just one further strategy, the use of the "voice" system—the active–passive distinction—to distinguish foreground and background. The languages which I will be discussing here are Malay and Tagalog.

Malay

TEXTS

The Malay narrative texts which will be discussed here are written in a style modeled quite closely on the classical form of the language, which persisted as a literary language until the end of the nineteenth century. They are taken from the writings of Abdullah bin Abdul-Kadir Munshi, a Ma-

laccan writer of Arab descent who can be described as a conscious stylist and a conservative rhetorician. Abdullah's writings concern modern subjects (the consolidation of British hegemony in Malaysia), but his language has more in common with the traditional Hikayat ('sagas') than to, say, the modern Malay novel. In addition to its historical interest, Abdullah's work provides examples of both lively narrative and reflective didactic commentary which illustrate with especial clarity the contrast between foregrounded and backgrounded discourse.

FOREGROUNDING IN MALAY

The morphosyntax of foregrounding in Malay involves two components. One is the use of the narrative particle *-lah*, which is attached enclitically to the verb. This particle is in essence a focus particle; it is used to denote contrastive emphasis on the word or constituent to which it is attached, for example (Abdullah 1932:82):

> *karna   di-antara jurutulis itu semua-nya **aku-lah** sa-orang yang terkechil*
> because among   the clerks all   I   the one who smallest
> 'because I was the youngest of all the clerks'

When the particle *-lah* is affixed to the verb, it denotes that the action or event of the clause is one of the main points of the narrative. Such verbs are almost always perfective; they denote completed actions, the beginning of which is contingent on the prior event and whose completion, in turn, is anterior to the following event. *-Lah* on the verb highlights and foregrounds the event, gives it especial prominence in the narrative, and announces it as one of a series of actions. Almost always the verb denotes a kinetic activity:

> *Maka ada pun lama-nya ia duduk di-darat itu ada enam tujuh hari.*
> and   was now time   he stay   on shore   was six   seven days.
>
> *Kemudian turun-lah ia ka-laut. Serta ia sampai, maka*
> Then   went   he to sea. When he arrive   then
>
> *di-surohkan-nya   bongkar sauh, lalu belayar. Maka*
> was ordered by him to raise anchor then sail.   And
>
> *di-layarkan-nya-lah kechi itu sampai kapada anak-anak sungai itu*
> was sailed by him   the ketch as far as   inlets   river the,
>
> *lalu di-suroh-nya   berlaboh. Maka tinggal-lah di-sana*
> then was ordered by him shelter.   And   remained   there
>
> *pula sampai enam tujoh hari. Maka ada-lah   datang sa-buah top*
> again up to six   seven days. And   it happened came   a schooner
>
> *hendak   lalu dari situ   maka di-tembak-nya   lalu*
> intending to pass through there and   was fired by him and

di-balas   *oleh orang top*   *itu, maka mati-lah dua*
(the fire) was returned by   crew schooner the and dead   two

orang dalam kechi. Se-telah   berperang-lah sampai masok matahari,
men in the ketch. After that was fought   until   set   sun

maka angin pun turun-lah, maka top   itu berlayar-lah, entah
and wind   died   and schooner the sailed away not know

ka-mana-kah ia pergi,   tiada lagi   kelihatan.
whither   they went not again was seen

'He remained on shore for six or seven days, and then came back on board. And when he arrived, he ordered the anchor to be weighed, and we sailed. He sailed the ketch into the inlets of the river, and then ordered us to anchor, and we remained there another six or seven days. A schooner came and wished to pass through, and he fired at it, but the men in the schooner returned our fire, and two men in the ketch were killed. We continued to fight until the sun went down, and then the wind fell, and that vessel sailed away, and where it went we could not see any more.'

A second and more consistent marker of foregrounding is the use of the so-called "passive" verb. Transitive sentences in Malay can be expressed in at least two ways, illustrated as follows:

> ACTIVE: *ia mem-bawa barang-barang ka-darat*
>   he brought   the goods   ashore

In this type of sentence, which is commonly called "active" in Malay grammars, the stem of the verb (here: *bawa* 'bring') is prefixed with *meng-*, the nasal *-ng* being homorganic to the stem-initial consonant. An alternative form of the same sentence is

> PASSIVE: *di-   bawa- nya   barang-barang ka-darat*
>   PASS bring he (AGT) the goods   ashore

It is customary to translate such sentences as 'The goods were brought ashore by him.' In actual fact, however, the Malay "passive" as it is used in the classical narrative rarely corresponds to the English passive. Rather, the Malay "passive" form is used for events that are perfective, active, foregrounded, and realis (as opposed to irrealis).[6]

[6] In the spoken Malay of Jakarta, the nasal prefix which corresponds to the *meng-* of Standard Malay carries somewhat similar meanings of irrealis, continuous, nonsegmented events. Stephen Wallace's data from this dialect (Wallace 1976) are revealing for the way in which considerations of focus, aspect, and the idiosyncracies of individual lexical items condition the selection of an affix.

With intransitive verbs, and also with transitive verbs which idiosyncratically do not take the prefix *meng-*, foregrounding is indicated by the obligatory use of *-lah*; for example, in Abdullah (1932:69) we have:

> *maka se-bentar itu juga   datang-lah ia*
> and at that very moment came   he
> 'and at that very moment he came'

> *maka ia pun   kembali-lah*
> and he TOPIC returned
> 'and he returned'

THE AGENT IN FOREGROUNDED CLAUSES

In foregrounded clauses, the agent of the transitive verb is marked differently from the object and from the agent of the intransitive verb. The third person pronoun has the forms *-nya* (transitive agent) and *ia* (intransitive agent/transitive object). In the first person, the transitive agent is proclitic *ku-*, and the other two functions are *aku*, for example (from Abdullah 1932, pages 44, 44, and 101, respectively):

> *maka aku pun   berlari-lah*
> and I   TOPIC ran
> 'and I ran'

> *maka ku-dapati budak Basir itu*
> and I found boy   the
> 'and I found the boy Basir'

> *maka di-suroh-nya   aku menulis demikian*
> and was told by him I   to write thus
> 'and he told me to write thus'

With full nouns, an agentive preposition *oleh* is used for agents of transitive verbs (Abdullah, 1932:115)

> *maka oleh tuan   itu di-suroh aku berdua*
> and by master the were told we two
> 'and the master told us both'

The distribution of these forms can thus be summed up as follows:

	A_{tr}	A_{itr}	0_{tr}
1st Person	*ku-*	*aku*	*aku*
3rd Person	*-nya*	*ia*	(*ia*)
Full Noun	*oleh*	$\emptyset$	$\emptyset$

Here, the object of the transitive verb *ia* is placed in parentheses because this pronoun normally has zero representation, and clear examples of exceptions to this are difficult to find; it has been put in here by analogy with the first person.

This distribution is, of course, typical of passives. The discourse function of the Malay "passive," however, is quite different from that associated with passives in Western languages, where passive is primarily a way of suppressing the agent of the transitive verb and secondarily denotes some kind of topic shift (e.g., object-thematization)—the details are, of course, controversial. In Malay classical narrative, the "passive" contrasts with the "active" as foregrounding to backgrounding.

Backgrounding in Malay

As an illustration of this backgrounding function of the "active" verb, I will present two parts of an episode in which Abdullah criticizes the behavior of a British officer. He introduces the episode with a general account of the British sailors in the early period of contact. This introduction to the main episode has continuing or repeated actions; the transitive verbs have the prefix *meng-*; and the intransitive verbs lack the foregrounding suffix *-lah*:

Shahadan ada   pun pada zaman itu   dalam negeri Malaka belum-lah
Now   there was at   time   that in   state   Malacca not yet

*ada   banyak Inggeris. Maka orang   **melihat** Inggerispun seperti **melihat***
were many   English. And   people saw   the English like   seeing

*harimau sebab   nakal-nya   dan garang-nya. Maka jikalau **datang***
tiger   because viciousness and fierceness.   And   when   came

*sa-buah dua buah kapal Inggeris **singgah** di-Malaka, maka orang-orang*
one   two   ships English arrive   in Malacca then people

*Malaka   semua-nya **menutup** pintu rumah-nya.   Maka ada-lah*
Malacca all   lock   doors their houses. And

berkeliling lorong itu beberapa   matrus itu mabok,   ada yang
around   streets   numerous sailors   got drunk some

memechahkan** pintu-pintu rumah orang, dan ada yang **mengajar
broke down   doors   houses people and some   chased

*perempuan-perempuan berjalan, dan ada yang **berkelahi** sama*
women   walking and some   fought   with

*sendiri-nya, pechah belah muka-nya, **menjadi** huru-hara   besar-lah*
themselves break   split faces their became disturbance great

'Now there were at that time not many English in the State of Malacca, and the population looked upon the English as one looks upon a tiger, as being vicious and fierce. And whenever one or two English ships would come and stop in Malacca, the population of Malacca would lock the doors of their houses. And everywhere in the streets there would be sailors getting drunk, some breaking down people's doors, some chasing the women as they walked, and some fighting among themselves and breaking one another's heads, and great was the uproar.'

The introductory passage is followed by the story of the scandalous behavior of the British officer. This story consists, for the most part, of single events happening in succession. It thus contrasts with the Einleitung, which consists largely of simultaneous or repeated events. The verbs in the actual narrative are, therefore, in the foregrounded function, i.e. they are "passive":

Se-telah itu   dalam sedikit hari lagi maka di-beli-nya pula
after   that within a few days more   he bought again

burong punai berkurongan, maka ada-lah ia berdiri dengan senapang,
pigeons   in cages   and   he stood with   rifle

maka di-lepaskan oleh orang-nya sa'ekursa'ekur, lalu
and   were freed by   his servant one by one   then

di-tembak-nya. . . . Kemudian di-beli-nya pula   beberapa ekur monyet,
he shot (them)   After that he bought again several   monkeys

maka di-lepaskan ka'atas pohon sena   di-hadapan rumah-nya,
and   released   up in   tree angsana in front of his house

kemudian di-tembak-nya jatoh mati.
then   he shot   fall dead

'After that a few days later he bought some pigeons in cages, and while he stood by with his rifle his servant freed them one after another, and he shot at them. . . . After that he bought a number of monkeys and set them free in the angsana tree in front of his house, and shot at them until they fell dead.'

Since "active" and "passive" constructions are assigned different but equal discourse functions, it can, I believe, be argued that it is wrong to attribute primary or secondary status to either one of them. From a morphological point of view they are equally complex, both "active" and "passive" being derived from simple stems. I shall therefore refer to the so-called passive as the ERGATIVE SYSTEM.

THE "DISCOURSE PASSIVE" AND ERGATIVITY

The introduction of the term ERGATIVE into this context raises some interesting questions concerning the origins of ergativity in discourse. These questions are also very complex, and it would not be appropriate to discuss them at great length here. At the same time, ergativity is linked to tense and aspect in a number of languages. In Malay, where tense is not overtly marked, the "voice" system serves the same function in narrative—to assert the respective anteriority of events and to indicate which events actually advance the narrative and which events are ancillary. Because this sequence-marking function of tense-aspect (and voice) is in turn bound up with focus marking, it is not surprising that syntax is also affected by the voice system.

Languages which are ergative in case marking tend to be either SOV or VSO in basic word order, while conversely SVO languages are accusative in case-marking.

This pattern is followed in Malay also, since the narrative ergative is characterized by VSO word order and the accusative system (i.e., the back-grounding form) is generally SVO, as is illustrated in the following clause-types:

> ACCUSATIVE: *ia*   *membawa barang-barang ka-darat*
> 'they brought   the goods   ashore'
>
> ERGATIVE: *Maka di-bawa-nya barang-barang ka-darat*
> 'and   they brought the goods   ashore'

The backgrounded sentence in Malay typically has a "thematized" subject; that is, in the transitive sentence the subject is placed before the verb. Although SVO syntax in backgrounded clauses was presumably once a matter of pragmatics—the greater likelihood of having a "new" subject in background—the situation in the Malay narratives is virtually grammaticized to the point where the verb prefixed with *meng-* MUST be preceded by the subject. On the other hand, the *di-* form of the verb is almost invariably followed by the subject. With the third person pronoun *-nya*, this distribution is fixed, whereas, with full-noun agents having the agentive preposition *oleh*, the preverbal position is rare.

The relationship between verb position and the ergative in Malay appears to be that FOREGROUNDED NARRATIVE CONTEXTS REQUIRE FRONTING OF THE VERB. The verb is the locus of actions and events and is therefore the newest part of a narrative clause. We have seen that foregrounding, whether it is carried out by morphology, syntax, or both, is invariably indicated by reference to the verb and not by some other constituent of the clause. In backgrounding, on the other hand, new information is likely to be located anywhere in the clause, including the subject. Backgrounding is therefore

more disposed to "thematized" word orders, with the subject preceding the verb. In Malay, these word orders are associated with the voice of the verb: VSO for "passive" (predicate focus), SVO for "active" (subject or other focus).

The preceding account, of course, still begs several questions, the most important being the origin of the morphological passive itself. This question is the more intriguing in that the *di-* prefix, which is said to be a passive marker, is itself probably a frozen form of a third person pronoun dia. It is interesting that in older Malay prose one finds occasional examples of the *di-*prefix with INTRANSITIVE verbs, for example, *di-tangis-nya* 'they wept', suggesting perhaps that the restriction of the *di-* form to transitives (i.e., the ergative distribution) is a relatively recent phenomenon. If this is so, then *di-* may at one time have been an unspecified subject marker (derived, of course, from a third person pronoun) for ALL verbs, which would for rather obvious pragmatic reasons become restricted to transitive verbs and eventually was reanalyzed as an agreement marker with third person agents. The pragmatic causes of this restriction would have been (*a*) the greater usefulness of the unspecified subject construction with transitive verbs; and (*b*) the greater frequency of truly transitive verbs in foregrounding (i.e., in VS clauses).

The point that I wish to make here is that in investigating the rise of ergative constructions it is of paramount importance to examine the discourse uses of "passive" as well as their morphosyntactic origins at the word and sentence level. Malay prose offers us an easily available example of a language which is by no means "ergative" in the sense in which this word is usually used but which cannot really be said to be simply active–passive. The Malay data may have a great deal to tell us about the development of ergativity in such languages as Samoan.

Tagalog

THE TAGALOG VERB

In Tagalog, which is quite closely related to Malay, a strikingly similar use of voice is found. Because of the greater complexity of the Tagalog verb system, a somewhat longer account of verbal morphology will be necessary; even so, it will be possible to give only a very general notion of structure functions; for further details, Schachter and Otanes (1972) should be consulted.[7]

The verb in Tagalog expresses two functions: (*a*) the ASPECT of the sentence; and (*b*) the CASE of the TOPIC of the sentence. The following illustrations will indicate some of the possibilities for coding the topic case into the verb:

(1)　　*B-um-ili ang bata ng tinapay sa tindahan sa nanay niya.*
　　　　bought the child　bread　　　at store for mother his
　　　　'The child bought bread at the store for his mother.'

Here, *bata* 'child' is topic and is therefore marked with the topic article *ang*. In addition, *bata* is the agent, and, since the agent is topic, the verb receives the agent-topic affix *-um-*, that is, *bili → bumili*. In the next example, the topic is the direct object *tinapay* 'bread':

(2)　　*B-in-ili ng bata ang tinapay sa tindahan sa nanay niya.*

The verb this time has received the object-topic affix *-in-*, and the object of the verb has the topic article *ang*; the agent in this sentence, which is not the topic, has the article *ng*. In Philippine linguistics, these constructions are known as "focus" constructions; thus (1) is called agent-focus, (2) object-focus, and so on. From the point of view of normal linguistic usage, this use of the term "focus" is erroneous; it would be especially confusing in the context of the present chapter, where focus is used in the sense of "main assertion, new information," that is, the direct opposite of the Philippine sense. I shall therefore use the term TOPIC here, and will refer to sentence (1) as agent-topic, sentence (2) as object-topic, etc. Other topic constructions are represented in (3), locative-topic, and (4), benefactive-topic:

(3)　　*B-in-il-han ng bata ng tinapay ang tindahan sa nanay niya.*

(4)　　*I-b-in-ili ng bata ng tinapay sa tindahan ang nanay niya.*

In addition to the case of the topic, the verb also shows aspect. Aspectual morphology is engaged to topic morphology to the extent that aspectual processes are different for the various topic types. A further slight complication is that there are several morphological classes of verbs, reflected in the affixation of the perfective aspect:

1. *-um-* verbs, for example, *kain: k-um-ain* 'eat'
2. *mag-* verbs, for example, *luto: magluto* 'cook'
3. *ma-*class, for example, *ligo': ma-ligo'* 'bathe'

The agent-topic conjugation for the three classes, in the three aspects, is as follows:

	Perfective	Imperfective	Contemplated	Gloss
-um- class	*k-um-ain*	*k-um-a-kain*	*ka-kain*	'eat'
nag- class	*nag-luto*	*nag-lu-luto*	*mag-lu-luto*	'cook'
na- class	*na-ligo'*	*na-li-ligo'*	*ma-li-ligo'*	'bathe'

In object-topic constructions, aspect morphology again varies according to the morphological class of the verb, for example:

	Perfective	Imperfective	Contemplated	Gloss
in- class	*b-in-asa*	*b-in-a-basa*	*ba-basa-hin*	'read'
i- class	*i-b-in-ukas*	*i-b-in-u-bukas*	*i-bu-bukas*	'open'
an- class	*p-in-unas-an*	*p-in-u-punas-an*	*pu-punas-an*	'clean'

Similar conjugations exist for the locative- and benefactive-topic constructions; for example, for *hiram* 'borrow' there is a perfective locative-topic *h-in-iram-an*, and *bili* 'buy' has the benefactive-topic *i-b-in-ili*; there is a certain amount of homophony among the various topic forms of the same verb.

The semantic contrasts of the conjugations are, in general, as follows: (*a*) action completed (stem unreduplicated) versus action incomplete (stem reduplicated); and (*b*) realis (*-um-* infix in -um-class, prefix-initial *n-* in *mag/ma* classes) versus irrealis (zero-affix in *-um-* class, prefix-initial *m-* in *mag/ma* classes). In non-agent-topic verbs, the infix *-in-* is found in both classes.

As regards the various noun-phrase roles, the articles with full nouns are *ang* (topic), *ng* (oblique), and *sa* (locative), corresponding to which are the pronouns:

	ang	*ng*	*sa*
'I'	*ako*	*ko*	*akin*
'he/she'	*siya*	*niya*	*kaniya*
'they'	*sila*	*nila*	*kanila*

TEXTS

The texts which I have chosen are from Bloomfield's *Tagalog Texts*. These are for the most part fairly short anecdotes, some funny and some tragic, dealing with human scenes and containing both dialogue and action. They provide excellent material for studying the functions of the verb forms in narrative.

FOREGROUNDING IN TAGALOG

The formations used for foregrounding in both transitive and intransitive sentences have in common the PERFECTIVE-REALIS verb form. Clauses which actually advance the story line and narrate new events have verbs with unreduplicated stems and with either the infix or the *n-* initial on the prefix. In the following illustrative text (No. 8 in Bloomfield 1917:32–33), the

foregrounded sentences in the English translation have been placed in boldface:

Nang dumating sila sa isa ng gubat ay iniwan sila   nang kanila
when came   they to a   jungle, left   them they

ng mugulang at   pinagsabihan sila   na   hantayin sila   doon, at
parents   and told   them that wait for them there and

sila y babalik agad.   Sila y naiwan, datapwat nalalaman nila
they would return soon. They left   but   knew   they

na hindi sila   pagbabalikan nang kanila ng magulan. Nang
that not they (=to them) would return   they   parents. when

makaraan ang ila ng sandali',   ay nakarinig sila nang isa ng ingay.
had passed   short time   heard   they   a   noise

Pinuntahan nila ang lugar na pinanggagalingan nang ingay. Doon ya
approached they   place   come-from   noise. there

nakita nila ang isa ng malaki ng higante na naliligo sa tabi nang isa ng
saw   they a   huge   giant   na bathed   side   a

balon. Tiningnan nila ang paligid-ligid nang lugar, at sa tabi nang isa ng
well. looked   they   surroundings   place   at sa side   a

kahuy ay nakita nila ang pananamit nang higante. Ang ikapitu ng
tree   saw   they   clothes   giant   seventh

bata ay pinaalis ang kanya ng manga kapatid at   sinabi niya na
child   sent away his   plur. siblings and told   he   that

magtago sila at kanya ng nanakawin ang sapatos nang higante. Ito ay
hide   they he   would steal   shoes   giant.   That

kanila ng ginawa', at   ninakaw nang bata ang sapatos.
they   did   and stole   child   shoes

'When they **came** to a jungle, their parents **left** them, **telling** them to wait for them there and that they would soon come back. They **left**, but they knew that their parents would not come back to them. When a short time had passed, they **heard** a noise. They **went** toward the place from which the noise came. There they **saw** a great giant bathing by the side of a well. They **looked** around the place, and by the side of a tree they **saw** the clothes of a giant. The seventh child **sent** his brothers and sisters away and **told** them to hide, and he would steal the giant's shoes. They **did** this, and the child **stole** the shoes.'

The verbs in clauses which advance the narrative are:

d-um-ating 'come'
in-iwan 'leave (transitive)'
p-in-ag-sabih-an 'tell'
na-iwan 'leave (intransitive)'
na-ka-rinig 'hear'
p-in-untah-an 'approach'
na-kita 'see'
t-in-ingn-an 'look'
na-kita 'see'
p-in-a-alis (i.e., *pa-alis*, *-in-*, and not, of course, reduplicated) 'send away'
s-in-abi 'tell'
g-in-awa' 'do'
n-in-akaw 'steal'

The intransitives have the infix *-um-* or else the prefix *na-*, according to the verb-class. The transitives have one of the several types of topic affixes known collectively as "goal-topic" (Schachter and Otanes 1972:283–284), indicating that the topic of the clause is not identified as the agent; for example, *ninakaw* 'stole' (*nakaw* + *-in-*) has goal-topic, and *pinuntahan* 'approached' (*punta(h)* + *-in-* + *-an*) has direction-topic, namely, *ang lugar* 'the place,' of which the article *ang* identifies the noun as topic.

BACKGROUNDING IN TAGALOG

Backgrounding is indicated by a variety of formations that have in common the absence of the perfective–realis markers of foregrounding. Thus, backgrounded events and descriptions may have verbs which are:

1. Reduplicated

   babalik 'would return' (i.e., irrealis)
   nalalaman 'knew' (i.e., realis but imperfective)

2. Suffix *-in* instead of Infix

   hantayin 'wait for' (i.e., irrealis)
   nanakawin 'steal' (i.e., irrealis)

3. *Ma(g)-* Prefix instead of *Na(g)-*

   makaraan 'pass, go (root: da)' (apparently pure backgrounding)
   magtago 'hide' (i.e., irrealis)

Evidently this variety of formations corresponds to a variety of "semantic" functions at the sentence level. But approached from the discourse level,

these semantic functions turn out to have a uniform pragmatic goal: They suggest a reduced assertion of the finite reality of the event. The devices used in backgrounding indicate events which are either contemplated or, if initiated, are not completed because they are ongoing, stative, or repeated.

AGENT AND OBJECT TOPIC

It is of course of especial interest that both in Tagalog and in Malay foregrounding is associated with voice, that is, the encoding in syntax and verbal morphology of the marked sentence topic. In Tagalog narrative, agent-topic is rather rare (cf. also Schachter 1977:279–306). It tends, in fact, to be found in sequence-initial clauses in foregrounding, the same function, it will be remembered, which elicits marked word orders in Old English; for example, in text no. 15 in Bloomfield (1971:56–57), the introduction is as follows:

> *Juan was a carpenter who had for a neighbor a Chinaman who also was*
> *a carpenter. This Chinaman was a skilled carpenter and his cleverness*
> *showed itself in his use of the plane.*
>
> *One day he bought a piece of wood forty feet in length. This he proceeded*
> *to smoothe.*

After the backgrounded scene-setting statements, the actual events of the narrative begin with the "Chinaman's" buying of the wood. This transitive sentence has the agent-topic verb:

> *Isa ng araw nakabili sya nang isa ng piraso-ng-kahoy . . . Itu y kanya ng*
> one   day bought he   a   piece of wood . . . this he
> *nilinis*
> smoothed

(where *nilinis* is the object-topic form of *linis*, with *ni-* here for *-in-*). The story continues with transitive sentences in one of the goal-topic formations, as in the second of the foregrounded sentences. These goal-topic verbs are found regularly in sequential narrative-advancing clauses and thus correspond functionally in discourse to the Malay "passive" in *di-*. About all of this, obviously, very much more needs to be said.

5. CONCLUSION

One advantage which accrues from considering linguistic data in wider contexts, such as discourses and "real-world" situations, is that it begins to make sense to ask beyond the question "What morphosyntactic devices does

a language possess?" the further question: "Why does this language, and languages in general, have such a mechanism?" The assumption that in a discourse the competent user of the language needs to mark out a main route through the narrative and divert in some way those parts of the narrative which are not strictly relevant to this route suggests at least a partial explanation of the existence of elaborate tense-aspect systems in some languages but not in others.

It is significant that morphological tense-aspect cannot be accounted for in the same way that we account for the famous snow vocabulary of the Eskimos, etc. Times and views of events are not imposed on cultures by external realities, at least not in any verifiable and noncircular sense. Diachronically, too, tense-aspect systems come and go within substantially the same cultures. But from a discourse viewpoint tense-aspect becomes intelligible. One finds typically an aspect marker specialized for foregrounding, or one specialized for backgrounding, or both functions indicated. Superimposed upon these markers there may be quite precise indicators of tense properly speaking, that is, the location of an action on the temporal-deictic axis. Most of these tense-markers can be expected to function in background only, for example, pluperfect, remote-past, future-perfect, future, etc. Their purpose is to gather in information and other detail scattered at arbitrary points on the axis. Because background tense markers signal happenings and states which are not "in sequence" and which by their very temporal inconsistency cannot and do not move the discourse forward, they have access to a much wider spectrum of temporal deixis. We have seen that one of the distinguishing properties of background is just such a "distortion" of the time-frame. Background is less constrained in tense than is foreground, because details of indirect relevance to the narrative do not have to be contemporaneous with the narrative but may be part of the prehistory of the narrated event (pluperfect), may provide a preview for a total perspective of the event (future or future-perfect), or may even suggest contingent but unrealized events (irrealis forms, such as conditionals and optatives). In foreground, by contrast, the only tense-indication needed is a conventional location of the successive events of the narrative in a nonreal (by which I mean "not currently being witnessed") framework. In many languages, this tense is the one known as a "preterite" or simple past; yet it is, of course, more important that a relative time-frame should be established with respect to the other events, so that, although for many languages a semantic constant "to the left of present on the time-axis" exists for this tense, the idea of speaker distance from the narrated events is paramount.

What of languages which do not possess elaborate tense-systems? Tentatively, one can say that at least the foreground–background distinction is overtly marked, and the degree of precision in tense-marking will vary from

language to language, with actual morphological indicators being supplemented by adverbs and by other more lexicalized markers. The foreground–background distinction may be shown in ways other than morphology. For example, the ordinary uninterrupted flow of the narrative in foreground may elicit a different word order from the "intervening" descriptive syntax of backgrounding, with its greater possibilities for shifts of subject and points of view. In this strategy, it is the position of the verb which is crucial. The verb is the location of new, narrative-advancing information. The verb's complement may or may not contribute to the narrative, and the subject of the verb is least likely to play a significant role in the story-line. Thus we typically find the verb in one of the two most prominent positions in the clause, the beginning or the end, and the subject of the verb is likely to be highly presuppositional, in fact, usually identical with the preceding subject.

The use of focus-indicating or "voice" mechanisms as a foregrounding device is, I would speculate, ultimately quite closely related to the verb-position strategy, though I am uncertain about the exact nature of this relationship. Eventually, it might be possible to show how ergativity develops quite naturally from such specialization of passive voice in discourse. Diachronically, it seems that some kind of reanalysis of a focus-indicating system as a passive–ergative one has taken place; such a reanalysis could have come about as a result of the high frequency of definite-object constructions in contexts in which the content of the verb was consistently the most prominent discourse-advancing factor.

Finally, a syntactic foregrounding strategy may very well be reinforced by a particle or by several particles which, when attached to a particular sentence constituent, indicate the discourse status of the event. Such particles may simultaneously indicate both focus and tense-aspect. It seems a rather short step to the situation where such a particle would become a verbal clitic and would eventually be reanalyzed as an aspectual morpheme affixed to the verb. An article by James Hoskison on Gude, an African language, seems to suggest that topic–focus markers in that language are tied to aspect in such a way that each aspect selects a different focus marker (Hoskison 1975:228–229). In the absence of actual discourse data, it is hard to judge the relevance of this example. There is, however, obviously a highly interesting field of research in the diachrony of tense-aspect in discourse, which has scarcely begun to be exploited.

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