FOREGROUNDING IN LANGUAGE AND THEME IN THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME

Shaista Kazim

Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature, the University of Lahore, Sargodha Campus

shaista.kazim@ell.uol.edu.pk

Abstract
This study applies Foregrounding Theory to Richard Connell's The Most Dangerous Game, *focusing on linguistic deviation and parallelism to explore themes of violence, morality, and survival. Using examples of lexical, syntactic, phonological, and semantic deviation, along with repetition and structural parallelism, the analysis reveals how Connell's stylistic choices heighten suspense and challenge moral boundaries. The findings underscore the role of language in deepening thematic impact and demonstrate the value of Foregrounding Theory in literary interpretation and stylistic analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

This study applies Foregrounding Theory to Richard Connell's *The Most Dangerous Game* to examine how deliberate stylistic deviations—such as lexical innovation, syntactic manipulation, and narrative parallelism—intensify the story's thematic concerns of civilization versus savagery, moral ambiguity, and survival instinct, revealing the deeper psychological and philosophical layers embedded in the text.

Foregrounding is a crucial concept in stylistic analysis that highlights how specific language features in a text intentionally break conventional rules to capture the reader's attention and enhance the meaning of the work (Simpson, 2004). It originates from the Prague School of Linguistics and is primarily realized through **deviation**—linguistic disruption from norms—and **parallelism**—the use of repetition and patterned structures to achieve artistic effects (Toolan, 2012).

These strategies work by defamiliarizing familiar language and intensifying the reader's engagement with both form and content (Leech & Short, 2007). Foregrounding serves not merely to ornament the text, but to highlight themes and ideological tensions, significantly shaping reader interpretation (Jeffries, 2010). As Mukařovský (1964) posits, foregrounding reorients perception by "making strange" the ordinary, thereby drawing attention to elements often taken for granted.

The Most Dangerous Game by Richard Connell is widely recognized for its suspenseful plot and philosophical reflections on violence, civilization, and human nature (Pizer, 2006). Through the high-stakes pursuit between Rainsford and General Zaroff, Connell critiques the fine line between hunter and hunted and interrogates the moral relativism behind acts of

cruelty (Zimbardo, 2011). While the story has been examined through psychological, moral, and philosophical lenses (Quinn, 2019), few studies have approached it from the perspective of foregrounding theory, a gap this research aims to address.

This study proposes a stylistic analysis rooted in foregrounding theory to explore how Connell's narrative techniques—including lexical deviation, syntactic manipulation, and narrative parallelism—highlight thematic elements such as survival, moral ambiguity, and the illusion of civilization (Fowler, 1996). Such devices, when foregrounded, not only enhance aesthetic appreciation but also produce deeper cognitive and emotional resonance (Freeman, 2000).

Leech (1969) describes foregrounding as "motivated deviation from linguistic and stylistic norms," an act that pushes literary language beyond the communicative function into the realm of artistic and ideological representation. For example, Connell's strategic juxtaposition of elevated diction with abrupt, violent imagery destabilizes the reader's moral compass and questions the civilized identity (Pilkington, 2000).

Foregrounding theory thus offers a compelling framework for uncovering the subtle mechanisms by which Connell's language encodes power dynamics, fear, and philosophical tensions (Cummings, 2014). This approach enables a more nuanced reading of *The Most Dangerous Game*, one that unites form, function, and meaning into a coherent literary analysis.

.
Objectives of the study
i. To examine the ways in which foregrounding strategies support the thematic development of important concepts like moral ambiguity, survival, and civilisation versus savagery.
ii. To analyse Connell's use of linguistic devices and stylistic patterns (such as imagery, unusual syntax, and repetition) to intensify reader engagement and defamiliarise common experiences.
iii. To use foregrounding theory to examine the functional connection between language and literary theme.

Literature Review
Bloshchynskyi, Boyko, and Yemets (2023) conducted a quantitative analysis of foregrounding in both classical and contemporary short stories, including flash fiction and the works of Kate Chopin. Their findings revealed the strategic placement of extended metaphors and grammatical repetition, especially at the structural boundaries of texts—openings and closures—underscoring their importance in thematic consolidation.

Abdul Basit, Hussain, and Abbas (2024) extended this inquiry into the realm of Afro-American poetry, where they applied Leech's foregrounding theory to uncover phonological, graphological, grammatical, and semantic strategies that not only emphasized identity but also served as resistance against racial oppression.

Hussein and Jamsheer (2021) demonstrated the versatility of foregrounding beyond fictional narratives in their analysis of contemporary poetry. They documented multiple levels of foregrounding—including graphological, phonological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic layers—proving the theory's broad applicability.

Rajpur and Mashori (2020) offered similar stylistic insights through their study of the poetry of Elsa Kazi, identifying frequent use of anaphora and epistrophe, which enhanced the poems' rhetorical force and persuasive appeal.

Miall and Kuiken (1994) explored the psychological effects of foregrounding, employing van Peer's theory to show that foregrounded segments were perceived as more emotionally potent and caused slower reading, suggesting deeper cognitive and affective engagement.

Semino and Culpeper (2002) emphasized that foregrounding is a central concept in cognitive stylistics, as it connects literary interpretation with experiential meaning.

WuWenZuo (2011) demonstrated this connection in practice through their analysis of Faulkner's *A Light in August*, where foregrounded language deepened both

character development and thematic resonance—paralleling the narrative strategy of Connell's *The Most Dangerous Game*.

Harash (2020) confirmed the cognitive salience of foregrounding using eye-tracking and think-aloud methods, which showed that experienced readers more thoroughly understood segments marked by stylistic deviation.

Koopman (2016) reinforced these findings with evidence that foregrounding enhances readers' empathetic responses, particularly in narratives dealing with grief. Readers of original, foregrounded texts exhibited greater emotional resonance compared to those reading neutralized versions.

Hakemulder, van Peer, and Zyngier (2004) further supported this view by showing that foregrounding shapes not only textual interpretation but also aesthetic appreciation and emotional processing.

Van Peer and Hakemulder (2006) provided a comprehensive theoretical overview, identifying the mechanisms and effects of foregrounding across poetry and fiction, which has helped establish a consistent analytical foundation.

Stockwell (2020) situated foregrounding within broader cognitive aesthetics, highlighting its relationship with metaphor, defamiliarization, and attention—all crucial for interpreting stylistic effects in short fiction.

Hickey, Sharma, and Nolan (2024), while not directly analyzing foregrounding, contributed relevant insights through their study on narrative focalization. By annotating lexico-grammatical patterns, they revealed how shifts in narrative perspective—similar to those in *The Most Dangerous Game*—are stylistically encoded, influencing point of view and reader orientation.

Research Methodology
Research Design
This study uses a qualitative research design based on literary stylistics, specifically the theory of foregrounding. The goal is to do a close reading of Richard Connell's The Most Dangerous Game to see how foregrounding (through deviation and parallelism) works to improve both the language and the thematic structure.

Qualitative design lets the researcher look into patterns in how language is used, stylistic devices, and their effects on meaning without having to use numbers. This method works best for literary texts that have a lot of meaning that is not straightforward.

Theoretical Framework
Jan Mukařovský first proposed Foregrounding Theory in 1964, and Geoffrey Leech built on it in 1969. The theory says there are two main ways to do things:
Deviation: Using artistic emphasis to break the usual rules of language (lexical, syntactic, phonological, and semantic).
Parallelism: using the same forms or structures over and over again to bring out rhythm, thematic motifs, or emotional intensity.

These theoretical tools help us look at certain language features in the text and what they mean for the themes.

Data Analysis
This chapter provides an in-depth stylistic analysis of Richard Connell's The Most Dangerous Game, applying Jan Mukařovský's (1964) and Geoffrey Leech's (1969) theoretical insights on Foregrounding Theory. This theory proposes that certain features of literary language deviate from ordinary usage to heighten reader attention and contribute meaningfully to the text. The chapter identifies and categorizes various foregrounding techniques in the story, particularly deviation (lexical, syntactic, phonological, and semantic) and parallelism, and interprets their stylistic and thematic significance. This analysis seeks to reveal how these techniques not only enhance the aesthetic quality of Connell's narrative but also deepen its thematic resonance—especially concerning morality, fear, civilization, and survival.

Lexical Deviation
Lexical deviation refers to the use of words or expressions that depart from normal usage or expected meanings to surprise the reader and

emphasize a concept. Connell employs this technique to alter perception and highlight emotional or psychological intensity.

One of the most vivid examples is:
"He lived a year in a minute."
This metaphor distorts conventional perceptions of time. It defamiliarizes the ordinary experience of time passage, making the reader stop and consider the emotional strain the protagonist is undergoing. According to Leech (1969), such expressions break the rules of literalness and pull focus toward internal states. Here, the metaphor not only presents a deviation in meaning but communicates Rainsford's heightened psychological state during his life-or-death chase.

Another powerful instance is General Zaroff's assertion:
"The world is made up of two classes—the hunters and the huntees."
This statement reduces the complexity of human life to a stark dichotomy, functioning as a lexical oversimplification that reflects Zaroff's warped worldview. The deviation lies in treating metaphor as literal truth. By positioning this ideology as a statement of fact, Connell uses lexical distortion to foreground Zaroff's moral detachment, aligning it with the broader theme of civilization versus savagery.

Syntactic Deviation
Syntactic deviation arises when the structure or order of a sentence breaks away from expected grammatical patterns to draw attention or convey mood and pace.

For example:
"Then he ran for his life."
The brevity and abruptness of this sentence emphasize urgency and raw instinct. The stark, declarative form immerses the reader into Rainsford's panic without any explanatory padding. It breaks rhythm intentionally, contrasting with more elaborate narrative prose to simulate adrenaline and fear.

Similarly, in the line:
"There was no sound in the night as Rainsford stood there,"

The structure emphasizes the eerie silence by placing it before the main clause. The inversion and isolation of "no sound" bring silence to the foreground, heightening suspense and reflecting the stillness before action. Connell's syntactic structuring thus aligns with the thematic undertones of fear, uncertainty, and isolation.

Phonological Deviation
Phonological deviation is the deliberate manipulation of sound patterns—through alliteration, assonance, or sibilance—to affect rhythm, mood, or tone.
An example occurs in:

"Screaming, squawking birds; the cry was pinched off short."
The repetition of harsh "s" and "k" sounds mimics the chaotic noise of distressed birds and breaks the prose's normal rhythm. These phonological effects create auditory imagery that underscores tension and environmental disruption. The onomatopoeic quality of "squawking" and "screaming" draws the reader's ear, making the scene vividly noisy and unsettling. Phonological deviation here acts as an acoustic foregrounding device, enhancing sensory immersion.

Semantic Deviation
Semantic deviation occurs when meanings are twisted or metaphorical in ways that challenge conventional interpretation.

Consider the metaphor:
"Rainsford knew now how an animal at bay feels."
This line symbolically collapses the boundary between human and animal. The semantic deviation lies in equating the human experience with that of a cornered beast. Rainsford's transformation from hunter to hunted subverts expectations and raises ethical questions about hunting and human supremacy. The metaphor invites the reader to empathize with prey, compelling a reconsideration of moral and natural hierarchies. Semantic deviation here supports themes of moral ambiguity and identity reversal.

Parallelism

Parallelism, the repetition of similar grammatical structures or phrases, is a key technique for creating emphasis, rhythm, and thematic unity.
For instance:

"The hunter had his nerve with him to tackle it with a light gun. It's no joke to hunt the Cape buffalo."
This repetition of hunting-related clauses creates symmetry and irony. The casual reference to "nerve" contrasts sharply with the real dangers of hunting, highlighting the theme of civilized brutality disguised as sport.

In another example:
"He did not recognize the animal that made the sound; he did not try to find out."
The anaphora ("he did not") underscores psychological detachment or denial. The repeated grammatical pattern emphasizes Rainsford's avoidance of moral reflection, reinforcing the theme of ethical blindness in moments of violence or fear.

Thematic Reinforcement through Foregrounding

Each of the above deviations and parallel structures contributes to the reinforcement of central themes:

Theme	Foregrounding Technique	Effect
Civilization vs. Savagery	Lexical & Semantic Deviation	Breaks moral binaries, reveals brutality beneath civilized behavior
Fear and Survival	Syntactic & Phonological Deviation	Recreates emotional intensity, evokes empathy through form and rhythm
Reversal of Power	Lexical Deviation & Parallelism	Highlights role inversion from hunter to hunted
Moral Ambiguity	Semantic Deviation	Challenges ethical certainty, exposes contradictions in human reasoning

In Richard Connell's The Most Dangerous Game, foregrounding plays a pivotal role in amplifying the story's central themes. Each instance of deviation and parallelism is not merely stylistic ornamentation but a deliberate mechanism to intensify thematic resonance and psychological engagement. The theme of civilization versus savagery is most evidently reinforced through lexical and semantic deviations. By manipulating the connotations of words such as "civilized" and "barbaric," Connell disrupts conventional moral binaries, illustrating how the veneer of civilization can mask a deep-rooted capacity for brutality. This linguistic subversion prompts readers to question the legitimacy of so-called civilized behavior when juxtaposed with acts of primal violence.

Similarly, the theme of fear and survival is brought to life through syntactic and phonological deviations. Irregular sentence structures, abrupt syntax, and heightened rhythm mirror the protagonist's psychological turmoil and the intensity of his life-or-death predicament. These deviations engage the reader's sensory faculties, creating a visceral experience that echoes the emotional stakes faced by the characters.

The reversal of power, another core theme, is underscored through lexical deviation and parallelism. The narrative progression from hunter to hunted is reflected in the careful repetition and contrast of key expressions and metaphors. This parallel structure highlights the inversion of roles and emphasizes the precariousness of dominance and control.

Lastly, the theme of moral ambiguity is intricately woven through semantic deviation. Connell blurs ethical boundaries, leaving readers uncertain about right and wrong. The language frequently contradicts itself or presents paradoxical ideas, compelling the audience to grapple with the shifting moral terrain of the narrative.

Together, these foregrounding strategies illuminate Connell's masterful command over language. The

deviations and repetitions are not merely decorative but essential to the construction of the story's moral complexity and thematic depth. Through this stylistic intricacy, Connell ensures that the narrative challenges, engages, and lingers with the reader, long after the final line.

Through the systematic application of Foregrounding Theory, it becomes evident that Connell's use of deviation and parallelism is not only a stylistic embellishment but a deliberate narrative strategy. By disrupting linguistic norms and repeating structural patterns, he constructs a narrative that is both emotionally compelling and thematically rich. The interplay between form and meaning engages the reader in a deeper inquiry into the nature of violence, survival, and ethical boundaries. Ultimately, foregrounding serves as a powerful tool in aligning literary technique with thematic substance, making The Most Dangerous Game a text that rewards close stylistic scrutiny.

Conclusion

This study employs Foregrounding Theory, originally introduced by Jan Mukařovský (1964) and later elaborated by Geoffrey Leech (1969), to conduct a stylistic analysis of Richard Connell's short story *The Most Dangerous Game*. The investigation focuses on identifying instances of foregrounding through deviation—lexical, syntactic, semantic, and phonological—as well as parallelism, to explore how these linguistic techniques contribute to the construction of themes, emotional resonance, and stylistic distinctiveness in the narrative.

Findings and Analysis

The analysis reveals that Connell masterfully manipulates various forms of **deviation** and **parallelism** to intensify the story's core themes and tone:

1. Lexical Deviation

Example: "He lived a year in a minute"; "two classes—the hunters and the huntees."

Effect: These unfamiliar or inventive expressions defamiliarize common experiences and foreground philosophical and ethical dilemmas, particularly around violence and social stratification.

2. Syntactic Deviation

Example: Disjointed, abrupt, or elliptical sentence structures, especially in chase sequences.

Effect: Heightens suspense, evokes urgency, and mirrors the chaotic mental state of characters under threat.

3. Phonological Deviation

Example: Onomatopoeic choices and sound patterns used to mimic auditory intensity.

Effect: Enhances the vividness of action scenes, reinforcing fear and tension.

4. Semantic Deviation

Example: Metaphorical comparisons between humans and animals.

Effect: Facilitates role reversal, undermines anthropocentrism, and questions the moral superiority of human behavior.

5. Parallelism

Example: Repetition of structural patterns in descriptions and philosophical reflections.

Effect: Provides rhythmic cohesion, emphasizes thematic contrasts (e.g., civilization vs. savagery), and invites reflection on ethical ambiguity.

Together, these foregrounded techniques function not as mere stylistic embellishments but as **thematic amplifiers**, reinforcing major conceptual tensions in the story such as:

Thematic concerns in *The Most Dangerous Game* are intricately woven through various foregrounding techniques, which serve to intensify the reader's engagement with the narrative. The theme of Civilization versus Savagery is illuminated through lexical and semantic deviation, revealing the thin line between cultured behavior and primal brutality. By defamiliarizing the language of civility, Connell lays bare the violent instincts that lurk beneath the surface of social norms. The theme of **Fear and Survival** is reinforced through syntactic and phonological deviation, where disruptions in sentence structure and rhythm echo the psychological turmoil of the hunted, amplifying the emotional realism of the narrative. Meanwhile, the **Reversal of Power** is foregrounded through both lexical deviation and parallelism, underscoring the shifting roles between

hunter and prey and challenging conventional power hierarchies. Finally, the theme of **Moral Ambiguity** is accentuated via semantic deviation, which unsettles moral assumptions and reveals the contradictions embedded in human logic and justification. These stylistic strategies collectively contribute to a layered, immersive reading experience where language and theme are inextricably intertwined.

Despite its insightful findings, this study is constrained by several limitations. Firstly, the scope is restricted to a single literary text, which limits the generalizability of its conclusions across other genres, authors, or literary traditions. Additionally, only select and well-known examples of foregrounding have been examined, leaving out a more exhaustive mapping of all possible instances due to the study's limited scope. Furthermore, the interpretation of stylistic features and their thematic relevance remains inherently subjective, as reader responses may vary based on critical orientation, cultural background, or theoretical lens. Lastly, the analysis is based solely on the English version of the story, without accounting for the possible shifts in meaning or stylistic effects that may occur through translation, which could impact the perception of foregrounding across linguistic contexts.

Building on the current study, future research may explore several promising directions. Comparative analyses could be conducted by applying Foregrounding Theory to a broader corpus of literary texts, particularly within the suspense or adventure genres, to uncover wider stylistic trends and thematic consistencies. Reader-response studies may investigate how individuals from diverse cultural or educational backgrounds perceive and interpret foregrounded elements, offering insights into the role of reader subjectivity in meaning-making. In addition, translation studies could examine how stylistic foregrounding is preserved, altered, or lost across different languages and cultural contexts, shedding light on the challenges and creativity involved in cross-linguistic literary interpretation. Theoretical integration is another fruitful avenue; combining Foregrounding Theory with frameworks such as Postcolonialism, Psychoanalysis, or Narratology may yield more layered and nuanced interpretations of texts. Lastly, pedagogical applications should not be overlooked—research could investigate how explicit instruction in foregrounding devices enhances students' literary analysis and interpretive skills in academic settings.

The findings of this study hold valuable practical implications for both educational and critical contexts. In literature classrooms, Foregrounding Theory offers a powerful and accessible lens for teaching stylistic and thematic analysis, encouraging deeper student engagement with texts through the exploration of how language shapes meaning. For literary critics and scholars, the research reaffirms the intrinsic link between form and content, providing a robust framework for interpreting how linguistic features contribute to narrative complexity. This study demonstrates the continued relevance of Foregrounding Theory in literary stylistics by revealing how Connell's strategic use of deviation and parallelism enriches the structural, emotional, and philosophical dimensions of *The Most Dangerous Game*. These stylistic choices are not merely decorative; they function as deliberate instruments of meaning-making, inviting readers to reflect on fundamental human dilemmas such as morality, instinct, power, and survival.

REFERENCES

Abdul Basit, M., Hussain, M. S., & Abbas, A. (2024). Examining foregrounding as a strategy for identity maintenance through stylistic analysis of Afro-American poetry. Journal of Social Research Development, 5(2), 14–25. https://doi.org/10.53664/JSRD/05-02-2024-02-14-25

Bloshchynskyi, I., Boyko, A., & Yemets, O. (2023). Foregrounding in classical and contemporary short stories: A quantitative stylistic approach. Language and Literature, 32(2), 134–149. https://doi.org/10.59400/fls.v5i2.1675

Connell, R. E. (1924). The Most Dangerous Game. In A. J. Cox (Ed.), Modern American Short Stories. Scribner.

Harash, A. L. (2020). Attention, aesthetic appraisal and semantic noise while reading a literary text (Doctoral dissertation, Tel Aviv University). (retrieved from institutional repository)

Hussein, S., & Jamsheer, S. J. I. (2021). Stylistic investigation of foregrounding in contemporary poetry. South Asian Research Journal of Arts, Language and Literature, 3(5), 1–15.

Koopman, E. M. (2016). Effects of literary foregrounding on empathy and theory of mind: A comparison of literary and non-literary texts. Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts, 10(1), 82–98. https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000041

Kuijpers, M. M., & Hakemulder, F. (2017). Understanding and appreciating literary texts through rereading. Discourse Processes, 54(2), 71–90.

Leech, G. N. (1969). A linguistic guide to English poetry. Longman.

Miall, D. S., & Kuiken, D. (1994). Foregrounding, defamiliarization, and affect: Response to literary stories. Poetics, 22(5), 389–407. https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X(94)P4296-W

Mukařovský, J. (1964). Standard language and poetic language. In P. L. Garvin (Ed.), A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure and Style (pp. 17–30). University of Michigan Press.

Rajpur, A., & Mashori, G. M. (2020). Foregrounding features in the poetry of Elsa Kazi: A stylistic study. International Journal of Language and Literature, 8(2), 101–115.

Short, M. (1996). Exploring the language of poems, plays and prose. Longman.

Simpson, P. (2004). Stylistics: A resource book for students. Routledge.

Stockwell, P. (2020). Cognitive poetics: An introduction (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Van Peer, W., & Hakemulder, F. (2006). Foregrounding. In J. Cuddon (Ed.), The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory (2nd ed., Vol. 4, pp. 314–316). Penguin.

WuWenZuo. (2011). Stylistic foregrounding and thematic depth in Faulkner's Light in August: A foregrounding interpretation (Master's thesis, Jinan University). (retrieved from university repository).