Grounding in English and Arabic News Discourse
Khalil, E.N.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Introduction

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

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

The major thesis about studying that *grounding* should be defined in terms of hierarchical relationships of semantic importance obtaining between propositions in a text. As a discourse semantic notion, *grounding* is distinct from other notions and levels of description. We posit that it should be distinguished from other semantic properties of discourse such as local and global coherence. While global coherence organizes high and low level topics in discourse, grounding organizes propositions on a FG-BG scalar structure. Although there are relationships between foreground meanings and macrosemantically important meanings or topics, both notions are distinct from each other in their theoretical basis and discourse function.

We will make other theoretical distinctions. So we will distinguish *grounding* from the more or less prominent ways it is signaled in surface structures. Since one of our intentions in the systematic analytical description is to distinguish different levels, we will use different terms to charac-
tize manifestations of grounding. Thus we will use the term prominence to refer to surface structure and the term salience to denote another level of organizing meaning, namely in terms of schemata: the hierarchical order of text segments (e.g. headline, lead sentence).

Similarly, we distinguish grounding from the pragmatic notion of lesser or greater relevance of information for language users, and from the cognitive notion of more or less importance of information as represented in the mental models of language users. Conceptual distinctions will allow the assignment of grounding-values to propositions independent of surface structure realization. They will also allow examining surface structure as one manifestation of the FG-BG distinction.

In contradistinction to many other treatments of grounding, where the individual concept or the single lexical item has been the major concern of writers, the present study takes a text-level approach to the grounding phenomenon by focusing on the grounding of the proposition and on certain entities or expressions that occur in sentence-initial position.

The major thesis about studying the surface expression of grounding is that languages vary inter alia in (the explicitness of) marking relative grounding-values at sentence-initial position and in the contribution of specific devices to the grounding-signaling function.

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

The study contributes to broadening the theoretical and empirical foundations of the field. It demonstrates that grounding is a fundamental property of text and that gradual differences of meaning importance in texts could be crucial for comprehension and interpretation.

The study offers insights into the textual structures and linguistic properties of news discourse. Short news texts are one type of the news story
that occupies a prominent place among other types of media discourse. They have hardly been studied from a discourse perspective as a form of written communication.

In addition, using data from other discourses than narrative, and using languages such as Arabic— a Semitic, non-Indo-European language— will increase our understanding of discourse grounding and its manifestations. The linguistic phenomenon of sentence-initial markers in standard Arabic has as yet not been accounted for within a theory of grounding. The present study underscores the importance of this feature in Arabic linguistics and provides evidence that linguistic phenomena can hardly be sufficiently explained by recourse to either sentence-level approach or one level of analysis. In this regard, the study highlights the discourse approach to grammar— one of the themes that engage current linguistic research. It explains the behaviour of a number of tense-aspect entities and examines text-functional distinctions between VS and SV word-order variants.

Furthermore, focussing on differences between Arabic and English in expressions of the FG-BG structure in sentence-initial position reveals patterns of communicating news in both languages and contributes to cross-cultural discourse studies or comparison. It also underlines textual problems in the process of translation and the need to consider structural features of different types of text.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS
Our approach to the FG-BG structure as a textual phenomenon will be outlined in chapter 1, where we describe a model of text-production, present basic and relevant notions of discourse, and review the literature on the grounding phenomenon. In chapter 2 we introduce the short news item as a special type of the news story and start our examination of text-level organization features by looking into some schematic manifestations of text-level grounding. Chapter 3 will present a detailed analysis of surface structure manifestations of text-level grounding in English news texts, exemplified by entities that occur in sentence-initial position. Two patterns of these entities will be explained and illustrated: constituents of the main clause such as noun phrases, and constituents that are marginal to the main clause, such as various kinds of adverbials. These constituents are referred to as strong providers of grounding signals at sentence-initial position.

In order to show one way in which Arabic news texts differ from
Introduction

English news texts in the explicitness of signaling the FG-BG distinction at sentence-initial position and the requirement of that signaling, in chapter 4 we introduce a class of markers from the Arabic language. By way of preparation for the analysis of these markers in chapter 5, the chapter examines the phenomenon of prefatory expressions in news texts, provides empirical evidence of its spread, and explains its significance. The chapter accounts for the requirement to use these expressions in terms of a communicative strategy and the writer's or the translator's goal to perform successful acts. The interplay of these markers with main clause word-order and their influence on the grounding-value will also be examined. Attention will be given to the consequences of the absence of markers from texts where markers should be present. Based on genuine examples from different samples of Arabic short news items, both translated and originally written in Arabic, a detailed description of these markers is presented in chapter 5. Constraints on the interchangeability of markers and cases where markers may neutralize other initial markers in English will be explored and illustrated. Finally, in chapter 6 we present a brief discussion of the major findings of the study and of some major issues, indicating a number of useful avenues for future research. Major concepts used in the study are briefly explained in the end.