

# Markedness Theory in the Holy Bible with Reference to English, Syriac and Arabic Translations

Lubna M. Khoshaba

Asst. Lecturer, Lebanese French University / Erbil

**Abstract**— *Markedness is a very comprehensive term which can be used in any discipline like phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, social sciences, among many other disciplines. As for linguistics, it means the way words, phrases, are changed, added, deleted or foregrounded, mid-grounded and backgrounded. All these changes take place in an accordance with the intentionality of the speaker whenever a certain idea should be confirmed. This research paper studies the use of “markedness theory” in three translated versions of ten verses of the holy Bible, namely (1) English, (2) Syriac and (3) Arabic. The main problem is that the study does not use the source language text since it is not available; therefore, a contrastive study will be conducted to see to what extent translators used the markedness theory in their renderings. This study hypothesizes that: (1) the confirmed messages or ideas are marked, and (2) the translators are aware of the marked elements. The main conclusions the study arrived at are: (1) the three versions: English, Syriac and Arabic were the output of communicative translations in that structurally speaking differences among the three versions are recognizable, and (2) confirmation of certain key-words which convey the gist of the verse has been marked and considered by the translators mainly by foregrounding and sometimes by midgrounding and backgrounding.*

**Keywords**— *markedness theory, foregrounding, middlegrounding, backgrounding, translation.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Much ink was spilt on the “markedness theory” by phonologists, morphologists, syntacticians, semanticists, among many other scholars. However, to the best of our knowledge no study has been conducted about the use of “Markedness Theory” in the Holy Bible with reference to English, Syriac, and Arabic translations. This paper is an attempt to abridge that gap. Markedness theory can be considered as one of the most important theories in structural linguistics, semantics, pragmatics, stylistics, among many other disciplines. Consequently, it

received a great attention of scholars of all linguistic levels such as phonology, morphology, phraseology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and stylistics and also all levels of literature such as poetry drama, novel, etc. This means that any study of markedness theory should be a multidisciplinary study tackling the notion of textuality, contextuality and intentionality. According to this theory, all languages of the whole globe, once they are used, they involve some elements or pieces of knowledge which are more basic and more important than other elements which are natural and normal. Those elements which are more important will be confirmed, i.e. will be marked according to their context by foregrounding, middlegrounding or backgrounding. Trubetzkoy and Jakobson (1931-1969: 306) who were representing Prague school propose the notion of markedness theory in terms of phonological contrast (see Yan-qin and Fen-yuan, 2015:54).

Trubetzkoy and Jakobson (1969) believe that the notion of markedness posits that the term of polar oppositions at any level of language are not only opposites, but rather than they show an evaluative non-equivalence that is imposed on all oppositions. Generally, the unmarked form is the more frequent option and also the one that has the most neutral meaning. Greenberg (1966) was the first to study markedness in terms of distinctive features. Later on, Noyer (1992) and Harley and Ritter (2002) focus more narrowly on morphological markedness. Sauerland (2008) focuses; however, on semantic markedness which is in fact one of Greenberg’s test of markedness based on marked value.

In linguistics, markedness refers to the way words are changed or added in order to give a special meaning. The unmarked choice is just the normal meaning. For instance, the present tense is unmarked for English verbs, whereas the past tense is marked, e.g.

1. "travel"(unmarked).
2. "travelled" is morphologically marked by the suffix (-ed).

Likewise, the noun

3. "host" (unmarked).

4. "hostess" is morphologically marked for femaleness by the suffix the (-ess).

In Arabic "مدير" (manager) is unmarked, whereas "مديرة" (a female manager) is marked. Morphologically, Arabic nouns showing masculine and feminine is well-known for markedness, e.g.

"مدرس" (a male teacher)

"مدرسة" (a female teacher)

Leech (1969) states that in the case of contrast between two or more members of a category like "number", "case", "tense", one of them is called "marked". If it contains some extra "affix" as opposed to the unmarked member which does not.

Nordquist (2017:65) claims that in many areas of language, markedness is a state in which one linguistic element, (phoneme, morpheme, word, phrase) is more distinctively identified or (marked) than another.

The following examples on the level of the elements of the sentences are illustrative.

1. ذهب زكي الى البيت.

2. زكي ذهب الى البيت.

In fact, both the above mentioned sentences are correct whether syntactically or semantically; yet, the first one is the norm, whereas the second one is deviated from the norm by foregrounding the subject, and; therefore, it becomes "marked".

Let us have an example in English.

1. He went home yesterday. (Unmarked)
2. Yesterday, he went home. The sentence has been marked by foregrounding the adverb "yesterday".

The second sentence confirms the adverb "yesterday"; therefore, it has been foregrounded.

From what has been said, one can say that markeness is a case in which one element of language is made more prominent than the other elements either by foregrounding, middlegrounding, or backgrounding and this element may be a phoneme, morpheme phrase etc. This occurs in an accordance with the intention of the speaker or writer. Hence, comes the multiplicity study of this phenomenon which may be any level of linguistics, e.g. phonological, morphological, phraseological, syntactic, etc. or any level of literature, like poetry, play, novel, and any piece of literary style.

## II. FOREGROUNDING, MIDDLEGROUNDING AND BACKGROUNDING

Foregrounding is a technique for making certain strange changes in Language, or it is a method of defamiliarisation in textual composition. Whether the foregrounded pattern deviates from a norm, or whether it replicates a pattern through parallelism the point of foregrounding as a stylistic strategy is that it should

acquire salience in the act of drawing to itself (Nordquist, 2017:4).

In literature, foregrounding may be most readily identified with linguistic deviation. The violation of grammatical rules and conversations by which a poet transcends the normal communicative resources of the language, and awakens the reader, by freeing him from the grooves of cliché expressions, to a new perceptivity. Poetic metaphor, is a type of semantic deviation, is the most important instance of this type of foregrounding, e.g.

Before me stare a wolfish eye

Behind me creeps a groan or sigh (Davis 1871-1941)

The idea of foregrounding is that the clauses which make up a text can be divided into two clauses. These are clauses which in one way or another, elaborate the important ideas, adding specificity or contextual information to help in the interpretation of the central idea. The clauses which convey the most central or important information are called foregrounded clauses, and their propositional content is backgrounded information. (Cornish, 2014:10).

A great deal of stylistic foregrounding depends on an analogous process, by which some aspects of the underlying meaning is represented linguistically at more than one level: not only through the semantics of the text- the ideational and interpersonal meanings, as embodied and in the writer's choice of his role but also by direct relation in the lexicogrammar or phonology.

### 2.1 Foregrounding Theory

Foregrounding theory is a powerful theory that has started in the Greek philosophy, developed by the Russian and Czech theorists, and flourished in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This theory is based on breaking up rules and norms by implementing devices of deviation and parallelism, yielding an aesthetic experience in the mind of the reader. The basic principles of the theory are: (1) defamiliarization in which foregrounding texts are striking and evocative, (2) affecting universal and related to specific type of individuals.

To sum up, foregrounding is striking, effective, time consuming and universal. It surprises the reader by violating the rules. Such violation triggers his feelings and requires much more time to understand and process the text, which in turn forces the reader to focus on the way the text is written more than the content. Finally, such effects are claimed to be universal irrespective of backgrounding or literary experience of the reader.

### 2.2 Myers-Scotton (1993) Model of Markedness Theory

Myers-Scotton (1993) Model provides a very useful framework within which to analyze different types of code switching, and the validity of the types of code switching. He believes that codeswitching is viewed as a positive linguistic phenomenon by the learners and the teachers and that it has specific functions in our multicultural and multilingual society.

This model is based on the patterns of language use and the functions fulfilled by code switching in different contexts and how these aspects affect the patterns of language use and functions of code switching in the class.

Myers-Scotton (1993:114) claims that the unmarked code switching takes place when the addresser makes choice the unmarked index of the unmarked Rights and Obligations set in the speech exchange when he/she wishes to establish the Rights and Obligations set. According to Kieswetter (1995:16) the unmarked code carries the social meaning, rather than the individual switches. The unmarked code choice is used to indicate simultaneous identities (Kieswetter, 1995:114), and usually consists of a continuous pattern of using two or more languages.

The Markedness Model consists of a set of general maxims which can be applied to any code choice. They are as follows:

1. The Unmarked Choice Maxim: Make your code choice the unmarked index of the unmarked rights and obligations set in talk exchanges when you want to affirm that rights and obligations set.
2. The Marked Choice Maxim: Make a marked choice which is not the unmarked index of the unmarked rights and obligations set in an interaction when you wish to establish a new rights and obligations set as unmarked for the current exchange.
3. The Exploratory Choice Maxim: When an unmarked choice is not clear, use switching between speech varieties to make alternative exploratory choices as (alternate) candidates for unmarked choice and thereby as an index of rights and obligations set which you favor.
4. Deference Maxim: Switch to a code which expresses deference to others when special respect is called for by the circumstances.
5. Virtuosity Maxim: Switch to whatever code is necessary in order to carry on the conversation/accommodate the participation of all speakers present.

### 2.3 Marked Model as a Rational Actor Model:

Rational Actor model, including the Markedness model, offer a great advantage over other current models of linguistic choice. From the outset, "being rational" constrains choices in an important way: Every choice in a speaker's repertoire does not have an equal chance of occurring. Instead, the goal to enhance rewards and minimize costs limits choices in a way that neither situational factors nor structural organization can do. The operative word regarding choices is not "possible" but "feasible" or advantageous or unconscious cognitive calculations.

One can say that although Rational Actor models such as the Marked Model do not claim that the assumption of rationality accounts for the data. That is, not only do Rational Actor models provide an explanation of why every potential choice does not occur with the same frequency, but they also provide a principled means for interpreting the choices that occur. From what has been said so far, it is believed that markedness model is considered as a rational actor model. As such, the Marked Model is integrated into a more comprehensive view of how social behaviors arise.

### 2.4 Markedness Theory and Our Model:

In our literature review, we reviewed two models of markedness theory. The first by Myers-Scotton (1993-1998) which is based on code switching approach that involves (1) sociolinguistic aspects of codeswitching, and (2) grammatical aspects of code switching. In regard to the sociolinguistic aspects of code switching, there are two models: (1) the markedness model of Myers which takes social norms as its starting point in analysis, and (2) the conversational codeswitching approach of Li (1994) and Auer (1995) which is based on face to face interaction or conversation as its starting point in analysis. Consequently, the first analysis can be seen as a top-down approach and the second as a bottom-up approach.

With regard to syntactic aspect of codeswitching this study employs the Matrix Language Frame model (Myers-Scotton, (1993 and 2002) to know the grammatical constraints on English, Syriac and Arabic codeswitching. Our analysis will be in coincidence with this model.

As for Berrendonner's Model of markedness theory, it seems that he viewed markedness in terms of foregrounding, middlegrounding and backgrounding which are based on macro-syntactic structure and micro-syntactic structure. Berrendonner (1990:28) states that, syntactically, a given clause or phrase may depend on governing unit (lexicon, group, phrase or clause). Hence, it represents a background unit in purely formal, syntactic in terms of textuality, but at the same time, in terms of discourse. This may constitute foregrounded information





sky, and heavenly bodies will be shaken but in those days, following that distress.

#### Syriac Version:

“هَكَبَر تَهَقَّوْ كَج كَلْمَا نَه كَرِهَلْتِي كَه ، يَحْتَكِر جِه نَعَج ،  
هَمِيَمَتَا كَه تَمِيَل نَحِيَم ، هَحَهَجَدِي كَه جِه نَعَلَر جِه عَجَتَا  
مِنِيَلَهْهِي كَه بَعَجَتَا جِه قَعَر حَه عَجِيَوْتَا .”

#### Arabic Version:

"ولكن في تلك الأيام، بعد تلك الصَّيْفَةِ، تُظَلِمُ الشَّمْسُ وَيَحْجُبُ الْقَمَرُ ضَوْءَهُ،  
وتتهاوى نُجُومُ السَّمَاءِ وَتَنزِعُ عَرْغُ القَوَاتِ التي في السماواتِ".

#### Analysis

Regarding these texts, one can see that there are three versions (1) English, (2) Syriac and (3) Arabic. It seems that there is no marked elements. Whatever is mentioned follows the norm, i.e. in an accordance with the grammatical rules and structures of the English Language.

Even the phrase “but in those days, following that distress” though it shows sequence implicitly, it has not been marked, simply, because it shows contrast rather than sequence because of the conjunction “but”.

As for as the whole verse are concerned, it seems that the three versions have sequence of sentences with complete grammatical structures matching the grammatical rules of the language in question. Only, in the Syriac version markedness has been confirmed in that subjects were foregrounded and verbs were backgrounded. With regard to translation, we are unable to decide which type of translation has been used exactly for text, simply, because we are not in an excess of the original copy. However, as a comparative study., it is clear that semantic translation has been used in both English and Arabic. As for Syriac, it is rather clear that communicative translation is used since all the sequences of sentences of the holy verse have been marked.

**A. English Version (5):** Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. (Galatians 2:1, p.558)

**B. English Marked Version:** Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also.

**C. English Norm Version:** I went up again to Jerusalem fourteen years later, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also.

#### Syriac Version:

جِه كَلْمَا كَر نَحِيَمِيَا يَحِيَوْتَا كَه جِدِيَتَا كَه سَمِيَلَر كَه نَعِيَلِيَر جِر نَحِيَكَا  
مَلِيَلَر جِر كَه هَمِيَلَهْه.

#### Arabic Version:

وَبَعْدَ أَرْبَعِ عَشْرَةَ سَنَةً، صَعِدْتُ مَرَّةً ثَانِيَةً إِلَى أُورُشَلِيمَ بِصَحْبَةِ بَرْنَابَا. وَقَدْ  
أَخَذْتُ مَعِيَ تَيْطُسَ أَيْضًا.

#### Analysis

A close look at this verse, with three different versions namely (1) English, (2) Syriac, and (3) Arabic, one can say that the emphasis has been put on the adverbial phrase of time, since it has been foregrounded, which means it has been marked to show that the most salient element of the verse is time. As for Syriac, it seems that the same procedure has been done in that the adverbial phrase of time has been marked by foregrounding since the focus is on time. In regard to Arabic language, it is clear that the same element has been foregrounded and thus marked. One extra element has been added in Arabic which is the conjunction "و" (meaning "and") to show that the incident in the verse is the sequence of the previous verse. Because there is markedness element, it is believed that communicative translation has been used. This comes in accordance with the intentionality of three translators if and only if the original source was marked.

**A. English Version (6):** "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". (Matthew 5:3, p. 9).

**B. English Marked Version:** "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

**C. English Norm Version:** The poor in spirit are blessed , the kingdom of heaven is for theirs.

#### Syriac Version:

“لَهَبَكَا لِحَسْبِيَوْتَا كَه حَاهِيَكَا ، فَتَد كَر مَبِي دَحِيَوْتَا كَه تَلَه جِلجِهْهِيَا  
بَعَجَتَا .”

#### Arabic Version:

(طُوبَى لِلْمَسَاكِينِ بِالرُّوحِ، فَإِنَّ لَهُمْ مَلَكُوتَ السَّمَاوَاتِ)

#### Analysis

The three versions of the angelic verse are (1) English, (2) Syriac, and (3) Arabic. It seems that all versions are used in a sort of structure which is suitable for saying prayers and requesting the Almighty God to let them know that they will win his satisfaction and mercy; and His heavenly world. Concerning the markedness elements, it seems that the English version confirmed the lexicon “Blessed” as a requesting prayer, whereas Syriac used “لَهَبَكَا”.

In regard to Arabic, it is obvious that the word "طوبى" has been used as a requesting prayer. This means that markedness elements have been achieved through the use of lexicons. As it is well-known prayers, in English are used through the subjunctive structures just like “May God bless the spirits of these poor people” or just “God bless the spirit of these people”.

As for Arabic, it seems that lexicon "طوبى" has been used as a marker of markedness.

Usually, in Arabic, "اللهم بارك" is used. So all the versions have been deviated from the norm for saying the prayer.





- [5] \_\_\_\_\_ (2000): "Morpho-Syntaxe, Pragma-Syntaxe, et Ambivalences Semantiques", **Linguistique**, 22, pp.23-41.
- [6] Catford, J.C. (1965): **A Linguistic Theory of Translation**, London: Oxford University Press.
- [7] Cornish, Francis (2014): "Micro-Syntax, Macro-syntax,Foregrounding and Backgrounding in Discourse", **Belgian Journal of Linguistics**, 26, pp. 6-34.
- [8] Greenberg, J.H. (1966): **Language Universal, with Special Reference to Feature Hierarchies**, The Hague: Mouton.
- [9] Harely, H. Ritter, E.(2002a): "Person & Number in Pronouns: A Feature-Geometric Analysis". **Language** 78/3: pp. 482-526.
- [10] \_\_\_\_\_ (2002b): "Structuring the Bundle: A Universal Morphosyntactic Features Geometry". In: Horst. J.
- [11] Simon and Heik Wiese (eds.) **Pronouns: Grammar and Representation**, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 110-112.
- [12] Hunang, Yan. (2000): **Anaphora: A Cross-Linguistic Study**, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [13] Khalil, Esam-N. (2005): "Grounding: Between Figure-Ground and Backgrounding", **Annual Review of Cognitive Linguistics**, 20,3: pp.1-21.
- [14] Kieswetter, A. (1995): **Code-Switching Among African High School Pupils**. Witwatersrand Occasional Papers inLinguistique 1.
- [15] Leech, G. N. (1969): **A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry**, London: Longman.
- [16] Myers-Scotton, C. (1993): **Language: Grammatical Structure in Code Switching**, Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press.
- [17] Newmark, P. (1982): **A Textbook of Translation**, London: Prentice Hall.
- [18] \_\_\_\_\_ (1988): **Approaches to Translation**, Oxford: Pergamon.
- [19] Nida, E. (1975): **Exploring Semantic Structure**, Munich: Fink.
- [20] Nida, E., and C.R. Taber (1982): **The Theory and Practice of Translation**, Leiden:E.J. Brill.
- [21] Nida, E. (1994): "Translation: Possible and Impossible".**Turjuman**,Vol.3, No.2, pp. 147-163.
- [22] \_\_\_\_\_ (1995): "Dynamic Equivalence in Translating", In: Chan, Sin-Wai and D.E. Polland (eds.), **Translation Studies**,pp. 223-230.
- [23] Nord, Richard(2017): **Foregrounding: Definitions and Examples**, www.Thoughts.com.
- [24] Noyer, R. (1992): **Features Positions and Affixes in Autonomous Dissertation**, (Unpublished Dissertation), Massachusetts University.
- [25] Trubetzkoy, N. S. & R. Jakobson(1939): **Oxford Research Encyclopedia Linguistics**, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [26] \_\_\_\_\_(1969): **Principles of Phonology**, Berkely: California University Press.
- [27] Yan-qin, Z. & Feng-Jvan, T. (2015): "Study on Markedness in Linguistics". **Sino-us English Teaching**, Vol. 12, No. 9, pp. 66-671.