

A Grammatical Study of Foregrounding in Selected Poems from Philip Larkin, the English Poet

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.61796/jscs.v3i1.431>



Sections Info

Article history:

Submitted: November 15, 2025

Final Revised: November 25, 2025

Accepted: December 06, 2025

Published: December 13, 2025

Keywords:

Foregrounding

Deviation

Syntax

Semantics

Phonology

Metaphor

Irony

Rhetorical question

Understatement

Overstatement

Consonance

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to explore the grammatical foregrounding in Philip Larkin's poetry, focusing on how this stylistic device attracts readers' attention, and to propose an eclectic model for analyzing foregrounded expressions. **Method:** A qualitative approach was used, analyzing selected poems from Larkin through frameworks by Quirk et al and Rajimmwale. The analysis examines various types of foregrounding, including ellipsis, rhetorical questions, and metaphor. **Results:** The study identifies predominant foregrounding techniques in Larkin's poetry, particularly pun and metaphor, and highlights the frequent use of understatement and fronting to emphasize the poet's themes of pessimism and the futility of life. Additionally, rhetorical questions were found to be less frequent but significant in their role in the poetry's meaning. **Novelty:** This work contributes a new eclectic model of foregrounding that combines various theoretical approaches, offering a unique tool for analyzing poetic texts and enriching the understanding of Larkin's stylistic choices.

INTRODUCTION

Stunned by irregularities and subversions of grammatical conventions in poetry, readers are looking forward to interpretations and analyses of such permissible inconveniences to get acquainted with suitable justifications for this disruption [1]. Put differently, the audience wonders about the type of the grammatical rules that are derailed, so to speak, in poetry and to what degree such anomaly is possible in literary texts. Additionally, the reader asks about the use of such deviation in poetry and the scope of aberration that the poet is allowed to make within a single poem. What is more, the audience is in pursuit of a guideline that leads him to linguistic areas in which such divergence is tolerated and performed.

Poets, orators, novelists, dramatists and literary writers do their best to disrupt the norms and canonical rules concerning the linguistic areas, particularly those related to the inner circle of linguistics, viz. syntax, semantics and phonology. Accordingly, this violation, which is referred to as foregrounding, merits a great deal of consideration and analysis since it brings about ideologically charged expressions which are in need of further processing on the part of the reader to construe. Worded differently, grammatical rules serve as a yardstick against which foregrounding strategies and mechanisms are measured [2]. Consequently, learners are entitled to get access to these grammatical irregularities to comprehend poetry and other literary genres.

Larkin's Biography

In Coventry, Philip Larkin, as a second child in the family and only son, was born on August 9, 1922. Attending the City's King Henry VIII school, Larkin, due to his literary interest and cleverness, contributed substantially to writing and editing in the school's magazine. After leaving the school, he joined St. John's College in Oxford University. Despite the war and its consequences, he completed his study and graduated from university in 1943 with "First Class Honours in English" [3]. In 1946, he made a librarian at University College in Leicester. Right from the beginning, he is greatly fond of poetry and he wrote numerous poems, which are mostly pessimistic, the most important of which are the Church Going, The Whitsun Weddings, An Arundel Tomb, Mr. Bleaney, The less depressed, The Whitsun Weddings and High Windows.

Highly influenced by Wordsworth, Eliot and Thomas Hardy, Larkin's poetry is heart-breaking depicting deprivation in such a way that is analogous to the one written by Wordsworth about daffodils [4]. Embracing linguistic devices attributed to practical experiences of modernism such as grammatical strangeness, self-conscious literariness, unexpected shift of register and voice along with intensity of symbolism, Larkin's poetry is characterized by understatement, colloquial style and direct involvement in commonplace experiences. As a touring figure in English poetry, Larkin wrote his poems in highly structured forms enriched in skepticism.

Foregrounding and Grammaticality

According to Trask, foregrounding is a phenomenon providing prominence for some part of a sentence or utterance [5]. By imputation, Abrams & Harpham stress the dominance of a linguistic feature by the writer/ speaker to make it noticeable, arguing that this trope is with artistic value that is considered as an act of novelty [6]. Digging deep into the character of foregrounding, Simson sustains that this trope is operative at any level of language, contending that it is a form of textual patterning motivated for literary aesthetic aims [7]. Characterized by irregularity in structure, foregrounding involves either deviation from the norm, or distortion of linguistic expressions via repetition or parallelism, a technique referred to as "more of the same". Looked at from another angle, foregrounding is seen as a method of defamiliarization simply because it sparks strange forms that demand mental thinking and assiduous efforts on the behalf of the listener to decode the foregrounded expressions.

As a stylistic strategy, foregrounding is meant to acquire salience in the sense of drawing attention to itself, a salience that develops images, themes and characters that elicit impact in a text's interpretation. Accordingly, foregrounding counts as a by-product of the writer's subjective inclination in style. For instance, Jonathan Swift is not interested in monosyllabic words, a characteristic that is highly impressive in his works [8]. However, such a feature is a personal tendency by the writer in question and has nothing to do with a design in literary foregrounding.

Rajimmwale argues that there are some challenges with respect to the theory of foregrounding. One of these challenges lies in the concept of "norm, by violation of which foreground is produced [9]. Worded differently, it is difficult to decide what is normal

and what is otherwise with regard to linguistic forms and construction. The second dilemma that the interpretation of foregrounding passes through pertains to the conventional nature of a feature or expression which is foregrounded one day and natural the other: that is to say, do we consider such features or expressions foregrounded or established?.

By and large, foregrounding is understood as deviation since it sparks change in the grammatical structure of expressions. This change; in fact, is semantically, phonologically or syntactically considered. Put differently, linguistic utterances are violated, whether they are words, clauses, phrases or phonemes so that they can stand out from the surrounding co-text in which they occur and made memorable, demanding further interpretation [10].

As such, deviation, which involves departure from the norm, is regarded as an indispensable mechanism in writing poetry [11]. The expression *a grief ago* by Dylan Thomas, for instance, represents a deviation from the norm of English since the determiner (a) precedes only countable nouns that can be pluralized. The postmodifier *ago* collocates with time nouns such as months, days, years and the like, while the word *grief* is emotion noun. Such violations are deliberately made to jolt the reader and stands out against a background which adheres to the norm.

RESEARCH METHOD

Model of Analysis

The model used for analyzing Philip Larkin's poetry is an eclectic one and the researcher depends on Rajimmwale, Quirk et al and Leech theories in tandem with the researcher's observation to construct the model in question which is diagrammed and mooted below [12]. According to McQuarrie and Mick, variation is grounded in tropes and schemes [13].

Tropes

Overlooking the sense of literal meaning of an expression, trope is brought about by subversion of semantic content of linguistic expressions to formulate an influential image. It is, in fact, of two kinds: destabilization and substitution.

Destabilization

Interested in meaning inconsistency, destabilization, Mulken affirms [14], has nothing to do with formal meaning of a construction. By contrast, the meaning produced is oscillating between two or more divergent domains and only the context can resolve this controversy. This trope can be achieved via three channels, namely pun, metaphor and irony.

Pun

Considered as a humorous trope resultant from incongruity, pun is "a form of word-play in which some feature of linguistic structure simultaneously combines two unrelated meaning" [15]. Formulated largely via homophony (two or more words with the same sound but different meaning) or homonymy (a single form with multiple senses), pun is common practice not only in poetry, but also other everyday use of

language, e.g. 'A cannonball took off his legs, so he laid down his arms where the italicized word homonymously exhibits the meaning of 'upper limbs' of a person or 'weapons' [16]. Semantically speaking, pun violates the notion of denotation which holds that a word in language should refer to a single entity in the world [17].

Metaphor

Sparkling a projection within one conceptual domain, metaphor implies comparison between two things, objects, ideas or events that are unrelated by stating that "one thing is another" as in "Reading is food" [18]. Evaluated as an innovative device to which poets and orators usually resort, metaphor is meant to facilitate a complex thought and maximize the value of a certain feature or image. With its make-up segmented into the target domain (which deals with the topic described by metaphor) and the source domain (which the speaker rests on to establish a metaphorical construction), metaphor sometimes causes syntactic violation as far as parts of speech are concerned; the verb cut, say, which means "to make an opening by a sharp-edge tool" can metaphorically morph into a noun to mean the 'omission of a part of play'.

Irony

Mey contends that irony is a trope which is concerned with "saying something while meaning something else", describing it as an insincere utterance [19]. In support of this claim, Leech points out that irony involves an implied negation since it comprises contrastive and inappropriate ideas [19]. For instance, the utterance It seems to be little windy is regarded as an ironic remark when said about a violent storm since there exists a gap between what is said and what is meant.

Following Simpson, irony is sometimes conducted by a speaker while echoing his partner's utterance to indicate the former speaker's critical comment and devalued judgment about what the latter says as in B's response in the following exchange [20] :

A: I'm really fed up with this washing up B: You're fed up. Who do you think's been doing it all week?

Included in the echoic character of irony are two related subtypes of this trope : parody and satire. Characterized by its aggressive nature and bitter criticism, satire is taken to involve humorous repetition that indicates the addressee's stupidity and vices. On the contrary, parody is designated for comic effect or in ridicule with an affectionate orientation by the speaker towards the addressee. In parody, which is usually devoid of hostility, there may be mild comments and constructive criticism while destructive comments are abundant in satire.

It is worth mentioning that irony is not assessed in terms of truth condition criteria pursued in semantics. This semantic deficiency is justified on the basis of the fact that irony is seen as a speech act assessed in terms of felicity conditions that create the divide between what is said and what is meant [21].

Substitution

Following Leech, truth conditions are neither reported as a black or white, so to speak, proposition because they involve gradable values extending between truth and falsehood extremes on a continuum [22]. As such, manipulation comes into play to trigger

overstatement and understatement on which substitution depends. Generally speaking, substitution is made in more twisted fashion, entailing selection of a construction that demands more processing to get access to and decipher the speaker's intended message in a bid to connect what is said to what is meant. This is, in turn, subdivided into three categories: overstatement, understatement and rhetorical questions.

Overstatement

Alternatively termed as hyperbole, overstatement, as argued by Leech, involves the objects or activities whose description is much greater than those indicated by the state of affairs, as in *Her runs faster than the speed of light* which alludes to the highest point on the scale of speed [23]. In fact, this maximization in scope contradicts with the categorical character of grammar since the semantic area suggested by overstatement is extremely extended beyond its real confines. Consequently, hyperbolic expressions such as the example aforementioned cannot be accounted for logically by means of their truth conditions. On the other hand, such breach is positively evaluated because it adds flavor, metaphorically speaking, to the content of the message sent with the speaker's / poet's intention to intensify the effect of the message and make it more attractive (1983: PP. 145-6). Put differently, the leverage of overstatement is discerned through its persuasive force despite the distortion in the canonical rule of sentence construction.

Understatement

Alternatively known as *litotes*, understatement is employed to play down an object or activity. That is to say, the scope of description assigned to the object or event is much narrower than that denoted by the real world [24]. This is exemplified by a release from a player belonging to a triumphant team that says “We didn’t play badly”. According to Leech, understatement masks a bad report which allows for good interpretation [25]. Nevertheless the formation of this trope sacrifices the semantic structure of the expression in question because the reduced object or event may match a word other than the original one that it is designated to allude to, and, hence, semantic discrepancy would arise as in *I wasn't overimpressed by her speech* [26], [27].

Equally important is the fact that the economy principle that is adopted here may collide with clarity principle which is at the core of grammatical organization [28]. Poets and orators usually have recourse to such a trope to jolt the reader and attract his attention because standard utterances that are free from aberration are dull and uninteresting and gender nothing but boredom on the behalf of the receiver [29].

Rhetorical Question

Following Quirk et al, rhetorical question is a forceful statement. In this kind of question, two subclasses are realised: a positive rhetorical question and a negative one [3]. The former is assumed as a strong negative assertion as in *Can anyone doubt the wisdom of this action?* (Surely no one can doubt the wisdom of this action), the latter, on the other hand, is a strong positive question, e.g. *Is no one going to defend me?* (Surely someone is going to defend me?) [5].

Characterized by its ambivalent nature, rhetorical question can perform a variety of speech acts that are subsumed under expressive category which Searle proposes such

as complaint as in Why did you put so few vegetables? Lane, as in What is the advantage of a naughty guy to the educator? Pride as in You hear about the Iraq farmer who downed the Apache helicopter? and Indignation, as in When did you stop your tricks? [2].

Grammatically speaking, rhetorical question is claimed to be the exception rather than the norm. This assumption is justified since questions, in general, are formulated to elicit information from the addressee while rhetorical questions are not so, but they intend to attract the audience's attention causing foregrounding.

Schemes

Following Rajimmwale, schemes are foregrounded recurrences of expressions the most important groups of which are: alliteration, parallelism and ellipsis. This study is confined to ellipsis to the exclusion of parallelism and alliteration since the latter two channels have no grammatical contribution to the topic under scrutiny [21].

Likened to substitution, ellipsis is employed to abandon repetition as in she might sing, but I don't think she will (sing) [18]. There are certain areas in which ellipsis may occur:

1. Adverbials in which the whole of the predication or part of it can be dropped as in I'm happy if you are (happy).
2. Post modification, e.g. The police rounded up men (who are/ were) known to have been in the building at that time.
3. Supplementing clause e.g. I caught the criminal-just (I caught the criminal. I only just caught the criminal).
4. Ellipsis not dependent on linguistic context e.g. (1) Beg your pardon, (Are you) looking for anybody?. This type of ellipsis extends to determiners, operators and pronouns that are deleted in block language as in headlines, titles, notices, etc.

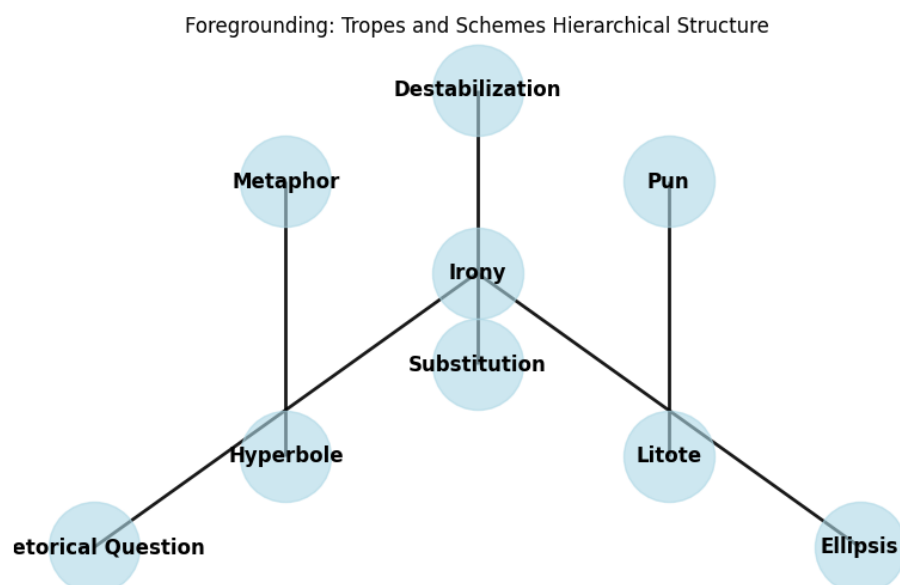


Figure 1. An Eclectic Model of foregrounding (After Leech (1983:PP.147-8) and Quirk, et al. (1985:P.825) in tandem with the researcher's observations).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Textual Analysis

In this section of the practical application of foregrounding analysis, the researcher adopts the model illustrated above to probe the foregrounded expressions that turn up in Larkin's poetry to express the poet's emotions and pessimism about life and people's fatal termination and to underscore the grammatical subversion that the poet had advertently made. Due to the curtailed space, six stanzas from different poems written by Larkin are randomly selected for analysis to meet this end. The chosen extracts are then segmented into sentences numbered as shown in these stanzas so that their analyses could be easily conducted within the framework of the proposed model and with the aid of the poet's biography as cognitive context displaying the worldview and atmosphere of his poems under scrutiny.

Extract (1) (From the poem Church Coming)

"Once I am sure there is nothing going on
I step inside letting the door thud shut,
Another church: matting, seats and stone,
and little books: sprawlings of flowers, cut" [30], [31].

The title of Larkin's poem "Church Coming" provokes pun as a foregrounding mechanism; that is to say, it is either glossed as "the practice of attending church for worship" or "disappearance of churches". It turns out that the poet opts to the latter interpretation. That is to say, the indeterminacy that pun arises, as Rajinwale affirms, is ultimately settled when the poet discloses, in the following lines, his non-religious character through his assertion that churches and religion would die out in the upcoming days when technology greatly flourishes [32]. The suspense that the poet first created was then triggered by understatement, which is a kind of substitution as Leech stresses, when he reduced the church and its holy atmosphere to mats, seats and stones in a bid to devalue the importance of this establishment [33], [34]. This understatement is triggered by a syntactic violation represented by deleting the construction of existence 'There is' which is supposed to be placed at the beginning of the line that reads " Another place.....". However, another understatement is issued once the poet says " little books" in reference to copies of Bible, which Christians all over the world consider as the genuine constitution of human behavior and heavenly guideline. The use of ' little' violates the syntactic structure of the expression employed here since this word is usually collocates with non-countable nouns. The poet, however, deliberately incorporates it in the poem so as to push the desired material tightly towards the reverse direction on the size scale, arousing the audience's emotions, as Rajinwale sustains [35].

Extract (2) (from the poem Cut grass)

"Cut grass lies frail
Brief is the breath
Mown stalks exhale
Long, long the death" [15], [16].

Conveying the idea of loss and transience, Larkin inaugurates this poem with a wonderful metaphor comparing life to grass which is cut, exhibiting the vulnerability and death that human beings would expose to. This trope, Simpson points out, represents a blunt disruption of sense-reference rule which stipulates that a word in language should map on an object or action in the world [19]. Worded differently, cut grass does not literally refer to life at all, a violation sparking innovation, as the notion of metaphor usually suggests. In the same vein, the poet proceeds in describing life as a breath in the second line, a metaphor that depicts the succinctness of the period through which human beings live. In this metaphor, the poet uses conversion to place the subject complement (brief) in the subject position, a conversion which is syntactically established as fronting, as Quirk et al. affirms, with the aim of emphasis to accentuate the shortage of life [21].

In the last couple of lines, the poet presented a metaphor, as Leech argues [23], pertaining to death which is much longer than life; that is to say, the burden of death, here, is depicted by a comparison between a plant stalk which is newly cut (the target domain) and death (the source domain) in a bid to persuade the audience of futility of life and uselessness of daily activities. Syntactically speaking, repeating words is banned in the standard English; nevertheless, the repetition of the adjective 'long', replacing the elliptic adverb 'very', is tolerated to emphasize the lengthy time of death.

Extract (3) (from the poem *The Explosion*)

"Down the lane came men in pitboots

Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke

Shouldering off the freshened silence." [25].

Trading on the aftermath and obscenity that the explosion brought about to highlight the stark contrast between peace and war, Larkin raises pun mechanism in terms of the noun (men) modified by a prepositional phrase (in pitboots), an ambiguous and murky expression which either means 'men wearing pitboots' or 'men put into pitboots' and it is the context that resolve this conflict in favour of the former interpretation. Syntactically speaking, the first sentence witnesses what Quirk et al. refers to as fronting which recommends shifting constituents that are normally situated after the verb to the beginning of a construction [28]. This syntactic mechanism is used by the poet in question to facilitate interpreting the burden of prepositional phrase (down the lane) in this expressive message. Put differently, Larkin expresses his deep concern about the countless deaths resultant from this catastrophic accident. In the second line, irony, as Leech proposes, is formulated once the poet described the victims' firm faith that they cannot abandon till their last moments of their lifetime [1]. By the same token, this explicit description disguises a covert message with the sense that "despite their robust belief, they lost their lives in a detrimental accident", a remark of the poet's disbelief in the power of fate. The last line of this stanza, however, serves as another type of irony to which the poet made no verbal response to indicate the divide between what is said and what is meant. In reality, silent responses are hardly established and solidified in such intimidating situations where explosions take place. Invested by the collocational

disruption of the expression “shouldering off the freshened silence”, irony is triggered to evoke the reader’s feelings towards the horrible accident.

Extract (4) (from the poem Deception)

“Slums, years have buried you. I would not dare

Console you if I could. What can be said?

Except that suffering is exact, but were

Desires takes charge, reading will grow erratic?” [3].

Drawing on the poet’s intention, this stanza opens up with a pun emanating from the word ‘slum’ with its meaning is swinging according to the class word to which the aforementioned word may be imputed. If noun, this word, Hornby contends [7], alludes to the streets crammed with houses in which the poor had resided, but it can be alternatively glossed as “to live cheaply” if verb. The ironic understatement is also raised, consisting in the years that bury the poor, something which is unreasonable. Here, the absurdity is discerned via selectional restrictions principle that recommends impossibility of collocating words that share no semantic links. As such, the verb ‘bury’ should have a human agent as its subject, and temporal subject like ‘years’ cannot co-occur with the verb in question, as Lobner concedes [12]. Nevertheless, this homonymy is reduced to the former interpretation by virtue of the linguistic context in which the word occurs. Nonetheless, this grammatical subversion is utilized to deepen the reader’s awareness of what Leech referred to as the charming channel of reporting an event, i.e. years’ placing human bodies into ground [30].

Asserting the futility of condolence he may issue to the poor people in death, Larkin intended to say that the poor were unable to make progression and advancement due to their deteriorated economic status. By imputation, the poet posed a rhetorical question “What can be said?” with its implicit indignation overtone, underscoring the poet’s depression of life and frustration over oppression that the poor people had long been suffering from. This question is semantically ill-formed and at odds with normal questions because questions are generally designated to elicit information from the addressee, as Yule sustains [34]. What is more, another rhetorical question is also directed basically to the audience about the process of reading people and their ambitions, which the poet intends to describe as not organized. In fact, the process of reading, here, is not literally taken since it involves the analytic interpretation of oppression and persecution that the poor had long experienced.

Extract (5) (from the poem Days)

“What are days for?

Days are where we live.

They come, they wake us

Time and time over

They are to be happy in

Where can we live but days?” [16].

Expressing boredom and monotony of life, the poet begins his poem with a rhetorical question concerning the uselessness of human existence. Later on, Larkin was

biased to understatement when he reduced days to dwellings, tilting his intention towards the futility of life at the expense of the semantic structure which is completely subverted in the sense that no correspondence between days as a temporal noun phrase and dwellings as a spatial noun phrase. Semantically speaking, this is contradiction simply because there is no truth condition in what the poet claimed; that is to say, days refer to time, while houses or dwellings express location, a discrepancy that attracts the reader's attention, as Rajimmwale claims [19]. Next, overstatement is brought about when Larkin upgraded the days to an extent that they can perform human activities such as waking people, some sort of violation in the semantic structure of the words employed to describe the action in question. Repetition emerges to maximize the amount of futility of days in the fleeting nature of human experience. Reiterating the rhetorical question, the poem ramps up this stanza with his pessimistic evaluation of life, arguing against the routine of days.

Extract (6) (from the poem (A study of Reading Habits)

“When getting my nose in a book
Curled these things short of school,
It was worth ruining my eyes
to know I still keep cool,
and deal out right the old right hook
to dirty dogs twice my size.” [22].

Introducing two divergent images of reading, Larkin draws upon ironic discrepancy when embodying two successive age phases of adolescence and adulthood with respect to reading. That is to say, the speaker, once adolescent, assumes reading as an escape from school mundanity and life drudgery. Over time, it turns out that reading is an essential task since it develops one's mentality and ability to encounter life difficulties and overcome the adversities and plights. Grammatically speaking, this irony touches upon the absurdity of the semantic structure of the sentences; it is unreasonable for the reader to place his nose into a book while reading. However, this description counts as an overstatement, the point of which is to attract the audience's attention to something unpredictable. By the same token, ironic understatement, as Leech emphasizes [24], is secured when the writer when the reader's eyes are reduced to something devastated due to constant contact to reading. What is more, metaphor features as an endorsing image that strikes a balance between the wicked people whom the poet branded as dirty dogs and the reader who alleges to overcome them despite their physical strength and tricks. Here, semantic conventions are disrupted; the verb 'cure' does not take non-human agent, like book, as a subject, nor does the verb 'deal' collocate with 'hook' as an object, as Quirk et al sustains [6]. Nevertheless, these violations are deliberately made to jolt the audience and get him to interpret such grammatical inconveniences properly.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : This study highlights that Larkin's poetry is characterized by a frequent use of foregrounding techniques, particularly pun and metaphor, to express his pessimistic outlook on life and human experiences. The research underscores how Larkin employs semantic disruptions, understatement, and fronting to convey his critical stance on the futility of daily activities and societal norms. **Implication** : The findings suggest that foregrounding plays a crucial role in deepening the interpretative engagement of readers, guiding them to reconsider conventional grammatical structures and meanings in literature. Understanding these techniques can enhance literary analysis, particularly in the study of modernist poetry. **Limitation** : The scope of the analysis was limited to a selection of Larkin's poems, and while the eclectic model of foregrounding proved effective, further studies may be needed to apply this model to a broader range of literary works. **Future Research** : Future studies could expand the framework to explore foregrounding in other poets or literary genres, examining its cross-genre applicability and further refining analytical models to encompass additional linguistic nuances and reader responses.

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