

## A Study of Lexical Foregrounding in Niyi Osundare's Village Voices

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### Abstract

This study explicates on lexical foregrounding in selected poems of Osundare's anthology of poems tagged *Village Voices*. It is possible that one's style of writing can be of deviating from the standard norms of a language to convey an important message. As such, foregrounding appeared to be unusual to many readers thereby making it somewhat difficult to decode messages contained in varieties of texts. Via the theory of foregrounding, eight poems were selected and analysed. The poems are; *I wake up this morning, sleeping, at five and twenty* and *eating tomorrow's yam*. Others include; *Feigning Rebel, A Reunion, The Cocks' Comb of fire* and *unequal fingers*. The result revealed that lexical foregrounding found in the selected poems were appositely foregrounded and encoded as well as disseminated their artistic visions, messages and meanings, which consequently, help readers and critics to comprehend and interpret the poet's emotional feelings and dispositions on the selected poems to convey cultural and socio-political messages to his audience.

**Keywords:** Stylistics, Foregrounding, Lexical foregrounding, Niyi Osundare and *Village Voices*.

### Introduction

This study explores on lexical foregrounding of selected poems in Osundare's anthology of poems titled *Village Voices* with a view to finding out how lexical foregrounding can be used in literary texts in order to reveal how writers use some of these devices to scramble and disseminate their artistic vision and message, which consequently, helps readers and critics to comprehend and interpret their (the poets) emotional feelings and dispositions.

*Village Voices* is the second volume of Osundare's poetry, *songs from the market place* being the first. The poems were first published in 1984 and subsequently in 2003 and 2004 respectively. The anthology consists of thirty-eight poems which are divided into three categories. The first category is titled *voices of dialogue and banter*, the second, *voices of coming and going* and the third *voices of anger and indictment*.

It is crystal clear that language is a pathway of human communication. Hence, the skilful use of language in poetry is one of the ways of literature for apt dissemination of messages as well as interpretation or meaning-making. Poetry is revealed to abundant interpretations. In fact, the meaning of a poem changes not only from reader to reader, but also from reading to reading. Osundare (2008) ruminates work of art as communication. Hence, language is regarded as an essential tool in the biosphere of poetry. It is significant to distinguish that Osundare's poems are distinctive and exceptional among his contemporaries because of his style of involving some aspects of lexical foregrounding. He further argues that writers do communicate using different styles or ways of communication. "Writing by its nature, is knotted by so many factors which referred to as 'temporo-spatial matrix, a definite and definable occasion'" (Osundare, 2008, p.24),

in which case the writers ‘now’ become the reader’s ‘then’ etc. which consequently, this notion calls for critical interpretations and meaning-making.

Leech (2013) cited in Modu and Rufai (2022) emphasises that literary language is difficult to be conceived as a describable language in its own right. Therefore, this study examines how Osundare creatively deploys foregrounding as device of communication to express his cultural and socio-political messages to his readers.

### **Justification for the Study**

It is obvious that literary texts are subjects to countless interpretations. Meaning making and texts interpretations depend largely on the language used and the style employed by a writer. At times, one’s own way of writing a text can be deviated from the standard to convey an important message. As such, it becomes unusual to the readers thereby making it somewhat difficult to easily decode the message of literary discourses.

It is against this background this study sets out to uncover how the poet’s used foregrounding to send across message to his readers. Thus, the main aim of this study is to reveal how, by deviating from the norm, the writer uses his own peculiar way of writing (lexical foregrounding), to express his feelings and ideas to the extent that his attitude and disposition become very colourful to readers. In other words, this study deals with how lexical foregrounding helps writers and readers in conveying message and meaning construction of a given text.

### **Objectives of the study**

The main objective of this study is to present a lexical foregrounding of the selected poems in Osundare's *Village Voices*. Thus, the specific objectives include:

- i. To identify the lexical foregrounding devices in the selected poems.
- ii. To examine how the identified lexical foregrounding devices in the text can lead to an appropriate interpretation.
- iii. To explain how the poet uses lexical foregrounding as means to achieve his aim of creating effects on social and cultural phenomenon.

### **Significance of the study**

As every study is expected to significantly play an important role in the academia, this study contributes to the growing literature on the interface between literature and language, precisely lexical foregrounding. The study aims at sharpening our awareness of lexical foregrounding in literary texts regarding meaning-making. It also serves as a reference material for students and researchers who are interested in conducting further research on foregrounding, stylistic analysis, rhetorical study and graphological studies in poetry.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

#### **Stylistics**

Toolan (1996) explains that stylistics is the study of the language in literature. Toolan further observes that stylistics can be used in the attempt to understand technique, or the craft of writing. It is further argued that, by bringing to the close examination of the linguistic particularities of a text, one can understand the functions of the language. For Person (2001), stylistics is not only to

describe the formal features of texts for their own sake, Stylistics is also defined as a study of the different styles that are presented in either a given utterance or a written text or document. The consistent appearance of certain structures, items and elements in a speech, an utterance or in a given text is one of the major concerns of Stylistics. In a similar view, Verdonk (2002) states that stylistics is the study of language in literature and it seeks to account for interpretation effects of a text through close study of its linguistic detail, such as syntactic structuring, semantic deviation, deixis, modality etc. in the words of Wales (2001) stylistic does not only focus on the formal features of the text but also highlights the interpretation of the text either it is literary or not, but, the major aim of stylistics study of any literary text is to examine the language use in such texts with the aim of relating the discovered linguistic features to its artistic functions (Leech & Short, 1981).

### **Foregrounding**

Foregrounding are elements of a text which stand out or are deviant from or parallel to what one would expect or what is conventional (Norgaard et al, 2010). In this way, it is vivid that deviation and parallelism are the main elements used to achieve deviation in texts. In this way, foregrounding involves a defamiliarization, deautomatisation of some discourse in a given text. Hence, it is the central means of defamiliarization which is an act of making unfamiliar what is familiar. In other words, the term foregrounding relates to linguistic devices on all levels of language that somehow stand out against the background of the text in which they occur (Norgaard et al, 2010).

Foregrounding as a stylistic strategy is closely related with aesthetic exploitation of language that takes the form of surprising a reader into a fresh awareness the linguistic medium. Foregrounding can be seen as an outcome of deviation from linguistic (and non-linguistic) norms of various kinds' linguistics and literary discourses (Leech & Short, 1981). The concept holds that literary artistry is to be measured by the extent and complexity of the language patterning perceived in different literary works. This implies that, foregrounded language is a language that the literary artists have made prominent so that it stands out from the rest of the text, which consequently make it to become significant.

### **Lexical foregrounding**

Lexis is one of the levels of analysis in stylistics, it pays attention to the choice of words made by an author and how those results in different types of meaning. Toolan (2010) observes that Lexis is central to whatever is distinctive about a particular literary text. In stylistics, lexical deviation refers to a new word or expression or a new meaning for an old word used on only particular occasion. Sometimes a writer intends to reach certain kind of rhetorical effect, so he will invent some new words based on the rules of word-formation. But these new words are seldom or hardly used on other occasions. Thus, lexical foregrounding is an attempt by an author to use words in a way that they appear unfamiliar to the reader, as a result of which the author is seen as deviating from the conventional way of using the words.

According to Leech (1969), what makes poetry so unique from other writings is the linguistic deviation or language manipulation in poetry and therefore linguistic deviation is regarded as a means of creating artistic beauty. A poem is considered to have lexical deviation if its words deviate from their actual and standard form in order to have a deeper value in meaning and in aesthetics. Leech (1976) claims that there are nine kinds of deviation usually found in poetry, and

lexical deviation is one of them. It is important therefore, to observe that in lexical analysis of a text, the main focus is usually on the content words.

### **Brief Account of Niyi Osundare**

Niyi Osundare was born in 1947 in Ikere, Ekiti State, Nigeria. He is a prolific poet, dramatist and literary critic. He obtained degrees (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup>) at the University of Ibadan, the University of Leeds and York University, England respectively. He has been identified as a champion of the right to free and is a strong believer in the power of words, saying “to utter is to alter”. Osundare believes that there is no choice for the African poet but to be political.

You cannot help quiet about the situation in the kind of countries we find ourselves, in Africa. When you wake up and there is no running water, when you have a massive power outage for days and nights, no food on the table, no hospital for the sick, no peace of mind...(Osundare, 2014, p.11).

Osundare’s works include: *songs from the Market Place, The Eye of the Earth, Moon songs, Songs of the Season, Waiting Laughters, Mild life, Random Blues, The World is an Egg and Village Voices* (which has been divided into three categories). His works vividly convey his concept on the relationship between the oppressed Nigerian/African and the crop of leaders there. Most of the themes of his writing include corruption, poverty, administrative mismanagement etc. (Alu, 2008). According to Saleh (2003), going by the titles of the three categories of poems in *Village Voices*, "the poems are grouped along thematic and, to some extent, stylistic lines". For example, readers could understand, as Saleh (2003) argues all the poems in *Village Voices* "assume the voice and world-view of the villager" and make the judgment that, Osundare's inspiration was drawn from his experience of many years of exploitation and neglect from the powers that governed him with the help of the style the writer employed.

Osundare’s interest in innovative style, as argued by Alu (2008), is conveyed in his keen interest in the use of language. For instance, *village voices*, exposes the simplistic life style of the village dwellers. The central theme in *village voices* is the predicaments of the societal underdogs.

Osundare’s style appears to be influential by usually making his poetry richly coloured by common expressions of traditional life (like aphorism and songs) which reflects the worldview of his people. His poetry is found to be accessible because in it he assumes the voice of the unlettered peasants and villagers. There are so many writings about Osundare’s poems most of which are stylistic study of one or more of the poems. Saleh (2003) has made a critical study of Osundare’s poems in his text titled “Poet of The People of Republic”: *Reading The Poetry of Niyi Osundare*. In a more recent time, Anyokwu (2015) writes on “The Essentials of Niyi Osundare’s Poetry”. Jimoh and Ibitayo (2016) have written on a socio-stylistic analysis of Osundare’s “blues for the new senate king”. This study is hoped to emerge as an additional literature with a new look in stylistic study of poetry.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis on Lexical Foregrounding**

This part presents the data obtained on lexical features found foregrounded in Osundare’s poems as well as their analyses.

### Use of Borrowing for deviation

Arguably, Osundare has mainly used words from his native language (Yoruba). It could be that the poet borrowed the words as an effort to create uniqueness in his work of art or for what he believes as bridging the gap “in space and time between the writer and the reader which makes him to rely on indigenous language in forecasting his message as in the following:

‘Bata’ which speaks with two elegant mouths (6)

‘omeki’ which come a high-pitched face (6)

And ‘gangan’ which *wasped* its waist (6)

with *gbedu’s* majestic accent (6)

and learnt why ‘egiri’ turns thick ears (6)

I have put a stick to ‘ibembe’

Lest they be like a woman’s ‘opoo’ (7)

When last did your hands touch ‘reso’ (7)

Where were you when ‘adan’ filled the night (7)

With the same of *opeloko* (7)

(A Dialogue of The Drums)

As explained in village voices, ‘Bata’, ‘Omele’, ‘Gangan’, ‘gbedu’, ‘ibembe’, ‘reso’, ‘ogbele’ and *adan* are types of drums. Also, the names of dances associated with them. ‘Egiri’, is the animals whose thick skin is used for ‘gbedu’. *Opoo* is a money belt made of cloth which is worn by women.

Another example appears in the poem ‘Not in my season of songs’ in which the poet writes;

‘sigidi’ thirsty for a dance of shame

The word ‘sigidi’ is a Yoruba word meaning an earthen effigy. In ‘killing without a sword’ he writes:

With ‘egusi’ soup whose taste (13)

he spreads out in ‘sanyan’ (13)

‘alabangada’ adorns his head (13)

While *alabangada* means a kind of cap, *sanyan* and *egusi* refer to expensive hand-woven cloth and melon. In addition, the poem “the Land of Unease” the poet uses some borrowed words as follows:

Ohan *Esimuda’s* sword (46)

and the many other’s *omodindinrin* (46)

*Esimuda* is a legendary *Ikere* warrior with a sword, extraordinarily large and sharp *Omodin dinrin* refers to the smallest finger.

In “A Villager’s Protest”, there is a word ‘*Esuru*’ which refers to a kind of yam which is tasty, soft, and loose but not possible or easy to pound.

### **Use of Collocation as deviant feature**

Lexical collocation refers to the ordinary use and association of words in language with others in sentences for they are related in terms of meanings. Robins (1989) explicates that in poetry ideas and messages are presented by the poet’s choice of related words and this constitutes the lexical collocation set which will be indicators of the theme or subject matter.

In village voices there are some instances of lexical collocation that can be seen in the poem “I wake up this morning”. The Poet writes:

“I wake up this morning  
with a song in my throat  
a youthful breeze harps the leaves  
rising feet drum the road  
to meet the upland sun...”

In the above lines, though, the word ‘youthful’ cannot collocate with ‘breeze’ because they do not have similar semantic meaning; the poet uses it for stylistic effect to make message clearer to the readers.

Collocation is the study of words in a language to occur in a close proximity to each other (based on logical and meaningful relationships between them, patterns of association and usage, etc.). Poet can draw on collocations to create special effects and meaning.

### **Figures of Speech as Deviant Features**

Figures of speech are seen as instances of linguistic devices which are foregrounded by slightly deviating from general norms. Figurative expressions are mainly seen as poetic discourse, but could also constitute essential part of a whole necessary for completeness of the functioning of language. The figures of speech can be identified in the selected poems are metaphor, simile and personification.

### **Use of Personification**

Encyclopedia Britannica (2012) cited in Rufa’i (2019) defines personification as the figure of speech in which human characteristics are attributed to an abstract quality, animal or inanimate object. Osundare has used personifications to highlight or foreground his message as can be observed in the following poems:

In “Villager’s Protest”, the poet writes:

*Esuru* grows swollen-headed  
and outgrows the prestigious belly of the mortar  
the wasp power-stung

enters a race with waists

The poet in the above lines tries to make *Esuru* lively. *Esuru* is a kind of yam which is soft, loose and tasty but difficult in pounding.

In another instances, Osundare personifies using the image of 'the day' to represent human as can be traced in the following:

The day has woken from the night of sleep  
time for the spinner to spin the spindle  
the day has woken  
time for the smith to fan smiling coals  
in to hissing steel. (I Wake Up this Morning)

Here, "the day" is given human attribute of being capable to wake up from the night sleep. Coal has also architecturally been made to smile, the act of which is only possible to human beings. All these are strange features foregrounded by the poet in order to allow readers have more rooms for interpretations which in turn, pave ways for the existence of meaning. This indicates that lexical choice or the process of using appropriate words in encoding the poet's message is an essential part of the poet's endeavour.

### Use of Simile

According to Meyer (2005), simile describes one person or thing as being similar to another. Using the word "like" or "as", two things are compared which appear to be different in order to indicate a relationship. In the poem "I Wake Up this Morning", the poet writes;

I wear courage like a shield  
and see, refusing to hide,  
those whom pour poison  
in the village stream.

The poet here reveals to the reader the importance of courage. He uses simile to create a relationship between 'courage' and 'shield' so that he cautions those who exploit villagers and their resources.

In another poem "*Akintunde* Come Home", Osundare uses simile in the second stanza in line 8 where he says:

...come away from bubbles  
which melt like wax  
before a raging blaze.

This is done in the poet's effort to offer advice to someone who is thought to be his son, to come back home and leave like he-said bubbles which melt like wax before a raging blaze.

## Use of Metaphor

Metaphor is a kind of figurative language in which two things are compared directly. In the poem “I Wake Up this Morning”, Osundare has described and compared his body to the virgin cool of earth which stands as a new day. The poet says:

...my sole treads the dew  
rousing my body  
to the virgin cool of earth.

In “A Dialogue of the Drums”, the poet tries to metaphorically describes how he raises his voice and the whole world becomes chorus which represents his personal-self. This helps categorically the poet to convey meaning in which case the reader is convinced to accept the poet’s view.

## Summary of Findings and Conclusion

This study reveals that poet employ’s a number of techniques to bring about linguistic deviation, thereby resulting in lexical foregrounding of the key elements in the selected poems. Analysis of the data obtained has shown that Osundare has a special ability in employing a lot of linguistic devices to foreground his poems so that the language used will suit his purpose of meaning-making, to convey his message and achieve aesthetic effect, which by implication assist readers to make several interpretations of the poem and have access to their meanings via linguistic deviation. The poet has in many situations used lexical items such as borrowing words from Yoruba language and inserting them in so many relevant places in the selected poems. This is a critical study which explores to show the poet’s precision in foregrounding words in the guise of word selection in conveying message. Apart from words borrowing, the poet uses collocation and figurative language in a deviant way which enables him to convey his socio-political messages to readers. This demonstrates Osundare to be a great poet whose use of language is highly creative and artistic in nature. This study has been conducted through poetic analysis in a qualitative mode of inquiry. The study ends up by discovering the types of linguistic devices foregrounded and the reasons for their use in Osundare’s collection of poems under study - *Village Voices*.

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