

GRAPHOLOGICAL FOREGROUNDING IN HELON HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the stylistic effect of foregrounding in Habila's *Oil on Water*. As a stylistic device, foregrounding is used to draw the readers' attention to certain features as intended by the writer in each text. Such foregrounded features may have to do with phonology, lexis, grammar, semantics, pragmatics, and graphology among others. However, this study chooses to take a closer look at graphological foregrounding in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. The graphological devices examined in this discourse include capitalization, italicization, hyphenation, bold print, ellipsis, and pidgin. The argument is that there is an inherent relationship between the appearance of words on paper and their function in each text. Using Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar as a framework, it is argued that the foregrounded structures are functional. They draw the readers' attention, create emphasis, guide interpretation, as well as enhance the readers' engagement, understanding and interpretation of the text.

Keywords: Graphology, Foregrounding, Stylistics, Capitalization, Italicization

Introduction

Writers have many ways of passing across their messages to readers and this is done through language which is God's divine gift to mankind. The effective use of language is characterized by the right choices that are made from a pool of options available to the writer to achieve a specific communication need. Whatever choice a writer makes, it is expected that there should be a level of comprehensibility

among readers because without humans comprehending one another, there would be total chaos as witnessed in the story of Babel in the Holy Bible where pandemonium occurred because of man's inability to understand one another (Genesis 11). The art of making language comprehensible therefore takes different forms because language is dynamic, and writers exploit this dynamism in their various discourses to put across their intended messages. This is also to say that writers have different methods of putting across their messages and these methods mark their individual styles. A close look at a writer's style is what is called stylistics. There are therefore certain stylistic devices through which writers encode their messages and send them to their readers and one of such device's graphology.

As a paralinguistic device, graphology is the study of written language system comprising of aspects such as typography, spelling and punctuation. Ebi Yeibo and Comfort Akerele capture it as a device which "helps writers to capture particular pragmatic senses in texts and aids readability, comprehension and interpretation of linguistic forms in a given situation" (9). They further say "it is a level of linguistic analysis which focuses on the layout of texts, the size or shape of words and any other feature which is graphical or orthographical" (10) Graphology is actually an aspect of foregrounding that deals with orthographic features such as italicization, capitalization, punctuation, indentation as some of the paralinguistic features used by writers to achieve message delivery and aesthetics. It also includes other matters as spelling, text's layout, font, choice, lists, paragraphing, colour, hyphenation, and general appearance of writing on paper. Paul Simpson simply understands graphology to mean "the patterns of written language; the shape of language on a page" (5). Silver Chalker and Edmund Winner see graphology as "the writing of a language" (179) while Geoffrey Leech sees it as "...the whole writing system: Punctuation and paragraphing as well as spacing (39).

Going by the above explanations, it can be deduced that graphological elements which a stylistician focuses on include punctuation, paragraphing, spacing, capitalization, italicization, and the general positioning or appearance of words on paper. A graphological analysis therefore entails taking a critical look at the graphological features in a given text, delving into the mind of the writer and bringing out his perceived intentions for using such features to the reader. This is why Terrumun Gajir, Chika Ojukwu and Dooyum Haako aver that a graphological analysis entails a critical examination of the graphemes (physical features) in each text (285). The examination is therefore to tease out the purpose of the writer.

The term foregrounding was borrowed from the art of painting where the foreground is the part of a painting which is the most prominent in the work of art. The theory is credited to the Russian formalists, Shklovsky, 1988; Jakobson 1964; and the Prague School of Linguistics (Jan Mukarovsky 1964) who formulated the principle of making a literary text more noticeable. It was in the 1960s that Paul Garvin translated the suggested terms “Vydvizheniye” and later “Aktualizace” into English as “foregrounding. Foregrounding is thus the intentional deviation of linguistic features of a text to make them stand out or catch the eye of the reader to be read twice or more. Alexander Yemets is of the view that “foregrounding is the principle of literary text organization which is aimed at concentrating the reader’s (the listener’s) attention on the most semantically and grammatically important elements of the utterance” (4)

As Mukarovský pointed out, foregrounding may occur in normal, everyday language, such as spoken discourse or journalistic prose, but it occurs at random with no systematic design. In literary texts, on the other hand, foregrounding is structured: it tends to be both systematic and hierarchical. That is, similar features may recur,

such as a pattern of assonance or a related group of metaphors, and one set of features will dominate the others (20).

Miall and Kuiken refer foregrounding to stylistic variation that evokes feelings and prolong reading time. The immediate effect of foregrounding is to make strange (*ostranenie*), to achieve defamiliarization. Shklovsky saw defamiliarization as accompanied by feeling: he noted, more precisely, that stylistic devices in literary texts "emphasize the emotional effect of an expression" (9). And, Mukarovský concurs, "When used poetically, words and groups of words evoke a greater richness of images and feelings than if they were to occur in a communicative utterance" (73).

Geoffrey Leech and Short refer to foregrounding as 'artistically motivated deviation' (48) Leech goes ahead to categorize foregrounding into qualitative and quantitative foregrounding. While qualitative foregrounding focuses on the deviation from the norm found in language use, quantitative foregrounding focuses on the deviation from expected frequency of an utterance (Leech 38, Short and Leech, 39). Deviation from the norm is the focus of this study. Katie Wales on the other hand is of the opinion that foregrounding can be categorized into paradigmatic and syntagmatic foregrounding. While paradigmatic foregrounding deals with deviation from the normal language use, syntagmatic foregrounding deals with frequency of usage or repetition. Going by Wales' submission, this discourse deals only with paradigmatic foregrounding because it looks at how Havila has deviated from the normal appearance of words on paper.

Gabriel Aja and Igiligi equate foregrounding to "giving somebody, especially a stranger, a front seat in the church to enable him to be noticed by every member of the congregation. When an utterance is foregrounded for literary effects, the author deviates from ordinary use of language by his peculiar choice of words, unusual sentence

patterns, attitudes, tone etc. to make such utterances prominent among others.

Foregrounding is therefore a stylistic device that is indispensable in literary discourse because it draws readers' attention to the foregrounded element. Aspects of a text wished by a writer to be read twice are foregrounded to achieve the desired stylistic effect. As stated earlier, foregrounded elements in a given text can be phonological, lexical, grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, graphological or dialectal. The present study, however, focuses on the graphological aspect of foregrounding found in Habila's *Oil on Water*. It is the intention of the writer to draw the readers' attention to the foregrounded aspects with concentration on graphological devices like capitalization, italicization, hyphenation, bold words, and others.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the functional use of language therefore we adopted M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar as our framework. Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) is a theory of language that describes how language makes meaning in the context in which it is used. He views language as system of meaning-making where choices are made based on the social and cultural context. This is why he says that "to learn language is to learn how to mean" (240) Systemic Functional Grammar interprets language as meaning potential where all strata of the linguistic system contribute to the making of meaning. For Halliday, the study of grammar cannot be done independent of the study of meaning, and the interpretation of the meanings construed by the grammar in a particular text is itself informed by the situation and culture in which these meanings are produced. This is the basis of his claim that language is organized into three metafunctions. The ideational metafunction which construes human experience and reality; the interpersonal metafunction which enacts social relations, creating and maintaining interactions between individuals; and the

textual metafunction which organizes language to convey meaning by creating cohesive texts and managing information flow to guide the reader. All the above metafunctions can be embedded in one expression as Halliday posits “a clause...one and the same time a representation of experience (ideation) and interactive exchange (interpersonal) and a message (textual)” (53). This emphasizes the interconnectedness of the three metafunctions.

However, it is based on organizing language to convey meaning in texts that this study is birthed. The graphological features highlighted in this work are for making the text more meaningful to the reader.

Textual analysis

Graphic Design

The front cover of the text has some graphic designs that look quite vague against a dark background. The shapes are vague because they seem not to make any meaningful appearance. While certain shapes appear to have human like features, others appear to have bird-like features with others looking more like trees. This phenomenon looks nightmarish without a clearly cut shape. This leaves the reader quite puzzled as to what Habila is trying to portray with the images. The presented puzzle causes the reader to take a deep and closer look at the cover of the book even before delving into the actual reading.

Habila has used other graphic designs too in his text which are meant to infer meaning. One of such is the artistic design of the cover page which shows water dripping from the three words that make up the title of the text. Furthermore, the dripping water from the three words looks like blood dripping from a murder weapon or a weapon used in committing a crime that involves the shedding of blood. This appearance is subject to different interpretations and shades of meaning. Apart from providing an appealing visibility, the designs captivate the readers attentions and draws him closer to the text.

The textual metafunction of language supports this analysis because these graphic designs aid in conveying the desired meaning and give the reader a deeper insight into the text.

Capitalization

Habila is guilty of abnormal use of capital letters in his work. Some sentences begin with capital lettered words then peter out to normal print; a practice not common in literary work. This is done for the purpose of drawing the readers' attention.

Excerpt 1

THE NEXT VILLAGE was almost ... (8) WE WERE AS SOUNDLESS as a ghost ship... (9) THEY ARE HERE! The soldiers are...(12) I OFTEN THINK BACK to our first night... (38) HE WAS WEARING military fatigues... (45) IT IS MY FIRST WEEK in Port Harcourt...(47) AND SO, UNDERSTANDABLY, this time, the invitation... (50)WHEN I GOT TIRED of watching the ...(77) THE FLOODES' HOUSE was one of the ... (94) I FOUND BOMA seated on the chair... (102)DINNER WAS AN OPEN-AIR AFFAIR, with the ...(120) I THINK SHE LIKES YOU, Rufus, my ... (124)THE NEXT DAY ZAQ was a changed...(126) I TOOK PICTURES of the cemetery...(132)TELL ME ABOUT THE Englishwoman... (134) THE NEXT NIGHT, around midnight...(136) TOWARDS MORNING, WHEN A PINK light stitched... (155)I WENT OVER TO ZAQ (160) I SAT UP ALL NIGHT beside Zaq...(163) THE TENEMENT HOUSE was not far...(167) YOU CAN SLIP AWAY quite easily if... (172) THEY WERE THE MASTERS of the waterways...(198) I SAT UNDER THE TREE and watched... (221)OUR BOATS PROW broke into the... (222) WE SET OUT FOR THE SHRINE with the first...(224) ZAQ. JOURNALIST.

AUGUST 2009. RIP. (225) I PASSED THE TWO MEN on
my way... (226)

The use of capital letters is an aspect of foregrounding that draws the readers' attention to the text, and this gives more meaning to the text in line with the author's desire thereby giving credence to the textual metafunction of language.

Bold Print

Bold print, just like capitalization, aims to draw the readers' attention to the foregrounded elements. All chapters begin with bold printed words before petering out to normal print. This is also found in many other places other than the beginning of chapters.

Excerpt II

After a while, the sky and the water and the dense foliage on the riverbanks all look the...(3)**We left before the dust had finally settled. We went to the riverbank with the villagers...**(13) **I woke up half asleep,** and Zaq was... (17) **Now, sitting in chief Ibiram's front room...** (20) **I clearly saw images** from that evening... (21) **To kill time,** I updated my reporter's...(23)**Zaq was trying hard** to hide his ... (26)**Towards morning, sitting side by side, both of us having given up on sleep,** I asked Zaq how... (28) **Early next morning** before we left... (33)**The old man, Tamuno, saw the helicopter first. I couldn't see anything** from where I stood... (42)**The invitation, written in black and ink** on a ten-inch-square... (46)**The Major sat on a field stool, the type made by unfolding the top of a swagger stick...**(52) **My father is standing** over me... (61) **I paused when I heard Zaq snoring...** (63) **Here I was** with my certificate... (63) **We left the oil-company jetty that day, six of us, five reporters including Zaq and...**(66) **Zaq was facing me** in the boat...(73) **Boma was alone, and I could tell she had been crying, when**

I got home in the evening... (88) **the reporter was a moderate, middle-brow daily occupying the two lower floors in a...**(91) **Zaq was lying on a mat under an acacia tree, and though the air was hot and humid...**(105) **Zaq had fallen asleep while I was talking, his whiskey bottle, now three-quarters empty...**(119) **the major will speak with you...**(146) **The major waved his hand toward the approaching shoreline, but his voice was drowned...**(157) **outside the sun is bright. I am talking to Zaq in the hut; it is one of those days when he...**(176) **It was not easy: first I had to convince them I was strong enough to leave, then I had to ...** (184) **But that was a dangerous thought, an illusion-like a drowning man letting down his guard...**(195)**I was somehow cheered by the man's assurance that the professor would definitely see...** (205)**When I woke up the next day, a man was kneeling over me, nudging me with his gun...** (218)

Bold words are used to add emphasis and strong emotions to the printed words to convey the desired meaning. This is also a textual metafunction of language.

Hyphenation

Punctuation marks are vital in conveying the desired meaning in every discourse and writers use them to pass their desired messages. One prominent punctuation mark used by Habila in his text skillfully to cause a re-read is the hyphen. Habila has stylistically deviated from using quotation marks to characterize dialogues or conversations between characters in his text and has resorted to the use of the hyphen. Apart from making the reader curious enough to take a closer look, this deviation is also for aesthetic effect. The textual metfunction of language is therefore germane in the analysis because the feature adds meaning to the text.

Excerpt III

-Tell me Rufus, my friend, what do we seek? (4) - Isn't it a bit too early? (5) - Where did the people go? (7) - You come with us (12) - Zaq is my first name (18) - Come on Zaq, tell us (20) - Rufus, you have the patience to make a great reporter someday (23) - I will go, I will do it (31) - The AK-47 freedom fighters (31) - There is something more (32) - Look. Okay. We'll take him. I will take him. I will find a way. (38) - He needs to see a doctor (45) - Journalist, it's a pity about your friend (219)-The woman is safe, as you will see for yourself (220) - I will write only the truth (221) - I have taken a bucket to the bathroom for you (222) - I was watching you sleep, and then I fell asleep.(223) - I have to go and say goodbye (223) - I am back now (226) - I have made up my mind to stay (226)

Ellipsis

Ellipsis is a stylistic device that entails omission of one or more elements in a construction. It is most times characterized by set dots "...” to indicate that part of the construction is omitted or the the speaker or writer ha trailed off. Habila's text is littered with this device even at certain constructions that seem to be complete. This causes the reader to have a second look at the construction in line with the writer's wish. This feature adds meaning to the text and thus makes the textual metafunction appropriate for the analysis.

Excerpt IV

We could be lost, you know... (5) Surely, that would depend on how...talented he was? (19) Surely, Zaq...sir (19) Most women won't see the joke in... I mean... (19)I am looking for the old man...and the boy. And... food... (24) That's why... (27) Well...it's complicated. No... she can't... (37) What Zaq is saying is that this is so sudden...(38) But...are you sure... (38) Is... is there a hotel nearby? (81) The man said we are going to a shrine... (81) Thank you for coming Mr...(94) No,

I don't think so... (97) A beer will do... star (98) He just want to know as much as possible the circumstances of the kidnapping... (99) There is another woman you see... (99) I ... have a few personal issues to take care of. (100) I know nothing is going to save me... nothing... (206) I didn't kidnap her (207) I find it hard to believe... (219)

Italicization

Italicization is a print type that is slanted to the right and is called italics. Part of a construction is italicized for emphasis or to distinguish certain words or utterances from others. Habila uses these types of words for emphasis.

Excerpt V

Oil well no. 2.1999. 15,000 metres (7) He will be taken to port Harcourt where he will be tried and found guilty for fraternizing with militants (24) Kidnapped Briton discovered in shallow grave (137) Akara (144) Mumu, mugu (208) Oyinbo (209) Haba (214)

Use of pidgin English

Pidgin is a grammatically simplified communication method that develops when the need arises for people to come out with a common language of communication where there seems to be none. As a form of informal language use, its existence in the text of study translates to foregrounding aimed at drawing attention to the foregrounded. Similarly, the appearance of pidgin prints on paper looks different from formal language print; thus, its inclusion into graphological foregrounding.

Excerpt VI

No, sah. People say dem fit be near abakiri (5) Dem left because of too much fighting (7) Not too far but e far small (9) Na my friend karibi shop be dis (10) Yes. He say we must

go. We no fit stay (11) Yes, dem hear say soja dey come here today come find am (11) Dem say he de help the militants (11) Wait here small,I dey come (14) No. No pay. Na my brother chief Ibiram (33) The Major wan see you. Now. Oya. (53) Sorry sir, no be im fault. Na small pikin sir (53) The woman dey fine (76) No far, but e far small. Soon we go get there (79) Wait small for oga here. E be like say e no too well (80) Na your sister be dis? (103) Oga Naman send me he say make I carry you go where you wan go (169) Chief Ibiram don go. E no dey here anymore (182) If you tink say na joke try us (196) No worry, you go see am. He dey busy right now (201) Where you tink say you dey go? (202)

The use of pidgin English gives meaning to the text especially considering the context and setting of the text. This also makes the textual metafunction of language apt for the analysis.

Conclusion

This discourse has looked closely at some typographic deviations used by Habila in *Oil on Water* and how they function in the text. Some of the foregrounded elements examined include capitalization, bold prints, hyphenation, italicization, ellipsis and pidginization. Capitalization and bold prints appear at beginning of sentences before abruptly petering out and giving way to normal print. Dialogues are characterized by hyphens instead of inverted comas as is the norm. Italicized words are randomly littered in the text the same way ellipsis is used. These elements make the text more meaningful and provide quite an interesting reading experience because apart from the emphasis craved by the writer, they provide visual aesthetics which are enjoyed by the reader.

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