

RESOURCEFULNESS OF GRAPHOLOGY: A STYLISTIC STUDY OF THREE AFRICAN POEMS

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Abstract

While the study of poetry before the advent of stylistics has been the exclusive preserve of literary critics, the arrival of stylistics has brought new and deeper insights into poetic analysis as Stylistics utilises both the linguistic and aesthetic tools of investigation in its desire to achieve fuller interpretation and understanding of literary texts. Graphology and its vast contribution to meaning-making especially in poetic texts still need to be explored and understood. This paper therefore focuses on the contribution of graphology and its resourcefulness in the understanding of poems. To this end, three African poems – K. G. Kyei's *Time*, Osundare's *Rain-coming* and RemiRaji's *Silence II* – have been purposively selected for analysis at the graphological level. In the process, interpretations at this level shall be related to the meanings in the poems. Analysis reveals that meaning and interpretations of chosen poems cannot be exhaustive without recourse to graphological explorations. The paper concludes that a good poem must foreground its meaning, preoccupations and aesthetics at the various levels of stylistic analysis.

Keywords: Stylistics, graphological deviation, poetry, foregrounding, aesthetics.

Introduction

Stylistic analysis is, without doubt, one area of linguistic studies which is aimed at closing the gulf between literary studies and linguistic investigations of literary texts. When it is applied to literary texts, stylistics helps to enhance interpretation and understanding, just as its methods help students of literature to acquire the necessary confidence in handling any literary work. To Simpson (1992: 48), stylistics uses “linguistic analysis to provide a window on the devices which characterize a particular work”. Carter (1996: 5) believes that Stylistics helps to enhance skills of interpretation and to encourage reading between the lines. He says further:

Stylistics provides students with a method of scrutinizing texts, ‘a way in’ to a text, opening up starting points for fuller interpretation. The method is detailed and explicit, it shows how you reach or begin to reach an interpretation. From a teaching point of view, students learn to open a text not only by osmosis but explicitly and consciously. A pedagogically sensitive stylistics can give students increased confidence in reading and interpretation.

Because all texts, written or spoken, literary or non-literary are carved in language, a linguistic investigation of literary texts will yield numerous advantages, especially because literary texts are believed to be the best instances of language use. This is why Simpson (2004: 3) maintains that the stylistic enterprise:

has an important reflexive capacity insofar as it can shed light on the very language system it derives from; it tells us about the 'rules' of language because it often explores texts where these rules are bent, distended or stretched to breaking point.

Simpson concludes that interest in language is at the forefront in undertaking stylistics and warns that anyone who is not interested in language should not venture to undertake stylistic analysis.

In conducting a stylistic analysis of a literary text, the levels of stylistic analysis, namely the grammatical (syntactic), lexico-semantic, graphological and phonological, should be taken into consideration. This is in agreement with Thornborrow and Wareing's (1998: 8) position that "analysing language on the levels of phonology, syntax and so on, and also the ways generations of writers have exploited the linguistic resources available to them, is in our opinion a direct and straightforward way to understand literature better (and not just individual texts)". Further, analysing language at these individual levels would further serve as a check on interpretations arrived at from other levels. According to Fasasi (2013: 78), the focus of scholars "is to appreciate the aesthetic values and study the linguistic structures of the text". This is done as a way of arriving at "interpretation in a detailed way and thereby providing as much explicit evidence as possible for and against particular interpretations of texts" (Short, 1996: 27). To these scholars therefore, style cannot be separated from meaning. These scholars, according to Short (1996: 27 – 28), "recognize that style and meaning are inextricably linked with one another...and this recognition has led to the modern concern with the relationship between linguistic form on the one hand and the meanings and effects which readers infer from it on the other". Fasasi (2013: 78) further argues that perhaps, it is:

in recognition of this inextricable link between style and meaning that linguistic stylisticians have mapped out patterns of linguistic analysis that may be used to account for the observed linguistic forms, to relate such forms to meaning and to explore their effects on readers. According to Osundare (2003: 29), the concept of reiteration "views linguistic elements of a text as existing not in isolation but in disciplined company; each element recalling, repeating and reiterating the other with the result that a well-executed text becomes a skilful patterns of echoes."

This position implies that linguistic elements in a good work of art should interrelate as patterns of a system and such patterns should be describable at various linguistic levels. The patterns thus created are expected to contribute significantly to the beauty or aesthetics of the work as well as to its meaning. Leech (2008: 44) supports the above claim when he says that "if a poem is a *fine and complex organism*, one would expect to find not just its vocabulary, but its organization on various linguistic levels, working towards the same end." Not surprisingly therefore, Haynes (1995: 31) shares the same view when he talks of "stylistic orchestration" in texts. According to him, stylistic orchestration "is the idea that patterns reinforce each other". In other words, items at one level, say the graphological level, should necessarily be seen as working in consonance with items at other levels, say the lexico-semantic and phonological levels, to reinforce the meaning being projected at those other levels.

Quite a large body of research works have explored the relationship between stylistics and literature, especially poetry. These include Widdowson (1975), Short (1983), Carter (1983, 1996), Okunoye and Odebunmi (2003), Simpson (2004), Alabi and Adedimeji (2009) and Fasasi (2011, 2013) to mention but a few. However, there is a paucity of research works on the importance and resourcefulness of graphology as regards its contribution to meaning interpretation and to its capacity to foreground the aesthetic aspects of poetic texts. Since we believe that graphological patterns in poems are not just there by chance but serve to help contribute, by interacting with the other levels, to aesthetics and the meaning-making process, our focus in this paper shall be on the significance of graphology in poetry. We shall limit our discussion to the contributions of graphology to interpretations and aesthetics in the chosen poems and then relate the results of the analysis to the overall meaning of the poems. To this end, three African poems, namely K. G. Kyei's *Time*, Osundare's *Rain-coming* and RemiRaji's *Silence II*, have been purposively chosen for the task. The choice of these is informed by the widespread exploitation of graphological features, among others, in the poems. While Osundare is perhaps the one contemporary African poet who has made the most prolific use of graphological patterning in his poems, RemiRaji is clearly a faithful student of Osundare in his poetic engagement. K. G. Kyei however belongs to the self-styled first generation of African writers, though with little literary influence. However, his work, *Time*, is one which, inter alia, relies heavily on formal patterning in disseminating its poetic message.

Graphology in Poetry

According to Crystal and Davy (1969: 15), levels of stylistic analysis include phonetic/graphetic, phonological/graphological, grammatical, lexical, and semantic levels. Graphology, which is the focus of this paper, is described as the "study of a language's writing system, or orthography, as seen in the various kinds of handwriting and typography" (Crystal & Davy, 1969: 18). Leech (1969: 39) believes that graphology goes beyond orthography as it "refers to the whole writing system: punctuation and paragraphing as well as spacing". Graphological patterns play a significant role in the interpretation of poetry. Perhaps this is why Carter (2005: 65) avers that it "is the strong view of most stylisticians that it is at best naive to assume that the patterns and structures of language play no significant part in the interpretive process." Poets foreground patterns of graphology through deviation in order to make readers contemplate the structure of words and symbols so that they may begin to read meaning into unusual graphic patterns. Just as sounds denote meaning in onomatopoeia, graphology is the arrangement of words to denote their meanings.

Crystal and Davy (1969: 156) aver that the "main graphological devices one can make use of are paragraphing, spacing, and capitalization, alongside the normal range of other punctuation marks". We must bear in mind that unconventional use of these devices or graphological deviation in literary texts is what creates stylistic effects and draws special attention to the parts of the text where it is deployed. Graphology "exerts a psycholinguistic influence on the reading process" (Simpson, 1997: 28) to such an extent that visual elements sometimes "are as important as the text" (Simpson, 1997: 28). In fact, the genre of writing known as 'concrete poetry' relies almost exclusively on manipulation of the visual

medium of language (Simpson, 1997: 27). Graphological deviation is conscious violation of the system of writing, “discarding of capital letters and punctuations where conventions call for them, jumbling of words, eccentric use of parentheses, etc.” (Leech, 1989: 47). These deviations in graphology need to be looked into because they not only foreground the various parts of the poems but are also devised to bring to the fore the preoccupations, connotations, and beauty of the poems under analysis. To us, markers of graphological deviations in poetry may be identified by such patterns as absence, rarity or overuse of punctuation marks, strange patterns of paragraphing, use of sub-headings, fragmentation/spacing or cluster of words, omission of letter(s) in words, ellipsis, strange/unusual capitalization (of words or letters), underlining, using words and sentences to create shapes, unusual stanzaic patterns, and so on.

Graphological Analysis of Selected Poems

In this section, we present graphological analyses of the chosen poems with a view to investigating the contributions of graphology to the process of interpretation and meaning-making in the poems. We shall relate our findings to the general opinions and perspectives on the poems and discuss the role of graphology in the overall interpretation of each.

Graphological Analysis of K. G. Kyei’s *Time*

Time
 an accomplice of waste
 is an image of expense
 it is always spilling
 its angry hands
 wheeling
 its consummate skill
 pounding
 like a drill on the brain
 never to be stopped
 retrieved
 or
 replenished
 forever whittling
 whittling
 whittling
 away
 away
 away
 away
 away
 all the vast stores
 of
 being!

A first look at the poem may astound a student-reader due to its strange and haphazard graphological patterning, especially one who expects that poetry should, as a norm, start each line with a capital letter and from the margin. However, the stylistic concept of deviation explains what seems like confusion, since whatever appears somehow abnormal in a literary work can be explained from the perspective of deviation and foregrounding. To start with, rather than appear like a verse typical of poems, the poem is cast prosaically, like one very long sentence. This idea of a long sentence is supported by the realization that the poem, which boasts of twenty four (24) lines, starts with an initial capital letter and ends with an end punctuation mark. Graphologically, this is the definition of a sentence. By this, the poet wants the reader to see the long and interminable character of time, the subject matter of the poem in its long lines. To reflect this one long and interminable span of time in the poem, the poet has deliberately commenced each line (except the first) with a lowercase letter, deviating by breaking the rule of poetic creation, so that each line easily appears as a continuation of the previous line, so that, that way, all the lines have unity. Starting each line with a lowercase letter also suggests that human beings regard time as trivial and insignificant, especially because time (and life span) does move on quietly without attracting special attention to itself.

Another graphological feature of the poem is the haphazard and random ordering of the lines, such that the next line goes further to the right than the previous one, making the text look chaotic. But within the chaos are observed recurrent patterns of progression. For instance, lines one, two and three display a 'forward-pushing' progression such that a line juts out more than the previous one. The same pattern is displayed by lines four to six, seven to nine, ten to thirteen, fourteen to sixteen, and by the last three lines. This observation explains the always competitive, on-the-move nature of time and life span.

From line sixteen to twenty-one however, there appears a reversal of the progression. Indeed, the lines are graphologically antithetical to the others as the lines retrogress, gradually dropping down, and dropping down towards the left. This pattern explains in clear terms how time gradually slips away, causing a decline, worsening and drawing back the life span of a being, till, unaware, it 'eats' away the life span.

From the above, it is apparent that the poem has foregrounded its message about 'time' at the graphological level by deviating from a number of poetic norms. For instance, the poem is carved in one convoluted sentence and without any internal punctuation mark that could have made the structure somehow clearer. The lines are haphazardly pushed further from the margin such that one competitively pushes out more than the other. The poem employs lowercase letters at the beginning of all lines (except the first), and then there is a gradual and steady depletion (retrogression) observed in lines sixteen to twenty-one. Graphologically therefore, the poem tells us that there is a long, interminable, seemingly endless span of time, and that in this ceaseless span, (human) beings struggle on competitively for continuity and advancement among themselves, oblivious of time. However, time quietly passes by, elapsing and declining till it gradually wastes and eats away the being.

Graphological Analysis of Osundare's *Rain-coming*

Slowly
but

surely
 the early rains ring the bell
 and the earth springs green
 from the sleep of brown

slowly
 but
 surely
 like liquid fingers
 on the aluminium drum
 of echoing roofs
 the rain unties the farmer's tongue
 bursting farming yawns
 into barns of liling yams
 plums and pumpkins
 dense with drink and daring
 roll juicily from furrow to furrow

slowly
 but
 surely
 the elephant grass caresses wayfarers
 with the tuskless blade
 of savannah leaves
 laughing partridges arouse the tender grass
 grasscutters take cover for their tasty flesh

slowly
 but
 surely
 the early rains ring the bell
 but oh my land!
 so deep and dry still
 in the unnatural desert
 of barn-burners.

Osundare's *Rain-coming*, a poem of four stanzas, immediately strikes a reader with its unusual pattern which runs through all the stanzas. Certain graphological features are noticeable to the reader because they are foregrounded as deviant. The haphazard and random ordering of the first three lines in each stanza, the use of lowercase letters to begin all lines (except the first) and, the absence of punctuation marks (except the two in the fourth stanza) are deviant and foregrounded.

From the standpoint of Stylistics, there is at least one reason for the haphazard ordering of the first three lines in each stanza. If we accept that the poem is about the arrival of the rain at a time when the earth and its occupants are thirsty, then each of the three lines in a stanza and the horizontal lines below them shall graphologically remind us of the rain, coming down gradually from the sky, 'slowly but surely', as if descending a flight of steps from heaven onto the earth. In other words, the straight lines at the end of each stanza symbolise the earth-bed, the level soil that is thirsty and waiting for the rain while the three

haphazard lines above create a visual image of a flight of steps down which the rain descends to the earth. What we have in this patterning can be referred to as a ‘graphological metaphor’, a process where arrangements and patterns of words and lines symbolise and communicate the theme of a text.

The use of lowercase letters to begin all the lines except the first can be attributed to the author’s desire to graphologically respond to the overall ambience (setting, mood, tone, etc) of the poem. For instance, the subject of the onset of the rain season is general and commonplace. It is especially an issue which ordinary/common people worry about, especially peasant farmers, rural dwellers and the lowly people in society. This poem can therefore be considered as rural or pastoral poetry and so, to symbolise the commonplace, peasant and rural/pastoral nature of the poem’s theme, the author resorts to the use of lowercase letters.

Again, the absence of punctuation marks (except the two in stanza four) is understandable, given the fact that rain comes in ceaseless showers and torrents. In other words, since rain falls down continuously over a period of time, the absence of punctuation marks may suggest continuous rainfall, just as their appearance at the end of each stanza or within it may contradict the ceaseless flow of the rain. Further, it seems the earth is ceaselessly expectant and waiting, and a number of activities are happening simultaneously on the earth in eager and quick response to the rainfall. The absence of punctuation until the end of the poem is therefore understandable. The exclamation mark in the last stanza is used only for effect, as it expresses the author’s shock and disappointment at the absence of rain in his own land.

Graphological Analysis of RemiRaji’s *Silence II*

who sings when the Beast prowls
 when Night thickens
 with dreams of blood
 when Sorrow’s scent suffocates
 the remains of lean laughter
 who sings
 when slit drums stand spent
 and deaf in defiled grooves
 who sings
 when rhyme’s winds
 run amok
 like amputated tongues
 when boots barrels
 and the gift of grenades
 chase the choir into silence.
 WHO SINGS WHEN THE BEAST PROWLs?

Reading the poem, a number of its features immediately stand out. In the poem, lines and, indeed all words, are written in lowercase letters. However, some words in the middle of lines start with capital letters, only two end punctuation marks are used (at the end of the last two lines), the last line is written in uppercase letters and, there is no comma between lines 13 and 14.

That words, especially at the beginning of each line, are written in lowercase letters is a graphological deviation with which the poet reflects the lowly condition of the oppressed. That is to indicate that the oppressed becomes submissive and meek, while the oppressor (in the last line) becomes assertive and domineering. One then understands the lowercase letters as a reflection of the submissive, cowed and constantly silenced disposition of the oppressed, having been frightened and weakened by the oppressor. In the middle of these lines written in lower case however, are some three words which start with upper case letters: 'Beast', 'Night' and 'Sorrow's' (lines 1, 2 and 4). These words are thus capitalized at the beginning to foreground the domineering and assertive instinct of the oppressor. One common feature of a beast or oppressor is the brutality and aggression which it/he wields, especially secretly under the cover of the night, at which time it/he freely distributes sorrows by causing grief and torment to those who dare raise their voices against it/him.

There are only two end punctuation marks in the poem, and they occur in the last two lines. One is a full-stop at the end of the first fifteen lines, while the other is a question mark at the end of the last line. These two marks polarize the poem into two uneven parts: the fifteen lines of lower case letters on the one hand, and the only one line of uppercase letters on the other. We may argue that the fifteen lines of lowercase letters represent the oppressed masses of the silenced, while the one last line of capital letters represents the single but domineering and frightening loud voice of the oppressor. Further, we take the first fifteen lines as simple declarative discussions among the oppressed masses about their plight because of the full-stop at the end of the last but one line, whereas no question marks were used at the end of all the preceding lines, despite the fact that they are introduced by the interrogative pronoun 'who', which usually introduces questions. On the contrary, we see the last line as a vehement who-dares type of interrogative, the type used to silence and cow others. And to really cow and silence the masses, the last line is foregrounded in bold letters. This we see as a reflection of the bold and domineering instinct of the 'Beast' who commands with a short, piercing and authoritative interrogative.

Although there is a scarcity of punctuation marks in the poem, we observe crucially that a necessary comma is missing in line thirteen (13). A comma is used to indicate a slight pause or to separate phrases and clauses in a sentence. We expect to see a comma between 'boots' and 'barrels'. The absence of the comma may be as a result of the fact that the poet does not wish to separate the two lexical items so that readers may envision them as pointing in the same direction just as separating them may make readers to see them differently. If these words had been written as part of a prosaic sentence, they would read, '... boots barrels and the gift of grenades chase the choir into silence'. The absence of a comma between the first two words, which are then linked to 'gift of grenades' by 'and', is meant to imitate the mayhem created by the deluge of destructive, death-dealing weapons which, like a hailstorm, the politically powerful can unleash on the 'choir' of the oppressed in order to 'silence' them, for good.

From the analysis, we conclude that the poem discusses a relationship between the poor voiceless masses and their dictatorial ruler called the 'Beast'. While the masses can only grumble repeatedly and suffer in silence because they have been subdued, the dictator dominates them boldly with brutality and aggression.

Findings and Conclusions

This paper has discussed the stylistic feature of graphology and its facilitating role in the reader's search for meaning in poetry using three African poems. Kyei's *Time* graphologically tells of the long and interminable span of time (life span) during which (human) beings struggle competitively for continuity and advancement among themselves, oblivious of the passing time. However, time quietly passes by, elapsing and declining till it gradually 'eats' away and wastes the being. Osundare's *Rain-coming* is a graphological metaphor that portrays the ceaseless and gradual fall/descent of the rain from the sky to the earth, a descent that gets the common people, farmers and rural dwellers happy. RemiRaji's *Silence II* graphologically foregrounds a relationship between the voiceless masses who can only grumble repeatedly and suffer in silence because they have been cowed by their dictatorial ruler, who dominates them boldly with brutality and aggression.

The analysis carried out in this paper has focused on deviation, which was foregrounded through the resourcefulness of graphology in the reader's search for meaning in poetry. We conclude that any insightful interpretation of a poem should first explore the various levels of analysis, and that any poem worth the name must foreground its meaning, preoccupations and aesthetics at those levels as much as possible.

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