

# A STYLISTIC OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE AS DISCOURSE

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**Rosemary E. Chiedu,**  
*Department of Languages,  
Delta State Polytechnic,  
Ogwashi-Uku,  
Delta State.*

## **Abstract**

*This paper sets out to investigate the stylistic props of some selected literary texts against the backdrop of linguistic deviation which is the definitive stamp of literary discourse. Basically, the paper x-rays the mechanics of interpreting a literary discourse despite its deviant nature and seeming ungrammaticalness outside the language code.*

There are numerous definitions of linguistic deviation or foregrounding. According to Leech & Short, (2007), foregrounding is the practice of making something stand out from the surrounding words or images. Wales (2001:157) defined it as the throwing into relief of the linguistic sign against the background of the norms of ordinary language. Widdowson (1997:27) stated that "...linguistic deviations do not occur randomly in a literary work but pattern in with other linguistic features, both regular and irregular, to form a whole". Wales (2001) explained the concept as the throwing into relief of the linguistic sign against the background of the norms of ordinary language. Based on this, the approach of this paper is purely stylistic in nature. In this wise, special attention will be given to Ted Hughes' "Wind", Tennyson's "In Memoriam", and part of Alexander Pope's poems. All these shall be pin-holed to investigate their stylistic props against the backdrop of linguistic deviation which is the definitive stamp of literary discourse.

Fundamentally, stylistics handles literary text as a discourse. Akwanya (1997) stated that discourse is what the speaker intends by the particular speech act. This intention may come out in the use of proposition in the standard form, with a subject and a predicate as in the case of description thereby, making an explicit claim that the message content is verifiable. He may equally use a language that deviates from the norm and conveys the intention by tropes or use of figurative language like simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole and so on.

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On his part, Widdowson (1997:33) saw discourse as the manner in which linguistic elements function to communicative effect. The uniqueness of literature as a discourse is its overwhelming deviation from the accepted language code. This is what the Prague Scholars call foregrounding. The Prague Linguistic Circle was an influential group of literary critics and linguists in Prague. Its proponents developed methods of structuralist literary analysis and a theory of the standard language and of language cultivation during the years 1920 to 1939. The linguistic circle was founded in the café Derby in Prague which was also where meetings took place during the first year. The members were Roman Jakobson, Nikolai Trubetzkoy, Sergei Karcevskiy as well as the famous Czech literary scholars, Rene Wellek and Jan Mukarovsky. These were the proponents of linguistic deviation or what they termed FOREGROUNDING.

### **Foregrounding**

Widdowson (1977) described foregrounding as the deliberate deviation from the rules of the language code or from accepted conventions of its use which stands out, or is foregrounded against a background of normal usage. Leech (1981) saw foregrounding or what he calls *artistic deviation* as a veritable instrument of every artistic creation. According to him, such deviation is a general principle in art work which members of the society expect in the medium (language) used. Every reader of the literary discourse, therefore, is expected to possess “stylistic competence” to complement his “linguistic competence” before he can reconcile and interpret such deviation in literary discourse. Widdowson endorsed this fact by agreeing that an interpretation of a literary work does not depend only on the reader’s knowledge of the language system or code since it is common to find uses of language which do not conform to this code and which are, nevertheless, interpretable.

To support Widdowson’s stand, Leech said that unlike Chomsky’s ideal of linguistic competence, stylistic competence is an ability which different people possess in different measures, although there may be a great deal in common between different English speakers’ responsiveness to style. What is unnatural in the literary text is so because the reader’s knowledge of the conventional code says otherwise. That literary discourse is deviant does mean it is always ungrammatical and uninterpretable, but where expressions become ungrammatical, that ungrammaticalness is justifiably motivated. Chapman (1973:48) claimed that “...any linguistic utterance involves some tension between rules on which communication depends and the freedom which the user’s unique situation demands”. This ‘tension’ referred to by Chapman is felt more by the poet since he struggles with the limited resources of the language code to achieve his best vision.

### **Types of Foregrounding**

The two variants of foregrounding as artistic form of deviation according to Leech(1981) are foregrounded irregularity, qualitative foregrounding or trope and foregrounded regularity, quantitative foregrounding or scheme. The first type refers to irregularity found in the use of language. That is, it is the artist's use of aberrant, unexpected linguistic deviation (from the code system) to create his vision. It is the height of exercise of poetic license. The second type, unlike the first, does not breach language code before the features become apparent. It has to do with the frequency of linguistic items in a structurally schematized sequence of occurrence. Parallelism is a good example in this regard. Gerald Manley Hopkins recognized this when he says that the artifice of poetry "reduces itself to the principle of parallelism". Crystal & Davy (1979:99) also agreed with this fact stating that "...as soon as we wish to explain the basis of a literary linguistic effect, either to ourselves or to others, we need to make reference to the normal patterns of language which the author has manipulated to produce this effect".

### **Stylistic Analyses of Selected Poems**

#### **(a) WIND by Ted Hughes**

This house has been far out at sea all night,  
The woods crashing though darkness, the booming hills,  
Winds stampeding the fields under the window  
Floundering black astride and blinding wet

Till day rose; then under an orange sky  
The hills had new places, and wind wielded  
Blade-light, luminous black and emerald,  
Flexing like the lens of a mad eye.

At noon I scaled along the house-side as far as  
The coal-house door. Once I looked up -  
Through the brunt wind that dented the balls of my eyes  
The tent of the hills drummed and strained its guyrope,

The fields quivering, the skyline a grimace,  
At any second to bang and vanish with a flap;  
The wind flung a magpie away and a black-  
Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly. The house  
Rang like some fine green goblet in the note  
That any second would shatter it. Now deep  
In chairs, in front of the great fire, we grip  
Our hearts and cannot entertain book, thought,

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Or each other. We watch the fire blazing,  
And feel the roots of the house move, but sit on,  
Seeing the window tremble to come in,  
Hearing the stones cry out under the horizons.

This poem, “Wind”, conveys the message of violence and terror which subjects the inmates of the house to insecurity, frustration and apprehension. It demonstrates a preponderant use of foregrounding especially the trope type (the irregularity). In terms of stylistic and linguistic categories, the reader is confronted with plethora of violation of selection restriction rule. The effect is that he is thrown into semantic crisis which he suffers from. The poem, which is compartmentalized into six stanzas, is replete with nouns that have semantic features of +inanimate, -animate, -human ( house, hills, wind, woods, day) and fuses them with human props so that they behave and function as subjects with defined predicative roles.

**Subject**                      **Predicative Roles or Functions**

house ..... has been far out at sea all night  
wood ..... crashng through darkness  
winds ..... stampeding the fields  
day ..... rose  
hills ..... had new places  
wind ..... wielded blade-light... and flexes like lens of a mad eye.

The baffling process of metaphorization of these lexical items with their attendant semantic values points to the poet’s conscious attempt to ignore conventional codes, express his dissatisfaction with its inability to meet his spontaneous demand and, of course, to create new rules, new meanings and new code to realize his vision. For the verbs ‘flex’ and ‘stampede’ to collocate with inanimate, abstract, subject-noun is deviant. This collocation is the trope type as it violates selection restriction rule of the Transformational Generative Grammar theory. This rule is also violated in subsequent verses.

<b><u>Subject</u></b>		<b><u>Predicate</u></b>
The tent of the hills	-	drummed...} stanza 3
The wind	-	flung ... away } stanza 4
The house	-	rang ... } stanza 4/5
The fields	-	quiver...} stanza 4
The window	-	trembles to come in ...} stanza 6
The roots of the house	-	move ...} stanza 6

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In all these noun phrases which mostly start with the definite article with their semantic components of +inanimate, -human, -animate, are humanized by the poet, Hughes. This style breaks ethics of conventional expectation. It beats one's imagination to hear 'stones' cry, to see 'window' tremble, to see 'the tent of hills' drum. The deviant linguistic features are channels through which Hughes communicates his vision. All the words relate with one another to conglomerate a central meaning. Widdowson, on commenting on this semantic cross-relationship or dependency, declares that by relating these, we get a composite impression of animate force and violence embodied in the wind, terrorizing the panic-stricken fields trembling in animate fear.

However irregular linguistic items are in literary discourse, with reference to the code, such irregularity is regular within the text. This was what prompted Thorne's proposal that each poem might be a dialect or different language that requires separate grammar. Widdowson is of the view that Thorne's proposal is meant to "counter the difficulty of modifying standard grammar (core-grammar) to accommodate deviant sentences". He feels that Thorne's dream grammar is only applicable to the poetry of the American poet, e.e. cummings, but not to the likes of Hughes under discussion. Widdowson stated that it is not satisfactory to treat the text of the poem (Wind) as if it were a separate language because the deviations while regular enough to provide interpretation are not regular enough to be systematized as a definite code. Widdowson is seemingly right. Otherwise, how does one explain the dual meaning of the noun "house" in line 3 of the poem both inside the poem and within the language code? There is no indication in the poem that shows this semantic dichotomy. He concludes his argument by asserting that what the poet (Hughes) wishes to express is that the violent animacy of the wind infiltrates life into the very house in which he thinks there is security. The house takes on roots which move, the windows come alive. Thus, the actual shift from normal code meanings to meanings which are individual to the context represents part of the message the poet is trying to convey.

In the above, two levels of meanings that linguistic items can manifest are advanced. It is believed that these levels cannot run parallel, but must converge to give rise to the third level. In other words, the amalgam of meanings of words in the language code upon which the artiste depends for communication on the one hand and the contextual meaning which the words in textual context manifest on the other hand, do not exist separately in literary discourse. They always co-relate to give rise to the message of the writer. In this way, the wind in Hughes poem has extra-textual semantic features of +abstract +inanimate +noun/verb -human within the language code, but it has the intra-textual values of +concrete +animate +human +noun within the poem. These shades of features have to be correlated to get at the poet's vision. Widdowson referred to the meaning of words in the language code as *signification* and their meaning within literary discourse as *value* but Leech called the latter meaning 'value in the

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game'. Between the two divides of signification and value, is a gulf which Widdowson and Leech refused to bridge. If signification and value refer to the meanings of lexical items externally and internally respectively (context-wise), then, what is their point of contact or what is their effect if they are correlated? The term "intent" is, henceforth, proposed to refer to the result of the harmonious relationship between signification and value. It is believed that no writer writes for writing sake (art for art's sake).

The vision or message of the writer comes alive when signification and value are married together.

Within the language code, every word has an entry in the dictionary. Such entry is often in a spiral process of signification leading to series of meanings. In a text-context, only one of those meanings manifests as the value while others become irrelevant. A reader may know the value of a word in a particular context if he knows the signification of other words used in that context. However, establishing value is a matter not of selecting a particular meaning from the semantic complex which constitutes an item's signification but of extending it sometimes. The target, here, is idiomatic meaning of words in phrasal association or the verb-phrase as in 'break up' which may be misconstrued by a foreign reader since it conjures tangible, concrete object that is broken or gets broken.

Every language user (not only literary artists) creates figurative meaning consciously and unconsciously. If such meaning becomes acceptable to the prevalent language code and current usage, they become part of the signification of such lexical item. With time and as common custom accepts new uses, particular values become part of signification and this expands the language repertoire. Widdowson (1977) asserted that the creation of new value is not the exclusive prerogative of the writer; such ability is an expression of every person's knowledge of his language. This knowledge Chomsky (1963) called competence. However, a person's competence manifests differently in both literary and non-literary contexts, that is, his performance varies according to context of situation of use of the language.

It is the person's performance that overcharges literary discourse with deviation from language code, but since deviation is understood partly by reference to the code and partly to the way it patterns in with the language of the text, this is the blend between signification and value to get intent. Tennyson's 'In memoriam' shows such deviation.

(b) **In Memoriam by Alfred Lord Tennyson**

He is not here; but far away  
The noise of life begins again  
And ghastly throw the drizzling rain  
On the bald street breaks the blank day.

This four line poem contains the type of foregrounding called foregrounded regularity or scheme. The poet deliberately uses parallelism in the first line especially in 'here' and 'far way'. According to Samuel Levin's concept of natural equivalence, it can be deduced that the two parts "He is not here" and "far away" in both structures are antonymously equivalent semantically. Phonologically, the last line is also patterned in that the bilabial voiced plosive /b/ makes the words 'bald', 'breaks' and 'blank' to be positionally equivalent since the /b/ starts all the words. Again, there is metrical rhyme or phonological congruence in the nucleus/peak in the words that end each of the four lines. Each word (away, again, rain, day) contains the diphthong /ei/ as its nucleus. Again, the syllabic structure of each terminal word at the end of each line is structurally congruent. They are deliberately mono-syllabized.

Although Widdowson pleaded that deviation or violation of linguistic rule is not inevitable in literature or literary discourse, there is practically no literary text that is devoid of deviation. What is not inevitable is the presence or attainment of equal degree of deviation within a discourse or between genres. Leech (1981) agreed with this fact saying that just as there are degrees of foregrounded irregularity, so there are degrees of foregrounded regularity.

Patterned equivalence or foregrounded regularity can help to condition lexical items in literary discourse in such a way that they lose their significance and take on new value. An excerpt of Alexander Pope's poem will explain this:

(c) See how the world its veterans rewards!  
A youth of frolics, an old age of cards  
Fair to no purpose, artful to no end  
Young without lovers, old without a friend.

Alexander Pope, in this poem, explores hyper-schematization. The first line contains syntactic inversion. There is, therefore, a verb-object positional displacement as a way of violating conventional norm. The first line should have read;  
*See how the world rewards its veterans.*

This type of deviation is called internal deviation.

Besides, there is also the use of parallelism as a form of schematic foregrounding. In line 2, there are two noun phrases with the semantic values of +article +noun +prep

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+noun as in "a youth of frolics" and +article +adj. +noun +prep +noun as in "an old age of cards". Both noun phrases are made up of MHQ (Modifier, Head, Qualifier) and both head words "youth" and "cards" are antonymously equivalent in number. In line 3, the same syntactic equivalent structures exist in both parts of the divide; adj. + to + no + noun as in "fair to no purpose" and adj + to + no + noun as in "artful to no end". Both parts are antithetically equivalent. These are examples of coupling. In line 4, parallelistic patterning also exists between "Young without lovers" (adj + without + noun) and "old without a friend" (adj. + without + noun).

There is a discovery of frightening co-relationship existing among items in the poem that suggests natural equivalence. Certain items are semantically equivalent, synonymously and antonymously. For instance, "youth" and "old age" are semantically opposed within the context of the poem. The words "frolics" and "cards" in line 2 are semantically related since both share the semantic features of +pleasure +entertainment. Again, "purpose" and "end" in line 3 are semantically related since both have the feature +aim +goal. In the same vein, 'fair' and 'artful' are semantically opposed in that both associate with 'youth' and "old age" respectively. 'Lovers' and 'friend' are synonymously equivalent but semantically opposed in terms of number.

By extension of the schematic patterning found in the poem, parallelistic relationship still exist between some items. The words that end each line 'rewards' and 'cards' in line 1 & 2 are orthographically equivalent in that both end with the letters '-ards' while in line 3 & 4, 'end' and 'friend' are equivalent in the same sense in that both contain the letters '-end'. Again, both 'rewards', 'cards', 'end' and 'friend' are positionally equivalent in that they form the terminal markers of each of the lines. 'Cards', 'end' and 'friend' are congruent syllabically in that they are monosyllabic structures. In addition, both 'end and friend' are numerically equivalent in that both are singular. However, they remain semantically opposed in their features in that 'end' is +noun -abstract -concrete -animate -human -countable, but 'friend' is +noun +concrete +animate +human +countable within the context of the poem.

The spectrum of schematic patterning of linguistic items in the poem in their opposition and congruence relocates the words from their signification in the language code to their semantic value in the poem. Of course, it is the reflection and attempt of the poet to manipulate conventional code to suit his vision or intent.

### **Conclusion**

So far, this paper has been able to highlight how meaning is arrived at in a literary discourse by correlating signification and value to get to the intent, vision or message of the writer. Also, the paper has x-rayed how the literary artiste manipulates the language to suit his taste and the effect of such manipulation which is called foregrounding or

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artistic deviation , and also , that this deviation is understood or judged against the backdrop of the writer/reader's knowledge of the language and the language of the discourse (text) itself.

Finally, however deviant a literary discourse may seem in terms of grammaticality, such grammatical aberration is, nevertheless, interpretable since it is justifiably motivated by the writer/poet who deliberately uses the language the way he does in order to deliver his message promptly as seen in the literary texts analyzed in this paper.

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