

## Foregrounding as a Stylistic Strategy for Political Critique in Lasisi Olagunju's *Cowries of Blood*

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### Abstract

*Cowries of Blood* by Lasisi Olagunju is a poignant collection of essays addressing the grave security threats facing Nigeria. The book criticises the socio-political scenery of 'Nigeria, addressing issues such as herdsmen violence, banditry, and what the author terms Nigeria's endgame politics'. While concentrating majorly on Northern Nigeria, *Cowries of Blood* is a strong means of portraying and expressing concern about the country's challenges through a rich tapestry of linguistic features. The paper presents a stylistic analysis of selected essays from Lasisi Olagunju's *Cowries of Blood*, focusing on more prominent, defamiliarised and deviant from the norm to attract attention and create aesthetic effects. Key stylistic elements such as foregrounding, metaphor, irony, and satire are skilfully utilised by the author to highlight issues of corruption, violence, and societal decay. Analysing nine essays in *Cowries of Blood* using Crystal and Davy's (1969) stylistics approach, the author's use of language, rhetorical devices, and narrative techniques contributed to the thematic concerns and persuasive power of language in the book. The study concluded that Olagunju's mastery of language and literary techniques enhances the persuasiveness of his socio-political commentary and engages readers in a critical reflection on the issues facing Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Corruption, Violence, and, political critique, *Cowries of Blood*, stylistics and foregrounding

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## Introduction

The power of language in shaping perceptions and influencing societal change cannot be overstated. In the realm of socio-political discourse, writers wield their pens as tools of critique, reflection, and advocacy. Lasisi Olagunju, a prominent Nigerian journalist and author, demonstrates this role through his collection of essays, *Cowries of Blood*. This work, an agonising indictment of Nigeria's socio-political scenery, employs a rich tapestry of linguistic features to convey its messages. *Cowries of Blood* is not merely a compilation of essays; it is a profound exploration of the issues that plague Nigerian society, from corruption and violence to systemic decay and social injustice.

Lasisi Olagunju, the author of *Cowries of Blood*, a multiple award-winning newspaper columnist, was Nigeria Media Merit Award (NMMA) Newspaper Columnist of The Year 2017 (Noiredge, 2024). He also won the Nigeria's Diamond Award for Media Excellence (DAME) for Informed Commentary Writing in 2019. *Cowries of Blood* contains essays about Nigeria's struggles with insecurity, elite failure and leadership inadequacies. The articles were published in the author's 'Monday Lines' column in the Nigerian Tribune between March 2012 and August 2021 (Rovingheights 2024). A stylistic analysis of Olagunju's essays provides a platform into the intricate ways in which language can be crafted to provoke thought and inspire action. By examining the stylistic elements within selected essays from *Cowries of Blood*, this study explores how Olagunju's employment of foregrounding, figurative expressions and graphological features enhance the thematic concerns and persuasive power of his work.

Focusing on the graphological aspects of the author's essays, the study analyses his unique use of punctuation, capitalisation, font variations, and other visual elements, which contribute to the overall impact of his work. The analysis explores how these features enhance the emotive and persuasive power of the essays, reflecting the urgency and intensity of the issues discussed.

However, this paper is anchored on the belief that understanding the stylistic nuances of Olagunju's writing can offer deeper insights into the socio-political commentary embedded within his work. Through this analysis, the broader significance of stylistic features in shaping public discourse and enhancing a critical consciousness among readers is illuminated.

## Statement of Problem

The study of stylistics in literature offers critical insights into how authors convey meaning, evoke emotions, and persuade readers through their use of language. While considerable attention has been given to the thematic and contextual analysis of literary works, there is a relative paucity of research focusing on the stylistic features that characterise non-fictional prose, particularly in the context of African literature and journalism. Lasisi Olagunju's *Cowries of Blood* is a significant collection of essays that addresses pressing socio-political issues in Nigeria. Despite the importance of his work in reflecting and critiquing contemporary Nigerian society, to our knowledge, there has been limited scholarly attention on the stylistic

elements such as foregrounding that define his writings. This gap in research neglects an essential aspect of Olagunju's technique of making certain elements of a text more prominent to draw attention or create special effects in his essays. This paper, therefore seeks to give a comprehensive stylistic analysis of Olagunju's essays, which are rich in rhetorical devices, linguistic creativity, and graphological features. It seeks to identify and analyse the key stylistic features employed by Olagunju, including his use of metaphor, simile, irony and the graphological elements in the text. Through this analysis, the study demonstrates how these stylistic choices serve to reinforce the thematic concerns of the essays and engage the reader on a deeper level.

### **Foregrounding as a Stylistic Strategy for Political Critique**

Foregrounding is a popular notion in the study of stylistics generally. According to Wales (1989), Garvin introduced the term in 1964 to translate the Prague School's "aktualisace" which literally means "actualisation" (p. 182). Foregrounding in discourse refers to the linguistic and rhetorical technique used to emphasise or highlight specific elements, words, or ideas within a text or spoken discourse. It involves giving prominence to specific elements to draw the reader or listener's attention and create a particular effect (Amadi, 2024). The theory of foregrounding plays an integral part in the way a reader perceives and decodes linguistic expression (Zakirova, 2024). Gregoriou (2023) technically submits that foregrounding refers to the property of perceptual prominence that certain things have against the backdrop of other less noticeable things. This means that foregrounding involves making certain elements of a text (like words, images, or sounds) stand out in a way that attracts attention, often by deviating from normal or expected forms. These foregrounded elements are perceived as more important, noticeable and highly significant compared to other elements that are backgrounded or less emphasised.

Foregrounding as a stylistic strategy for political critique involves emphasising specific linguistic or textual features such as repetition, imagery, irony, or deviation from norms to draw attention to political issues. Certain elements are deliberately highlighted (made prominent) to catch the reader's or viewer's attention, thereby subtly or overtly exposing societal and governmental flaws.

**Foregrounding** is a powerful literary and linguistic tool that writers and speakers use to bring attention to particular elements of a text, often creating a sense of heightened meaning or urgency (Ajala and Adeyanju, 2022). In the context of **political critique**, foregrounding serves as a means of highlighting social injustices, power dynamics, and the struggles within political structures. Through stylistic deviation whether in language, imagery, or structure, foregrounding directs the reader's or audience's attention to specific issues, creating a reflection on those issues from an ideological or critical perspective.

While communicating with language, more is often meant than what is said which is shown by how people say or complain about something (Ajala, Adebago and Adeyanju, 2023). In

literature, if an author uses a unique metaphor or unexpected word choice, this would be foregrounded against the usual language of the narrative, making it more impactful (Bob, Kwekwe and Okoko, 2024). For instance, in *Cowries of Blood*, Olagunju uses metaphors like “blood-stained cowries” to represent political violence. The imagery of blood is foregrounded, drawing attention to the horror and implications of violence, compared to more neutral descriptions in the background.

### **Foregrounding as a Stylistic Framework for Literary Analysis**

Foregrounding is a fundamental stylistic strategy that improves the aesthetic and communicative functions of literary works. Leech and Short (2007) define foregrounding as “artistically motivated deviation,” which highlights specific linguistic elements by deviating from established standards or establishing unexpected regularities. They distinguish between two main types of foregrounding: deviation and parallelism. Deviation is the deliberate violation of linguistic standards, whereas parallelism involves repetition and patterned regularity at multiple levels of language, such as phonology, syntax, and semantics. This theoretical framework serves as the foundation for assessing stylistic elements in Lasisi Olagunju’s *Cowries of Blood*.

Graphological foregrounding, a subtype of deviation, is concerned with the visual features of text such as typography, layout, and punctuation. According to Leech (1969), graphology is a potent instrument for increasing stylistic prominence by changing spelling, spacing, and textual arrangement. Gregoriou (2009) expands on this by arguing that graphological deviation includes uncommon formatting choices such as bold text, italics, altered punctuation, and unconventional layouts, all of which serve to capture the reader’s attention and increase the expressive quality of the text. More recent research, such as Eva, (2015), confirms that graphological disturbances, such as irregular capitalization and spacing, not only highlight certain textual parts but also generate a sense of estrangement, engaging readers on both emotional and cognitive levels.

Deviation and parallelism work together to improve thematic expression. Ihor, Yuliya and Oleksandr (2023) make a useful distinction between qualitative foregrounding, which highlights rule-breaking occurrences due to their rarity, and quantitative foregrounding, which relies on frequency and repetition for significance. Lexical deviations are frequently manifested as neologisms, meaning changes, or unorthodox word choices that defy the reader’s expectations. Graphological deviations, on the other hand, use visual cues to underline important concepts or emotions. Parallelism occurs in a variety of language areas, including phonological patterns like alliteration, syntactic structures like repeated clauses, and semantic fields that appear across a text to underline major ideas.

The psychological impact of foregrounding has also been empirically validated through reader-response studies. Van Peer (1986) and Miall and Kuiken (1994) demonstrate that deviations slow down the reading process and elicit heightened emotional engagement, making the stylistic features more salient and memorable. Further research using eye-tracking and

think-aloud protocols (e.g., Harash, 2018) confirms that readers, especially those with literary training, tend to process foregrounded elements more deeply, enhancing their interpretive experience. Halliday (1971) emphasizes that foregrounding operates as “motivated prominence,” asserting that such features achieve salience only when they contribute meaningfully to the text’s communicative goals.

Applying these theoretical insights to Lasisi Olagunju’s *Cowries of Blood*, one can observe how both deviation and parallelism serve to enrich thematic development. The essays frequently employ lexical deviations through creative vocabulary and semantic innovation. Graphological features such as bold prints, italics, unconventional punctuation, and distinctive layout choices function to visually emphasize key themes and emotional high points. Parallel structures, including figurative language, repetition of significant terms, and recurrent semantic fields, create a rhythmic and cohesive narrative that underscores the author’s central concerns.

### Theoretical Framework

This study employs Crystal and Davy’s (1969) stylistics approach to analyse the linguistic styles adopted in the *Cowries of Blood*. As outlined in their book “Investigating English Style” (1969), this theory focuses on analysing the distinctive features of language use in various texts. Foregrounding in literary and political discourse draws from key stylistic theories that emphasise how linguistic deviation and emphasis aid deeper meanings. The theory was first proposed by Jan Mukařovský in 1932. According to Mukařovský, foregrounding occurs when certain elements of a text deviate from the norm of everyday language, drawing attention to those elements and enhancing their aesthetic or ideological impact. This deviation creates meaning beyond the surface level, making it an ideal tool for political critique. To complement Mukařovský’s approach, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), introduced by Teun A. van Dijk in the 1980s, is applied in this analysis. According to Ajala and Alayinde (2025), CDA focuses on the relationship between language and power, examining how texts shape, sustain, or challenge social structures. Blommaert (2005) and Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) also stated that CDA analyses the relation of language within a society and its impact on the discourses.

In the case of Olagunju’s *Cowries of Blood*, CDA helps to explore how foregrounding is used not only to create aesthetic deviation, but also, to critique the political and social environment in Nigeria. Olagunju’s deliberate stylistic choices through repetition, symbolism, and metaphor highlight themes of violence, injustice, and corruption, which are central to the political discourse of the nation.

Recent studies have further extended the application of foregrounding in political discourse. For instance, Simpson (2004) discusses how foregrounding serves as a method of drawing attention to ideological constructs in political texts. Moreover, Van Leeuwen (2008) emphasises that foregrounded language in political narratives serves not only aesthetic functions but also reveals power dynamics and social inequalities. Thus, this theoretical framework merges

Foregrounding Theory with CDA to examine how Olagunju's stylistic choices foreground political issues, offering a nuanced critique of Nigerian society.

Foregrounding, a core concept in stylistics operates primarily through deviation which is the breaking linguistic norms and parallelism, reinforcing patterns (Mukařovský (1964), Leech & Short, 2007). Deviation may occur at various levels: phonological (e.g., alliteration, rhyme), grammatical (e.g., breaking syntactic norms), semantic (e.g., paradox, ambiguity), graphological (e.g., unconventional punctuation or layout), and lexical (e.g., neologisms) (Short, 2021). Such linguistic deviations are particularly effective in political discourse and literature, where they function to challenge dominant ideologies or draw attention to marginal voices (Simpson, 2014). These deliberate deviations from expectations disrupt automatic processing, inviting critical engagement and interpretation. In political or literary discourse, such deviations often function to question dominant ideologies or highlight contradictions in power structures.

Parallelism, in contrast, involves the repetition of linguistic forms to create cohesion and emphasis. This includes syntactic (repeating sentence structures), phonological (sound patterns), and lexical parallelism (repetition of key terms or synonyms) (Burton, 2014). Parallelism not only enhances memorability, but also reinforces ideological positions and emotional appeal, particularly in political critique or advocacy. Parallelism is especially powerful in political texts, where recurring phrases shape public perception and emotional response (Jeffries, 2010). Combined deviation and parallelism form a dual mechanism of foregrounding that enables writers and speakers to critique, persuade, or emphasise. In contemporary stylistic analysis, foregrounding remains a critical tool for unpacking how language constructs social, political, and ideological meaning (Short & Leech, 2007). Thus, foregrounding through the dual strategies of deviation and parallelism serves as a powerful stylistic tool for drawing attention, shaping interpretation, and prompting reflection on social and political realities (Simpson, 2014).

## Materials and Methods

This paper adopts a qualitative approach, using both descriptive and analytical methods to examine stylistic features in selected essays from *Cowries of Blood*. The focus is on foregrounding, i.e. two major stylistic categories: deviation; graphological features such as bold text, italics, punctuation, and layout and parallelism; which includes figurative language, vocabulary choice, repetition, and semantic fields. These devices are explored for their roles in enhancing thematic expression and stylistic effect across the essays.

The data comprises essays written between 2013 and 2021, systematically sampled from the collection. Using a systematic sampling technique, one essay from each year was selected, specifically the first essay of every year, resulting in a total of nine essays. The rationale behind selecting the first essay of each year is on the assumption that these essays would give a background picture of the thematic and stylistic focus for that year. Therefore, the sampling for analysis are labelled 'Essay from 2013 to Essay from 2019'. This method ensures representativeness and consistency across the data, enabling a balanced analysis of stylistic

evolution over time. The selected essays reflect varying socio-political contexts and offer a rich ground for identifying recurring patterns and deviations in style. This strategic selection minimises bias while ensuring diversity in content and technique. The methodology is designed to yield an insightful and comprehensive understanding of the stylistic strategies deployed by Olagunju in his socio-political commentaries.

### Data Presentations and Analysis

The presentations and analysis of the selected essays from *Cowries of Blood* are grounded in the stylistic theory of foregrounding, operationalised through deviation and parallelism. Each datum is examined to identify how these two stylistic strategies are employed to highlight socio-political themes and enhance the persuasive force of the text.

### Excerpt from 2013 Essay

Titles and Headings: “Cowries of Blood: Essays on Herdsmen, Banditry, and Nigeria’s Endgame Politics”, “Tears, Tears, Tears, and Blood”

### Analysis

**Graphological Features:** Olagunju employs a strategic use of titles and headings to foreground the central themes of his essays. The structure and titling of the book are designed to reflect and emphasise the gravity of Nigeria’s socio-political challenges. The main title, *Cowries of Blood*, is a potent metaphor that combines the traditional symbol of wealth (“cowries”) with the visceral image of “blood.” This juxtaposition highlights the moral cost of Nigeria’s ongoing crises, suggesting that economic and political gains are often achieved at the expense of human lives. The subtitle, *Essays on Herdsmen, Banditry, and Nigeria’s Endgame Politics*, explicitly outlines the book’s focus areas, signalling a deep dive into the nation’s security issues and political dynamics. “Tears, Tears, Tears and Blood” is the opening chapter title strategically positioned to set the tone for the subsequent discussions in the book.

Olagunju also employs ellipses and italics to convey emotional depth and urgency, as seen in phrases like “We went to offer help...youths and masses went crazy...” (p. 2). Lexico-semantic features include repetition of emotionally charged words such as blood, violence, and death (e.g., “blood ran like river,” p. 5), and vivid imagery like “maddening bloodletting” (p. 4). These features, alongside semantic fields of war and suffering, highlight the brutality and psychological trauma of conflict.

Parallel structures and figurative language such as: “There are no winners, just two losers, and it’s a question of who loses the most” (p. 6), “You kill my brother, I kill yours” (p. 6), “Broken roofs, shattered glasses littering the streets” (p. 5), create rhythm and reinforce cyclical violence. These constructions foreground the inevitability and repetition of conflict.

Acronyms like DIG: Deputy Inspector General and BBC: British Broadcasting Cooperation (p. 2) introduce institutional authority and media presence, which contrasts with the chaos on the ground, foregrounding the tension between power structures and lived realities.

Polysemous use of *strike* (p. 5), which operates both physically (“you strike me”) and politically (“striking citizens”). This dual meaning emphasises the pervasive impact of conflict. Compounded words like *blood-curdling* and *marketplace of bloodletting* (p. 4) are strikingly unusual collocations that foreground violence through graphic imagery.

Listing of co-hyponyms such as *Afghanistan*, *Pakistan*, *Jos*, *Gaza* (p. 5) foregrounds a global pattern of violence, collapsing spatial distances and placing the local within the global frame of war zones.

Metaphors like “*engine room of our sanity*” (p. 3) and “*marketplace of maddening bloodletting*” (p. 4) foreground psychological and physical collapse by attributing mechanical and commercial metaphors to human trauma. Symbolism: *Blood* (found throughout—pp. 2, 4, 5, 6) and *innocence* (p. 5) serve as foregrounded images of human cost and moral erosion.

### Excerpt from 2014 Essay

The writer strategically employs graphological features, lexico-semantic choices, and figures of speech to dramatise the state of emergency Nigeria faces. These stylistic choices are deliberately foregrounded to arrest attention, disrupt complacency, and provoke national introspection.

Graphologically, the chapter title on page 7, *Are We Really Not at War?* is framed as a rhetorical question that challenges the reader’s perception and governmental narratives. This is a clear instance of foregrounding by deviation, as it contrasts the ideal of national peace with the reality of an undeclared civil war, thereby highlighting national hypocrisy.

The writer employs various forms of punctuation to enhance tone and emotional intensity. Ellipses, as seen on pages 7 and 8 (“And we say we are not at war...”, “...whatever decision we take or refuse to take today...”), serve to create suspense and hesitation, thereby reinforcing the speaker’s reflective and critical tone. Similarly, exclamation marks on page 8 (“And we are not at war!”, “Bama!”) function to dramatise the absurdity of denial and express incredulity, thus foregrounding irony and emotional tension.

The text’s layout also reflects a structured argumentative progression. Each paragraph builds upon the last, providing examples, citing locations, and analysing systemic failures. On pages 7 to 9, the use of numbers and statistics (e.g., “Over 98 people”, “55 mobile policemen”, “110 security operatives”) contributes a chilling authenticity. These figures serve as foregrounded factual anchors, emphasizing the scale of the crisis and challenging abstract denials with concrete data.

Lexico-semantically, the writer’s use of repetition is stylistically marked. The phrase “We are not at war” is repeated across pages 7 and 8, creating a refrain that starkly contrasts the brutal images presented. This is foregrounding through parallelism, as the repetition not only builds rhythm but also intensifies the irony.



The deployment of semantic fields is another major stylistic strategy. The vocabulary cuts across several domains: violence and conflict (e.g., insurgents, war, massacre, enemy pp. 7–9); denial and ignorance (denial, suffocating, spirit of denial pp. 8–9); political crisis (political ambitions, revolution, elections p. 8); injury and death (slaughterhouse, fallen, altered destinies—p. 9); and geographical zones of conflict (Nasarawa, Borno, Damaturu pp. 7–8). These interrelated fields are foregrounded to reinforce thematic unity, and their accumulation underscores the widespread, multi-faceted nature of the crisis.

The use of lexical collocations and word formation further amplifies meaning. On pages 8 and 9, compounds such as “slaughterhouse,” “rudderless political ambitions,” “odious fleas,” and “mobile policemen” are carefully selected. These combinations are foregrounded through deviation from standard collocation, and they function to conjure stark, emotive images. For example, “slaughterhouse of the lawless” (p. 9) metaphorically describes the Nigerian landscape as a space of impunity, heightening the horror.

The essay is richly embroidered with figures of speech that dramatise its thematic concerns. Metaphors like “Personnel in the hands of insurgents pulls us all nearer the precipice” (p. 8) and “laid bare and supine at the slaughterhouse of the lawless” (p. 9) present vivid imagery of national vulnerability and collapse. These are foregrounded metaphors that reframe abstract conditions in visceral, bodily terms. On page 9, hyperbole is evident in “They fart into our mouths and say we must not talk...”, an exaggerated expression that critiques repression in grotesque terms, achieving foregrounding through shock value.

Irony is another dominant device, especially in the repeated phrase “And we are not at war!” (p. 8). This sarcastic refrain creates dissonance between statement and situation, foregrounding the state’s denial. The rhetorical question, “Who else bothered to read the alarm...?” (p. 9), challenges public apathy and is a technique of foregrounding through interrogative provocation. On pages 8–9, personification (“The spirit of denial is suffocating”, “the injustice of the situation demands...”) endows abstract forces with agency, making them active oppressors. This foregrounds the psychological burden of silence and injustice.

### **Excerpt from 2015 Essay**

The graphological and lexico-semantic features in *Chibok: Bringing Back Our Guts* reflect the writer’s strategic use of language to critique Nigeria’s socio-political climate. The main title, “Chibok: Bringing Back Our Guts,” in bold and larger font, immediately signals the urgency and gravity of the issue. The extensive use of punctuation such as commas, question marks, exclamation marks, and quotation marks, serves to emphasise the emotional intensity, irony, and scepticism towards governmental responses. For instance, the rhetorical question “Or does wisdom no longer connote or denote understanding and sober optimism?” challenges the reader’s perception of Nigeria’s political leadership.

Repetition plays a crucial role, especially phrases like “Nothing shocks anyone in Nigeria” and “We can weep for ourselves,” which underscore a sense of national apathy and indifference.

Lexico-semantic variations, such as polysemy in words like “shock” and “cry,” further add depth, with “shock” reflecting both literal and figurative meanings (p. 7–8). The use of figures of speech, like metaphors (“It is a nation of shock absorbers”) and hyperbole (“Nothing works in Nigeria. Nothing.”), emphasises the nation’s dysfunctionality and desensitisation to tragedy (p. 8–9).

Rhetorical devices such as anaphora (“We can weep for ourselves; we can cuddle the afflicted”) and sarcasm (“The president, at least, graciously reacted even if it came two weeks after”) critique the delayed and inadequate responses to crises (p. 9). These stylistic features are employed to evoke emotional engagement and provoke critical reflection on the state of the nation.

### **Excerpt from 2016 Essay**

There are also instances of graphological features in 2016 essay to foreground meaning and enhance clarity. The main title, “*Cowries of Blood: Essays on Herdsmen, Banditry and Nigeria’s Endgame Politics*”, appears in bold and large font to establish the thematic focus. Section titles like “*El-Rufai and the Beggars of Kaduna*” serve as visual markers for new arguments. Subheadings such as “*Now, Osun State:*” guide the reader through thematic transitions. Quotations like “It is hardly surprising that, with so many people flocking to the towns...”, and “For the beggar, how you asked, and who, where you asked, and what you asked for, all needed to be finely judged.” emphasize key observations.

Repetition features prominently, particularly in the use of words like “What,” “street begging,” and “El-Rufai.” This repetition emphasises emotional intensity, reinforces key concerns, and creates a rhythm that draws attention to recurring social and political issues. For example, “What should I write? What difference will it make?” underlines the speaker’s frustration and scepticism about change.

Lexico-semantic variation is also evident through the use of borrowed names and terms like Kaduna” (Hausa origin), “El-Rufai” (Arabic origin), “Ibadan”, “Osun”, and “Aregbesola” (all Yoruba origin), “Port Harcourt” (British colonial origin), along with the acronym UNIOSUN (Osun State University).

The text explores various semantic fields such as governance, social issues, urban life, and sanitation, weaving them into a vivid commentary on contemporary Nigeria. Through powerful metaphors like “odious negativity oozing out of that state” and “sink their self-esteem in the septic tank of begging,” the writer paints a bleak picture of societal decay. Similes such as “like a malfunctioning phone needing shock treatment” reflect drastic solutions to social problems.

### **Excerpt from 2017 Essay**

Foregrounding in the passage is achieved through deliberate graphological features that highlight key themes and evoke strong emotional responses. Titles and headings, such as “Ese Oruru:

Northern Nigeria Needs Help!”, are foregrounded using bold and larger font size, drawing the reader’s attention immediately to urgent sociopolitical issues. The exclamation mark reinforces the emotional weight and urgency of the message. Quotation marks are used to foreground factual evidence and expert commentary, such as: “58 percent of children under five in these (five northern) states suffer from stunting. . . .” These statistics are not only quoted but also strategically framed to emphasise the dire humanitarian conditions. Punctuation plays a stylistic role too—question marks (e.g., “So, what am I saying?”) provoke reflection, while parentheses, as in “(five northern)”, insert crucial clarifications without breaking the flow. Ellipses (...) signal omitted but impactful data, deepening the foregrounded concern about educational and nutritional disparities in Northern Nigeria.

Repetition is a powerful tool in foregrounding. Terms like “percent” and “education,” are repeated in 2017 essay of Olagunju to emphasise the overwhelming scale of deprivation, e.g. “65.5 percent of girls... had no education at all in the North-East.” The use of semantic fields—such as health and nutrition (“malnutrition,” “stunting”), education (“primary school,” “educational attainment”), and social issues (“poverty,” “maternal death”) reinforces the interconnected crises. Lexico-semantic variation, including acronyms like UNICEF and hyponyms such as Katsina, Kebbi, Zamfara under “region,” provides specificity. Figures of speech like metaphor “sink their self-esteem in the septic tank of begging” vividly dramatise the dehumanisation of the poor.

### Excerpt from 2018 Essay

Foregrounding through graphological features in the section titled “Back to Unongo’s Northern Advantage” is achieved using visual and typographical cues to guide readers’ focus and reinforce key themes. The title itself is foregrounded through bold and larger font size, signalling a thematic shift and drawing attention to the significance of Unongo’s political stance. Capitalization of acronyms like “NEF” emphasizes institutional authority. Quotation marks highlight historical and political tensions, e.g., “Armed native authority policemen were called in...” and “Eight people... were wounded with batons”, bringing vividness and authenticity to reported events. Punctuation marks like commas and question marks structure the rhythm and provoke reflection: “Does the ‘advantage’ of the north take care of the interests...?” Parentheses and ellipses, as seen in “(ugly) face of today’s Kwara State” and “secession from Northern Nigeria...”, introduce subtle commentary and unresolved tension, effectively foregrounding socio-political complexity and emotional undercurrents.

Foregrounding in the passage is achieved through parallel structures and figurative language. These stylistic tools enhance emphasis and reinforce thematic concerns like power imbalance, regional marginalization, and political manipulation. The repetition of “advantage” e.g., “give us your advantage” and “the advantage it enjoys over other parts” highlights the recurring motif of northern dominance, while “Nigeria” is reiterated to stress national decay, as in “Nigeria is a country of thorns and spikes”. Figurative language deepens the critique: metaphors like

“They own the yam and hold the knife by the handle” depict total control, and similes such as “butterflies like the Middle Belt have no chance” vividly portray vulnerability. Parallel structures “You have seen... You have heard...” build rhetorical rhythm, amplifying urgency and emotional engagement. Rhetorical questions like “Does the ‘advantage’ ...take care of the interests...?” provoke critical reflection. These stylistic devices foreground inequality and the need for structural reform while lending the piece both poetic resonance and political weight.

### Excerpt from 2019 Essay

Foregrounding through **graphological features** in the passage enhances emphasis and thematic intensity. **Quotation marks** frame critical assertions, giving prominence to direct speech and ideologies, such as “*Did you not hear Ibrahim Coomassie... proclaiming his people’s indispensability?*”, which emphasises arrogance and regional dominance. **Hyphenation**, in phrases like “*blood-soaked*” and “*ground zero*”, compounds meaning and conveys stark, visual imagery of conflict and collapse. **Ellipses** signal silenced or ongoing tragedy, as seen in “*maiming and killing for their sport...*”, inviting reflection on unresolved violence. **Parentheses** insert clarifying commentary, subtly guiding reader interpretation. **Dashes** create emphatic breaks and draw attention to contrasts or unfolding arguments, as in “*North to south, Presidents and governors abandon the poor...*”. Finally, **rhetorical questions** and **exclamation marks** (“*Silence!*”, “*What cast those shadows before daybreak?*”) heighten tension and dramatise national disillusionment.

Repetition of words like “silence”, “blood”, and “North” amplifies the urgency of violence and political stagnation. The semantic field of violence “blood-soaked,” “maiming,” “abduction” evokes a chilling landscape of brutality, while references to geography, such as “Chibok,” “Dapchi,” and “Arewa”, localise the crisis. Foregrounded parallelism in lines like “a huge lake of blood; a field of stupid deaths; a world of unusual disasters...” constructs a cumulative rhythm of despair. Metaphors like “the south is a helpless detainee in the north’s leper colony” portray the imbalance of power and decay. Rhetorical questions, such as “When was the last time the north gave Nigeria a reason to smile?”, compel introspection and confrontation. Personification, as in “Greedy leaders have made the south an abductee...”, dramatises political betrayal. These stylistic devices foreground injustice and incite emotional engagement with the region’s plight.

### Excerpt from 2020 Essay

Graphological features are employed in text to enhance clarity, emphasis, and critical engagement. The layout and structure, such as the title “The North’s 2019 Presidential Votes”, foregrounds the central theme and draws immediate attention to the political focus. Statistical data including “Total registered voters: 82,344,107” is positioned clearly at the top of the page, using numerical precision to convey legitimacy and authority. Capitalization of names like “General Muhammadu Buhari”, “Atiku Abubakar”, and institutions like “INEC” emphasizes

political actors and adds visual weight to key elements. The use of punctuation, particularly question marks (e.g., “What happened to the balance of 1,659,977 voters?”), conveys doubt and invites scrutiny. Parentheses, such as “(4.5 percent of total votes cast)”, offer clarifying detail, enhancing the reader’s understanding of electoral data. These graphological choices foreground the urgency and perceived irregularities in Nigeria’s electoral process, guiding reader interpretation through visual and structural emphasis.

The deliberate use of specific terminology like “registered voters,” “INEC,” and “accredited voters” foregrounds the political context and adds legitimacy to the discourse. The semantic fields of education, elections, and social issues e.g., “illiteracy,” “rigging,” “poverty,” “Boko Haram” emphasise Nigeria’s multifaceted challenges, particularly in the North. Idiomatic expressions like “chains and won’t let the South exist without fear” metaphorically depict Northern dominance. Repetition of key terms like “votes,” “INEC,” and “education” heightens urgency and maintains thematic focus. Vivid metaphors such as “yam and the knife of Nigeria” and “harvesting the kids on election days” dramatize power imbalance and child exploitation. Rhetorical questions, like “What happened to the balance of 1,659,977 voters?”, provoke critical reflection. Irony, hyperbole, and parallelism inject satirical and emotional weight, while personification (e.g., “The jubilant North”) animates regional narratives, deepening the socio-political critique.

### Excerpt from 2021 Essay

The graphological features in the article “Amotekun and the North’s Fears” contribute significantly to its communicative force and stylistic richness. The bold heading clearly foregrounds the central theme, setting a serious and political tone. Quotation marks highlight direct speech, distancing the author’s perspective while reinforcing key points. For instance, “Àmòtèkùn is a complement that will give our people confidence. . .” foregrounds the legitimacy and intent of the security outfit. The strategic use of parentheses, such as in “. . . the Kyari thesis was that ‘if the Muslim Hausas. . .’ (The west just did that with Operation Àmòtèkùn)”, provides nuanced commentary without disrupting the narrative flow.

The article makes strong use of foregrounding through stylistic choices that draw attention to its core themes—violence, governance, ethnic identity, and security. Repetition of phrases like “the president issued a condolence statement condemning the killings and reprisal killings” reinforces the monotonous and ineffective governmental responses, while “death is cheap and security is impotent” captures public despair. The semantic fields of security, leadership, and ethnic identity are tightly interwoven, with terms like “Àmòtèkùn,” “Fulani herdsmen,” “governors,” and “Yoruba” underscoring the socio-political tensions.

Parallel structures such as the repetition of condolence statements mirror the cyclical nature of violence and inaction. Acronyms like “APC” and “NYCN” add institutional weight, while metaphors and proverbs e.g., “wheelbarrows of politics” and “Ìgi gangaran má gún mi l’óju”

foreground indigenous wisdom and resistance, stressing the importance of vigilance and proactive measures.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The analysis of Olagunju's essays reveals a sophisticated interplay between visual and verbal strategies that contribute to the power and distinctiveness of his political critique. At the graphological level, the deliberate manipulation of visual elements like bold print, italics, and irregular punctuation serves as a powerful tool for directing reader attention and highlighting crucial aspects of his arguments. These unconventional features are not mere stylistic embellishments, but are functionally designed to foreground key points, emphasise critical moments, and even suggest underlying emotional or ironic tones that resonate with the socio-political context of his essays. The use of ellipses and dashes, for instance, create pauses that invite contemplation or signal emotional tension.

At the lexico-semantic level, the paper uncovers the significant role of parallelism in shaping Olagunju's message. This is evident in the repetition of key lexical items, the strategic use of figurative language, and recurring syntactic patterns. Lexical parallelism effectively reinforces dominant themes such as corruption, governance failures, and public suffering, creating a sense of persistent emphasis on these critical issues. The rhythmic effect generated by repetitive sentence structures, coupled with the evocative power of metaphorical language, adds an emotional layer to the essays, enhancing their critical impact. This multi-layered approach to analysing Olagunju's style, considering both the visual and verbal dimensions, is to give a deeper understanding of the deliberate stylistic patterns that contribute to his unique authorial voice and the overall effectiveness of his political commentary.

The incorporation of cultural allusions, as exemplified by the use of Yoruba proverbs like "Omo eni kò sè'dí bèbèrè," adds another layer of complexity and richness to Olagunju's writing. This integration of indigenous perspectives through proverbs not only enriches the text culturally but also challenges the reader to engage with the underlying cultural nuances that inform his critique of political dynamics. This deviation from standard English expressions serves to ground his arguments within a specific cultural context, making his critique resonate more deeply with a local audience while also offering a unique perspective to international readers. This strategic use of cultural elements demonstrates a conscious effort to infuse his writing with a sense of place and identity, further strengthening the impact of his political message.

Finally, the analysis of syntactic parallelism, particularly the recurring structure "It is about..." in "Nigeria's Cowries of Blood," highlights Olagunju's mastery of rhetorical devices. This repetitive structure creates a powerful rhythm and emphasises the multifaceted nature of the issues he addresses. By framing a series of points with the same opening phrase, he effectively compels readers to confront the breadth and depth of the challenges facing Nigeria, from economic exploitation to social injustices. This deliberate syntactic choice not only enhances

the readability and flow of the text but also serves to underscore the interconnectedness and pervasiveness of the problems being discussed, leaving a lasting impression on the reader and reinforcing the urgency of his political critique.

### Conclusion

The study critically examined the linguistic and pragmatic features of the selected political discourses of Olagunju, focusing particularly on how language functions as a strategic tool in political communication. It highlighted how Olagunju adeptly employed various linguistic devices such as presuppositions, implicatures, metaphors, lexical choices, and rhetorical structures to influence public perception and subtly convey ideologies within a volatile political context.

The analysis revealed that his discourse is rich in strategic ambiguity, deliberate indirectness, and calculated facework (both threatening and saving), all of which underscore his rhetorical competence and political acumen. These findings reinforce the assertion that political language is rarely neutral but is loaded with intent, ideology, and strategic positioning.

Olagunju's discourse reflects the intersection of language, power, and ideology, highlighting the potent role of linguistic strategies in shaping sociopolitical narratives and influencing public discourse. The paper affirms the relevance of pragmatic and stylistic tools in decoding political communication in African contexts and advocates for a broader application of these tools in analysing political texts.

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