

Foregrounding as A Stylistic Technique In Dul Johnson's *Across The Gulf*

AHGU, ASHEAZI AND UMBUGUSHIKI, EMBUGUSHIKI AHIDJO

Abstract

The study is a foregrounding analysis of Dul Johnson's *Across the Gulf*. The research which is primarily a textual analysis investigated how the author in his creative and imaginative craftsmanship and acumen foregrounded certain linguo-literary features to achieve stylistic effects in the novel. Thirty excerpts were extracted from the novel through purposive sampling technique, presented and analysed based on the theory of foregrounding. The findings revealed that the writer used foregrounding as one of the techniques in writing the

text. There were several deviations from the norm in his presentation of text which were evident in the odd use of capitalisation, italic, neologism and unusual textual layouts. There were also instances of repetitions which struck the reader's attention. The study concluded that the presentation of the familiar in a strange or unfamiliar way is a useful technique for enhancing people's perception of the world around them.

Introduction

This study discusses foregrounding in relation to examples from Dul Johnson's novel *Across the Gulf*. The novel tells the story of resilience, love and loyalty during and after the Nigerian civil war. The concept of foregrounding suggests that linguistic features are presented in unusual ways that they attract the reader's interest and attention. The strange presentation of these linguistic features which the reader is certainly not familiar with will catch the attention of the reader because it will surely become the centre of focus.

Foregrounding is a popular concept in stylistics and it has its origin from Viktor Šklovsky (1917) who called it *ostranenie* in Russian. *Ostranenie* is translated into English as defamiliarization. Šklovsky states that "the technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar'". Jan Mukarovsky borrows the concept and he calls it *aktualisace* (a Czech word) which is translated as foregrounding.

The text, *Across the Gulf*, has several linguistic features that call attention to themselves because

the writer intentionally made a choice to arrange several linguistic features in a way that is unfamiliar and unusual. These *representations* focus the attention of the reader on the elements that the writer intends for the reader to notice. Foregrounding in *Across the Gulf* are of two forms: deviation from the norm and repetition, of which deviations are in the majority. The paper investigates the concept of foregrounding as a stylistic technique in Dul Johnson's novel *Across the Gulf*. It also identifies the linguo-literary features employed by the novelist to foreground certain essential aspects of the text of distinctive stylistic significance. In addition, the study specifically and practically seeks to demonstrate the semantic peculiarities of some lexical items in the novel and showing that lexical components called 'lexical items' which are found in the classes of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs are chiefly responsible for the meaning potential in discourse, depending on the peculiarities of their graphology, syntax, morphology and phonology.

Conceptual Review

Foregrounding

Foregrounding refers to the notion of making certain features prominent in a text, so that these features are able to stand out and to catch the readers' attention. Richard Nordquist (2018)

Department of English, University of Jos

Corresponding Authors

AHGU, A.; AND EMBUGUSHIKI, A.U.

E-mail: dianaahgu@gmail.com

ahidjoembugushiki@gmail.com

defines foregrounding as linguistic strategies that call attention to themselves, causing the reader's attention to shift away from *what* is said to *how* it is said. The concept that laid the foundation for what is known today as foregrounding is called defamiliarization. Catherine Emmort and Marc Alexander describe defamiliarization as a common translation of *ostranenie*, the Russian Formalist term for an aesthetic estrangement from the perception of the familiar and routine. First used by Šklovsky in 1917, the purpose of defamiliarization is the desire to increase both the effort and the duration of a perceiver's experience of a text. With defamiliarization as the intended aesthetic effect of a text, the textual and linguistic process by which it is achieved is often translated as foregrounding (Emmort and Alexander 290). Foregrounding is a popular term in stylistics introduced by Paul Garvin in 1964 to translate the term '*aktualisace*' which literally means actualization. Foregrounding is borrowed from Russian Formalism and developed by Mukarovsky who called it *aktualisace*. Mukarovsky believed, like the Russian formalists before him, that it was the function of poetic language to surprise the reader with a fresh and dynamic awareness of its linguistic medium, to de-automatize what was normally taken for granted, to exploit language aesthetically. Foregrounding is thus the 'throwing into relief' of the linguistic sign against the background of the norms of ordinary language (Wales 166).

Christiana Gregoriou states that in technical but also in non-technical contexts 'foregrounding' refers to the property of perceptual prominence that certain things have against the backdrop of other less noticeable things. In the visual and perhaps more obvious sense of the term, one can see foregrounding manifesting itself as a psychological effect generated by particular aspects of say images, thereby drawing the viewer's attention to themselves or parts of themselves. For instance, one would expect bright colourful objects to be more noticeable in an environment compared to those objects in dull colouring. To give another example, it is for foregrounding-related effects that poster advertising designers manipulate the size and position of words and objects within the poster space to direct the observer's focus on particular aspects of the product advertised while distracting

potential buyers from possibly discouraging aspects of this same product (Gregoriou 87). Foregrounding is done in such a way that when a reader comes across a foregrounded text, it deliberately registers in the mental image of the reader as something attractively or unattractively strange so that the reader is intrigued and motivated to ponder on the issue presented much longer than usual.

Foregrounding can be applied at all levels of language be it graphology, syntax, semantics, phonology and so on. The foregrounding theory gives writers the opportunity to artistically deviate from the norm so that what is presented is not noticeable in quite the same way as the rest of the piece. Paul Simpson states that foregrounding refers to a form of textual patterning which is motivated specifically for literary-aesthetic purposes. Capable of working at any level of language, foregrounding typically involves a stylistic distortion of some sort, either through an aspect of the text which deviates from a linguistic norm or, alternatively, where an aspect of the text is brought to the fore through repetition or parallelism. That means that foregrounding comes in two main guises: foregrounding as 'deviation from a norm' and foregrounding as 'more of the same'. Foregrounding is essentially a technique for 'making strange' in language, or to extrapolate from Shklovsky's Russian term *ostranenie*, a method of 'defamiliarisation' in textual composition. Whether the foregrounded pattern deviates from a norm, or whether it replicates a pattern through parallelism, the point of foregrounding as a stylistic strategy is that it should acquire salience in the act of drawing attention to itself. Furthermore, this salience is motivated purely by literary considerations and as such constitutes an important textual strategy for the development of images, themes and characters, and for stimulating both effect and affect in a text's interpretation (Simpson 50).

Similarly, Katie Wales explains that foregrounding is achieved by a variety of means, which have been largely grouped under two main types: deviation and repetition; or paradigmatic and syntagmatic foregrounding respectively. Deviations are violations of linguistic norms: grammatical or semantic, for example. Azuike equates style as a deviation from a norm to "a

departure or deflection from accepted norm" (11). It has no connection with error of usage. For an act of deviation to amount to style, the user of the language must be aware of the norm he/she is deviating from. Darbyshire supports this view thus: style could be defined in terms of deviations from the norm – provided that we know what the norm is (43). It means, therefore, that if a user of a language is not aware of the norm, his/her act of deviation from the norm cannot amount to style. The act of deviation must be a conscious act. Thus one can only understand style as a deviation from a norm when one situates the deviation in the context of the norm which has been deviated from. Without an understanding of the contextual variables surrounding the norm, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain the act of deviation from the norm. Azuiké (2006) observes that there is a violation of linguistic norms when the writer fails to observe the principle of sufficient contextual provisions which the reader would not only identify in his dreams but also in his consciousness. Unusual metaphors or similes (the traditional tropes) produce unexpected conjunctions of meaning, forcing fresh realizations in the reader. In one sense repetition is a kind of deviation; it violates the normal rules of usage by over-frequency. Repetitive patterns (of sound or syntax, for example) are superimposed on the background of the expectations of normal usage, and so strike the reader's attention as unusual: alliteration, parallelism, and many figures of speech or schemes involving repetition of lexical items are thus commonly exploited in foregrounding (Wales 167). Gustavo Martin-Asensio explains paradigmatic foregrounding as the selection of an item not permitted or expected at a particular point while syntagmatic foregrounding is the repeated selection of an item where a single selection is expected. Foregrounding is not done haphazardly; it involves a careful and conscious selection by a writer which is creatively applied in a text.

Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short refer to foregrounding as artistically motivated deviation. They state that 'foregrounding may be qualitative, i.e. deviation from the language code itself – a breach of some rule or convention of English – or it may simply be quantitative, i.e. deviance from some expected frequency' (39). Foregrounding makes

something stand out from the surrounding words or images. The purpose of foregrounding is to hone readers' mental picture and perception of happenings, feelings, situation, or concept that the writer wants to point out in the hope of giving readers fresh clarity or motivation. This study analyses the novel *Across the Gulf* based on the concept of foregrounding.

Methodology

This research is essentially concerned with the foregrounding analysis of Dul Johnson's *Across the Gulf*. The study made use of primary and secondary sources of data collection. The primary data consisted of thirty excerpts extracted from the fictional prose work selected for this study. The researcher made use of purposive sampling technique for the extraction of the excerpts. The excerpts were presented, analysed and discussed based on the concept of foregrounding. The secondary data which is a product of extensive library-based research consisted of critical works, journals and scholarly published works in the field of foregrounding. The data consisted of published works of linguists such as Emmott, Catherine and Alexandra, Marc (2016), Gregoriou Christiana (2014), Leech, Geoffrey and Short, Mick (2007), Martin-Asensio, Gustavo (2000), Nordquist, Richard (2018), Simpson, Paul (2004), Wales, Katie (2011), among others. Internet sources were also consulted in order to provide a broader spectrum of issues relevant to this study.

Synopsis of across The Gulf

Across the Gulf is a novel written by Dul Johnson. It is a story that centres around the life of a young woman called Ifunaya during the 1967 civil war in Nigeria that lasted for 2 years, 6 months, 1 week and 2 days, and the aftermath of the war on her and her family. Ifunaya is Igbo and lives in the eastern part of Nigeria, precisely Okigboli. She is engaged to Ofala but a night to their wedding, there is an aerial bombardment that ushers the war into Okigboli; Ifunaya and Ofala are together and some distance away from their homes when the bombardment occurs, so they had to both go in separate directions; Ifunaya heads home while Ofala goes to join the Biafran army.

However, Ifunaya does not get home because

she is injured and is rescued by Captain Janbut Rinbut, a medical officer with the Nigerian Federal Troops. An interesting story of friendship and love builds up between Ifunaya and Janbut who are supposedly from two different sides of the warring groups. The war ends and she has to choose between Ofala and Janbut.

As will be illustrated in the following sections, the novel examined and makes profound use of foregrounding to convey the message and to communicate the author's intention. The author uses linguistic devices such as repetition, interesting vocabulary and grammatical choices, neologism, onomatopoeic terms, unusual graphological presentations which include; odd capitalisation, striking paragraphs, and unusual textual layouts.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

Foregrounding Direct Thoughts

The writer expresses the thoughts of the characters by italicising expressions that indicate the characters' direct thoughts. He graphologically foregrounds the characters' thoughts and in most of the instances, he does not add any information to show that what has been expressed is the character's direct thought, hence there are seldom such expressions as 'I/she/he thought' following the direct thought as is often done in most writings. Here are some excerpts from the novel to show direct thoughts without 'I/she/he thought':

Soldiers under treatment! Lucky to be where? (26)

You could be as right as the rising sun, but you could never be a replacement for Ofala. (30)

God, where are you? (31)

If that was bait, you got it wrong. (43)

Here are some excerpts from the novel to show direct thoughts with 'I/she/he thought'. In all these excerpts, the 'I/she/he thought' is not italicised:

And about your blindness, she thought (66).

Highlighting Words that Imitate Sounds

The writer foregrounds words that imitate sounds such that these words have one letter of the alphabet being repeated more than twice for emphasis and stress. By having a letter of the alphabet repeated several times in a word where it should appear only once or twice in such a word, the writer raises the

level of apprehension in the reader by emphasising the intensity of the situation. These words are not the conventional words found in the dictionaries. They are onomatopoeic terms that have been created by the writer while some of the terms may have been used in colloquial conversations. Neologism also plays a significant role in the terms described here because most of these onomatopoeic terms used in the novel were created by the writer. So, he uses words that imitate the sounds that they denote to describe some of the events that took place in the novel, for instance: "*Gboooooooooom!* The aerial bombardment of Okigboli had commenced" (10). The word "*Gboooooooooom!*" imitates the sound of a bomb. In the second paragraph of the first chapter the writer prepares the readers' minds that there is some sort of doom lurking around. However, subsequent paragraphs before the actual trouble begins shift away completely from that of trouble to that of everyday normal life until the term "*Gboooooooooom!*" appears in the novel. The arrangement of several adjectives alongside a noun may have sufficed in the description of the aerial bombardment. Nonetheless, the term "*Gboooooooooom!*" captures effectively the intensity of the situation and the topsy-turvy happenings and fear that represents the emotions of the characters which has been produced by the occurring event. Furthermore, sound has the ability to trigger emotions in people; it could be fear, joy or any other emotion.

Also in the example below:

Ifunaya started to run.

Gbu? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? hhhh!!!! (14)

The term "*Gbu? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? hhhh!!!!*" represents the speed that Ifunaya applied while she ran. Again, instead of using adjectives or adverbs to describe the manner in which Ifunaya ran, a word that imitates the sound of speed is used by the writer. Moreover, the lower case of the letter '?' used in the word "*Gbu? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? hhhh!!!!*" is different from the lower case of the letter 'a' used in the entire novel.

Additionally, the onomatopoeic terms are written in italics so that they stand out from the other background words. Below are several more

examples of the onomatopoeic terms in the novel:

Gboooooom!! Gbu-gbu-gboooooom!!! (10)

Fadugba looked like his name: something that had fallen forcefully and heavily – *gbaa* – like a mighty tree trunk. (25)

But as he turned to tiptoe back to his seat, there was a *phroop* at the door, and Kalu would have fainted if a *kee-ki-keet* did not follow immediately. A cat had just terminated a rat's journey. (34)

Presentation of Nigerian English Lexis and Indigenous Terms

There are terms that are of Nigerian origin that have found their way into the English language spoken by Nigerians. These terms are recognised and understood by a good number of Nigerians because they are used in all regions of the country; a good example of such terms is the word 'oga'. The writer makes use of terms that can be found in the Tarok language and in the Igbo language. These are indigenous terms that belong to a particular group of people and can be found in their language. Whereas it is not impossible to use the English version of some of these indigenous terms in the novel, a translation of some of the terms into English can water down the meaning of the words making the terms to lose their strength. Also, it is important to note that some of these indigenous terms have no English equivalents, and that is why the writer has opted to use them as they are.

The writer also foregrounds the terms by putting them in italics to make them prominent so that not only is the attention of the reader called to the terms, the reader is able to identify them as non-English words that are even very important and have significant meanings which have contributed in telling the story. Below are some of the examples of such terms from the novel:

Then you will live with them without me in this house, *Nna'anyi*. (10)

I just want to take her, *Oga*. (15)

That evening they shared his *bichi* – the special alcoholic drink reserved in a special earthen jug for the head of the house... (22)

...they also prayed for a speedy end to the

war, with a resounding victory for Biafra, and for God's wrath to fall on the *Awusa* soldiers and their *Ogas* in the North and in Lagos. (34)

Politicians in *agbada* and in military uniform caused the war. (46)

The Use of Capitalization

The writer uses capitalization where it should not be so as to stress some of the things he is saying and to give prominence to some words that have been written in order to call the attention of the readers and to create certain ideas that may not have been created in the readers' minds. These foregrounded words raise the curiosity of the readers and motivate them to feel all the right emotions that the words carry. Below are some examples from the novel:

'Go to the admin office and formalise it. Your pass begins tomorrow. If the need of your presence arises this evening, I HAVE NOT given you any pass. Understood?' (16)

IFINAYA! he called again, this time with a stress, and pronouncing it badly. (28)

I-FUNANYAAA! Oh, Ifunanya! Nwamaka screamed, breaking into, and disrupting the prayer. (33)

'I will break your mouth if you argue with me again.'

'EVENGELIST Kalu!' (36-37)

She is NOT married to the Awusa man, *Nna'anyi*. (64)

The first excerpt above depicts a command that has automatically revoked the pass that has been given to Ofala just in case there is a need for his presence in the Biafran camp. In the second excerpt, IFINAYA is written in capital letters to show the stress placed on the word by Janbut, and to also emphasise that they are from different parts of country since Janbut pronounces the name badly. The third excerpt shows a word that is pronounced with so much stress but the kind of stress that depicts pain. 'I-FUNANYAAA!' as written by the author shows a lot of emotion, any reader can feel the mother's nervous tension and such a reader is immediately aware of the mother's desperation and fear for her daughter's safety. The hyphen and the

two additional 'As' added at the end of the word demonstrate the stress the mother uses in calling her daughter's name because of the circumstances surrounding them at the moment. In the fourth excerpt, 'EVANGELIST' is written in capital letters to call the reader's attention to Kalu who is known for his show of spirituality but who is now treating his wife with violence. The negation 'NOT' in the fifth excerpt clearly shows Nwamaka's view on the relationship between Ifunanya and Janbut, and the fact that her loyalty lies with her daughter Ifunanya and no one else. Excerpts two, three and four each carries an exclamation mark to show that they are emotional statements.

Repetition

The repetitions of lexical items are commonly exploited in foregrounding. In *Across the Gulf* the writer makes use of repetitive patterns which are superimposed on the background of the expectations of normal usage and this usage strikes the reader's attention as unusual. Here is an example:

A piece of paper **blown by the breeze** rustled.
She **froze for a few seconds**. (27)

The above excerpt is an example of alliteration; the same consonant appears at the beginning of each stressed syllable in a line. In the first sentence the consonant used is /b/ and /f/ in the second sentence. Below are some other examples of repetition:

' Don-don-don't just get me angry. Go out to the Awusa soldiers and ask them for-for-for your daughter.'
'So they have her?'
'Are you asking me? Nwamaka, are you asking me?'
'I don't know. I don't know!'
'You don't know? Then why are you back here.'
(36)

The use of repetitive patterns in the second excerpt is different from the first excerpt given above. In the second excerpt, the writer repeats words in the same sentence and in other cases clauses are repeated. The writer expresses common things in an unusual

or eccentric way in order to enhance perception and increase insight of the familiar or the common. By so doing, the linguistic strategies applied by the writer draw the attention of the reader so that the reader is able to connect on a deeper level with the words that she/he reads.

Striking Paragraphs and Unusual Textual Layouts

The first paragraphs in a few of the chapters consist of just a single line. These single line paragraphs are packed full with suspense and they sort of introduce a new dimension to the story and this builds on the readers' curiosity about the unfolding events. The types of paragraphs discussed here are found in chapter one, five, six, and thirty-three; below are the examples:

Ifunanya did not come back. (9)
The truck rattled to a stop a few minutes after 2 pm. (37)
Ifunanya grabbed her knapsack and jumped to a standing position. (47)
Nnanna clambered into the truck. (205)

A chapter which is a main division of a book usually begins on a fresh page typically with a number or title. The writer has two chapters that do not begin on a new page; instead they share a page with the preceding chapter. Chapter four is written under the shadow of chapter three while chapter five is written under the shadow of chapter four. Why this is the case for these two chapters is not exactly clear as all the other chapters begin on a fresh page. However, this deviation from the norm definitely catches the readers' attention.

Furthermore, there are a few sentences in the novel that have either a noun or a pronoun written in italics. These highlighted nouns and pronouns that have been foregrounded clearly stand out from the other background words. These nouns and pronouns are given a certain level of prominence and because the reader's attention automatically shifts to the foregrounded words the message the writer conveys is intentional and he makes a deliberate effort to communicate it so that the reader does not miss it. By writing these words in italics, the writer emphasises the importance of the words in producing the meaning of the sentences. Here are some excerpts from the novel:

'But better people than *you* have done this job! (20)
 'As you know, it is not every man that is a *man*, actually.' (20)
 'So you still drink this *our* dirty thing, even as a Doctor?' (22)
 'The *town* would have destroyed your family before you come back.' (23)

Conclusion

Across the Gulf is a well told story of the Nigerian Civil war and the after effect of the war as regards the decisions taken during the war by some of the characters. What makes the story even more beautiful and interesting is the way the writer was able to foreground some linguistic features in the novel. Graphological foregrounding is the major form of foregrounding in *Across the Gulf* as the writer italicises nouns, pronouns, direct thoughts, Nigerian English lexis and indigenous terms that he wants to direct the reader's attention to in order to heighten the readers' curiosity or to give the reader new clarity or motivation. The above instances of graphological foregrounding discussed consist of a deviation from the norm. Other forms of deviation in the novel are odd capitalisation, neologism and unusual textual layout. Repetition is another form of foregrounding used by the writer in telling the story.

The story of the Nigerian civil war is a familiar one but the writer was able to write the story using unfamiliar or strange linguistic strategies in order to make it fresh. The writer was able to creatively tell the story through the use of foregrounding which greatly contributed to making the story an intriguing and a memorable piece.

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