Graphological Structures of Iconicity in Niyi Osundare's *Random Blues* and *Waiting Laughters*

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Abstract

This paper examines the deployment of graphological structures of iconicity in Niyi Osundare's *Random Blues* (2011) and *Waiting Laughters* (1990). Adopting M.A.K. Halliday's conceptualization of style as prominence, it studies graphological structures and other meaning-enhancement elements like syntax and lexico-semantics in both texts. The study finds that Osundare has brought to bear the complementarity between language resources and literary devices in creating sensory impression through mimetic representativeness which the linguistic forms embody. It also argues that foregrounded regularity of graphological forms in the fashion of lineation and stanzaic arrangements, lexical truncation/fragmentation, lexical cramping, quotation marks and lexico-graphics are iconically exploited for their symbolic and evocative potentials. The foregrounding of these forms reinforces the meaning expressed in the poet's communication of the major themes of leadership ineptitude, bureaucratic bottlenecks, corruption and its effects in Nigeria.

Keywords: iconicity, graphology, foregrounding, prominence, visual poetry.

Introduction

This paper offers a linguistic examination of how iconic meaning is visually represented in Niyi Osundare's *Random Blues* (RB) and *Waiting Laughters* (WL). It focuses on the poet's use of graphological structures—such as stanzaic form, spacing, and word arrangement—as symbolic tools to reinforce meaning. These visual strategies work alongside morphological, lexical, syntactic, and contextual elements to enrich the texts' messages. Central to the analysis is the concept of foregrounded regularity—deliberate and patterned graphological choices that carry

evocative and symbolic weight. The texts are chosen specifically for their richness in iconic language, particularly in how they interrogate themes of leadership failure and political dysfunction in Nigeria.

Waiting Laughters features reflective, song-like poems where Osundare channels his concerns through multiple voices and layered tonalities. *Random Blues*, meanwhile, has drawn significant scholarly attention, and prior analyses provide valuable context for this study. Asomwan Adagbonyin, for instance, focuses on Osundare's use of verbal and nominal groups, along with repetition of lexical items in *Waiting Laughters* observing how these parallelistic features reflect the poet's broader vision (45). Jimoh Rafiu and Ibitayo Odetade, in their study of *Random Blues*, note that the poet achieves foregrounding through rhythmic repetition of linguistic elements (45). Felix Ogoanah and Ray Chikogu, analyzing both *WL* and other works, examine Osundare's artistic motivations and his full engagement with the linguistic system through verbal ingenuity (69). Osoba Gabriel, drawing from Osundare's *Sunday Tribune* columns, emphasizes how the poet mobilizes language to advocate for the politically silenced and disenfranchised (412).

Given the considerable interest in Osundare's work and the ongoing need to explore new dimensions of his poetic technique, this study offers a focused reading of graphology in *RB* and *WL*, grounded in Leech and Short's principle of iconicity.

Theoretical Background

This study is anchored on M.A.K. Halliday's conception of style as *prominence*, a theoretical framework that underpins its approach to textual analysis. Halliday's notion of prominence expands on the concept of *foregrounding*, originally advanced by Jan Mukarovsky and the Prague School. While Aristotle did not use the term "foregrounding," he laid its philosophical groundwork by asserting that literary language ought to distinguish itself through metaphors, unusual diction, and creative deviation. This early idea of stylistic distinction evolved through the works of Czech structuralists and Russian formalists, who brought sharper focus to the idea of foregrounding in literary expression. Among them, Viktor Shlovsky famously argued that the essence of art lies in presenting the familiar in unfamiliar, complex ways, thereby renewing the audience's perception. Similarly, E. Traugott and M. Pratt underscore foregrounding's intimate connection with novelty, reinforcing its place at the heart of stylistic creativity (32).

David Crystal defines foregrounding as:

An analogy of a figure against a background [which] is frequently used in stylistics, particularly in poetics, and occasionally in pragmatics and discourse analysis to describe relative prominence (emphasis intended) in language, which frequently involves deviation from a linguistic norm. It is suggested that the noticeable or aberrant feature was foregrounded. (194)

Foregrounding, according to Geoffrey Leech, is a departure from linguistics or other socially acceptable conventions. He uses the image of a figure against a background as an analogy (57). According to Leech, what makes a piece of art interesting and stylistic is that it deviates from mass-produced regularities of pattern (86).

The most prominent definition of foregrounding is that of M.A.K Halliday, as he sees it as "prominence that is motivated." He goes on to describe it as "regularities in the sounds, words, or structures that stand out in some way, or may be brought out by careful reading" (112). There are two types of foregrounding: quantitative and qualitative. There is a departure from the language itself in qualitative foregrounding. There is a departure from a certain expected frequency in quantitative foregrounding (39). Halliday further states:

> I believe that prominence is the driving force behind foregrounding. It's easy to spot prominent patterns in a poem or prose piece, regularities in the sounds, phrases, or structures that stand out in some way, or that are highlighted by close reading. One is often led toward new ideas by discovering that such prominence adds to the writer's overall meaning. A prominent element will only be highlighted if it contributes to the overall meaning of the text. (339)

Halliday's adoption of the term *prominence* marks a deliberate move away from the Prague School's earlier assumption that stylistic features always operate as deviations from linguistic norms. He critiques the term *foregrounding* for being overly focused on deviation and instead proposes *prominence* as a more inclusive concept—one that accommodates both deviant and conventional linguistic elements, provided they serve a communicative function within a text. He identifies two types of prominence: the first is *negative*, which corresponds to a departure from the norm, and the second is *positive*. This reflects the establishment or reinforcement of a norm. Together, these perspectives allow the stylistician to attend to all artistic language choices, whether they subvert expectations or reinforce them. In this light, even so-called "routine licences," which may appear conventional, become stylistically significant when set against the backdrop of everyday language (Leech and Short 57).

Further elaborating on this, Halliday asserts that stylistic prominence may arise from any linguistic feature designed to shape textual meaning, from nuanced measurements of subject reactions to carefully placed parenthetical elements.

Osundare's poetic technique exemplifies this principle. His stylistic choices are not random but deliberate expressions of his poetic vision. In *Random Blues* and *Waiting Laughters*, his use of graphology—spacing, layout, and visual form—functions as a style marker, enabling language to visually enact the meanings it conveys.

Definition of Terms

Iconicity in this study refers to the mimetic potential of linguistic forms. According to Roman Jakobson, the term stems from *icon*, understood as "an image which more or less reflects a situation, concept or object in the real world" (qtd. in Fischer 63). As Leech and Short explain,

literary language serves both presentational and representational functions. In the latter sense, it imitates the meaning it seeks to express. A code becomes iconic when its textual structure mirrors its semantic content. Examples include the sequence of words, their markedness, the centrality or marginality of content words, spatial relationships, repetition, parallel structures, analogy, and various forms of metaphor (Leech and Short 187–189).

Prominence, a term adopted by M.A.K. Halliday, is used in place of *foregrounding* to avoid the Prague School's narrow view that stylistic significance is always tied to deviation from a norm. Halliday finds *foregrounding* misleading because it overlooks the communicative value of conventional forms. His concept of prominence accommodates both deviant and non-deviant features that meaningfully contribute to a text.

Graphology is defined as "the patterned system of the graphic substance and their study" (Spenser and Gregory 70). In this study—especially with reference to *Waiting Laughters*—graphology includes the poet's visual strategies such as stanza arrangement, lineation, punctuation, lexical cramping, truncation, fragmentation, and concrete or visual poetry. These features are used deliberately to encode and enhance meaning through visual form.

Data Presentation and Analysis

In *Random Blues* and *Waiting Laughters*, various graphological patterns are used for their iconic and communicative values.

Text A

i.Who will save us

From the madness of our rulers

I ask, who will save us

From the madness of our rulers

They trample our dreams without a mind

Coffin-makers and dead-end dealers

<div align="center">(RB 35)</div>

    ii.   Show me your pain

Show it raw

I say, show me your pain

Show it raw

Let no fire near your tender whimper

Allow your lion its full-throated roar

<div align="center">(RB 33)</div>

  iii.   Let me fly

Like your favourite bird

I say, let me fly

Like your favourite bird

Over vast distances beyond the haze

With soaring syllables and the feathered word

<div align="center">(RB 11)</div>

  iv.   Trendy jeeps for mistresses

Countless scoops for sundry bribes

Say, trendy jeeps for mistresses

Countless scoops for sundry bribes

The Accountant-General lost count

Of doles and doles to teeming tribes

<div align="center">(RB 37)</div>

In the text, each of the poems (except "Random Blues 10", 27-28) is made up of seven (7) stanzas. As texts A(i)-(iv) show, each stanza consists of six lines and is anchored on linear-lexical replication. The rhyme-pattern of each stanza (ABABCB) demonstrates the linear replication and lexical iteration found in lines 1 and 2, 3 and 4, respectively. Osundare observes that the stanza form with its six lines is typical of the traditional blues genre written by Afro-American poets like Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown, etc. (*RB* 6-10). As typical of the canonical blues poems and in the excerpts above, the two rhyming lines forming ABAB present a situation that is

developed or resolved in the fifth and sixth lines. Understandably, the poet keeps the first lines short to show the "incidental" nature of the blues.

In *WL*, the irregular nature of the lines and stanzaic patterns reveal the various techniques deployed by the poet: pattern stanzas, visual and auditory images all culminating into graphic poetic forms for the conveying of his poetic intent. In fact, the collection can be categorized as an example of visual poetry. Eduardo Mitre explains:

> The visual poet investigates every possible way that language can be viewed as a material substance, including the connotative use of graphic signs, their spatial distribution, word fragmentation, the introduction of non-linguistic elements like drawings, and the imprinting of specific objects to create combinatorial art. The poet becomes a calligrapher, an artist, or, to put it succinctly, a builder. (qtd. in Bohn 14)

Many of the poems in Osundare's *WL* possess a great number of the qualities highlighted above. In these poems, the poet, here described as a builder, makes deliberate efforts to build the message into the structure of the poems. To help comprehend the information, he uses visual scenes, broken words and structures, and graphic indicators as verbal and visual signals. These are shown in a review of the text's subsequent examples.

TEXT B

Waiting

for the nail which springs an ivory wonder

in the aprons of the finger

Waiting

for the tome which splits its spine

in the spotted arena of reading eyes

Waiting

for the deer which loves its hide

and hunters cuddle their flaying guns

Waiting

for the razor's stubbled glide

across the firmament of the beard

Waiting

for fists which find their aim

and idioms which split their atoms

in 'ploding shadows.

<div align="center">(WL10)</div>

The sequence of stanzas presented above typifies the pattern adopted in some other stanzas in the text. The poet emphasizes the one-word lines realized by "Waiting" both spatially and indentationally in the first six stanzas. This action elevates the word to a unique status. Additionally, the lines in these stanzas are enjambed to demonstrate how the mind moves from "waiting" to the things or occurrences that people are anticipating.

      Given that the verses depict a variety of "waiting" scenarios, the one-word lines "Waiting" and the preposition "for," which introduces the second lines, indicate a straightforward stanzaic parallelism structure. The last line of the sequence, spatially highlighted so as to be regarded as a separate stanza, sums up the essence of waiting in the series. Here, everything comes to a climax. As can be observed from the text, "'ploding" is an incomplete word or a contracted form whose first syllable has been removed to enhance its 'oral-aural' bang. In this way, the onomatopoeic effect of an explosion or violent eruption suggested by the word is made to capture the overriding theme of violent change depicted in the entire volume.

      Other relevant examples in the text where lines and stanzas are manipulated for stylistic, iconic and communicative effects are presented below:

i.Time

Ambles

    in

           diverse

    paces

      with

    diverse

        persons   (29-30)

ii.

The
Criss and cross
rails

    in a crisis of sleep-
            ing
                steel (32)

iii.   The axe-man

                came

                saw

                and nearly

                    conquered . . . (34)

In Text B(i), Osundare's use of indentation and spatial arrangement captures more than just the visual shape of the stanza—it mirrors the emotional weight of time dragging. Positioned at the end of a poem filled with striking comparisons, like a prisoner awaiting execution or a husband pacing the halls of a labour ward, the stanza evokes the anxiety and tension that accompany delayed hopes of the downtrodden. The use of single-word lines, spaced apart, forces the reader to slow down, almost as though the poem itself is making us wait. This deliberate pacing transforms space into a graphological device that echoes the poem's core theme.

Text B(ii) takes this visual experimentation even further and offers one of the clearest examples of visual poetry in *Waiting Laughters*. The poem's layout mimics the very thing it describes: a railway system in decay. The "criss-cross" arrangement on the page resembles rail lines, while the fragmented form of the word "sleeping"—broken mid-morpheme—visually enacts the disjointed, failing state of Nigeria's transport infrastructure. By isolating it on the page, Osundare reinforces the sense of weight, repetition, and stasis that defines both the railway's physical condition and the broader socio-political paralysis it symbolises.

In Text B(iii), the poet turns again to spacing and indentation—not only as visual tools, but as subtle forms of punctuation. The stanza's structure departs from earlier patterns, drawing the eye toward its final line. The word "conquered," heavily indented, stands alone with emphatic

force pointing to the quest of the socially marginalized people; the hope of changing or bettering their lot in the end. This technique of isolating and spotlighting a single word at a key moment becomes a recurring stylistic feature in the collection, allowing visual form to amplify poetic meaning and emotional impact.

2.2 Line Truncation/Lexical Fragmentation

By using line breaks and lexical fragmentations to emphasize his preference for visual poetry, Osundare broadens the variety of stanza forms in *WL*. The following passages demonstrate how the texts take advantage of these strategies.

Text C

i. Wait

ing . . .

 And the hours limp a –

 long,

with

band-

ages

of fractured moments (*WL* 29*)*

 ii. And minutes

drag their

feet so

in - finitely

in grey

boots of

leaden hours

each   wink

a   wail

each   wail

one   eon

in   the

sleepy   chronology

of   drastic

        etherings

time ambles in diverse paces . . . .   (*WL*36)

 iii.   For time it may take

Time it may take

The stammerer wil one day call his

Fa – fa – fa – ther – ther's   na – na – na – me!   (74)

In Text C(i), Osundare uses fragmented words and line breaks to visually enact the sluggishness and emotional strain of waiting. Words like "waiting," "along," and "bandages" are split across lines, creating a physical pause that mimics the slow passage of time. The disjointed form of the poem reflects the poet's central metaphor— "fractured moments"—suggesting that the experience of waiting is not only drawn out but broken and disoriented. By disrupting the integrity of words, Osundare gives visual form to the psychological toll of anticipation.

        Text C(ii) continues this technique, extending it to the image of time dragging even further. The word "infinitely" is deliberately fragmented into "in-" and "finitely," a choice that emphasises

the near-endless nature of the wait. Through these disruptions, Osundare re-creates the feeling of minutes crawling by, filled with weariness and dull repetition. Descriptive terms such as "drag," "leaden," "wail," and "sleepy" amplify this mood, painting a landscape of emotional and temporal exhaustion. The spatial fragmentation of the word "wink" and the phrase "each wail / one eon" draws a direct parallel between the content of the poem and its structure, reinforcing the oppressive weight of unfulfilled hope.

In Text C(iii), the poet applies lexical fragmentation to mirror the hesitant, broken speech of a stammerer. The phrase "father's name" is rendered as "fa–fa–fa–ther–ther's na–na–na–me," capturing both the sound and rhythm of stammering in written form. This speech pattern becomes a metaphor for the silenced and marginalized—the poor, the hungry, and the forgotten—whose lives are marked by delay, deprivation, and forced voicelessness. Their struggles, symbolised by "water-pots... in famished homesteads" and "rags... a commonwealth of lice" (p. 74), parallel the stammerer's faltering attempts at speech. Yet Osundare presents this stuttering not as mere weakness but as a precursor to eventual resistance. Just as the stammerer will one day articulate his father's name, so too will the oppressed find their voice. The poet's intentional misspelling of "will" as "wil" underscores this point, acting as a subtle yet powerful graphological sign of disruption and emerging rebellion.

A more radical instance of the use of line truncation and fragmentation of words is shown in another poem from the collection:

iv.   Long-

er

than

the

y

a

w

n

of

the

moon

in

a

sky

so

brown

with

heels

of

fleeting

fancies

a

diamond

tear

waits,

tremulous,

in

the

eye

of

the

cloud   . . . (*WL* 84)

The poem, the longest in the collection, beautifully showcases the poet's dedication to balancing form and meaning, with the two often working hand in hand. Its use of sound and visuals makes it a challenge to read aloud, as the lines are fragmented into individual letters, morphemes, and words. For example, the word "Yawn" stretches across four lines, while "longer" is broken into "long" and "-er." This fragmentation reduces the poem's flow, making it hard to read smoothly, as each line stands almost independently.

The poem feels much longer than it would if presented as complete sentences. However, this deliberate stretching serves a purpose: it mirrors the long, agonizing wait before the harvest. The extension of "yawn" across four lines symbolizes the boredom and despair during this wait. But even as hope seems distant, it doesn't fade entirely. The expected rain, described as "a diamond

tear in the cloud / dropping / dropping / dropping," promises renewal. The rain will revive the dry plants, and soon, the drums will sound in celebration of the "rain-bow/harvest."

Through these visual and phonetic techniques, Osundare conveys a message of hope. Even through long periods of hardship and despair, change will come, and with it, celebration and joy.

2.3   Lexical Cramping

Aside from the use of truncation and fragmentation of words to break up thoughts and ideas and illustrate the process of waiting, Osundare also jams together words which, conventionally, ought to be spaced. This graphological craft is exemplified in *WL* in the following excerpts:

Text D

i. The innocence of the Niger

waiting, waiting

fourhundredseasons

for the proof of the prowl.

waiting

 for the irreverent probing of pale paddles

waiting

for the dispossessing twang of alien accents

waiting

for scrolls of serfdom, hieroglyphs of calculated

treacheries

<div align="center">(WL37)</div>

ii.   Waiting

withoutafacewithoutanamewithoutafacewithouta-

waiting

for the Atlantic which drains the mountains with

practical venom

(*WL*37)

In text D(i), the poet critiques the neo-colonial mindset still prevalent among many Nigerians who, despite their struggles, continue to idolize the foreign "alien accents" of their colonizers. The poet mocks this mentality, pointing out that these individuals seem to be waiting passively for more oppression instead of rising up against it. The phrase "four hundred seasons" is tightly packed, symbolizing the long years of suffering the people have endured. Although four hundred seasons (years) is a significant span of time, the cramming of the words gives a sense of how quickly those years of hardship have passed. The poet also highlights the difficulty of expressing this suffering, evident in the jumbled words, which make it harder to vocalize the pain and frustration.

Text D(ii), a stanza from the same poem, shifts focus to the exploitative nature of imperial powers and their treatment of Africans. This message is conveyed through the crammed words in the second line of the stanza. The phrases "without a face, without a name" are squeezed together so tightly that the space between the words disappears. Strikingly, the word "name" vanishes entirely in the second phrase, as the line ends abruptly with a hyphen but doesn't continue with "name." The next line simply says "waiting."

The cramped words in this section suggest that the act of waiting has gradually erased the true African or Nigerian identity. The inability to read the line as a coherent structure reflects the challenge of defining or even recognizing the authentic African identity. The poet portrays the people as "without a face, without a name," highlighting the identity crisis that began with European colonization and still persists.

The poet asks rhetorically:

But for how long can the hen wait

Whose lay is forage for galloping wolves?   (*WL*38)

He wonders how long the people will wait for revolutionary figures like Bussa and even Nelson Mandela to rise up and champion the crusade for freedom and justice. In the end, the poet invites and mobilizes the people to rise up for collective action, to remember past massacres in Sharpville, Langa and Soweto, and let the memory spur them on to action instead of waiting. According to the poet, "Time ambles in diverse paces. . ." (p. 39). Time passes slowly and people are too indifferent to notice.

Punctuation

Other graphological features relevant on account of their communicative and evocative effects relate mostly to punctuation. These involve quotation marks and italics. The utilization of these features in the texts is stylistically relevant for their representational value, as the principle of iconicity denotes.

Quotation Marks

Quotation marks play significant roles in the appreciation of Osundare's poems. An aspect of punctuation, quotation marks are used to set off direct speech in his poetry, and the poet also uses

them, especially double quotation marks, to foreground, draw attention to, or mimic a speaker's idiosyncrasies. The following excerpts illustrate these functions in the texts.

Text E

i.And said the Bishop:

"Oh welcome the Lord's Anointed"

And said the Imam:

"All hail the favourite of the Almighty"

"Whoever opposes him

Is on a one-way ticket

To the hottest part of hell

Whoever queries his order

Will disappear behind the clouds"

<div align="center">(RB 29)</div>

ii.   The Boss tells his Vice

"You are a bloody thief"

Yes, Boss tells his Vice

"You are a bloody thief

With your itchy fingers and bottomless pocket

The petrol funds have come to terrible grief"

"You are the mega-thief!

Retorts the angry Vice

Say, "you are the mega thief"

Retorts the angry Vice

"Your endless raids have drained the funds

Spare the nation your ugly lies"

(*RB* 35)

iii.   Says the hyena to a clan of lambs;

"Today, I dissolve your flock

For making such loud noises

About my eating habits.

I will now set up a group

To select your spokesmen

Who will come freely to my den

With your woes and sundry views".

(*WL* 62)

iv.   And the snake says to the toad;

"I have not had a meal

For a good one week;

And my stomach yearns

For your juicy meat"

"Suppose I turn into a mountain?",

Asks the toad,

'I will level you in the valley

Of my belly"

(*WL* 63)

In text E(i), the poet critiques the way religious leaders, such as Bishops and Imams, hypocritically praise politicians for their own selfish gain. The use of quotation marks highlights their direct speech, emphasizing their insincere words of support for corrupt politicians. The Bishop, representing Christianity, and the Imam, representing Islam, both overlook their religious differences in order to flatter the "Gangsta Govnor," a term used to mock the politician. By marking these words with quotation marks, the poet mocks the sycophantic behavior of these religious figures, who use flattery and deceit to align themselves with corrupt politicians in hopes of sharing in the spoils.

In text G(ii), part of the poem "(Blues for Boss & Vice, Part 3)," the quotation marks are used to create a tense dialogue between the "Boss" and the "Vice," two figures embroiled in accusations and corruption. The poet adopts the role of a reporter, using the third-person present tense to bring their exchanges closer to the reader. The direct speech between them reveals the extent of their greed, with each accusing the other of stealing and misappropriating funds. Through this dramatic exchange, Osundare critiques the infighting among corrupt leaders, exposing the hollow nature of their power struggles.

In texts E(iii) and E(iv), Osundare continues to use quotation marks to capture direct speech, but this time in a more theatrical setting where animals such as the toad, snake, and hyena are personified. These animals engage in dialogues that reflect their natural instincts and tendencies. The snake desires the "juicy meat" of the toad, while the hyena uses intimidation to manipulate others. Through these stories, Osundare critiques oppressors and bullies who exploit the weak for their own gain. The use of direct speech in these passages adds immediacy and brings the scenes to life, reinforcing the conversational style of his poetry and the sharp societal commentary woven throughout.

Conclusion

This research has examined relevant visual devices, under the umbrella of graphology, as they have been able to contribute their quota to the communicative import of the texts. In this regard, the varying patterns of lineation and stanzaic arrangements, matched with other features of the stanza such as line breaks, lexical truncation, fragmentation and cramping; and an aspect of punctuation which is quotation marks, have been examined. Their presence in the various instances suggests more of a deliberate attempt by the poet to give substance to the message being encoded.

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