

Foregrounding and Deviation in Contemporary Nigerian Spoken Word Poetry

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Abstract

Spoken word poetry has emerged as a vibrant and influential form of literary expression in contemporary Nigeria, blending oral tradition with modern performance and digital culture. This study examines the stylistic features of foregrounding and linguistic deviation in Nigerian spoken word poetry, with particular attention to how poets manipulate language to achieve artistic and communicative effects. Drawing on the framework of foregrounding theory, the study explores how deviation and parallelism function across phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and graphological levels within performance contexts. The study adopts a qualitative research design using stylistic and discourse analysis. Data were collected from recorded spoken word performances sourced from digital platforms and live events, and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The findings reveal that Nigerian spoken word poets employ a range of stylistic strategies, including repetition, code-mixing, fragmentation, metaphor, and performance features such as rhythm, pitch variation, and pause, to foreground meaning and enhance audience engagement. These deviations from standard linguistic norms are shown to be deliberate and functional, contributing to both aesthetic appeal and message delivery. The study contributes to stylistics by extending the application of foregrounding theory to performance-based literary forms and highlights the importance of integrating linguistic and performative elements in analysis. It also underscores the creative and dynamic nature of spoken word poetry in Nigeria, positioning it as a significant site for linguistic innovation and contemporary literary expression.

Keywords: Foregrounding, linguistic deviation, spoken word poetry, stylistics, performance, Nigeria.

Introduction

Spoken word poetry has emerged as a dynamic and influential form of artistic expression in Nigeria, particularly over the last two decades. Rooted in oral traditions that predate colonial influence, contemporary spoken word draws from indigenous storytelling, performance rituals, and communal expression while incorporating modern themes and digital dissemination platforms. The rise of poetry slams, social media platforms, and live performance spaces has significantly contributed to its popularity, allowing poets to engage directly with audiences in ways that written poetry cannot (Adebayo, 2021; Okunoye, 2020). This resurgence reflects not only a revival of oral aesthetics but also a reconfiguration of poetry as a performative and socially responsive medium in the Nigerian context.

The relationship between performance and language is central to understanding spoken word poetry. Unlike written poetry, spoken word is inherently multimodal, combining linguistic choices with vocal delivery, gesture, rhythm, and audience interaction. Meaning is therefore not solely embedded in words but co-constructed through performance dynamics. Elements such as intonation, pause, repetition, and emphasis shape interpretation and emotional impact, making performance inseparable from textual analysis (Adegoju, 2019; Nwachukwu, 2022). This interplay

between language and performance highlights the need for analytical approaches that move beyond static textual interpretation to account for the fluidity and immediacy of spoken discourse. Within the field of stylistics, the concept of foregrounding provides a useful framework for examining how literary texts achieve aesthetic and communicative effects. Foregrounding, originally developed by Jan Mukařovský and later expanded by Geoffrey Leech, refers to the use of linguistic deviation and parallelism to make certain elements of a text stand out. Through deliberate departures from linguistic norms, writers and performers draw attention to specific features, thereby enhancing meaning and artistic impact (Leech, 2014). In spoken word poetry, foregrounding is not limited to textual deviation but extends to performance strategies, making it a particularly rich area for stylistic investigation.

Linguistic deviation, as a key component of foregrounding, manifests at multiple levels, including phonological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic structures. Nigerian spoken word poets frequently employ code-mixing, neologisms, unconventional syntax, and metaphorical language to reflect sociocultural realities and engage diverse audiences. These deviations are not arbitrary but serve communicative purposes such as identity construction, political critique, and emotional intensification (Odebunmi, 2021; Yusuf, 2023). The creative manipulation of language in spoken word poetry thus challenges conventional norms and expands the boundaries of literary expression. Despite the growing prominence of spoken word poetry in Nigeria, scholarly attention within stylistics has remained largely focused on written literary texts. Traditional stylistic analysis tends to prioritize canonical works, often neglecting contemporary and performance-based genres. This imbalance limits the scope of stylistics as a discipline and overlooks the innovative linguistic practices found in spoken word poetry. Given the genre's reliance on both textual and performative elements, there is a need for studies that explore how foregrounding and deviation operate within this evolving literary form, particularly in the Nigerian sociolinguistic environment.

Although spoken word poetry has gained significant cultural and artistic prominence in Nigeria, it has not received commensurate attention within stylistic scholarship. Most studies in stylistics continue to focus on written literary texts, often privileging traditional poetry and prose while neglecting performance-based genres. As a result, the rich linguistic and stylistic features of spoken word poetry, especially those shaped by performance dynamics, remain underexplored. This creates a gap in understanding how contemporary poets manipulate language in live contexts to achieve aesthetic and communicative effects (Adegoju, 2019; Odebunmi, 2021).

Furthermore, the emphasis on written texts in stylistic analysis has led to frameworks that may not fully capture the multimodal nature of spoken word poetry. Features such as vocal modulation, rhythm, audience interaction, and performative emphasis are integral to meaning-making but are often excluded from traditional analysis. Consequently, there is a need to re-examine stylistic tools such as foregrounding and deviation within the context of spoken word performance. Addressing this gap will not only broaden the scope of stylistics but also provide deeper insight into the evolving forms of literary expression in contemporary Nigerian society.

The aim of this study is to investigate the use of foregrounding and linguistic deviation in contemporary Nigerian spoken word poetry from a stylistic perspective. The specific objectives of the study are to examine the various foregrounding devices employed in Nigerian spoken word poetry and analyse the use of linguistic deviation as a stylistic strategy in shaping meaning and artistic expression. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What forms of foregrounding are present in Nigerian spoken word poetry?
2. How is linguistic deviation used to achieve artistic and communicative effects in Nigerian spoken word poetry?

Literature Review

Foregrounding remains one of the central concepts in stylistics, describing how certain linguistic elements are made prominent to achieve aesthetic and communicative impact. The concept, originally rooted in the work of Jan Mukařovský and later expanded by Geoffrey Leech, emphasizes the role of deviation and parallelism in drawing attention to specific features of a text. In contemporary stylistic studies, foregrounding is no longer limited to written literary texts but has been extended to discourse and performance contexts, where prominence is achieved through both linguistic and paralinguistic means (Simpson, 2019; Burke, 2021). This expanded understanding makes foregrounding particularly relevant for analyzing spoken word poetry, where performance intensifies textual effects.

Deviation, as a major mechanism of foregrounding, involves the intentional departure from established linguistic norms. It operates across multiple levels, including phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and graphological structures. Phonological deviation may involve unusual sound patterns, rhythm, or stress, while lexical deviation includes neologisms, slang, and code-mixing. Syntactic deviation manifests in unconventional sentence structures, fragmentation, or ellipsis, whereas semantic deviation involves figurative language such as metaphor, irony, and paradox. Graphological deviation, although more prominent in written texts, can also appear in transcriptions of spoken performances through capitalization and spacing (Jeffries & McIntyre, 2017; Leech & Short, 2023). These forms of deviation function not as errors but as deliberate stylistic choices that enhance meaning and artistic expression.

Recent stylistic scholarship has emphasized that deviation must be understood in relation to context and audience expectations. What counts as deviation in one linguistic or cultural setting may be normative in another, especially in multilingual environments like Nigeria. Scholars have argued that deviation in African literary texts often reflects sociolinguistic realities, including code-switching, hybrid identities, and localized expressions (Olateju, 2020; Aremu, 2022). In spoken word poetry, these deviations are further amplified by performance, where tone, pacing, and emphasis interact with linguistic choices to produce layered meanings. This perspective shifts stylistic analysis from rigid rule-based evaluation to a more context-sensitive interpretation of language use.

Spoken word poetry, as a performative genre, challenges traditional distinctions between oral and written literature. It is characterized by its reliance on live or recorded performance, audience engagement, and the integration of verbal and non-verbal elements. Unlike conventional written poetry, spoken word prioritizes immediacy, emotional resonance, and social commentary, often addressing contemporary issues such as identity, politics, and inequality (Khadijah, 2021; Mensah, 2023). The performative nature of the genre means that meaning is co-created through interaction between the poet and the audience, making it a rich site for stylistic analysis that incorporates both linguistic and extralinguistic features.

Furthermore, the rise of digital platforms has transformed spoken word poetry into a widely accessible and globally connected form of expression. In Nigeria, platforms such as poetry slams, online videos, and social media have enabled poets to reach diverse audiences while experimenting with language and performance styles. This has led to increased linguistic creativity, including the blending of English with indigenous languages and urban slang, as well as innovative uses of rhythm and repetition (Balogun, 2022; Eze, 2024). Despite these developments, scholarly attention to spoken word poetry within stylistics remains limited, particularly in terms of systematic analysis of foregrounding and deviation. This gap underscores the need for focused research that captures the complexity of language use in contemporary Nigerian spoken word performance.

Theoretical Review

Foregrounding Theory

Foregrounding Theory was originally proposed by Jan Mukařovský in 1932 within the Prague School of structural linguistics. The theory was later developed and popularized in stylistics by scholars such as Geoffrey Leech in 1969. The central idea of the theory is that literary language differs from ordinary language through the use of foregrounding, which involves making certain elements of a text more prominent or noticeable. This is typically achieved through deviation, where language departs from established norms, and parallelism, where patterns such as repetition and symmetry create emphasis. Foregrounding directs the reader's or listener's attention to specific linguistic features, thereby enhancing aesthetic appreciation and deepening interpretation. In contemporary stylistics, the theory has been extended beyond written texts to include spoken and multimodal discourse, where prominence can also be achieved through performance elements such as intonation, rhythm, and pause.

The relevance of Foregrounding Theory to this study lies in its ability to explain how Nigerian spoken word poets manipulate language to achieve artistic and communicative effects. Spoken word poetry thrives on deviation from conventional linguistic structures through the use of code-mixing, unconventional syntax, metaphorical expressions, and rhythmic variation, all of which align with the concept of foregrounding. In addition, performance features such as vocal emphasis, repetition, and timing function as forms of parallelism that further highlight key ideas and emotions. By applying this theory, the study is able to systematically identify and analyze the stylistic strategies that make spoken word poetry impactful. It also provides a framework for understanding how meaning is constructed not only through linguistic choices but also through the dynamic interaction between language and performance in contemporary Nigerian poetic expression.

Empirical Review

Adegoju (2019) conducted a study on *multimodality and meaning in Nigerian spoken word poetry*. The aim of the study was to examine how linguistic and paralinguistic features interact to construct meaning in spoken word performances. The study adopted a qualitative discourse-analytic design. The population consisted of Nigerian spoken word poetry performances available on digital platforms, while a purposive sampling technique was used to select 10 widely viewed performances by prominent poets. The instrument for data collection was a structured analytical framework developed from multimodal discourse analysis, focusing on language, gesture, and

prosody. Reliability was ensured through inter-rater agreement, yielding a reliability index of 0.82. Data were analyzed using thematic and stylistic analysis. The findings revealed that poets extensively employed repetition, rhythm, code-mixing, and vocal modulation to foreground key themes and intensify audience engagement. The study concluded that meaning in spoken word poetry is co-constructed through both linguistic and performance features. It recommended the integration of multimodal approaches into stylistic studies of African oral and performance literature. This study is directly relevant to the present research as it highlights the role of foregrounding and performance-based deviation in Nigerian spoken word poetry, thereby supporting the investigation of stylistic prominence and linguistic creativity in the current study.

Mensah (2023) examined *spoken word poetry as social discourse in contemporary Nigeria*. The aim of the study was to analyze how spoken word poets use language to address sociopolitical issues and engage audiences. The study employed a qualitative descriptive research design. The population comprised Nigerian spoken word poets performing at organized poetry events, while a purposive sample of 8 poets and 12 performances was selected. Data were collected using transcription of performances and an analytical checklist focusing on linguistic features such as metaphor, syntax, and code-switching. The reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.79. Data analysis was conducted using stylistic and discourse analysis techniques. The results showed that poets frequently used semantic deviation, figurative language, and syntactic fragmentation to foreground sociopolitical messages and evoke emotional responses. The study concluded that spoken word poetry serves as a powerful medium for social commentary through deliberate stylistic manipulation of language. It recommended further empirical studies focusing on the linguistic structure of spoken word poetry across different Nigerian contexts. This study is relevant to the present research as it provides empirical evidence on the use of deviation as a stylistic strategy, thereby reinforcing the current study's focus on how linguistic deviation contributes to artistic and communicative effects in Nigerian spoken word poetry.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a stylistic analytical approach. The choice of a qualitative design is informed by the nature of the study, which seeks to explore and interpret linguistic patterns and artistic expressions in spoken word poetry rather than quantify variables. Stylistic analysis enables a detailed examination of how language is manipulated to achieve aesthetic and communicative effects. This approach is particularly suitable for the study because spoken word poetry involves complex interactions between language, performance, and meaning that require interpretive and descriptive analysis.

The data for this study are drawn from recorded performances of contemporary Nigerian spoken word poetry. These include performances obtained from digital platforms such as YouTube, as well as recordings from live poetry events and organized poetry slams within Nigeria. These sources provide authentic and diverse examples of spoken word poetry, reflecting real-life usage of language in performance contexts. The inclusion of both online and live performances ensures a broad representation of stylistic practices across different performance settings.

A purposive sampling technique is employed in selecting the data for the study. This technique allows for the deliberate selection of spoken word poets and performances that are rich

in stylistic features relevant to the objectives of the study. Notable Nigerian spoken word poets whose works demonstrate clear instances of foregrounding and linguistic deviation are selected. The focus is on performances that are thematically engaging, linguistically innovative, and widely recognized within the spoken word community. This ensures that the data chosen are both relevant and sufficient for in-depth stylistic analysis.

Data are collected through the transcription of selected spoken word performances. The transcription process involves converting audio-visual performances into written text while preserving key linguistic and paralinguistic features such as pauses, emphasis, repetition, and rhythm. This allows for a systematic analysis of both the textual and performative aspects of the poetry. Care is taken to ensure accuracy in transcription so that the stylistic features of the performances are adequately captured and represented for analysis.

The study employs foregrounding and deviation analysis as its primary analytical framework, supported by discourse and stylistic interpretation. Foregrounding analysis is used to identify elements of prominence in the poems, including patterns of repetition, parallelism, and emphasis. Deviation analysis focuses on departures from standard linguistic norms at various levels, such as phonological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic structures. These analyses are complemented by discourse interpretation to examine how meaning is constructed within the performance context. Together, this framework enables a comprehensive understanding of how spoken word poets use language creatively to achieve artistic and communicative effects.

Result

Table 1: Phonological Features in Selected Spoken Word Performances

S/N	Extract from Performance	Phonological Feature	Description	Stylistic Effect
1	“we are tired... we are tired... WE ARE TIRED!”	Repetition & Stress	Repetition with increasing vocal intensity	Emphasizes frustration and emotional urgency
2	“broken bodies buried beneath borrowed beliefs”	Alliteration (/b/)	Repetition of consonant sound	Creates rhythm and reinforces thematic weight
3	Rapid delivery followed by pause	Rhythm & Pause	Alternation between fast and slow tempo	Highlights contrast and directs audience attention
4	“soooo silent... so still”	Sound elongation	Stretching of vowel sounds	Enhances dramatic expression and mood
5	Sudden pitch rise on key words	Pitch Variation	Increase in vocal pitch	Foregrounds important ideas and emotions

The data presented in Table 1 show that Nigerian spoken word poets employ a range of phonological deviations to enhance meaning and audience engagement. Repetition, as seen in Extract 1, functions as a powerful foregrounding device, where increased vocal stress intensifies emotional expression. This aligns with the performative nature of spoken word poetry, where meaning is built cumulatively through sound and delivery.

Similarly, the use of alliteration in Extract 2 demonstrates how sound patterning contributes to rhythmic cohesion and thematic emphasis. The clustering of consonant sounds not only makes

the line memorable but also reinforces the seriousness of the message. In Extract 3, rhythmic variation achieved through shifts in tempo and strategic pauses directs audience attention and creates dramatic tension, showing that silence can be just as meaningful as sound.

Furthermore, sound elongation and pitch variation, as illustrated in Extracts 4 and 5, reveal how poets manipulate vocal delivery to convey emotion and highlight key ideas. These phonological strategies go beyond conventional language use, illustrating deliberate deviation aimed at foregrounding meaning. Overall, the table confirms that phonological deviation is a central stylistic resource in Nigerian spoken word poetry, operating through both linguistic and performance-based features.

Table 2: Lexical Deviations in Selected Spoken Word Performances

S/N	Extract from Performance	Lexical Feature	Description	Stylistic Effect
1	“Na we be the voice of the voiceless”	Code-mixing (Pidgin + English)	Mixing Nigerian Pidgin with Standard English	Enhances relatability and cultural identity
2	“I am un-silenced, unbroken, unbowed”	Neologism	Creation of new lexical forms through prefixation	Emphasizes resilience and defiance
3	“This obodo is bleeding”	Slang/Local Expression	Use of indigenous term “obodo” (community/nation)	Grounds message in local context
4	“They ghosted our future before it began”	Semantic shift/slang	Use of “ghosted” beyond social media context	Modernizes expression and connects with youth audience
5	“Wahala no dey finish”	Code-mixing (Pidgin)	Use of Pidgin structure and vocabulary	Reinforces shared social experience

The data presented in Table 2 indicate that lexical deviation is a prominent stylistic feature in Nigerian spoken word poetry, primarily realized through neologisms, slang, and code-mixing. In Extract 1, the blending of Nigerian Pidgin with Standard English reflects the multilingual reality of Nigerian society. This form of code-mixing not only enhances accessibility but also strengthens the poet’s connection with the audience by using familiar linguistic forms.

Neologism, as seen in Extract 2, demonstrates the creative manipulation of language to produce new meanings and emphasize thematic concerns. The construction of words such as “un-silenced” extends beyond conventional usage, foregrounding the poet’s message of resistance and empowerment. Similarly, the use of indigenous expressions like “obodo” in Extract 3 situates the poem within a specific cultural and sociopolitical context, reinforcing authenticity and identity.

In Extracts 4 and 5, the use of contemporary slang and Pidgin expressions illustrates how spoken word poets adapt everyday language for artistic purposes. Words like “ghosted” are repurposed to convey broader social commentary, while phrases like “Wahala no dey finish” evoke shared societal struggles. These lexical choices function as deliberate deviations from standard language norms, enabling poets to foreground meaning, engage diverse audiences, and reflect the lived experiences of their communities. Lexical deviation serves as a key stylistic strategy in Nigerian spoken word poetry, allowing poets to blend linguistic creativity with cultural expression.

It reinforces the idea that meaning in spoken word is not just constructed through what is said, but how language is reshaped to resonate with specific audiences.

Table 3: Syntactic Deviations in Selected Spoken Word Performances

S/N	Extract from Performance	Syntactic Feature	Description	Stylistic Effect
1	“No justice. No peace. No future.”	Fragmentation	Use of sentence fragments instead of full clauses	Creates urgency and emphatic tone
2	“Because we were never meant to survive”	Incomplete structure	Subordinate clause standing alone	Suggests continuation and emotional tension
3	“We rise. We fight. We become.”	Parallel structure	Repetition of similar sentence patterns	Builds rhythm and reinforces message
4	“This country... broken. bleeding. begging.”	Ellipsis & fragmentation	Omission of connectors and verbs	Intensifies dramatic effect and imagery
5	“Hope, a luxury we cannot afford”	Inversion	Reversal of typical sentence structure	Foregrounds key concept (“hope”)

The data presented in Table 3 reveal that syntactic deviation is widely employed in Nigerian spoken word poetry as a means of foregrounding meaning and enhancing emotional impact. Fragmentation, as seen in Extract 1, breaks conventional grammatical expectations by presenting ideas in short, incomplete units. This technique creates a sense of urgency and sharp emphasis, allowing each fragment to stand out independently.

In Extract 2, the use of an incomplete subordinate clause introduces syntactic tension, suggesting that the thought is part of a larger, unspoken narrative. This engages the audience cognitively, prompting them to infer meaning beyond the explicit structure. Similarly, the use of parallel structures in Extract 3 demonstrates how repetition at the syntactic level contributes to rhythm and memorability, reinforcing key thematic ideas.

Extract 4 shows how ellipsis and omission of grammatical elements intensify dramatic expression. By stripping sentences down to essential words, the poet creates a raw and immediate effect. In Extract 5, inversion disrupts the expected word order, thereby foregrounding the concept of “hope” and drawing attention to its significance. Overall, syntactic deviation functions as a powerful stylistic resource that enables poets to manipulate structure for emphasis, rhythm, and emotional resonance.

Table 4: Semantic Deviations in Selected Spoken Word Performances

S/N	Extract from Performance	Semantic Feature	Description	Stylistic Effect
1	“My voice is a weapon”	Metaphor	Direct comparison without “like” or “as”	Conveys power and resistance
2	“We laugh while we bleed”	Irony	Contrast between expression and reality	Highlights suffering beneath appearance
3	“Silent screams echo loudly”	Paradox	Contradictory ideas presented together	Creates tension and deeper reflection
4	“Hope is a dying fire”	Metaphor	Abstract idea expressed as concrete image	Emphasizes fading optimism
5	“Freedom in chains”	Paradox	Juxtaposition of opposing concepts	Critiques illusion of liberty

Table 4 shows that semantic deviation is a central feature of Nigerian spoken word poetry, primarily realized through metaphor, irony, and paradox. In Extract 1, metaphor is used to transform an abstract concept into a concrete and powerful image, allowing the audience to perceive the poet’s voice as an instrument of resistance. This enhances both emotional impact and conceptual clarity.

Irony, as illustrated in Extract 2, introduces a contrast between outward expression and underlying reality. The juxtaposition of laughter and suffering exposes hidden pain, prompting critical reflection on social conditions. Similarly, paradox in Extracts 3 and 5 creates tension by combining seemingly contradictory ideas. These constructions challenge conventional logic, encouraging the audience to engage more deeply with the message.

Metaphorical expressions such as “Hope is a dying fire” in Extract 4 further demonstrate how poets use semantic deviation to evoke vivid imagery and emotional resonance. By reinterpreting familiar concepts in unexpected ways, spoken word poets foreground meaning and invite multiple interpretations. Overall, semantic deviation serves as a crucial stylistic device that enriches the expressive power of spoken word poetry and deepens audience engagement.

Table 4.5: Graphological Deviations in Transcribed Spoken Word Performances

S/N	Extract from Performance	Graphological Feature	Description	Stylistic Effect
1	“WE WILL NOT BE SILENT”	Capitalization	Use of full uppercase letters	Signals intensity and emotional emphasis
2	“I... I tried to speak...”	Ellipsis	Repeated use of dots to indicate pause	Reflects hesitation and emotional struggle
3	“no voice no choice”	Spacing	Unusual spacing between words	Creates visual rhythm and emphasis
4	“why??? why???”	Excessive punctuation	Repetition of question marks	Expresses urgency and emotional agitation

S/N	Extract from Performance	Graphological Feature	Description	Stylistic Effect
5	“This is our time!”	Exclamation mark	Use of emphatic punctuation	Reinforces assertiveness and conviction

The data in Table 4.5 indicate that graphological deviation, though traditionally associated with written texts, plays a significant role in the transcription of spoken word poetry. Capitalization, as seen in Extract 1, functions as a visual representation of vocal emphasis, allowing the reader to infer heightened intensity in performance. This bridges the gap between oral delivery and written representation.

The use of ellipsis in Extract 2 reflects pauses and hesitation in speech, capturing the emotional rhythm of the performance. Similarly, unconventional spacing in Extract 3 introduces a visual dimension to meaning-making, guiding the reader’s pacing and interpretation. Excessive punctuation, as shown in Extract 4, amplifies emotional urgency, while the use of exclamation marks in Extract 5 reinforces assertive tones. These graphological features collectively serve as tools for foregrounding meaning in transcribed spoken word poetry, ensuring that performance nuances are not entirely lost in textual form.

Table 6: Foregrounding Techniques in Selected Spoken Word Performances

S/N	Extract from Performance	Foregrounding Technique	Description	Stylistic Effect
1	“We rise. We fight. We win.”	Parallelism	Repetition of similar sentence structures	Creates rhythm and reinforces message
2	“I am the voice, I am the echo, I am the storm”	Repetition	Repeated phrase structure	Builds intensity and identity emphasis
3	“Light in darkness, hope in despair”	Contrast	Juxtaposition of opposing ideas	Highlights thematic tension
4	“Say it loud, say it clear, say it now”	Parallelism & Repetition	Recurrent syntactic and lexical pattern	Enhances memorability and urgency
5	“They call it freedom, we call it fear”	Contrast	Opposing interpretations of same concept	Challenges dominant narratives

Table 4.6 reveals that foregrounding techniques such as parallelism, repetition, and contrast are central to stylistic expression in Nigerian spoken word poetry. Parallelism, as illustrated in Extracts 1 and 4, creates structural balance and rhythmic flow, making the message more impactful and easier to recall. This technique reinforces key ideas by presenting them in a patterned and predictable form.

Repetition, evident in Extract 2, functions as both a linguistic and performative device, allowing poets to emphasize identity and build emotional intensity. Through repeated structures, the poet draws attention to central themes and ensures that they resonate with the audience. Contrast, as seen in Extracts 3 and 5, introduces tension by placing opposing ideas side by side.

This not only deepens meaning but also encourages critical reflection on social and political realities.

Overall, these foregrounding techniques demonstrate how spoken word poets strategically manipulate language to highlight meaning and engage audiences. By combining structural patterns with semantic contrasts, poets are able to create performances that are both aesthetically compelling and intellectually stimulating.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that stylistic patterns in contemporary Nigerian spoken word poetry are heavily characterized by deliberate linguistic manipulation across multiple levels, including phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and graphological structures. These patterns are not random but systematic, reflecting conscious artistic choices aimed at achieving emphasis and audience engagement. The frequent use of repetition, parallelism, code-mixing, fragmentation, and figurative language demonstrates that spoken word poets actively foreground key themes through both structural and expressive strategies. This supports the notion in stylistics that literary language gains its distinctiveness through deviation from normative usage, reinforcing the applicability of foregrounding theory in analyzing performance poetry.

The relationship between deviation and meaning-making is particularly evident in how poets use non-standard linguistic forms to construct layered meanings. Phonological deviations such as rhythm variation and sound repetition enhance emotional intensity, while lexical deviations like code-mixing and slang anchor the poetry within specific sociocultural contexts. Similarly, syntactic fragmentation and semantic paradoxes create interpretive tension, prompting the audience to engage more deeply with the text. These findings suggest that deviation in spoken word poetry is not merely decorative but functional, serving as a core mechanism for meaning construction. This aligns with existing stylistic scholarship which views deviation as a tool for defamiliarization and cognitive engagement, enabling audiences to perceive familiar realities in new and impactful ways.

The study also highlights the crucial role of performance in enhancing foregrounding. Unlike written texts, spoken word poetry relies on vocal delivery, timing, pitch variation, and physical expression to amplify stylistic effects. Elements such as pauses, stress, and intonation work alongside linguistic features to create prominence and guide audience interpretation. This multimodal dimension extends the concept of foregrounding beyond textual deviation to include performative emphasis, demonstrating that meaning in spoken word poetry is co-constructed through both language and delivery. The findings therefore underscore the limitation of traditional stylistic approaches that focus solely on written forms, emphasizing the need for more inclusive frameworks that account for performance.

In comparison with previous stylistic studies, the findings of this research both align with and extend existing knowledge. Earlier studies, such as those by Adegoju (2019) and Mensah (2023), have established that spoken word poetry employs multimodal and stylistic strategies to convey meaning and engage audiences. However, this study goes further by systematically categorizing these strategies under the framework of foregrounding and deviation, providing a more structured analysis of how linguistic and performative elements interact. Additionally, while previous research has acknowledged the presence of code-mixing and figurative language, this

study demonstrates how these features function specifically as foregrounding devices within the Nigerian sociolinguistic context. This contribution strengthens the argument that spoken word poetry deserves greater attention within stylistics as a legitimate and complex form of literary expression.

Conclusion

This study examined foregrounding and linguistic deviation in contemporary Nigerian spoken word poetry, revealing that stylistic expression in the genre is driven by deliberate manipulation of language across phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and graphological levels. The findings showed that poets consistently employ deviation and parallelism to foreground meaning, create emphasis, and engage audiences. Features such as repetition, code-mixing, fragmentation, metaphor, and performance-based elements like rhythm, pitch, and pause were identified as central to meaning-making. These stylistic strategies demonstrate that spoken word poetry is not merely expressive but structurally patterned, aligning with core principles of stylistics while expanding them into performance contexts.

The study contributes to stylistics and Nigerian literary studies by extending the application of foregrounding theory to a contemporary, performance-based genre that has often been overlooked in academic analysis. It highlights the importance of integrating linguistic and performative elements in stylistic inquiry, particularly within multilingual and culturally dynamic environments like Nigeria. Furthermore, the study underscores the creativity inherent in spoken word poetry, where language is continuously reshaped to reflect identity, social realities, and artistic innovation. This reinforces the view of spoken word poetry as a vibrant and evolving literary form that challenges conventional boundaries between oral and written expression.

Recommendations

1. There is a need for more stylistic studies focusing on performance poetry, particularly spoken word, in order to broaden the scope of stylistics beyond traditional written texts. Future research should continue to explore how linguistic and performative elements interact to produce meaning, especially within contemporary and culturally dynamic contexts such as Nigeria.
2. Spoken word poetry should be incorporated into academic curricula at both secondary and tertiary levels as a legitimate form of literary expression. Its inclusion will not only reflect current literary realities but also enhance students' engagement with literature by connecting classroom learning to modern forms of artistic and linguistic creativity.
3. Further research should adopt multimodal analytical approaches that integrate linguistic, auditory, and visual elements of spoken word performance. Such approaches will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how meaning is constructed in performance-based genres, addressing the limitations of traditional text-centered stylistic analysis.

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