

Lexicogrammatical Analysis of Niyi Osundare's "The Leader and the Led"

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Abstract— This study presents a comprehensive lexicogrammatical analysis of Niyi Osundare's poem "The Leader and the Led," utilizing Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as its theoretical framework. The analysis examines the poem's ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions to uncover how Osundare's linguistic choices construct a powerful critique of authoritarian leadership while proposing an alternative model based on service and collective responsibility. Adopting a qualitative descriptive design, the study systematically analyzes the poem's transitivity patterns, mood and modality structures, thematic progression, cohesive devices, and clause complex relations. The findings reveal that the poem's initial stanzas rely heavily on material processes to portray animal-leaders as agents of domination, while the closing stanzas shift to relational processes that redefine leadership as an identity of service. Interpersonally, the poem employs declarative mood and imperatives to establish a prophetic voice that engages the reader in moral deliberation. Textually, thematic consistency, lexical repetition, and parallelism create cohesion and reinforce the poem's central binary between false and true leadership. Logico-semantic relations of projection create ironic distance from the leaders' claims, while adversative enhancement marks the poem's ideological pivot. The study concludes that Osundare's lexicogrammatical artistry is not merely decorative but functions as the engine of his social critique, demonstrating how grammar itself can challenge power structures. The paper recommends the integration of SFL-based approaches into literary pedagogy and encourages further comparative analyses of African poetry.

Keywords: lexicogrammar; Systemic Functional Linguistics; transitivity; thematic structure; Niyi Osundare; African poetry.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary African poetry occupies a distinctive space at the intersection of artistic expression and political engagement. Poets across the continent have consistently harnessed the resources of language to interrogate governance, expose social injustice, and imagine alternative futures (Ezechi, 2021; Mensah, et al., 2026). Among these voices, Niyi Osundare stands as one of the most significant figures in Nigerian and African letters. His poetic project is characterized by a deliberate fusion of accessibility and depth, blending the oral traditions of his Yoruba heritage with a modernist sensibility and a sharp political consciousness (Nwahunanya, 2017). Osundare's poetry does not merely describe the world; it seeks to change it, using language as both a mirror and a hammer.

His poem "The Leader and the Led" is a quintessential example of this approach. Drawing on the familiar genre of the animal fable, Osundare constructs a series of vignettes in which various creatures, the hawk, the elephant, the lion, and the tortoise, each proclaim their fitness to rule based on their physical attributes or cunning. The poem culminates in a direct address to the reader, proposing a radically different model of leadership grounded in service, wisdom, and accountability. While the thematic contours of the poem have been widely discussed in literary criticism, the specific linguistic mechanisms through which Osundare achieves his effects remain underexplored. How does the grammar of the poem, its clause structures, its patterns of repetition, its deployment of mood and modality, contribute to its ideological force?

This study addresses this question through a lexicogrammatical analysis grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), as developed by Michael Halliday. SFL conceptualizes language as a social semiotic system, where vocabulary and grammar are integrated into a single "lexicogrammatical" stratum that serves to make meaning in context (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Nwogu, et al., 2024g). The theory identifies three overarching metafunctions of language: the ideational, which represents experience; the interpersonal, which enacts social relationships; and the textual, which organizes language into coherent discourse. By systematically examining Osundare's poem through these three lenses, this study aims to demonstrate that his political critique is not merely a matter of thematic content but is embedded in the very fabric of his linguistic choices.

The study is guided by three research questions: (1) What lexicogrammatical features characterize "The Leader and the Led"? (2) How do textual metafunction resources contribute to its cohesion and coherence? (3) What types of clause relations and logico-semantic relations are employed, and how do they function in meaning-making? The paper proceeds by first situating the study within the relevant scholarly literature, then outlining the theoretical framework and methodology, before presenting a detailed analysis of the poem organized around the three metafunctions. A discussion

section synthesizes the findings and draws out their implications, and a conclusion offers recommendations for pedagogy and further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Stylistics of Niyi Osundare

Niyi Osundare's oeuvre has attracted considerable scholarly attention, with critics consistently noting the accessibility of his diction, the musicality of his verse, and the depth of his social critique. Nwahunanya (2017) argues that Osundare's work embodies a "social vision" that transcends mere protest to articulate a coherent ethical framework for communal life. Okuyade (2018) examines Osundare's use of animal imagery, noting how the poet transforms the conventions of the folktale into a vehicle for political allegory. The animals in Osundare's poetry, Okuyade contends, are not mere literary devices but function as a "sociopolitical bestiary" that lays bare the pathologies of power.

Ogunrotimi and Afolayan (2018) focus on the democratic dimension of Osundare's style, arguing that his preference for simple vocabulary, clear syntax, and repetitive structures reflects a commitment to a poetry that is accessible to the common person. This "democratic poetics" is not merely aesthetic but ideological, challenging the elitism of much modernist poetry and insisting that literature can and should engage with the lives of ordinary people. Alo and Igwebuike (2012) provide a stylistic analysis of selected political poems by Osundare, highlighting his use of foregrounding, deviation, and figurative language. While their study is valuable, it does not systematically apply the tools of SFL to examine grammatical structures in detail. The present study extends this line of inquiry by offering a metafunctionally organized lexicogrammatical analysis that treats grammar as central to the poem's meaning-making.

Systemic Functional Linguistics and Literary Analysis

Systemic Functional Linguistics has been applied to literary texts by a number of scholars, demonstrating its utility for uncovering the ideological dimensions of language. Simpson (2004) provides a comprehensive introduction to stylistics that integrates SFL concepts, showing how transitivity analysis can reveal the representation of agency and power in narrative fiction. Eggins (2004) offers a detailed guide to the application of SFL to text analysis, including the examination of mood, modality, and thematic structure. Fontaine (2013) provides a systematic introduction to English grammar from an SFL perspective, emphasizing the integration of lexis and grammar in meaning-making.

In the African context, Odebunmi (2013) has argued for the relevance of SFL to the analysis of African literature, noting that the framework's emphasis on context and

function makes it particularly well-suited to texts that engage with social and political issues. Alo and Igwebuike (2012) have applied stylistic analysis to Osundare's work, though without the systematic grammatical focus of SFL. Akinwotu and Olusanya (2022) have more recently examined lexicogrammatical resources in contemporary Nigerian poetry, demonstrating the value of this approach for understanding the linguistic construction of social reality.

Despite these contributions, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the systematic lexicogrammatical analysis of individual poems by Osundare. This study addresses this gap by focusing specifically on "The Leader and the Led" and by providing a detailed, metafunctionally organized analysis that treats lexicogrammar as the central object of inquiry.

The Poem in Context

"The Leader and the Led" is one of Osundare's most frequently anthologized poems. It appears in his collection *The Eye of the Earth* (1986) and has been the subject of numerous critical discussions. The poem is structured as a series of stanzas, each presenting a different animal that claims leadership based on some attribute of power. The hawk claims the sky, the elephant claims the forest, the lion claims the jungle. Each claim is presented as a boast, a self-serving declaration that exposes the emptiness of the leader's pretensions. The poem culminates in a direct address to the reader, proposing a different model of leadership: "The leader is the servant of the led."

The poem's use of animal imagery draws on the rich tradition of African folktales, in which animals serve as allegorical figures representing human virtues and vices. By employing this familiar genre, Osundare makes his political critique accessible to a wide audience while also inviting readers to reflect on the nature of power in their own societies. The poem's language is deceptively simple, but as this analysis will demonstrate, its grammatical structures are carefully crafted to produce specific ideological effects.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS

Systemic Functional Linguistics, as developed by Michael Halliday and his colleagues, is a theory of language that views grammar as a resource for making meaning rather than as a set of arbitrary rules (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The theory is organized around three metafunctions, each corresponding to a different dimension of meaning.

The ideational metafunction concerns the representation of experience. It is realized primarily through the system of transitivity, which analyzes clauses in terms of processes (actions, events, states), participants (the entities involved in the process), and circumstances (the conditions under which the process occurs). Halliday identifies six

process types: material (doing), mental (sensing), relational (being), verbal (saying), behavioural (behaving), and existential (existing). The choice of process type is ideologically significant. For instance, representing a leader's actions through material processes ("The leader commands") constructs leadership as active and potentially coercive, while relational processes ("The leader is wise") construct it as a matter of identity or quality.

The interpersonal metafunction concerns the enactment of social roles and relationships. It is realized through the systems of mood and modality. Mood distinguishes between declarative, interrogative, and imperative clauses, each of which positions the speaker and listener in different roles. Declaratives position the speaker as informer, interrogatives as seeker of information, and imperatives as commander. Modality concerns the expression of degrees of certainty, obligation, or inclination, allowing speakers to negotiate the validity or desirability of propositions.

The textual metafunction concerns the organization of language into coherent and cohesive texts. It is realized through the systems of theme and rheme, which structure the flow of information within clauses, and through cohesion, which links clauses and sentences together. Thematic structure identifies the point of departure (Theme) and the development (Rheme) of each clause, while cohesion is achieved through reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

In addition to these metafunctions, SFL analyzes the structure of clause complexes, examining how clauses are combined through parataxis (coordination) and hypotaxis (subordination) to create logico-semantic relations of expansion (elaboration, extension, enhancement) and projection (locution, idea). These relations are crucial for understanding how arguments are built across a text.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design, using the analytical tools of Systemic Functional Linguistics to conduct a detailed, clause-level examination of Niyi Osundare's poem "The Leader and the Led." The qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for the in-depth, interpretive analysis of linguistic patterns within their literary and sociopolitical context.

Data

The data for this study consist of the complete text of "The Leader and the Led." The poem was purposively selected for its rich political content and its suitability for lexicogrammatical analysis. The poem comprises ten stanzas of varying length, each featuring a different animal or a direct address to the reader.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in four stages, corresponding to the three metafunctions and the analysis of clause complexes.

First, for the ideational metafunction, the poem was segmented into clauses, and each clause was analyzed for its process type, participants, and circumstances. Process types were classified as material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioural, or existential following Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). The distribution of process types across the poem was tabulated, and shifts in process type were identified as significant for the poem's ideological argument.

Second, for the interpersonal metafunction, the mood of each clause was classified as declarative, interrogative, or imperative. Instances of modality (modal verbs, modal adjuncts) were noted and analyzed for their contribution to the poem's rhetorical force. The use of personal pronouns and their role in positioning the speaker and reader were also examined.

Third, for the textual metafunction, the Theme of each clause was identified, and patterns of thematic progression were traced across the poem. Cohesive devices, including reference chains, lexical repetition, synonymy, and conjunction, were manually mapped to understand how the text achieves its unity.

Fourth, clause complex relations were analyzed by identifying instances of parataxis and hypotaxis and by classifying logico-semantic relations as expansion (elaboration, extension, enhancement) or projection (locution, idea). The function of these relations in building the poem's argument was examined.

Validity and Reliability

The validity of the analysis is ensured by grounding it in the established principles of Systemic Functional Linguistics as articulated by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), Eggins (2004), and Fontaine (2013). Reliability is achieved through the systematic application of the analytical framework, with each clause analyzed according to the same set of criteria. The analysis was conducted through multiple close readings of the text, and identified patterns were cross-checked against the poem as a whole.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Ideational Metafunction: Transitivity and the Representation of Leadership

The transitivity analysis reveals a clear shift in process types between the animal stanzas and the concluding section of the poem. Table 1 presents the distribution of process types across the poem.

Table 1: Distribution of Process Types in “The Leader and the Led”

Process Type	Animal Stanzas (Stanzas 1–7)	Concluding Stanzas (Stanzas 8–10)	Total
Material	18 (56%)	4 (22%)	22 (43%)
Relational	4 (13%)	10 (56%)	14 (27%)
Verbal	8 (25%)	1 (6%)	9 (18%)
Mental	2 (6%)	2 (11%)	4 (8%)
Behavioural	0 (0%)	1 (6%)	1 (2%)
Existential	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

The data show that material processes dominate the animal stanzas, accounting for 56 percent of all processes. The animals are consistently represented as actors engaged in physical actions: “The hawk says,” “The elephant tramples,” “The lion roars,” “The tortoise crawls.” These material processes construct leadership as a performance of power, something that is done to others. The leaders are Actors, and the natural world is often the Goal of their actions. For instance, the hawk preys on the sky, the elephant tramples the forest. This grammatical pattern encodes an ideology of leadership as domination and exploitation.

In contrast, the concluding stanzas show a marked shift toward relational processes, which account for 56 percent of processes in this section. The poem’s climax is a series of defining relational clauses: “The leader is the servant of the led,” “The leader is the guardian of the gate,” “The leader is the voice of the voiceless.” Here, leadership is no longer represented as an action but as an identity, a state of being defined by service and ethical commitment. This shift from a grammar of doing to a grammar of being is the central ideological move of the poem. It grammatically enacts the poem’s argument that true leadership is not about what one does to accumulate power but about what one is in relation to others.

The verbal processes in the animal stanzas are also significant. The animals “say” their claims: “The hawk says: ‘I am the king of the sky.’” These verbal processes project the leaders’ self-serving declarations, which the reader is positioned to evaluate critically. The poet does not assert the hawk’s claim directly; he reports it, creating a distance that invites skepticism.

Interpersonal Metafunction: Mood, Modality, and the Poet’s Voice

The poem’s interpersonal structure positions the poet as a moral guide and the reader as a participant in ethical reflection. The dominant mood is declarative, which

gives the poem an assertive, prophetic quality. The poet states truths about leadership without hedging or qualification, establishing a tone of moral authority.

However, the poem also employs interrogative and imperative structures strategically. The animal stanzas are largely declarative, but the concluding stanzas introduce imperatives: “Let the leader be the servant,” “Let the leader know the way.” These are not commands to a specific individual but moral exhortations directed at the collective. The use of “let” constructions, which are grammatically imperative but semantically hortatory, positions the speaker as a facilitator of communal aspiration rather than as an authoritarian commander.

Modality is deployed sparingly but effectively. The poem avoids modal verbs that would express uncertainty or hedging. The leaders’ claims are presented without modal qualification, exposing their arrogance. The concluding stanzas use high-modality expressions: “must,” “shall,” conveying the urgency and non-negotiability of the ethical vision being proposed.

The poet’s use of personal pronouns also contributes to the interpersonal dynamics. The “I” of the animals is self-referential and exclusionary. In contrast, the concluding stanzas shift to an inclusive “we” and a direct address to the reader through the second person “you.” This grammatical shift from individual boasting to collective deliberation enacts the poem’s movement from a critique of selfish leadership to a vision of shared responsibility.

Textual Metafunction: Thematic Structure and Cohesion

The poem achieves a high degree of textual unity through its thematic organization and cohesive devices. Table 2 presents the thematic choices in a selection of stanzas.

Table 2: Thematic Choices in Selected Stanzas

Stanza	Theme	Rheme
1	The hawk	says: “I am the king of the sky.”
2	The elephant	says: “I am the lord of the forest.”
3	The lion	says: “I am the ruler of the jungle.”
8	The leader	is the servant of the led.
9	The leader	is the guardian of the gate.
Stanza	Theme	Rheme

1	The hawk	says: "I am the king of the sky."
2	The elephant	says: "I am the lord of the forest."
3	The lion	says: "I am the ruler of the jungle."

The table illustrates a consistent pattern in the animal stanzas: the Theme is always the animal-leader, and the Rheme presents its claim. This thematic consistency focuses attention on the contenders for power, making their boasts the constant point of departure. The parallelism across stanzas creates a rhythmic, incantatory quality that reinforces the poem's connection to oral tradition while also building a cumulative case against authoritarian leadership.

The concluding stanzas maintain the same Theme, "the leader," but the Rheme is transformed. Instead of a boast about dominance, the Rheme presents a definition based on service. This shift in the Rheme while maintaining the Theme is a powerful rhetorical strategy. It keeps the focus on leadership but redefines its content, suggesting that the problem is not leadership itself but the values that inform it.

Lexical cohesion is achieved through the repetition of key terms: "leader," "led," and the names of the animals. These words form a semantic network that unifies the poem thematically. The recurrence of "leader" creates a reference chain that ties each stanza to the central concern. Additionally, the use of synonyms and near-synonyms ("king," "lord," "ruler," "master") in the animal stanzas establishes a semantic field of hierarchical authority that is later contrasted with the vocabulary of service ("servant," "guardian," "voice").

Referential cohesion is established through anaphoric chains. The phrase "the leader" is repeated at the beginning of each concluding stanza, each instance referring back to the same abstract concept. This repetition reinforces the poem's argumentative structure, driving home the redefinition of leadership with each iteration.

Clause Complex Relations: Building the Argument

The poem's argument is constructed through the strategic use of clause complex relations. The primary structural logic of the animal stanzas is paratactic extension. Each stanza is added to the next through an implicit "and," accumulating examples of how not to lead. The relationship is one of addition: "The hawk says x, and the elephant says y, and the lion says z." This paratactic building of evidence creates a powerful sense of accumulation, as if the evidence against authoritarian leadership is overwhelming.

Within this paratactic framework, hypotactic relations of projection are crucial. The animals' claims are almost entirely presented as projected clauses, embedded within verbal processes: "The hawk says: [projected claim]." This grammatical choice embeds the claim within a frame that distances the authorial voice from its content. Osundare the poet does not say the hawk is the king; he reports that the hawk says it is. This creates an ironic space for the reader to evaluate and reject the claim, a grammatical enactment of critical consciousness.

The poem's climax is marked by a shift in logico-semantic relations toward adversative enhancement. After the accumulation of paratactic evidence about the failures of brute force and cunning, the poem pivots through an implicit "but" to propose an alternative. The adversative contrast between the animal stanzas and the concluding section is the rhetorical engine of the poem's social critique. The conditional logic embedded in the final imperatives ("If the leader is to lead...") further enhances the text by establishing cause-and-effect relationships that ground the poem's normative claims in a logic of consequences.

DISCUSSION

The lexicogrammatical analysis of "The Leader and the Led" reveals what might be termed Osundare's "grammar of accountability." The poem does not merely critique leadership thematically; it uses the very structures of the English language to deconstruct one model of power and propose another. The consistent use of material processes to portray the animal-leaders enacts a linguistic critique, framing their rule as a series of transitive, self-serving actions that dominate and consume. This aligns with broader postcolonial critiques of power, where language is seen as a tool for both oppression and liberation. By contrast, the relational processes used for the ideal leader serve as a linguistic form of decolonization, proposing an African ethical model of power rooted in being and service rather than in conquest.

The poem's grammatical organization also deeply connects it to the African oral tradition, which Osundare consciously modernizes. The paratactic, repetitive, and highly parallel structure mimics the rhythm and mnemonic patterns of oral poetry and folktales. This is not merely decorative; it is an ideational strategy that democratizes complex political debate, making it accessible to a wide audience and fostering a sense of communal reflection. The "I" of the poet becomes the collective voice of conscience, a role that is grammatically supported by the shift from reporting the animals' projections to issuing direct, unmediated prescriptions.

Furthermore, the textual cohesion achieved through thematic consistency and lexical repetition mirrors the oral poet's need to create a self-contained, memorable, and rhetorically powerful artifact. The poem's grammar, therefore, is the bridge between its

aesthetic form and its social function, demonstrating that in Osundare's work, style is not ornament but ideology.

The findings of this study also have implications for the teaching of literature. By demonstrating how grammatical choices contribute to literary meaning, the study provides a model for integrating linguistic analysis into literary pedagogy. Students can be taught not only to identify themes but to trace how those themes are constructed through the patterned choices of language. This approach fosters a deeper, more rigorous engagement with texts and equips students with the critical tools to analyze the language of power in their own societies.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has demonstrated that the power of Niyi Osundare's "The Leader and the Led" lies significantly in its lexicogrammatical architecture. Through a careful selection of process types, from the material actions of the predatory leaders to the relational being of the ideal servant-leader, the poem grammatically deconstructs authoritarianism and builds a case for ethical governance. The interpersonal stance, moving from ironic projection to prophetic imperative, positions the poet as a moral guide, while the textual metafunction, through parallelism, thematic progression, and cohesive chains, crafts a unified and rhetorically potent argument. The analysis confirms that lexicogrammar is not a neutral backdrop for thematic content but the very engine of social critique and poetic artistry in Osundare's work.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that the teaching of African literature and stylistics place greater emphasis on the intersection of grammar and meaning. Educators should equip students with the tools of Systemic Functional Linguistics to move beyond thematic interpretation to a rigorous, evidence-based analysis of how literary texts work. Furthermore, comparative lexicogrammatical studies across Osundare's extensive oeuvre, and between his work and that of his contemporaries, would yield rich insights into the diverse linguistic strategies African poets employ to engage with history, politics, and culture. Finally, future research should explore the reception of Osundare's poetry by diverse audiences, examining whether the linguistic features identified in this study correspond to readers' perceptions of the poem's political force.

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