A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF VISAYAN CONTEMPORARY POP SONGS

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ABSTRACT

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| This stylistic analysis of Visayan contemporary pop songs aims to understand how linguistic stylistic devices enhance the expressive quality of songs and contribute to deeper interpretation of their lyrics. Using the theoretical lens of foregrounding as proposed by Leech (2008), the research focuses on syntagmatic foregrounding (parallelism and repetition) and paradigmatic foregrounding (lexical deviation and code-switching) found in five award-winning Vispop songs from 2013 to 2017: *Duyog, Labyu Langga, Bok Love, Imoha ra ang Akong Kasingkasing*, and *Kurog Ko*. Through a qualitative descriptive analysis, the study reveals that linguistic stylistic devices such as anaphora, antithesis, neologisms, and affixation play a central role in conveying emotional intensity, shaping identity, and enriching interpretation. Syntagmatic foregrounding highlights emotional appeals and recurring themes, while paradigmatic foregrounding showcases linguistic creativity through hybrid Visayan-English-Tagalog expressions. These stylistic strategies contribute to multiple layers of meaning—extending interpretations from romantic to familial or even spiritual dimensions. Furthermore, the frequent use of code-switching and lexical innovations reflects the evolving sociolinguistic realities of Filipino youth. The study concludes that Visayan pop songs are not only musical expressions but also linguistic and cultural artifacts. Their stylistic features offer insight into contemporary discourse practices and affirm the role of popular music in representing hybrid Filipino identities. |

*Keywords: Vispop, stylistics, foregrounding, code-switching, lexical deviation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, there has been a notable resurgence in Visayan music in the Philippines, particularly through the rise of Vispop—a movement promoting original compositions in Visayan languages. Since its inception in 2013, Vispop has produced songs that have charted nationally and gained mainstream attention. For instance, *Duyog* (2013) and *Labyu Langga* (2014) were featured in popular media, including national films, enhancing their appeal beyond the Visayan-speaking regions (Catan, 2017).

This resurgence is linked not only to musicality but to lyrical innovation. Many Vispop songs blend Cebuano with Tagalog and English, incorporating millennial slang, neologisms, and code-switching. These linguistic styles reflect not just artistic trends, but also evolving cultural identities among Filipino youth. According to Candilas et. al (2021), code-switching has become a dominant mode of discourse among urban, college-educated Filipinos, functioning as a marker of informality and cultural fluidity. It is commonly used in the society and might even be considered as part of the culture of the people. In fact, code-switching signifies informality among middle class, college-educated, and urbanized Filipinos but is considered as the lingua franca of millennials (Lising et.al, 2020).

Linguistic stylistics, particularly through the theory of foregrounding, provides a useful lens for understanding how such language features contribute to meaning-making. Foregrounding refers to the strategic use of deviation and repetition to draw attention to specific elements in a text (Leech, 2008; Stockwell, 2020). It encompasses both syntagmatic features (e.g., parallelism, repetition) and paradigmatic features (e.g., neologisms, code-switching), all of which are commonly found in Vispop lyrics. By foregrounding these stylistic elements, the study reveals how Visayan pop songs communicate layered meanings and evoke listener responses—supporting the research aim of understanding stylistic devices in contemporary music.

Recent stylistic studies have demonstrated the impact of foregrounding in popular texts. Ramazani (2017) explained that switching from one language to another in poetry shows the dialogic nature of language while Yuhui (2023) noted that code-switching not only highlights the rhyme and structure of songs, it also expresses deep emotions like sadness, reflection, guilt, and loneliness. In the Philippine context, Galvez (2019) analyzed Tagalog-Visayan-English hybrid songs and concluded that foregrounded linguistic innovations reflect a creative negotiation of linguistic norms and cultural belonging.

Against this backdrop, this study explored how linguistic stylistic features—syntagmatic and paradigmatic foregrounding—were used in Visayan contemporary pop songs to enhance meaning and affective appeal. Specifically, this study aimed to identify the linguistic stylistic features present in selected Visayan contemporary pop songs in terms of syntagmatic and paradigmatic foregrounding as well as to explain how these stylistic features contribute to the extended meanings of the song lyrics.

2. methodology

This qualitative research employed a descriptive linguistic stylistic analysis of selected Visayan contemporary pop songs, with focus on foregrounding features present in the lyrics. Guided by Leech’s (2008) framework, the study focused on two key types of foregrounding. **Syntagmatic foregrounding** was examined through patterns of **parallelism** and **repetition**, which contribute to the rhythm and structure of the text. **Paradigmatic foregrounding**, on the other hand, was explored through instances of **lexical deviation**, including the use of **code-switching** between Visayan and English, as well as the formation of **neologisms**. By foregrounding these stylistic features, this study aimed to understand how stylistic devices enhance the expressive quality and deeper interpretations of the song lyrics.

**2.1 Corpus Selection**

The corpus consisted of five award-winning Vispop songs that received Listeners’ Choice, Netizens’ Choice, or People’s Choice Awards from 2013 to 2017. These include:

* *Duyog* (2013)
* *Labyu Langga* (2014)
* *Bok Love* (2015)
* *Imoha ra ang Akong Kasingkasing* (2016)
* *Kurog Ko* (2017)

These songs were selected for their popularity, accessibility, and lasting cultural relevance. As recipients of people’s choice awards, they represent the most widely celebrated and influential period of the Vispop movement. While newer songs have been released in recent years, the hiatus of the Vispop competition after 2019, as well as the absence of widely available official lyrics and verified audio sources for several recent entries, posed limitations to consistent data collection.

**2.2 Data Collection and Preparation**

The official lyrics of each song were obtained from Vispop’s verified social media pages and YouTube accounts. Each song text was transcribed, if necessary, and verified for accuracy using multiple sources to ensure fidelity to the artists’ original intentions.

**2.3 Analytical Framework**

The study employed a stylistic approach to analyze foregrounding features at two levels:

1. **Syntagmatic foregrounding** – focusing on repetition and parallelism within phrases, clauses, and sentences, as indicators of emphasis and rhythm.
2. **Paradigmatic foregrounding** – examining lexical deviation, including code-switching, affixation, compounding, and neologisms, which deviate from standard linguistic norms to create novelty and emotional appeal.

The lyrics were examined line-by-line to identify patterns of repetition, structural symmetry, or linguistic innovation. Analytical notes were made on the form and function of these features, and interpretive insights were grounded in Leech’s (2008) theory of foregrounding as well as recent scholarly literature on linguistic stylistics (e.g., Burke, 2018; Stockwell, 2020).

3. results and discussion

The following are the results of the study after linguistic stylistic analysis of five selected Visayan contemporary pop songs were made, focusing on features of syntagmatic and paradigmatic foregrounding.

**3.1 Duyog**

*Songwriters: Jewel and Joe Edward Villaflores*

At first glance, *Duyog* appears to be a conventional love song, expressing devotion to a beloved. However, a closer linguistic stylistic analysis suggests an extended meaning that moves beyond romantic affection—possibly towards spiritual or religious devotion.

**3.1.1 Syntagmatic Foregrounding: Repetition and Parallelism**

A strong use of **anaphoric parallelism** is evident in the repeated phrase *Ikaw lang* ("Only you") in the refrain:

*Ikaw lang akong, akong higugmaon.*
*Ikaw lang ako, ako matinud-anon.*

The repetition of *Ikaw lang* at the beginning of each line emphasizes exclusivity and emotional centrality. According to Khan (2015), such repetition draws attention to the subject and reinforces emotional depth in lyrical texts. Similarly, placing the phrase at the beginning of multiple lines aligns with Leech’s (2008) principle that repetition in strong syntactic positions (e.g., line-initial) enhances foregrounding.

This pattern continues in the second stanza:

*Ikaw akong hangin*
*Ikaw akong ulan*
*Ikaw akong langit*
*ug ang akong kalibutan.*

Each line begins with *Ikaw akong* ("You are my"), forming a **repetitive syntactic frame** that lists metaphorical associations—air, rain, heaven, and the world. This not only reinforces possession and emotional intensity but elevates the addressee to a near-divine status. Andrews (2021) noted that such metaphoric parallelism in lyrical texts deepens interpretation by invoking universal imagery.

The chorus extends this foregrounding by connecting the addressee to temporal dimensions:

*Ikaw akong gahapon*
*Ikaw akong karon*
*Ikaw akong kanunay*

The phrase *Ikaw akong* reappears, now emphasizing time—past (*gahapon*), present (*karon*), and forever (*kanunay*). This triadic parallelism underscores a consistent and timeless emotional attachment. As observed by Stockwell (2020), foregrounded structures that highlight temporality often serve to anchor identity or emotional continuity in texts.

The strategic placement of *ikaw* ("you") at the beginning of nearly every line across the refrain and chorus creates a cohesive pattern that draws attention to the central figure of the song. Leech (2008) asserts that repetition in structurally dominant positions creates a “foregrounded” element that reshapes interpretive focus.

**3.1.2 Extended Interpretation: Romantic or Religious?**

Although presented as a romantic song, the sheer degree of emotional centrality attributed to the addressee suggests a deeper or alternate interpretation.

*Pulong ko tinud-anay*
*Kasing-kasing paminawa*
*dinuyugan ning gitara*
*wa ka nag-inusara*

These lines suggest not just affection but **devotion and spiritual communion**, especially with phrases like “You are not alone” and “accompanied by the guitar,” hinting at prayer or praise. The positioning of *Ikaw* as the unchanging, omnipresent figure—past, present, and always—may suggest a divine referent, possibly God.

This aligns with the findings of Galvez (2019), who argued that foregrounded metaphors in contemporary Philippine music often signal religious duality, particularly in love songs that border on spiritual declarations.

Therefore, the linguistic stylistic features—particularly repetition, metaphorical parallelism, and structural foregrounding—support a reading of *Duyog* not only as a love song but also as a **religious ode**. This dual interpretation underscores the power of foregrounding in shaping lyrical meaning.

**3.2 Labyu, Langga**

*Songwriter: Jerika Teodorico*

*Labyu, Langga* became widely popular after its inclusion in the 2015 Star Cinema film *Etiquette for Mistresses*. Its upbeat rhythm and affectionate tone made it a staple in romantic playlists. However, a linguistic stylistic analysis reveals deeper emotional layers encoded in the language structures, particularly through **syntagmatic and paradigmatic foregrounding**.

**3.2.1 Syntagmatic Foregrounding: Repetition and Contrast**

The chorus offers a key example of **parallelism and antithesis**:

*Ako nang gihatag nimo akong kasingkasing*
*Ikaw na ang bahala sa pagtipig ug pag-amping*
*Hugti ang pagtoo nga dili ko mobiya*
*Sa kasadya’g kabalaka, kanunay kang may kasangga*
*I love you, langga*

Here, the use of paired verbs *pagtipig* (“to keep”) and *pag-amping* (“to protect”) creates **semantic parallelism**. These Visayan verbs, both prefixed forms, are structurally and semantically aligned to emphasize the speaker’s vulnerability and plea for emotional safeguarding.

Furthermore, the contrast between *kasadya* (“joy”) and *kabalaka* (“worry”) forms an **antithetical parallel structure**, drawing attention to the speaker’s devotion “in good times and bad.” Leech (2008) describes this as foregrounded antithesis, where opposing lexical elements serve to highlight emotional intensity and relational commitment.

In other words, the use of an antithesis parallel structure allows the listeners to better understand the message of the song. The contrasting elements prompt the listeners to pause and reflect on their meanings and their contribution to the overall message. This is supported by the study of Zheng (2014) which claims that the use of contrasting elements in Martin Luther King’s speech highlights a vivid image of the conditions described which therefore makes the speech more persuasive and more meaningful for the listeners. In this song, the contrasting elements send off an emotional vibe that adds more meaning to the song.

**3.2.2 Paradigmatic Foregrounding: Lexical Deviation**

Foregrounding also appears at the lexical level through **neologism and code-switching**. For example, the term *happy-happy* in: *Buntag, hapon, gabii—sige lang og happy-happy, basta kitang duha kuyog pirmi* is a **reduplicated English word used in a Visayan grammatical context**. Reduplication is common in Filipino languages and often implies continuity or emphasis. In this case, it mimics colloquial expressions of leisure and joy. Its playful tone also marks it as a paradigmatic deviation—an intentional break from normative lexical usage, which draws attention and deepens engagement (Burke, 2018).

Additionally, code-switching between Visayan and English (e.g., *I love you, langga*) contributes to the song’s accessibility among multilingual Filipino listeners. Bautista (2004) noted that code-switching in Philippine discourse is a reflection of identity and familiarity, and often used to create intimacy. The inclusion of both *langga* (a Visayan term of endearment) and *I love you* illustrates this hybrid linguistic identity.

**3.2.2 Extended Interpretation: Beyond Romantic Love**

Interestingly, while *Labyu, Langga* is widely interpreted as a romantic song, the songwriter has publicly stated that the inspiration came from her mother’s use of *langga* as a term of endearment for her and her siblings (The Freeman, 2014). Thus, the song’s subject may include familial or platonic love, not just romantic affection.

This interpretive gap—between original intent and public perception—demonstrates the effect of **foregrounded language** in shaping diverse meanings. As Hakemulder (2016) explains, foregrounding encourages interpretive multiplicity by drawing attention to unusual or emotionally loaded language. In this case, the foregrounded structures not only express strong affection but also allow the song to be interpreted through different emotional lenses. Whether as a tribute to family or a love declaration, the song’s linguistic patterns enhance its emotional depth and cultural relatability.

**3.3 Bok Love**

*Songwriters: Felipe Anjelo Calinawan and Therese Marie Villarante*

*Bok Love* stands out in the Vispop lineup for its humorous and lighthearted portrayal of romance between two food-loving individuals. While its tone may be playful, a linguistic stylistic analysis reveals deeper commentary on identity, self-acceptance, and contemporary cultural expressions through **lexical deviations** and **code-switching**.

**3.3.1 Paradigmatic Foregrounding: Lexical Deviations and Affixation**

The chorus features two prominent examples of **affixation-based lexical deviation**:

*Pramis this is pinakalast nga extra rice*
*Ugma lang ta mag-diet ha?*

Here, the words *pinakalast* and *mag-diet* are formed through the blending of Visayan affixes (*pinaka-*, *mag*) with English root words (*last*, *diet*). This creative affixation is a clear instance of **neologism**, where non-standard word formations foreground the speaker’s emotional tone—both humorous and emphatic.

According to Leech (2008), paradigmatic foregrounding occurs when a writer substitutes expected linguistic forms with unexpected ones, thereby highlighting specific meanings. In this case, *pinakalast* exaggerates finality, implying that the speaker's promise to stop eating extra rice is both sincere and likely insincere—an intentional contradiction that adds to the song’s humor.

Li and Shi (2015) emphasized that lexical deviation often enhances memorability and emotional resonance by offering novel expressions. Similarly, Bautista (2004) noted that these hybrid constructions are typical of urban Filipino discourse, especially among youth who regularly mix English with local languages in daily conversation.

**3.3.2 Code-Switching and Cultural Commentary**

*Bok Love* is rich in **Visayan-English code-switching**, such as in the phrases:

*Ngilngig pa nis mantikaong humba*
*Plus potato corner fries*

and:

*Gi-celebrate jud nimo imong ka-pogi*

These lines freely alternate between Visayan and English, incorporating culturally specific references (*humba*, *extra rice*) alongside modern pop culture terms (*potato corner fries*, *celebrate*). According to Ramazani (2017), code-switching in poetry or lyrics signals not just linguistic play but also a layered identity—a reflection of how speakers simultaneously occupy multiple cultural and linguistic spaces.

The term *ka-pogi*, formed from the Visayan prefix *ka-* and the Tagalog word *pogi* (“handsome”), is another lexical deviation that foregrounds Filipino humor and cultural confidence. The humorous tone also masks social critique, such as the rejection of narrow beauty standards. Despite being teased for their size, the couple in the song chooses to affirm their self-worth and affection for one another.

**3.3.3 Foregrounding and Social Themes**

Through **paradigmatic foregrounding**, the song celebrates authenticity, body positivity, and humor as central components of love. The blending of Visayan, English, and Tagalog through affixation and compounding reflects a contemporary Filipino linguistic landscape—flexible, inventive, and deeply personal. Galvez (2019) argues that such hybrid linguistic expressions in pop music function not merely as stylistic embellishments but as “acts of identity,” allowing marginalized voices or non-mainstream perspectives to find space within popular discourse. *Bok Love*, through its stylized language and wit, contributes to this space by celebrating love that defies social expectations.

**3.4 Imoha ra ang Akong Kasingkasing**

*Songwriters: Sherwin Fugozo and Mara Monton*

*Imoha ra ang Akong Kasingkasing* is an upbeat Vispop track that deals with unreciprocated feelings and the emotional plea for clarity in a budding romance. The lyrics feature recurring themes of emotional vulnerability, delivered through well-structured **parallelisms** and **foregrounding techniques** that intensify the speaker's longing.

**3.4.1 Syntagmatic Foregrounding: Repetition and Structural Parallelism**

A key moment in the song appears in the third stanza:

*Kay wa’y lain na gyud nga hinungdan*
*Ug ikaw lang gyud ang pitik ning dughan ko*
*Ug wa’y lain na gyud nga padulngan*
*So, palihug lang ampingi*
*Ampingi gyud baya*

The first and third lines—*wa’y lain na gyud nga hinungdan* (“there’s no other reason”) and *wa’y lain na gyud nga padulngan* (“there’s no other destination”)—are **structurally parallel**. They share a syntactic skeleton that emphasizes exclusivity and emotional finality. This kind of **syntagmatic foregrounding**, as described by Leech (2008), helps focus the listener’s attention on the singularity of the speaker’s emotional direction.

Additionally, the verb *ampingi* (“take care of”) is repeated at the end of the stanza. The duplication—*Palihug lang ampingi / Ampingi gyud baya*—strengthens the speaker's plea. As Khan (2015) observes, repeated imperatives in poetic discourse serve as intensified appeals, which can elicit empathy and dramatize internal conflict.

**3.4.2 Code-Switching and Emotive Appeal**

Although this song uses less overt lexical deviation than others in the corpus, it still contains subtle instances of **language blending**. The entire emotional narrative is built upon the mixture of formal-sounding appeals (*palihug lang*, *ampingi*) and personal declarations. The few insertions of casual or conversational tone contrast the more poetic pleas, creating a layered emotional atmosphere.

This aligns with Stockwell’s (2020) argument that stylistic shifts—even within a single voice—allow song lyrics to function both as narrative and affective texts. The oscillation between poetic structure and conversational intimacy in this song enhances its relatability.

**3.4.3 Foregrounding and Meaning Extension**

By employing **foregrounded repetition and symmetrical phrasing**, *Imoha ra ang Akong Kasingkasing* magnifies the speaker’s internal emotional state. The heart (*kasingkasing*) becomes both literal and symbolic—the emotional center of affection, decision-making, and vulnerability.

The focused use of syntagmatic parallelism reinforces the idea that the beloved is the only possible outcome for the speaker’s journey—both emotionally and romantically. Such structures are not merely ornamental; they serve to dramatize the urgency and singularity of the speaker’s appeal.

In line with Andrews (2021), the linguistic strategies in this song encourage deeper emotional identification. The emotional force is not just in the message but in the **form** of the language itself—its repetition, its rhythm, and its narrowing lexical scope that suggests devotion.

**3.5 Kurog Ko**

*Songwriter: Jeremy Sarmiento*

At first impression, *Kurog Ko* appears to be a romantic ballad—its title suggesting physical trembling due to love or infatuation. However, the lyrical narrative reveals a deeper, sarcastic subtext. Through **foregrounding techniques** and **code-switching**, the song cleverly critiques performative affection and masculine vanity.

**3.5.1 Syntagmatic Foregrounding: Repetition and Emphasis**

The second stanza presents the use of **anaphoric parallelism** with emotional clarity:

*Di mahalata*
*Di sab makapa*
*Unsa ang buot mong ipakita*

The repetition of the negative adverb *Di* (“not”) at the beginning of the first two lines emphasizes the speaker's emotional frustration. By placing *Di* in a prominent line-initial position repeatedly, the speaker draws attention to her emotional dissonance: nothing about the other person’s behavior communicates sincerity.

As Leech (2008) explains, **foregrounding through repetition** creates an “aesthetic pause,” drawing the reader or listener into reflection. In this case, the listener is prompted to feel the speaker’s confusion and disillusionment. This structure also aligns with findings from Zheng (2014), who argued that parallel negative constructions in literary texts often generate a heightened emotional rhythm, particularly in expressions of rejection, doubt, or skepticism.

**3.5.2 Paradigmatic Foregrounding: Lexical Deviation through Code-Switching**

The song employs clever **code-switching** and **affixation-based lexical deviation**, particularly in Stanza 3:

*Wa ka kilati*
*Ang gagukod babaye*
*Gi-celebrate jud nimo imong ka-pogi*

The phrase *Gi-celebrate jud nimo imong ka-pogi* (“You really celebrated your handsomeness”) illustrates two levels of paradigmatic foregrounding:

1. **Gi-celebrate** combines the Visayan prefix *gi-* (perfective verb marker) with the English word *celebrate*.
2. **Ka-pogi** combines the Visayan prefix *ka-* (nominalizer) with the Tagalog word *pogi* (handsome).

Both constructions are examples of lexical innovation, or **neologisms formed by code-mixing**, that deviate from standard English or Visayan syntax. These hybrid words draw attention to the message, making it more emotionally potent and memorable.

Ramazani (2017) highlights that this kind of lexical deviation in poetic texts reflects the “dialogic nature of identity”—multiple languages embedded in a single poetic voice. In *Kurog Ko*, this reflects a modern Filipino woman’s response to shallow romantic advances, using humor and irony.

**3.5.2 Foregrounding and Irony**

The title *Kurog Ko* (“I Tremble”) implies physical affection or romantic tension. However, by the end of the song, the listener realizes the tremble may actually stem from **annoyance, disappointment, or mockery**—not romantic excitement.

This ironic twist is supported by Walliyullah’s (2015) observation that linguistic deviation, especially when blended with humorous tone, often masks social critique. The male character’s vanity and insincerity are humorously exposed through code-switched language and absurd imagery (e.g., *gi-celebrate ang ka-pogi*).

The foregrounding strategies used in this song—parallel structure, code-switching, and neologism—serve to express complex emotional states, such as frustration masked by sarcasm. Ultimately, *Kurog Ko* achieves its effect not just through message but through **linguistic performance**.

4. Conclusion

The consistent use of **Visayan-English and Visayan-Tagalog hybrid structures** across all five songs reflects a broader trend in Philippine popular discourse. As noted by Bautista (2004) and supported by more recent studies (e.g., Galvez, 2019), code-switching has become a linguistic norm in contemporary Filipino society, especially among urban and millennial audiences. The songs analyzed in this study mirror this reality, embedding cultural identity, emotional complexity, and linguistic creativity within their lyrics. Importantly, the study reaffirms that **foregrounding serves as a powerful analytical tool** in uncovering both explicit and implicit meanings in song texts. It demonstrates that linguistic structures—when intentionally foregrounded—are not just stylistic choices but also carriers of deeper social, emotional, and cultural significance. Further, this study proves that Visayan contemporary pop songs are not merely entertainment products but culturally embedded texts. They offer insights into the evolving linguistic landscape of the Philippines and serve as expressive platforms for identity, emotion, and creativity. To further prove this, future researchers may compare the stylistic features of Visayan pop songs with those in other regional languages such as Ilocano, Bicolano, or Tagalog to identify shared and distinct stylistic patterns across Filipino musical cultures.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

Author hereby declares that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT) are not used in the writing of the manuscript.

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