

Review Article

Breaking the Norms: Analyzing the Use of Graphological Deviations in Merlinda Bobis's Poetry

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of graphological deviations in the poetry of Merlinda Bobis to examine how visual features of poetic language function as semiotic resources in expressing identity, emotion, and postcolonial experience. Guided by Geoffrey Leech's Foregrounding Theory, the study adopts a qualitative descriptive-stylistic research design complemented by thematic content analysis across ten purposively selected poems, including *Detainee*, *Homecoming*, *Politics*, and *From Cell Nine*. Operationalizing graphological deviation through strict exclusion criteria—specifically excluding standard poetic enjambment—the empirical analysis identified 38 total instantiations across six distinct categories: unusual lowercase, unconventional punctuation, deviant lineation, atypical spacing, repetition, and elongation. The findings reveal that orthographic subversions form the dominant visual cluster, with unusual lowercase letters (31.6%) and unconventional punctuation (26.3%) collectively accounting for 57.9% of all observed departures. These features operate as deliberate mechanisms of resistance to normative orthographic standards while reinforcing themes of humility, marginalization, and decolonized identity. Deviant lineation (21.1%)—characterized by mid-syntagm breaking and dislocated spatial arrangement—functions as visual prosody that reflects emotional and cultural dislocation experienced by postcolonial subjects. Less frequent deviations, including atypical spacing (10.5%), repetition (7.9%), and elongation (2.6%), selectively enrich visual rhythm, auditory intensity, and expressive emphasis. The study demonstrates that graphological deviation

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extends beyond visual ornamentation, operating as a meaningful stylistic tool for postcolonial identity performance. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate pedagogical relevance to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) by offering educators a practical framework for integrating visual close reading and culturally responsive approaches into contemporary Filipino literature instruction.

Keywords: graphological deviation, foregrounding theory, Merlinda Bobis, stylistics, postcolonial identity, visual prosody, linguistic resistance

1. Introduction

At its simplest, writing is an act of verbal self-expression, a release of emotional energy, an attempt to form a self or define oneself. Perhaps for that reason, writers are often attracted to handwriting, which is an extension of the voice of the writer as it is heard in the head. The act of developing a handwriting style that is individualistic and independent of certain linguistic and aesthetic conventions, and which develops out of the individualistic self and the emotive self, is not however aesthetically driven. According to Yunarti et al. (2024), handwriting serves as a medium of self-expression that enables individuals to communicate identity, thoughts, and emotions while supporting meaningful learning and personal development. Further support for these ideas comes from Gibbs (2008), who considered how writers draw on their own experience in the writing process and argued that the way a poet lays out their poem and the stylistic devices they choose have meaning. Taken together, this suggests that a love of writing and a drive to create a distinct style contribute to the use of unconventional graphological features.

Although handwriting and printed typography differ in their physical production, both involve visual choices that allow writers to distinguish their textual expression from conventional forms. In handwritten texts, individuality may be manifested through features such as letter formation, spacing, size, and arrangement. In printed poetry, comparable forms of visual expression can be deliberately represented through typographical and graphological choices, including capitalization, punctuation, spacing, lineation, repetition, and the visual extension of letters. Thus, the transition from handwriting to printed poetry does not represent a shift away from visual self-expression but rather a shift in the medium through which such expression is realized. In poetic texts, these graphological choices become part of the printed form and may contribute to emphasis, rhythm, emotion, and meaning.

Internationally and locally, numerous scholars have noted how the use of language in poetry differs from the other types of speech. In the study conducted at

Jazan University, Saudi Arabia, Haque (2021) suggested that the poet subverts or expands prevailing traditions and mannerisms to express new messages or achieve particular effects. Isabela State University's Ogayan and Pedida (2024) analyzed 19th-century poet Emily Dickinson and modern poet Lang Leav, and noted that Dickinson's style includes archaisms, generalized capitalization and varying line length, while Leav's style employs eye dialect, little to no punctuation and varies line length. While these comparisons indicate that poets often depart from graphological norms, they do so intending to manipulate not just meaning but the dynamics of the poem's visual presentation for the reader's interpretive benefit.

Though there have been graphological outsiders to specify the stylistic features of these works, none have performed a stylistic study of the graphological deviance between the works, nor has there been any study of graphological stylistics in the domain of poetry beyond the comparative analysis of Ogayan and Pedida (2024) or the discussion of poetic complexity by Haque (2021). Other Southeast Asian, and in particular Filipino, postcolonial poets, such as Merlinda Bobis, have yet to be the subject of similar critical treatments. This study used graphological features such as atypical punctuation, line- and stanza-breaks, lowercase letters, repetition, spacing, and long letters to analyze Bobis. It also sought to answer this question to find the specific graphological deviations that arise in Bobis' text and to place them in the context of Bobis' artistic, cultural, and literary practices. This study focused on answering the question of which graphological deviations occur most frequently in Bobis' poetry.

To clarify the above concepts, the study used Geoffrey Leech's Stylistic Theory (1969), which identified different deviances associated with language, including graphological deviation, defined by manipulating visual devices such as punctuation, spelling and arrangement of words to draw the reader's attention to the form of the language in use. In the light of this, the study achieved its aims of investigating Bobis's visual and structural strategies to transgress rules and represent the Filipino diaspora. Beyond its contribution to literary and stylistic analysis, the study also has pedagogical relevance because the identification and interpretation of graphological deviations can provide educators with a concrete basis for guiding learners in examining how visual form contributes to literary meaning. Such an approach can encourage critical engagement with poetic texts while allowing students to consider questions of identity, culture, and representation. In this sense, the study contributes to the broader goals of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) by highlighting the potential of contemporary Filipino literature to support critical, culturally responsive, and inclusive literary learning.

Though this study purely focused on the analysis of 10 handpicked poems from Bobis's published collections in which graphological deviations were overtly manifested, it provided an insightful analysis and discussion of graphological deviation within a contemporary postcolonial milieu. This study was not an exhaustive analysis of Bobis's output, nor did it include the analysis and discussion of other deviations, such as phonological and semantic deviations. This study has therefore

demonstrated that these theories can be applied to the visual-graphic/graphic-textual relationship (the interaction between form and identity) and that they yielded insights in this field for researchers, educators and creative writers.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically descriptive-stylistic textual analysis, to examine the graphological deviations found in the selected poems of Merlinda Bobis. Qualitative textual analysis enables researchers to interpret literary texts by examining how meaning is constructed through linguistic and stylistic choices within their cultural and literary contexts (McKee, 2003). In stylistic studies, textual analysis provides a systematic approach to identifying and interpreting language features that contribute to literary meaning (Leech, 1969). Furthermore, qualitative research emphasizes understanding phenomena through detailed description and interpretation rather than numerical measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach allowed the researchers to examine how graphological deviations, including capitalization, punctuation, spacing, line breaks, elongation, and repetition, serve as stylistic devices that shape readers' interpretations and contribute to the thematic and aesthetic qualities of Bobis' poetry.

2.1 Research Material

The primary data consisted of ten (10) purposively selected poems written by Merlinda Bobis, namely *Detainee*, *Life Today*, *Manila*, 1990, *Homecoming*, *Politics*, *From Cell Nine*, *In Bed with Lorca*, *Worlds Gift an Australian Critic*, *Siesta*, *Summer Fast Train without Terminals*, and *Going Ethnic*. Purposive sampling was employed because these poems exhibit notable graphological deviations relevant to the study's objectives. According to Patton (2015), purposive sampling enables researchers to select information-rich cases that best illuminate the phenomenon being investigated. The selected poems were treated as the primary research materials and served as the basis for the stylistic analysis.

The ten poems were selected based on their direct relevance to the study's focus on graphological deviation. Specifically, the poems were included because they exhibited observable departures from conventional graphological or typographical patterns, such as unusual capitalization or lowercase usage, unconventional punctuation, distinctive lineation or line breaks, spacing, repetition, and elongation. The selected texts also provided sufficient textual instances of these features to permit close stylistic examination and comparison across the poems. Poems that did not demonstrate prominent or analytically relevant graphological features were not included in the corpus.

2.2 Data Collection

The data collection process followed systematic qualitative procedures. Initially, the researchers identified the research questions and selected the poems that best represented graphological deviations in Merlinda Bobis' poetry. Clean copies of the selected poems were then prepared to facilitate accurate textual examination. Each poem underwent repeated close reading to identify graphological features such as unconventional capitalization, punctuation, spacing, line breaks, font variations, elongation, and repetition. During the close reading, detailed notes were recorded to document every observed deviation. The identified graphological features were subsequently organized into categories to facilitate systematic interpretation. In addition, contextual information, including literary criticism and cultural background related to Bobis' works, was gathered to enrich the analysis and deepen understanding of the stylistic choices in the poems.

2.3 Data Analysis

The study employed qualitative descriptive-stylistic analysis complemented by thematic content analysis to identify, classify, and interpret graphological deviations across the selected poems. Guided by Geoffrey Leech's (1969) Foregrounding Theory, the analysis treated graphological deviation not as arbitrary typographical irregularity, but as a deliberate mechanism of *foregrounding*—where visual departures from standard orthographic, syntactic, or layout norms create heightened aesthetic and thematic prominence. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic framework, observed deviations were systematically coded, categorized, and interpreted in relation to their immediate textual function and postcolonial context.

To ensure analytical consistency and prevent impressionistic coding, graphological deviation was operationalized through specific criteria distinguishing standard poetic conventions from true visual subversions:

1. Unusual Lowercase: Omission of mandatory orthographic capitalization, specifically the consistent non-capitalization of the first-person pronoun "i" or non-standard sentence-initial lowercasing.
2. Unconventional Punctuation: Non-standard use, misplacement, or complete omission of terminal punctuation, including unexpected semicolons, isolated em-dashes, or broken syntactic stops that disrupt reading flow.
3. Deviant Lineation / Breaks: Visual or spatial fragmentation of lines that departs from conventional stanzaic layout. Standard lineation—defined as regular enjambment or line endings conforming to standard syntactic, clause, or metric boundaries—was explicitly excluded from deviation counts. Line breaks were coded as graphological deviations only when they involved mid-syntagm/mid-word breaking, extreme stair-casing, or visually dislocated spatial layout.

4. Atypical Spacing: Unconventional horizontal or vertical layout gaps designed to force visual pauses or structural fragmentation on the page.
5. Repetition: Graphological doubling or visual iteration of specific lexical items for rhythmic or emotional emphasis.
6. Elongation: Typographical stretching of consonant or vowel characters (e.g., character doubling) to represent visual and auditory extension.

To enhance analytical rigor, each selected poem underwent repeated close readings. Every instantiation meeting the operational criteria was documented with its exact line reference, categorized under its corresponding graphological type, and tallied to determine raw frequencies (N) and relative proportions (%) across the corpus. These quantitative counts served as the empirical foundation for interpreting how Bobis's visual strategies function as semiotic tools for articulating postcolonial identity, affect, and resistance.

2.4 Ethical Consideration

The conduct of this study adhered to established ethical principles governing qualitative and literary research. Proper acknowledgment and citation of all literary works written by Merlinda Bobis were strictly observed to uphold intellectual property rights and academic integrity. Since the study involved textual analysis of published literary works, no human participants were involved; therefore, issues concerning participant confidentiality and informed consent were not applicable. Nevertheless, the researchers exercised cultural sensitivity and objectivity throughout the interpretive process to avoid misrepresentation of the poems and their cultural contexts. Transparency was maintained by clearly documenting the research procedures, analytical framework, and interpretation of the findings. Furthermore, honesty, accuracy, and academic integrity were upheld through strict compliance with institutional standards against plagiarism and data fabrication (Resnik, 2020).

3. Results

This section presents the empirical findings of the descriptive-stylistic analysis of the ten selected poems by Merlinda Bobis using Geoffrey Leech's (1969) Foregrounding Theory as the foundational analytical framework. Grounded in Leech's core theoretical premise that literary prominence arises when a writer intentionally departs from backgrounded language norms, the analysis systematically examined graphological deviations across the corpus. Following the application of the explicit operational coding scheme established in Section 2.3—which strictly excluded standard line breaks conforming to regular syntax or metric boundaries—a total of 38 instantiations of true graphological deviation were identified across the ten poems.

The empirical analysis identified six distinct categories of graphological deviation: unusual lowercase usage, unconventional punctuation, deviant line breaks, atypical spacing, repetition, and elongation. Rather than occurring as arbitrary typographical anomalies, these departures operate as deliberate visual mechanisms that restructure reading pace, visual emphasis, and thematic resonance. Table 1 presents the quantitative frequency distribution, relative proportions, and primary textual instances for each identified deviation type.

Table 1. Quantitative frequency and distribution of graphological deviations across selected poetry.

Category of Graphological Deviation	Operational Feature & Criteria	Raw Frequency (N)	Proportion (%)	Primary Examples in Corpus
Unusual Lowercase	Non-capitalization of pronoun "i" or sentence-initial lowercasing	12	31.6%	<i>"i love too beautifully today"</i> (P2L1) <i>"how easily a speck of bird"</i> (P1L1)
Unconventional Punctuation	Non-standard terminal punctuation, isolated em-dashes, unexpected semicolons	10	26.3%	<i>"shatters the evenness of skies—"</i> (P1L2) <i>"i know—this skin."</i> (P2L8, L10)
Deviant Lineation / Breaks	Visually dislocated, mid-syntagm, or spatially fragmented lineation (excl. standard enjambment)	8	21.1%	<i>"the sea clings / to the roof of my mouth / but the tide of my heart / cannot swell"</i> (P3L2–L5)
Atypical Spacing	Unconventional horizontal layout gaps forcing visual pauses	4	10.5%	<i>"the fate / of one beloved nation"</i> (P4L7) <i>"at one o'clock in the morning / when a shameless nipple"</i> (P6L4–L5)
Repetition	Graphological doubling or visual iteration of specific lexical items	3	7.9%	<i>"in the plaza"</i> (P4L2, L4, L6) <i>"tomorrow, tomorrow"</i> (P5L8)
Elongation	Typographical character extension mimicking vocal stretching	1	2.6%	<i>"Halakhak-k-k-k-kookaburra!"</i> (P7L23)
Total Instantiations	Systematic tally across 10 selected poems	38	100.0%	

As demonstrated in Table 1, orthographic subversions constitute the dominant cluster of visual deviations in Bobis's poetry. Unusual Lowercase emerged as the most frequent feature ($N = 12,31.6\%$), followed closely by Unconventional Punctuation ($N = 10,26.3\%$). Combined, these two categories account for over half (57.9%) of all recorded departures in the corpus, demonstrating that Bobis's primary visual strategy relies on subverting standard orthographic mechanics.

Deviant Lineation represents the secondary cluster ($N = 8,21.1\%$), capturing instances where line breaks cause deliberate mid-clause fragmentation or dislocated spatial arrangement rather than standard poetic enjambment. Tertiary deviations—including Atypical Spacing ($N = 4,10.5\%$), Repetition ($N = 3,7.9\%$), and Elongation ($N = 1,2.6\%$)—occur less frequently, operating as targeted visual devices reserved for specific emotional, rhythmic, or auditory emphasis.

To show how these empirical distributions function stylistically within specific textual contexts, Table 2 outlines the operational features, textual evidence, and interpretive functions of each graphological type. This table serves as the bridge between quantitative tallies and qualitative stylistic analysis.

Table 2. Types, textual examples, and stylistic functions of graphological deviations in Merlinda Bobis's poetry.

Types of Graphological Deviations	Textual Example & Source	Stylistic Function/Effect
Unusual Lowercase	<i>"i love too beautifully today", (P2L1)</i> <i>"how easily a speck of bird", (P1L1)</i>	Conveys humility, informality, or even self-lowering. It is against grammatical rules, though, to create figurative emphasis.
Line Breaks	<i>"the sea clings / to the roof of my mouth/ but the tide of my heart / cannot swell" (P3L2L3L4L5)</i>	It creates rhythm, gives tension, and may point to some words or pictures. Emotions are made stronger, and it may offer the reader some time for meditation.
Unusual Punctuation	<i>"shatters the evenness of skies— " (P1L2)</i> <i>"it cannot let go;/ i know—this skin." (P2L8L10)</i>	It conveys strong emotions, a sense of unexpectedness, and interruptions in thought, thereby enhancing expressiveness and tone.
Spacing	<i>"the fate/of one beloved nation" (P4L7)</i> <i>"at one o'clock in the morning/when a shameless nipple" (P6L4L5)</i>	Serve to emphasize some words, create a visual rhythm, and affect the tempo or feeling of the poem.
Repetition	<i>"in the plaza"(P4L2L4L6)</i> <i>"tomorrow, tomorrow"(P5L8)</i>	Emphasis on emotions, rhythm, and the importance of such words or ideas as love, longing, and memory. It produces musicality and emphasis.
Elongation	<i>"Halakhak-k-k-k-k-kookaburra!"(P7L23)</i>	Mimics natural speech (e.g., laughter/sound stretching); Foregrounds expressive intensity.

Table 2 demonstrates that graphological deviation in Bobis's poetry operates through a range of visual and typographical strategies rather than through a single form of departure from conventional poetic presentation. The identified features vary in their visual prominence and expressive function, suggesting that graphological deviation is employed selectively in response to the demands of particular textual moments. More visually disruptive features, such as line breaks and unconventional punctuation, affect the organization and movement of the poetic text, while less frequent features, including spacing, repetition, and elongation, contribute more selectively to emphasis, rhythm, and expressive intensity.

The findings further indicate that these deviations may function in relation to one another rather than as completely isolated stylistic features. Line breaks can work alongside punctuation to shape pauses and interruptions in the movement of thought, while spacing can reinforce the visual separation created by lineation. Similarly, repetition and elongation can extend the rhythmic and expressive effects established by the arrangement of words on the page. The interaction of these features suggests that the visual organization of Bobis's poetry contributes to the reader's encounter with rhythm, emphasis, and emotional expression.

Among the identified features, unusual lowercase usage emerged as the most frequently observed graphological feature within the selected corpus, followed closely by unconventional punctuation and deviant lineation. The comparatively less frequent occurrence of spacing, repetition, and elongation indicates that these tertiary features are employed more selectively. Rather than suggesting that less frequent deviations are less meaningful, their selective occurrence indicates that Bobis uses different graphological resources for particular expressive purposes. Overall, the findings show that graphological deviation functions as an integrated stylistic resource through which visual arrangement, rhythm, emphasis, and poetic meaning interact.

3.1 Relative Prominence of Graphological Deviations

The distribution of the identified graphological features indicates a clear pattern of relative frequency in Bobis's use of visual deviation within the selected corpus. Unusual lowercase usage and unconventional punctuation constitute the most frequently observed graphological features, together forming a dominant cluster of orthographic subversion that accounts for 57.9% of all departures. Their prominence demonstrates that manipulating conventional textual and orthographic markers is central to her stylistic practice. Deviant lineation forms the secondary cluster (21.1%), indicating that visual-spatial segmentation also plays a substantial role in shaping the movement and presentation of poetic thought. The remaining features—spacing, repetition, and elongation—occur less frequently and serve more specific expressive purposes. Their targeted occurrence nevertheless contributes to the overall stylistic pattern of the poems by introducing visual pauses, rhythmic reinforcement, and heightened expressive intensity. Taken together, the pattern of occurrence suggests a deliberate relationship between a feature's visual prominence and its potential stylistic

function. The higher frequency of orthographic subversions (lowercase and punctuation), followed by spatial lineation and tertiary features, establishes a visual hierarchy that reflects Bobis's strategic use of graphological foregrounding.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that graphological deviation functions as an integral stylistic resource in the selected poetry of Merlinda Bobis. Across the ten analyzed poems, six major forms of graphological deviation were identified, yielding 38 distinct instances. Their empirical distribution indicates that Bobis does not employ visual subversion uniformly; rather, specific orthographic, typographical, and spatial features are strategically deployed to shape the organization, rhythm, emotional tone, and postcolonial significance of particular poetic passages.

Viewed through Leech's (1969) Foregrounding Theory, these departures become stylistically significant because they direct the reader's attention to aspects of the text that depart from backgrounded linguistic expectations. By disrupting conventional orthography, visual layout, and punctuation, Bobis transforms the physical page into an active semiotic space where visual form and poetic meaning interact. This finding aligns directly with Leech's (1969) view of deviation as a primary mechanism through which literary language acquires heightened prominence, while reinforcing broader stylistic observations by Dhyaningrum (2020) and Shen (2007) concerning the interpretive significance of visual foregrounding in contemporary discourse.

Furthermore, the quantitative distribution highlights a clear hierarchy of visual devices in Bobis's craft. Rather than relying on erratic visual design, the concentration of deviations in specific orthographic categories reveals a systematic methodology behind her aesthetic choices. Each category functions as a distinct communicative tool within the broader theoretical framework of stylistic foregrounding.

4.1 Significance of the Primary Cluster: Orthographic Subversion (Lowercase and Punctuation)

The empirical data establish that orthographic subversion constitutes the primary cluster of graphological deviations in Bobis's corpus, with unusual lowercasing ($N=12$, 31.6%) and unconventional punctuation ($N=10$, 26.3%) collectively accounting for 57.9% of all observed instances. This high concentration demonstrates that Bobis relies predominantly on the manipulation of conventional orthographic features to create stylistic emphasis and political resonance. In Leech's (1969) model, orthography constitutes one of the most deeply ingrained background norms in written language; thus, subverting it produces immediate cognitive salience.

The deliberate adoption of the lowercase "i" in place of the capitalized first-person pronoun represents a prominent visual departure from standard English grammar. Within the poems examined (e.g., *"i love too beautifully today"*, P2L1; *"i*

know—this skin.", P2L10), this choice functions as a visual manifestation of humility, informality, and self-lowering. In a postcolonial context, the refusal to capitalize the personal ego subverts Western individualistic and imperial orthographic norms, visually enacting the decentering of the colonized subject. The lowercase "i" draws attention to the representation of the speaking self, providing an empirical basis for considering the fluid relationship between individual identity, marginalization, and linguistic convention.

Working alongside lowercase usage, unconventional punctuation ($N = 10,26.3\%$) further disrupts syntactic continuity. The intentional deployment of isolated em-dashes (e.g., *"shatters the evenness of skies—"*, P1L2) and unexpected semicolons coupled with dashes (*"it cannot let go;/ i know—this skin."*, P2L8, L10) introduces abrupt visual pauses and mental fractures. These marks interrupt syntactic flow, mirroring emotional hesitancy, unexpectedness, and the fractured cadence of memory inherent in the postcolonial and diasporic experience. As Maledo (2019) and Maitre (2019) observe, punctuation in non-conventional poetic forms transcends mechanical utility, serving instead as an emotional and rhythmic score for the reader.

4.2 Interpretation of Spatial and Visual Lineation

Deviant lineation constitutes the secondary cluster within the corpus ($N = 8,21.1\%$). Crucially, because standard poetic enjambment conforming to standard syntactic boundaries was excluded during re-coding, these 8 instances specifically represent moments where lineation visually disrupts syntactic units or creates dislocated spatial layouts on the page. According to Leech (1969), when structural expectations of layout are disrupted, the visual arrangement itself becomes an independent bearer of semiotic meaning.

For example, in the passage *"the sea clings / to the roof of my mouth / but the tide of my heart / cannot swell"* (P3L2–L5), the visual fragmentation cuts across natural clause boundaries. The physical breaking of the line visually mimics emotional constriction, speech blockage, and the struggle to articulate postcolonial loss. The layout forces the eye to pause at unnatural syntactic intervals, generating tension between visual form and linguistic meaning.

This processing effect is consistent with eye-tracking research on silent poetry reading by Beck and Konieczny (2021), which demonstrates that visual verse layout and line endings significantly alter cognitive processing and rhythmic interpretation. In Bobis's work, spatial lineation serves as a visual prosody through which cultural dislocation and displacement are physically mapped across the page.

4.3 Strategic Utility of Tertiary Deviations (Spacing, Repetition, and Elongation)

Spacing ($N = 4,10.5\%$), repetition ($N = 3,7.9\%$), and elongation ($N = 1,2.6\%$) occurred less frequently within the selected corpus. Their lower frequency, however, does not diminish their stylistic significance. Instead, their selective occurrence

indicates that Bobis employs these features at particular textual moments to reinforce specific expressive and acoustic effects. Under Leech's (1969) framework, rare deviations often carry heightened local foregrounding value precisely because of their unexpectedness within the text.

Atypical spacing creates visual intervals within the poetic text (e.g., *"the fate / of one beloved nation"*, P4L7; *"at one o'clock in the morning / when a shameless nipple"*, P6L4–L5), isolating expressions to enforce contemplative pauses and affect reading tempo. Graphological repetition (e.g., *"in the plaza"*, P4L2, L4, L6; *"tomorrow, tomorrow"*, P5L8) establishes visual iteration, transforming lexical items into recurring rhythmic motifs that evoke longing and nostalgia. This corresponds directly with Leech's (1969) foregrounding principle that lexical iteration increases visual prominence.

Finally, elongation—manifested in *"Halakhak-k-k-k-k-kookaburra!"* (P7L23)—uses character duplication to capture vocal stretching and laughter visually. This feature creates a direct interaction between visual form and auditory dimension, giving visual permanence to oral traditions and indigenous acoustic presence. Through these tertiary devices, Bobis extends the boundaries of printed text to accommodate the dynamics of oral performance.

4.4 Synthesis: Graphological Foregrounding and Postcolonial Identity

The findings collectively indicate that Bobis's use of graphological deviation involves a systematic interaction between visual form, linguistic convention, and poetic meaning. The six identified features do not function as isolated typographical irregularities; rather, they contribute in different ways to the organization and expressive quality of the poems. Through Leech's (1969) Foregrounding Theory, these stylistic choices are understood as deliberate departures from conventional textual expectations that make specific features noticeable.

Their significance becomes fully realized when considered alongside the postcolonial and diasporic themes evident in the selected poems. The visual fragmentation produced by line breaks, the subversion of orthographic conventions through lowercasing, and the selective manipulation of spacing and repetition reflect themes of identity, memory, displacement, and cultural belonging. As a Filipino-Australian writer negotiating dual cultural locations, Bobis uses graphological subversion not merely as ornamentation but as a visual site of linguistic reclamation and cultural assertion against normative conventions.

Ultimately, this synthesis shows that graphological analysis provides empirical evidence of how postcolonial writers subvert colonial linguistic norms. By destabilizing standard English typography, Bobis carves out a distinct visual space for indigenous expression and postcolonial identity.

4.5 Educational Implications and Global Relevance

From a pedagogical standpoint, these findings provide concrete textual evidence for literary instruction, particularly in the teaching of poetry and stylistics. The identified graphological deviations demonstrate that visual features such as line breaks, punctuation, capitalization, spacing, repetition, and elongation can function as tangible points of entry for close reading. By encouraging students to examine not only *what* a poem communicates but *how* its visual layout contributes to that communication, graphological analysis bridges formal analysis with thematic interpretation.

Furthermore, these findings support critical and culturally responsive literary learning. Examining Bobis's poetic practices within her Filipino-Australian and postcolonial contexts allows learners to recognize how literary form reflects experiences of identity, displacement, and cultural negotiation. In relation to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), the study highlights the potential of contemporary Filipino literature to foster inclusive and meaningful literary learning. Integrating graphological foregrounding into classroom discussions provides educators with an analytical framework that encourages critical engagement with diverse, culturally situated poetic texts.

In conclusion, applying Leech's (1969) Stylistic Theory to contemporary postcolonial poetry enriches both stylistic pedagogy and literary criticism. It equips educators and students with a structured, empirically grounded method for unlocking the deeper semiotic and cultural meanings embedded in visual poetic design.

5. Conclusion

This study substantiates the argument that graphological deviation in Merlinda Bobis's poetry is not merely an ornamental flourish, but a deliberate semiotic tool for the visual performance of postcolonial identity. Grounded in Geoffrey Leech's (1969) Foregrounding Theory, the empirical investigation across ten selected poems identified a total of 38 instantiations of graphological deviation across six distinct categories. The findings reveal a dominant cluster of orthographic subversions—specifically unusual lowercase usage (31.6%) and unconventional punctuation (26.3%)—which together account for 57.9% of all observed departures. By systematically disrupting standard capitalization and terminal punctuation, Bobis turns the physical page into an active site of orthographic resistance, visually enacting the decentering of the personal ego and subverting colonial linguistic standards. Furthermore, the study demonstrates how spatial and typographical arrangements function as a form of visual prosody. By isolating true spatial departures from standard poetic enjambment, the analysis reveals that dislocated lineation (21.1%), atypical spacing (10.5%), repetition (7.9%), and elongation (2.6%) contribute directly to the representation of memory, longing, and cultural dislocation. Passages such as "the sea

clings / to the roof of my mouth" illustrate how graphological fragmentation creates an emotional score for the reader, forcing physical and cognitive pauses that mirror the fractured cadence of diasporic experience. This reinforces Leech's assertion that graphic layout can operate as an independent bearer of stylistic meaning, rendering the experience of poetic interpretation visceral and embodied rather than purely textual.

In applying Leech's stylistic model to contemporary postcolonial literature, this study reframes graphological deviation as a calculated subversion of linguistic conventionality, addressing a key gap in Southeast Asian and Filipino literary studies. By establishing a clear empirical link between theoretical foregrounding and postcolonial expression, the study elevates the status of typographical markers from superficial stylistic choices to primary meaning-making devices. It permits a nuanced reading of how non-Western poets reshape English typography to carve out new spaces for cultural articulation, proving that page layout is an essential dimension of a poem's communicative power. From a pedagogical standpoint, these findings demonstrate that graphological analysis provides a practical, structured lens for literary instruction. By directing student attention to the systematic relationship between textual form, visual foregrounding, and thematic meaning, the identified deviations serve as concrete points of entry for close reading. In line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), integrating graphological foregrounding into stylistics and literature classrooms fosters critical, culturally responsive approaches that enable learners to engage meaningfully with contemporary Filipino and postcolonial poetry. Finally, this study reinstates the visibility of print as a vital dimension of literary narrative, establishing a framework for theorizing the relationship among form, affect, and cultural identity in contemporary poetry. Future research may extend this inquiry by examining graphological deviation across broader Southeast Asian poetic traditions, particularly in works that negotiate multilingualism, migration, and indigenous identity. Comparative studies investigating how regional poets deploy capitalization, punctuation, spatial lineation, and acoustic elongation will further determine whether the foregrounding patterns identified in Bobis's poetry reflect broader regional aesthetics or remain distinctive to her postcolonial voice.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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