



FOREGROUNDING OIL EXPLORATION AND EXPLOITATION ON THE ECOLOGY: AN ECOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF KAINE AGARY'S *YELLOW YELLOW*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how ecolinguistic theory is deployed in Kaine Agary's Yellow Yellow in highlighting the problems that oil-rich communities face as a result of the activities of oil drilling companies in the Niger Delta region. A purposive sampling of six extracts from the text was conducted, and Stibbe's framing and evaluation frameworks were utilized to provide insights for the textual analysis. The results show that Agary employs the ecolinguistic tools of framing and evaluation in foregrounding issues such as prostitution, discrimination, environmental degradation, kidnapping, destruction of micro/macro-organisms on the ecology, and oil theft/bunkering among others. The text constructs these issues and presents them from a negative angle using the tools of framing and evaluation.

KEY WORDS: Ecolinguistics, ecology, foregrounding, literary discourse, oil exploration.

Introduction

Language is used in many different contexts to convey ideas as well as the characteristics of objects and activities in the surrounding world. It serves as a reflection of both human activity and the environment we live in. According to Stanlaw (2020), ecolinguistics is a fairly recent field of linguistics that takes into consideration how language and discourse shape the environment and ecology as well as the physical and social ecological framework in which language acts. It is also sometimes referred to as language and ecology. Stanlaw posited that language serves as a tool for both intellectual expression and environmental

impact. In other words, language both influences and is a tool for illustrating the environment and ecosystem.

Oil exploration is the process of finding and extracting oil, whereas oil exploitation is the process of extracting the oil and, frequently, depriving the native population of oil-rich areas of the advantages from the oil's revenues. These two concepts are inseparable. Stewart (2011) states that petroleum geologists have acquired the knowledge to search for hydrocarbons not only in areas where they have previously been discovered, but also in areas where conditions are comparable to those of former discoveries. He cites the example of how

geophysical techniques, like seismic surveys, were created to help find such structures in the subsurface when oil explorers noticed that oil and gas were occasionally found in anticlines, where flat rock formations had folded into an arched structure. This implies that the actual process of demolishing earth surfaces that resemble locations where oil has been discovered is a result of the search for oil. This illustrates how the pursuit of "black gold" is causing the biosphere to deteriorate on a daily basis (Aluya & Adebayo, 2019).

Agary's *Yellow Yellow* examines the Niger-Delta people's struggles with the environment critically. The novel looks at the politics behind oil companies' exploratory efforts in the area. The author examines how the government is perceived as a covert accomplice in the rape of the area and shows how the government and expatriates' profit while the people, whose everyday lives are marked by poverty, are left disappointed. Additionally, he skillfully uses language to convey how human activity—specifically, the extraction of oil—is devastating the biosphere. Certain operations have started in some locations because of the availability of oil in those areas. Authors like Kaine Agary have been able to creatively highlight these acts and their effects in this masterfully written work because of the creative power of language. Kaine Agary raises a number of concerns in the novel, including underdevelopment, carelessness, pollution, kidnapping, gas flaring, vandalism, destruction of farmlands and micro/macro-organisms, and prostitution (Aluya & Ocheme, 2024). Discussed are the problems with oil-rich communities and its effects on the environment, with a focus on the life of Zilayefa, an adolescent who faced discrimination from many people because of her skin tone and the circumstances of her birth.

Conceptual Framework

This section covers two concepts: ecolinguistics and ecology. Ecology is the study of how various species interact and relate to one another as well as their surroundings. It is focused on the broad ideas that apply to both plants and animals. Ecology is the

study of life and nature. It is about the interactions that occur between organisms and their surroundings. According to Balasubramanian (2019:2), ecology is essentially a field of biology that examines how organisms interact with their biophysical surroundings. There are biotic and abiotic elements in this biophysical environment. He claims that the German scientist Ernst Haeckel invented the term "ecology" in 1866, combining the Greek words Oikos (home) and logos (study). The article explains that the biophysical environment in which all interactive mechanisms occur is referred to as an ecosystem, and that earth science serves as the backbone of ecology.

Ecology is concerned with creatures, populations, communities, ecosystems, and the biosphere. The organism's surroundings serve as its living space. Hence, ecology is frequently referred to as environmental biology. Ecology is widely accepted as a natural science. It is thought to be a science dealing with the nature and interrelationships of living things. The term ecology is derived from the Greek word "oikos," which means 'habitation, residence, or living space'. According to Nayaya et al. (2018), ecology is the scientific study of how different living things—plants, animals, and microbes—interact with one another and their natural surroundings. It focuses primarily on how biotic and abiotic environmental factors control an organism's growth, dispersion, behavior, and survival. Put another way, "ecology" refers to both the science that studies how creatures interact with their surroundings and the philosophy that frames the meaning of life in terms of natural processes.

However, different academics have different interpretations of ecolinguistics: some see it as the study of the ecology of language, others as the iterative interaction between human discourses and the natural world, and still others suggest it deals with the general decline in linguistic diversity (LeVasseur 2014, Aluya & Adebayo, 2019). According to Stibbe (2012), ecolinguistics adds a crucial perspective to research on language and

globalization since it considers the entire world, or more accurately, the biosphere, which is the thin layer of the planet Earth's atmosphere that is home to and sustains all known species. The necessity for ecolinguistics stems from a discipline that treats people as being in isolation rather than in contact with the rest of the biosphere and the diversity of life forms within it, seemed to have forgotten the ecological embedding of the species it studies. Thus, ecolinguistics unites language, the environment, and people. The study of ecolinguistics "explores the role of language in the life-sustaining interactions of humans, other species, and the physical environment," (Stanlaw, 2020). In addition to focusing on how language use affects environmental deterioration, it also considers how linguistic diversity, like biodiversity, is essential to a healthy world (Aluya & Uduma, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Arran Stibbe's (2015) ecolinguistics model as a theoretical framework. The theory examines language to identify the stories we live by, evaluates those stories from an ecological standpoint, rejects harmful stories, and aids in the hunt for alternative stories to live by. Stibbe (2015) notes that the stories we live by are narratives that many members of a culture carry about in their heads, shaping their behavior, speech, and thoughts. He lists eight different categories of stories among which two (i.e. framing and evaluation) are deployed in this study.

Framing is the process of organizing a target domain using a source frame, or packet of knowledge. Stories about a particular aspect of life called framings utilize frames, which are discrete units of general knowledge. Climate change can be conceptualized as an environmental concern, a security risk, a problem, or a dilemma, and our understanding of it varies depending on which of these terms we use.

The term "evaluation" refers to narratives that people have about what aspects of life are good or poor. Cognitive assessments are associations we

have in memory, such as that honesty is good and lying is bad, rather than a meticulous analysis of the data to determine whether something is good or bad. These stories become cultural evaluations when they are widely shared within a culture; they are stories about what is good or evil that have gained societal acceptance. Numerous cultural judgments are ingrained in everyday discourse regarding various facets of social life, such as the positive aspects of economic expansion, retail sales, higher profits, speed, and convenience (Stibbe, 2015). It is possible for cultural assessments to get entrenched to the point that people forget why some things are viewed as good and others as bad. It gets easy to accept the "good news" that Christmas sales are up without thinking about the environmental costs or the issues associated with mounting

Empirical Studies on Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow*

Abioye and Ajiboye (2014) employ lexical examples to highlight the distinctively Nigerian or Niger-Deltan flavor of *Yellow-Yellow* and to establish the connection between language use and style, or the way the writer expresses their experience. According to them, the lexical selections have been artistically chosen to harmonize with the text's language and its setting. That implies that, the linguistic motive and style are predominantly Nigerian, as seen by the usage of loan words, loan-blends, and loan phrases as well as by coinages, semantic extensions, Nigerian Pidgin, and imagery derived from the surrounding context. They claim that the reader can easily relate to the richly cultural expressions since they evoke strong mental images in them. As a result, there is far less chance of misinterpretation—especially for Nigerian readers.

The study conducted by Ishaku (2018) concentrated on discourse markers as essential components of Nigerian English and markers of identity and ownership in general discourses and writings. It also looked at the significance of discourse markers in indigenous writings and how they shed light on the use of discourse markers in

everyday speech. The study used Labov's variability theory to analyze a few passages from Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow* and Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer*. Secondary sources of written materials and journals were also consulted for information regarding the discourse markers. The study revealed that indigenous discourse included in the texts plays an essential function in depicting ownership of the writings and is understandable to Nigerian consumers.

Okwuokei's (2019) dissertation focuses on the extent of psychological damage the degraded environment has brought upon the selected characters in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, revealing grief, nostalgia and aggression as traumatic manifestations. The study asserts that hopelessness, helplessness, fear, guilt and anger bring about trauma in the characters. Furthermore, it explains the effect of trauma on aggression and the extent to which trauma leads to chaos. The study concludes that grief, nostalgia and aggression as a result of trauma are a test of true personality and affect the society in general.

Ogunfolabi (2019) takes on the connection between the discourse of racial purity and its traumatic effects on the biracial woman which for him takes center stage in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*. Ogunfolabi mentions that trauma and biracialism manifest in valorization and vilification of biracial subjects. The article argues that the connection between the discourse of racial purity and its traumatic effects on the biracial woman.

The relationship between language and its surroundings is examined by Aluya & Ocheme (2024), with particular attention to the role language plays in regard to ecological deterioration and the social evils that accompany it. The article examines purposively sampled extracts from Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow*, drawing on insights from Arran Stibbe's (2015) ecolinguistics framework to explore how the issue of ecological degradation has been framed, the frames that have been used to construct it, the ideological stories present in the text, and how

they influence the thoughts, conversations, and actions of the characters. The study's conclusions demonstrate the various framing strategies used to connect the topic of ecological degradation and other related societal concerns. These strategies include complex sentence constructions, additives, adversatives, contrasts, pronominal, and vocabulary items. The author presents the problem in a negative perspective in order to emphasize how serious it is. This representation is accomplished by combining source and target frames with descriptive and evaluative lexical words that have negative meanings. These language tools draw attention to the different ideological narratives that are told in the text and how they shaped the problem. Thus, the analysis serves as an example of how language might be used to address environmental concerns.

Theoretical Framework

Ecolinguistics has been used as the framework for analysis in this study in order to provide light on the foregrounding of oil exploration and exploitation on the ecology in the Niger Delta region. Ecolinguistics is defined as the role language plays in the life-sustaining interactions of humans, other species, and the physical environment. It is interested in the language used to discuss how the environment deteriorates and how diversity in language, like biodiversity, is essential to a healthy world (Stanlaw 2020). Zhou (2021) argues that the ecological crisis—which serves as a crucial foundation—and an ecological perspective on linguistics—which serves as a linguistic necessity—are responsible for the emergence of ecolinguistics. Ecolinguistics was created in response to the rise and persistence of societal challenges, allowing for the effective discussion and analysis of the environment through language. Ecolinguistics can be helpful in promoting behaviors that preserve the ecosystems on which life depends, or harmful in incentivizing actions that cause harm to the ecosystems. By opposing harmful narratives and supporting the hunt for fresh narratives to live by, it makes an effort to practically stand out in the world (Stibbe 2015). Narratives that depict nature as a machine or a

resource, advertising, consumerist, stories of unrestricted economic expansion, and stories of intensive farming are all included in the resistant nature of ecolinguistics. Ecolinguistics uses Positive Discourse Analysis to discover new tales to live by researching nature writing, poetry, environmental writing, and traditional and indigenous forms of language from throughout the world.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design. According to Bhandari (2023), qualitative research is the collection and analysis of non-numerical data (such as text, video, or audio) in order to better comprehend thoughts, opinions, or experiences. It is used to obtain detailed insights into a topic or to generate fresh research ideas. Bhandari emphasizes that qualitative research is utilized to understand how individuals see the world. Using only secondary sources of data, such as articles and texts, the researchers carefully examine how the writer has skillfully portrayed the negative impacts of oil exploration and exploitation on the environment. The publications consulted were helpful in developing and completing the literature review phase of the research. The review is then utilized to better understand the scope of the investigation. Using the ecolinguistics theory, the paper selects fragments from the text to serve as the core data for analysis. The passages are taken from the text and cited by page number, with the message or messages read from it explained thereafter. Excerpts are text excerpts that reflect how language depicts the influence of oil exploration on the ecology. The social, psychological, and cultural worldviews of the people are also covered in excerpts, along with how the novel reflects them. The results of the analysis and talks are given, along with any suggestions that may be made to help address the ecological situation.

Textual Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The text *Yellow Yellow* is authored by Kaine Agary and is set in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. It discusses the issues of life and environmental

degradation among others. In this section, various portions of the text relevant to this study are presented below for analysis. One of the ecolinguistic tools used by Agary in the text is framing. The extracts below illustrate the deployment of framing in foregrounding environmental degradation:

Extract 1

Sometimes, when I would sit outside
with boys and girls in my age groups,
we would listen to the radio and
sometimes we would hear an Ijaw person,
living in Port Harcourt or Lagos
speaking about how the oil company had
destroyed our Niger Delta with
impunity. They would discuss how the Ijaws
and other ethnic groups were
suffering and even dying while the wealth of
their soil fed others. They would
proffer ideas about what the oil company
and the government had to do (Agary,
2006, p.8).

Extract 2

A group of people, painted in the
same balck as my mother, some covered
from head to toe, was marching to
see the Amananowei, the head of the
village. They were marching to the
Amananowel's house to report the
matter and demand that he take it up
with the oil company. Some were crying;
Others were talking about compensation
(Agary, 2006, p.4).

Extract 3

If we had to suffer admist such plenty,
then these boys would cause as much
as havoc as possible until someone took
interest in our plight and until justice,
as they saw it, prevailed (Agary, 2006,
p.9).

Extract one emphasizes the themes of degradation, destitution, and exploitation in the Niger Delta, despite the region's abundant resources. It consists of three sentences, each of which has a main clause and a succession of subordinate clauses that contribute to the content of the text. Framing, which is an ecolinguistic tool employed in this extract, is achieved through pronominal reference, contrast and some lexical expressions. The author uses these features as frames to successfully portray the discourse subject. Stibbe (2015) defines framings as specific stories about a specific area of life that make use of small packets of generic knowledge known as frames. Packets of knowledge here refer to a source frame that is utilized to structure or map a destination domain. The source frames contribute to understanding the target domain, and for this understanding to be realized, both frames must be structured or mapped. In extract one, Agary uses the lexical terms "the oil company", "suffering and dying", and "others" as source frames to build or map the target domains, "our Niger Delta", "the Ijaws and other ethnic groups", and "the wealth of their soil". Lexical items such as "destroyed", "were", and "fed" help to structure these domains. The writer conceptualizes the source frames as issues and draws the reader's attention back to the target domain to explain how the problem generated by the source frame has affected the target frames, which are his ultimate goal. Pronominal words such as "we," "our," and "their" deserve special attention because of their functional significance in the text. The text's references to "we" and "they" refer to the youths in the region discussing the issue of environmental degradation and resource exploitation. The use of "we" and "they" expresses the youths' solidarity for the region's future, indicates the collectivity of their actions, and asserts their willingness to exercise their rights. Aside from the use of pronominals, the writer uses contrast as a linguistic technique to express his intentions concerning the subject of discourse. Here, he uses the compound-complex sentence form to highlight the Niger Delta's hunger and want in the midst of

abundance. Two characteristics of the Niger Delta are contrasted in the expression, "The Ijaws and other ethnic groups are suffering and even dying while the wealth of their soil fed others". The writer's use of comparison strengthens each component of the text by stressing the various aspects of the problem presented.

Extract two leverages on framing as an ecolinguistics strategy to highlight the issue of land degradation caused by oil spills. It consists of three distinct sentences with intricate structures. As Agary points out, all components of each sentence contribute to the subject at hand. The first sentence contains a major clause and two subordinate clauses. The first sentence's use of the nominal word "a group of people" exposes the reader to the writer's discourse subject. As a result, the term serves as a focalisation device, making this section of the sentence the focus or topic of discussion. The two subordinate clauses "painted in the same black as my mother" and "covered from head to toe" that precede the main clause serve to complement it by providing additional information that helps to bring to light the subject of oil spills and their consequences for people and farmlands. The author uses vocabulary items like "painted in black" and "covered from head to toe" to describe the devastating effects of oil spills. The pronominal item "they" is used at the beginning of the second phrase in extract one to connect the sentence's flow to the preceding sentence. The pronominal item in this instance refers to the same individuals who were introduced in the opening phrase. But the subordinate clause "to report the matter and demand that he takes it up with the oil company" and the main clause "they were marching to the Amananowei's house" highlight how serious the topic the author is discussing. The final line, which consists of the two clauses "some were crying" and "others were talking about compensation," alludes to the devastation that oil spills cause to people, supporting the seriousness of the writer's topic of discussion. A detailed examination of this text reveals Agary's use of complex sentence patterns

and lexical objects as frames to portray a negative image of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region. Framings used by the writer draw the reader's attention to the discourse subject, give depth and context to the issue discussed, and improve the overall aesthetic of the message transmitted.

Extract three projects the themes of suffering and protest in the Niger Delta region. This is accomplished using a complex sentence form that includes one main clause and a succession of subordinate clauses. The subordinate clause, "if we had to suffer amidst such plenty" highlights the writer's use of framing and contrast to convey the idea of pain. The pronominal component "We" in this expression refers to the region's whole indigenous population. The author uses contrast to highlight two tragic facts concerning the Niger Delta people. The first reality points to their poverty, while the second points to their plenty of wealth. Next to the first subordinate clause, the main clause "these boys would cause as much havoc as possible" is used to emphasize the topic of protest. Aside from comparison, the author uses framing as an ecolinguistic tool to present the problem of injustices committed against the region by oil firms and the government. For example, lexical terms like "suffer amidst plenty", "as much havoc as possible", and "someone" are used as source frames to map the destination frames "we", "these boys", and "our plights". The mapping between these two frames is accomplished by lexical elements like "had to," "would cause," and "took interest in". Agary focuses on the target frames, which all symbolize the Niger Delta people. However, in order to let the reader understand the predicament of the target frames, i.e., the obstacles that the region's residents face, he adds the source frames, which depict the reason responsible for the region's impoverishment, prompting the teenagers to protest. The second phase of analysis captures how evaluation as an ecolinguistic tool has been used to assess the issue of environmental degradation.

Extract 4

The black oil that spilled that
day swallowed my mother's crops and
unravelling the threads that held
together her fantasies for me (Agary,
2006, p.10).

Extract 5

Their faces, hands, legs, and
feet were yellow, though some parts
had big smudges of black.
Their skin had an acrid smell worse than
the odour of festering wounds,
which they tried to bury under scented
powders and perfumes (Agary,
2006, p. 35).

Extract 6

Flooding and farming, the
occupations that had sustained my mother,
her mother, and her mother's
mother no longer provided gain. I had
witnessed lands claimed by
massive floods during the rainy season,
the earth slowly melting into
the rivers. Women rowed their canoes
farther and farther away to
find land for farming. In addition, every
year, it was harder to catch fish
(Agary, 2006, p.39).

Extract four captures the destruction of the protagonist mother's farmland. This is achieved through a compound complex sentence comprising a main and two subordinate clauses. The main clause is denoted by "the black oil swallowed my mother's crops and unravelled the threads". Conversely, the subordinate clauses are "that spilled that day" and "that held together her fantasies for me". The lexical evaluations here are achieved through adjectivization, where the value of the evaluation is placed on the qualifying adjective (e.g. black). Apart from the use of adjective, lexical items such as "swallowed", "spilled", and "unravelling"

are verbs equally deployed as evaluative indicators in assessing the issue of destruction of farm produce by oil spills. For instance, the use of “black” alludes to the smelly liquid that invaded the protagonist mother’s farmland while the choice of “spilled” and “swallowed” suggest the destruction of the farm produce, hence, the seriousness of the subject been discussed. Through these evaluative indicators, Agary portrays the adverse effect of oil spills on the farmland in a negative light.

Evaluation in extract five is observed to be made in relation to the theme of prostitution, one of the attendant issues of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region. Two different sentences and a few lexical choices are employed here to evaluate the resultant effect of what young girls do to attract men. The text begins with the compound complex expression, “their faces, hands, legs and faces were yellow, though some parts had smudges of black”. The writer employs linguistic contrast to presents two colours of the body parts of these young girls. The main clause specifies one of the colours while the subordinate clause captures the other. While the compound complex sentence is deployed in the first sentence, the complex sentence is deployed in the second sentence as captured in “their skin had an acrid smell worse than the odour of festering wounds, which they bury under scented powders and perfumes”. Just like in the first sentence, this sentence equally features the utilisation of linguistic contrast. Through the device of contrast, the smell that oozes from the skin of these young girls is compared to that of the odour of festering wounds. Lexical evaluations in this text are indicated using “big smudges of black”, “acrid smell”, “odour of festering wounds”, and “scented powders and perfumes”. The use of “scented powders and perfumes” alludes to the creams and other deodorants utilised by the girls in order to look attractive. Conversely, the choice of “big smudges of black”, “acrid smell” and “odour of festering wounds” suggest the adverse effect which the chemicals in these creams and deodorants have on the skin of these girls. Agary, through the

abovementioned sentence types and lexical choices, portrays the issue of prostitution among young girls in the region in bad light.

Extract six captures the despondency and destitution of the Niger Delta inhabitants owing to the destruction of their major means of occupations by environmental degradation. The extract comprises four sentences. Each of the four sentences is deployed by the writer to assess the adverse effect of environmental degradation on the inhabitants in the region. The first sentence begins with the expression, “Fishing and farming, the occupations that had sustained my mother, her mother and her mother’s mother no longer provided gain”. Observe the nominal items “fishing and farming” in “fishing and farming, the occupation...”, it is an appositive employed as an adjective to allude to the two major occupations in the region which had been affected by environmental degradation. Such effect of environmental degradation on the region’s major occupation is corroborated using the lexical expression, “no longer provided gain”. Another evaluative tool worth commenting on in this sentence is the device of linguistic contrast. Through this device, two realities about the region are contrasted. The first reality alludes to those good old days when fishing and farming provided resources for the region. This is exemplified in the expression, “had sustained my mother, her mother and her mother’s mother”. However, the second reality points to the current time, that is, the bad time when these major occupations no longer benefit the region. This is equally captured in the lexical expression, “no longer provided gain”. It is important to mention that lexical expressions such as “lands claimed by massive floods” and “earth slowly melting into rivers” in the second sentence; “rowed their canoes farther and farther to find land for farming” in the third sentence; and “harder to catch fish” in fourth sentence are evaluative indicators deployed in expounding on the negative impacts of environmental degradation on the inhabitants of the region. For example, the use of

“lands claimed by massive floods” and “earth slowly melting into rivers” suggest the loss of farmlands by the inhabitants of the region while the choice of “rowed their canoes farther and farther to find land for farming” further corroborates this loss. Also, the utilisation of “harder to catch fish” suggests the negative impact of the oil spills on the rivers leading to the deaths of many fishes.

Conclusion

This study investigated Agary's *Yellow Yellow* for how the ecolinguistic tools of framing and evaluation have been deployed in relating the subject of environmental degradation and other attendant issues. Framings and evaluations in the text were constructed using a variety of sentence types, pronominal reference, additive and adversative conjunctions, nominals, verbals, linguistic contrast, descriptive and evaluative lexical items. Sentence types such the complex sentence and compound-complex sentence help to clarify, elaborate, and construct a multidimensional depiction of the environmental issues conveyed in Agar's texts. Remarkably, the discourse functions of these sentence types suggest that Agary seeks more than just informing. Pronominal references range from first, second, and third person pronouns. These pronoun references are operative linguistic feature which Agary employs to identify different classes and groups. Agary exploits linguistic contrast in presenting different realities about the issues on environmentalism discussed in the text. As the analysis has shown, oil is as important as gold. Its Exploration leads to somany issues. As foregrounded by Kaine Agary in *Yellow Yellow*, while the government and some leaders seem to show little or no concern as a result of the benefits they gain from the multinational companies they host, the communities are left to battle with continuous destruction of their lands and incessant loss of organisms. The people are equally faced with exploration, negligence, pollution, sicknesses and many others to numerous to mention here.

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