

ANALYSIS OF METAPHOR IN ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE OF HELON HABILA'S OIL ON WATER

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Abstract

This paper examines metaphors as an eco-linguistics device in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. This is with a view to investigating the role of metaphor in constructing environmental discourse in the text under study. The aim is to uncover the underlying narratives and power dynamics that drive ecological debates. It also unravels the hidden meaning and ideology embedded in the use of metaphors which shape environmental narratives particularly in the text that addresses the ecological crisis in the Niger Delta. To do this effectively, the paper adopts eco-linguistic framework and critical metaphor analysis as a theoretical framework. The research adopts both models using qualitative method of data collection, the data used were extracts from the text that addresses the variables under study. From the analysis carried out, the findings reveal traces of ample use of metaphoric features used to describe the state of environmental destruction in the Niger Delta Environment. Habila's use of metaphors not only narrates environment catastrophe but also critique cooperates and government exploitation in the Niger Delta.

Keywords: Metaphor, Environment Discourse, Eco-linguistics, Critical Metaphor Analysis.

Introduction

The Niger-Delta region for a long time has remained the buffer zone for political gladiators in Nigeria. On the other hand, the oil exploration and exploitation have left the region used, misused, abused

and abandoned. The region is characterised by abject poverty, lack of basic amenities including access to good drinking water and education (Akung 9) commenting on the Niger-Delta plight, Amanye explains that oil exploration has turned Ogoni into a wasteland with its lands, streams, and creeks totally and continually polluted (4).

Corroborating Amanye's position, Ushie (2006) opines that 50 years of crude oil exploitation and exploration have rather left the Niger-Delta environment completely vandalized. Its once fertile land soaked in and sterilized by crude oil, are people living on thatch and mud shacks, its rivers, stream and creek poisoned, its fishes murdered, its people left without drinkable water, left without electricity supply, left without security, left without jobs, and left without health facilities (5).

Similarly, Maier argues that the crisis in the Niger-Delta as it is now still mild, all these explosions throughout the Niger-Delta are just mini explosions. There could be a time bomb. The Niger-Delta is at the base of Nigeria, and it is like putting a keg of gun powder under Nigeria. If the Niger-Delta explodes Nigeria goes with it. (10)

The struggle to liberate Niger-Delta region from both political and economic shackles over the year have taken different forms. There had been the political fronts, activism as well as the most recent from the militancy. These struggles are reactions to repressive military and democratic regimes that have threatened to annihilate the Niger-Delta people (Akung 2006:10).

The marginalization of the Niger-Delta region has been brutal, total and complete. It is on this basis that various agitations have been going on both at the political front, all aimed at achieving the desired wellbeing of the region.

Helon Habila is a prolific writer who is concerned with the social, political, economic, and environmental issues in Nigeria especially in the Niger-Delta. As an environmentalist who has not been indifferent to this scenario, he has equally raised awareness on

environmental concerns through his creative response with a view of portraying the enormity of the problem as well as recommending possible ways through which they can be fixed. He has equally called a prioritization of green discourse for better leadership and social-economic relations, as well as environmental sustainability.

His work is characterised by different linguistics features, power relation, ideology and frequent, use of metaphors to frame environmental injustices done to the Niger-Delta region.

Literature Review

Environmental discourse emerged alongside the increasing global awareness of environmental issues in the mid-20th century. With several publication of works such as Racheal Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) has played a key role in shaping public discourse about pollution and ecological degradation.

Scholars in Eco linguistics and discourse analysis have examined environmental discourse from the multiple perspectives including metaphor analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA) and Eco linguistic framework.

The rise of Eco linguistics in the (1990s) led by scholars like Michael Halliday (1990) further reverberates the establishment of the importance of language in ecological studies. In his influential essay "New Ways of Meaning". "The Challenge to Applied Linguistics" called for linguists to engage environmental concern.

Environmental Discourse as a concept can be defined as the way language is used to construct, represent, and communicate environmental issues, concerns, and ideologies. It encompasses various textual and verbal expressions including political speeches, media, reports, literature, Scientific discussion, and activist rhetoric.

Additionally, the study of environmental discourse examines how language shapes people's perception of nature, climate change, sustainability, and ecological crisis affecting public attitude.

Policies and Actions

Several Scholars have explored how language instruct environmental realities. Arran Stibbe (2021) emphasises that “language plays a crucial role in both the destruction and the protection of the environment by shaping the way people think, feel, and act” (3). His work examines how linguistic pattern either sustains or challenge harmful ecological ideologies. Michael Halliday (18) argues that linguistic choices we make determine whether we describe the world in ways that sustain or harm the environment.

Lakoff explores environmental discourse as a metaphorical framing. He argues that metaphors shape public understanding of climate change. He states “The framing of Climate change as a “war” or “crisis” triggers different emotional and political responses (5).

Other Scholar who also share their views are Norma Fair Clough (1992), applies CDA to environmental discourse, highlighting how power relation influences the framing of environmental debates. He argues that “environmental discourse is not neutral. It reflects and reinforces existing social structures and economic interests”. Deborah et al (14) examine the role of discourse in shaping environmental activism and resistance movement. They are asserting that “language is central to activism as it mobilises people and constructs narratives to dominant economic and political interest.

In exploration on stylistics (2008) and *Critical Reading and Writing: An Introductory course book* (2000), Goatly examines the role in environmental discourse. He critiques dominant metaphors and advocates for alternative metaphors which promote ecological awareness. He also introduces the concept of resisting metaphor and suggests that alternative metaphors can reshape discourse and foster critical thinking.

Eco-Linguistics

Eco-linguistics also known as ecological linguistics, emerged in the 1990s as an entirely novel field of research in linguistics that broadened sociolinguistics to include not only the social context in which language operates but also the larger ecological setting, which includes other organisms and the natural world (Alexander & Stibbe 2014).

The term refers to the relationship between a language and its environment (Chem, 201 Language and eco-linguistics are synonymous concept Chem.2016.) Einar Haugen (1972;323) first used them in his seminal study titled “Language and ecology”, which examines the inter connectedness of language and its environment. The two major approaches to eco-linguistics are connected to Einar Haugen and Michael Halliday (1992).

Haugen uses ecology as a metaphor “for the study, at the same, Halliday approaches the study by examining the role of language in relation to environment despoliation and how to alleviate this challenge from this point, eco-linguistics has blossomed as an interdisciplinary interrelationship between language and our environment. In contrast, Halliday approaches the study by examining the role of language in relation to environmental despoliation and how to alleviate this challenge. From this point, eco-linguistics has blossomed as an interdisciplinary field of linguistics and environmental studies.

Landmark development began in the field in 2005 with the publication of different journals and the establishment of the language and ecology research forum now as now known as the ‘Eco-linguistic Association’. Other notable works in the field are Peter Muehlhauser’s *Language of Environment* 2023. Stibbe’s *eco-linguistics: |” language and ecology and the story we live by”*, 20215.

As a field that studies language and environment. Hauge defines Eco linguistic as the study of the interaction between any

language and its environment, he explains that the actual environment of language is not just the physical world but includes the psychological mindset of an individual and the sociological influences of the society that uses it as one of its codes. As such ecology of language is determined by the people who learnt it, use it, and transmit it to others (Haugen,57). Citing Stibble (2015), Chem (109) says, Eco linguistics analyses language to reveal the stories we live by and contribute to the search for new stories to live by”.

Eco linguistics originated from Arran Stibbes defined it as “the study of the impact of language on the life- sustaining relationship of human and other species and the physical environment”. Ashankey a Proponent in the field, sees Eco linguistics as the “analysis of stories we live by--the dominant narrative, metaphors and discourses that affect how people perceive and interact with the natural world. Eco linguistics uses several metaphors to critique harmful environmental discourse and promote language that support ecological balance and sustainability.

Metaphors

Metaphor plays a crucial role in discourse analysis. it is a powerful tool in language, thought and communication. Metaphor is a key literary device that enhances meaning, imagery and emotional appeals in literary works. This article under study investigates the role of metaphor in constructing environmental discourse in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*.

Scholarly works have explored the role of metaphor as an eco-linguistic x-raying different perspectives in environmental discourse. Metaphor plays vital role in shaping how people conceptualise and respond to environmental issues. Scholars in cognitive linguistics, eco-linguistics and critical discourse analysis have investigated how metaphorical language frames environmental debates and other social-cultural issues related to environmental issues.

The antecedent of metaphor can be traced back to ancient philosophical and rhetorical tradition with particularly references to Aristotle, who was the first to conceptualise metaphor in his popular classic work titled: *In poetics and Rhetoric*. Aristotle defines metaphors as a “form of linguistic transference where a word is used to denote something other than its literal meaning”. He saw it as a tool for both poetic creativity and effective rhetoric.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) were among the 20th-century who challenged Aristotle view on metaphor “in metaphors we live by”, they argued that metaphor is not just a linguistic device but a fundamental part of human thought and conceptualisation. They introduced the “conceptual metaphor theory” (CMT), which suggests that everyday cognition is structured by metaphor.

Conceptual metaphor as proposed by Lakoff et al is a fundamental cognitive mechanism where one conceptual domain is understood in terms of another. He argues that metaphors are not just linguistic expressions but shape human thought, perception, and action. He identified Conceptual Domain mapping – a conceptual metaphor consists of a source domain (a familiar concept) mapped onto a target domain (an abstract or complex concept). They are of the view that metaphor structures our everyday reasoning and behaviour.

Goatly, Andrew (2011) builds on Lakoff et al metaphor. He explores metaphor with the view of eco-metaphors like “green revolution” and “sustainable development” showing how they shape ecological narratives. Goatly (1997) classified metaphor into different types: Dead Metaphor (Conventional, they are no longer noticed), active metaphors (shaping current discourse) and extended metaphors (spanning multiple sentences or narratives). His metaphor analysis aligns with Stibbe’s Eco linguistics tools such as framing and erasure.

Another contemporary scholar whose work on metaphor falls with the early 21st century, aligns with cognitive linguistics and critical discourse analysis is Charteris – Black. Black (2004) delves into corpus

approaches to critical metaphor analysis introducing critical metaphor analysis (CMA) which explains how metaphor shapes ideology and political persuasion. He incorporated it into political and media discourse. Black 2004 (28) defines critical metaphor analysis (CMA) in relation to cognitive linguistics and CDA. He explains the emotional and ideological impact of metaphor (12).

Critical metaphor analysis (CMA) combines corpus linguistics, cognitive semantics, and discourse analysis to examine how metaphors shape meaning in social contexts which is the primary focus of this paper. Black (4), further proposes how metaphor can be interpreted and explained. The interpretation of metaphor, according to him involves establishing a relationship between metaphors, cognitive and the pragmatic factors that determine them, which involves identification of metaphoric expression in discourse, interpreting their conceptual meaning and explaining their ideological function. This approach of metaphor identification is used for the data analysis of the metaphor used for environmental discourse in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*.

Building on Eco linguistics, metaphor according to Stibbes (21) explores how metaphors shape our understanding of the environment by framing ecological issues in particular ways, he identifies destructive metaphor and beneficial metaphor in environmental discourse. By analysing metaphors in environmental discourse, Stibbes demonstrated how language influences public perception and policy decision regarding ecological issues.

Some other researchers such as Max, Neary, Umar, et al did review on different-on-different perspectives of metaphor analysis. Umar (24) also delves into the analysis of metaphorical representation of men using insight from Lakoff conceptual metaphors investigating the dominant metaphors employed to represent men in selected Nigeria Newspaper. Exploring how conceptual metaphors contribute to the representation of masculinity.

Arran Stibbe's Eco linguistic framework postulates eight toolkits for analysing environmental discourse, one of which is metaphor. The Stibbes framework is used to identify and select all the core variables addressing environmental discourse.

Charteris Black Critical Metaphor Analysis model identifies three methods to analyse metaphor base on metaphor identification, interpretation, and explanation.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework preferred in this study is Arran Stibbe's eco-linguistics framework and Charteris Black Critical Metaphor Analysis CMA model, which are the key methodologies used for analysing metaphor addressing environmental discourse in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*.

It is a combined framework because of the purpose both serve. Stibbe's eco-linguistics framework is used to identify the core variables, while CMA method is used to analyse identification, interpretation and explanation.

Black's metaphors serve three key functions: persuasion, legitimization, and mythmaking (Black 28). By analysing metaphors of "pollution", "war", "economic" "exploitation" and "resistance". The model helps to uncover how metaphor on environmental discourse is identified, interpreted, and explained. It also unravels how Habila's exposes environmental destruction, frames corporate exploitations as war, challenges economic myth of oil wealth and reinforce resistance narrative.

The analysis and discussion of findings reveal that, first the metaphors deployed in the text are derived from environment discourse. The metaphors also express the source and target domain and focus on the conceptual, ideology, and persuasion.

Also, the metaphors in oil on water strategically construct an environmental discourse that is emotional, ethical, and politically

charged. Nature is mainly presented as both “victim” and protector, while “oil” and industrial infrastructure are conceptualized as agents of violence and “invasion”.

Methodology

This study adopts qualitative analysis which the text addressed, using insight from both the Eco-linguistic framework and Critical Metaphor Analysis model to provide a template for the qualitative analysis of the core variables under study. The data for the study was source from extract in the text “Elon Habila” Oil on Water”. The choice of text was informed by the core variables under study that the text addresses.

Fifteen samples of metaphors were subjected to analysis using Black’s (2004) metaphor identification model (CMA). This critical metaphor analysis model outlines three steps: identifying, metaphor expression in discourse, interpreting conceptual meaning and explaining its ideological function.

The analysis is represented in a table form for proper identification based on the three -, steps method mentioned.

Analysis of Data

Table 1 set of Metaphors in Environment Discourse using the CMA three-step method in analysis.

N	Metaphor	Source Domain	Target Domain	Cognitive and Pragmatic Effect	Ideological Implication
1	The river was a black ribbon of oil	A Ribbon means fabric or material	River (Polluted water body)	The metaphorical expression presents the river as something artificial and unnatural	It highlights the destruction of natural resources caused by oil pollution. And portrays industrial activities responsible for environmental degradation.
2	The Land was bleeding crude	Human body (bleeding)	Land (Oil Pollution)	The Land is personified as 'wounded' 'entity', evoking suffering and loss crude depicted as blood.	It suggests environmental exploitation as a form of violence. Oil extraction is akin to wounding the land reinforcing anti-extraction.
3	The sky was a thick curtail of smoke	Curtain (fabric covering)	Sky- polluted air	The sky is likened a curtain implying obstruction and	This suggests a loss of visibility and purity, reinforcing the image of

				concealment. The thickness suggests an overwhelming preference of pollution	industrial pollution suffocating the natural environment.
4	The flame licked hungrily at the oil-slicked water	Animalistic behaviour (Licking)	Fire consuming an oil spill	Fire is personified as having hunger, making it seem predatory and aggressive. The verb licked conveys an image of slow light inevitable destruction	It portrays the environmental crisis as relentless and insatiable, suggesting that human activities have triggered a disaster that is beyond control.
5	The tree stood like a skeleton against the sky.	Skeleton (Death, Decay)	Tree (Deforestation, destruction)	The tree is compared to skeleton, evoking imagery of death and lifelessness reinforcing environmental elevation	It suggests the consequences of deforestation and pollution showing nature as stripped of its "vitality" which is likened to human action

Discussion of Analysis

The analysis of Table 1 follows the three-steps approach of Charteris Black's critical metaphor analysis (CMA) framework (2004). This analysis is divided into three tables for easy analysis and discussion of findings.

Discussion of Findings

The metaphors in “table 1” adopt Black’s analysis procedure, the above metaphors serve ideological and cognitive function to unravel the reality of environmental discourse. “The Flame Licked Hungrily, attributes an animalistic destructive force to firm, making environmental destruction seem aggressive and insatiable. The sky was a thick curtain of smoke” which suggests concealment and suffocation, reinforcing the impact of industrial pollution on air quality and visibility. Also, “the tree stood like a skeleton” and the ruler was a black ribbon of oil”, emphasized the loss of life and purity depicting nature as something that has suffered because of human action. The land was bleeding crude” can be equates oil extraction with bodily harm reinforcing the idea that oil exploitation wounds the land.

From the above analysis, metaphors were used to depict nature as a “victim” and depict pollution as ‘overwhelming’ and ‘unnatural’.

The above metaphors strategically construct environmental discourse by presenting pollution and degrading as “unnatural”, violent” and “catastrophic” which align with eco-linguistics.

Sn	Metaphor	Source Domain	Target Domain	Cognitive and Pragmatic Effect	Ideological Interpretation
6	The River carried the dead dream of the people	Funeral procession (carrying the dead)	River (Pollution, lost hopes)	The river instead of sustaining life, is depicted as a carrier of lost dreams evoking despair and ‘hopelessness’	It suggests that oil pollution has destroyed livelihood and aspirations, reinforcing the socio-economic impact of environmental destructions
7	The oil was a black	Curse (supernatural)	Oil (resource)	Oil is framed as a curse rather a	Challenges the narrative of oil as economic progress,

	curse upon the land	misfortune)	exploitation)	blessing' implying it brings suffering instead of "prosperity". The color black connotes darkness 'evil' and 'downfall.	presenting it as the source of misfortune, suffering and environmental ruin
8	The villages were drowning in oil	Drowning (death by water)	Village (Overwhelmed by oil pollution)	The village is metaphorically submerged in oil, reinforcing the total devastation caused by oil spills.	Suggests oil has engulfed and destroyed the community, portraying environmental degradation as an existential crisis
9	The air was thick with the breath of decay	Breath (life force)	Air (pollution, death)	Instead of sustaining life, the air is filled with decay personifying the atmosphere as diseased or dying.	Highlights the suffocating effect of pollution, showing that industrial activities have poisoned the very air people breathe.
10	The pipeline was a vein running through the heart of the land	Vein (human circulatory system)	Pipeline (oil infrastructure)	The pipeline is likened to a vein, suggesting it is central to the land's existence but also hinting at the extraction of life force (oil as blood)	Reinforces the idea that oil is life-sustaining but also exploitative as the Land's "life blood" is drained for profit.

Table 2: Analysis of another Set of Metaphors in Environmental Discourse using the CMA three- steps methods.

Sn	Metaphor	Source Domain	Target Domain	Cognitive and Pragmatic Effect	Ideological Interpretation
6	The river carried the dead dream of the people	Funeral procession (carrying the dead)	River (Pollution, lost hopes)	The river instead of sustaining life, is depicted as a carrier of lost dreams evoking despair and 'hopelessness'	It suggests that oil pollution has destroyed livelihood and aspirations, reinforcing the socio-economic impact of environmental destructions
7	The oil was a black curse upon the land	Curse (supernatural misfortune)	Oil (resource exploitation)	Oil is framed as a curse rather a blessing' implying it brings suffering instead of "prosperity". The color black connotes darkness 'evil' and 'downfall.	Challenges the narrative of oil as economic progress, presenting it as the source of misfortune, suffering and environmental ruin
8	The villages were drowning in oil	Drowning (death by water)	Village (Overwhelmed by oil pollution)	The village is metaphorically submerged in oil, reinforcing the total	Suggests oil has engulfed and destroyed the community,

				devastation caused by oil spills.	portraying environmental degradation as an existential crisis
9	The air was thick with the breath of decay	Breath (life force)	Air (pollution, death)	Instead of sustaining life, the air is filled with decay personifying the atmosphere as diseased or dying.	Highlights the suffocating effect of pollution, showing that industrial activities have poisoned the very air people breathe.
10	The pipeline was a vein running through the heart of the land	Vein (human circulatory system)	Pipeline (oil infrastructure)	The pipeline is likened to a vein, suggesting it is central to the land's existence but also hinting at the extraction of life force (oil as blood)	Reinforces the idea that oil is life-sustaining but also exploitative as the Land's "life blood" is drained for profit.

Discussion of Analysis

The above table is an analysis of five different samples of metaphors. These metaphors construct environmental discourse using key ideological framing. First, oil was considered as a symbol of "suffering" and "doom". The oil was a black curse upon the land" which

transforms oil from a resource into a supernatural curse implying irreversible misfortune. “The village was drowning in oil, which” that oil is not as ‘wealth’, but as ‘destruction’, reinforcing a critique of environmental exploitation.

Similarly, environmental discourse was framed as ‘nature as a dying entity’. “The river earned the dead dream of the people” personifies the river as a funeral cove, symbolising the loss of hope in the wake of pollution.” The air was thick with the breath of decay” represent pollution as a slow suffocation, highlighting the consequence of industrial waste.

More so, the land was framed as a living body under attack. “The pipeline was a vein running through the heart of the land” which suggest the land is alive but being drained of its resources, reinforcing the theme exploitation and ecological harm. The analysis aligns with eco-linguistics showing “how languages can frame oil extraction as a violent “suffocating” and “exploitative process”.

Table 3: Analysis of another Set of Metaphors in Environmental Discourse the CMA three-step method

Sn	Metaphor	Source Domain	Target Domain	Cognitive and Pragmatic Effect	Ideological Interpretation
11	The oil gleaned like a dark mirror	Mirror (reflection truth)	Oil (pollution, destruction)	The ‘dark mirror’ suggests oil reflects something in us, possibly human greed or environmental destruction	Implies that oil extraction reveals the dark side of human ambition, pollution, corruption, and exploitation
12	The flare of gas wells were fire	Mythical creature (Dragon)	Gas flares (Pollution destruction)	Gas flares are personified as dragons, evoking	Suggests industrial activities are

	breathing dragons			danger, destruction, and chaos.	monstrous and destructive, reinforcing own extractive industry sentiment
13	The Land was a battlefield scarred by greed	Battlefield (war violence)	Land (oil exploitation)	The Land is depicted as a war zone with greed as the cause of the destruction. The word 'scarred' suggests 'long-term damage'	Frames oil extraction as a 'violent conquest' positioning corporate greed as an aggression against nature
14	The rain fell, washing the poison deeper into the earth	Poison (toxicity, death)	Rain (polluted water cycle)	Rain, typically cleansing is now a carrier of poison spreading contamination'	It highlights the inescapability of pollution, suggesting that even natural elements like rain are now agents of harm.
15	The river whispered of things lost	Whispering (Secrecy lament)	River (history, environmental destruction)	The river is personified as a storyteller mourning lost things - loss of nature, lives or tradition.	Suggests the river carries historical memory of destruction, reinforcing them as loss and ecological grief

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The analysis aligns with eco-linguistics showing “how languages can frame oil extraction as a violent “suffocating” and “exploitative process”.

Discussion of Analysis

Table three represents another different sample of metaphors used to strengthen environmental discourse in the text. Metaphors vividly and ideologically were used to frame “pollution” “industrialization” and “environmental destruction” The ‘oil gleamed like a dark mirror” implies oil reflects human greed and destruction, reinforcing the critique of economic exploitation. The oil is a symbol ominous ‘reflection’ and ‘doom’. “the flare of gas well were fire

breathing dragon” presents as flaring as a monstrous and uncontrollable force, evoking ‘destruction’ and ‘fear’.

The land was framed as a victim of ‘war’ and ‘greed’. The land was a battlefield, scared by greed, highlighting oil exploitation as a ‘war’ waged against the environment, emphasising permanent damage. The rainfall washing the poison deeper into the earth” shows how pollution is inescapable’, reinforcing ecological contamination themes.

Furthermore, these metaphors align with Arran Stibbe’s ecological discourse analysis by exposing harmful ideologies and reframing oil exploitation in the Niger-Delta terrain.

Conclusion

This paper identifies metaphor analysis in environmental discourse in *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila. Also, it explores how different metaphors were used to depict the state of environmental destruction unleashed in the Niger-Delta Environment. A total of 15 samples of metaphors were subjected to data analysis. The findings reveal that the writer explored the use of metaphor amongst many other linguistic features used in the text. Metaphors such as ‘oil gleaned’, ‘the flame of gas’, the oil was a black curse, and the village was drowned in oil’ are a few examples of metaphors used in this paper.

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