

Ecolinguistics: Critical Perspectives of Eco-friendly Stakes in Selected Anglophone African Literature

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Abstract

As underpinning mobiles of climate change, ecosystemic degradation and environmental pollution are two major global threats to-date. Thus, protecting the nature has turned a shared concern to all researchers, including scientists, philosophers, sociologists, artists, activists, and linguists. The current study aims then to highlight the contribution of English Applied Linguistics to the common battle. Leaning on an eclectic research methodology coupling tools inherent in both Systemic Linguistics and Pragmatics, this work is a trans-textual Critical Discourse Analysis of systematically culled statements from a few Anglophone African writings testifying that literature is a handy channel of brainwashing for eco-friendly sensitization worth taking considerately.

Keywords: *Eco-linguistics; climate change, global threats; pragmatics, eco-friendly sensitization.*

Introduction

“Human beings as a collective species, or *Anthropos*, now account for the primary force shaping the earth’s natural landscapes and ecosystems”, so reads Lamb’s (2019, p. 1) much telling accusatory and eco-centric contention. Indeed, pretending themselves to be holding some privilege and ascendance over all other animal and plant species, humans over-exploit and havoc nature to meet both their essential needs and gargantuan desires. Thus, for these misdeeds, nature has been paying us back with severe boomerang effects today.

As a matter of fact, environmental threats against humanity are a global ablaze issue on the agenda to-date, a black goat to common awareness worldwide. Actually, in their frenzy run to satisfy their selfish needs and whimsical desiderata, humans recklessly overuse nature and alter its balance; turning our common living environment more and more hostile. Thus, gasping for taming the insidiously but harshly havocking tide, all scholars endeavour to bring their block to re-building or servicing our planet. Be they scientists, artists, activists, philosophers, linguists, everyone is to play their partition, juggling with slowing the galloping tide of environmental menaces, what Lamb (2019:1) refers to as “human-induced ecological crises enveloping the world.”

This work aims to showcase the contributions of linguistics and pragmatics to this momentous battle. It is a methodologically eclectic and trans-textual specimen of Critical Discourse Analysis. In handling tools inherent in both Systemic Functional Linguistics and Pragmatics, this study is devoted to highlighting ways how literary writers display eco-friendly strategies through castigation of human eco-phobic misdeeds and the glorification of nature via stylistic beautification; say, their deification. Aside from some brief epistemological insights, the current study centres around a theoretical framework and literature review, presentation, analysis and critical interpretation of a few short statements systematically culled from selected African Anglophone literary universe on the ground of their in-borne eco-specific semantic loads, and eventually makes a few suggestions.

Epistemological Background of the Study

Environmental degradation has turned a planetary concern in recent decades. It is all scholars’ focus of attention to-date. The combat angle in Africa calls for the rise of a good range of paradigms including

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ecocriticism, postcolonial ecocriticism, ecofeminism, bioregionalism, environmental humanities, African literary environmentalism (Nuri, 2021). Indeed, for Nuri (2021:101), the various trends are referred to as “Green approaches to literature.” As for ‘*bioregionalism*’, it is an environmental literary and cultural movement within the field of environmental humanities started in Northern America in the 1970s (Lynch et al., 2012). Expanding from the very trend is the concept of *Ecolinguistics* as a scientific study of language revealing ways how humans’ discourse works to display their selfish inner-self and suggest ways and means for corrective change. As for Stibbe (2015:183), “Ecolinguistics analyses language to reveal the stories we live by, judges those stories according to an ecosophy, resists stories which oppose the ecosophy, and contributes to search for new stories to live by.” In the same vein, Chen (2016:109) also contends what follows: “Ecolinguistics adopts ecosophy as its principal normative framework. Central to ecosophy is the commitment to ecological equilibrium.” The overall point of interest one may coax out of these contentions is that ecolinguistics relates to a scientific study of language with eco-friendly underpinnings, hence the *ecosophy*-paradigm.

Definitely, it is worth specifying that Ecolinguistics as the study of the language of ecology (Halliday, 1990; Fill, 1998) does differ sharply from its metalinguistic sense as the ecology of language (Haugen, 1972; Bastardas-Bordas, 2000) regarding the hegemonic pressure of established and dominant languages causing the rampant extinction of minority ones worldwide. By the way, Halliday (1990:199) contends that “Classism, growthism, destruction of species, pollution and the like are not just problems for the biologists and physicists. They are problems for the applied linguistic community as well.” Thus, though young enough, the field of Ecolinguistics – as a branch of applied linguistics –: has benefited a good deal of research endeavours, some of which are critically explored below.

A Brief Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The theoretical plinth of the current study centres on applied linguistics, chiefly using semantics, Critical Discourse Analysis and socio-pragmatics defining tools. Indeed, for Leech (1983:x): “Pragmatics is the study of how utterances have meaning in situations”. This meaning is also referred to as “contingent proposition” (Trauth & Kazzazi, 1996:248), “implicit content” (Green, 2006:179). This is a meaning coaxed out of utterances by means of “situated interpretation.” (Gumperz, 1982:4). Thus, meaning making involves Yule’s (1996:134) “conversational implicature”; that is, an indirect or behind-scene conversational value which most often does differ from the overtly stated message or surface meaning in a conversational context. By the way, plenty of researchers have built on such tools to search about ecological and environmental issues in literature.

For instance, Chen (2016) labours on a meta-analysis of 115 journal publications on ecolinguistics relating to western environmentalism. The size of his study sample is quite allusive of the flourishing interest of scholars in the fresh research field. His work not only endeavours to stance convergences and divergences relating to the concept, but also evokes prospective potential directives for future research. From an environmental perspective, he shows that ecolinguistics builds on an “anti-hegemonic commitment and the fact that the alarming ecological degradation requires collective responses of the entire human civilization” (p.113) he deems that individual choices may save the world only if aided by social and political commitment. This entails that to solve ecological crises, political and social process requirements rank above the control of individual citizens. He also claims that our collective materialistic sense of “good life” requires re-visiting (p.114).

Nuri (2021) builds on five plays by the multi-skilled Nigerian writer, Wole Soyinka to showcase concerns of ecological degradation and call for environmental protection in literature. His work leans on *The Lion and the Jewel*, *The Road*, *The Beatification of an Area Boy*, *A Dance of the Forests*, and *The Swamp Dweller*. Nuri (2021) shows that Soyinka has leaned on the Yoruba myths and culture to express his worship-worthy deification of environmental resources and call as well for their respect. In demonstrating that these plays bear clues of environmental protection and preservation of the ecosystem, the researcher has concluded that “the earth is an organic system in which everyone must play their part” (p. 106); which contention is quite his call for ending human hegemonic precedence over other species, a call for ecological democracy or “eco-democracy”. (Kopnina, 2021)

The very vein of thought shows up in Stibbe (2015). He contends that the hegemonic sense in mankind is spurred and poked up by 'the story we live by'. He has classified such stories into eight groups as relating to ideologies, framings, metaphors, evaluations, identities, conviction, erasure and salience. For Kortzen (2006) – as is cited in Stibbe (2015) –, such stories are characterized as “prosperity story promoting worship of material acquisition and money, the biblical story focusing on the after-life instead of the world around us, the security story building up the military and police to protect relationships of domination, and the secular meaning story reducing life to matter and mechanism” (Referred to in Stibbe, 2015). “*Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By*”, p.2). As for Kingsnorth and Hine (2009), the most dangerous story we live by is “the story of human centrality, of a species destined to be lord of all it surveys, unconfined by the limits that apply to other, lesser creatures” (Stibbe, 2015). In relation to the identity concept, it relates to stories featuring who we are or what we brag ourselves to be. Benwell and Stokoe (2006:167) provide an illustrative case of human supremacist mind in relation to food quality differentiation as follows: “Consumption becomes a means of articulating a sense of identity, and, perhaps, even more crucially, distinction from others.” This contention is symbolical of the haughty sense causing humanity to be stratified into in-groups with competing minds of supremacy over outsiders. Thus, every in-member shrugs themselves to be the most blessed with quality consumption.

In his meta-analytical approach to Arran Stibbe’s (2015) *Ecolinguistics: language, ecology and the stories we live by*, Razmjou (2017) finds that the 10-chapter book presents “a new course for ecolinguistics including a framework for understanding the theory of ecolinguistics, exploration of consumerism, and discourse analysis of texts of different types.” Also, in examining the professional life of Stibbe – a research icon in ecolinguistics – he claims that the man devoted himself to scavenging ways how language encodes the stories we live by, the self-bragging hegemonic mind of mankind and our consumerist relation with the earth and other animals. In a word, he tries to set into the fore that the research nexus of Stibbe centres on how and why the haughty and supremacist sense of human known as ‘human exceptionalism’ is spurred and poked up by ‘the stories we live by’, our conception of life and our relationships with the environment surrounding us as well as ways how we may free ourselves from the yoke of this long-lasting bondage by creating new stories to live by, re-setting human psyche.

Research Objectives and Methodology

This study is a linguistic scrutiny of the manifestations of ecocriticism in literature. It builds on small sequences of utterances culled from a few Anglophone African fictions. Thus, sample data are maintained from such artefacts as: *Oil on Water* (Helon Habila, 2010), *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Road* and *The Swamp Dweller* (maintained from *Collected Plays N°1, 1973*), *The Lion and the Jewel* (from *Collected Plays N°2, 1974*), *The Beatification of the Area Boy* (1999), all of them by Wole Soyinka, and *The Thing Around Your Neck* (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2009; chiefly focussing on the story-part “Tomorrow is Too Far”).

Indeed, in Brumfit’s (1995:27) terms, Applied Linguistics is “the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue.” So, grounding on the assumption that African Anglophone writers handle language as an alert weapon to partake in environmental or ecological welfare building, the current study leans on Applied Linguistics to set writers’ strategies into the fore. Hence, aspects relating to modality and polarity functions as well as transitivity system are covered from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics. Findings are further appreciated by means of *Presupposition* and *Inference* as are inherent in pragmatics, a “philosophy of language” (Lycan, 2008) or a study of “the meant-but-unsaid” (Horn: 2004/2006:1), of Yule’s (1985/1996:127) “Invisible meaning.” The overall aim is to coax out eco-friendly and environment-specific behind-scene meanings concealed in literature through “stylistic gymnastics” (Mireku-Gyimah, 2013:272).

A Holistic Topical Pinning of some African Anglophone Artefacts

African literary environmentalism is pioneered by established as well as young writers. Some of them are Wole Soyinka (*A Dance of the Forests; The Roads; The Swamp Dwellers*), Amos Tutuola (*The Palm Wine Drinkard*), Chinua Achebe (*Things fall Apart*), Ngugi wa Thiong’o (*A Grain of Wheat*), Wangari Maathai (*The Green Belt*

Movement, Challenges for Africa, Unbowed), Helon Habila (*Oil on Water*), etc. Down here are some testimonial works with their holistic ecocentric insights and the unsaid presumptive meaning lurking in them.

Writers	Titles	Eco-specific foci	Presumptive /Situated Meaning
Wole Soyinka	<i>A Dance of the Forests</i>	A deification of African forests and a depiction of how man's infringement on the environment is condemned by the spirit	Urging for forest preservation and ecological balance maintenance
	<i>The Lion and The Jewel</i>	conservative stance of Baroka against roads and railway construction	Advocacy for resistance to desertification and eco-phobic assails of all sorts
	<i>The Road</i>	Depicting destructive facets of urbanization and the wrath of the spirits against modern man	A call for preserving forests and other natural resources in Africa
	<i>The Swamp Dwellers</i>	Deification of land as belonging to a deity serpent	A witty policy of land preservation
	<i>The Beatification of the Area Boy</i>	Consecration and divination of natural resources, the interlocking relations between man and his environment and the centrality of nature to mankind welfare building	A call for respect and preservation of nature and minimization of degradation impetuses
Chinua Achebe	<i>Things fall Apart</i>	Depicting socio-cultural harms of colonization and valuation of agricultural merit	A celebration of agriculture in aid of sustainable development in Africa
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie	<i>The Thing Around Your Neck</i>	Depicting the food sufficiency building and climate soothing potential of trees	Promoting afforestation in Africa
Helon Habila	<i>Oil on water</i>	Depicting harms of oil-spurred environmental pollution in the Delta State of Nigeria	An urgent call for a careful handling of oil and other chemicals for ecological friendship enhancement

Source: A compilation of our own as is derived from our reading

A Further Advanced Analytical Overview: Thematic Selection of Corpuses, Sequences and Utterance Specification

Under this heading, some sequences culled from two selected works are itemized into numbered utterances for analytical sake, sorting out their eco-focussed sense as well as their behind-scene meanings. The target books are Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and Adichie's (2009) story titled "Tomorrow is Too Far" in her collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*.

Damnation of Environmental Pollution

Data Presentation and Utterance Specification

The basic study corpus under this heading is maintained from Helon Abila's *Oil on Water* (2010). It displays the awful aftermaths of an oil barn explosion in the Delta State of Nigeria. The target sequence (pp.8-9, written in italics) reads as follows, with related utterance counts:

¹The village looked as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it. ²A square concrete platform dominated the village center like some sacrificial altar. ³Abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia were strewn around the platform; ⁴some appeared to be sprouting out of widening cracks in the concrete, alongside thick clumps of grass. ⁵High up in the rusty rigging wasps flew in and out of their nests. ⁶A weather-beaten signboard near the platform said OIL WELL N°2. 1999. 15.000 METERS. ⁷The houses began not too far away from the derelict platform. ⁸We went from one squat brick structure to the next, from compound to compound, ⁹but they were all empty, with wide-open windows askew on broken hinges, ¹⁰while overhead the roofs had big holes through which strong sunlight fell. ¹¹Behind one of the houses we found a chicken pen with about ten chickens inside, all dead and decomposing, the maggots trafficking beneath the feathers. ¹²We covered our noses ¹³and moved on to the next compound, ¹⁴but it wasn't but different: ¹⁵cooking pots stood open and empty on cold hearths; ¹⁶next to them stood water pots filled with water ¹⁷on whose surface mosquito larvae thickly flourished. ¹⁸It took less than an hour to traverse the little village, going from one deserted house to the next, taking pictures, moving from one accidental straggler, one survivor, one voice to interview...

¹⁹The atmosphere grew heavy with the suspended stench of dead matter. ²⁰We followed a bend in the river ²¹and in front of us we saw dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots. ²²The next village was almost a replica of the last: ²³the same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and flagrant stench, the barrenness, the oil slick and the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return. ²⁴In the village center we found the communal well. ²⁵Eager for a drink, I bent under the wet, mossy pivotal beam ²⁶and peered into the well's blackness, ²⁷but a rank smell wafted from its hot depths ²⁸and slapped my face; ²⁹I reeled away, my head aching from the encounter. ³⁰Something organic, perhaps human, lay dead and decomposing down there, ³¹its stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil.

Analysis and Interpretation of the Findings

This excerpt numbers 31 utterances, all of which roundly relate to describing the sorrowful aftermaths of an oil barn in the Delta State of Nigeria. For 100%, the descriptive tone is negatively polarized all the more since no single utterance hints hedging. Life in this setting is absolutely relegated to a past story as is testified by the exclusive past tense of the description. There remains no human presence and even birds and fish are all dead. (18; 21). Actually, the explosion has leaved no chance for any living soul. Indeed, people used to live in the place, as can be deduced from the presence of houses, open widows, a chicken pen; but due to the oil explosion – as is strongly and assertively emphasized through the lexicon ‘unmistakable’ in “Its stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil” (31). The matter has given way to a generalized voidance; given that not any house is still inhabited in the first village and the second has proved to be a replica of the first one, as are shown in utterances 8; 17; 18 and 22 for instance.

The logical inference emanating from this shocking depiction is that the writer makes of the dull plight a warning window display to sensitize his readership against all pollution-prone malpractices. The zero absence of living soul alludes to the point that when we prove carefree to let environmental pollution occur, it spares no wrong-doer nor their victims. Through this quite telling tabula rasa of life, the author seems to be urging mankind to reducing their mind of having some supremacy over nature, their fake and haughty sense of “human exceptionalism” – Dunlap & Catton, 1979; Catton, 1994; Dunlap 2008 –, an exact conceptual match to “Gbèto” – father of the universe – in the *Fon* patois of Benin Republic in West Africa. Overall, the harshness of the descriptive tone is quite unlikely to let a reader joke with any environmental pollution issue.

Acclaiming Green Environment

Under this cover, the sequence maintained is made up of heteroclitite but semantically attuned excerpts selectively adapted from Adichie's (2009) *The Thing Around Your Neck*, (pp.187 -191).The sequence functions univocally to intensify the promotion of a green environment. They are therefore chained-up in their utterance counts, reading as follows.

Data Presentation and Utterance Specification

¹You remember the heat of that summer clearly even now, eighteen years later – ²the way grandmamma's yard felt moistly warm, ³a yard with so many trees that the telephone wire was tangled in leaves ⁴and different branches touched one another

⁵and sometimes mangoes appeared on cashew trees ⁶and guavas on mango trees... ⁷in the morning Grandmama let only your brother Nonso climb the trees to shake a loaded branch... ⁸fruits would rain down, avocados and cashews and guavas, ⁹and you and your cousin Dozje would fill old buckets with them... ¹¹It was the summer Grandmama taught Nonso how to pluck the coconuts. ¹²The coconut trees were hard to climb, so limb-free and tall, ¹³and Grandmama gave Nonso a long stick ¹⁴and showed him how to nudge the padded pods down. ¹⁵She didn't show you, ¹⁶because she said girls never pluck coconuts. ¹⁷Grandmama cracked the coconuts against a stone, carefully, so the watery milk stayed in the lower piece, a jagged cup. ¹⁸Everybody got a sip of the wind-cooled milk, ¹⁹even the children from down the street who came to play, ²⁰and grandmamma presided over the sipping ritual to make sure Nonso went first. ²¹Grandmama would not call it summer. ²²Nobody did in Nigeria. ²³It was august, nestled between the rainy season and the harmattan season. ²⁴It could pour all day... ²⁵It has been 18 years ²⁶and the trees in grandmama's yard looked unchanged; ²⁷they still reach out ²⁸and hug one another, ²⁹still cast shadows over the yard.

Analysis and Interpretation of the Findings

This sequence numbers 29 utterances. The experiential meaning or message borne in them can fall into so various strands as: heat soothing, food sufficiency building, easing rainfalls, consolidating rural gregarious mind and building ecosystemic sustainability.

Actually, the abundance of trees in Grandmama's yard and their heavy foliage entanglement stand for an umbrella alertly meant to symbolize environmental protection. Tree is a cover to mankind against the stinking and ablaze wrath of bare sun. utterances (2-4) and (29) for instance function to showcase this shadowing mission of trees; say, of forest.

Besides, the writer's exclusive choice of fruit trees is nothing wanton. Taking for granted that fruits are vitamin-provider foods, the mention of profuse availability in cashew, avocado, guava and mango as is pointed to in utterance (7) is allusive of Adichie's intent to promote diversification in fruit consumption in order to ensure a good balance in vitamins for the fitness of mankind. Moreover, in contrasting the singularity of 'a loaded branch' with the plurality of 'old buckets' and the semantic load of affluence infused in such verbal forms as 'rain' and 'fill' (9), one may easily grab the writer's allusion to an abundantly yielding season. Much further emphatic clue of this contention shows up in the telling imagism in (5) and (6): "and sometimes mangoes appeared on cashew tree and guavas on mango tree." This apparently misleading mixture or entanglement of fruits insinuates the high productivity of the various trees and of a bloomy season.

Another sensible inference leaking from the passage is the eulogy of agricultural contribution to a cheaper or free maintenance of community health all the more since the affluence in fruits under share is for free and open to common enjoyment. No payment is involved. This affluence in available fruits spares Grandmama from being stingy or a miser. The testimony lies in utterances (17) through (19) displaying her prodigality in serving the coconut watery milk to every child, including outsider children. The fact is quite symbolical of a sociological merit of agriculture in enhancing and consolidating a gregarious mind in people with a view to fostering a quite enjoyable community life. It is bluntly antagonistic to urban lifestyle marked with divisive, individualistic and avaricious practices as roughly every item needed for daily life is to be bought while money runs scarcer and scarcer, harder and harder to find.

As for the utility of trees in building and maintaining sustainable ecosystemic balance as well as oiling rainfall conditions, this can be sensed out of utterances (1-4) and (21-29). By the way, the leitmotiv use of the 18-year duration as is repeated in (1) and (25) is indicative of the writer's intent to highlight sustainable or lasting cool climate condition provided by trees in Grandmama's yard. Furthermore, this depiction stands for an indirect – though earnest – call to the writer's readership for promoting woodlands with a view to taming the wrath of climate change and global warmth in Africa, and worldwide as well.

Synoptic Overview and Limitations of the Study, and Derived Recommendations

Overall, the smart organization of plots and the stylish suavity of literary language are handy tools African nature-writers alertly handle in their ecological combat. Throughout all literary artefacts under consideration

in this study, clues of ecological activism are quite manifest, though more outstanding in some than they are in others. This notice entails that literature is a requisite appendage to sociology, science and technology in the fight against ecological imbalance with a view to preserving sustainable resilience and welfare in aid of mankind. For this remarkable utilitarian merit of literature, African eco-specific decision-makers need to value literature as an operative tool able to oil the path towards the attainment of their target agents at the heart of the matter.

Regrettably, the eco-gear'd bosom intent of literary scholars fails to be conveniently grabbed and enjoyed by most Africans for some number of reasons. While the most common one relates the large-scale illiteracy permeating Africa, quite few of the schooled and intellectuals are deeply inclined or devoted to reading, let alone reading English as a Foreign Language (EFL), so as to keep at pace with Anglophone eco-writers' strategic but stylistically meant orientations.

Accordingly, we would suggest that educational decision-makers not only encourage schooling, but also promote eco-specific utilitarian EFL-reading. For this to prove workable, alertly oriented reading abilities need to be grown in children from their grass-root education. Reading-reward policies may also be established to titillate people's love for reading from primary to higher education, and possibly lifelong.

Conclusion

In all regards, both agriculturalists and agri-food consumers need to be careful and finicky enough so as not to deliberately though visibly unknowingly help themselves slide from the merry land of agriculture and get jettisoned into the unfathomable abyss of death-culture. And for the round working of such a caution, the indexical contribution of literature as a mind-awakener, a sensitizer and, at times, a castigator is a quite requisite and essential interface of the eco-friendly battle to save mankind and prepare and life-worthy planet in legacy for our posterity. Altogether, to reverse or refrain the silently ravaging tide of environmental violence, literature is a handy channel of brainwashing for eco-friendly sensitization worth taking considerably. As is contended by Nuri (2021:105): "It is incumbent on man to protect his natural environment for his own survival." And further supportive of federated combat endeavours is Chen's (2016:109) contention that: "Ecosophy proposes that ecological crises require not only scientific solutions, but also moral introspections of anthropocentric activities." Definitely, any realistic and sustainable ecological policy should take into consideration the Micklin and Poston's (1998) concept of "Human Ecological Complex" glossed as POET; that is, Population, Social-Organization-Environment and Technology. For the smooth working of this complex, literature does have its sensitization and brainwashing partition to play in aid of all political and scientific combat strategies. By the way, in highlighting the undebatable necessity for literature to enhance communal welfare, Achebe (1988:85) contends that a writer uses his art to control his environment. As is rightfully claimed by Garrard (2012:205): "In addition to the clever technologies, wily policies and ethical revaluations that we shall need to respond to environmental crisis, we shall need better, less anthropocentric metaphors." But for such a joint frame of mind in scholars of all persuasions, endeavours to grease natural favour in aid of sustainable human welfare consolidation would remain mere figments proving right Achebe's (1988) title *Hopes and Impediments*.

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