

AN ECOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF MEDIA DEPICTIONS OF OIL SPILLAGE IN  
OGONILAND

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ABSTRACT

*The Niger Delta environment especially the Ogoni area has been a subject of debate from the time oil was discovered in the area in 1958. The land has been enamoured by hostilities, kidnappings, killings and criminalities as a result of the inhuman activities of the federal government, the multinational oil corporations and the host communities. These activities arise from the level of environmental degradation carried out by the oil explorers. The murder of environmental and human rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995 climaxed the hostilities in Ogoniland. The focus of this study is to critically examine thee reports from oil explorations in Ogoniland from the perspective of language by applying the theoretical principles of Eco-Critical Discourse Analysis to explicate the discourses raised. Eco-Critical Discourse Analysis as a theoretical model in this study because it deals with the application of Critical Discourse Analysis to texts about the environment and environmentalism, in order to reveal hidden assumptions and hidden messages and comment on their effectiveness in achieving environmental aims. CDA also implies intervention by providing resources for those who may be disadvantaged by exposing the hidden things, since they are not evident for the individuals involved and because of this, they cannot be fought against. Critical Discourse Analysis reveals how texts are constructed so that particular and ‘Potentially indoctrinating’ perspectives can be expressed.*

Key words: Media Depictions, Oil Spillage, Ogoniland, Eco-Linguistics

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Niger Delta region is principally agrarian. The discovery of crude in the region in 1958 led to violence as a result of the activities of the Multinational Oil Companies (MNOCs), the host communities and the Nigerian leaders. Ogoni is a community in Rivers State- part of the Niger Delta which is the oil producing region of the country. The federal government continues to repress the people of this region through oil exploration, exploitation and environmental degradation. State security apparatus had been used to harass and intimidate the people leading to torment, suppression and outright destruction of some communities. This culminated in the formation of various Environmental Movement Organizations (EMOs) and armed non-state youth organizations emerged in a bid to counter the continued harassment, intimidation, rape, oppression and repression of the Niger Delta people. The murder of the environmentalist, writer and human rights campaigner Ken Saro-Wiwa, along with eight other members of the Ogoni people, by the Nigerian State in 1995 led to the formation of more ferocious militant groups in the region. The state monopoly of the violence means of destruction has been undercut by the widespread deployment of arms locally by militia and other militants. The oil company operating in Ogoniland was the Shell Petroleum Development Company and In 1993 Shell withdrew from Ogoniland in the face of protests.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE

Even though the critical approach to language study is not a recent development, the analysis of pictorial representation of events is minimal. This is partly due to the occurrence in pictorials of two different semiotic signs, words (either written or spoken) and images, the latter not being of direct interest to linguists. In an attempt to describe images from the perspectives of linguistics,

Fairclough in (1995), examines some parts of a documentary broadcast on British television, *A New Green Revolution?*, as a practical example of critical analytic methodologies applied to media texts. In this pilot study, he looks at some important ‘ideologically loaded’ linguistic features, i.e. nominalisation, pronouns, the ‘nature’ of sentences (events, actions, mental and verbal processes), metaphors, and explains the function they generally serve, he does not attempt to look at the different genres and text types which compose the documentary or try to find out whether the linguistic features might serve different functions in those different contexts. Analysing the different genres individually, for example, is useful because, as van Dijk (1998: 265) notices, “some genres more typically function as persuasive expressions of opinion than others” and this could result in two different, but equally important consequences: on the one hand, it might be that a linguistic feature which is used ideologically in one genre does not have the same function in another; on the other hand, knowing that a given genre is not generally perceived as containing personal opinions could give text producers the opportunity to employ that genre to subtly put forward their ideology (van Dijk: 1998: 265). The same is true in respect to the ideological use of text types like the narrative or the report, which are perceived as less biased than, say, the argumentative text type.

Social semiotics in this study is interested in the analysis of semiotic sign-the pictorial representation of the Niger Delta environment from the point of view of despoliation. It draws on visual analytical theories based on the work of social semioticians such as Jewitt & Oyama (2001) and Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) to show how problems of humans are brought to the fore through pictorial representation of reality. This helps to explore the power relations between the individuals and the audience that different camera angles can suggest (e.g. more power to the

persons on the screen if they are shown from a low angle) or how the position of a person on the left or right side of the screen corresponds to the thematic structure of a language like English with elements on the left considered as ‘given’ and elements on the right as ‘new’.

#### THE TRIADIC MODELS OF SEMIOTICS

Basically the Peircean approach to semiotic analysis relies on the three linguistic models:

**Symbol:** a mode in which the signifier does *not* resemble the signified but which is fundamentally *arbitrary* or purely *conventional* – so that this relationship must be agreed upon and learnt. **Icon:** a mode in which the signifier is perceived as *resembling* or imitating the signified (recognizably looking, sounding, feeling, tasting or smelling like it) – being similar in possessing some of its qualities. **Index:** a mode in which the signifier is *not arbitrary* but is *directly connected* in some way (physically or causally) to the signified (regardless of intention) – a link that can be observed or inferred: e.g. ‘natural signs’ (smoke, thunder, footprints, echoes, non-synthetic odours and flavours), medical symptoms (pain, a rash, pulse-rate), measuring instruments (weathercock, thermometer, clock, spirit-level), ‘signals’ (a knock on a door, a phone ringing), pointers (a pointing ‘index’ finger, a directional signpost), recordings (a photograph, a film, video or television shot, an audio-recorded voice), personal ‘trademarks’ (handwriting, catchphrases).

These three modes arose within (and because of) Peirce’s triadic model of the sign and from a Peircean perspective it is reductive to transform a triadic relation into a dyadic one (Bruss 1978). The widespread use of these Peircean distinctions in texts which are otherwise primarily within that tradition may suggest either the potential for (indirect) referentiality in dyadic models or merely slippage between ‘sense’ and ‘reference’ in defining the ‘meaning’ of the sign. Iconicity

is based on (at least perceived) ‘resemblance’ and indexicality is based on (at least perceived) ‘direct connection’. Symbolic signs such as language are (at least) highly conventional; Iconic signs always involve some degree of conventionality; Indexical signs ‘direct the attention to their objects by blind compulsion’ (Peirce 1931–58, 2.306). *Indexical* and *Iconic* signs can be seen as more constrained by referential *signifieds* whereas in the more conventional *symbolic* signs the *signified* can be seen as being defined to a greater extent by the *signifier*. Within each form signs also vary in their degree of conventionality. For instance, Hodge and Kress suggest that indexicality is based on an act of judgement or inference whereas iconicity is closer to ‘direct perception’, making the highest ‘modality’ that of iconic signs (Hodge and Kress 1988, 26–7).

The more a signifier is constrained by the signified, the more ‘motivated’ the sign is: Iconic signs are highly motivated; Symbolic signs are unmotivated hence the need for indexicality of the two as represented in the pictorials for analysis here. The less motivated the sign, the more learning of an agreed convention is required. Nevertheless, most semioticians emphasize the role of convention in relation to signs.

## METHODOLOGY

This study opines that that a good, sound and logical research output should be governed by a well-defined research methodology based on scientific principles and based on this; the present study relies and supports the position and gathered data from pictorial representations of events in Ogoniland. All together five (5) images were generated from two Nigerian newspapers and explicated accordingly. These Newspapers are: The Vanguard Newspaper and The Punch Newspaper. This study made use of the purposive method of data collection. Data gathering was based on the knowledge of the pictorials. Because the Ogoni issue has been severally

condemned, and that it borders on inhuman treatment of the host communities, it has been widely reported in the media, this study is therefore interventionist and timely.

#### DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The analysis of the data is based on Charles Sanders Peirce's approach to socio-semiotic study of texts. The study aims to show how images from a degraded environment appeal to the human senses and the reactions to such bestialities of humans. It also reveals the extent of damage done to the ecosystem as a result of oil exploration. The semiotic resources in the images are described and interpreted from a linguistic perspective to expose the significance of the cultural damages done to the people and their ways of life. Through the application of the Peircean triadic model of the sign in semiotic analysis the results reveal loaded messages conveyed in images.

#### RELEVANCE OF THE TRIADIC MODEL TO TEXTUAL/PICTORIAL ANALYSIS

In the Peircean triadic model of semiotic analysis, a representamen can refer to its **object** by virtue of its relationships of similarity, contextual contiguity. The sign is therefore called **an icon**, **an index** and **a symbol**, respectively. The reference between a sign and its object is **iconic** if the sign resembles the object. For example, the feeling produced by playing a piece of music is the icon of that piece of music. Likewise someone's portrait is the icon of that person, and a model is the icon of a building. A drawing of a glass is the icon of a glass, but if it is placed on a crate, then it belongs to the pictogram code and becomes a replica of the signifying 'fragile' through iconic portrayal of a specie (a glass) that is part of a genera (fragile objects). The reference between a sign and its object is **indexical** if the sign really is affected by the object. For example, the position of an anemometer is caused by the direction of the wind; it is the index of the wind direction. A knock on the door is the index of a visit. The symptom of an illness is the

index of that illness. An index cannot have a representamen, because there is only "sameness" in firstness, and no contextual contiguity; therefore, an index is always iconic. An index may have as its representamen a sinsign, as in the examples above, or a legisign, as in certain words known as "indexical" words.

A sign is a **symbol** when it refers to its object. Passwords, tickets to a show, banknotes, and the words of a language are symbols. The symbolic rule may have been formulated by convention, or by cultural habit. A symbol's representamen is necessarily a legisign, but the legisign cannot really act until it is embodied in a replica, and from that point on, the symbol implies an index. According to Peirce, a **sign** may be simple or complex. Peirce does not see the sign as the smallest unit of signification because according to him, anything or phenomenon, no matter how complex, may be considered as a sign from the moment it enters into a process of semiosis. A semiotic process involves a triadic relationship between a sign or representamen (a first), an object (a second) and an interpretant (a third). The **representamen** is a thing that represents another thing: its object. Before it is interpreted, the representamen is a pure potentiality. The **object** is what the sign represents. The sign can only represent the object; it cannot furnish acquaintance with it. The sign can express something about the object, providing that it is an object with which the interpreter is already familiar from collateral observation (experience created from other signs, which are always from previous history). For example, a piece of red paper that is used as a sample (representamen) for a can of paint (object) indicates only the red colour of the object, since it is assumed that one already knows all of its other characteristics (packaging, content, usage, etc.). Peirce distinguishes the **dynamical object** (the object as it is in reality) from the **immediate object** (the object as it is represented by the sign). Upon being

interpreted, the representamen has the ability to trigger an **interpretant**, which in turn becomes a representamen by triggering another interpretant referring to the same object as the first representamen, and thereby allowing the first one to refer to the object. For example, the definition of a word in the dictionary is an interpretant of the word, because the definition refers to the object (= what the word represents) and thereby allows the representamen (= the word) to refer to this object. But in order to be understood, the definition itself requires a series, or more accurately, a bundle of other interpretants (other definitions). These three linguistic semiotic models assist us in having a clear understanding of the environmental issues as they are reported in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria from a purely linguistic view point.

DATA ANALYSIS 1 OIL SPILLAGE IN OGONI



S/N	Triadic Model of the Sign	Semiotic Resources in the Image	Semiotic Significance
1	Index	This is a devastated environment through oil spillage in the Ogoniland. The bushes are razed; the soil is full of crude oil as a result of exploration. The land is indexical of destruction due to oil spillage.	The spillage has caused damaged not only to the farming land but to the ecosystem
2	Icon	The picture shows the level of carnage caused by the oil spillage and the picture is an iconic form of a disturbing scenario and therefore calls for caution.	The picture shows the damage done to the environment.
3	Symbol	Oil spillage should be avoided because it can only aggravate a situation.	The picture calls for caution from oil explorers

DATA ANALYSIS 2 GAS FLARING IN OGONI



S/N	Triadic Model of the Sign	Semiotic Resources in the Image	Semiotic Significance
1	Index	A farmer in his devastated farmland, a thick smoke rising to the sky and destroyed trees at the background.	Environment and the ecosystem in danger
2	Icon	This is also an indication of damage to the eco system through oil spillage and the picture is an iconic form of a disturbing scenario.	The picture the damage done to the eco system
3	Symbol	Oil spillage should be avoided because it can only aggravate a situation.	There is need for caution

DATA ANALYSIS 3 A DEVASTATED FARMLAND IN OGONI



S/N	Triadic Model of the Sign	Semiotic Resources in the Image	Semiotic Significance
1	Index	A fog of smoke rising to the sky to destroy the ecosystem in oil farmlands in Ogoni	The dangers of the ecosystem
2	Icon	Damage to the eco system through gas flaring and the picture is an iconic form of a disturbing scenario.	Getting the eco system porous
3	Symbol	Gas flaring should be avoided because it destroys the ecosystem	There is need for caution

DATA ANALYSIS 4 POLLUTED WATER FOR FISHERMEN IN Ogoni



S/N	Triadic Model of the Sign	Semiotic Resources in the Image	Semiotic Significance
1	Index	Two canoe drivers and local farmers rowing their canoe to their farm. Their legs are stained with oil from spillage in Ogoniland	Apart from the psychological effect, physical damage is done to the human skin from oil spill
2	Icon	A cancerous scenario the picture is an iconic form of man's inhumanity to man.	The iconic significance of this pictorial representation is that it portrays the inhabitants of the region as endangered species
3	Symbol	Oil spill should be avoided because it destroys the ecosystem and humans	There is need for caution

DATA ANALYSIS 5 A BURNT FARMLAND IN OGONI



mother and child in Oza-Bangoma following military raid

A guest blog from Ben Amunwa, campaigner with oil industry watchdog [Platform](#).

S/N	Triadic Model of the Sign	Semiotic Resources in the Image	Semiotic Significance
1	Index	Colour still photography: The picture shows a woman carrying a naked baby and staring at an unburnt shell drum in the midst of devastation.	The dangers of the ecosystem
2	Icon	A woman carrying her little naked baby facing Shell tank and surrounded by a devastated environment	Getting the eco system porous
3	Symbol	A totally destroyed land that leaves the people without a future: A devastated land in the midst of imperialism	The imposition of a superior will on a helpless people

#### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS OF SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

The findings from the semiotic analysis from the perspectives of the triadic models of Index, Icon and Symbol reveal common thematic preoccupations: Neglect, pollution, agitation, environment degradation and despoliation. In **Analysis 1** there is a devastated environment through oil spillage in the Ogoni land; the surrounding bushes are razed to the ground as a result of the search for crude oil. The abundance of crude oil; which is supposed to be a source of blessing has become more of a curse to the people of the Niger Delta region. In linguistic terms, the land is indexical of destruction due to oil spillage which has caused damaged not only to the farm land but to the ecosystem. The picture is a clear demonstration of the level of carnage caused by the oil spillage and the picture is an iconic form of a disturbing scenario and therefore calls for caution. The picture is an outcry from a helpless people whose means of livelihood has been destroyed and are at the verge of extinction. It also shows the damage done to the environment. This goes to show that oil spillage can and should be avoided because it can only aggravate a situation. There is therefore the need for caution on the part of oil explorers.

In **Analysis 2** we see a typical farmer in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria in his farmland which is already devastated. There is a thick smoke rising to the sky and destroyed trees at the background symbolizing the fact that the environment and the ecosystem are in danger. The fog of smoke rising to the sky is suggestive of a potential destruction of the ecosystem. The oil spill through exploration also destroys the environment and renders it barren as represented in the picture. There is clear neglect, devastation and degradation in the land as a result of the quest for oil exploration. It also shows that oil spillage can and should be avoided through cautious

handling of the process in the course of prospecting, extraction and exploration. The picture therefore calls for caution. **Analysis 3** shows a pool of oil from a spill on a farmland with a farmer onsite denoting a devastated environment and the ecosystem; damage to the eco system through oil spillage and the picture is an iconic form of a disturbing scenario. It depicts an instance of environmentally despoiled eco system. It also shows the level of damage to the eco system through gas flaring and the picture is an iconic form of a disturbing scenario. This is a clear demonstration of how quickly it is to get the eco system porous. It tends to sound a note of warning that gas flaring can and should be avoided through the conversion of same gas into more useful resources rather than allow it to destroy the environment especially the ecosystem. **Analysis 4** is more of an eye sore. Niger Delta inhabitants are not only agrarian but they are also fisher men/women. The fact that they are inside a canoe buttresses this fact. Sadly, it is not only the green environment that has been destroyed but also the water has been polluted and the fishes poisoned. The two canoe drivers are local farmers rowing their canoe to their farm. Their legs are stained with oil from spillage. Apart from the psychological effect, physical damage is done to the human skin from oil spill. This possibly paints a cancerous scenario. The picture is an iconic form of inhuman treatment on the part of the government and the multi-national corporations. There is little or no form of care from the government; and the same polluted water is used for cooking, drinking and bathing. This iconic picture is a demonstration of the fact that oil spill should be avoided because it destroys the ecosystem and human lives. Oil explorers and prospectors should therefore exercise caution while performing their roles.

**ANALYSIS 5** shows a devastated environment with an unburnt shell drum. Shell has always been at the forefront of allegations of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region. Right

from when the late Isaac Adaka Boro took up arms against Nigeria in 1967 to the gruesome murder of Ken Sarowiwa in 1995, shell has been accused of conspiring against the people to unleash environmental terror. The picture in analysis 5 is a clear representation of the supremacy of imperialist powers on the people of the region through their proxy companies. In the picture we see the entire surrounding completely burnt down by the activities of oil explorers who seem to show no iota of care for the people of the region. The woman in the picture is half naked tying *wrapper* while her topmost part of the body is exposed---an indication of lack of care in an environment that produces the wealth of the nation. The baby she is carrying is naked with brownish hair a sign of malnourishment resulting from inadequate food, lack of basic health care, portable water and nutrition. The zinc that gives shelter in form of roof material is seen scattered on the ground. This is a representation of complete neglect and abandonment. The trees around are completely destroyed signifying the destruction of the natural environment. There is an iron chair at the scene of the incident which shows that people were using that particular place as an abode but the chair is completely destroyed revealing the skeletal iron used in making it. This is a clear representation of a psychological trauma that the people are made to face. The most significant sight in this picture is the drum that belongs to shell which does not show any sign of destruction. This is a clear picture of the imposition of imperialism on the poor people of this region by the foreign companies that represent and protect the interest of the former colonial masters. The drum is as fresh as ever despite it being in the middle of an inferno. An indication that all the sectarian crises in the Niger Delta region do not affect the imperialist powers in any way. They are shown here as being catalytic---being able to speed up a chemical reaction but remaining unchanged in the face of the fracas. The woman epitomises femininity that always bears

the brunt of any war situation---lacking protection and always exposed to hazards. This picture is a portrayal of the injustices suffered by the Niger Delta people.

## CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that pictorial representation of the environmental issues in the Niger Delta region using Ogoni land as a paradigm possesses indexical semiotic features that share cultural and universal appeals. The pictorials have cultural significance because they yield results that lend themselves to the similarities of interpretations in both contexts and they are universal because they portray happenings in all inhuman societies the world over through the thematization and representation of multimodal features with global acceptability. The practice of portraying inhuman attributes in oil producing areas especially in inhuman societies is not only condemnable in Nigeria but also in the entire universe as a result of the counterproductive effects on global warming, destruction of the ecosystem and environmental degradation. It is equally significant in semiotic analysis because it exposes the ills suffered by the “less privileged” in the society and exposing the activities of the oil explorers whose aim is to satisfy their quest for wealth acquisition at the expense of human and environmental development. It is our view that the findings in this study will not only expose the ills of environmental despoliation through oil exploration but that the findings will call the attention of the relevant authorities to the level of damage done to both human and environmental resources and lead to effective collaboration between the government and the governed so as to forge a close tie in human and environmental development. Through this process, there will definitely be a cordial relationship between the inhabitants of the oil producing areas and the multinational oil companies and reduces the crimes of kidnapping, destruction of oil installations, killings and constant

harassment and intimidation. This will surely impact positively on the business relations and lead to indexical growth in business and human relations.

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