A STUDY OF AMBIGUITY IN THE ECOLOGICAL POEMS ON THE NIGER DELTA

Uche Kenneth Chukwu[1i],
Chioma Chinedu-Oko[2]
[1]PhD, Directorate of General Studies,
Federal University of Technology,
Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria
[2]Federal Polytechnic Nekede,
Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria

Abstract:
Literary communication is one of the fields that allow flexibility in the use of language. Most essentially, in the poetic genre, creative writers manipulate the elasticity of linguistic principles, rules, and techniques in their attempt to express their intended messages. This paper examines ambiguity as one of the linguistic principles open to such creative manipulations. In the paper, six poems by six different poets, Tanure Ojaide, Ibiwari Ikiriko, Ogaga Ifowodo, Obari Gomba, Sophia Obi and Chris Onyema, have been examined with particular focus on how the words *shell*, *crude* and *palm*, have been manipulated within the context of the Niger Delta environmental politics. The paper adopts the systemic functional theory as its major theoretical framework against the background that the choices and manipulations of meaning are instances of functionality of language. The poets are selected through simple random technique, while the poems are selected through purposive method, with specific interest on the creative manipulation of the selected lexical items. The conclusion of the paper is that although ambiguity is mostly regarded as a barrier to precise expression of ideas, it can also be positively exploited to realize brevity through duality of relevant significations.

Keywords: ambiguity, ecology, poems, Niger Delta

1. Introduction

Word choice is an essential consideration in both literary appreciation and linguistic text analysis. There is always the need for examining the writer's choice of words and its significance on the overall literary message, the possible motivations for such choices, as well as their appropriateness to the context of the text.

---

[1] Correspondence: email chukwukeneth@yahoo.com

There is an accepted conclusion in linguistic study that meanings of words are not usually taken in isolation, rather, they are often measured in relation to the context in which they have been used. So in text analysis, context is very essential in evaluating a writer's choice of words. George Yule, for instance, has identified two types of context that must be considered in the evaluation of a text: physical context and linguistic context. Physical context according to Yule is "*the time and place in which we encounter linguistic expressions*" (129). Linguistic context, which can also be called "*surrounding co-text*", on the other hand, refers to other words or phrases or sentences that are used in the company of any word (129). Both the physical and the linguistic contexts play vital roles in the evaluation of language use in a text. They help to offer the background upon which descriptive statements and assumptions are made concerning a text.

The right word in the right place is one of the hallmarks of good writing. To be able to effectively express the desired intentions, a writer consciously selects and puts words in what he or she considers their right positions. One feature of written communication is that, most often, it has the absence of the writer at the point of text consumption. The reader is usually left with the option of drawing meaning and inferences based on what is before him or her. There is, therefore, the need for caution and care on the part of the writer because words and expressions placed wrongly can only produce wrong interpretations and inferences at the point of reading.

In any case, a writer may intentionally choose words that generate non-specific or non-single significances. The word significance has been used in its technical sense as an aspect of meaning that is different from the strict logical or cognitive meaning. According to Geoffrey Leech, significance in text analysis is "*the meaning of a poem, a line, a word etc. which may include everything that is communicative by it*" (40). Significance is, therefore, a context-based interpretation. To consider the significance of a word is to consider its motivation, intention, and the overall relevance to its context of use. Thus, a writer may intentionally choose and use words in peculiar manners that broaden their significances. For instance, some words by their nature are susceptible to non-specific usage. In speech, homophones can generate non-specificity where the context is not considered. Similarly, in writing, homonyms can also generate the same effect. Such non-specific usages are ambiguity carriers. It is against this background that this paper examines the import of ambiguity which arises from the use of the words shell, crude and palm in selected poems on the Niger Delta ecological poems.

2. Review of Relevant Concepts

2.1 Ambiguity

According to Leech "*the trouble with the word 'ambiguity' is that it is itself an instance of troublesome ambiguity. In linguistics, it has generally been used in a narrow sense which we may represent as 'more than one cognitive meaning for the same piece of language*" (205). Empson also quoted in Leech describes ambiguity as "*any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language*" (205). From the view point of these assertions, ambiguity is a barrier to precision and the exact expression of

intention. It is capable of creating two meanings: the writer's intended meaning and the reader's perceived meaning.

But what happens where the alternative reactions, borrowing from Leech, are all relevant to the intentions of the text? Or what happens where a writer intentionally uses a word that is capable of ambiguity? According to Jacob Mey, in such circumstance, "*we are not so much interested in 'disambiguation in context' but instead, in what one might call 'ambiguation in context'*" (86). What this implies is that ambiguity cannot always be viewed as instance of writing flaw; it could be harnessed by a writer to achieve stylistic effects. For instance, the choice of a homonym that its different meanings are relevant to the themes of a literary text could be read as a technique of linguistic brevity. Therefore, examining the extent to which the ecological politics of the Niger Delta has influenced the creative elasticity of ambiguity in the communication of the literary messages forms the purpose of this paper.

2.2 Ecological Poetry

A question asked by Gander could assist us in understanding the concept of ecological poetry. According to Gander, "*if natural processes are already altered by and responsive to human observations, how does poetry register the complex interdependency that draws us unto a dialogue with the world?*" (http://poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2008/11/what-is-eco-poetry).

The answer to this question exists in the study of poems that employ the idioms of aquatic environment to draw attention to the dilemma and predicaments in the troubled Niger Delta in Nigeria.

Ecological poetry, which is also known as eco-poetry, is any poem that has ecological motivation. Literary communication is a socially committed art, and as such, it draws from the various spheres of human life and experiences, the ecology inclusive. Ecology is usually discussed on the premise that human life is connected to the environment, and each affects the other. Most ecological poems, in registering this complex interdependency between the human and the ecology, reveal a rather un-symbiotic relationship. What is presented, except in the fantasies of the Romantics and Pastoralists, is the helpless and hapless environment that has been vandalized and mutilated by human actions and activities. Hence, most ecological literature serve as voice for the ecology who presents her debased, abused and devastated self, with human being as the major culprit. To what extent the manipulation of seemingly ambiguous words help in registering this complex co-existence forms the focus of the paper

Language is the major tool with which the writer creates situations and themes. This involves various forms of manipulations at the different levels of language description. This paper focuses on lexical manipulation, with particular reference to ambiguity in word choice, and how it helps in couching the environmental politics in the Niger Delta.

2.3 Niger Delta

Citing Ekpo, the Niger Delta, "*a geographical area measuring about 70,000 square kilometers lies in the southern-most part of Nigeria, stretching from the Nigeria-Cameroun boundary in the east to the Ondo-Ogun states boundaries in the west. The area is bounded in the north by Enugu, Ebonyi, Anambra, Kogi and Ekiti states, with the Atlantic coast forming the general boundary in the south*" (1). This is one of the several ways in which the region is delineated. However, other considerations aside from geography have also been adopted, such as anthropology and mineral deposit, with the latter being the mostly adopted. Simply speaking, in Nigeria, the Niger Delta is synonymous with the oil producing areas of the country.

Niger Delta in Nigeria is the oil rich region that forms the main stay of the nation's economy. The region has experienced several forms of ecological debasement arising from oil exploration activities in the area: air pollution from gas flaring, exposure to hazardous wastes, destruction of the aquatic environment through oil spillage, soil aridity, and so on. Consequently, the area is known for militancy and other forms of social protests as a reaction to the inhuman experiences. Often times, the government of the country and the leaders of the region engage in accusations and counteraccusations, sometimes submerging the major issues in mere rhetoric. Again, creative efforts of writers from this region have extensively been channeled into recreating this aspect of existence. This paper believes that a study of eco-poetry on the Niger Delta should, therefore, not exclude how the writers' lexical choices reflect the ecological problems, the economic, cultural and sociopolitical power play relating to environmental politics of the region.

3. Methodology

This paper is a text analysis of selected poems on the Niger Delta ecological existence; used to illustrate how ambiguity could be approximated into positive lexical elasticity. The poets are randomly selected, and the poems for analysis are purposively selected, with ambiguity in the identified lexical items in focus. The theoretical framework adopted is Halliday's systemic functional theory. The choice of the theory is premised on its emphasis on the functionality of language. The theory contends that language contains interrelated sets of alternatives from which users make choices, where such choices are motivated by the function which the user wants the language to perform. According to Halliday, "*functionality is intrinsic to language: that is to say that the entire architecture of language is arranged along function lines*" (31, italics his). Meaning making function relates to choice, and choice involves "*options that arise in the environment of other options*" (http://sk/systemic_functional_linguistics.htm). The choice factor makes the systemic functional theory emphasise description along the paradigmatic axis instead of the syntagmatic.

The relevance of the theory to the purpose of this paper is predicated on the examination of how the writers in the selected poems have made choices from the options available in the English language lexicon. The paper is convinced that the

choice of the words *shell, crude* and *palm*, and their peculiar usages in the selected poems have been motivated by the peculiar subject of discourse, that is the Niger Delta ecological politics. Thus, it is the function which the poets want the words to perform in the selected poems that informed their choices.

3.1 Text Analysis

Let us reiterate that three words have been selected for analysis in this paper (shell, crude and palm). The purpose is to describe how the poets have played on their meanings to suit the Niger Delta environmental politics. Furthermore, six poems by six different poets have been selected. The poems and their authors include: "*When green was the lingua franca*" by Tanure Ojaide, "*The Palm and the Crude*" by Ibiwari Ikiriko, "Odi" by Ogaga Ifowodo "*Pearls of the Mangrove*" by Obari Gomba, "*Oloibiri*" by Sophia Obi and "*Wave Three*" by Chris Onyema. The paper recognises that, other poets, or the same poets but in other poems, could have used the same words peculiarly. So limiting the data to the selected poems does not conclusively exonerate other poets from this stylistic technique.

3.2 Shell

In the poem entitled "*When green was the lingua franca*" Tanure Ojaide antithetically presents the pre-crude oil exploration days, and the present-day conditions of the Niger Delta. This juxtaposition foregrounds the manner of industrial harm the Niger Delta has experienced through the activities of the oil firms. The pre-crude oil exploration days are captured in a nostalgic reflection of the childhood days of the persona; a beautiful environment with *unbroken parks, green environments, sparkling water with glamorous fish, snails and fruits*. On the other hand, what obtains currently is a violated and abused environment characterized by *quakes and flares, doomed neighbours, victims of arson, treeful carnage, amputated leaves and weeds.*

However, the interest of the paper is in the ambiguous use of the word *shell* in the poem. Let us examine an excerpt from the poem to illustrate a play on the word:

> "Then Shell broke the bond
> With quakes and a hell
> Of flares. Stoking a hearth
> Under God's very behind!
>
> Explosions of shells in *under*
> drove the seasons mental
> mine grease-black gold."
>
> (p.13, stanzas 4 and 5. Italics his, ellipsis mine)

Within the context of the Niger Delta environmental politics, the word *shell* can attract any of the following interpretations:

- Shell as the proper name for one of the major multi-national oil exploration companies, (Shell Petroleum Development Company, SPDC) which operates in the Niger Delta.
- Shell as a verb for the bombardments and attacks carried out by the security guards of oil companies; as well as, the vibrations and quakes arising from the use of heavy duty machines by the companies.

The poet understands this possibility of double interpretation of the word. Therefore, he plays on this accident of sound and interpretation to expand the message of the poem. Shell as a company has been at the centre of accusations of oil spillage and other activities of ecological degradation inflicted on the Niger Delta. Again, in their despicable vandalism and violation of the ecology of the people, the company also uses heavy duty machines that shell the environment. Thus, the poet relies on graphology to distinguish between the two shells. Shell as used in stanza 4, line 1, begins in an upper case letter, and the one in stanza 5, line 1, begins in a lower case letter, despite that none of them is the first word of a line. Thus, it may be argued from the graphological viewpoint that the first shell is a proper noun, while the second is not. Again from the viewpoint of syntax, shell in stanza 4, line 1, is the subject of a transitive verb:

A   S   P   C
"Then Shell broke the bond."

In stanza 5, line 1, shell is the head of a prepositional qualifier to the subject "*explosion*":

"Explosions of shells"

Such syntagmatic reading assists in differentiating between the two shells. But the problem is on how such graphological and syntagmatic clues could assist in the disambiguation, in the event of oral presentation of the poem.

Ojaide is not alone in this unique linguistic strategy. Let us also examine excerpts from other selected poems. In the poem entitled "*Odi*", Ogaga Ifowodo also plays on the word thus:

"…Hearing no shrieks, the sort his well-trained soldier's
Ears knew as the terror of a *shell-shattered*
Night just before dawn, he steadied his hand
For the second lob, this time in line with rest…

They scattered with the muddy splash
Deeper into the bush. *Shell-shocked* babies
and children smothered the instinct to cry"
                                        (pp.19-21. ellipsis and italics mine)"

The two words that are of interest are "*Shell-shattered*" and "*shell-shocked*". Both are compound words. Shell-shattered could be interpreted as:

a. *Shell* as an agentive qualifier to *shattered*. In this regard, shell-shattered night could be interpreted as a night that is shattered by shell as a company.

b. *Shell* as agentive qualifier to *shattered*, where a night is shattered by shell as bombardment or explosion from machines.

Similar interpretations apply to *shell-shocked babies,* which could be interpreted as babies shocked by Shell as a company, or shell as an instrument.

What is significant is that both stanzas describe the gory and devastating shock which the inhabitants of the Niger Delta environment experience. While the first talks of an old man whose dinner is disturbed by the devastating sound of weapons of destruction, the second presents children slaughtered, maimed and scattered by similar weapons.

In each, case however, the compounds: *shell-shattered* and *shell-shocked* capture both the agent of an action and the action itself. Thus, whether shell is seen as an oil exploration company, or as an instrument of destruction, both are agentive; while *shocked* and *shattered* are consequential. The consequence is as important as the agent.

In "*Pearls of the Mangrove*", Obari Gomba also plays on the word shell. Consider the following excerpt:

"Listen to the *seashells*
They tell stories. Listen to them…
Now I hear their voices
On the mangrove fields
Of Agbor, Echie and Obon."

(p.115, lines 1-5, italics mine)

The choice of *seashell* in this excerpt could pose some questions. Is *seashell* as an action (attack in a sea using shell as instrument), or is *seashell* a living object made to tell the stories? In whichever case, the interpretation is relevant to the eco-experiences of the Niger Delta. There is the use of explosives to shell (destroy) both the land and aquatic environments of the Niger Delta. As well, there are seashells as part of the inhabitants of the aquatic environments, whose life is threatened by the exploration activities. Both interpretations are relevant to the Niger Delta eco-discourse. Even where the latter seems a more possible interpretation, the personification of the organism is also notable, when we consider the linguistic environment of "*Listen to the seashells… Now I hear their voices*". Thus, the meaning of seashell in this context is not particular to this specie of organism, but it becomes a metaphorization of the Niger Delta aquaculture that is under severe threat.

The three poets have, therefore, exploited the homonymic richness of the word, and have stylistically used this in a manner that evokes more than one signification. However, the fact that the different significations are coalesce into the Niger Delta environmental discourse makes the ambiguity creatively considerable.

3.3 Crude

Crude is another word that its creative elasticity has been exploited by poets from the Niger Delta. In the poem entitled "*Oloibiri*" by Sophia Obi, one of the stanzas reads:

> "Along the coast,
> The smoke stench
> Of my *crude* flow desecrates
> My marine reserves."
>
> (lines 10-12, my italics)

Generally, the poem contains personal lamentations, with the Niger Delta environment as the persona. From the view point of the Niger Delta environmental discourse, the word *crude* is capable of the following suggestions:

a) raw, unrefined, simple, not very accurate;
b) a clipped form for crude oil.

The two interpretations are, therefore, retrievable within the linguistic and social contexts of the poem. Consider that *crude flow* is a noun phrase, where *crude* is an adjectival modifier and *flow* is the noun head. *Crude* suggests the manner of the *flow. Crude flow,* thus, could be read as a kind of flow that is simple or unrefined. From this view point, *crude flow* exists in the same paradigm with phrases such as: unsteady flow, irregular flow, zigzag flow.

From another perspective, *crude* in the excerpt could be taken as the object that flows. Consider the following paradigms: sea flow (the flow of sea), blood flow (the flow of blood). In this context, *crude* becomes a clipped form for crude oil. This interpretation becomes more relevant as *crude flow* in the excerpt is a part of the structural subject, *my crude flow*, which controls the transitive verb *desecrates,* and the object, *my marine reserves.* If we then consider other words in the linguistic context of the excerpt: *coast*, *marine* and *reserves*; the aquatic environment of the Niger Delta is evoked, (an area that is characterized by marine coasts exploited by the multi-national oil industries through the deep off-shore explorations).

What is significant in the excerpt, however, is that whether it is crude oil that flows or any other liquid that flows crudely, for instance water, each fits into the Niger Delta environmental experience where spilled crude oil flows to desecrate (pollute) the aquatic environment, with the result that rivers or streams or ocean tributaries in the area begin to flow sluggishly (crudely).

In the poem entitled "Wave Three" by Chris Onyema, a similar manipulation of ambiguity is evident. Examine this excerpt:

> "*Crudely* exploited and abandoned
> With none to love and care for
> I see people hated in *crude* manners
> Like the Ogoni Bill of Rights."
>
> (Lines 22-25, my italics)

Crudely exploited in this excerpt portends ambiguity. Crudely could be an adverb modifier (manner) for the verb exploited. Crudely could thus be viewed in the same paradigm with words such as unrefined and barbaric. Then, contrast them with such words as smartly, tactfully or intelligently. Within the context of the Niger Delta environmental experiences, crude as manner would call to mind the inhuman and barbaric mode of operation which the oil companies operating in the area are accused of. The manner of exploitation lacks human consideration.

On the other hand, crudely in the excerpt could also suggest the area or aspect of exploitation, that is, an exploitation that involves the production of crude. From this view point, crude becomes the clipped form of crude oil. Contrast crudely exploited with sexually exploited, financially exploited, spiritually exploited. Meanwhile, in whichever way it is interpreted, the message about the ecological experiences of the Niger Delta is embedded.

3.4 Palm

Another word that its semantic elasticity has been exploited by Niger Delta poets is palm. In the poem entitled "*The Palm and the Crude*", Ibiwari Ikiriko, for instance, exploits the homonymic character of the word palm. In the third stanza, the poet writes:

> "In the beginning
> Was the palm
> And the Palm
> Oiled the palms
> Balmed our joints
> Sweetened our insides
> And anointed our heads."
>
> (p.31, lines 1-8)

In this excerpt, palm has been used in two senses:
  a) a type of tropical plant which produces palm fruit and palm oil
  b) a part of the human body.

Like in the use of shell discussed earlier, this poet relies on graphology (upper case and lower case letters) for the disambiguation. However, a clearer disambiguation approach here could be through structural consideration. The first *palm* is used as the agentive subject for *oiled*, *balmed* and *sweetened*. The second *Palm* is used as an object, and in syntactic parallel with *joints*, *insides* and *heads*. Thus, we may take *palms*, *joints*, *insides* and *heads* as co-meronyms, where the human body becomes the super-ordinate.

There are, therefore, both structural and semantic distinctions between the two *palms*. But these can only be identified on a close and critical examination. No doubt, the poet has introduced such ambiguity to play on their relevance to the environmental politics of the Niger Delta. Both palm as tree and as palm as part of the human body relate to the Niger Delta ecology and history. Prior to the discovery of crude oil in the area, Niger Delta was a major exporter of palm oil. As the major export which formed

the main stay of the economy of the region, palm oil, therefore, oiled the palms of the citizens. "*To oil the palm*", in this context, becomes a local transliteration of "*to grease the palm*".

4. Conclusion

The paper has examined the words *shell, crude* and *palm* and their strategic manipulation to capture the various but related Niger Delta ecological experiences. Compared with the other two genres (prose and drama), poetry is noted for brevity. This promotes extensive manipulation of language resources at the various levels of linguistic description. The paper has concentrated on the lexical choices. Again the paper has examined the selected words against the background of the principle of ambiguity and how the principle can be creatively harnessed to achieve multi-inclusiveness of significations; which relates to Lyons' "*many-to-one correspondence*" phraseology (71). The paper thus concludes that the manner of using the selected words helps the poets to develop various legs with which their poems stand on the various ecological concerns of Niger Delta. Therefore, ambiguity in the view of the paper should not always be accounted for as a barrier to precision, as it could also be manipulated into a technique of brevity to facilitate the expression of many relevant messages using limited words.

References

Ekpo, Udeme. The Niger Delta and Oil Politics. Lagos: International Energy Communication. 2004. Print

Gomba, Obari. "Pearls of the Mangrove" in Pearls of the Mangrove. Port Harcourt. Newson & Dexter, 2011. Print

Halliday, M.A.K. Introduction to Functional Grammar. Revised by Christian M.I.M Mathiessen, 4th ed.. London: Routledge, 2014. Print

Leech, Geoffery N. A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry. London: Longman, 1968. Print Ifowodo, Ogaga. "Odi" in The Oil Lamp. Eriteria: Africa World Press, 2005. Print

Ikiriko, Ibiwari. "The Palm and the Crude" in Oily Tears of the Delta. Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2000. Print

Mey, Jacob L. Pragmatics: An Introduction. 2nd ed. U.K. Blackwell, 2006. Print

Obi, Sophia. "Oloibiri" in Tears in a Basket. Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2005. Print

Ojaide, Tanure. "When green was the lingua franca" in Delta Blues and Home Songs. Ibadan: Kraft Books, 1997. Print

Onyema, Chris. "Wave Three" in Crude Waves of the Delta. New Jersey: Goldline & Jacobs, 2012. Print

Yule George. The Study of Language. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. Print