

Implicatures of Protest on Environmental Degradation of the Niger Delta in Nnimmo Bassey's Poetry

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Abstract

This paper examines implicatures of protest on environmental degradation of the Niger Delta in Nnimmo Bassey's poetry collection, *We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood*. Nnimmo Bassey's poetry has received scholarly attention from the point of view of literary and linguistic criticisms. However, there is paucity of pragmatic studies in poems from the collection. Significantly, H. P. Grice's principle of implicature has rarely been applied as an analytical tool to explore the themes of protest and ecological devastation of the Niger Delta region which are the foci of the entire poetry collection. Therefore, this study is an attempt to undertake a pragmatic analysis of selected poems from the collection using H. P. Grice's Cooperative Principle as a theoretical framework. The thrust of the study is to decipher the extent to which the poet adheres to the conversational maxims of quality, quantity, manner and relation in the projection of protest and the Niger Delta issues in the selected poems. Purposefully, poems which foreground environmental degradation, oil exploration and exploitation and protest which characterise Niger Delta poetry are selected to project how the poet presents, projects and protests the Niger Delta issues. Our findings reveal that the poet's violation and adherence to Grice's maxims of Quality, Quantity and Relation are pragmatic tools used to project the messages inherent in the poems.

Keywords: Nnimmo Bassey, Niger Delta poetry, oil exploration, protest, cooperative principle, implicature, environmental degradation

1. Introduction

The concept of implicature is key to pragmatics as it is one of the most important aspects of the discipline. Reiter and Placencia (2005) corroborate this fact when they assert that H.P Grice's cooperative principle and its related maxims of conversation is one of the most important contributions to the study of pragmatics. Implicature stands as a paradigmatic example of the innate characteristics and power of pragmatic explanation to linguistic phenomenon (Levinson, 1983). Basically, it concerns itself with how a hearer attains the level of expressed meaning from the level of implied meaning. During conversation, meaning making transcends the spoken words, utterance interpretation being a central issue in pragmatic researches (Osunbade, 2020,

p. 177; Ogungbemi, 2024). Interlocutors deduce much more from what has been spoken and communication requires people to cooperate (Mey, 2001, p. 71). In other words, implicature gives a clear account of how it is possible to mean more than what is actually said (Levinson, 1983, p. 97). In a bid to communicate or converse in a maximally efficient, rational way, the cooperative maxims stipulate that participants should speak sincerely, relevantly, clearly and provide sufficient information.

According to Reiter and Placencia,

Grice observed that conversation is usually coherent and continuous; thus, he assumed that there must be some kind of prior agreement between interactants concerning the principles of the exchange, an agreement that makes the participants recognize common aims and specific ways of achieving them (2005, p.146).

Cooperative principle holds that language is interpreted on the assumption that the user obeys four maxims: quantity, quality, relation and manner. These maxims each consists of sub-maxims that govern accepted conversational behavior. Conversational implicature is an indispensable part of the system of everyday communication. A speaker might communicate either by obeying the maxims or flouting them provided the hearer is able to decode the strategy which is employed (Kroeger, 2018, p. 142). In other words, the hearer is not expected to slavishly follow the principle; speaker and hearer only need to be aware that it exists.

According to Kroeger (2018), Grice describes different specific patterns of reasoning that generate conversational implicatures. The first case is that in which there exist an apparent violation but no maxim is really violated. The implicature triggered in this case becomes necessary that it turns out to be that there is no real violation. Another notable case is that an apparent violation of one maxim results to a conflict with another maxim. Third, Grice described instances of maxim flouting where deliberate and obvious violations are intended to be treated and recognized as such.

Kroger (2018) adds that sometimes, speakers utter tautological sentences or contradictions. In cases like these, the communicative value of the utterance comes basically from the pragmatic inferences triggered. The semantic content of the sentence contributes little or nothing, the semantic content may be uninformative. Metaphors, ironies and other figures of speech can be regarded as flouting the maxim of quality since the literal semantic content is false. However, Grice's cooperative principle has been criticized on the ground that it represents a philosopher's paradise and does not pay attention to the realities of life and conversation as these principles do not always apply in real life (Capone & Mey, 2016).

In this study, Nnimmo Bassey as a poet-activist, articulates his dissent against the agonizing oppression, marginalization and sufferings of the Niger Delta people due to the nefarious activities of the government and corporate oil companies who are out there to degrade the environment by oil exploration. Nnimmo Bassey's poems focus on environmental sensitization and project the untold pain brought about by the aftermath of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. He employs poetry as a tool to register his protest against the hazardous effect of oil exploration in his collection, *We thought it was oil but it was blood* and squall for the rescue of the environment.

Three poems – “We thought it was oil but it was blood”, “When the earth bleeds” and “The United Niger Delta Oil Co” – are purposively selected from the collection and subjected to a rigorous analysis using Grice's cooperative principle. This analytical tool helps to x-ray clearly how the conversational maxims are employed by the poet to register his protest, disappointment and anger against the perpetrators of these nefarious acts.

The poetry collection, *“We thought it was oil but it was blood”* bothers on the correlation between exploration, exploitation and devastation. It x-rays resistance poetry by portraying the struggles and protestations of the Niger Deltans, the adverse effects of oil exploration on the environment, history, agriculture, culture and economic life of the Niger Delta people in particular and Nigeria in general. This study investigates how Bassey employs poetry as a potent tool to protest the injustice meted out to his people. It examines how his violation or adherence to the conversational maxims helps him to register his protest.

2. Statement of the problem

The poetry of Nnimmo Bassey has received critical attention from the point of view of literary and linguistic criticisms. Some of such studies include Maledo and Uzezi (2021), Gomba (2016), Abba and Onyemachi (2020) and Igwedibia (2018). A reading of such studies showed that not much has been done in Nnimmo Bassey's poetry from the perspective of pragmatics. Most importantly, the poems have rarely been studied using Grice's cooperative principle as analytical framework. Also, the issue of oil exploration in the Niger Delta has not been given enough scholarly attention from the point of view of linguistics and pragmatics. Bassey recognizing the urgency in this employs poetry as a way to tackle the issue. And this is what this study is meant to investigate.

2.1 Aim and objectives

This study is aimed at examining the implicatures of protest on environmental degradation of the Niger Delta in Nnimmo Bassey's poetry. The specific objectives are to:

- i. investigate the extent to which the selected poems adhere to or violate the maxims of quality, quantity, manner and relation,
- ii. give a meaningful interpretation of the selected poems based on the implicature generated through the violation of the conversational maxims; and
- iii. show how the selected poems are able to protest against the issues discussed and how they affect the Niger Delta environment.

Literature Review

The poetry of Nnimmo Bassey has received a good number of critical attentions from the perspectives of linguistic and literary criticisms. From the linguistic point of view, Maledo and Uzezi (2021) is a stylistic study of Nimmo Bassey and Tanure Ojaide's poetry using the Hallidayan Transitivity System of the Experiential Metafunction. From the literary perspective, Gomba (2016) studies minority rights in the poetry of Ibawari Ikriko, Nnimmo Bassey and Ogaga Ifowodo. The study investigates how power is a determining factor in control and dispossession. It argues that the exercise of state might is a repression strategy which designs accumulation for the states and its privilege entities and concludes that dispossession, environmental degradation and underdevelopment are connected with repression which culminates in resistance and violence.

Also, Abba and Onyemachi (2020) is a study on eco-alienation in the Niger Delta Eco-poetics. The paper avers that the anthropocentric standing of man at the center of the universe which is the root cause of hyper-capitalist greed is the premise in the discussion of eco alienation in Ojaide's *Delta Blues* and *Home Songs* and Nnimmo Bassey's *We thought it was oil but it was blood*. It argues that the poetry collections project the feelings of disconnection between the Niger Delta people and the oil wealth in their community and concludes that rather than improving the condition of living, oil becomes a metaphor for death and that eco poetry is a very useful tool to interrogate the eco estrangement, not just in the present Niger Delta but also in the Eco-discourses globally.

Grice's principle of conversational implicature has also been applied to pragmatic works as well. Igwedibia (2018) is a study of selected poems of Audre Lorde using Grice's cooperative principle as analytical tools to investigate the extent to which the

selected poems adhere or violate Grice's maxims. The study concludes that the poems adhere to the maxims and violates them in the same frequency. Li (2017) is an endeavor on Grice's cooperative principle as a stylistic device to x-ray the ultimate meaning and the aesthetic effects in Bishop's *North Haven* and *Insomnia*. The paper adopts a pragma-stylistic approach to investigate the poems and it argues that the reader's understanding of the poem is enhanced by the level of the relation between Bishop's violation of cooperative principles and the generation of conversational implicature. It concludes by stating that a multidisciplinary path to the exploration of literary texts by linguistic principles should be encouraged. While noting the importance of the above studies, it appears that none of them has deployed Grice's maxims to the study of Nnimo Bassey's poetry.

3. Theoretical framework Implicature

Implicature as a pragmatic aspect of meaning was first identified by H.P Grice (1975). He describes the characteristic features of implicatures and proposes a systematic explanation for how they work. In his William James lecture series at Havard, partially collected and published in Grice (1979), he presents a panorama of his thoughts and laid out his analysis of implicatures which attracted great interest in and research about his topic. He labelled these ideas the tottering steps towards a systematic, philosophically inspired theory of language and this has come to be known as Gricean pragmatic theory. Sometimes, it is cited as the beginning of pragmatics as a separate field (Kroeger, 2018).

Grice identifies two types of implicature. These are conventional implicature and conversational implicature. They both convey additional level of meaning beyond the semantic meaning of the words and utterances. However, in the case of conventional implicature the same implicature is always conveyed, regardless of context, whereas in the case of conversational implicature, what is implied varies according to the context of utterance (Thomas, 1995, p. 57). Conventional implicatures are non-truth-conditional inferences that are simply attached by convention to particular lexical items or expressions. It is derived by the conventional meaning of words and utterances. This is not a very interesting concept in pragmatic study. Huang (2007) maintains that Grice's theory of implicature remains one of the cornerstones of contemporary thinking in linguistics pragmatics.

Grice argues that there exists an underlying principle that determines how language is used with maximum efficiency and effectively to achieve relational interaction in

communication. This he calls the cooperative principle. Grice formulated the cooperative principle and conversational maxims on the assumption that the effective exchange of information is the main purpose of conversation (Reiter & Placencia, 2005, p. 145). He focuses on the rationality and/or otherwise of conversational behavior rather than on any other feature of conversation. Grice believes that since conversation is usually coherent and continuous, there must be a kind of prior agreement between interactants which concern the principles of the interaction, an agreement which makes the participants perceive common aims and specific ways of achieving them. According to him, there exists an overriding principle of conversation which is “make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange” (Grice, 1975, p. 45). Participants are expected to observe this principle. He divided the cooperative principle into four maxims classified into nine categories. These are: Quality, Quantity, Relation and Manner. The cooperative principle and the maxims ensure that the right amount of information is provided and that the interaction is conducted in a truthful, relevant and perspicuous manner in an exchange of conversations. The cooperative principle of Grice and the maxims which form the bedrock of this study are provided below.

Quantity: Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange).

Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Quality: Do not say what you believe to be false.

Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Relation: Be relevant.

Manner: Avoid obscurity of expression.

Avoid ambiguity.

Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

Be orderly.

Each of the above constitutes a convention that is normally obeyed in conversation. Grice observes that there are occasions when people fail to observe the maxims. He then suggests five ways of failing to observe a maxim: Flouting a maxim, violating a maxim, infringing a maxim, opting out of a maxim and suspending a maxim. A speaker may fail to observe a maxim, not with any intention of deceiving or misleading, but because the speaker wishes to prompt the hearer to look for a meaning which is different from, or in addition to the expressed meaning. This additional meaning he

calls “conversational implicature” and he terms the process by which it is generated “flouting a maxim”. A flout occurs when a speaker blatantly fails to observe a maxim at the level of what is said, with the intention of generating an implicature (Thomas, 1995, p. 65). Therefore, this study is meant to show how the flouting, violation, infringing, opting out or suspending of any of Grice’s maxim becomes a form of protest in Nnimmo Bassey’s poetry.

3.1 Methodology

This study adopts textual analysis using Grice’s cooperative principle in the study of three of Bassey’s selected poems from the poetry collection *We thought it was oil but it was blood*. The poems are purposively selected based on their subject matter and their adaptability to the focus of the study. The aim is to show how the violation or otherwise of the Grice’s maxims helps the poet to register his protest, contributes to meaning making and enhance our understanding of the selected poems. The study employs a qualitative descriptive method and the analysis is done at the different levels of Grice’s maxims.

4. Data Analysis

The poetry collection, *We thought it was oil but it was blood*, Bassey displays environmental rights activism. The poems testify to the resilient will power even in the face of subjugation and oppression. As a well-grounded environmental activist, Nnimmo Bassey who assumes the responsibility of sanitizing the environment projects his activism in this collection of poetry. The oil motif resonates throughout the poems. The transnational oil firms ally with the Nigerian government by wielding military might against the Niger Delta people. Gas flaring, oil spillage, and the dangerous spreading of oil pipe line even in residential areas pose terrifying hazard to the people. Farm lands are rendered barren and aquatic lives are destroyed by oil spillage and exploration activities.

The poem is inundated with metaphors to portray the horrendous effects of the activities of oil exploration on the people. For instance,

Heart jumping into our mouths/floating on/emotion’s dry well...

represents the horrible experiences of the Niger Delta people. The contrast between the expectation of the people and the actual reality is glaring. “We thought it was oil but it was blood” reveals the disappointment faced by them. The “dance” which

accompanied the oil is replaced with “hearts jumping into our mouths/floating on emotion’s dry well”. Rather than dancing with joy in our hearts, they “leapt in fury” as things fall apart.

Maxim of Quality

The guiding principle of the maxim of quality is “make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs” (Levinson, 1983, p.101). In other words, do not say that which you believe is false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. Instances of metaphors, tautologies, and other figures of speech flout this maxim.

The chosen poems are inundated with the flouting of the maxims of quality. In *we thought it was oil but it was blood*, “heart jumping/ into our mouths” (lines 16-17) overtly and blatantly flouts the maxim of quality as hearts do not possess the capability to jump into mouths. Bassegy flouts this maxim in order to exploit it for communicative purpose. The inference drawn from this utterance is that the people were thrown into a state of severe panic and fear. The assumption that the above utterance is cooperative can be maintained by looking beyond the superficial or literal meaning that hearts jump into mouths.

Also, “Floating on /emotion’s dry well” (17-18) also violates this maxim. In the first instance, nothing floats on dry wells. Again, emotions do not own wells. The implicature generated here is that the activities of oil explorers have brought so much pains to the people that they cry and tears no longer flow from their eyes because their tears are exhausted. This is a device employed by the poet to reiterate the suppression experienced by the people. In the same vein, “Dried tear bags” (line 40) also flouts the maxim of quality. In the first case, tears do not have bags. Secondly, tears cannot be dry. This line is however cooperative as the poet uses it to show the magnitude of the brunt of oil exploration activities.

Furthermore, “Evil horrible gallows called oil rigs/Drilling our souls” (lines 46-47) is a metaphor used to describe the oil rigs, which instead of improving the lives of the people “drill” their souls and take life out of them. This line flouts the maxim of quality as it appears false on the surface level. The poet seems to be saying that which is false. The implicature generated is that the effect of oil exploration is very destructive to the lives of the people.

“...Burnt sky” (line 57) is also a blatant violation of the maxim of quality. Bassegy ostentatiously violates this maxim for communicative purposes. In the actual sense, sky cannot be burnt. However, the words are employed to describe the air pollution and environmental degradation caused by oil exploration activities. Hence at the non-

superficial level, this utterance cannot be said to be non - co-operative. "But the blood will speak" (line 65) is yet another violation of the maxim of quality. Blood do not and cannot speak, when these words are taken literally or at the surface level. This deployment of personification by the poet is a device to vehemently protest and display his activism. It is a threat or a warning to those who are involved in oil exploration activities. He informs them through this maxim violation that the blood of the innocent people who may have lost their lives or source of livelihood through oil spillage and its attendant environmental pollution will "speak". The implicature triggered here is that the oil explorers would be haunted and made to pay for their sins. Lines 27 – 28 adheres to Grice's maxim of Quality as the Ogonis and the Ijaws of the Niger Delta have suffered the brunt of oil exploration and exploitation:

First it was the Ogonis

Today it is Ijaws (lines 27-28)

Here, there is no apparent violation of any maxim.

In "When the earth bleeds", one cannot help but notice the conspicuous flouting of the conversational maxims which begins from the title of the poem. For instance, "bleeding rigs" (line 9) is an obvious and blatant flouting of the maxim of quality. Rigs do not have blood and cannot bleed. A cursory look at this line reveals that the utterer has said that which is false. However, the implicature generated is that the oil rigs are sources of pain and injury to the people in the Niger Delta regions. "This oil flows from the earth's sick bed" (Lines 10-11) is yet another flouting of the maxim of quality. Earth is not a human being with a sick bed. The violation of the maxim of quality is an instrument deployed by the poet to show the state of the earth which is no longer the same since it has been polluted by oil.

"But in Ogoniland we can't even breathe" flouts the maxim of quality. Man cannot survive without breathing as oxygen is a prerequisite for life. This hyperbole implicates the fact that the air and the atmosphere have been polluted due to gas flaring and other activities linked with oil exploration. In the same vein, "Let's bandage the earth" also violates the maxim of quality. It is not possible to bandage the entire earth. No bandage can hold the earth. This figure of speech has been deployed by the poet to encourage his people not to relax or lose hope, but to be optimistic, proactive and make good use of what is left of the land to their own benefit.

In the poem, *The United Niger Delta Oil co*, the maxim of quality is violated. "We will pump blood into the belly of the earth" flouts against this maxim as it is semantically anomalous. The earth has no belly which blood will be pumped into. Also, "the lament of the silent drums" (line 43) is an ostentatious flouting of the maxim of quality. This figure of speech appears contradictory as a drum cannot be silent and lament at the same time. The implicature generated is the untold lament and pains experienced by the people as a result of oil exploration activities. "Oil makes life stop" (line 49) is unarguably, literally false. The expression flouts against the maxim of quality by generalizing that oil puts an end to life. This statement must have been borne out of intense disappointment, pain and grief which has overwhelmed the poet, contrary to the expectation that oil would make "things move" in the Niger Delta region in particular and in Nigeria in general, nothing improves, rather, things get worse.

The title of the poem "The united Niger Delta Oil company incorporated" is a metaphor for corporate plunder as the united Niger Delta Oil Company incorporated "shared and divided the land and the sea/took the entire coasts of our country (lines 12 and 14).

Maxim of quantity

The basic principle of this maxim is: "make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purpose of the exchange in which you are engaged" (Levinson, 1983, p.101). This maxim requires that one makes one's contribution as informative as is required, without deliberately holding back any fact. It also requires that one does not make one's contribution more informative than needed.

The titled poem, "We thought it was oil but it was blood", blatantly flouts the maxim of quantity as the line is repeated twelve times in the poem, thereby giving too much information than is necessary or needed. Repeating the line twelve times makes the contribution more informative than is required. In "The United Niger Delta oil co" Bassey adheres to the maxim of quantity by stating boldly, without mincing words that the culprits of *The United Delta oil Co* are "Shell, Exxon-Mobil, Texaco, NNPC/Elf, Chevron Agip, Statoil and similar entities". The poet states clearly and unambiguously that these companies have jointly decided that "the most desired entity of all" is the "United Niger Delta Oil Company incorporated" (lines 9-12). Their excessive greed results in the plundering of the natural resources of the region. Bassey accuses the culprits and pillagers of looting as the Delta "they re-christened their property" (line 17). And in "When the earth bleeds", the maxim of quantity has been broken as well. The lines "the oil only flows when the earth bleeds" is repeated six times. This gives too much information thereby flouting the maxim of quantity. The poet employs repetition for the sake of emphasis, to make people realize the damage of oil exploration to the earth.

Maxim of manner

The title poem, "We thought it was oil but it was blood", presents several instances of non-adherence to the maxim of manner. By repeating "we thought it was oil but it was blood", twelve times in the poem, the poet flouts the maxim of manner. The lack of brevity of this information makes it flout the maxim. By this outright violation of this maxim, Bassey represents or registers his bewilderment, fury and disappointment. Also, "Emotion's dry well" (line 18) represents the tears and suffering of the people. This information is however, obscure as emotions do not possess wells that will run dry. However, at the non-superficial level, it portrays the pain these activities have caused the people, thereby triggering the implicature of suffering. In stanza 18 lines 8-20, "Slaughtered by the day/ we are the living/ long sacrificed" out rightly flouts the maxim of manner as this expression is not perspicuous and lacks clarity. A careful examination of this shows that one cannot be slaughtered by the day. However, it is a metaphor for expressing what the people experience in the hands of the oil explorers and exploiters who are oppressive, both to the people and to the environment. In the second poem, "When the earth bleeds", copious cases of flouting of the maxim of manner abound. "In conference hall / we talk in gardens of stones / The ocean waves bathe our eyes" (lines 22-23) violates the maxim of manner by offering information that lacks clarity. It is not clear how talking in the garden of stones contributes meaningfully to the subject matter. However, it generates an implicature that although these issues are discussed in conferences, they seem to fall on deaf ears.

The third poem, "The united Niger Delta oil co" also flouts the maxim of manner. "The savage land" violates the maxim of manner as the expression is repeated thrice in lines 18-20. Although this repetition inhibits brevity, it generates the implicature of emphasis to convey the seriousness of the subject matter. The expression need not be repeated thrice before the message can be passed across.

Maxim of Relevance

This maxim requires that one make one's contribution relevant. In "The United Niger Delta Oil Co", there are obvious cases of flouting of the maxim of relation. The thematic thrust of the poem, just like in the other selected poems, is protest on oil exploration. The analogy in the lines below appears to flout the maxim of relevance. The topic under discussion is oil exploration activities. The biblical analogy on how the serpent deceived Eve by making her eat the forbidden fruit and how Eve in turn lures the husband into eating from it is presented in the poem. The relation between oil

exploration and how Adam and Eve sinned against God remains a wonder as it seems to be out of point with respect to the subject matter of the poem.

The snake bedevilled the apples (line 21).

And Adam, adamant to the sneer in her eyes (line 22).

However, a more critical look reveals the inference that both scenarios have deception or deceit as the underlying message. Just like the serpent deceived Eve and Adam, the oil explorers deceived the people and took advantage of them.

Another glaring case of the flouting of the maxim of relation is “the tapster tapped the palms to death” (line 33). Once again, this is another case of veering off the topic of discussion. A palm wine “tapster” tapping palms to death has nothing to do with the aforementioned oil companies exploring oil from the Niger Delta region. Implicature is also generated here that nothing is left of the soil after oil exploration due the damages caused by the activities, just like the “tapster” has killed all the palm trees after tapping them. The digression to the butterflies in lines 49-58 is also an instance of sinning against the maxim of relevance. Butterfly pointing accusing antennas at the ponds of their spills has no relation with oil exploration and spillage. However, implicature is triggered that even nature is not happy with their wicked acts.

5. Findings and Conclusion

This study has established the fact that Grice’s conversational maxims can be successfully applied to poetry. Thus, it has made a major contribution to the application of pragmatics to the study and analysis of poetry. Since the chosen poems are inundated with metaphors, there is a higher frequency of the violation of the maxim of quality than any other maxim. Bassey’s flouting and violation of the conversational maxims and the consequent generation of implicature have aided a better understanding of the poems. This has also enabled Bassey to protest the present status quo in the Niger Delta region.

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