

## METAPHOR AND EVALUATION AS ECOLINGUISTIC DEVICES IN HELON HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER*

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### Abstract

This paper investigates metaphor and evaluation as ecolinguistic devices in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, a Nigerian novel that dramatises the ecological devastation of the Niger Delta. *Oil on Water* presents an imaginative re-creation of how oil exploration has altered the natural environment and human livelihoods. Within the framework of ecolinguistics and drawing insights from cognitive metaphor theory and appraisal theory, this study examines how metaphors construct ecological meanings and how evaluative language conveys attitudes, judgments, and values about environmental degradation. The analysis reveals that metaphors in the text highlight tensions between purity and pollution, life and death, and nature and exploitation, thereby encoding the struggle of marginalised communities in ecologically compromised spaces. Evaluation, on the other hand, amplifies ideological positions by foregrounding negative judgments of oil corporations and political elites, while affirming sympathy for human and nonhuman victims of ecological violence. The study concludes that metaphor and evaluation function not merely as stylistic devices but as ecolinguistic strategies that deepen readers' awareness of the politics of ecology and the ethics of environmental survival in Nigeria. The paper argues for the continued use of literary texts in ecolinguistic inquiry to illuminate the cultural and moral dimensions of ecological crises.

**Keywords:** Ecolinguistics, Metaphor, Evaluation, Niger Delta, Helon Habila, *Oil on Water*

### Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has long been a site of ecological, social, and political tensions. Oil exploration, while fueling the national economy, has devastated local ecologies and communities. Literature from the region captures this paradox, presenting both the beauty of the environment and the violence inflicted upon it. Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) is one such text, dramatising the catastrophic effects of oil exploration on rivers, forests, and people. In the novel, represented not only through narrative but also through language and style.

This paper investigates two central devices—metaphor and evaluation—as ecolinguistic strategies in *Oil on Water*. These devices are significant because ecolinguistics emphasises how language constructs human relationships with nature (Stibbe, 2021). Metaphor frames ecological experiences by mapping environmental realities onto familiar conceptual domains, while evaluation reflects the stance of narrators and characters toward environmental events. Together, these devices construct ecological meaning in literature.

## Literature Review

Ecolinguistics examines the relationship between language and ecology, emphasizing how linguistic structures shape human interaction with the natural environment (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001; Stibbe, 2021). Concerned initially with ecological metaphors and environmental discourse, the field has broadened to include the analysis of literary texts. Literature, with its symbolic and imaginative power, plays a significant role in framing ecological realities and shaping environmental consciousness (Aluya & Uduma, 2024). African literature, particularly works from the Niger Delta, has been studied from ecocritical perspectives (Bassey, 2016; Ojaide, 2020). Scholars argue that these texts function as cultural responses to ecological crises by exposing exploitation and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities. Ecolinguistic studies of African texts, though fewer, have highlighted how linguistic resources—such as metaphor, lexical choices, and narrative stance—construct ecological discourses (Okoro, 2021). This study builds on that tradition, focusing specifically on metaphor and evaluation.

## Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two complementary frameworks: Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Appraisal Theory within ecolinguistics. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), pioneered by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003), revolutionized the study of metaphor by shifting the focus from metaphor as a mere rhetorical ornament to metaphor as a fundamental mechanism of thought. According to CMT, metaphors are not simply decorative features of language; they are cognitive devices through which individuals understand abstract, complex, or intangible domains of experience in terms of more concrete, familiar ones. In this sense, metaphor is both a linguistic and a conceptual phenomenon.

Metaphors involve systematic mappings between a *source domain* (the familiar or concrete domain) and a *target domain* (the abstract or less familiar domain). For instance, in the expression “pollution is a disease,” the source domain of *disease*—with its associations of spread, pain, and the need for cure—is mapped onto the target domain of *pollution*. This mapping shapes how people perceive environmental degradation, framing it as a pathological condition and an urgent remedy (Aluya & Iangba, 2025). In the context of ecolinguistics, metaphors are significant because they reveal the underlying cultural and ideological frameworks through which societies conceptualise the environment (Stibbe, 2021). By portraying ecosystems as “resources,” for example, discourse legitimizes exploitation, while metaphors of the earth as “mother” invoke care and protection. Thus, metaphor is not neutral; it has ethical and ecological implications.

Applied to Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*, CMT enables an exploration of how the Niger Delta environment is conceptualised through recurring metaphorical patterns. The polluted river described as a “snake” or a “corpse” activates source domains of danger, death, and fear, shaping the reader’s perception of ecological devastation not as an abstract event but as an immediate, embodied reality. Similarly, when oil pollution is framed as a “shroud,” the metaphor invokes mourning rituals, highlighting loss and grief (Aluya & Terver, 2024). These metaphorical constructions demonstrate how ecological realities are experienced cognitively and affectively, reinforcing the argument that metaphor is a central ecolinguistic device.

Appraisal Theory, developed within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) by Martin and White (2005), extends Halliday’s (1994) interpersonal metafunction by detailing how speakers and writers position themselves and their audiences through evaluative language. It moves beyond the notion of evaluation as a

broad category to offer a systematic model for analysing how attitudes, emotions, judgments, and values are encoded in discourse.

The theory is organised around three interrelated subsystems: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation.

1. **Attitude** refers to the expression of feelings, judgments of behaviour, and appreciation of things, processes, or states of affairs. It has three domains:
  - *Affect* (the expression of emotions such as fear, joy, sadness, or hope).
  - *Judgment* (the moral or ethical evaluation of human behaviour, such as condemning greed or praising courage).
  - *Appreciation* (the aesthetic or value-laden evaluation of things, texts, or phenomena, such as describing a landscape as “beautiful” or “spoiled”).
2. **Engagement** concerns the ways speakers and writers acknowledge, align with, or distance themselves from other voices and viewpoints in discourse. It highlights dialogism—the interplay of perspectives—and shows whether a text presents ecological degradation as a matter of consensus or contention.
3. **Graduation** refers to the scaling of evaluative meaning in terms of force (intensity, quantity, degree) and focus (sharpening or softening categories). For instance, describing oil pollution as “utterly devastating” intensifies judgment, while referring to it as “somewhat harmful” downscales the evaluation.

In ecological discourse, appraisal resources are crucial because they do not simply describe environmental phenomena but frame them in ways that guide readers’ attitudes and ideological alignments. As Hunston and Thompson (2000) argue, evaluation is central to how texts construct authorial stance and influence interpretation. Applied to Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*, Appraisal Theory reveals how the novel encodes ecological positions. Through **negative judgment**, oil corporations and political elites are portrayed as corrupt, greedy, and destructive. Through **appreciation**, the environment is represented both nostalgically (as “endless green”) and tragically (as “lifeless and dark”), creating a contrast between ecological abundance and devastation. Through **affect**, characters voice fear, despair, and anger in response to ecological degradation, humanizing the environmental crisis. By combining attitude, engagement, and graduation, the novel constructs a moral landscape that delegitimizes exploitation and foregrounds empathy for victims—both human and ecological. Thus, Appraisal Theory provides a robust framework for understanding how evaluation in *Oil on Water* functions not merely as subjective commentary but as an ecolinguistic device that shapes moral, emotional, and ideological responses to the Niger Delta environment.

### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, drawing on methods of textual analysis and ecolinguistic stylistics to investigate how metaphor and evaluation function as ecolinguistic devices in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*. The methodological approach is interpretive, focusing on uncovering the ecological meanings embedded in language use, rather than on quantification or statistical generalisation.

The primary data for the study are Helon Habila’s novel *Oil on Water* (2010). The text was purposively selected because it is one of the most influential Nigerian novels that thematises oil exploration and environmental devastation in the Niger Delta. Within the novel, passages vividly describing landscapes, oil pollution, community experiences, and ecological conflict were identified for analysis. These passages are

significant because they foreground ecological realities and provide rich material for metaphorical and evaluative interpretation.

The analysis proceeded in two stages:

1. **Identification of Metaphors**

- Following the principles of **Conceptual Metaphor Theory** (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), metaphorical expressions were identified by examining instances where one domain of experience was described in terms of another. Attention was given to recurrent source domains (e.g., disease, death, darkness, animal imagery) and their mappings onto target domains of ecological degradation. This enabled the researcher to trace dominant metaphorical patterns in the novel.

2. **Identification of Evaluative Language**

- Using **Appraisal Theory** (Martin & White, 2005), evaluative instances were categorized according to *attitude* (affect, judgment, appreciation), *engagement* (alignment with or distancing from viewpoints), and *graduation* (intensification or downscaling of meaning). This systematic framework helped reveal how ecological crises are emotionally charged and ideologically framed.

Both metaphors and evaluative expressions were analysed within an ecolinguistic perspective (Stibbe, 2021), which emphasises how language constructs relationships between humans, other living beings, and the environment. The combined use of CMT and Appraisal Theory ensures that the analysis captures both the cognitive dimension (how readers conceptualise ecological degradation) and the interpersonal dimension (how readers are positioned to feel, judge, or value ecological realities). To ensure validity, interpretations were validated against existing eco-linguistic scholarship on African literature (e.g., Okoro, 2021; Ojaide, 2020). Contextual knowledge of the Niger Delta crisis was also used to ground interpretations in socio-ecological realities. While the analysis is qualitative and interpretive, it aims at theoretical generalisation—showing how metaphor and evaluation operate as ecolinguistic resources—rather than statistical generalisation. The study is limited to a single novel, which constrains the generalizability of findings. However, this focused analysis allows for an in-depth understanding of ecolinguistic strategies in one representative text. Future research may expand the corpus to include multiple Niger Delta novels for comparative analysis.

**Data Analysis and Discussion**

The analysis of *Oil on Water* reveals that metaphor and evaluation work hand in hand to construct ecological meanings and ideological positions. While metaphors encode how the Niger Delta environment is conceptualised, evaluation highlights attitudes and values attached to ecological practices and actors. Together, these devices transform the novel into an ecolinguistic narrative that dramatises the lived experience of environmental crisis.

**Metaphors of Pollution, Death, and Disease**

Habila repeatedly employs metaphors that link ecological degradation to death and disease. For instance, the description of oil spills as “a dark shroud covering the river’s face” (Habiba, 2010, p. 41) casts the river as a corpse. The shroud metaphor evokes death, mourning, and burial, suggesting that the river—once a source of life—has been killed. This conceptual metaphor, *THE ENVIRONMENT IS A CORPSE*, forces readers to confront the gravity of ecological destruction as an irreversible loss rather than a temporary inconvenience.

Similarly, pollution is described as “an open sore on the land” (p. 73). This metaphor draws from the source domain of disease, suggesting infection, festering, and pain. It resonates intertextually with Wole Soyinka’s (1986) metaphor of Nigeria as “the open sore of a continent,” linking ecological degradation to national trauma. The disease metaphor positions pollution not only as an environmental issue but as a pathological condition that threatens both land and people.

Animal metaphors also appear prominently. The river, described as “a thick black snake slithering into the horizon” (p. 34), invokes danger, fear, and unnaturalness. Snakes, often culturally associated with deceit or threat, highlight the corruption of a natural element that should nourish life. Here, water—normally conceptualized as purity and sustenance—becomes alien and hostile. These metaphors reconfigure the environment from life-giving to life-threatening, underscoring the ecological violence wrought by oil exploration.

### **Evaluative Judgments of Ecological Actors**

Evaluation in *Oil on Water* targets the human agents responsible for ecological devastation. Through judgment, oil corporations and political elites are condemned for greed and corruption. The narrator describes “greedy politicians who feed fat on the people’s suffering” (p. 59), invoking parasitism and exploitation. This aligns readers against elites, positioning them as morally culpable for both human and ecological suffering.

Similarly, militants are evaluated ambiguously. While they claim to fight for environmental justice, their methods often involve violence and kidnapping. This dual evaluation reflects the complex moral terrain of the Niger Delta crisis: militancy is both a response to oppression and a contributor to instability. Habila’s language captures this ambivalence, enabling readers to grapple with conflicting ideological positions.

### **Appreciation of Environment and Nostalgia for Loss**

Evaluation also emerges through appreciation, especially in descriptions of the environment. Early in the novel, the narrator recalls the Delta as “a place of endless green and shimmering waters” (p. 12). This positive appreciation contrasts with later depictions of polluted, lifeless rivers. The shift creates a nostalgic frame, emphasizing what has been lost due to oil exploitation. The rhetorical effect is to amplify grief for the destroyed environment and to highlight the magnitude of ecological injustice. The environment is not merely described but aesthetically valued. Negative appreciation—“lifeless and dark waters,” “rotting mangroves”—frames the landscape as degraded and violated. These evaluations reinforce the metaphors of death and disease, ensuring that ecological devastation is experienced as both physical and moral loss.

### **Affective Responses and Human Cost**

Affective language further humanizes ecological crises. Characters express fear and despair: “We watched the river with dread, knowing it could no longer feed us” (p. 82). Such affective evaluations bridge the gap between ecological degradation and lived human suffering. The river’s inability to “feed” communities illustrate how ecological damage translates directly into hunger, poverty, and despair. Moreover, affective responses create solidarity with victims. The grief of families displaced by oil spills, the anger of fishermen whose livelihoods are destroyed, and the despair of children growing up amid pollution all foreground the human cost of ecological destruction. Evaluation here functions not just as commentary but as an invitation for readers to share in the emotions of the oppressed.

### **Interplay Between Metaphor and Evaluation**

The most powerful ecolinguistic effects occur when metaphor and evaluation interact. For example, when the river is described as a “corpse” (p. 90), the metaphor

encodes death, while the evaluative stance signals mourning and outrage. Similarly, when oil is described as a “curse” rather than a blessing, the metaphor frames it as supernatural punishment, while evaluation condemns the exploitation that produced this curse. This interplay ensures that ecological realities are not presented as neutral descriptions but as morally charged narratives. Readers are positioned to see oil not merely as an economic resource but as an agent of death, disease, and despair. Through this dual strategy, Habila constructs a discourse that critiques ecological violence while mobilizing empathy for its victims.

### **Ideological Implications**

The analysis demonstrates that metaphor and evaluation in *Oil on Water* are not stylistic ornaments but ideological devices. They delegitimize corporate and political exploitation, highlight the suffering of marginalized communities, and frame the environment as a victim of violence. In doing so, the novel aligns with what Stibbe (2021) calls “beneficial stories”—discourses that encourage care for the environment and resistance against destructive ideologies. At the same time, the novel complicates ecological narratives by acknowledging the contradictions of militancy and resistance. By offering multiple evaluative perspectives, it prevents ecological discourse from being overly simplistic, instead reflecting the complex socio-political realities of the Niger Delta.

### **Conclusion**

This study has examined metaphor and evaluation as ecolinguistic devices in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*, demonstrating how language is central to the representation of ecological crises in the Niger Delta. Through conceptual metaphor, Habila translates environmental degradation into experiential realities by framing pollution as death, disease, and danger. These metaphors allow readers to grasp the enormity of ecological devastation in embodied and affective terms. Similarly, through the evaluative frameworks of judgment, appreciation, and affect, the novel assigns moral responsibility, articulates aesthetic values of the environment, and foregrounds the human cost of ecological violence.

The interplay of metaphor and evaluation transforms *Oil on Water* into a text of ecological advocacy. By framing the environment as a victim, the river as a corpse, and oil as a curse, the novel challenges dominant capitalist discourses that frame oil as a resource for national progress. Instead, it offers what Stibbe (2021) describes as “beneficial stories”—narratives that encourage care, justice, and ecological consciousness. In this sense, Habila’s novel not only bears witness to ecological destruction but also challenges readers to rethink the stories that legitimise exploitation and violence.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to ecolinguistics, literary stylistics, and African literary criticism. It highlights how African literature provides a vital space for ecological discourse, drawing attention to the complex intersection of environment, politics, and human survival. By showing how metaphor and evaluation construct ecological meanings, this paper affirms the power of language to shape ecological consciousness and mobilise resistance to destructive practices. Future research could extend this study by conducting comparative analyses of other Niger Delta texts, exploring metaphor and evaluation across genres such as poetry, drama, or oral narratives. Additionally, combining ecolinguistic analysis with empirical reader-response methods—such as surveys or eye-tracking experiments—could reveal how audiences actually process and are influenced by ecological metaphors and evaluations. Ultimately, *Oil on Water* demonstrates that literature is not merely reflective but also transformative. Through its ecolinguistic devices, the novel bears



ethical witness to ecological injustice while offering discursive tools for imagining alternative, sustainable futures.

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