

# Investigating Ecolinguistic Landscape in Chimeka Garricks's Tomorrow Died Yesterday and Helon Habila's Oil on Water

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## Abstract

## Review Article

This study examines the ecolinguistic landscape in Tomorrow Died Yesterday by Chimeka Garricks and Oil on Water by Helon Habila, with particular attention to how language is used to construct environmental degradation, ecological justice, and the relationship between humans and nature in the Niger Delta. The research adopts a qualitative design. The data were obtained through the reading of the primary texts and relevant secondary sources were analysed descriptively. The findings reveal that both authors employ metaphor, personification, rhetorical questions, repetition, and other linguistic devices to foreground environmental destruction, human suffering, corporate exploitation, and resistance against ecological injustice. The study concludes that language serves not only as a medium of storytelling, but also, as a powerful tool for promoting ecological consciousness and advocating environmental sustainability. The study recommends that literary scholars, environmental advocates, policymakers, and educational institutions should encourage the use of literary texts in raising awareness about environmental protection and ecological responsibility.

**Keywords:** Ecology, ecolinguistic, landscape, language linguistics.

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## Introduction

The place of language in human communication and description is wide and overwhelming. Language is at the centre of all the activities of man; hence, it is generally seen as human essence (Chomsky, 1965). Ecolinguistics sees language as more than just a neutral tool; it views it as an important part of the earth's ecosystem. While regular linguistics looks at the basic parts of language like sounds, word forms, sentences reference, and sentence structure, ecolinguistics goes further by exploring how language connects with the environment. It studies how we use language to describe nature and how these

descriptions affect our behaviour towards the environment. Because of this, understanding language is crucial for protecting the environment and promoting social fairness. According to Fill and Mühlhäusler (2001 p. 1), ecolinguistics is a "re-evaluation of the role of language in the life-sustaining interactions of all species."

In the Nigerian context, the Niger Delta region serves as a profound site for ecolinguistic investigation. The region's landscape once defined by lush mangroves and pristine creeks has been physically redefined by oil exploration, pollution, deforestation, oil spillage, vandalism,

and conflict.

The Niger Delta, found in the southern region of Nigeria, is one of the largest wetland areas in the world and was once famous for its rich wildlife, complex mangrove forests, and productive farming. Before the 1950s, the economy here mainly relied on fishing and agriculture. However, the discovery of oil in 1956 changed everything for this area.

While oil generated significant wealth for the federal government and international companies, it has caused severe environmental damage to local communities. Two notable works that highlight the decline of the Niger Delta's environment are Chimeka Garricks's *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*.

If Buffon (1753) claimed that "Style is the man himself" in Garrick and Habila's works, the style represents the environment. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how language was used in Garricks's *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* and Habila's *Oil on Water* to describe the the Niger Delta environment with regard to the roles and impact of seismic operations.

### Statement of the Problem

The environmental and social issues in the Niger Delta region have sparked a lot of literary criticism, still there is a lack of understanding about how the language used in these conflicts reflects the deep-rooted struggles between humans and nature. Research on environmental injustice in the Niger Delta has examined oil crisis in the region by looking at issues like ecological damage, "ecological imperialism," and a "crisis of betrayal." This can be seen in the works of authors like Agary(2006), Ojaide(2006), and Yerima(2005).

Even though some researches have explored the oil crisis through political and sociological lenses, few studies have focused on the unique language used by different characters in these narratives. However, there is a noticeable lack of critical studies that try to interrogate ecolinguistic landscapes in Niger Delta fiction. Most linguistic works on the Niger Delta are

limited to media discussions or resistance literature, neglecting the use systematic ecolinguistic methods to compare the harmful language of industrial powers with the positive language of local communities. Specifically, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is no thorough study on the ecolinguistic landscapes in Garricks's *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* and Habila's *Oil on Water*, so this presents bridges this gap in scholarship

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Linguistics

Linguistics is basically the scientific study of language. Its goal is to understand how languages grow in our minds and to describe how they are put together and used. This area of study covers all sorts of things, like language structure, sociolinguistics, grammar, syntax, semantics, and phonetics.

Chomsky in his book, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965), Chomsky describes linguistics as a mentalistic science aimed at understanding the innate knowledge (competence) of an ideal speaker-hearer instead of merely observing how language is used externally.

### Language

Language is primarily a means of communication. With language, man is able to develop himself, relate with others and conquer his environment. Language is at the centre of man and development because without language, man cannot achieve anything.

Language is an abstract entity, yet it is grammatical, dynamic, rule governed, structural locational, complete feedback, species specific. (Nwala, 2016)

Yule-Ifode (as cited in Ngulube, 2015 p.54) states that language is man's greatest asset and without the use of language, human society is doomed".

Similarly, Nwala (2016) observing the place of language in human interaction simply states that it is the system of all the endeavours of man, and

that with language man is able to develop himself and conquer his environment.

### Ecolinguistic

Ecolinguistic is the study of how we use language to talk about, show, understand and describe the environment. More specifically, ecolinguistics looks at the link between language, people, and nature. It is more than just a subject to study; it is a practical approach to improving relationships between people and their surroundings.

A broad definition, supported by scholars like Stibbe (2015), describes ecolinguistics as: "The study of the impact of language on the life-sustaining relationships among humans, other organisms, and the physical environment, with the goal of preserving these relationships." (p. 104)

### Landscape

A landscape refers to the visible characteristics of a piece of land, including its shapes and how they connect with both natural and man-made features. It consists of physical parts like mountains, hills, and bodies of water such as rivers, lakes, ponds, and the ocean. A landscape is a part of Earth's surface that can be seen all at once from one spot.

Carl Sauer, a cultural geographer, made an important contribution to understanding landscape by defining it as the outcome of how people interact with nature. He described a "cultural landscape" as one that forms when a culture changes the natural surroundings, embedding human values and practices into the environment (Sauer, 1925, p. 46). This view changes our understanding of landscapes from being purely natural to ones actively shaped by human actions.

### Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical model used for this analysis is *The Stories We Live By*, created by Aran Stibbe. This concept was introduced to Ecolinguistics in

2015. *The Stories We Live By* explores how language shapes the worldview that influences human behaviour, especially concerning the environment. It emphasizes sustainability and the conservation of the whole ecosystem where people live. This model reveals how language can create specific perspectives and how it can encourage changes in attitudes towards more sustainable or ecologically friendly actions, shifting our view of human interaction with the environment from negative to positive.

As Okri (1996, p. 21) beautifully puts it thus: "stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories that individuals or nations live by and you change the individuals and nations themselves."

Aran Stibbe, who developed this theory and plays a key role in ecolinguistics, states in his book: *Ecolinguistic: Language, Ecology, and The Stories We Live By* (2015, p. 8), that "stories not only reflect but actively construct the worldview that drives environmental attitudes and actions." One of Stibbe's main points is that *The Stories We Live By* is deeply rooted in language and culture, which affects how we relate to nature and behave toward the environment. He argues that how we talk about environmental issues is crucial in shaping societal values, identities, and behaviour. Many analytical models have provided important insights into Ecolinguistics, but many scholars consider Stibbe's model, *The Stories We Live By* to be the most influential one in this field. His model effectively explains what Ecolinguistics involves by showing how language and stories impact our worldview. It illustrates how linguistic features shape individual thoughts and views, encouraging positive or ethical environmental actions among people. *The Stories We Live By* offers a thorough understanding of Ecolinguistics. This model goes beyond just examining separate linguistic traits; it looks at how different aspects of linguistics come together to form stories or mental models. These narratives influence how individuals and societies understand nature and their connection with the environment. This analytical method is particularly appreciated for being practical; it not only investigates how

current language usage may contribute to environmental harm but also provides pathways or solutions for fostering a positive narrative that encourages a better relationship between humans and the environment.

### Empirical Review

Adegoju (2019a) carried out a study on selected Nigerian literary works that address the issues of environmental damage. He used a qualitative approach to look at word choices, imagery, and metaphors that describe oil pollution and land destruction in the Niger Delta. His findings showed that writers use strong ecological images to create "damaged landscapes" that are not just physical locations but also act as conscious victims of human harm and unfair systems. By focusing on how language depicts the earth as suffering, Adegoju highlights literature's role in fighting against environmental neglect. While Adegoju (2019b) looks broadly at imagery and vocabulary across different texts, this study takes a more focused approach using Arran Stibbe's Ecolinguistic framework. While Adegoju identifies general themes, this research examines the specific *Stories We Live By*, looking at how language shapes, supports, or challenges certain ecological beliefs through framing, evaluation, and omission.

Additionally, this study broadens its investigation by comparing both *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* and *Oil on Water*. By concentrating specifically on the "ecolinguistic landscape," which is where physical space meets language and ideology, this research goes beyond general imagery to investigate how these novels serve as tools for raising ecological awareness. Thus, this study not only complements Adegoju's work but also progresses into a more organized and precise linguistic exploration within African environmental humanities.

Similarly, Stibbe (2015) conducted an in-depth ecolinguistic study that analyzed environmental discussions found in literary, political, and media texts using qualitative discourse analysis. The research looked at language features like

metaphor, agency, transitivity, and evaluative language to see how words create ecological realities. The results showed that many texts support harmful environmental ideas through human-centered stories, while others challenge these ideas by highlighting ecological damage and human responsibility. In another work, Habila (2013) studied Nigerian environmental stories and looked closely at how language describes oil-polluted areas and their impacts on both people and nature, particularly in his book, *Oil on Water*. He used a literary approach to analyse techniques like dark imagery, broken storytelling, and negative language that portray the Niger Delta as a place of ecological damage and instability. His research showed that the words chosen in the novel reflect not just physical harm to the environment but also mental distress and social issues faced by the local people.

All the aforementioned studies made giant attempts to describe the environment and the roles of man, there still remains gaps that have not been filled. Therefore, the present study intends to investigate the role of language in describing these activities of man in Nigeria Delta environment and suggest what can be done to check these deplorable situation.

### Methodology

#### Research Design

This study adapts a qualitative research design. Qualitative design is a type of design that defines or analyzes data the way they are. Nwala et. al. (2024) Drawing upon textual analysis as its primary methodological approach, the study examined how ecological issues are communicated and framed in prose texts. This approach is suited for uncovering the ways language reflects, constructs, and interrogates environmental discourse.

#### Area of Study

The two primary texts selected for this study are *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* by Chimeka Garrick

and *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila. These two texts were purposely chosen by the researcher due to their rich engagement with environmental issues and their unique artistic use of language to analyse ecological concerns such as resource conflict, oil spillage, environmental degradation, pipeline vandalism, and sustainability. The secondary sources are relevant textual materials such as textbooks, internet sources, dictionaries, and previous dissertations and theses.

### Method of Data Analysis

Using Arran Stibbe's ecolinguistic framework from *The Stories We Live By*, the study analyzed Four important dimensions that relate to the text; Dimension such as ideology, metaphor, narrative and identity to analyse the corpus of the study, excerpt of the themes were put in tables and also what the paper calls linguistic manifestation and description.

### Analysis

#### Ideology:

| Excerpt 1                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Linguistics Manifestations/Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The Yorubas control all the juicy jobs in the oil industry, and they are the most openly biased tribe in this country. Our people are left with the menial jobs. The stupid excuse is that we are not qualified. (P.151) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethnic categorization – “The Yorubas” shapes identity based on ethnicity and highlights divisions and competition between different ethnic groups.</li> <li>• Power and dominance construction – “control all the juicy jobs” shows that economic power and advantages are held by a specific ethnic group.</li> <li>• Evaluative lexical choice – “juicy jobs” uses a metaphor to describe desirable positions as attractive and rewarding opportunities.</li> <li>• Negative ideological labeling – “openly biased tribe” claims that this group practices discrimination and unfair treatment.</li> <li>• Inclusive collectivization – “Our people” fosters a sense of unity among the marginalized Niger Delta community.</li> <li>• Social inequality representation – “left with the menial jobs” illustrates how labour is unevenly distributed, leading to economic disadvantage.</li> <li>• Delegitimizing expression – “stupid excuse” dismisses official reasons for exclusion as dishonest or unreasonable.</li> <li>• Passive construction – “are left with” highlights the helplessness and lack of control experienced by the marginalized group.</li> </ul> |

The passage explains the notion of ethnic inequality, marginalization and economic unfairness in the Nigeria's oil industry. Doye, known by his nickname of Doughboy, is a character that expresses the anger and struggles of the Niger Delta people in the face of unfair treatment, lack of inclusion and exploitation in Nigeria's oil industry. He does this by contrasting terms such as “juicy jobs” with “menial jobs”. Thus, Doye is a voice of their

struggle against these problems, exposing the imbalanced power relations and creating awareness on the social and economic problems that the Niger Delta community experiences. It demonstrates that society is built on unequal access to wealth and opportunity. This shows that the Niger Delta people are excluded from the oil economy despite being residents of an oil-producing region and that the powerful groups benefit from the oil economy. The passage



critiques tribal favoritism, social exclusion and systemic injustice, highlighting the uneven

distribution of power and privilege in the oil industry based on ethnicity.

### Metaphor:

| Excerpt 2                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Linguistic Manifestations/Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ‘What about the future? Our children? Their tomorrow?’ It was my turn to be amazed. ‘You still don’t get it, Kaniye, do you? There is no future for the children of the Niger Delta. Their tomorrow is already dead. It died yesterday.’ Kaniye slumped back in the seat and closed his eyes. (P.153) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conceptual metaphor – The phrase “Their tomorrow is already dead” uses a metaphor to describe the future as something alive that can die, highlighting feelings of hopelessness and despair.</li> <li>• Temporal metaphor – Saying “It died yesterday” blends the past, present, and future together to imply that hope was lost long before the future could even begin.</li> <li>• Negative existential expression – The statement “There is no future” expresses complete hopelessness and a grim outlook for the children in the Niger Delta.</li> <li>• Pronominal collectivization – By saying “Our children,” it makes the suffering feel shared and creates a sense of community with those affected.</li> <li>• Repetition of futurity – Frequent mentions of “future” and “tomorrow” underline worries about upcoming generations.</li> <li>• Emotive reaction – The line “Kaniye slumped back in the seat and closed his eyes” shows feelings of emotional defeat, shock, and giving up.</li> <li>• Dialogic structure – The back-and-forth questioning highlights the struggle between hope and despair.</li> <li>• Absolute diction – The phrase “no future” describes the situation as irreversible and disastrous.</li> </ul> |

This passage primarily uses metaphor to express feelings of hopelessness and the loss of future chances in the Niger Delta. When the speaker says that “tomorrow” has “died,” they make the concept of the future seem alive, and its death

symbolizes a loss of hope for upcoming generations. The passage portrays the crisis in the Niger Delta as not only an environmental and social disaster but also as a deeper sign of lost hope.

### Oil on Water

#### Narrative:

| Excerpt 3                                                                                           | Linguistics Manifestations/Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| I’ve seen children snatched away from their mothers, never to be reunited. I’ve seen husbands taken | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First-person eyewitness narration - The repeated phrase “I’ve seen” establishes the narrator as someone who has personally witnessed suffering and violence, lending credibility and emotional weight to the account.</li> <li>• Repetition for emphasis - By repeating “I’ve seen,” the speaker highlights how often and intensely these traumatic experiences occur, stressing the harshness of</li> </ul> |

|                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| from their wives and kids and sent away to prison. I've seen grown men flogged by soldiers in front of their kids. That's how history is made, and it's our job to witness it. (p.60) | <p>what happened.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violent action processes - Words like "snatched," "taken," "sent away," and "flogged" illustrate force, oppression, and human pain.</li> <li>• Family-separation narrative - Mentions of "children," "mothers," "wives," and "kids" highlight the breaking of family ties and community stability.</li> <li>• Victimization imagery - The public punishment of "grown men... in front of their kids" creates strong images of shame, fear, and mental distress.</li> <li>• Historical framing - The phrase "That's how history is made" turns personal suffering into a wider story about shared historical experiences.</li> <li>• Witnessing responsibility -The statement "It's our job to witness it" frames witnessing as a moral duty, stressing the need to document injustice.</li> </ul> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

This passage shares a story about violence, oppression, and the shared pain felt in the Niger Delta. By using personal stories and repeating certain ideas, the character demonstrates that suffering is common and deeply embedded in everyday life. The violent events mentioned

reveal how power can be abused and emphasize the human cost of conflict and political turmoil . The continued separation of families and public punishments show a community filled with fear, grief, and emotional distress.

### Identify:

| Excerpt 4                                                                                            | Linguistics Manifestations/Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| And remember, make them understand that nothing must happen to her. She's a British citizen — (p.32) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nationality as an identity marker - The term "British citizen" highlights the importance of national identity in social and political contexts.</li> <li>• Protective discourse - The phrase "nothing must happen to her" portrays the woman as someone who needs urgent protection.</li> <li>• Power relations -The focus on citizenship suggests that people may be treated unequally based on their nationality and global standing. - Elliptical expression – The incomplete statement ("—") indicates a shared understanding about the benefits that come with a Western identity.</li> </ul> |

This passage explains how nationality and global power construe a person's identity. By calling the woman a "British citizen," it highlights her importance and makes her safety seem like a political issue. This implies that lives from other countries may get more attention and protection than those from the local area in the Niger Delta conflict. The incomplete thought emphasizes

that being British carries power, special status , and global implication. In this context, identity is closely linked to power, visibility and geopolitical important.

### Summary and Conclusion

The study summary presents language as a social

tool that people use to interact with the world. It presents Linguistics and Ecolinguistics as a field that look into the relationship between humans and their environment. It describes the ecological situation of Niger Delta as framed the two books. This research reveals that Nigerian petro-fiction is a strong tool for discussing environmental issues by turning ecological realities into cultural, ethical, and moral stories. Through the use of language and culturally relevant ideas, Chimeka Garricks's *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* show that environmental crises are not just physical events but are deeply intertwined with capitalist values, corporate exploitation, and broken social connections.

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