Pragmatic Canvas of Environmental Degradation in the Poetry of Ibiwari Ikiriko and Nnimmo Bassey

By

Stephen Wellcome Akirika
Department of English and Communication Arts
Faculty of Humanities, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education
Rumuolumeni
Rivers State.
akirikastephen1991@gmail.com
08139143815
&
Amgbaduba, Ibinye Kumo
Department of English Education,
Federal College of Education (Technical),
Omoku, Port Harcourt.
08037770859

Abstract

Pragmatics as a discipline is concerned with the meaning of a word as it concerns context of usage either an utterance or discourse. Furthermore, pragmatics as a theory that discusses the 'conditions for the proper use of the language's speech and constructions. This paper however investigates the poetry of Ibiwari Ikiriko and Nnimmo Bassey. However, these poets have manipulated the English language to portray the environmental worth of their society. The research work therefore addresses itself to language use and desired meaning contextually. Ikiriko's artistic powers in translating directly into English language, the rhythm, the nuances and environmental issues have opened up a new reality in Africa and Niger Delta literary expression. Bassey's elitist language has shown that poets can manipulate language to convey unique experiences. The research design for this work is descriptive research design. Data were sourced from the two collections of poems. Through speech acts and analysis of the poems, *Oily Tears of Delta* and *We thought it was oil but it was blood* as well as the writers language use have facilitated meaning along their pragmatic imports and meaning are brought to the forecourt. The research outcome has accentuated the need for the manipulation and adoption of

English language to literary creativity in a second language environment. This research work will be very useful to anyone who would want to get a feel of the African experience and Niger Delta environmental literature or anyone who desires to know more about Niger Delta heritage and its existence. It will also serve as a reflection of reality, a product of arts and a window to an ideology. Most importantly, it will contribute to the advancement of African literature and scholarship.

Introduction

Pragmatics is closely related to semantics because both study meaning with various aspects of interest. Pragmatics is concerned with the meaning of a word as it concerns context of usage whereas semantics is into meaning as it relates to sense relation within the language. The context of utterance and the language structure is what a pragmatic study is all about, Onugha, (2019). Pragmatics as a study was usually subsumed under semantics till recently, linguistics decided to carve a niche for it. Pragmatics studies the practical application of language. Groenendijk and Stokhof (1978) as quoted in Ken-Maduako (2003), defines pragmatics as a theory that concerns the 'conditions for the proper use of the language's speech and constructions. Where semantics is truth theory, pragmatics is the philosophy of correctness." In the same vein; Maiyanga (1990) as seen in Ken Maduako (2003) posits that pragmatics tends to deal with connotative rather than denotative or conceptual meaning. We may also want to see pragmatics as the study of the practical nature of meaning foregrounded by contextualization.

2.0 Conceptual Framework and Definition of Terms

In underscoring these terms used in this research, it is pertinent that we understudy our theoritical framework and a few concepts used in this study in order to gain a wider knowledge and clarification of the arguments analyzed in this research.

2.1 Conceptual Review

The poems of Bassey and Ikiriko shares similar sameness of faith in title "We Thought It Was Oil But it Was Blood" (the title-poem of the collection). Bassey's poem is an "ill-fated testimonial to unbroken will power of a people" Akirika (2021) affirms. This builds to the total degradation of the Niger Delta region which laments for environment justice. Navigating onwards to resolve points to "the

courage of men and women who daily fight for their rights…communities…the environment, justice and equality" (7). Consequently, Esperanza Martinez maintains (in his foreword to Bassey's collection) viz; Ikiriko and Bassey have a common backcloth. They are both poets of Niger Delta ideology. They both have concern for what oil exploration has done to the societies of the Niger Delta. As in Ikiriko's Oily Tears, Bassey's We Thought It Was Oil is also strong on the oil motif. Martinez says that Bassey's collection "creates poetry from pipelines that destroy the soul of the forest, the towers that bleed the earth and leave it without a future, the fires that burn the past and the memory of a people, until we are strangers in our land" (6-7).

Ikiriko and Bassey are seasoned environmental activist of global standing through the poems which activism have rubbed off on the poems in this collection. Based on these constructive activism, necessitates this study "pragmatic canvas of environmental issues in Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears if the Delta* and Nnimmo Bassey's *We thought it was oil but it was Blood."*

2.2 Speech Acts Theory

The speech act theory was propounded by John L. Austin (1962) as a reaction against *logical positivism,* the theory of language meaning that existed at that time. Austin opined that the semantic notion of 'truth condition' was inadequate for explaining language. Since his 1962 publication, the *speech act theory* has been influential not only within philosophy, but also in linguistics, psychology, literary theory and many other scholarly disciplines. It has made it possible for language in use to be perceived as doing other things rather than just describing reality.

Unfortunately, Austin did not live long enough to modify his embryonic ideas nor to answer critics who found his theory discursively unwieldy. One of his notable critic is John Searle. Searle (1969) defines speech act as the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication. While maintaining Austin's threefold classification of speech acts, Searle streamlined the types of illocutionary acts. Based on their essential conditions and the intention of the speakers, he came up with five distinct typologies.

However, language in use is liable to illocutionary indeterminacy (Leech, 1983): it is not always plausible for a hearer to easily come to conclusion about what speaker means. So to account for the inherent meaning in an utterance made by a participant in a discourse,

3.0 Pragmatic Analysis of the Collections

The analysis are engulfed from John L. Austin and John Searle's Speech Acts Theory.

3.1 Linguistics Foregrounding in *Oily Tears of the Delta*

According to Yankson (1987) linguistic foregrounding refers to the deviation of any literary language from the normal language code. This deviation is necessary to bring message to the forecourt of the reader's attention. Such violation or deviation of a normal language code come in the form of a repetition of lexical items, phrases and even sentences, which is otherwise known as parallelism, and the application of local words and idioms.

3.1.2 Repetition of Sentence Elements

The following in the poem *Oily Tears of the Delta,* there is the technique of foregrounding using parallel structures, words, phrases, clauses and sentences. They are to intensify or foreground a message.

Examples of such parallelism in *Oily Tears of the Delta* include:

To the voices...
To the voices (11)

Parallelism in the Niger Delta

raffia pad...
raffia pad

a pitcher...
the pitcher

base Delta...
brave Delta (19)

In the first parallel structure, the persona is troubled and worried in his mind based on the alienation in his environment. The second parallel structure by the poet was in response to ecological issues ranging from degradation, exploitation, loss of aquaculture issues recorded in the poem *Oily Rivers* and *To the Niger Delta.* Local expressions , code mixing are also dominant in the poem.

3.2 Analysis of *We thought it was oil but it was blood*

The following excerpts of words, phrases, sentences are used in different situations and contexts. In the poem "I will not dance to your beat".

Datum 1

I will not dance to your beats.
If you call plantations forests
It will not sing with you
If you privatize my water (II)

Illocutionary act - Assertive

The above poem is a speech act of warning and total rejection that one should be mindful not to rejoice and accept a "dance" to the style of the government ill rulership and wrong identity of calling "plantations forests". However, this creates a wrong assertion of the Niger Delta environment. Consequently, the speech act of cautioning, which reaffirms that one will not rejoice with the detector for sole ownership of the "water" of the Niger Delta region.

Perlocutionary act: the effect the speech act has on the heater- hence the effect on the government to retrace their steps from wrong assertion of calling "plantations" of the Niger Delta region "forests" and further privatizing her oil.

Datum 2

I will confront you with my fists
If climate change means death to me
But business to you (II)

Illocutionary act - declarative
The lines of the poem exhibits speech act of warning and confrontation or even threat that if the climate changes which will changes which will result to death in the Niger Delta and business to the government.

Perlocutionary act: the effect of the speech act has on the hearer is that the government should advert this oil exploitation in the region and thud create avenue for environmental cleaning, if an atom of hazard occurs. Furthermore approve resource control for the region to avoid this "first" protest.
From the collections:

The poets have used local words to convey ideas in the texts. They down drifts for stylistic and pragmatic purposes viz:

Datum 3
I will confront and denounce you
If you insist on carbon offsetting and other do nothing false solutions
I will make you see red
If you keep talking about RED and push forest communities
Anyway, from their land
I will drag you to the climate tribunal
If you pile up ecological debt
And refuse to pay your climate debt (II)

Illocutionary act - declaratives
The lines of the poem showcases speech acts of threat, warning, anger and protest, if you (government) insist on "carbon offsetting" there by affirming to protest against the carbon pollution in the region as a result of this oil exploitation and exploration. The poet further used "red" to connotes danger danger, protest if there is no remedy to the inderpin environmental issues. By these, ecological debts will be paid for restructuring of our green environment.

Perlocutionary act: the effect the speech act has on the hearer is that the government is obliged to adhere to the warnings and threats issue to avoid oil spillages or be taken to court.

Datum 4.
I will not dance to your beat unless we walk the sustainable path
And accept real solution and respect mother earth
Unless you do
I will not and
We will not dance to your beat.

Illocutionary act - constatives
The aforementioned verse is a speech act of segregation and withdraw not to "dance to the beat of the government" until a lasting solution and assurance is made for both the Niger Deltans and other regions which is the "sustainable path". Further affirmed that the environment which is made of the rivers, land and air "mother earth be respected and given a lasting solutions. The poet in his speech act also opined that he and his region will not accept by "dance to their best". However, with the level of disgust, disillusionment expressed in this speech act the poet has constructively choose his words.

Perlocutionary act: Hence, the effect on the government is either they will continue isolating, alienating and exploiting the Niger Delta region or stop the exploitation or adventure into resource control or in extension inculcate the Niger Deltans into gaining from the system.

Datum 5
...Allah alone it is
Who will judge the case
Between you and me
So be it between
Us and them

Illocutionary act - acknowledgement
In this speech act, the poet has acknowledged and affirmed that "...Allah alone will judge the case" between the region and the government. Thus, the poet in his speech act involved the supernatural being of the oppressors to be the judge.

Perlocutionary act: the effect of the speech act is to accept whatever outcome that emanates regarding to the judge which may result to defeat.

Datum 6

Another poem from poem entitled **Okara's Nun** the persona at the beginning reflected on the past glory of the Niger Delta.

Okara's
Silver surfaced
Nun
Is no more...(23)

Illocutionary act - acknowledgement

The speech act in the stanza one acknowledges the changes in the originality of the river nun by the industrial activities of the region by affirming that "Okara's silver surfaced Nun is no more..."

Perlocutionary act: the effect of the speech act is total acceptance of defeat of environmental degradation and spoilation.

Datum 7

The first excerpts here is from *Oily Tears of the Delta*

It is an old float net
Older perhaps than his promanship
Mended and remained in many meshes
The network is a refractory reticulate.

Illocutionary act - expressives

The speech act in the poem expresses the government's net distribution gestures massive in the media token in real terms, that never got him or the Niger Delta region.

Perlocutionary act: the effect is whether the government believes or not the speech act is made.

Datum 8
A jumbo tanker
An oil boat: in his own words
Burst into the sea... (27)

Illocutionary act - assertives
The above poem showcases speech act of a clarion call by a fisherman who noticed exploitation of crude oil in the region, perceived oil tank live in a battleship, sails through and the same time he sends waves.

Perlocutionary act: the effect is whether the fisherman is believed or not the speech act is made

Datum 9
From Nnimmo Bassey's collection **Watchful in the Box**
Watch night
On whose side are you
Where in earth were you
When bulldozed our forest
Where in the sky were you
When men gassed and flared our skies (18).

Illocutionary act - commissives
The speech act in the verse is a caution and questions passed across his knowledge about the environmental hazard in the region and encourages himself by asking "do they uncover the climate criminal.

Perlocutionary act: the effect of the speech act is viewed that the persona (Niger Deltans) and their environment is faced with disaster and exploitation. Hence, the clarion call is to the watchman to arise and take every necessary step to restore mother earth.

Datum 10
Mountain of food... Oceans of hunger
Mountain of food

Ocean of hunger
How can this remain the lot of our people? (27)

Illocutionary act - directives

The speech act in the aforementioned poem is an indication of further actions and troubles at the devastating environment. Consequently, it shows how rich Africa is while the inhabitants and indigenes are not benefiting from the wealth of the continent, and in same manner the Niger Deltans. The first line "Mountain of food... Ocean of hunger". The speech act explains further that with the surplus wealth, hunger and starvation is the bedrock of the region.

Perlocutionary act: the effect of the speech act triggers anger and protest.

4.0 Conclusion

The point of departure here is, there is a consistent interface in the historicity of the issues of exploitation, alienation, degradation, etc. that are depicted in the poems. The images shown at every context are strategies of repression. It is obvious that repression begets protest, resistance, and violence which is always an option. Given that oppression is a violent phenomenon, and even the most peaceful approaches of resistance get fouled in some ways, is the piety of non-violence not somewhat naïve? The foregoing are some of the many issues raised by the quest of power and environment restructuring in the works of Bassey and Ikiriko. Their poetry brings to fore that oil-conflict has a long history of tremors and pragmatics is a phenomena for adequate redress of these backdrops.

References

Akirika, S. W. (2021). "The Poet as an Eco-Activist*:* An Exploration and Exploitation of Aquaculture and Crude Realities" in Ibiere Ken-Maduako's *Sounds of Motherhood: Festchrift in honor of Professor Ozo-Mekuri Ndimele.* Eds. I. Ken-Maduako, J. Kinaane, S. Amaele, P. E. Iyalla-Amadi and I. C. Mmejim. Port Harcourt: University Press, 143-148.

Ikiriko, I. (2000). *Oily Tears of the Delta.* Kraft Books Limited.

Nnimmo, B. (2010). *We thought it was oil but it was Blood*. Scholarly Press.

Austin, J.L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford Clarendon Press.

Ken-Maduako, I. (2003). *Semantics*: What is the meaning of meaning? Edik Integrated Services.

Leech, G.N. (1982). *Principles of Pragmatics*. Blackwell.

Martinez, E. Foreword. Bassey, We Thought 6-7.

Onugha, C. (2019). *An Introduction to language and linguistics*. Emhai Books.