



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



Who Spilled the Oil? Transitivity, Agency and the Politics of Environmental Representation in Nigeria's Niger Delta

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International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2022, 07(01), 603-607

Publication history: Received on 01 September 2022; revised on 21 October 2022; accepted on 28 October 2022

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/ijrsra.2022.7.1.0200>

Abstract

This study investigates how Nigerian newspapers linguistically construct oil spills and environmental degradation in the Niger Delta, using Halliday's transitivity system and Ogungbemi's (2016) Integrated Model of Ideological Representation in Discourse (IMIRD). While existing scholarship focuses on the ecological, economic, and health consequences of oil pollution, this research addresses a crucial gap: the discursive strategies through which institutions narrate, obscure, or legitimize environmental harm. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of twenty news reports from *Daily Trust* and *Leadership*, the study examines how material and relational processes encode agency, responsibility, and resistance. Findings reveal that passive constructions, agent deletion, and nominalization are frequently used to mask corporate and governmental culpability, framing pollution as inevitable or accidental rather than systemic. Relational processes often normalize underreporting and institutional silence, while material processes that foreground community responses are softened or fragmented to limit their rhetorical impact. The analysis also uncovers ideological patterns that present governments as neutral mediators rather than complicit actors, and oil spills as technical malfunctions rather than outcomes of extractive capitalism. Ultimately, this study highlights how language not only reflects environmental realities but actively shapes public understanding, accountability frameworks, and policy responses in Nigeria's ongoing ecological crisis.

Keywords: Transitivity Analysis; Environmental Discourse; Oil Spills; Niger Delta

1. Introduction

Nigeria's Niger Delta has become emblematic of environmental catastrophe, marked by decades of unchecked ecological destruction largely driven by the operations of multinational oil conglomerates and state-run entities. Once rich in biodiversity and home to over 30 million people, this region now stands as a global case study in the environmental costs of fossil fuel dependency. Rampant oil spills, continuous gas flaring, and indiscriminate industrial waste dumping have left ecosystems in ruins and communities struggling with compromised health and livelihoods (Hoffman & Jennings, 2011).

Oil-related pollution in the Delta manifests most visibly through chronic oil spills, caused by deteriorating infrastructure, operational negligence, sabotage, and weak enforcement mechanisms. These spills leach toxic substances into soils, waterways, and fragile mangrove ecosystems, crippling both agricultural output and aquatic life. Entire networks of rivers and creeks have become saturated with oil, decimating fish populations and making water sources unsafe for human use (Plessl, 2017).

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Gas flaring adds another layer of environmental injustice. Despite international outcry, Nigeria remains one of the top gas-flaring nations, with vast plumes of methane and carbon dioxide routinely released into the atmosphere. These emissions accelerate climate change, corrode buildings via acid rain, and cause chronic respiratory issues for those living near flare stacks. Compounding the crisis is the systematic destruction of mangrove forests—natural carbon absorbers—further diminishing the region’s ecological resilience (Bodo, 2019).

The health implications of this environmental collapse are staggering. Contaminated drinking water has triggered outbreaks of waterborne diseases such as cholera and dysentery, while prolonged exposure to hydrocarbons and flared gases has been associated with increased risks of cancer, respiratory illness, and congenital defects (Bodo, 2019). Scientific studies point to elevated infant mortality rates in oil-producing areas, highlighting the vulnerability of the most defenseless populations.

Economically, the region bears the scars of environmental degradation through the collapse of traditional livelihoods. Farming and fishing, the mainstays of rural subsistence, have been rendered unsustainable. Oil-contaminated soils have lost fertility, leading to plummeting crop yields, while poisoned waters have driven fish stocks to near extinction. The result is not only food insecurity but deepening poverty and unrest. Frustration over environmental neglect has fueled tensions, prompting community resistance, sabotage of oil infrastructure, and the rise of militant groups (Ugboma, 2015).

While the ecological and economic fallout of oil spills in Nigeria’s Niger Delta has been well documented—from collapsing fish populations (Osugwu & Olaifa, 2018) to toxic water systems, existing literature largely ignores the discursive forces that shape public understanding and institutional responses. Studies have spotlighted the environmental toll (Ugboma, 2015), health hazards from heavy metals (Chinedu & Chukwuemeka, 2018), and the broader devastation of local ecosystems (Chiluwa 2011). Yet, how language itself is mobilized to obscure culpability or construct legitimacy remains undertheorized.

A striking omission in the scholarship is the absence of linguistic inquiry into how oil companies and state actors narrate pollution. Through euphemisms like “operational incidents” or depersonalized phrases that erase human agency, official discourse frequently neutralizes environmental harm. Passive voice, nominalization, and agent deletion function not merely as stylistic choices but as rhetorical tools for denial, delay, and diversion. To address this critical gap, the present study applies Halliday’s Transitivity framework to examine how Nigerian newspapers construct oil spill narratives. Specifically, it investigates how material and relational processes encode agency and responsibility, how linguistic choices shape representations of environmental reality, and how grammatical strategies, such as passive constructions, agent deletion, and nominalization, sustain or challenge dominant narratives advanced by corporate and governmental actors. In doing so, the study seeks to uncover how language operates not only as a tool of representation but also as a mechanism of environmental control and resistance, shaping the terrain of accountability, public sentiment, and policy discourse in the context of ecological degradation.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in the principles of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to explore how oil spills are discursively constructed in Nigerian print media (Halliday 1967, 1994). The analysis focuses on the transitivity system, particularly material and relational processes, to uncover how language encodes agency, responsibility, and causality in narratives of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. To enhance the ideological depth of the analysis, the study applies Ogungbemi’s (2016) Integrated Model of Ideological Representation in Discourse (IMIRD) as its theoretical framework. IMIRD offers a composite analytical lens by combining critical discourse analysis, transitivity analysis, and lexical connotation analysis. This model enables a nuanced examination of how discursive choices reflect and reinforce structures of power, resistance, and environmental accountability. The data for this study consists of twenty (20) purposively selected news reports drawn from *Daily Trust* and *Leadership*, two widely circulated Nigerian newspapers known for their national reach and coverage of environmental issues. The corpus includes a mix of news articles, investigative features, and editorials published between 2021 and 2024, all focused on oil spills in the Niger Delta. These texts form the empirical basis for the study’s discourse analysis, allowing for a detailed investigation of the linguistic strategies used to frame oil pollution events in public discourse.

3. Data Analysis

3.1. Excerpt 1

Worse, the region is battered by poverty, dilapidation and gross underdevelopment despite being blessed with plenty. Its major undoing is environmental degradation which has affected the people's agricultural means of livelihood. The effect of oil spills and gas flares has been death to aquatic life and waste to farm lands. However, the challenges didn't arise overnight. Since the 1980s, the oil-bearing communities have been protesting against the dangers of oil exploration. In fact, the struggle of the Ogoni people represent a large aspect of the past and present day realities of oil exploration in Nigeria's south-south region and the many attempts to provide compensation and remediation have failed, leaving the region vulnerable and still prone to conflict.

(‘The real cost of opacity in Nigeria’s oil industry is death and inequality’, *Daily Trust*, 13 Sep, 2021)

In Excerpt 1, transitivity analysis using Halliday's framework and Ogungbemi's (2016) Integrated Model of Ideological Representation in Discourse (IMIRD) reveals how language encodes agency, responsibility, and resistance in narratives about the Niger Delta. The clause “the region is battered by poverty, dilapidation and gross underdevelopment” employs a passive material process that casts the region as a victim of repeated harm while erasing the Actor—likely the state or oil companies. This erasure aligns with IMIRD's notion of ideological concealment, where power structures are masked in discourse. The circumstantial phrase “despite being blessed with plenty” highlights the irony of resource wealth amidst deprivation, reinforcing the injustice of imposed underdevelopment. In “the effect of oil spills and gas flares has been death to aquatic life and waste to farmlands,” a relational identifying process defines pollution's outcome in absolute terms, equating oil exploration with irreversible ecological destruction. This framing supports IMIRD's emphasis on discursive finality and environmental collapse, countering corporate narratives that minimize damage. Meanwhile, the clause “the oil-bearing communities have been protesting” introduces an active material process, restoring agency to local actors. Here, IMIRD's resistance axis is foregrounded, portraying communities not just as passive sufferers but as historical agents of protest and environmental advocacy. Together, these process types construct a narrative of systemic harm, silenced responsibility, and persistent struggle, exposing the ideological tensions underlying environmental discourse in the Niger Delta.

3.2. Excerpt 2

The second is the stunning consciousness that gas flaring/environmental degradation resulting from crude oil prospecting/production-related activities in the country is under reported. This second concern stems from a recent comment, which according to media report was credited to the Director-General, National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency, (NOSDRA), Idris Musa, who stated that findings by his agency showed that an average of five oil spills was recorded daily in Nigeria. Musa, who spoke to journalists in Abuja, said, “In 2018 we had about 600 oil spill incidents and in 2019, we had over 700 oil spill-impacted sites across the country. This wakeful comment becomes even more relevant to the present discourse when one remembers that Nigeria according to reports is dotted with about 139 gas flare locations spread across the Niger Delta both in onshore and offshore oil fields where gas which constitutes about 11 percent of the total gas produced are flared.

(‘Taming Nigeria’s Oil Spillage And Gas Flaring Scourge’, *Daily Trust*, 13 May 2021)

Excerpt 2 reveals how relational processes construct environmental degradation as a normalized yet institutionally neglected reality in Nigeria. The first clause, “The second is the stunning consciousness that gas flaring/environmental degradation... is underreported”, uses an identifying relational process to equate “the second” with a belated awareness of underreported ecological harm. The Value, marked by the phrase “stunning consciousness,” suggests a sudden realization of long-standing issues, framing underreporting not as new but as a newly acknowledged crisis. Through IMIRD's lens, this construction exposes ideological delay and media silence, foregrounding how environmental injustice in the Niger Delta often remains invisible until endorsed by official or elite voices. The second clause, “This second concern stems from a recent comment... credited to the Director-General, NOSDRA”, employs an attributive relational process, tracing public awareness to a government official's statement rather than grassroots knowledge. This shifts epistemic authority away from affected communities to institutional actors, a dynamic IMIRD interprets as the marginalization of local agency in environmental discourse. The clause “This wakeful comment becomes even more relevant...” further illustrates how institutional acknowledgment is needed to validate ongoing crises. Here, the relational verb “becomes” signals conditional relevance, revealing how issues gain traction only within elite discourse. Lastly, the clause “Nigeria... is dotted with about 139 gas flare locations...” frames environmental degradation as a fixed, almost natural feature of the national landscape. The attributive relational process passivizes the agency behind the

pollution, omitting corporate or governmental responsibility. IMIRD highlights this as a strategic ideological move that obscures culpability while reinforcing a discourse of permanence and helplessness. Taken together, the relational processes across the excerpt construct environmental destruction as both widespread and underacknowledged, reinforcing a structure of institutional dependency for visibility, and marginalizing local voices in shaping environmental narratives.

3.3. Excerpt 3

“The government of Bayelsa State states that the cause of the spill is equipment failure, and shall take all appropriate steps to pursue environmental justice for itself and the affected communities to put an end to the perennial pollution of our environment through reckless and irresponsible oilfield practice that is condoned by a weak or compromised regulatory system” he said. Already, some indigenes of the affected community have raised concerns over the environmental hazard the oil spill has caused, as well as the negative impact on the health of the people.

(Nembe oil spill: Why Aiteo, Bayelsa govt, host community differ, *Daily Trust* Sun, 23 Jan 2021)

In Excerpt 3, transitivity analysis reveals how material processes are strategically deployed to manage agency, deflect blame, and structure environmental justice discourse. The clause “The government of Bayelsa State states that the cause of the spill is equipment failure” features a low-transitivity, materialized verbal process (“states”) that privileges discourse over action. This positions the government as a declarative authority rather than an active problem-solver. The embedded goal, “that the cause of the spill is equipment failure”, further shifts agency from corporate actors to inanimate machinery, reinforcing IMIRD’s notion of ideological displacement, where technical language masks institutional and corporate culpability. In the next clause, “The government... shall take all appropriate steps to pursue environmental justice”—a modalized material process (“shall take”) projects action into the future, signaling deferment rather than urgency. The vagueness of the goal (“appropriate steps”) and the inclusion of “for itself and the affected communities” create a rhetorical dual victimhood, which blurs lines between benefactor and victim, diluting the state’s complicity in extractive regimes. This abstraction reflects what IMIRD identifies as institutional depoliticization, where language performs responsibility without enacting it. In contrast, “Some indigenes... have raised concerns over the environmental hazard” introduces a high-transitivity material process that foregrounds grassroots agency. However, the goal, “concerns”, remains discursively soft, reflecting limited institutional power to transform grievances into systemic change. The actor is generalized, presenting community response as fragmented and informal, rather than as part of an organized resistance. Additionally, the embedded clause “the oil spill has caused” does employ a causative structure, but it still omits human agents, attributing harm to the event (“the spill”) rather than to the oil companies or regulators. IMIRD thus highlights a recurring discursive pattern: power is obscured, institutional actors present themselves as neutral or reactive, and community agency is acknowledged but structurally contained. Together, these material processes construct a narrative in which pollution is depersonalized, accountability is deflected, and justice is deferred.

3.4. Excerpt 4

According to Preye Romiel, an indigene of the community, “The thing is affecting us because the whole river is polluted. The oil is everywhere. The spill was on for over a month, so our water is filled with oil. “All the fishing settlements around that territory are affected. The content of the oil was so much that the whole water is totally polluted. No way to use the water at all. We cannot also fish because all fishes have run away from that area.” Another indigene, Tombara Dressman, who ruled out the idea of sabotage, said he stood by the findings of the state government committee which linked the spill to equipment failure. He said, “That wellhead has not been producing for years now. It is the pressure from it that caused the spill. That platform was bought from shell in 2015 and they have not been able to maintain those equipment. They have been there for decades. “The pressure from that head busted that thing because it has not been producing; and it has been stagnant. If they were using it, that pressure will not be there. “The oil has spilled to other communities because the water has low and high tide.”

(Nembe oil spill: Why Aiteo, Bayelsa govt, host community differ, *Daily Trust* Sun, 23 Jan 2021 3:07:36 WAT)

In Excerpt 4, transitivity analysis within Halliday’s framework and Ogungbemi’s (2016) Integrated Model of Ideological Representation in Discourse (IMIRD) highlights how material processes shape the narrative of environmental harm while obscuring corporate accountability. The clause “The oil spill has caused the environmental hazard” is a high-transitivity, causative material process that constructs a direct cause-effect relationship between the spill (Actor) and ecological harm (Goal). However, by personifying the oil spill as the Actor, the sentence erases human agency—particularly the oil companies, regulatory bodies, and maintenance failures responsible for the incident. This aligns with IMIRD’s concept of *ideological masking*, where agency is grammatically displaced to naturalize disaster and deflect

blame. The ergative construction gives the impression that the spill is an autonomous force, reinforcing a broader pattern in environmental discourse where pollution is treated as an unfortunate accident rather than a preventable outcome of systemic negligence. In the Niger Delta, such constructions reflect decades of extractive capitalism, decaying infrastructure, and weak enforcement. While the material process strengthens the perception of environmental damage, its grammatical form weakens attribution of guilt. According to IMIRD, this tactic is ideologically strategic, it decontextualizes harm from the socio-political structures that produce it, allowing oil multinationals and complicit state actors to remain unnamed and unchallenged. Ultimately, such language reproduces a discourse where destruction is visible, but responsibility is invisible.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the discursive framing of oil spills in Nigerian newspapers plays a pivotal role in shaping how environmental degradation is understood, contested, or ignored. Through transitivity analysis and the IMIRD framework, it becomes clear that grammatical choices, particularly passive voice, nominalization, and agent deletion, are not neutral. They serve ideological functions by minimizing the visibility of powerful actors, deflecting responsibility, and presenting systemic failures as natural or unpreventable. While grassroots resistance is occasionally acknowledged, it is often reduced to expressions of “concern” rather than positioned as organized or forceful. By contrast, government actors are depicted as reactive agents promising vague future actions, thereby sustaining a discourse of deferred justice. The absence of explicit attribution of blame to oil companies and regulatory bodies allows extractive capitalism to remain rhetorically unchallenged. This discursive pattern contributes to the continued marginalization of Niger Delta communities and undermines efforts to achieve environmental accountability. Therefore, addressing ecological injustice in the Niger Delta must involve not only policy and legal reform but also a critical interrogation of the language used to report, explain, and justify environmental harm. Only by disrupting these ideological narratives can a more equitable and transparent environmental discourse emerge.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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