

## Evaluation as Ecolinguistic Device in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

**Gloria Yakubu**

Department of English and Literary Studies  
Bingham University Karu  
Nasarawa State, Nigeria  
[gabrielayakubu078@gmail.com](mailto:gabrielayakubu078@gmail.com)

**Nden Julius Nimnan**

Department of English and Literary Studies  
Bingham University Karu  
Nasarawa State, Nigeria  
[nimanj8@gmail.com](mailto:nimanj8@gmail.com)

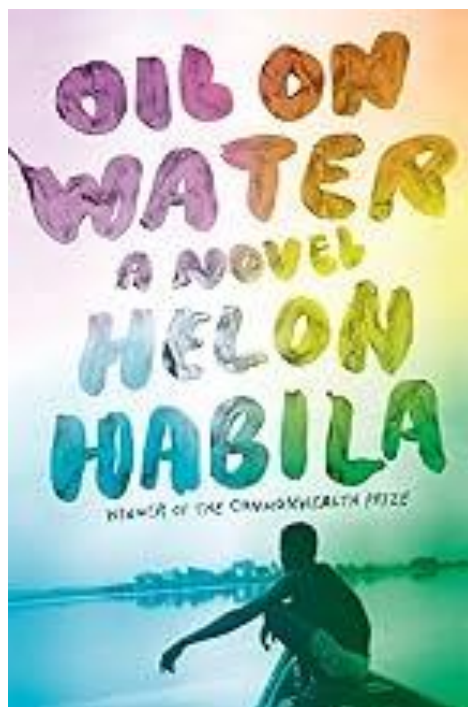
**Ojiakor Peace Amara**

Department of English and Literary Studies  
Bingham University Karu  
Nasarawa State, Nigeria  
[ojiakorpeace2o18@gmail.com](mailto:ojiakorpeace2o18@gmail.com)

**Kotiya Babayo Philip**

Department of English and Literary Studies  
Bingham University Karu  
Nasarawa State, Nigeria  
[kotiyaphilipkoko@gmail.com](mailto:kotiyaphilipkoko@gmail.com)

---



Courtesy: [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

### **Abstract**

This study examines the thematic concerns in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* from an ecolinguistic perspective. The objective is to identify the linguistic means through which evaluation as an ecolinguistic tool is realised in the text and to describe how this tool is deployed in portraying the thematic concerns discussed by the author. Using evaluation as one of the toolkits proposed by Arran Stibbe in his ecolinguistics framework, the study analysed five sample texts purposively extracted from Habila's *Oil on Water*. The findings reveal that evaluation in the analysed texts is constructed using a variety of sentence types, pronominal reference, additive and adversative conjunctions, nominals, verbal, linguistic contrast, and descriptive and evaluative lexical items. Sentence types such as complex and compound-complex sentences help clarify, elaborate, and construct a multidimensional depiction of the environmental issues Habila conveys in the text. The study concludes that the creative utilisation of evaluation as an ecolinguistic device attests to Habila's novel being mainly information-laden and fact-given.

**Keywords:** Helon Habila, *Oil on Water*, Ecolinguistics, Environmental concerns.

## Introduction

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* presents the sordid reality of the Niger Delta. The text discusses issues such as the devastating effects of environmental pollution in the Niger Delta, the neglect of the people by the authorities concerned as a result of corruption in Nigeria, and the resultant social unrest in the region (Koussouhon, & Dossoumou, 2015). The story is told through the eyes of a young journalist, Rufus, who hunts down a story in search of his big break. He accompanies his mentor, Zaq, a man haunted by his past, into the winding creeks. Their mission is to find the wife of an expatriate oil worker held for ransom by militants. An army intervention, run-ins with militants, and illness punctuate the journey. In the end, Rufus finds another truth he had not been seeking. The text captures an apt representation of the endless cycle of death and decay in the Niger region (Imossan, et al., 2025). Corrupt oil companies exploit small communities supported by the greedy government. The militants in the text are not black or white. They blow up the pipelines, polluting the waters. To them, it is the only way to get the attention of the companies that break lives while looking for new places to sink their pipelines. People are not faultless with greed, and sometimes, they overcome rationality. Through his mastery skills, the writer can use imagery to portray the damaged waters, the dead fish, and the burning villagers. The yellowed eyes of hungry souls and the looks of terror in the eyes of men whose lives were cut shut. In addition, the writer shows how politics has permeated every inch of our relations (Komolafe et al., 2025) and how poverty and oppression have pushed a narrative of silence even on the ones who need to speak the truth. Considering the significance of Habila's environmental text, the present paper seeks to examine the concerns raised in the text from the perspective of ecolinguistics. The objective is to identify the linguistic means through which evaluation is realized in the text and describe how evaluation as an ecolinguistic tool has been used to appraise these issues (Edem & Aluya, 2023).

## Review of Literature

This section reviews previous studies that have been conducted on Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. The review aims to identify the depth of research carried out in the novel under examination to establish the gap in literature that the present intends to fill. To start with, Koussouhon & Dossoumou's (2015) article examines Habila's *Oil on Water* using the Systemic Functional

Grammar as a theoretical framework. By applying the theory of the grammar of experiential meaning to Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2011), the study attempts to auscultate African society's emerging perception of gender identity as it affects and re-presents women. By borrowing the way the writer encodes his experience via the medium of language to affirm male writers' support of the trend, this article proves the propriety and relevance of womanist theory by re-evaluating and re-defining African women's identity and personality through the novel under study.

Edokpayi (2019) examines Habila's *Oil on Water* from a Linguistic stylistic perspective. The paper focuses on the significant syntactic, lexico-semantic, and graphological levels of language study. To this end, the paper seeks to expound on how the writer deploys language resources to convey the Niger Delta crises, their security risks to society and the Nigerian economy, as well as the decisive steps to arrest the ugly situation. The paper employs linguistic stylistic analysis as a theoretical framework for analysing extracts purposively selected from the text. The findings indicate that syntactic features (declarative sentence, interrogative sentence, imperative sentence, exclamatory sentence, parallelism), lexico-semantic features (simile, metaphor, personification, and idiomatic expressions) and graphological features (capitalisation, ellipsis, use of pidgin) are used to portray the devastating effects of ecological degradation which have subjected the people of the region to a lot of problems ranging from environmental pollution, unemployment, poverty, hunger, diseases and deaths. The study concludes with Habila's call on the Nigerian government and the oil companies to give more attention to the Niger Delta and address the problems with all seriousness and urgency to restore peace and enhance national development in Nigeria.

Diana (2017) studies Habila's *Oil on Water* and *Waiting for an Angel* from a linguistic stylistic viewpoint. It seeks to identify both texts' recurrent linguistic and stylistic features and the stylistic significance of Habila's style choice. This study adopts the style analysis method outlined by Leech and Short in analysing extracts randomly extracted from the texts. The study reveals that Habila is consistent in his style of writing. For every linguistic feature and stylistic device examined in *Waiting for an Angel*, there seems to be a similar recurrence in *Oil on Water*, except for a few. Habila's style conforms to the concepts of style, which see style as a choice and deviation. This work has been able to establish that the style of the text is manifest in the linguistic

features of the text. This study has revealed that Habila has been consistent in his style since both texts have more recurrent linguistic features than diversities.

Ojukwu & Gajir (2019) explore Habila's *Oil on Water* to explicate the effects of oil exploration in the Niger-Delta region. Using Critical Discourse Analysis coupled with principles of ecocriticism, the study, through a content analysis, examined extracts from the novel. The findings reveal that Habila employed experienter constructions, laced with graphic descriptions of the damaging effects of oil spillage, to elicit emotions by the various degree of environmental degradation and the injurious effects of oil exploration in the Niger Delta. The breakdowns of grammatical structures in critical discourse analysis extend the scope of language from its formal structures of modes that re-create social realities beyond the sentence level.

Ojarike (2018) studies Habila's *Oil on Water* from a stylistic perspective. The study adopts the Systemic Functional Grammar and Critical Stylistics as theoretical models. The findings reveal how the nominal group feature and the naming strategy in describing the reckless exploitation of petroleum resources in the underdeveloped region as well as reveal how the people of the Niger Delta have been impoverished and their environment degraded from decades of exploitation and neglect.

Edem (2023) examines how meaning is negotiated through some cohesive devices in Habila's *Oil on Water*. Also, the study focused on a qualitative research procedure and adopted Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion theory as a theoretical model. The findings reveal that words cannot be isolated, as they are related in a text to produce a predetermined meaning. This was achieved through the author's careful use of some cohesive devices such as reiteration, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, and meronymy, which improved the textual quality of the text. The study concludes that the author, through cohesive devices, made reading of the text meaningful and easily understood by the reader.

Imossan et al. (2024) examine the representations of actions, events, and states in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. To do this, Jeffrey's (2010) critical stylistics model, which centres on

investigating underlying ideologies within a text or an utterance, is the foundation upon which the study was premised, emphasising Hallidiyan’s Transitivity Model—thus forming its theoretical framework. With this framework, Habila’s use of the processes of transitivity highlights the subject of corruption, violence, and exploitation as entrenched in society. The method of analysis used was the textual analysis. Twelve excerpts were extracted from Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* with a focus on his choice of lexical items within a syntactic construction. This aided in explicating how actions, events, and states are represented in the text. From the findings, it was concluded that Habila’s lexical choices reflect the four processes of the transitivity model: Material process, verbalisation, mental process, and relational process. Through these processes, his ideologies, which primarily are the indictment of the government and oil companies in the exploitation of the people, are not just well represented but have within them the potential to be impressed upon the readers.

Komolafe et al.’s (2025) study examines prioritisation as a critical stylistic tool in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*. The research aims to analyse how specific elements within the text are prioritised by Habila to strengthen the ideological dimensions of his narrative, heighten emotional impact, and strengthen topical ideas. The qualitative research uses Lesley Jeffery’s (2010) Critical Stylistics Models but focuses only on prioritisation. Ten (10) extracts were selected from the text to demonstrate how this critical stylistic tool has been used in the text. The findings show that Habila’s stylistic choices strongly influence the narrative structure and thematic concerns, offering a nuanced understanding of character development and plot dynamics. The study further reveals that prioritisation in *Oil on Water* sets out to foreground key events and character experiences, create urgency, and examine the differences between expected and actual outcomes. The data analysis shows that Habila employs prioritisation to emphasise notable narrative moments. This technique by Habila also focuses on the characters’ emotional and physical states. The study contributes to the broader field of literary criticism by demonstrating how prioritisation functions as a key stylistic tool in contemporary African fiction.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Arran Stibbe’s (2015) ecolinguistics serves as the study’s framework. Arran Stibbe observes that ecolinguistics examines language to identify the narratives we live by, evaluates



those narratives from an ecological standpoint, rejects harmful narratives, and aids in the hunt for alternative narratives to live by. He claims that by exposing and questioning the narratives we live by, the theory contributes to the reinvention of society along more ecological lines. Stibbe (2015) notes that the stories we live by are narratives many culture members carry about, shaping their behaviour, speech, and thoughts. He lists eight categories of stories: ideology, evaluation, erasure, salience, identity, narrative, framing, and metaphor. He notes that these categories can affect people's cognitive perceptions of reality, inspiring people to use language that will inspire them to preserve the environment rather than endanger it (Aluya & Ocheme, 2024). "Evaluation" refers to people's narratives about what aspects of life are good or poor. Cognitive assessments are associations we have in memory, such as that honesty is good and lying is bad, rather than a meticulous data analysis to determine whether something is good or bad. These stories become cultural evaluations when widely shared within a culture; they are stories about what is good or evil that have gained societal acceptance. Numerous cultural judgments are ingrained in everyday discourse regarding various facets of social life, such as the positive aspects of economic expansion, retail sales, higher profits, speed, and convenience (Stibbe, 2015). Cultural assessments can get entrenched to the point that people forget why some things are viewed as good and others as bad. It gets easy to accept the "good news" that Christmas sales are up without thinking about the environmental costs or the issues associated with mounting personal debt or to accept the "good news" that an exploitative and environmentally harmful corporation is making more money (Aluya & Uduma, 2024).

## **Methodology**

The study applies qualitative content analysis to examine environmental degradation in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, which serves as the data for the study. The study employs a purposive sampling method to select the data. The choice of the purposive sampling method as a technique for data selection is based on the fact that it enables the researcher to choose only those portions of texts that will be relevant to the variables under scrutiny (Ogunsiji & Aluya, 2022). The study employs the purposive sampling method in collecting five excerpts from the text chosen for the study. The study employs Stibbe's (2015) ecolinguistic framework. Stibbe's ecolinguistics model consists of eight toolkits. Out of the eight toolkits, only one is used for the analysis. To conduct

the analysis, portions from the text are critically examined for instances of Habila's use of evaluation as an ecolinguistic tool.

### **Textual Analysis**

Stibbe (2015) defines evaluation as stories in people's minds about whether a particular area of life is good or bad. These stories are associations we have in memory that, over time, influence how we view or address issues. Evaluation, an ecolinguistic tool, is deployed by Habila to assess some stories (i.e. discourse subjects or themes) in his texts. This is actualised by deploying value-laden language to express an opinion or point of view. The writer employs different sentence types and choices of lexemes that show judgment and emotional attachment to the stories or issues addressed. The following extracts from the texts exemplify evaluation as an eco-stylistic tool.

#### **Extract 1**

Irifike Island, also known as Half-moon Island because of its distinct the crescent-shaped coastline had long since disappeared, swallowed by the distance and the darkness cast by the mist that rises like smoke from the river banks (Habila, 2012, p.3).

#### **Extract 2**

The village looked as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it. A square concrete platform dominated the village centre like some sacrificial alter. Abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia; some appeared to be sprouting out of widening cracks in the concrete, alongside thick clumps of grass. The chunks began not too far away from the derelict platform. We are went from one squat brick structure to the next, from compound to compound, but they were all empty, with wide-open windows askew on broken hinges, while overhead the roofs had big holes through which strong sunlight fell (Habila, 2012, p.7).



### **Extract 3**

I couldn't understand their words but imagined they were speaking of dwindling stocks of fish in the river, the rising toxicity of the water, and how soon they might have to move to another place where fishing was still fairly good (Habial, 2021, p.16).

### **Extract 4**

And that was why we decided to leave, ten families. We did not take their money. The money would be our curse on them for taking our lands and for killing our chief (Habila, 2012, p.41).

### **Extract 5**

Karibi sat straight between two soldiers, his hands tied behind him, His face stares at the horizon (Habila, 2012, p.13).

Extract one employs linguistic contrast in presenting two contrasting realities about an Island in the Niger Delta region. This presentation is captured using a compound-complex sentence. The text begins with the nominal expression “Irifike Island”, alluding to the writer’s topic of discourse. The adjective in the nominal expression specifies the particular Island being referred to by the writer. The first reality of the Island, as captured in the text, alludes to its beauty and ambience. This is represented by lexical expressions such as “half-moon Island” and “distinct crescent-shaped coastline.” These are evaluative indicators used to evaluate the beautiful sight of the island. However, the second reality alludes to the devastating state of the Island. This devastating state is represented using lexical evaluations such as “disappeared” and “swallowed”. Both lexical items are verbs deployed to indicate what environmental degradation has done to the Island (Edem & Aluya, 2019). Other lexical expressions in the text deployed as evaluative indicators to assess the pitiable plight and sight of the Island include “the darkness cast by the mist” and “smoke from the river banks”. The abovementioned lexical items are deployed as evaluative indicators to assess the former and current state of the Island. Through the foregoing



evaluation, Habila laments the devastating havoc environmental degradation has caused in the region.

Evaluation in extract two is observed to be made about the desertion of the local communities by its inhabitants. This is due to the havoc caused by oil spills. For example, the adverse effect of oil spills is primarily evaluated to its negative impacts on the indigenes. Almost all the lexical evaluations in this extract are achieved through adjectivisation (e.g. deadly epidemic, abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia, thick clumps, derelict platform, etc.). Apart from the abovementioned lexical items used as evaluative indicators, lexical expressions such as “from compound to compound”, “all-empty-with-wide-open windows”, and “broken hinges” corroborate the abandonment of the communities by their inhabitants. The use of “abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia” suggests the activities of the oil operators (Aluya, 2016). The choice of “widening cracks”, “thick clumps of grass”, and “derelict platform” indicate that the villages had been deserted for a long time. Finally, the lexical item “deadly epidemic” denotes the disease caused by the toxic substance from oil spills, so the inhabitants vacated the communities.

Extracts Two and Three focus on the devastating consequence of oil spills on the rivers in the region using a complex sentence that comprises a main clause and several subordinate clauses. The main clause is introduced with the expression, “I could not understand their words”. Evaluation in this text features in the subordinate clause. Evaluative expressions include: “dwindling stocks of fish” and “the rising toxicity of water”. Here, Habila assesses the current state of fish in the river and the current condition of the rivers through lexical evaluations such as “dwindling stock” and “rising toxicity”. Through these lexical evaluations, Habila depicts the adverse impact of oil spills on the fish and the rivers.

Evaluation in extract four is made to the desertion of the villages by their residents and their refusal to accept the money offered by the government as compensation for the lands that were forcefully confiscated from them. Also, it captures the reason behind the residents’ decision not to accept the money. Lexical expressions such as “decided to leave”, “did not take their money”, “taking our lands”, and “killing our chief” are deployed in the text to render the activities

of the government and oil companies in the region in a negative light. The focus of extract six is on the oppression and brutalisation of leaders of the region by law enforcement agents owing to their refusal to consent to the government's request to possess their lands. Such oppression and brutalisation are depicted through lexical evaluations such as "sat straight between two soldiers" and "his hands tied behind him".

## Conclusion

This study has focused on evaluation as an ecolinguistic device in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. It approaches the subject of environmental degradation using insights from Stibbes' concept of evaluation. The 5 sample texts that constitute the data examined bring to the fore some ecolinguistic features used in the texts. Evaluations in the sample texts examined are constructed using a variety of sentence types, pronominal reference, additive and adversative conjunctions, nominals, verbal, linguistic contrast, and descriptive and evaluative lexical items. Sentence types such as complex and compound-complex sentences help clarify, elaborate, and construct a multidimensional depiction of the environmental issues Habila conveys in the text. Remarkably, the discourse functions of these sentence types suggest that Habila seeks more than just informing. Pronominal references range from first, second, and third-person pronouns. These pronoun references are operative linguistic features that Habila employs to identify different classes and groups. Habila exploits linguistic contrast in presenting different realities about the issues of environmentalism discussed in the text. The creative utilisation of these eco-stylistic features attests to the writer's novel being mainly information-laden and fact-given. Also, it confirms that most of the misunderstanding between the Niger Delta inhabitants and the government is based on clash of ideologies.

---

## References

Aluya, I. (2016). 'Still in the Woods': A Stylistic Reading of Osundare's Essays. *Ihafa: A Journal of African Studies*. 8(2): 187-208.

Aluya, I. & Ocheme, W. (2024). An Ecolinguistics Approach to Framing and Ideology in Kaine

Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*. *Dutsin-ma Journal of English and Literature*, 8(1), 208-218.

Aluya, I. & Uduma, A. (2024). A Cognitive Stylistic Study of Mind Style in Selected Short Stories in Dul Johnson's *Shadows and Ashes*. *Research Nebula*, XII(IV):51-62.

Edem, E. (2023). A Lexico-Semantic Analysis of Helon Habila's "Oil on Water". *International Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics*, 6(2), 90-101.

Edem, S. & Aluya, I. (2019). 'Pragmatic Face and Ideology in Selected Speech Discourses of President Muhammadu Buhari'. *Ife Journal of Languages and Literature*, 5(1): 91-101.

Edem, S. & Aluya, I. (2023). 'Redefining the Women's Space: A Frame Analysis of Thomas Ajayi's *Moremi the Courageous Queen*'. *Research Nebula*. XII(III): 14-25.

Imossan, M. I., Dul, F. R., & Ozioko, T. M. (2024). Encoding Experience in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*: A Critical Stylistics Study. *International Journal of Arts, Languages, Linguistics and Literary Studies*, 13(3).

Koussouhon, L. A., & Dossoumou, A. M. (2015). Exploring ideational metafunction in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*: A re-evaluation and redefinition of African women's personality and identity through literature. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 4(5), 129-136.

Komolafe, I., Elemihe, J. U., & Kakaye, N. Z. (2025). Prioritising as a Critical Stylistic Tool in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. *International Journal of Arts, Languages, Linguistics and Literary Studies*, 14(1).

Ogunsiji, A. & Aluya, I. (2022). Lexical Repetition and Syntactic Parallelism in Selected Political Essays of Niyi Osundare and Ray Ekpu. *Journal of Universal Language*, 23(1): 77-107.

