

Pragmatic Dimensions Of Language Use In Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* And Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the pragmatic dimensions of language use in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* and Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, arguing that linguistic strategies function as instruments of ideological resistance and socio-political engagement in Niger Delta fiction. Drawing on Speech Act Theory, Conversational Implicature, Presupposition, and Deixis, the paper explores how meaning is constructed beyond literal expression through context, intention, and reader inference. Situated within the ecological and gendered realities of the Niger Delta, both novels deploy language not merely as narrative medium but as social action. In *The Activist*, performative protest discourse enacts environmental resistance, while in *Yellow-Yellow*, indirect speech and identity-centered deixis articulate gendered negotiation and self-assertion. Through qualitative textual analysis, the study demonstrates that pragmatic features shape ideological positioning, reader engagement, and moral persuasion. By extending pragmatic theory into African literary discourse, the paper highlights how language mediates power, constructs identity, and performs activism. It concludes that literary pragmatics offers a productive framework for understanding the intersection of language, ideology, and socio-environmental experience in contemporary Nigerian fiction.

Keywords: Ideological Critique, Literary Discourse, Niger Delta Fiction, Pragmatics, Speech Acts

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The study of language in literature has increasingly moved beyond structural and semantic analysis toward a dynamic understanding of discourse as social action. Meaning is no longer confined to what words denote; it emerges through intention, inference, context, and shared cultural knowledge. This shift, central to pragmatics, foregrounds how speakers and writers use language to perform actions, negotiate power, and construct social realities. Within African literary traditions, particularly Nigerian fiction this, perspective is especially productive, as language frequently functions as a site of resistance, identity formation, and ideological intervention (Adegbija, 2021; Mey, 2001).

The Niger Delta occupies a unique position in Nigerian literary imagination. As a region marked by environmental exploitation, oil-induced ecological crisis, political neglect, and socio-economic inequality, it has generated a body of literature deeply invested in exposing systemic injustice. Writers from and about the region often employ narrative not merely to document suffering but to contest it. Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* (2006) and Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) are significant contributions to this discourse. While Ojaide foregrounds collective ecological resistance against multinational oil corporations and state complicity, Agary centers his narratives on the gendered and psychological consequences of environmental and cultural dislocation. Both texts operate within the same socio-historical terrain, yet they mobilize distinct linguistic strategies to articulate protest, negotiation, and survival.

Although these novels have attracted substantial thematic and socio-political analysis, scholarly engagement has largely privileged eco-criticism, feminist critique, and postcolonial theory. Less attention has been devoted to the linguistic mechanisms through which resistance and ideological critique are constructed. Specifically, there remains a gap in understanding how pragmatic elements speech acts, implicatures, deixis, and presuppositions

function as structural engines of meaning and activism within these narratives. Addressing this gap allows for a more precise account of how language itself becomes a performative force in Nigerian fiction.

Pragmatics offers an analytical framework capable of revealing these dimensions. Speech Act Theory demonstrates how utterances perform actions rather than merely describe states of affairs (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Gricean implicature explains how meaning is implied rather than stated directly, enabling subtle forms of critique. Deixis anchors discourse within specific spatial, temporal, and social contexts, while presupposition encodes shared assumptions and ideological positioning. When applied to literary discourse, these tools illuminate how fictional dialogue and narration operate as communicative events between author, text, and reader.

This study, therefore, argues that pragmatic strategies are central to the ideological and activist force of *The Activist* and *Yellow-Yellow*. In Ojaide's novel, performative protest language transforms dialogue into environmental advocacy. In Agary's narrative, indirect speech, silence, and deictic positioning articulate gendered negotiation and identity formation. By comparatively examining these pragmatic dimensions, the paper demonstrates that language in both texts functions as social performance shaping reader interpretation, constructing moral alignment, and mediating resistance.

Through qualitative textual analysis grounded in pragmatic theory, this study contributes to African literary scholarship in three key ways: (1) It foregrounds linguistic analysis as a complement to thematic and postcolonial readings, (2) It extends pragmatic theory into the context of Niger Delta eco- and gender discourse, and (3) It positions literary language as an active force in ideological critique and social imagination. In doing so, the paper reinforces the argument that in contemporary Nigerian fiction, language does not merely represent reality; it intervenes in it.

1.1 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored primarily on Speech Act Theory as developed by J. L. Austin (1962) and John Searle (1969), complemented by Grice's theory of Conversational Implicature (1975), and supported by theories of deixis and presupposition within pragmatic linguistics. The framework views literature as a communicative act in which authors, through fictional characters and narrative strategies, perform speech acts directed toward their readership. The pragmatic approach therefore provides a methodological lens to interpret how meaning is constructed through these acts, particularly in socio-politically charged narratives like those emerging from the Niger Delta.

The concept of *pragmatics* is rooted in the philosophical and linguistic traditions of meaning-making, with key contributions from Charles Peirce (1878), William James (1898), J.L. Austin (1962), and John Searle (1969). Peirce's pragmatism established that the meaning of any concept lies in its practical consequences an idea that resonates strongly with literary pragmatics, where the meaning of a text extends beyond its linguistic surface to its social and ideological impact. Similarly, Austin's *Speech Act Theory* (1962) advanced the notion that language is not merely descriptive but performative: to say something is to do something. This framework underpins the study's theoretical foundation.

In pragmatic literary analysis, language is seen as an action that influences perception, ideology, and behavior (Adegbiya, 2021; Mey, 2001). Austin's threefold division of speech acts as locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary offers tools for analyzing how characters' utterances perform social actions. For instance, in *The Activist*, protest speeches and dialogues perform illocutionary functions of resistance, while in *Yellow-Yellow*, conversations about gender, body, and identity perform perlocutionary effects of self-realization and empowerment (Ojaide, 2011; Orhero, 2015).

Further theoretical support comes from Grice's *Cooperative Principle* and *Conversational Implicature*, which explain how speakers convey meaning indirectly, relying on shared context and social knowledge (Mey, 2001). In literary discourse, implicatures are critical for understanding subtext, irony, and satire devices richly present in both Ojaide and Agary's works (Eze, 2019). The notion of *deixis* linguistic expressions that situate meaning in context also becomes significant, as it connects characters to their spatial, temporal, and social settings (Hanks, 2009; Kennedy, 2012).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of pragmatics and African literature has gained increasing scholarly attention in recent years (Adegbija, 2021; Akinyemi, 2018). Scholars such as Diala (2007), Nnolim (2006), and Nwagbara (2012) have explored the political and ecological dimensions of Nigerian fiction, while others like Chukwuma (2006) and Ezeigbo (1996) have focused on feminist linguistic discourses. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that pragmatic theory provides a fertile ground for decoding the multi-layered meanings embedded in African literary texts.

2.1 Pragmatics and Literary Discourse

Literary pragmatics, as advanced by Mey (2001), extends pragmatic inquiry beyond everyday conversation into fictional communication. In this framework, a literary text functions as a communicative event involving author, narrator, character, and reader. Meaning is not static but negotiated through context and inference. Adegbija (2021) emphasizes that pragmatic analysis uncovers how speech acts and implicatures reveal power relations and ideological positioning embedded within discourse.

Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) establishes that utterances perform actions. In literary contexts, characters' statements can command, resist, promise, accuse, or empower. Grice's theory of implicature further explains how implied meaning communicates

and critique indirectly, particularly in politically sensitive contexts. Deixis situates discourse spatially, temporally, and socially, while presupposition encodes shared assumptions and ideological commitments. Together, these tools allow critics to move beyond thematic interpretation toward linguistic precision in analyzing how meaning operates

2.2 Pragmatics and African Literary Tradition

African writers have historically employed language as a site of resistance and cultural reclamation. Nigerian fiction, in particular, uses narrative voice and dialogue to interrogate colonial legacies, environmental injustice, and patriarchal systems (Diala, 2007; Nwagbara, 2012). While eco-critical and feminist readings dominate scholarship on Ojaide and Agary, fewer studies systematically examine how linguistic choices construct activism. Ojaide's linguistic strategies have been recognized for exposing environmental injustice (Edebor, 2014), while Agary's narrative voice has been praised for articulating female subjectivity (Orhero, 2015). However, the pragmatic mechanisms underpinning these strategies remain underexplored. This study contributes to bridging that gap.

2.3 The Niger Delta Discourse

The Niger Delta, as a recurring motif in Nigerian literature, represents both a physical and symbolic site of struggle. Ojaide's *The Activist* and Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* are two significant contributions to this body of literature. Scholars such as Aghoghovwia (2018) and Okoye (2017) note that these novels not only document environmental degradation but also perform linguistic resistance through the narrative voice and character dialogue. Pragmatically, these texts embody performative discourse language that does something in the world. Through protest songs, community dialogues, and reflective monologues, characters use words to enact social critique and environmental awareness (Ojinmah, 2011; Nwagbara, 2012).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design grounded in literary pragmatics. The research is textual and analytical, relying primarily on close reading of Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* (2006) and Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) as primary data sources. The method of analysis involves purposive extraction of relevant dialogues, narrative statements, and character utterances that demonstrate pragmatic features. Selected textual excerpts were examined using four analytical lenses:

1. Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969)
2. Conversational Implicature (Grice as discussed in Mey, 2001)
3. Deixis
4. Presupposition

Each extracted passage was analysed to determine its locutionary content (what is said), illocutionary force (what is performed), and perlocutionary effect (its impact on characters and readers). Instances of implied meaning, contextual inference, deictic positioning, and embedded assumptions were identified and interpreted in relation to the socio-political realities of the Niger Delta. The approach is comparative and interpretive rather than statistical. It seeks to demonstrate how pragmatic structures function as ideological tools within literary discourse. Secondary sources published between 2000 and 2024 were consulted to situate the findings within existing scholarship.

4.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section of the study's theoretical discuss is divided into four sub-sections in order to highlight the relationship between the keywords. These sections are presented as follows: pragmatic strategies in *the activist*, pragmatic strategies in *yellow-yellow*, comparative pragmatic perspectives and pragmatics as ideological critique. These are further discussed and thereafter, the conclusion is drawn and some recommendations are suggested.

4.1 Pragmatic Strategies in *the Activist*

Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* (2006) offers a linguistically rich narrative in which language functions simultaneously as protest and persuasion. The protagonist, symbolically referred to as "The Activist," deploys speech to mobilize, critique, and construct a communal ideology. His utterances perform illocutionary acts of resistance and advocacy, illustrating Austin's (1962) proposition that language constitutes social action. Through a pragmatic lens, the novel's dialogues reveal how locutionary acts (what is said) and illocutionary force (what is performed) combine to produce perlocutionary effects eliciting emotional alignment and ideological commitment from both characters and readers.

For instance, the protagonist's speeches against oil exploitation operate as both informative and performative discourse, urging the Niger Delta community toward environmental consciousness (Nwagbara, 2012; Ojinmah, 2011). When the protagonist declares, "We will not watch our land die in silence," the utterance exceeds mere description. The locutionary content reports environmental decline, yet the illocutionary force functions as a declaration of resistance. The perlocutionary effect is mobilization within the fictional community and potentially among readers. The inclusive deictic marker "we" constructs collective identity, while the possessive expression "our land" presupposes communal ownership and emotional attachment. Pragmatically, the utterance operates as a performative act of protest, consistent with Austin's (1962) theory that to speak is to act.

In terms of implicature, Ojaide frequently employs irony and coded expressions to critique governmental complicity and multinational oil corporations without overt accusation. This rhetorical subtlety, grounded in Gricean principles of indirect meaning, sustains a moral stance while inviting reader inference (Edebor, 2014). Additionally, recurrent deictic markers such as "our land," "these waters," and "this oil" spatially and ideologically anchor the discourse within the Niger Delta's lived reality (Aghoghovwia, 2018; Kennedy, 2012). Thus,

The Activist exemplifies how literary pragmatics links language to socio-political transformation. Each speech act becomes a symbolic reclamation of voice and agency, aligning with Peirce's (1878) pragmatic assertion that meaning derives from practical consequences. Ojaide's text therefore transcends descriptive realism to become an act of socio-political intervention.

4.2 Pragmatic Strategies in *Yellow-Yellow*

Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) shifts the pragmatic emphasis from collective activism to personal identity and gendered negotiation. The narrative follows Zilayefa, a biracial woman navigating cultural alienation and gendered vulnerability in postcolonial Nigeria. Agary's deployment of pragmatic resources particularly presupposition, deixis, implicature, and expressive speech acts constructs a discourse of introspection and gradual empowerment (Adesanmi, 2020; Orhero, 2015).

Zilayefa's internal monologues and interpersonal exchanges reveal a subtle negotiation of power through language. When she reflects, "They call me Yellow-Yellow as if I chose it," the utterance embodies layered pragmatic meaning. Although structurally descriptive, the implicature conveys resentment toward imposed identity. The third-person plural deixis "they" constructs an unnamed yet socially authoritative collective, while the clause "as if I chose it" presupposes lack of agency. The speech act functions expressively, articulating psychological resistance to racialized and gendered labeling. Through such indirectness, Agary encodes critique without overt confrontation.

The recurrent use of personal pronouns ("I," "me," "they") further illustrates person deixis as a mechanism of identity construction (Charney, 1980). These markers are not merely grammatical features but indices of evolving self-consciousness. As Zilayefa transitions from passive observer to assertive subject, her linguistic choices reflect what Mey (2001) describes as the pragmatic dynamism of discourse.

Moreover, the novel's socio-pragmatic texture demonstrates how implicature exposes gender constraints. Conversations between Zilayefa and older women often rely on indirect speech acts, euphemism, and strategic silence cultural mechanisms for communicating caution and moral expectation (Chukwuma, 2006; Ezeigbo, 1996). Pragmatically, these silences function as meaningful communicative acts rather than absences of speech, reinforcing the contextual nature of interpretation. Environmental critique also emerges through presupposed references to oil pollution and ecological degradation (Izevbaye, 2010; Okoye, 2017). The cumulative effect is a restrained yet potent indictment of exploitation, where even reflective dialogue performs subtle resistance.

4.3 Comparative Pragmatic Perspectives

Comparing both novels highlights how pragmatic analysis reveals ideological nuances in African narrative discourse. While *The Activist* performs collective speech acts of resistance, *Yellow-Yellow* enacts personal and gendered speech acts of self-discovery. Both employ context-dependent meaning, presupposition, and implicature to address broader issues of justice, identity, and survival.

Ojaide's discourse aligns with what Diala (2007) describes as *eco-activist pragmatism*, where environmental activism merges with moral speech. Agary's narrative, by contrast, aligns with *feminist pragmatics*, where language functions as an instrument of emancipation. Together, they illustrate how pragmatic frameworks offer an interpretive bridge between linguistic form and social reality in postcolonial literature. Thus, both novels extend Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) theories into African contexts demonstrating that the performative power of language transcends Western philosophical boundaries. As Hookway (2010) notes, pragmatism evolves by adapting to context; in this case, Nigerian literature localizes global theories to express regional struggles.

4.4 Pragmatics as Ideological Critique

A key contribution of this paper is its argument that pragmatics serves not only as a linguistic theory but as a method of ideological critique. In African literature, where language often mediates power and resistance, pragmatic analysis exposes the interplay between form, meaning, and ideology (Adegbija, 2021; Mey, 2001). In *The Activist*, the performative force of protest language transforms words into social action illustrating what Peirce (1878) termed *practical meaning*. In *Yellow-Yellow*, indirect speech acts and conversational implicatures become strategies for navigating patriarchal discourse. In both cases, pragmatics bridges linguistic analysis with cultural semiotics. By applying these theories to literary texts, scholars and readers uncover not only what is said but *how* it is said and *why* a process central to understanding African literature's communicative depth.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that pragmatic theory provides a powerful lens for examining how language functions as social action in Nigerian fiction. In *The Activist*, speech acts and implicatures perform environmental resistance and collective mobilization. In *Yellow-Yellow*, deixis and presupposition articulate identity negotiation and gendered resilience. By extending pragmatic analysis into Niger Delta literature, this research underscores how linguistic performance mediates ideology, power, and ecological consciousness. Literature emerges not as passive reflection but as active intervention. Future studies may incorporate relevance theory, critical discourse pragmatics, and conversation analysis to further explore evolving forms of African eco- and gender discourse. Ultimately, the pragmatic approach affirms that in contemporary Nigerian fiction, language does not simply describe reality; it participates in transforming it.

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