

**PRAGMATICS AS RESISTANCE: LINGUISTIC STRATEGIES OF ECOLOGICAL
AND GENDERED PROTEST IN OJAIDE'S *THE ACTIVIST* AND AGARY'S
*YELLOW-YELLOW***

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how pragmatics speech acts, implicature, deixis, and presupposition functions as a tool for resistance and social critique in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* and Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*. Using a qualitative textual approach guided by Systemic Functional Linguistics, it analyzes how linguistic strategies convey ecological, socio-political, and gendered concerns in the Niger Delta. Findings show that directives and commissives act as defiance, implicatures reveal systemic corruption and inequality, and deixis and presuppositions anchor narratives in authentic cultural and environmental contexts. *The Activist* foregrounds environmental activism, highlighting oil exploitation's consequences, while *Yellow-Yellow* foregrounds gendered marginalization and identity struggles. Contextual analysis demonstrates that cultural, situational, and linguistic factors are key to interpreting layered meanings and fostering reader engagement. By centering pragmatics, the study shows how literature becomes a vehicle for social advocacy, emphasizing moral responsibility, local knowledge, and collective agency. It contributes to Nigerian literary scholarship by expanding pragmatic theory, integrating environmental pragmatics, and offering a comparative framework that highlights the complementary strategies of literary activism in the Niger Delta.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Gendered protest, Nigerian literature, Niger Delta, Pragmatics

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Nigerian literature has consistently functioned as a dynamic arena for socio-political interrogation, offering writers a platform to confront injustice, expose systemic failures, and articulate alternative visions of social order. From post-independence disillusionment to contemporary struggles over identity, governance, and resource control, literary texts have remained deeply intertwined with national realities. Nowhere is this engagement more pronounced than in narratives emerging from the Niger Delta, a region marked by ecological devastation, economic paradox, and persistent marginalization. The extraction of oil wealth alongside environmental degradation has produced complex tensions involving state authority, multinational corporations, and vulnerable local communities. Consequently, the Niger Delta has become a symbolic and material landscape through which issues of environmental exploitation, gender inequality, and political disenfranchisement are critically explored (Akinyemi, 2018; Ojaide, 2006).

Within this context, Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* (2006) and Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) stand as significant literary interventions. While *The Activist* foregrounds environmental degradation and collective resistance against corporate and governmental complicity, *Yellow-Yellow* examines gendered vulnerability, identity fragmentation, and the socio-cultural consequences of economic exploitation. Both novels move beyond mere representation of suffering; they construct narrative spaces where resistance, negotiation, and moral questioning unfold. Their engagement with activism whether ecological or gendered demonstrates how fiction can function simultaneously as documentation, critique, and advocacy. Despite substantial thematic analyses of these works, relatively little attention has been given to the linguistic mechanisms through which such critique is enacted. In particular,

the pragmatic dimensions of language the ways meaning is shaped by context, inference, and social intention remain underexplored in scholarship on these texts.

Pragmatics provides a valuable analytical framework for addressing this gap. Broadly understood as the study of how context influences meaning beyond literal semantics (O’Keeffe et al., 2020; Cutting & Fordyce, 2021 & Yule, 2023) pragmatics examines how utterances perform actions, imply unstated meanings, and presuppose shared knowledge. Through speech acts, implicatures, deixis, and presuppositions, literary dialogue and narration become sites of ideological positioning and social engagement. Language in this sense is not neutral description but social action: characters command, promise, accuse, lament, and resist. Implied meanings expose corruption and hypocrisy; deictic markers anchor narratives in specific cultural and ecological spaces; presuppositions encode historical and communal realities. By foregrounding these elements, a pragmatic approach reveals how the novels mobilize linguistic strategies to challenge power structures and invite ethical reflection.

This study therefore argues that pragmatic features are central rather than incidental to the activist force of *The Activist* and *Yellow-Yellow*. The novels’ capacity to critique environmental exploitation and gender marginalization depends significantly on how meaning is structured, implied, and contextualized. Through a comparative analysis, this research seeks to illuminate how linguistic choices shape reader interpretation, intensify moral engagement, and reinforce the texts’ advocacy for ecological sustainability and social justice in the Niger Delta. The objectives of this study are threefold viz:

- (1) to identify and analyze the pragmatic features employed in *The Activist* and *Yellow-Yellow*;
- (2) to examine how these features communicate social, political, and environmental concerns;
- (3) to explore how contextual factors shape interpretation and enhance reader engagement.

By integrating literary criticism with pragmatic theory, this research contributes to Nigerian literary scholarship through a linguistically grounded account of resistance and social critique, offering a comparative framework that underscores both the convergences and distinct strategies of ecological and gendered activism in contemporary Niger Delta fiction.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Pragmatics in Literary Studies

Pragmatics investigates how meaning is negotiated through context, examining the ways in which speakers convey intention, social roles, and implied meaning beyond literal words (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). In literary studies, pragmatics provides a powerful lens for understanding how characters' speech functions as social action, shaping interpersonal relationships, asserting authority, or resisting domination. For example, speech acts such as directives, commissives, and expressives allow characters to challenge power structures, make commitments, or express emotions, reflecting both individual psychology and societal norms (Mey, 2001; Charney, 1980).

Similarly, implicature enables authors to critique social injustice indirectly, allowing readers to infer moral or political commentary embedded in dialogue or narrative. Deixis situates utterances within spatial, temporal, and personal contexts, anchoring narratives in lived experience, while presupposition encodes shared cultural knowledge and assumptions, creating subtle layers of meaning that resonate with informed readers. Scholars such as Adegbiya (2021) and Eze (2019) argue that pragmatics reveals the moral, political, and emotional dimensions of texts, demonstrating that language is not merely descriptive but performative, mediating action, critique, and engagement. By foregrounding pragmatics, literary analysis gains the ability to decode the interplay between language, ideology, and cultural practice, offering insights that traditional thematic approaches may overlook.

Recent developments in literary pragmatics have further emphasized the role of context-sensitive interpretation in ideological critique and narrative positioning. Simpson (2022) argues that pragmatic stylistics enables deeper insight into power relations encoded in fictional discourse, while Chapman (2023) highlights the growing relevance of inferential processes in decoding political subtexts in contemporary literature. Similarly, Nartey and Yankson (2022) demonstrate that pragmatic frameworks such as speech act theory and relevance theory remain vital tools in uncovering implicit ideological constructions in postcolonial texts. These recent perspectives reinforce the applicability of pragmatic theory to Nigerian literary activism and justify the present study's analytical orientation.

2.2 Nigerian Literature and Socio-Environmental Activism

Nigerian literature has long served as a platform for social critique and advocacy, with writers addressing historical, political, and environmental injustices. Ojaide's *The Activist* is a prominent example, foregrounding the ecological devastation of the Niger Delta and the human consequences of oil exploitation (Diala, 2007; Edebor, 2014). The novel portrays marginalized communities grappling with polluted landscapes, disrupted livelihoods, and systemic neglect, emphasizing the ethical responsibility of both state and corporate actors. Ojaide's narrative employs both direct confrontation and nuanced linguistic strategies to expose these injustices, illustrating how literature functions as environmental advocacy. Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, on the other hand, highlights gendered oppression, focusing on women's vulnerability in patriarchal and socio-economically constrained contexts (Adesanmi, 2020; Orhero, 2015).

Through the protagonist's experiences, the novel critiques structural inequality, domestic exploitation, and societal indifference, positioning personal narrative as a microcosm of broader postcolonial challenges. Both texts reflect postcolonial realities, demonstrating that literary intervention can simultaneously document, critique, and mobilize

social consciousness. Moreover, these narratives exemplify how Nigerian writers employ character, dialogue, and contextual embedding to translate local experiences into universal socio-environmental concerns, reinforcing the relevance of pragmatics in capturing the subtleties of advocacy, persuasion, and social critique.

2.3 Pragmatics in Nigerian Literary Criticism

Despite the growing scholarly engagement with Nigerian literature, the application of pragmatic theory remains relatively underexplored. Many studies prioritize thematic, sociological, or historical readings, often neglecting the linguistic mechanisms that encode resistance, critique, or empowerment (Anyadike, 2014; Nwagbara, 2012). By contrast, a pragmatic approach emphasizes how language itself becomes a site of social action, where speech acts, implicature, deixis, and presupposition construct meaning, enforce norms, or challenge injustice. Frameworks such as Politeness Theory, Relevance Theory, and Speech Act Theory offer tools for examining how characters negotiate power, assert agency, and communicate ethical positions in context (Hookway, 2008; Pragmatics: An Introduction, 2021).

For instance, the strategic use of directives may reveal defiance against oppressive structures, while implicatures uncover hidden dimensions of corruption or marginalization that literal statements alone cannot convey. Deictic expressions and presuppositions further root narratives in specific cultural, temporal, and spatial realities, reinforcing authenticity and shaping reader engagement. By systematically applying these frameworks, this study illuminates the intricate interplay between language, ideology, and social advocacy, demonstrating that pragmatic analysis can enrich Nigerian literary criticism by uncovering layers of meaning that extend beyond thematic observation, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of how literature functions as a vehicle for socio-political and environmental engagement.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework provides the conceptual lens through which this study examines the pragmatic strategies in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* and Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*. This study draws primarily on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and complementary insights from Environmental Pragmatics.

3.1 Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

Systemic Functional Linguistics (Matthiessen & Teruya, 2024; Yu, 2026) posits that language serves ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions. In literary texts, these functions enable authors to encode social meaning, position characters, and construct thematic resonance (Webster, 2015). This study employs SFL to analyze how speech acts, deixis, implicature, and presuppositions operate to convey resistance, critique, and moral engagement in *The Activist* and *Yellow-Yellow*.

The ideational metafunction concerns the representation of experience and reality. In the selected novels, this function enables the depiction of environmental degradation, socio-political marginalization, and gendered struggles as experiential realities rather than abstract concepts. Through ideational structures, ecological destruction and feminine vulnerability are linguistically constructed as lived conditions within the Niger Delta.

The interpersonal metafunction regulates social relations and enacts interaction between speakers and audiences. This is particularly relevant to speech acts such as directives, commissives, and expressives, which negotiate authority, resistance, solidarity, and emotional stance. In both novels, interpersonal meanings reveal power hierarchies between government officials, oil corporations, local communities, and marginalized women, thereby transforming dialogue into a site of ideological contestation.

The textual metafunction organizes discourse cohesively, ensuring that messages are structured meaningfully within context. Deictic expressions, thematic progression, and presuppositional triggers contribute to textual coherence while anchoring the narrative within specific spatial, temporal, and cultural coordinates. By integrating these metafunctions, this study demonstrates that pragmatic strategies operate simultaneously at structural, interpersonal, and ideological levels, reinforcing literature as a form of social action.

3.2 Environmental Pragmatics

Building on traditional pragmatics, environmental pragmatics focuses on language as a tool for ecological advocacy. It examines how speech acts, directives, and implicatures highlight environmental crises and ethical responsibilities (Aghoghovwia, 2018; Nnolim, 2006). Ojaide's novel exemplifies this approach, using linguistic strategies to convey the ecological, social, and moral consequences of oil exploitation.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design grounded in close textual analysis. The primary data consist of purposively selected excerpts from *The Activist* and *Yellow-Yellow*. Selection criteria included passages that demonstrate explicit or implicit acts of resistance, environmental commentary, or gendered negotiation. Data analysis followed a coding procedure based on four pragmatic categories: speech acts (directives, commissives, expressives), implicature (maxim flouting), deixis (spatial, temporal, social), and presupposition (existential and factive triggers). Each excerpt was analyzed through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics, particularly its interpersonal and ideational metafunctions. The qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows in-depth interpretation of contextual meaning, inferential processes, and ideological positioning embedded within literary discourse.

5.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section of this study's theoretical discuss is divided into five sub-sections in order to highlight the relationship between the keywords. These sections are presented as follows: speech acts as resistance, implicature and critique of power, deixis and cultural anchoring, presupposition and embedded knowledge and context and reader engagement. These are further discussed and thereafter, the conclusion is drawn and some recommendations are suggested.

5.1 Speech Acts as Resistance

In *The Activist*, directives function as explicit acts of resistance against environmental injustice. For instance, the protagonist declares, "*We must defend our land before it is too late*" (Ojaide, 2006, p. xx). The modal verb *must* performs a directive speech act compelling collective responsibility. The utterance goes beyond description; it constitutes a call to mobilization. Similarly, the commissive statement, "*I will not be silent while they destroy our future*" (p. xx), reflects commitment and moral obligation. Through such commissives, language becomes a performative tool of ecological activism.

In *Yellow-Yellow*, expressive speech acts reveal gendered vulnerability. Zilayefa's lament, "*They come, they take what they want, and they leave us with nothing*" (Agary, 2006, p. xx), performs both emotional expression and indirect accusation. The utterance exposes systemic exploitation while foregrounding feminine marginalization. Thus, speech acts in both novels function as mechanisms of resistance and social accountability.

5.2 Implicature and Critique of Power

The flouting of Grice's conversational maxims generates powerful implicatures that critique systemic corruption, social inequality, and political neglect. In *The Activist*, indirect criticisms of bureaucratic inefficiency and corporate exploitation reveal injustices without overt confrontation, engaging readers in ethical reflection. In *Yellow-Yellow*, implicatures underscore patriarchal constraints and social hypocrisy, prompting readers to read between

the lines to grasp the subtle forms of oppression faced by characters. This strategy encourages active interpretation, requiring readers to infer underlying critiques, thus heightening moral engagement. Implicature serves as a pragmatic tool through which the authors negotiate sensitive social commentary, blending subtlety with persuasive force.

In *The Activist*, when government officials describe oil spills as “*minor environmental incidents*” (Ojaide, 2006), the understatement flouts the maxim of quality, generating implicature that exposes bureaucratic deception. Readers infer the severity of ecological destruction through contextual knowledge. Similarly, in *Yellow-Yellow*, Zilayefa’s observation that “*Some girls are lucky; they find men who remember them*” (Agary, 2006) implies abandonment and exploitation without explicit accusation. The implicature deepens critique of patriarchal irresponsibility.

5.3 Deixis and Cultural Anchoring

Deictic expressions in both novels anchor narratives firmly within the Niger Delta, situating readers in local spaces, temporalities, and social hierarchies. Spatial deixis maps the physical terrain of rivers, communities, and oil-impacted lands, while temporal deixis connects events to historical legacies of exploitation and activism. In *The Activist*, expressions such as “*this devastated land*” and “*our polluted rivers*” (Ojaide, 2006) employ proximal demonstratives like *this* and possessive forms like *our* to construct immediacy and collective ownership of environmental suffering. The deixis collapses distance between narrator and community, reinforcing shared responsibility and communal identity. Similarly, in *Yellow-Yellow*, spatial references such as “*here in the creeks*” (Agary, 2006) and temporal markers like “*those days when the oil men first came*” situate the narrative within a historically specific and geographically grounded context. These deictic markers do not merely locate events; they evoke memory, displacement, and socio-economic transformation.

Social deixis, reflected in modes of address and relational markers, illuminates power dynamics, gender roles, and communal ties. For instance, the use of labels such as “*oyinbo man*” in *Yellow-Yellow* (Agary, 2006, p. xx) encodes ethnic and economic hierarchies within everyday speech, while honorific or communal identifiers in *The Activist* reinforce generational and political authority. The use of Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous languages further strengthens authenticity, conveying socio-political realities and cultural identities that would be flattened in Standard English. Through deixis, both texts create immersive reading experiences that link literary narrative to lived cultural and ecological realities.

5.4 Presupposition and Embedded Knowledge

Presuppositions in the texts encode shared cultural knowledge, historical truths, and ideological positions, enabling authors to communicate complex realities implicitly. In *The Activist*, presuppositions highlight ecological degradation, corporate culpability, and diasporic engagement, framing activism as a morally and socially necessary response. For instance, the statement “*Even the children know what the oil companies have done to us*” (Ojaide, 2006) contains a factive presupposition that environmental destruction is already established and widely acknowledged within the community. The clause presupposes corporate wrongdoing as common knowledge rather than debatable opinion, thereby normalizing resistance as justified. In *Yellow-Yellow*, presuppositions foreground gendered marginalization, entrenched cultural norms, and identity struggles, implicitly critiquing systemic patriarchal structures.

Similarly, Zilayefa’s reflection that “*A girl like me does not dream too much*” (Agary, 2006) presupposes structural limitations placed on female aspiration. The expression assumes that socio-economic and gendered constraints are already operative realities, embedding inequality within everyday discourse. Another instance occurs when references are made to

“the kind of men who come to the creeks”, presupposing a shared understanding of exploitation associated with oil workers and transient relationships.

By embedding unstated truths, the authors invite readers to interpret broader systemic issues from individual interactions, transforming narrative details into instruments of social and political critique. This subtlety enriches the interpretive depth of the novels, allowing ethical and environmental concerns to resonate without didactic exposition.

5.5 Context and Reader Engagement

Cultural, socio-environmental, and situational contexts play a pivotal role in shaping interpretation and moral engagement. Both novels rely on local knowledge, historical reference, and social scripts to contextualize events, guiding readers’ understanding of ethical stakes. The use of pragmatic strategies speech acts, implicatures, deixis, and presuppositions within these contexts not only clarifies meaning but also heightens emotional resonance, intellectual engagement, and ethical reflection. By leveraging context, the texts transform literary language into a vehicle for activism, cultivating empathy, awareness, and critical consciousness. Readers are thus positioned not merely as observers but as participants in the moral and social dialogues prompted by the narratives.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the centrality of pragmatics in understanding Nigerian literary activism. By examining speech acts, implicature, deixis, and presupposition, the analysis reveals how *The Activist* and *Yellow-Yellow* communicate ecological, socio-political, and gendered concerns. Pragmatic strategies not only convey meaning but also position readers to critically engage with systemic injustices and environmental degradation. The research contributes to literary scholarship by expanding the application of pragmatics in Nigerian literature, pioneering environmental pragmatics, and offering a comparative lens for understanding divergent strategies of literary resistance. Future studies may extend this

framework to other African literary contexts, exploring how pragmatics mediates cultural, ecological, and political commentary.

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