NEGATION AS A LINGUISTIC DEVICE IN THE POETRY OF JOE USHIE

Richard Oliseyenum Maledo*
English and Literary Studies Department, Delta State, Abraka, Nigeria
&
Precious Chimuanya Mordi
English and Literary Studies Department, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

Abstract

Existing studies on the poetry of Joe Ushie have primarily focused on literary and linguistic creativity, with limited emphasis on how he employs negation as a linguistic device to convey his ecological, social, and political messages. Therefore, this article examines the use of linguistic negation in the poetry of Joe Ushie. For in-depth and rigorous textual analysis, four poems are selected from two collections of Joe Ushie for this study. This selection is purposefully based on the manifestation of linguistic negation and appropriate subject matter. The analysis is carried out at the levels of semantic, morphological and syntactic negations. Our findings reveal that negation enables Joe Ushie to emphasise absence and loss, compelling readers to confront environmental and societal deprivations, contradictions and despair. It further reveals that negation heightens emotional intensity, creates semantic contrast and establishes a critical tone. It concludes that by consistently denying, rejecting, and reversing expectations, negation has a foregrounding effect and makes prominent the expectations denied and dismissed.

Keywords: Linguistic Negation; poetry; semantic contrast; critical tone; foregrounding effect

Introduction

Poetry has always been linked to the basic structures of language. This connection shows that language is not just for communication but also a creative art form. Poetry uses morphology, syntax, phonetics, and semantics to go beyond mere information delivery. In morphology, poets often change word formation to create new words, assign new meanings, and develop a distinctive lexical style. According to Wales (2014, p. 272), "poets frequently extend the lexicon through novel compounds, neologisms, and other forms of word-formation, enriching the expressive potential of language." In phonology, a poem's musical quality relies on its thoughtful use of sound features. The manipulation

of sounds provides the raw material, shaped for artistic purposes. In syntax, poets bend grammatical rules to create emphasis. Syntactic creativity forces the reader to engage with the text more deeply, highlighting how the structure of phrases, clauses and sentences can be used as poetic tools. Lexis and semantics also play vital roles in the relationship between poetry and meaning. Poetry makes use of figurative language, symbolism and ambiguity to broaden. On symbolism, Eco (1979) refers to as "semiotic overcoding," where a text gains extra meaning through cultural convention, rhetorical repetition, or intertextuality, layering interpretation beyond its literal sense. This linguistic complexity allows poetry to capture vast human experiences in compact, nuanced forms, making an understanding of linguistic basics essential for creating and interpreting poetic works. Fowler (1986, p.25) states that "literature does not simply reflect the world but is constructed through specific linguistic choices." Therefore, poetry and linguistics overlap, where language serves as both the medium and subject of artistic innovation. When exploring the connection between poetry and language, it becomes clear that language is more than a communication tool. It is a rich system that poets use to achieve their creative aims. Halliday (1978, p.112) states, "language functions ideationally to construct reality, interpersonally to negotiate relationships, and textually to organise discourse." Beyond aesthetics, a writer's choice of language, slang, or style builds social identity and context. By manipulating language, poets create unique perspectives and voices. Miall and Kuiken (2021, p. 9) affirm that "defamiliarisation in literature disrupts automatic perception, fostering deeper emotional and cognitive engagement." This idea, first proposed by the Russian formalist Shklovsky (1917/1965), shows how literary language interrupts everyday language to enhance perception and encourage deeper interpretation. Simpson (2014) emphasises the role of language in highlighting ideas, power structures, and identity within texts. This perspective makes language a tool for artistic expression and a platform for engaging critically with broad human experiences and social truths, linking text, culture, and power.

One contemporary Nigerian poet who exemplifies the creative interplay between literature and language is Joe Ushie. His use of language draws attention and engages readers actively. Ushie is known for his inventive use of language, exploration of socio-political and cultural themes, and a unique poetic style that mixes African oral tradition with modern literary techniques. In African literature, especially Nigerian poetry, Ushie's works deal with themes that reflect the complexities of Nigeria. He explores human experience, cultural identity, African spirituality, social issues, human rights, social justice, ecological concerns, and protest literature. His wide-ranging themes, artistic depth, and innovative style make his contributions significant to both African and global literary traditions. His poems stand out for their unique structures, roots in oral tradition and folklore, vivid imagery, symbolism, inventive language, personal and collective voice, free verse, and varying line lengths. Given these points, this study analyses negation as a trope of meaning in selected poems by Joe Ushie. Through the lens of negation as a linguistic device, the study aims to show how Ushie expresses his themes

and enriches his poetic style, particularly addressing harsh realities in Nigeria, such as environmental issues, poor governance, marginalisation, political oppression, economic challenges, and cultural displacement.

Negation in Linguistics

From a linguistic point of view, negation is hard to define and describe compared to affirmation. Most existing discussions are affected by traditional philosophical issues (Downing, 1997). What is clear is that negation exists in all natural languages. It is a feature that rejects the truth of a statement (Maledo & Igbomeme, 2020). "Negating a proposition reverses its truth value" (Huddleston, 1988, p. 143). Since all languages can express negation, it is a crucial part of language and thought. It allows us to deny, contradict, oppose, or indicate the absence of something. According to Horn and Wansing (2017), negation introduces opposition, creating a distinction between what is affirmed and what is denied. As a linguistic variable, negation acts as opposition to affirmative sentences. Gibbons and Whiteley (2018) observe that negation is typically understood in relation to affirmative constructions. It is sometimes called negative polarity in contrast to positive polarity. Horn (2001) considers negation one of the key functions in language, used universally across all languages to show the opposite or absence of a concept. Hulse (2010) notes that we can define negation in various ways in English. It is an abstract concept that shows some form of contradiction or opposition. This can occur grammatically or semantically, realised through a grammatical structure or specific process. Negation is fascinating in languages because, according to Zeijlstra (2004, p.1), it appears in every language worldwide; it can be conveyed or understood in different ways; it interacts with many other language features; and finally, it reveals various syntactic and semantic mechanisms.

As a grammatical construction, negation contradicts a statement or concept. One function of negation is its ability to let speakers reverse the truth value of an affirmative statement. A statement has a truth value of either true or false. Negation acts as a tool that reverses a statement's truth value. If an affirmative sentence is true, its negated version will be false, and vice versa. This binary opposition offers a framework for making distinctions in communication. Negation is deeply embedded in all human languages, although the ways of expressing it can differ greatly across languages.

We can categorise the occurrence of negation at different linguistic levels into three areas: syntactic, morphological, and semantic negations. Syntactic negation is the most common form in English, mainly realised with negative markers like "no" and "not," along with contracted forms such as "isn't" to negate verbs. Quirk et al. (1985) note that this type of negation is generally straightforward, involving an auxiliary verb followed by a negation marker. Various negative words express syntactic negation. According to

Horn (1989), these words carry a negative meaning and negate the sentence or clause without the need for additional negation markers. Examples include nouns like nowhere, nothing, none, nought; pronouns like nobody and no one; adverbs like never; and conjunctions like nor. Morphological negation happens at the lexical level by adding negative morphemes or affixes. These modifications change the meanings of base words. Booij (2007) mentions that morphological negation is often discussed in relation to word formation processes, exploring how it interacts with other morphological processes like compounding and derivation. Morphological negation is particularly productive in languages with rich morphological systems, allowing speakers and learners to use affixes on many words that contrast truth conditions. Semantic negation refers to the meaning aspect of negation that focuses on inherently negative words. It addresses how negation interacts with the meanings of words and sentences, influencing truth conditions, inferences, and implications. Givón (1979) calls this category "inherent negation." This study follows this classification.

Negation in Stylistics
Negation is a very valuable linguistic tool in the stylistic analysis of texts. According to Gibbons and Whiteley (2018), negation as an approach to stylistics explores how particular stylistic elements in language shape readers' interpretation, emotional engagement, and response to literary text. Gibbons and Whiteley merge cognitive and literary stylistics to provide a lens through which negation is not just a linguistic denial tool, but a mental and interpretative mechanism. This is based on the idea that negation disrupts mental processing and shapes engagement and interpretative effort from readers by introducing concepts of denial, absence or opposition in discourse structure. They see negation as a grammatical construct and a stylistic interpretative mechanism. In analysing poetry, negation serves complex stylistic and ideological functions. Such as negation and foregrounding, negation and attention, and negation and cognition (Gibbons & Whiteley, 2018).

In negation and foregrounding, negation is recognised as a foregrounding device that makes certain aspects of a text more prominent. This foregrounding effect indirectly shapes meaning and guides the reader's perception and interpretation. Negation constitutes a foregrounding feature that departs from expected norms and draws attention to its meaning-making role in poems. It is a grammatical construct and a stylistic interpretative mechanism. By negating an expectation, attention is drawn to the non-negated alternative, making it more prominent and stylistically significant. For negation and attention, they argue that negation plays a central role in spotlighting certain concepts and shaping salience through reversal and denial. Negation and attention highlight that negation triggers contrastive mental imagery; this attention diversion implicates how readers judge. In poetry, these attentional deviations ultimately affect how the unsaid or denied are charged. Negation and cognition are grouped as part of cognitive stylistics, and it is argued that negation functions cognitively and triggers a mental picture of what is being denied; that is, the mind must imagine a concept to negate it. Lakoff's (2005)

analysis of American politics reaffirms that it is hard for readers not to think of an elephant because the instruction "don't think" serves to foreground "an elephant", the object it negates. Moreover, the cognitive impact of negation in the literature highlights oppression, resistance, loss, and denial. In protest poetry like the poetry of Joe Ushie, negation can reflect suppressed voices and unseen realities; this invites the readers to construct an imagined silenced world.

Empirical Review

The main concerns of modern Nigerian poetry are the twin post-colonial issues of human survival amidst bad governance by post-colonial rulers and the environmental challenges of preserving the ecosystem. As a prominent voice in contemporary Nigerian poetry, Joe Ushie has effectively portrayed these concerns in his poetic engagements. Therefore, Bassey and Omagu (2018) utilise an eco-critical approach to explore the connection between environmental and social issues in Joe Ushie's poetry. The study concentrates on the use of imagery and symbolism to depict environmental degradation and its impact on communities. It argues that Ushie's poetry acts as a platform to raise awareness about pollution, deforestation, and climate change, and to connect art with activism. The study offers insights into how environmental issues are intertwined with political corruption and social inequality on a larger scale. Aboh (2024) also explores the theme of eco-consciousness in Ushie's poetry through the lens of Bette-Bendi's indigenous epistemology. He explores how Ushie's poetry reflects the indigenous perspective on environmental balance and sustainability, portraying the relationship between humans and the environment. Aboh opines that Ushie's poetry takes a seat in the growing body of ecological literature that addresses environmental issues through artistic expression.

Through hydro-criticism, Enukora and Okolo (2021) examine the use of water imagery in Joe Ushie's poetry. This theoretical approach examines the cultural and symbolic significance of water and ecology in literature. The study examines how water is utilised as a multifaceted tool to address cultural identity, sociopolitical challenges, and environmental degradation. It argues that Ushie's use of water symbolism is a powerful tool for criticising environmental injustice, cultural protection, and advocating ecological conservation. The finding reveals that water imagery embodies both life and destruction, reflecting its dual nature in the ecosystem and socioeconomic contexts. Orhero and Okon (2021) examine the use of animal imagery and symbolism in Ushie's poetry. The study focuses on Ushie's unique poetry style, arguing that his poetry draws heavily from African oral tradition, where animals serve as metaphors for human behaviour and how these symbols reflect societal and environmental issues, and human conditions and emotions. It further explores how Ushie creatively blends modern literary techniques with traditional African symbolism, weaving a meaningful narrative that resonates with local and international audiences. Focusing on the "Civan" metaphor, representing a militant principle dedicated to war and conflict in Africa, Tsaaior (2012) looks at how Ushie's poetry addresses themes of conflict, war, and post-colonial African experience.

He explains that Ushie critiques the "Civan" and aspires for peaceful coexistence, which he claims is vital for Africa's progress and development. This study is based on the collection *Eclipse in Rwanda*, which is noted for its thematic vision and depth, navigating the chaos of Africa's post-colonial condition.

Agyo and Bassey (2025) focus on the portrayal of environmental exploitation and its consequences in Joe Ushie's collection *Hill Songs.* The study discusses how Ushie implements vivid imagery, metaphors, irony, and sensory language to exhibit the decaying relationship between humans and the environment. The study shows that Ushie contrasts nostalgic recollections of a peaceful past with current environmental degradation as he underscores the effects of human greed.   It concludes that Ushie's eco-poetic is a wake-up call, urging the preservation and protection of the environment for future generations.

In exploring the linguistic structures of Ushie's poems, Edung (2020) employs a semio-stylistic approach to demonstrate how Ushie crafts his poetry to textual patterns to contribute to his poems' overall aesthetics and meaning. The study argues that Ushie's semio-stylistic approach enriches the poems and serves as an artistic expression. The study provides a comprehensive understanding of Ushie's poetry, noting that by blending semiotics and stylistics, Ushie transcends traditional linguistic boundaries, challenging readers and provoking thought. Udoinwang and Akpan (2023) analyse the use of language, vivid imagery, and thematic concerns in Ushie's poems to show his activism in addressing governance, corruption, and inequality. It explores the "muse" concept, suggesting that Ushie's inspiration stems from lived experiences in marginalised communities and sociopolitical environments. The study suggests that this muse is a driving force in Ushie's creative thought process. Furthermore, the study comments on Ushie's stylistic experimentation and linguistic techniques that enhance the impact of Ushie's poetry, making it aesthetically compelling.

Aboh (2010) explores how Ushie incorporates loan words from indigenous languages into his English poetry to assert political themes and cultural identity. The study reveals that the deliberate use of lexical borrowing serves purposes like critiquing the sociopolitical landscape of Nigeria and reinforcing ethnic heritage. He argues that these lexical terms enrich the linguistic texture of his poetry and challenge the dominance of colonial languages, promoting a more inclusive representation of Nigerian identities. He concludes that Ushie's linguistic strategy highlights the complex relationship between politics, language, and culture, showing how poetic expressions function as powerful tools for personal and collective identity construction. In a similar vein, Maledo (2021) focuses on Ushie's use of morpho-lexical creativity to project social and political messages in his poetry. The study observes that Ushie employs morpho-lexical experimentations in his lexical creativity to create unusual expressions that not only enrich poetic meaning but also critique governance, corruption, and societal struggles, reflecting Ushie's disappointment with the status quo. The study concludes by emphasising that Ushie's nonce formation portrays the evolving nature of Nigerian

English, suggesting that this lexical creativity provides insights into how African writers can extend the stylistic and lexical scope of the English language.

Exploring the phonesthetic devices such as meter, alliteration, consonance, rhyme, intonation, assonance, repetition, and onomatopoeia in Ushie's poetry, Ubong, and Ekpema (2024) examine the contribution of sounds in meaning-making and how it creates emotional impact on readers. The findings of the study reveal that these phonesthetic devices are not decorative items but reinforce the themes in the selected poems and the artistic quality of Joe Ushie's poetry. By blending sounds with meaning, Ushie invokes a multi-sensory effect that interests readers to engage more deeply with his works. Ufot (2021) examines Ushie's poetry by applying discourse stylistics, a linguistic analysis of discourse studies, to appreciate Ushie's poetic techniques. The study analyses the linguistic and rhetorical strategies and how they shape meaning, ideology, and reader engagement. It argues that these techniques compel readers to confront uncomfortable truths. From the above, it is obvious that the poetry of Joe Ushie has received a good number of attentions from both literary and linguistic perspectives. However, it appears that not much has been done from the perspective of negation as a linguistic stylistic device. Hence, the relevance of this study.

Methodology

This study is in the realm of linguistic stylistics, a subdiscipline of applied linguistics. It adopts a critical textual analytic method. For a detailed and in-depth analysis, the data for the study consists of four poems selected from two poetry collections of Joe Ushie. The poems are "Hill song" and "The African Mosquito" from *Hill Songs* (2004) and "Ábuja" and "Bat echoes" from *Lambs at the Shrine* (2005). This selection is purposefully based on the manifestation of appropriate features of negation with related ecological, social and political messages. The poems are analysed one after the other by extracting linguistic features of the texts, which manifest appropriate syntactic, morphological and semantic negations. They are analysed by relating them to the ecological, social and political context of the poems.

Data Analysis and Discussions

"Hill Songs" (*Hill Songs*, pp. 9-12) is a long poem of sixteen stanzas, celebrating the beauty of the poet's homeland and rich tradition, which has been depleted due to destructive human ecological activities. In the poem, Ushie emphasises the symbiotic relationship between man and nature, highlighting how destructive human activities adversely affect the environment. Through his poetry, Ushie advocates for environmental consciousness and social change, urging readers to recognise the interconnectedness of humanity and the natural world. The word *"forgotten"* in the first line of stanza four semantically negates the opposite state of being remembered. It negatively describes "the ridges" as forgotten, which carries an absence of beauty or green. It triggers a mental image of an abandoned but enduring ridge. The use of *"forgotten"* conveys a neglected

ecological heritage and highlights human disregard and nature's enduring state. "Axe" and "flame" are semantically lexicalised as symbolic agents of environmental destruction. "Axe" is a negative symbol of machinery used to hew the flora and fauna of the environment, while "flame" is a negative symbol of the burnouts of the oil exploration companies in the Niger Delta region, the home of the poet. The reversative prefix attached to "dressed" negates the word morphologically. Thus, "undressed" foregrounds environmental destruction by presenting nature in terms of human vulnerability. It has a foregrounding effect as it focuses attention on the violence of deforestation, and readers are made to visualise a hill stripped bare and ashamed. The word "nude" semantically reinforces "undressed". It deepens the negation into not lacking clothes but being entirely exposed. Likening the hills to a naked body foregrounds ecological violence, and the readers imagine a scorched hill stripped of its dignity and standing helpless before human gaze. Together, "undressed" and "nude" aid in the poem's lament of environmental destruction, and this stylistic use of negation shifts readers' attention from mere descriptors to ecological protest.

Environmental despoliation is further foregrounded by the use of a semantically negative verb, "gone", in stanza thirteen:

> With the wind is your grace gone
> With the wind is your awe gone
> With the wind is your groves gone

The refrain-like parallelistic repetition in the above stanza underscores the poet's lamentation of the defoliation of the grace, awe and groves of the environment. The verb gone semantically reminds us of what used to be and which is no more. It calls forth a cognitive effect of what is lost in the subconscious of readers. The nature of this loss and destruction is further described through morphological negation in the next stanza, thus:

> It came unnoticed this greed-fanned flame
> It came unnoticed this greed-clad axe
> It came unnoticed this greed-brewed death

In the word "unnoticed", the negative prefix *un-* means not. Its use and repetition in a parallel syntactic manner underscores the fact that the aborigines were taken unaware at the arrival of the agents of environmental despoliation. It creates a parallel syntactic and semantic structure. The morphologically negative compound words "greed-fanned", "greed-clad", and "greed-brewed" pre-modifying "flame", "axe", and "death", respectively, underscore greed as the prime motivation behind the environmental violence in the Niger Delta region. The idea of arrival ("It came") and the negative notion of absence ("unnoticed") create cognitive dissonance. Readers are prompted to infer why these significant events ("greed-fanned flame", "greed-clad axe", and "greed-brewed death") were unnoticed.

The semantically negative words "wither", "bare", "burnt", "go" ("so soon"), and the syntactic negative adverb, "no more", in stanzas fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, and nineteen, semantically negate "world of my bloom", "hills of my bloom", "streams of my bloom", "trees of my bloom", and "birds of my bloom" in each stanza respectively. Each of these negators evokes a vivid picture of a loss of vitality or life cut short. "Wither" and "bare" provoke a world and a hill stripped of vegetation and trees, "burnt streams" suggests poisoning of the water bodies with blowouts from oil explorations, trees and "go so soon" is suggestive of fleeting disappearance of the flora and fauna and excessive and premature lumbering activities while birds that sings "no more" underscores the poisoning of the air with arsenic chemicals from oil exploitation and exploration. These negative expressions collectively echo the larger lament of ecological devastation in the poem and the destruction of nature in society.

Again, in "The African Mosquito" (*Hill Songs*, p. 13), Ushie emphasises the concerns of the Niger Delta. "Mosquito" in the title of the poem is inherently negative, as it is an insect that feeds on human blood. As an insect, the mosquito embodies destruction. It negates comfort, freedom, and peace. In African ecology, the mosquito is a harbinger of pain, unrest, irritation, and malaria. Thus, readers are led to imagine a tormentor hovering and piercing the skin. In the poem, the mosquito is a symbol of exploitation and represents the multinational oil companies. It uses the mosquito as a critique of oil companies that suck oil the way mosquitoes suck human blood, while the poor masses suffer from pollution and economic marginalisation. Like mosquitoes draining human blood and causing malaria, the oil companies extract oil from the land, leaving it dry and unproductive for crops and causing inhabitants to become malnourished and devastated. Similar to a mosquito departing the human body with drained blood, the oil companies leave each night with wells of oil, leaving the communities in ruin.

In the last line of stanza one, the words "hollow", "graft", "indifferent", "wails', and "weals" are inherently negative in meaning. "Hollow" implies emptiness and deafness among the inhabitants of the region as a result of the activities of the oil companies. "Graft", which the exploiters demand, implies corruption and illicit profit. The lexical items "wails" and "weals" negate the expected state of peace and joy while conveying grief, suffering, and protest. "Wails" is an audible expression of sorrow; its intensity is louder than ordinary sobs and weeping, demanding the reader's attention. A "wail" cannot be imagined without its piercing and haunting sound. In the context of the poem, "wails" reflect the cries and voices of the exploited and peasants under attack from the oil companies. "Weals" are wounds on the surface of the flesh caused by a stroke from a rod or whip. Thus, they underscore the impact of oil exploration on the human community. This creates a mental dissonance between the expected benefits for the aborigines of the Niger Delta from oil exploration and the wounds inflicted upon them by the oil companies. "Indifferent" summarises the stance of the multinational oil companies: unconcerned and uninterested. The words "wounds", "raids", and "fallow" semantically evoke the ideology of war in the region by the oil explorers. "Wounds" represent destruction and injuries; they are inherently negative, indicating pain and damage while

denying well-being. Instead of describing it as a simple bite, Ushie elevates it to "wounds", forcing readers to envisage war-like injuries. "Raids" negatively depict the activities of the oil companies in the region as invasions in war, while "hollow" suggests the aftermath of war, as the region is left inactive, undeveloped, and desolate.

Painting the picture of a conquered territory by the oil companies is presented through another set of semantically negative lexical items in stanza four:

> And into some grove and cranny
> You flee, far far from here
> Across the hills and loaded with the loot

The use of "flee" in this context suggests running away or escaping, while repeating "far" to collocate with "here" creates a mental image of a distant place, far removed from the home where the oil is produced. And "loot", as used, signifies goods seized from enemies through violence following the plundering of a place during war or other forms of aggression. Thus, the Niger Delta region has been invoked, as the use of negation as a stylistic device can reveal.

In stanza seven, "Strengthless" is a morphologically negative lexical item. Its use conceptualises a mental image of strength that is then removed; only emptiness and absence remain. Additionally, the verb "bar" in the same stanza is inherently negative, meaning to prevent, deny access, or block something. In the poem, it semantically negates the natural right to sleep. Using the word "bar" alongside "strengthless" highlights the mosquito's disruptive power. This captures the reader's attention and highlights the absence of peaceful sleep. It evokes a mental image of millions of sleepless eyes wide open in the dark, kept awake by the buzzing of mosquitoes. Overall, the poem's message uses 'bar' to dramatise how something insignificant can exercise dominance over human life and reflects neglect of health and the environment, letting the "mosquito" bar not only "sleep" but also comfort, stability, and progress.

The syntactic fronting and repetition of "strengthless" in a parallelistic form, along with the repeated use of the conjunction "yet" in stanza seven, highlight the apparent power of the "strengthless mosquito". Aside from its role in depriving sleep, it personifies "Death", which is feared as depicted in the last line of stanza seven. The semantically negative term "death" appears in two forms here: "Death" (metaphorically representing the oil explorers), which is a force more terrifying and greater than death itself, and is stronger than ordinary death. For the poet, Death (symbolising the oil companies) kills before the normal death occurs. This reflects the fate of the people of the Niger Delta. Ultimately, this Death is conveyed in a more semantically negative phrase in the first line of the final stanza: "African tyrant of the dark". Therefore, the African mosquito in the title of the poem is ultimately identified as Death and as the African tyrant of the dark, who has waged war against the flora and fauna of the Niger Delta region.

"Abuja" (*Lambs at the Shrine*, p. 15) is a politically charged poem that critiques Nigeria's capital as a symbol of corruption and social alienation. Ushie presents "Abuja" not merely as a geographical location but as a metaphor for power, wealth, and the privileged class, disconnected from the suffering of less privileged Nigerians. In the poem, the morphologically negative compound word, "blast-famous", combines two contradictory concepts: "blast", which signifies destruction, noise, bombing and catastrophe, and "famous", which connotes glory, recognition, or prestige. The semantic conflict inherent in the two words negates the idea of being famous in a noble sense and instead suggests infamy through destructive means. This depicts how Abuja's fame is tainted, evoking a mental image of a city known for unrest, destruction, and explosions. In the poem, "blast-famous" undermines the superficial narrative of "Abuja" as a fairy-tale city, revealing the stark contrast between its idealised image and its actual reality.

Stanza two depicts Abuja both in the past and the present. Abuja of the past is unspoiled, while Abuja of the present is fragmented. "Unspoiled" is formed by adding the prefix *un-*, meaning not, to "spoiled" to indicate something that is not spoiled. Therefore, stating that Abuja of the past is "unspoiled" suggests that Abuja of the present is spoiled, creating a mental image of a degraded, overrun landscape. Consequently, the word "minced," meaning subdivided, carries a negative connotation in this context. It highlights the poet's critique of dividing Abuja into various areas and districts to serve the interests of the political elites, without regard for ordinary Nigerians, especially the impoverished original inhabitants of Abuja.

In stanza three, the poet tells us that new building plans from France, Britain, America or Japan are erected in Abuja each day. And in the rest of the poems, he tells the occupant of those buildings through the use of syntactic negation:

> But, in these structures, you do not find
> that navvy hanging out of an open truck like a
> roosting bat, but who has just been sloughed
> from these nooks and crannies which,
> Only yesterday, were his workplace.
> You do not find, in a house in this
> heart of our wonderland, that displaced
> Gwari who, her load loud on her shoulder,
> scavenges for food on the waste-heaps
> behind NICON NOGA or Sheraton hotels

In the above, "do not find" is repeated twice. The syntactic negator, "not", is attached to the auxiliary verb "do" to negate the lexical verb "find". In the cognitive mental process, to say something does not exist, one must first of all imagine the existence of such an object before one can conceptualise its nonexistence. Thus, in the context of this poem, the negative expression "You do not find" tells us that the peasants, the labourers, the ordinary Nigerian labourers and the aborigine Gwaris who were displaced and dislodged from those places are not the ones living there now. It foregrounds the fact that the top

military class and the politicians are the occupants. This underscores the social inequality and negates the status of Abuja as a symbol of unity. Likening the labourers to a "roosting bat" is an instance of semantic negation. Bat is inherently negative in meaning, and it is linked to witchcraft among the Ibibio people of southern Nigeria (Sieradzki & Mikkola, 2022). Thus, it paints a negative picture of Nigerian peasants of Abuja. These instances of negation reveal Abuja as an artificial wonderland, highlighting how images of oppression, displacement, and scavenging are always present, even when denied.

Furthermore, the verb "scavenges" is inherently negative, while "waste-heaps" is an instance of morphological negation via compounding. The former implies poverty and negates wealth and decent livelihood; by extension, the latter negates wealth and abundance. These negative words foreground incongruity and create a linguistic clash on the unappealing disparity of luxury hotels on one hand and a woman rummaging through the garbage on the other hand. "Scavenges" and "waste-heaps" highlight the marginalisation of the Gwari people from their ancestral home as they are reduced to scavengers. These negative words depict how symbols of modernity (infrastructure and hotels) co-exist with poverty.

In stanza seven, "nor", "tar-dazed" and "pendulum" are instances of syntactic, morphological and semantic negations, respectively. In denying the existence of "graduate applicants" living in Abuja mansions, the poets affirm that those who live there are the political and the military class who greedily amass the country's wealth for themselves and their immediate family. The morphologically compound "tar-dazed" negatively describes the chopped-off shoes of the job seekers in the streets of Abuja with no luck. The collocation of "tar-dazed" and "pendulum" underscores the trekking up and down the city aimlessly, with no hope of getting a job, irrespective of their level of education.

"Crazy" is a semantic negative word that negates rationality, sanity or balance and implies the absence of sensibility. In the poem, *"crazy"* foregrounds the tension between the ideal of democracy and its chaotic reality and evokes a mental image of political disorder and shouting crowds. It highlights the disconnect between the centre of political power (Abuja) and the lived democratic experience in other regions. Abuja is portrayed as a sanitised bubble, shielded from the crazy struggles of democratic voices in places far away. The word *"surrender"* implies the absence of resistance. The shift from "loud yesterday" to *"surrender…to our currency today"* foregrounds the tension between past and present; this contrast captures attention. An image of loud defiant voices now falling silent as though conquered is conjured. In the poem, the semantic negative term *"surrender"* shows how the dominance of money suppresses genuine democratic voices of ordinary people and shows Abuja as a place that silences authenticity and replaces it with currency-driven politics. People's voices are not simply faded but are bought.

The terms *"favellas"* and *"ghettos"* mean poverty and exclusion; they negate wealth. These semantic negative words foreground the fake illusion of Abuja and its surrounding slums, and evoke an image of dirty roads, cramped shacks, and deprivation surrounding polished city walls. "Favellas" and *"Ghetto"* convey the message of poverty and destroy

the image of prosperity surrounding Abuja. The expressions *"austere"* and *"ascetic voice"* are another instance of semantic negation in the poem. These words negate comfort, abundance and luxury.   *"Austere"* and *"ascetic voice"* present the poor settlement and the deprived voices far from Abuja's grandeur.

Abuja is further described as a disorganised and disoriented city in the last stanza of the poem, thus:

> Here in the heart of this wonderland
> you lie, wearing round you, Suleja,
> Karimo, Karu, Gwagwa, Gwagwalada,
> Nyanya, Masaka and Mpape like
> rags wrapped round a golden pillar.

The word "rags" is semantically negative. It denies the expected grandeur that should surround Abuja (Nigeria's capital city) and negates wealth, beauty and dignity. It foregrounds Abuja's disorganisation by disrupting the expectation of beauty and wealth, and readers imagine Abuja with its gleaming monuments surrounded by shabby and disorganised settlements. "Rags" semantically carries a message of critique, while the intended city to represent unity is surrounded by poverty, slums and societal marginalisation, showing the grandeur of Abuja to only be superficial, undermined by the poverty that clings to it.

In "Bat Echoes" (*Lambs at the Shrine*, p.19), the bat in the poem's title inherently carries a negative connotation. It is used metaphorically to reflect on the plight of black people worldwide, subjected to unjust discrimination and segregation. The bat is a unique creature that feeds, vomits, excretes, and procreates through its mouth; it is the only animal that rests upside down; and it shares teeth with other animals while having wings like birds. These traits are semantically negative, and the bat rhetorically questions in the first four stanzas why such a fate should befall it among all of God's creatures. In the fifth stanza, the poet links the bat's fate to that of the young black man, as the echoes of the bat's queries pierce his heart, leading him to ask why black people are subjugated everywhere across the world. In the remaining stanzas, the poet questions, through the use of negation as a stylistic feature, why blacks are marginalised and subjugated.

In stanza six, the poet focuses on racial segregation in America, specifically in Los Angeles, which is derived from the Spanish word "The Angels". The noun "angel" refers to a spiritual being, often seen as a messenger of God. Here, Ushie creatively coins "angel-less" through morphological suffixation to negate the noun "angel" to mean "without angels". The juxtaposition of "angel-less" with Los Angeles, a city whose name means "The Angels", introduces a contrast, calling attention to the moral and spiritual vacuum the poet associates with racial violence in the city. This is with reference to the racial subjugation and abuse of the rights of blacks in America. An instance here is Rodney King, a black American, who suffered police brutality at the hands of the Los Angeles Police Department on March 3rd, 1991. After being tried on allegations of using

excessive force, four of the implicated cops were ultimately found not guilty. This led to the 1992 riot in Los Angeles, which was caused by racial minorities' indignation about the trial's outcome. This unexpected negation compels a mental image of what is denied, angelic presence, thus triggering a cognitive image of racial injustice and segregation. This negation draws the reader's focus, disrupts semantic expectations, and evokes a mental representation of absence angels, godliness, in a city of "Angels".

The Rodney King episode and its likes are what the poet describes as an "ungoing scar" in the world's forehead". "Ungoing" is formed morphologically through prefixation with a homophonic relation with "ongoing". Meanwhile, why "ongoing" means continuing, "ungoing" has a negative semantic implication. *Un-* as a prefix is usually attached to adjectives and participles, and it means "not" or "the converse of" (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 2540). In this context, it means that racial abuse, the type suffered by Rodney King, is still permanent, not going away. It construes a mental image of a scar, a wound or a trauma that refuses to heal. This negation activates what is denied, thereby intensifying the reader's engagement. "Eyeless Polyphemus" is an instance of semantic negation. Polyphemus is an eyeless savage and man-eating giant in the ninth book of the *Odyssey.* Attributing these negative features to Los Angeles shows the racial depravity in the city. Its effect is to highlight institutional blindness and neglect of racial injustice.

Stanza seven focuses on the apartheid regime in South Africa, where the South African blacks are haunted by the whites and their dogs. Here, the poet presents three scenarios in the apartheid prone country: "bare-footed black", "helmeted policeman", and "humanised alsatian dog". The compound word "bare-footed", modifying "black", is negative morphologically. It means ordinary and unprotected. Helmeted modifies policeman to indicate protection, while an ordinary dog is described as humanised, thus psychologically and ideologically dehumanising the black man in South Africa. Life for the youths in Lagos is negatively described as "agonising". This is formed through suffixation by adding the *-ing* suffix to the noun agony to mean "with reference to". And the high-brow areas of the city – Allen Avenue, Victoria Island and Ikoyi - are semantically "alien", a noun with an inherent negative semantic implication. This again underscores segregation even among the blacks in a city like Lagos.

The ethnic abuse and carnivorous nature of man in war-torn Somalia and Liberia are equally represented in stanza nine. "Feast on human flesh", "felled by fire", and "swells the vultures" are semantically negative by virtue of their collocational relation. And they foreground human cannibalism. The lexical items "dwindled", "violated Maori" and "murdered" are inherently negative to project racial abuse. Dwindled is morphologically formed from dwindle with the addition of the past tense -ed morpheme to indicate that the depreciation of the quality of young black's lives is not recent. The lexical item violated is also formed from the verb violate by adding the *-ed* tense morpheme to mean irrelevance or disrespect. The Maoris are described as "violated" because they have long been marginalised and disadvantaged socially and economically, and they are concentrated in areas of unskilled employment in New Zealand. And the word murdered

formed from murder is an instance of semantic negation. Nothing can be worse than man's inhumanity and marginalisation than when children are being killed to honour a few people in power. This pattern is repeated in stanza eleven, where children, in the Central African Republic, are referred to as "minced meat in saucers / to brighten the gloomy mood of the emperor, where gloomy is inherently negative in meaning and minced meat is contextually negative too.

Conclusion

This study has examined the use of negation as a linguistic device in selected poems of Joe Ushie. The study has shown that the poet richly explores semantic, syntactic and morphological negations. It evokes a multifaceted response from readers of Ushie's poetry. Negation provokes intellectual curiosity, inviting readers to consider the inherent meaning of words and concepts. Morphological negation in Ushie's poetry, for instance, forces readers to pause, reinterpret, and engage deeply and provoke robust responses from readers. The study has further shown that negation enables the poet to capture readers' attention and to evoke vivid mental imagery, and that negative expressions are as informative, expressive, and relevant as positive choices. Negation functions as a key linguistic resource to project the poet's disapproval of ecological neglect and existential despair, while advancing Ushie's broader thematic concerns of social criticism, memory, resistance, and human vulnerability. The has demonstrated that negation is central to Ushie's poetic craft, shaping meaning, intensifying emotion, and reinforcing thematic depth. Our findings reveal that Joe Ushie's use of negation as a linguistic device enables him to emphasise absence and loss, compelling readers to confront environmental and societal deprivations, contradictions and despair. It further reveals that negation in poetry also heightens emotional intensity, creates semantic contrast and establishes a critical tone. The study also shows that by consistently denying, rejecting, and reversing expectations, the use of negations goes a long way to foreground and make prominent the expectations denied and rejected. The deliberate subversion of expectations by negating what is typically affirmed creates a feeling of loss, disquiet, bittersweet nostalgia, and melancholy, prompting readers to feel the weight of the absence as familiar ideas are deconstructed. It also produces a dynamic tension in the poetic structure and a spectacular aesthetic, pushing readers to explore multiple layers of interpretation and appreciate language's complexity.

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