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Disappearance of the Nile:
Storytelling and environmental awareness

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Abstract

This paper tries to assert the importance of storytelling in increasing the environmental awareness of children, thus building a society that has more care and respect for nature. The first part of the title of the paper is inspired by an Arabic children story entitled *Disappearance of the Nile* written and illustrated by Rania Hussein Amin (Maktabet El'osra, 2007). The field of ecolinguistics is used here to discuss the great effect language may have on ecosystems.

Amin's *Disappearance of the Nile* (2007) starts with narrating the history of the Nile since the era of the pharaohs. She gives a very beautiful image of the Nile at that time illustrated by colourful drawings. She shows how the pharaohs used to treat the Nile with care and respect. She personifies the river: "the Nile was happy because he was kept clean. Anyone who tries to throw something into its water gets severely punished." (p. 6). Then, Amin shifts to the present showing us the drastic difference between how the Nile used to look like and how it turned to be now. Then one day, the Egyptians woke up to find that the Nile has totally disappeared. She gives voice to the Nile that speaks to people telling them how he was mistreated and he had to go away.

Through this paper, the problem of the Nile in Egypt is discussed from an ecolinguistic perspective. The paper investigates how storytelling can be utilised in raising the children's environmental awareness. It also shows the power of language in changing our future to a better one. The paper also sheds light on the use of multiple modes of communication.

Keywords: The Nile, ecolinguistics, storytelling, environmental awareness, the power of language, multimodality

1. Introduction

The urge to write this paper is the calamity of shortage of water we are about to face in Egypt. Professor Terry Gifford gave us a very effective image from the Titanic film; "while people were busy partying and having fun, they couldn't notice the iceberg in the horizon." (Academic Research Circle Talk). Our iceberg in Egypt now is the problem of the Nile. For years, Egyptians took the Nile for granted, not knowing or considering that one day we may be facing an iceberg in the horizon threatening our life.

Raising the environmental awareness of people in general and children in particular is a crucial issue. The child is a building block of a society. Storytelling is one of the most effective methods of teaching at a very early stage. Through telling or reading stories, you can give children indirect lessons and values. It can create an everlasting memory.

Lucarevschi (2016) states that many studies claim that "… effectiveness of storytelling relies on the fact that it is fun, engaging and highly memorable, raising learners' interest in listening to stories, as well as in speaking, writing and reading about them" (p. 23). He adds that "… storytelling had a strong power to hold students' attention and encourage them to actively participate in oral and written activities related to the story they heard" (p. 24).

This paper investigates the importance of storytelling as a very effective pedagogical tool used for promotion of values through entertainment. As an adult, I still remember the stories we were told while we were young children. I learned that I should not lie, not through direct teaching, but rather through the story of "The Shepherd and his Goats[1]". Callahan (2015) states that "[t]he features of a story help us remember much more than just facts alone". Willis (2017) adds that "… the familiarity of the narrative pattern becomes a strong memory-holding template". In the following lines, the problem of the Nile in Egypt is discussed within Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal discourse analysis and Stibbe's (2012, 2015) eco-discourse analysis theoretical frameworks. The paper also shows how children stories can be more powerful in raising environmental awareness of children more than traditional tools like school books.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Multimodality

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) state that "like linguistic structures, visual structures point to particular interpretations of experience and forms of social interactions" (p. 2). They introduced the concept of 'visual code' and that both verbal and visual structures combine to form the whole meaning. In other words, different modes can be utilised in delivering a

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[1] In this story, the Shepherd used to scream that a wolf is eating his goats and people hurry to help. He repeated this lie more than one time till people realised that he is a liar and stopped believing him. One day, a wolf attacked his goats, so he started screaming asking for help. People did not respond this time till the wolf ate all his goats.

certain message. Kress (2010) indicates that all signs in all modes of communication have a meaning. Thus, modality is a multimodal concept that can be applied to pictures or any visual representation.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) claim that:

> Just as grammars of language describe how words combine in clauses, sentences and texts, so our visual 'grammar' will describe the way in which depicted elements — people, places and things — combine in visual 'statements' of greater or lesser complexity and extension. (p. 1)

The sign-makers have a certain meaning in mind, the 'signified', and they express it through a clear representational mode such as drawing, painting, or speech, the 'signifier'. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) add that signs are 'motivated' rather than 'arbitrary'; "signs are never arbitrary, and 'motivation' should be formulated in relation to the sign-maker and the context in which the sign is produced" (p. 8).

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) differentiate between two types of images: high-modality and low-modality images. Images have high or low modality according to how much they reflect reality. In other words, it is whether items (human or non-human) in the images look the same as in real life or not. They list three items to investigate in a picture: the representational metafunction, the interpersonal metafunction, and the compositional metafunction. The representational metafunction is about items in the image, i.e. objects, persons, places. It is about what the items in the picture are involved in. It is simply concerned with what the picture is about. The interpersonal metafunction is about the relation between the producer and the viewer of the image. That is to say what the producer utilises (framing, colours, focus, etc.) in the image to deliver the meaning properly to the viewer. In other words, the interpersonal metafunction creates the connection between the producer and the viewer. The compositional metafunction is equivalent to syntactic structure in the verbal language. This metafunction shows how the representational and interpersonal metafunctions are combined together to form a meaningful whole (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 41-44).

The multimodal discourse analysis framework is applied here to show how the images can serve as an effective mode of communication along with verbal mode to deliver the message beyond the story. In the following section, the ecolinguistic analysis framework is discussed. It shows how language can be utilised to improve the relation between man and the surrounding environment.

2.2. Ecolinguistics

The field of ecolinguistics "… is now emerging because the consequences of ignoring the ecological embedding of humans and human societies are becoming starkly clear, as climate change, resource depletion and ecosystem degradation reduce the ability of the Earth to

support humans and many other species" (Stibbe, 2012b, p. 1).

Stibbe (2012b) also adds that it "… is not only that language and ecological destruction are linked, but that globalisation of various kinds plays a central role in linking the two" (p. 2). He claims that globalisation brought exotic discourses that fail to adapt to different ecosystems and thus leads to environmental degradation. Nettle and Romaine (2000) state that "our global village must be truly multicultural and multilingual, or it will not exist at all" (p. 191).

Each ecosystem has its own language and culture that are environment-friendly, or in other words that have been deeply rooted and adapted to this ecosystem. The existence of a global culture or language that is forced on different remote places can be destructive to the surrounding environment. When populations move to totally new environments, it is noticed that environmental degradation starts "… including waves of extinction of large animals in the wake of human arrival in new regions as long ago as 46,000 years, in Australia, North America, South America, and Pacific islands" (Stibbe, 2012b, p. 2, citing Diamond, 2005; Flannery, 1994). This happens because of the failure of the new language and culture to attune to diverse ecosystems.

Ecolinguistics was pioneered by Professor Einar Haugen in his book *The Ecology of Language* (Stanford University Press, 1972). Haugen (1972) defined 'language ecology' as "the study of interactions between any given language and its environment" (p. 57).

The main online research forum for ecolinguistics, the International Ecolinguistics Association (IEA), states that:

> Ecolinguistics examines the influence of language on the life-sustaining relationships of humans with each other, with other organisms and with the natural environment. Research ranges from the impact of advertising discourse in encouraging ecologically damaging consumption to the power of nature poetry to encourage respect for the natural world.

Thus, it is really essential to search for new stories to live by; stories that show respect and care for nature. Stibbe (2015) defines these stories as "stories in the minds of multiple individuals across a culture" (p. 6). These stories control how people behave in the world; in a positive constructive way or a negative destructive one. Stibbe (2015) differentiates between three types of discourse; destructive, ambivalent and beneficial.

Destructive discourses include advertising, economic, industrial agricultural discourses, etc. (encouraging ecologically damaging consumption). Such discourses should be resisted along with the ambivalent discourses that have ambiguous double aspects. On the other hand, we should promote beneficial discourses that are mainly found in the literary field like nature poetry, nature stories and prose (encouraging respect and care for nature) (Stibbe, 2015). Ecolinguistics deals with how beneficial discourses can contribute to the solution of many ecological problems or irresponsible use of nature.

Lidström (2017) argues that since the environmental challenges we face in the twenty-

first century are disastrous and the governments are not paying them enough attention, there must be new ways of thinking about the relationships between humans and nature.

Wilson (2003) in his book *The Future of Life* listed sixty endangered and extinct species and races. The image he presented of how human harms nature is shocking. God says in the *Holy Qur'an* "Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by what the hands of people have earned" (30:41). In spite of the gloominess Wilson (2003) opens his book with, "… an encouraging vision that solutions to the environmental problems facing humanity are within reach" is given.

3. The ecosophy of this research

This research looks for new stories to live by; stories that bring people's attention to the environment around. The paper tries to ring an alarm that continuing in ignoring the crisis of water Egypt is about to face will have disastrous consequences. The title of the paper (named after the children story in hand) is shocking to change people priorities from self-centred inconsiderate attitude to a more caring and considerate one. Disappearance of the Nile does not mean only disappearance of a water source. It means disappearance of life of many creatures and plants. Turning a deaf ear to that problem would lead to a catastrophic end. Water should be consumed moderately. Garbage and factory waste should not be thrown into the Nile. There must be campaigns and missions to increase people's environmental awareness to decrease water consumption level and prohibit water pollution.

In the following section, the problem of the Nile in Egypt is discussed in an attempt to search for the way out. The relationship between ecology and language is reciprocal. Therefore, it is really essential to utilise the power of language in solving our ecological problems.

4. Problem of the Nile

The Nile River is the longest river in Africa and in the world. It has a length of 6,671 kilometres (*Global Arabic Encyclopædia*, 1999). It flows from south of the Equator northward to drain into the Mediterranean Sea (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2018). The Nile supplies water to eleven nations: Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. It secures 95% of water needs in Egypt.

El-Nashar and Elyamany (2017) declare that:

> Egypt depends on the Nile River to secure 95% of the water needed for different purposes as drinking, household uses, agriculture, fishing source, water transportation, tourism, electricity generation from the High Dam and industry. (p. 1)

The Nile creates a fertile green valley across the desert where one of the oldest civilisations in the world has begun. The ancient Egyptians lived by the banks of the Nile and farmed lands to secure food for themselves and their animals. They also used the Nile for transportation.
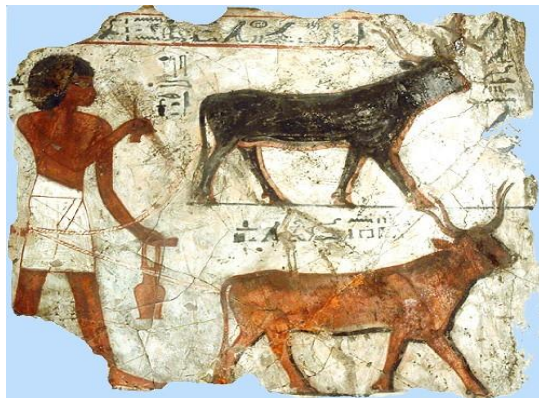

Figure 1. Wall painting showing the ancient Egyptians farming
(www.primaryhomeworkhelp.co.uk/rivers/nile.htm)

The Nile River was almost the only source of water in Egypt since the rainfall was really rare. Without the Nile River, the ancient Egyptian civilisation could not exist. For that reason, the ancient Egyptians appreciated the river. They even used to worship the Nile and sacrifice a beautiful lady every year for the river. Loring (1884) declares that "[t]he ancient Egyptians were accustomed to appease the god of the Nile and induce him to bestow a bountiful inundation by throwing as a sacrifice into its sacred water a beautiful virgin" (p. 140).
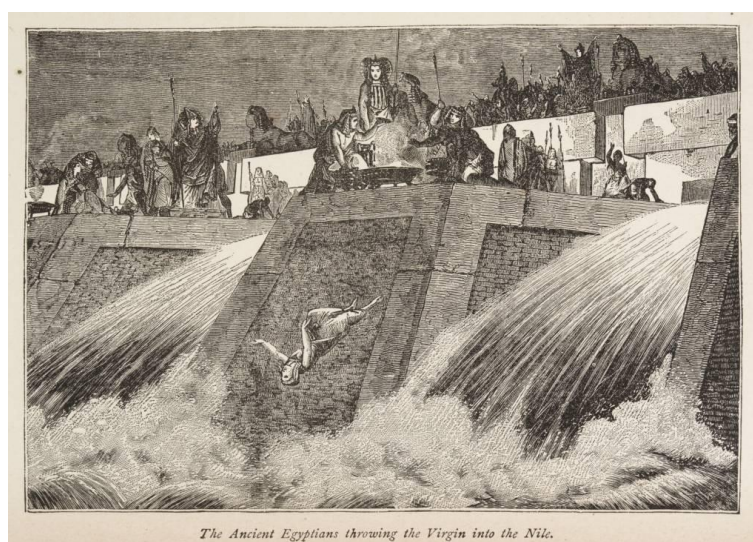

Figure 2. The ancient Egyptians throwing a virgin into the Nile
(https://scholarship.rice.edu/handle/1911/21497)

Nowadays the Nile River is totally mistreated by people. Through years, Egyptians turned

into brutal consumers with no environmental awareness at all. Industrial trash, assorted garbage, and dead animals are all thrown into the Nile. People took the Nile for granted as if it will last forever. Kucirkova (2018) states that Egypt:

> … suffers a shortage of water that reaches 54 billion cubic meters, and it needs a total of 114 billion cubic meters in order to cover its needs from water for agricultural, industrial and households needs. Egypt's current resources only provide about 60 billion cubic meters.

Among the factors that caused this shortage and may lead to a water crisis in Egypt in the near future are: population explosion, pollution, climate change, and Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) construction. The UN predicts that by 2025 Egypt will be close to "… a critical shortage of water" (BBC Report, 2018). It is crucial now to take action to "… implement water conservation measures like water recycling and control the water pollution at the River Nile" (Kucirkova, 2018).

Rashad (2018) states that:

> … due to the country's rapidly increasing population, climate change, and poor garbage, sewage and pollution management, this verdant region is at risk. Today, the river can barely supply the country's water needs. Egypt's population is expected to double by 2050, and with that growth comes increased demand for farms and food. So, too, comes greater pollution of the river and canals, on which farmers rely heavily to irrigate their fields.

Many initiatives have been taken to save the Nile before it disappears. Save Egypt's Water is a Facebook page of a "… movement aiming to increase the awareness of the Egyptians about the water risk in Egypt" (Save Egypt's Water, 2018). It encourages people to change their habits concerning water consumption. This paper is also one of the attempts to participate in changing the people's attitudes towards the Nile through children stories. In the next section, it is discussed in detail how storytelling can help in raising environmental awareness of children.

5. Storytelling and environmental awareness

Storytelling is simply defined as "the activity of telling or writing stories" (Dictionary.com). Gunner and Scheub (2018) in *Encyclopædia Britannica* viewed storytelling as "… a sensory union of image and idea, a process of re-creating the past in terms of the present". They added that "[s]torytelling is alive, ever in transition, never hardened in time".

Storytelling can be used to instil values and develop awareness in a more effective way than traditional educational tools. Gunnarsson (2014) states that "[s]torytelling has an important role within human culture. People from all over the world usually tell stories in

relation to their values, traditions, experiences, and actions." (p. 6342).

What makes storytelling distinct from other educational methods is that it is educating through getting children engaged in an interesting activity. Children listen with interest and excitement to stories. They learn and respond to what they listen to indirectly. Children stories last in their memories forever.

Amin in *Disappearance of the Nile* personifies the Nile so the children get more empathetic about it. The Nile is given human attributes to encourage respect and care for it. The story starts with an abrupt opening "This is the Nile; the protagonist of our story. He is the most precious of all we have." (Amin, 2007, p. 3). The story goes on in a narrative style. The narration is accompanied by colourful illustrations by the author. The narrator speaks in the second person. This creates the effect of inclusivity. We are all included in the narrative, for example "Do you believe this is our river?" (Amin, 2007, p. 4). This rhetoric question is accompanied by an illustration of the Nile at the time of the pharaohs. The Nile was close to the pyramids and there are a hippopotamus and a crocodile swimming in it. Some other animals are peacefully drinking from the Nile. The illustration tells a lot more than words.

Amin's story thus includes two modes of communication; the written and the visual. Children can see pictures while they read or listen to the story. This makes the story more effective. Narey (2017) states that "multimodal approaches to learning promote children's higher mental functions as they explore common objects and pursue ideas generated through multimodal processes" (p. xii). Narey (2017) adds that "visual images have become a particularly critical feature of engagement as we prepare children to navigate the changes and challenges of our millennium" (p. 1).

Amin in *Disappearance of the Nile* minimised the number of words to around seventeen words per page. She left the pictures to give the children the intended meaning. There is a sudden shift in time from the past to the present. The first three pages of the story show how the pharaohs used to glorify the Nile and treat it kindly. They appreciate the blessings the Nile gives to them. The personification metaphor continues: "The Nile was happy, because he was clean." (p. 6).

Then suddenly on the fourth page, there are high buildings in front of a man and a woman who cannot see the Nile because of these buildings. Amin says that people still love the Nile and they do their best to visit him and say hello to him. It is noticed in the illustrations of the present that the colour of the Nile is not light blue anymore. It is closer to grey. The plants, animals and green grass on Figure 3 below as opposed to the high buildings, cars, ships, roads and crossovers on Figure 4 show the drastic difference between the Nile in the past and present. Figure 3 makes the river very close to the viewer. The Nile is fronted in the picture creating a sense of intimacy with the river. In Figure 4, the Nile looks very distant from the viewer. This distance shows the feeling of indifference nowadays. Thus the items in the pictures (the representational metafunction) are utilised by the illustrator to deliver the meaning properly; changing colours, changing distances, replacing items (animals and trees) with others (ships, boats and buildings) (the

interpersonal metafunction). Both the representational and interpersonal metafunctions are combined together to give the compositional metafunction, i.e. a meaningful whole that gives the message beyond the story.
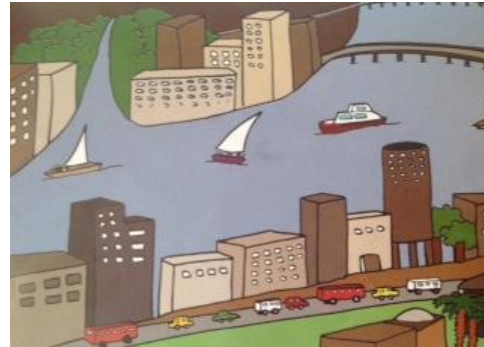

Figure 3. The Nile in the past

Figure 4. The Nile nowadays

People now look at the Nile from a distance as opposed to the close relation between people and the Nile in the past as shown in figures 5 and 6 below:
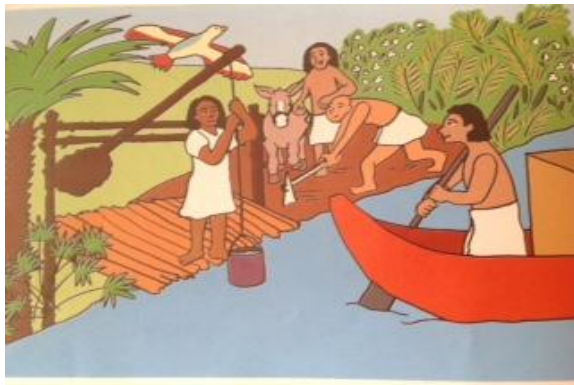

Figure 5. The Nile in the past

Figure 6. The Nile nowadays

The human features of the Nile here are made salient through the use of linguistic devices such as personification and the active voice. Stibbe (2015) defines salience as "a story in people's mind that an area of life is important or worthy of attention". The Nile here is made salient throughout the story so that the children know how important the Nile is. Talking about the Nile as an inanimate object would not be as effective as making it human. In Figure 5, people are in direct contact with Nile. They are very close to its water. They touch, smell and feel the Nile better than people in Figure 6 where they stand over the bridge and can hardly ever see the Nile from a distance. The representational metafunction is utilised to compare between the Nile in the past and the Nile nowadays. Again, the illustrator here uses the disappearance of trees and living creatures in Figure 6 to show how harmful the man is to nature. Both the items in the figures (representational metafunction) and how they are organised (interpersonal metafunction) are composed together (compositional metafunction) to show that over years man destroyed many things around.

The Nile is the subject of active clauses throughout the story; e.g., "The Nile was happy, for he was clean." "The Nile is not happy anymore … Today the Nile is sad." "The Nile shouted us 'enough, please! My water is polluted and became not suitable for drinking. My fish decreased." "The Nile escaped." "The Nile decided to escape not knowing where to go. He searches for a place where he gets cared for and respected." "The Nile toured the world and he was welcomed everywhere." "The Nile passed here. We begged him to stay, but he left." "The Nile is back in its place smiling." "The Nile says: you are my family and this is my land. I cannot live without you." All these examples turn the Nile into a human. He feels. He moves. He speaks.

Stibbe (2015) states that evaluations are "stories in the people's minds about whether an area of life is good or bad" (p. 83). Amin in *Disappearance of the Nile* does not say about people's behaviour towards the Nile as being bad or good. She just narrates what actually happens and the children deduce how bad or good it is. She says people nowadays throw garbage in the Nile. They get rid of their factories sewage into its water. They wash their dishes in its water. She shows through her illustrations how the fish are annoyed and sad. These lines and illustrations show indirectly how bad those deeds are. Children form mental images about human behaviour towards the Nile. They can tell for sure that these deeds are bad and lead to the disappearance of the Nile later in the story. The items in the figures below are all sources of pollution: the human throwing garbage, the factory's chimney, the drainage pipe, and the pesticides aeroplane.

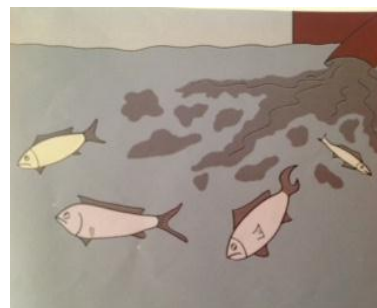Figure 7   Figure 8   Figure 9

Figure 10. Village women washing dishes in the Nile

In Figure 10 above Amin gives the Nile a crying human face. The Nile looks so sad, dull and dirty. The personification device continues till the end of the story. When people woke up one day to discover the disappearance of the Nile, they started to ask about him as a lost person. Persons in the image are deeply involved in the process of searching for the Nile. They are not addressing the viewer. They have pictures of the Nile in their hands to ask people if they have seen him, as illustrated in Figure 11 below.

Figure 11. An Egyptian village man asks a foreigner about the Nile

This deep engagement in the search for the Nile gives the viewer the feeling of the seriousness of the situation. It is a critical moment now and everyone is in charge. The interpersonal metafunction here plays an important role in getting the viewer involved in the situation through transferring feelings of anxiety, distress and responsibility. There is also a picture showing the Nile gets up from its place to escape:

Figure 12. Escape of the Nile

Figure 12 marks the climax of the story. It is more effective than words to see the Nile as a living human standing up and escaping. This sudden disappearance is shocking and the people's desperate search for the Nile is sad. You can feel the anxious gloomy atmosphere

after the disappearance of the Nile. Amin shows how Egypt turned into a mere dry dessert with no trees at all:
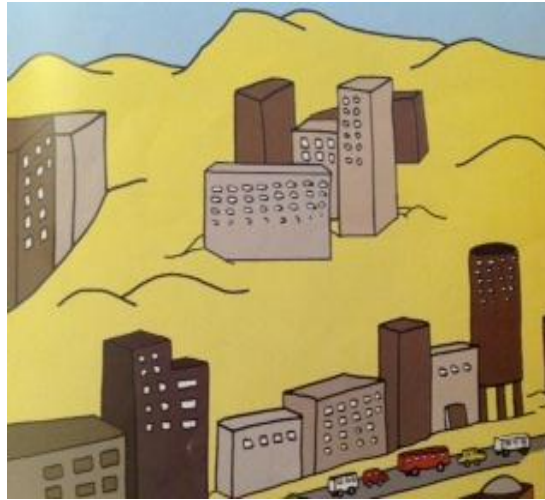

Figure 13. Egypt after the disappearance of the Nile

Disappearance of people or any sign of life in Figure 13 above adds to the calamity of the situation. The picture tells a lot. Only buildings and cars appear in the picture (the representational metafunction). This coldness in the picture shows how it is catastrophic if the Nile disappears. Compared to the shiny bright colours used in the very beginning of the story, this picture is really dark and plain (the interpersonal metafunction). People in Egypt and Africa search for the Nile all over the world. What they only have are pictures of the Nile. The children get involved in this bad situation since they cannot see the Nile in six pages. The Nile only appears in the small pictures that people have in their hands. After getting empathetic and intimate with the Nile, they feel worried about him now. While people were searching, the Nile returns back since he finds no other place to stay in. The Nile all the time is given the active verbs of action in sentences. Even when people ask about him, he is given human attributes. This salience of the Nile makes the Nile more worthy of attention as opposed to the industrial discourse that uses inanimate characteristics to refer to the natural world.

The last picture in the story, Figure 14 below, shows an Egyptian family that prevents their kid from throwing a banana skin into the Nile. This behaviour is indirectly promoted through this illustration. The representational metafunction here includes utilising items such as the plants by the Nile side, the family, the fish in the Nile and the Nile itself. These items are given to the viewer in a certain arrangement to deliver a certain meaning to the viewer (interpersonal metafunction). The Nile is brought back to the foreground. People can touch its water. This closeness between humans and the Nile shows the care and respect people have for the Nile after its return. The colour of the Nile is light blue again. The viewer of this image can feel the happiness and peace created in the image by bright colours, happy faces, smiling fish, and a boat trip. The green plants are back by the Nile sides. Life is back by this vivid image.
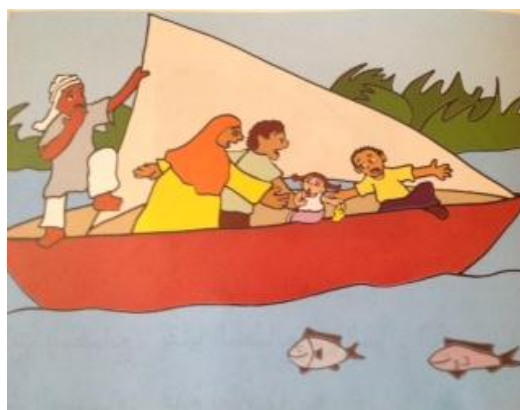
Figure 14

6. Conclusion

The power of language and image work together to deliver the message in this story. Amin made use of illustrations to add to the effect of the verbal message. Children look first at the picture then listen to or read the words below the picture. Throughout the story, the whole page consists of a big picture and two or three lines of words below it. The children can see how close the Nile used to be at the time of pharaohs and how it looks very distant now. This effect is achieved through both words and illustrations. At the very beginning of the story, the pharaohs used to plant around the Nile. Nowadays, there are high buildings hiding the Nile. People can barely see the Nile through narrow isles among the buildings. Children can clearly see this contrast through words and images. We see how the Nile is in the foreground in the very first pages. Then the Nile is getting more and more distant till it disappears. The representational metafunction, i.e. the items used in the pictures, animals, plants, trees, at the early images show how nature used to be before human development harmed nature. The high buildings, roads and crossovers replaced the nature items in the nowadays images in the story. The interpersonal metafuction gives what the producer has in mind to the viewer through change of colours from bright ones at the very beginning of the story to pale and dull ones later on. It is also noticed how the nature items are foregrounded in the early images being closer to the viewer. This technique creates connection and intimacy with nature. In Figure 3, which is the first image in the story and its cover, animals are sitting peacefully, relaxing and enjoying the beauty of nature. The total disappearance of animals in nowadays images gives the viewer the sense of dullness. This shows how harmful the man is to nature. The items in the images and the way they are represented are interwoven together to achieve the compositional metufunction of creating a meaningful whole. The producer of the images could deliver the meaning to the viewer through changing items in the picture and their representations.

Being given human attributes, the Nile is brought more to the foreground and focus of attention. Children get connected to the Nile and start being more conscious to its suffering. From an ecolinguistic viewpoint, this story serves as an effective method of increasing environmental consciousness of the children. Using multiple modes of

communication makes the story more powerful in delivering the message. Amin tries through this story to get the children's attention to the Nile. She shows them how dear the Nile is to the Egyptians, but they act carelessly and unconsciously. The word 'Nile' is repeated twenty five times throughout the story. This shows how important and precious the Nile is.

By the end of the story, the Nile returns back and people become more appreciative of it. They start to throw the garbage in specified places. There is a warning at the very last line of the story: "Woe to anyone who tries to throw anything into its water." Amin tries to be didactic here. This is the moral of the story. The children who read this story can serve as the Nile guardians now. They will care for the Nile themselves and serve as protectors who can illuminate people with information they get from the story.

By investigating this story, the research tries to search for new stories we can live by, stories that encourage more care and respect for the natural world. This children story can be classified as the beneficial discourse that should be promoted. More and more stories of that kind should be brought to the fore. The research also encourages more research on different discourses, both beneficial and destructive, to bring people's attention to the iceberg we are about to face in the near future if we continue to turn a deaf ear to the environmental degradation.

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