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Exposing ideological effects of mediational means variation or alignment in stakeholders' impact discourses

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ABSTRACT

The mining industry's links to sustainable development (SD) often trigger a struggle over mining's impact representations. For instance, there are politics of what issue to communicate and whose interest is served by mining SD representations. To represent mining's impact, stakeholders prefer one meaning-making system over another. In the social world, no semiotic system choice is neutral. Rather, they are mediated by social actors' values and interests. What has not been extensively studied is how stakeholders' choice of a mediational means over another *indexicalise* the stakeholders' ideology manifested in the discursive strategies of positive in-group and negative out-group representations. Investigating stakeholders' mediational means choices can facilitate stakeholders' engagement because it affects how people relate to others in society. Data is generated from an interview tour of a mining company's physical settings and selected portions of the Chief Executive Officer's (CEO) letter to the stakeholders. The concepts of ideological use of mediational means and mediational means as historical, informed the empirical analysis. The findings of this study show that the local activists used ethnographic photographs to engage in negative othering, but the company used disembodied visuals to engage in positive self-representation. We conclude that the politics of mining impact representation must be understood as involving an irreducible tension between 'what is out there' in the physical settings and the stakeholder's ideological use of 'what is out there' to engage in either a positive self-representation or a negative othering. Policy measures aimed at resolving mining companies and communities' struggles must uncover the hidden interests and values behind semiotic resources used to communicate impact.

1. Introduction

This article responds to the limited literature on the historical and ideological implications of stakeholders' mediational means choices and how they shape positive in-group and negative out-group representations. Existing studies have not prioritised how stakeholders' choice of a mediational means over another i*ndexicalise* the stakeholders' routine experience and ideology manifested in the discursive strategies of positive in-group and negative out-group representations. Yet, ever since the mining industry's lurch to sustainable development (SD), there has often been a debate over mining's impact representations (Frederiksen & Banks, 2023; Gilberthorpe & Banks, 2012; Kirsch, 2010; Nilsson et al., 2013; Whitmore, 2006). For instance, there are concerns about whose interest mining SD representations serve (Amoako et al., 2022; Nilsson et al., 2013) and how communities resist mining (Conde, 2017). Also, the politics of communicating mining impacts have been explored through different theoretical perspectives. For example, some studies are informed by ecological economists' perspective that the conventional valuation of mining excludes many costs, and misunderstands nature's value (Bebbington et al., 2008). Besides, the struggles have been explained from the limit and survivalist theoretical perspective that mining exploits a finite resource (Bebbington et al., 2008). Not sufficiently applied to understanding mining and community relations is mediated discourse analysis (MDA) theory. MDA focuses on social action and how multimodal resources are used as mediational means to accomplish it (Bhatia et al., 2008; R. Scollon, 2001). This study addresses how multimodal resources are used to accomplish positive self-representation and negative othering in ways that communicate stakeholders' experience of mining. This focus is relevant for the following reasons. First, MDA shares in critical discourse analysis a politically engaged stance. This stance is relevant to addressing the politics of what issue to communicate in mining impact discourses. For example, MDA's politically engaged stance enjoins this study to focus on the histories and experiences of marginalised impacted communities and maps their relationship with company discourses. Second, MDA's theoretical focus on discourse and its mediational means as historical and ideological helped this study to 'explain' the existing issue of whose interest a particular mediational means choices serve, albeit in unclear

ways. To refocus the understanding of mining and community struggles based on accounts of actions, data generated from an interview tour of a mining company's physical settings and selected portions of the Chief Executive Officer's (CEO) Letter to the stakeholders' report are used as media for analysis.

1.1 Description of the study context

Newmont Ghana Gold Limited (NGGL) is a multinational mining corporation that operates a Greenfield gold mining project in Ghana's Brong Ahafo Region (as it then was). The company operates open-pit and underground mining within the then-Ahafo regions (Boakye et al., 2018). The Ghana Chamber of Mines adjudged NGGL as the Mining Company of the Year on many occasions. The Chamber's award recognises NGGL's outstanding achievements in innovation, local content support, occupational health and safety, environmental management, and social service provision. Nevertheless, there is resistance from community activists over NGGL's adverse socio-environmental impacts. They include the dislocation of peasants and cocoa farmers from their sources of livelihood, a lack of local investment opportunities, and youth unemployment. The Kenyasi Youth Association (KYA) alleged that efforts to have a social and development agreement with the mining company have proved futile. The polemic representations of NGGL's impact are a basis for investigating the ideological effects of mediational means variation or alignment in the company and its stakeholders' impact discourses. Ideological effects of mediational means variation or alignment means that mediational means can be used beyond their normative value to one that serves the interest of the users. For example, mediational means can be used in an instrumental way to display activists' suffering and to gain more from the company. Also, it can be used to showcase the company's good works and to gain the social license to operate. Exposing such doings can contribute to understanding the different ways corporate executives and activists communicate mining's impacts and provide insights for policy measures aimed at reducing mining companies' and communities' struggles.

2. Theoretical perspectives of the study

MDA's notion of social action as mediated by language and non-language resources informed this study (Hult, 2017; Scollon, 2001; Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Scollon & de Saint-Georges, 2015; Wohlwend, 2014). First, MDA's view that mediational means choices have normative and instrumental affordances and constraints(R. Scollon, 2008b) guided this study to focus on the ideological implications of mediational means variation or alignment in stakeholders' impact discourses. Here, the instrumental use of mediational means implies that stakeholders' choices of semiotic resources can undercut what is represented in unclear ways. Second, nexus analysis's scalar dimension provided an opportunity for this study to compare the variation or alignment of mediational means from the interpersonal scale (interview interaction) to the organisational scale. It enabled this study to avoid the challenge of connecting micro-events to broader practices. Besides, MDA's notion of a historical body is also used to understand how routine experiences over time and place are used to communicate mining impact. This is more productive than 'finding out' because it allows us to see how the experiences evolved and their transformations. Finally, MDA's analytical notion of interaction order and discourses in places guided this study to conceptualise the interview as a social practice through which ongoing events and events in the immediate past are accounted for. Using conventional interviewing techniques would have denied this study the affordances of material settings and their meaning.

2.1 Meaning-based analysis of social movements

There appears to be no existing literature on the ideological effects of mediational means variations or alignment in activists' and mining companies' impact discourses. However, meaning-based analysis of extractive struggles can provide a meta-theoretical context for this article's analytical focus. Gray et al.(2007) are text-biased, thus ignoring the spatiotemporal settings of environmental discourses and how those settings are *encontextualised*. Combining the semiotic matter 'already there' and the sense disputants make of what is 'already there' can be productive in revealing whose interests and values stakeholders' mediational means choices serve. Walton and Rivers(2011) glossed over how stakeholders use the physical settings of the Nevis River to construe sustainability. This study suggests that within physical settings, there are potential meanings that become activated through selection and exclusion based on the values and interests of the actors involved. Haalboom's (2011) focus is on real-life SMOs. However, an action-oriented approach can enhance an understanding of the daily experience of what strategic frame variation does (e.g., resisting dominant groups' attempt to undermine indigenous ecological stewardship) rather than what it means. The reason is that an action-oriented approach to discourse analysis concerned itself with practices and organisations. For example, unpacking how discourse legitimises or resists a social positioning concerning mining. Lust (2014) appears to have homogenised how local social movement mobilization can connect to the national scale. Focusing on interdiscursive relations rather than counting heads is more productive because interdiscursive relations can reveal the durable structuring and networking of social practices. Özen and Özen (2017) addressed why local communities react to mining differently. However, their analysis focused on the non-material mediational means, such as community values, to the neglect of the materiality such as physical settings and their meanings. De Mattos Neto and Da Silva Rebelo (2018) pointed out that social movements aim to deconstruct mining companies' truth. However, in De Mattos Neto and Da Silva Rebelo's (2018) study, the semiotic resources social movements use to counter-resist mining companies' truth received less attention. Tibaijuka's (2019) opinion is that non-material cultures, such as values, norms, and interests, vary from one society to another. This presupposes that the semiotic resources for comprehending impacts vary across cultures. Another way is to expose the hidden interests behind mediational means variation or alignment. It can provide an objective basis for comparing the different sense-making of mining's impact.

This article and those before it, such as Özen and Özen (2017), are written in a way that counters mining positive socio-economic impact discourse. Also, it relates to De Mattos Neto and Da Silva Rebelo (2018), through similarity in the research interest of exposing unjust impact relations

legitimised in discourse. However, this article differs from the existing discourse approach to mining and community relation discourses. For example, it differs in terms of the question asked or not asked, its unit of analysis, and its focus on practices over time rather than abstract textual structures such as framing. By focusing on 'physical action' other than 'strip' of language, such as turning taking, this study aims to understand 'what is going on' within its embodied immediate setting and its extended nexus of practice. By this, this article seeks to make visible routine practices and shared meanings that would have remained hidden if abstract events like company reports were the sole objects of analysis. Also, by using places and their meanings, the current study can bind communities of practice together and expose the ideologies of positive in-group and negative out-group representation. Regarding the type of research question(s) asked, this study differs from other meaning-based analyses of socio-environmental conflicts, such as Walton and Rivers (2011). For instance, rather than answering what a particular environmental entity means to individuals, this article implicitly addresses the nexus analysis question: What is going on at a place, and how is discourse used to accomplish it? This is productive because social action produces routine experiences, practices, values, and histories of social actors involved, not just what some environmental entity means, thus constituting the basis for change.

3. Research design

Through nexus analysis longitudinal research design, this study strategized the research focus on how activists used the affordances of language and non-language resources to engage in positive self-representation and negative othering. Nexus analysis design enabled this study to pay attention to how activists' use historical body, discourses in place and interaction orders to represent themselves and their actions in a positive light and to represent NGGL's sustainability practices negatively. These positive self-representations and negative othering would have remained obscured if conventional interviewing practice had been used. The reason is that it is the historical body, interaction orders, and discourses in places that trigger the way self and others are represented differently. The discourses are said to be in place because they are part of the situational context of the action and are appropriated as 'tools' for doing things (Hult, 2015). The historical body refers to the individual histories, beliefs, values, everyday experiences, habits, and practices which are used to accomplish an action (Scollon and Scollon, 2004; Hult, 2010, 2015, 2017). The historical body points to the agency of individuals to influence the actions of other members of society. The interaction order calls attention to the interpersonal scale and is about situated norms and expectations for interacting (Hult, 2010, 2015, 2017). Mapping the interaction order is a practical standpoint to understand how social actions occur (Scollon and Scollon, 2004). However, the historical body, the interaction order and the discourses in place are non-representational. That is, they can enable more or less to be done or said in a way that serves the agenda of the dominant in unclear ways.

3.1 Sampling

Snowball sampling technique was used to recruit community activists for the interview tour of local places. Snowball sampling is often used in situations where probability sampling is less practicable(Bryman, 2016). For instance, in nexus analysis, the sampling question is: Who are the social actors involved in the action of interest, and how does the analyst include them in the study? This implies that only individuals involved in the action studied should be selected. Scollon and Scollon (2004) recommend conducting social actor, scene, and discourse surveys to identify and include social actors. This article departs from Scollon and Scollon (2004) because the mine-affected communities are located in the interior of Kenyasi and are not readily identifiable by academic researchers. Snowballing sampling technique enabled this study to identify the first gatekeeper, G1. G1 introduced the interviewer to the first community activist who lived in the 'interior where the real action takes place'. The first community activist interviewed introduced the researcher to a second community activist. This process continued until the researcher identified and interviewed four mining-affected activists with knowledge and experience about "what is going on" in NGGL's operational sites. Also, the study purposively selected relevant portions of NGGL's Sustainability Report, 2018. We paid particular attention to parts of the Chief Executive Officer's (CEO) letter to the stakeholders which relates to events at the NGGL's physical settings. The choice is influenced by Breeze's, (2012), who suggests further enquiry into the ideological functions of the CEO's letters to the stakeholders.

3.2 Data collection

In nexus analysis, engaging the nexus of practice constitutes the data collection stage (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Scollon and Scollon's (2004) Field Guide suggested scene surveys, social actors' surveys, discourse surveys, and focus group interviews as methods for generating data. We add an interview tour of places and select relevant portions of NGGL's Sustainability Report, 2018, as methods of generating data. These choices are informed by nexus analysis roots in critical discourse analysis (selecting text for analysis) and interactional sociolinguistics in using the interview as an interaction order in which other actions are accounted for (Hult, 2015, 2017; Scollon, 2008). The choice of a mining company's discursive events as a site for analysis is informed by nexus analysis' analytical focus on social action as mediated by three types of discourses.

3.3 Analytical focus and processes

This article focuses on exposing the ideological implications of mediational means variation or alignment as manifested in positive self-representation and negative othering. The concepts of ideological use of mediational means and mediational means as historical informed the empirical analysis. This translates into focusing on mediational means as tools which have come to be used to index certain identities and to express membership of themselves and others. For instance, mediational means are used to draw attention to a sequence of practices over time that constitute an affected member or an environmental steward. The empirical analysis will include paying attention to how lexical choices such as verbs, adverbs, and adjectives in conjunction with material objects are used to engage in positive self-representation and negative othering.

Inspired by Walton and Rivers (2011), the first step towards understanding how mediational means variation or alignment

triggers positive self-representation and negative othering is generating text that shows "what is going on" in physical settings. Unlike Walton and Rivers (2011), who relied on communities' submissions to a tribunal, we generated text by transcribing an ethnographic interview tour of a mining company's physical settings and selected portions of the company's text. Also, whereas Walton and River (2011) used transcripts of interviews conducted by a company, this study suggests that company-generated interview transcripts can be technologized. For this reason, we 'generated' naturalistic data from corporate reports to its stakeholders. This implies that the selected text is a 'particular text' because the researcher influences what is selected as data (Bryman, 2016; Fairclough, 1995; Morehouse, 2012). This is in sync with the interpretivists' ontological position that the social actors' experiences influence reality. However, reflexivity is needed in the analysis because the researcher influences which text becomes data (Wellington, 2015). In this study, reflexivity is achieved through recording and transcribing interview conversations, allowing interview participants to navigate the sites of engagement, asking research questions in ways that do not predetermine the research issue, asking questions that elicit information on individuals' memories about the place and through an interview tour of places approach. However, the interview transcripts are not total but particularised accounts. To fill the gap, we used corporate executive's report as frozen action to counter community activists' positive self-representation and negative othering.

Throughout the empirical sections, R refers to the researcher who conducted the interview tour, whereas P1, P2, P3 and P4 refer to the interview participants.

3.3.1 Interactional order analysis to reveal what is going on in physical settings

To ensure that the interview interaction focuses on "what is going on" in a physical setting, the researcher and interview participants jointly negotiated the physical sites of engagement. For instance, extract 1, lines 19-22, show that R and P4 decided the sites of engagements. However, extract 1, line 21 reveals R as being cautious in the line of questioning. This can be observed in how R avoided naming the place of the interview ('[…] where are we now') and how R did not introduce the interview's subject matter. For example, R's choice of 'this environment' instead of asking the straightforward question 'Is this your farm?' showed that R does not want to impose a naming of the sites of engagement on P4. Doing so could, in one way or another, impose R's interests on what P4 says. Re-listening to the audio recording of R and P4's interaction, we observed that R repaired the exchange by adding, "Is this your farm?" only after a minor pause. R's hesitancy to name places and things or impose the researcher's categories on P4 forms part of the agreement for interaction on the company's sites.

Besides, allowing affected voices to take photos of objects, places, and events of interest ensured that the researcher's agency in deciding the relevant theme for the interaction shifted to P4. This discourse materialized in extract 1, line 23, where R asked P4 to use the mobile phone camera to photograph any object of interest to P4 that exists within P4's environment. In response, P4 took photos of crops, after which R asked P4 to look at the picture and decide what was of interest to P4. P4 nominates the crops' appearance and output as issues of interest to P4. The use of the adverb of time, 'previously' gives information that P4's observation on the crop's appearance occurred overtime. Hence, P4's choice of mediational means is based on a sequence of observations across time. The connection of mediational means to time positioned P4 as one who had experienced two subject positions; a farmer who used to have a bumper harvest and one who now has low output. Also, P4 observed the company's use of chemicals to position the company as the cause of low crop output (Extract 1, lines 43 &-44). P4's self-positioning as an affected farmer influenced the choice of objects in place that are relevant to the practice he engages in. This explains the selection of crop size and appearance as relevant semiotic aggregates and the exclusion of other semiotic resources such as the brown, yellow, and green colours in the photographs. The alternative semiotic resources in the environment *indexicalise* the natural semiotics of wilderness areas but are not relevant to P4's embodied position as an affected farmer. This attests to the view that the choice of semiotic resources is not value-neutral but rather influenced by users' interests and history in the nexus of practice. P4, as a farmer, is interested in crop output but not the ecology of the place. In effect, P4 uses embodied mediational means to counter-positioned mining as destroying agricultural productivity. This positioning served the activists' interest in demanding better social support from the mining company.

Extract 1

19 R : […], where are we now?
20 P4: Wiasegruma community.
21 R : Yes, but this environment, is that your farm?
22 P4: […] It is our farm.
23 R : Please take this camera, take anything of […] interest to you within
24 […] your environments.
25 R : [P4 takes a picture of crops] […]
28 R : So, looking at this picture, what is of interest to you in this
29 picture?
30 What do you want to talk about in this picture?
34 P4**:** Even the appearances, it is not quality as previously, so[…] the right
35 this thing is not being what we do not get the right; I mean foodstuffs
36: because it will come in smaller, small quantities, but previously,
37 it was not like that and most especially the cocoyam.

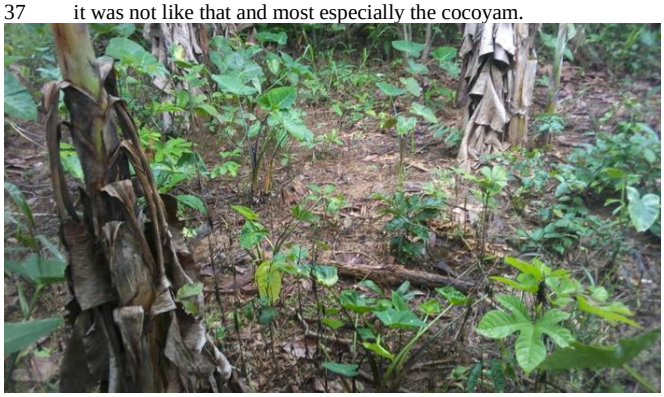

Figure 1: Picture of cocoyam and plantain farm

38 R **:** What is wrong with the cocoyam?
39 P4: The cocoyam you just […] look at this one. This one is about 2 years
40 like this one, but it looks at how […] the thing is.
41 [P4 uprooted cocoyam and showed me how small the tubers are]
42 R**:** Cause of your, the low produce you get from your cocoyam, plantain
43 and other things, :[…] What do you think is the cause?

44 P4: The cause is their activities like the chemicals they are using […].

Taking pictures *in situ* and pointing at objects as semiotic systems that concretise mining's adverse effects *indexicalise* the affordance of the interactional co-context on what counts as evidence. This enabled the activists to use the connection between semiotic systems within the interactional co-context to communicate adverse effects. For instance, in extract 2, lines 48 and 49, P1 connects the perceived leaking tailings dam to a community source of potable water. Based on the spatial closeness of the two physical entities, P1 first expresses a collective fear. This can be realised through the lexicalisation "we are afraid" (Extract 2, line 50).

Extract 2

48 P1: There is someplace where the tailing dam is leaking.
49 And it is the same place that […] is not far from where the borehole
50 is. So we are afraid it can leak through that one, too […]
51 R**:** So, […] do you have people who have […] had proven cases of […]
52 proven medical cases,
53 that the experts say is due to the drinking of contaminated water?
54 P1:Yeah, we have had that problem.
55. I think that was two years ago**,** people got foot rot and skin rashes.
56 As you can see, this brother here has experienced severe skin rashes.
57 He went to the clinic, and they told him he had been using contaminated water.
58 And […] and this, this the one we use to bath, wash, and do everything.

On a time scale, P1 gave a longitudinal account of what happened in the immediate past but from a subjective evidential source as in "I think" (Extract 2, line 55). Time sequencing is evident in P1's reference to time sequence, such as '[…] I think that was two years ago, some people got foot rot.' Spatially, the use of the deictic 'here' and the demonstrative deictic 'this brother here' constitute a concretisation of mining's adverse effects on a material human body which exists in the interview's immediate environment. To sum up the interaction order, the way the interaction order is structured and the norms for interaction facilitated how the study positioned interview participants as agentive. It also allowed them to use concrete objects and their embodiment in the immediate past to communicate their positioning relative to mining adverse impacts.

3.3.2 Historical body as mediational means

Activists' historical body constitutes a discourse used to engage in positive self-representation and negative othering. For instance, they used a discursive construction of "before and after experience" to position themselves as affected and to position NGGL as the agent of adverse health impacts. Empirically, P4 who used his father's paralysed body as evidence of NGGL's negative impact on human health. Beyond the individual scale, P4 represented NGGL's impacts on human health on a societal scale. This is realised in the claim that "Chickenpox, a lot of people encountered this thing here […]". So, it is not just an isolated case of P4's father but "[…] a lot of people" in the community suffered strange ailments.

Extract 4

32 R : […] is this borehole still working
33 P3**:** Yes, it's still working
34 R : It's working, and there is no problem about
35 P3: […] the problem that […] we are facing now that I was talking about
36 Was when they came, […], they made a tailing's dam, I will take
37 you to the places. […], and then we were having a small stream also
38 at the place, I will show you that place, too.
39 R: What is the name of the stream?
40 P3**:** That's 'River' Subri.
41 R: Subri
42 P3: […] It and even at that time […] this borehole, when NGG Ltd
43 workers Even come here, they normally come and take some. They
44 drink it a lot. But later on, now they saw that now some chemicals
45 had gone deep into […], so they don't even want to use the borehole
46 again. […], the community members here now, most of us use the
47 water, which affects us a lot. Like something like boils and so many,
48 rashes […]. There is a boy here who had rashes sometime back.
49 R: Can you produce any evidence of this?
50 P3: I will give you the picture after this.
51 [P3 presented the picture to R, it's a picture of a child with rashes on the body]

Also, extract 4 exemplifies how R and interview participants used past practices associated with semiotic objects and the pronouns 'we' and 'they' to engage in positive self-representation and negative othering. For example, in the R and P3 interaction, a 'we' is relationally positioned as facing a problem due to the coming into being of a 'they'. To back this claim, P3 provided examples of ailments that bedevilled the community after NGGL's tailings dam was created close to a community borehole (Extract 4, in lines 45-47). The reference to a sequence of past practices and events associated with a particular borehole implies that if the analyst focuses on what is in the immediate situational environment, a distorted view of the motivation for community activists' action is likely. Instead, a historical analysis of the discourse cycles provided a broader basis for understanding the experience and values that enabled the positioning of NGGL as an aggressor.

3.3.3 Discourse in place as mediational means

It can be inferred from extract 4, that different semiotic systems inhabit the space where R and P3's interaction occurred. They include a photograph of a boy with rashes on his body, a borehole, a 'river', and NGGL's tailings dam. Though each of these semiotic systems exists independently, their interaction over time is used to represent NGGL as a producer of ill health. For example, R and P3 discursively construed sewage of chemicals from NGGL's tailings dam into underground water as a cause of skin rashes. Also, an alleged interaction between NGGL's tailings dam and a change in the material practices of an *other* in the nexus of practice formed a basis for P3's allegation that NGGL's tailings dam is the source of ill health. This is verbalised as "now they saw that some chemicals had gone deep into this thing [borehole], so they don't even want to use the borehole again" (Extract 4, lines 44-45). The deictic adverbial 'now' is used to index a common notion of the present where NGGL's workers no longer drink the borehole's water. The use of the deictic adverb functioned to relatively position the pre-mining era as safe and the mining era as unsafe. Additionally, the pronoun 'we' conjoined with deictic adverbs to communicate a common notion of a present time where individuals witnessed the emergence of strange diseases. This is evident in P3's use of the pronoun 'we' to position the community members as negatively affected. The collective pronoun "we", realises an objective statement about a group's relative positioning as affected, and the deictic such as "here" and now" collaboratively indexed attestable, real-time, and place victims of NGGL's unsustainable practices.

Moreover, extract 5 illustrates how R and P1 used memory and sense of practices associated with a place to index mining's harmful effects on a group. For example, R's use of the demonstrative deictic, "this place" redirects P1's accounts of NGGL's impact to past and present events in the immediate environment of the interacting parties. P1's response that "Our land' is being destroyed" implied that the owners of the land are positioned as present continuous victims of NGGL's activities. The present continuous tense "being destroyed" signifies a continuing destruction process and possibly functions to resist the company's continuous land reclamation practices. Third, the adverb of time "[…] previously" is used to compare the "before mining" era with the "after mining" era to evaluate that a community's previous land use practices such as cocoa farming were more sustainable than mining.

Extract 5

90 R**:** So, before NGG Ltd came to being […] these things were here, so
91 when you now see this place, what comes to your memory? Do you
92 remember what this place used to be like?
93 P1**:** Our land is being destroyed because previously, all here were cocoa
94 farms, […] full of crops, fruits, and vegetables, and now look at it.
95 R**:** How beneficial were those to you? Cocoa farms, crops
96 P1**:** Cocoa farms, we get money, our school fees were taken care of, we
97 were not hungry and now, they are all gone. They have graded it away.
98 R: NG GL says they have come to in place of cocoa they now have […]
99 which is doing so well in education, so if your cocoa farm has gone
100 away and they are now paying your school fees through […] and
101 building schools, they built […] College they have done this. You
102 have an ICT training centre, then what is the difference?
103 P1**:** […] previously, how we were managing ourselves quite differs from
104 how they tell us that things are going. That […] support you are
105 talking is not easy, and not all people get access to it. It's a […] even
106 those within the NGGL use the […] system. We, the villagers
107 and the poor people, when you go there, they don't look at you.

Thus, the activists engaged in positive self-representation through scalar comparison. For example, by juxtaposing the pre-mining and post-mining eras, P1 positioned impacted communities as environmental stewards and the company as environmental villains. This is evident in the assertion that before mining came into being, "[…] all here were cocoa farms, they were full of crops, fruits, and vegetables and now look at it" (Extract 5, lines 93-94). Inviting P1's interlocutor to "now look at it' shows P1's sensing-making is based on embodied action at a place and disembodied past positive practices associated with the place. For instance, disembodied practices like cocoa farming, which hitherto greened the environment afford how P1 expresses a negative attitude on NGGL's impact. This suggests that activists' sense-making is significantly influenced by place semiotics and social practices in place. Besides, the activists used lexicalisation to resist the reproduction of NGGL's positive self-representation. For example, in extract 5, lines 98-102, R mentioned NGGL's good works such as providing educational facilities, constructing a nursing training college, and building ICT infrastructure to counter activists' negative othering. But P1 counters NGGL's corporate social responsibility discourse through categorisation between "those within Newmont Ghana Gold Limited system" as beneficiaries and "We the villagers", and "the poor people", who are excluded from mining benefits. The exclusion of P1's group is linguistically expressed as "they don't look at us". This symbolises the abstract discourse that it is the urban middle class that benefits from mining, whereas the mining-affected communities bore mining's socio-environmental costs.

The next section focuses on how NGLL is self-represented as an environmental steward and a survivor of a "tragic accident" who has learned lessons.

3.3.4 Analysis of corporate text to reveal positive self-representation

First, we analyse how the company uses a visual to portray its environmental stewardship. A critical reading of the elements in the photograph must reveal that NGGL perceives sustainability as nested. That is to say, human-made systems and biological systems are interconnected in harmony. This is evident in the showing of a river basin surrounded by sparse human systems and a completely green natural vegetative cover. This visual texturing positioned the company as one that believes that the extraction of finite resources, natural water bodies, and human settlement co-exist harmoniously. Portraying a harmonious existence among natural and human activities could serve to enrobe critics into believing that NGGL is sustaining the ecology. Also, by placing the sparse human settlement behind the riverine vegetative cover and by the enhanced graphics of the biological entities, the representation foregrounded the biological entities and backgrounded the human systems. This is consistent with sustainable development Discourse respect for biological entities. Foregrounding biological entities can serve to portray the company as one that places a premium on sustaining the ecology rather than sustaining continuous mining. This may function as a counter to the critique that the mining industry's use of SD had 'emptied' its ecological meaning for economic variables such as an increase in shareholder value and increased public infrastructure services.

Another possible interpretation is that the phrase "Beyond the mine" in its visual semiotic aggregates suggests an organic metaphorical structuring. That is, NGGL is telling its readers that just as living organisms and human beings grow through socialisation, the mining industry has grown from 'the old bad practices' to a new sustainable mining practice. And that with the 'new sustainable mining' NGGL can use planned activities to trigger ecological regeneration beyond a focus on increasing shareholder value. Still, if looked at in terms of the fate of entities in the post-mine era, the phrase "Beyond the mine" and the beautiful scenery in which it is located evokes the extractive industry's rhetoric of 'reassurance' discourse. By this, NGGL persuades its stakeholders that its reclamation activities can extend the lives of fauna and flora beyond the mine's life cycle. This counters civil society's lamentations that they are suffering from mining's effect on their health, land, and social practices.

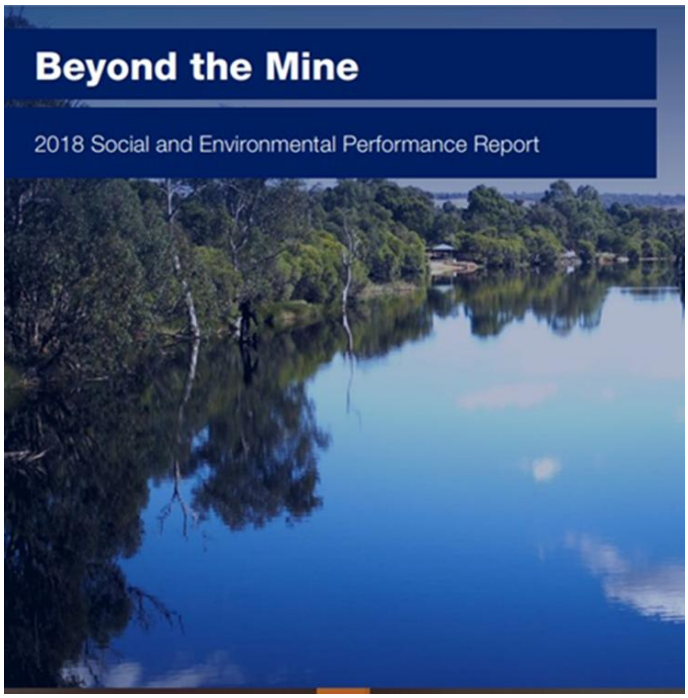

Figure 2: Extract from the title page of NGGL's Sustainability Report 2018

Despite this texturing, Capitalism, we are told, neutralises potential or real critique through the adoption of the language of its critics such as civil society (cf. Kirsch, 2010). Therefore, the phrase "Beyond the mine" in its semiotic aggregate functions to de-emphasise the notion that sustainable mining is "a corporate oxymoron." It does this by counter-projecting a harmonious relationship between extracting finite resources, protecting the ecology, and ensuring distributive justice. In other words, the phrase in its semiotic aggregates enrobes the reader in the belief that gold extraction and 'strong sustainability' are mutually inclusive.

Consistent with the foregoing, the CEO's Letter to the shareholders and stakeholders portrayed NGGL as an environmental steward, accountable, socially responsible, and a survivor. First, the letter to stakeholders represented the company as a survivor of an accident "resulting in six fatalities and the death of a colleague […]". One way the CEO's Letter sought to self-represent positively is through a discursive strategy of abstracting the death of six employees as "fatalities" whereas the death of a single employee of another project is represented using the word "death" and absolute numbers. Abstracting the relatively large numbers of deaths amounts to using language to downplay and discursively transform the crisis of capitalism and capitalist organisation. For example, the lexical "fatalities" 'give off' the possible meaning that the accident is naturally predetermined and, therefore, inevitable. Additionally, the CEO's choice of "fatalities" within a text environment where "death" is used to refer to a single case suggests the *technologisation* of diction. That is the CEO used "fatalities" to euphemize the loss of six lives (thereby emptying the sympathies that would have accrued to the bereaved families) and *de-agentialise* the accident, to legitimise the company. Second, the CEO sought to legitimise the company by placing the accident narrative in the first position, a place where most CEO letters place "an optimistic general overview" of their company's annual performance (cf. Breeze, 2012). Rather than a felicitous opening, the letter opens with a recognition of the significant role safety plays in sustaining the business's profitability, environmental sustainability, and obtaining a social license to operate. The blending of social responsibility, sustainability, and profitability in a statement on the significance of safety to the company has ideological consequences. It is another way corporations appropriate the language of their critics and manage critique, such that recognition and harm are transformed into the cynicism that freezes resistance. Another interpretation is that the CEO blended the discourses to allay possible fears of shareholders about the negative implications on company profits. Additionally, the interdiscursive texturing positioned the safety discourse as the most important because the rest "[…] are anchored, first and foremost, in strong safety cultures" (Extract 6, lines 60 and 61). By prioritising the safety discourse, the CEO sets the tone for the NGGL's claim to legitimacy even before the company's safety performance is presented to the stakeholders. Perhaps the purpose is to create an impression in the minds of readers of a company which knows that a strong safety culture is fundamental to attaining the bottom financial line and social acceptance. Given this knowledge, the occurrence of accidents on the company's sites can only be a force majeure. This is supported by the description of the accident as a "tragic accident" which necessitated "a sober reflection" (Extract 6, lines 61-64).

Extract 6

60: Responsible, sustainable, and profitable businesses are anchored, first
61: and foremost, 61: in strong safety cultures. The tragic accident in
62: Ghana at our […] Mill Expansion project in April–resulting in six
63: fatalities–and the death of a colleague working underground at […]
64 underground operations in […] in November, serve as sobering.
64: reminders that nothing is more important than everyone going home
65 safely. The loss of 65: Of our colleagues will have a lasting impact on
66: their families, friends and the entire Newmont family. Following in
67 depth investigations, we are applying lessons learned from both
68 accidents across our business, while sharing our learnings with the
69 broader mining industry to help prevent similar accidents from ever
70 happening again. We have redoubled our efforts to fully integrate our
71 Fatality Risk Management programs across our sites while consistently
72 applying the critical controls we have in places to keep people safe.

Representing the event as one that triggered a "sobering reminder" is intended to tell the reader that NGGL is already doing safety. However, the accident awakened the company to reflect further on its existing safety protocols. This is yet another strategy corporations use to prevent criticism and stakeholders' demand for political reforms. The discursive strategy to avoid stiffer regulation is verbally expressed as "we are applying lessons learned from both accidents across our business". The trick could be to let the company say it regrets the events and indicate that it is taking action to prevent their occurrence in the future. This way, civil society will have no grounds to make demands on the state for stronger regulation and enforcement of safety codes. Besides, portraying the company as a remorseful one that learned from previous accidents symbolises the broader discourse of corporate citizenship whereby corporations have hearts and consciences to be remorseful. Yet, civil society, such as mining-affected individuals, know that "the emperor is still naked". Additionally, the company intends to "sharing our learnings with the broader mining industry to help prevent similar accidents" positioned the company as emerging from the accident stronger and wiser to play the leadership role of helping other industry players forestall future accidents.

The CEO's Letter uses personal pronouns to achieve a rhetoric of solidarity with the affected families and portrays the company to the stakeholders as a co-affected person. For instance, the CEO used the first-person plural, "we", to position himself relative to other employees as equals. Also, the word "colleagues" is used twice in the extract as an attempt to bring the CEO down to the level of the employees. The discursive positioning of the more powerful CEO as a co-employee of the company opens a discourse of solidarity and fellow feeling with the families and work colleagues of the departed. This is expressed as "The loss of our colleagues will have a lasting impact on their families, friends, and the entire NGGL family". Of course, the death of six people in a mine can have a "lasting impact" on shareholders' decision to retain their shares in the company and impact the company's ability to raise the requisite capital. The net consequence of this may be a loss of company reputation and a reduction in its share value. It is, for this reason, that the CEO's Letter solidarizes with all stakeholders and offers solutions to assure shareholders that their assets are safe. The agency of the company can be realised in the use of the first-person plural "we" plus an action verb. For instance, the actions of "Following in-depth investigations" and on which basis "we are applying lessons learned", as well as "[…] sharing our learnings […]" and "to help prevent similar accidents […]" are markers of the company's agency claims.

4. Discussion

This study set out to understand how stakeholders' choice of a mediational means over another *indexicalise* the stakeholders' values, interests and beliefs manifested in the discursive strategies of positive in-group and negative out-group representations. Very little or nothing was found in the mining and community relations literature about this article's subject matter.

The observation that the social actors' positioning influenced the choice of semiotic resources used to communicate the company's impact is consistent with Davies and Harre (2001). Activists positioning themselves as victims impacted their choice of places, objects, and people as evidence of negative impacts. NGGL, being aware of its positioning as a destroyer of the environment, influenced its use of visuals and words to downplay its impacts on human lives and the environment. However, this study extends Davies and Harre's (2001) work by empirically demonstrating how an interview interaction can be structured to offer an interview participant access to language and non-language resources as evidence or images of an absent other in the time and place of the interviews.

Walton and Rivers' (2011) assertion that meaning-based analysis can help to reduce resource policy disputes is consistent with this study's observation. This study found that the knowledge of how semiotic resources which stakeholders used to engage in positive self-representative or negative othering evolved is an avenue for understanding why and how activists resist mining activities. For example, the use of memory and sense of a place in terms of cocoa farms, which have been graded away and the importance of cocoa farms to the livelihoods of the people can provide an empirical basis to understand activists' protests. Also, it can constitute the basis of policy measures aimed at managing the mining and community struggles. The reason is that mediational means are carriers of "sociocultural patterns and knowledge", and their active use transforms meaning and cultural tools and gives rise to new meanings (cf. Wertsch, 1994). Therefore, understanding and managing mining companies' and communities' struggles requires understanding the semiotic tools used and whose interest their use serves. Additionally, this study observed that the company used abstract visuals and lexical to construe a harmonious nexus between extraction and socio-ecological entities, thereby engaging in a positive self-representation. This is similar to Haalboom's (2011) conclusion that ecological modernisation and indigenous people's conservation can co-exist. However, ongoing events at the company's site are used to resist rather than co-exist with corporate executives' positive self-representation. In other words, analyses of community voices show that attestable real-time and place actions as well as discourse located in different times, places and media are used to counter-represent the mining company as producing ill health. This study's grounding in MDA explains why activists' and corporate executive voices, which occurred at different sociolinguistic scales, have been tracked and connected. The implication is that the nexus analysis notion of discourse as *recontextualisation* of social practice across scale is relevant in following up and linking practices, places, and objects which are used to position a self as a victim and the other as an aggressor. The dichotomy between corporate representations and activists' voices is similar to Whitmore's (2006). Whitmore (2006) observed that despite the mining industry's sustainability claim, from the perspective of mining-affected communities, nothing appeared to have changed. Moreover, this study's observation of polemic in corporate and activists' mediational means choices and how they are used to position social actors differently is consistent with Frederiksen and Banks (2023) and Onn and Woodley (2014). They observed that the mining industry's SD discourse is one thing, and its actions in the material world are another. Thus, effective engagement between mining companies and communities must engender an interchange of discourses. One way to do this is through a focus on social action as the unit of analysis. The reason is that social action, unlike groups, is non-reductive, hence providing an opportunity to understand a social issue in its complexity(cf. Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Wertsch, 1994). The practice of touring places, taking photographs and talking about linkages between events, objects and social practices as means of creating an image for the self and others illustrates the usefulness of a mediated action approach.

Snow et al. (2019) is like this study's finding that although both activists and a mining company used visuals to represent socio-environmental impact, the two varied on the level of concreteness and how they all positioned a mining company relative to adverse impacts. This indexed this study's view that stakeholders' mediational means choices do ideological works. Thus, to promote harmonious relations between mining companies and communities, there is a need to understand the interest and values behind the choice of the semiotic tools that stakeholders use to represent corporate impact. This can inform policy-makers as to whether or not corporate executive intends to undercut the impact of their activities or activists intend to magnify their situation to

mobilise support. Ocaklı et al. (2021) have noted that despite different ways of valuing mining impact, corporate executives combined the discourses of self-interest rationale versus cooperative motives to delegitimise alternative ways of valuing mining impacts. Similarly, despite a clear-cut issue of the death of employees on a company's site, the interdiscursive structuring of the CEO's text revealed how the CEO uses a combination of discourses to anticipate, restructure or transform its possible discursive positioning of the company as the cause of death of employees to a position of a survivor of a tragic accident. This observation re-echoes the point that though corporations' impacts may exist materially, how they are communicated is dependent on the discourse positioning of the communicating stakeholder.

This study's observations fill in the silences pointed out in the literature review. Very little was found in the literature about how social actors used cycle of discourses to position themselves and others relative to impacts. A significant finding is that analysis of the discourse cycles intersecting at the interview interaction provided an opportunity to understand the far and near experiences that influenced how and what is represented. Thus, if the analysis is focused on what is in the immediate situational environment only, a distorted view of the motivation for activists' positioning of NGGL as endangering human lives is likely. Also, several studies (such as Benford, 1997; Gray et al., 2007; Haalboom, 2011) neglected the influence of ethnographic settings on frame choices. An interesting finding is that activists' sense-making of the company's impacts takes a significant part of their meaning from where they occur and their interaction with other discourses in place. A possible explanation for this can be this study's focus on the accounts of actions as the unit of analysis and its choice of interview tour of physical setting as a means of generating ethnographic data.

5. Conclusion

We conclude that understanding the politics of mining impacts representation must be understood as involving an irreducible tension between 'what is out there' in the physical settings, on the one hand, and the stakeholder's ideological use of 'what is out there' to engage in either positive self-representation or negative othering. Also, it is concluded that to understand how activists position mining negatively, there is the need to expand the circumference beyond a single moment of action to consider complex relationships in different moments, places and media because they bring different practices and experiences. We recommend that future studies on positive self-representation and negative othering using mining stakeholders' impact discourses be conducted using the same media as objects of analysis. Further, policy measures aimed at resolving mining companies and communities' struggles must uncover the hidden interests in the semiotic resources used to communicate impact.

Disclosure statement

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