

## Meaning Ambivalence through the Expression of Relative Distance in Road-side Sign-posts

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### Abstract

*Written discourse, like dialogical discourse types, consists of sequences of ordered speech acts that convey communicative action and promote the negotiation of meaning in situated contexts. This paper aims at offering a general account of the structure and functions of speech act sequences as conceptualised by individuals based on the circumstance of reading the message contained in signposts through the expression of relative distance. The written discourse in question is both graphics and visuals as the two combine to effect variations in meaning to different decoders through the instrumentality of mediation, which, by our intent, is termed 'meaning ambivalence'. Ambivalence here is in view of the fact that what is someone's preference may be another person's dislike, and what is in-depth at a point may be a scratch on the surface at another, depending on the perspective of viewing and the viewer's propensity and disposition. Within the speech act theoretical framework, presupposition was adopted as it offers several planes of pragmatic assumptions. These assumptions include the factive, the structural, the lexical and the existential. With relative distance attached to the perusal of messages contained on signposts, an opinion initially held may suffer diffusion, just as imagination may turn to reality. It was discovered after analysis, that colour separation and mixture serve as determinants of meaning construction to the audience at different moments of the day (given the realities of road usage) as purportedly orchestrated by the encoder. It was thereby concluded analogically that getting the fact of a matter requires some level of proximity and that uncovering the truth of a matter may involve extra ordinary devices and time.*

**Keywords:** *meaning ambivalence, signposts, colour separation and graphic mixture, speech act*

### Introduction

Written discourse, like dialogical discourse types (conversation, court trials, news interviews, political debates, classroom lectures, interactions via chat or service encounters) consists of

sequences of ordered speech acts that convey communicative action and promote the negotiation of meaning in situated contexts-(Felix-Brasdefer (2014). The term “speech act sequence” was an extension of speech act theory (Austin 1962, Searle 1969) to account for the coherence and function of speech act sequences in conversation. The concern of this paper being the written discourse on roadside signposts, is in tandem with Wittgenstein (1958) *Philosophical investigations* in that words are actions with different functions and that the meaning of a word is found in “its use in the language” (p. 20).

The order of the written discourse on a signpost such as the use of capitalization, lower case letters, placement of words, font-size, colour, including symbols is indicative of the purported message or actions performed by a writer. Embedded in a situated context (the roadside signpost in this case) is a communicative exchange, between two or more interlocutors. The interlocutors from both ends are the implied senders of the message contained in a signpost and the target audience including others outside the target audience –the general public.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to offer a general account of the structure and functions of such speech act sequences as conceptualised by individuals based on the circumstance of reading the message contained in the signpost through the expression of relative distance. It is worthy of note that early philosophers and proponents of speech act (Austin, 1962, Searle, 1969) and later work (1975, 1976, 1992, 2010) were concerned with the structure of utterances (or written texts) with respect to their meaning, use and action.

Any Nigerian political enthusiasts would not easily forget the ‘Gan-Dollarisation’ of Kano politics preparatory to the 2019 general elections. Newspapers’ headlines and columns similarly portray meaning ambivalence that could be least thought of. Imagine *The Punch* column tagged “**adam & eve**”. The Saturday, February 8 edition had the caption:

**How many times should a couple have sex in a week?**

(*The Punch*, Saturday 8 February, 2020, p. 15)

Given the religious inclination of the column, the tone of the language as decided by the two *Punch* correspondents that went to town to seek people’s responses on the issue would be

expected to differ in the thinking of the pious. As an allusion to the biblical statement, the caption, probably would have read:

How many times should a couple 'know' each other in a week?

The correspondents may nevertheless be seen as being socio-religious or acting in the name of professionalism. The non-print media, the television is not an exception in news casting that seems to have multiple meanings. Noting the headlines in print that runs under the newscaster only may not be enough to decide occurrences unless one juxtaposes the print with the 'voice'.

Channels TV 10pm news relayed on November 15, 2019 has as one of its headlines:

**Presidential election: Buhari qualifies to run**

However, in the course of the news cast, the headline changes to:

**Buhari qualifies to have contested**

This was on the day set aside by the Nigeria apex court to give reasons for the dismissal of Atiku's appeal at the Supreme Court:

**APEX COURT GIVES REASONS FOR DISMISSING ATIKU'S APPEAL**

While the first headline, '**Presidential election: Buhari qualifies to run**' gives the impression of a commissive act, a commitment to a future action, the second headline '**Buhari qualifies to have contested**' that replaces the first within a couple of minutes gives the impression of a representative act, a piece of information on a concluded act. One can see the working of the human psyche, including professionals.

Of the three facets of speech act, (locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary) it is the illocutionary act that represents the focal point of speech act theory because it centres on the speaker's intentions when performing speech acts. In the signposts under consideration in this paper, dominant are such acts as informing (representative), making an offer (commissives), requesting (directives) and appealing (expressive).

**Expression of relative distance**

Expression of relative distance relating to roadside signposts implies the circumstance under which such message is read. Searle (1969:10) stated that “all linguistic communication involves linguistic acts”. Communication implies that the illocutionary force expressed by speaker A is recognised and acknowledged, under appropriate circumstances, by speaker B. Due to the circumstance of reading the message on the signpost, a variety of responses are generated. The pragmatic meaning and understanding generated by readers in a fast-moving vehicle or any automobile may be different from readers walking by. The meaning generated from a far-off, on a given signpost often changes when the readers are close-by, more so when some linguistic items within the signpost discourse vary in size and colour. It depends on the point of view in literary terms. This brings about meaning ambivalence, a similitude of the mirage seen at a distance on a sunny afternoon on the highway which, on getting to the spot vanishes. It is therefore a question of illusion versus reality likes and dislikes conservatism and radicalism.

Illocutionary acts, by convention, “invites a response or a sequel” (Austin, 1962:117). A response can be realised through head nods, prosodic features (e.g., low or rising intonation), or by gesture.

### **Point of view (POV)**

The study of point of view in language aims at “exploring the ways in which things are made to look in language” and focuses “on language as representations, as a projection of positions and perspectives” (Simpson, 1993:2). This implies that the use of language and, by extension the design of a signpost indicates writers’ or speakers’ point of view. In the opinion of Rasley (2008:9), “a point of view is the perspective from which the reader experiences the action of the story.” In literary writing or narrative, POV is an essential part of developing plot and character as it adds subtext, secrets and suspense to a narrative. Rasley’s narrator’s worldview can be optimistic or pessimistic, naive and cynical, suspicious or trusting; it could also have a political outlook or religious faith that colours his view. McIntyre (2006) considers a cognitive stylistic approach to viewpoint in drama and other text types. This work, in particular, provides insights into writers’ of signposts worldview as represented in the Nigerian context.

The literal (i.e. non-metaphorical) sense of ‘point of view’ (an ‘angle of vision’ as Wales (2001:300) defines it as an important aspect of the phenomenon of view point, and it is from this that the metaphorical senses of the term are analogized. The fact that ‘point of view’ has overt visual connotations is a criticism often leveled at those writers who prefer this term, which of course suits our own motive in this paper. Such criticism was led by Genette (1980) and others like Bal (1997) who would prefer the term ‘focalisation’.

Uspensky (1973), however, asserts that point of view exists in four ‘planes’, these being the spatial and temporal plane, the ideological plane, the phraseological plane and the psychological plane. To Uspensky, both spatial and temporal points of view exist on the same ‘plane’. Spatial point of view, refers to the special position from which a scene is viewed. This is where the issue of relative distance comes in when a given signpost is being visualized. Temporal point of view focuses on the frictional representation of events from a particular position in time. The concepts of distance and proximity apply metaphorically to a temporal viewpoint.

Uspensky (1973:8) explains that point of view on the ideological plane is concerned with the question of “{...} whose point of view does the author assume when he evaluates and perceives ideologically, the world which he described?” Semino (2002:97) opines that ideological points of view “capture those aspects of world views that are social, cultural, religious or political in origin, and which an individual is likely to share with others belonging to similar social, cultural, religious or political groups”. In Uspensky’s taxonomy, point of view on the phraseology plane has to do with the viewpoint effects that can arise as a result of an author’s choices with regard to the presentation of speech and thought. This plane also concerns the naming of characters. Psychological point of view is all about the choices an author makes with regard to the various ways in which a story might be narrated or a message might be presented. The first plane - point of view on the spatial and temporal plane - is more useful for the present study because it provides the tools for the identification of ambivalence in meaning from different perspectives on the issue of roadside signposts.

In conventional analysis, the signpost belongs to ‘a fact giving genre’. The nature of the genre involved is strongly determined by the specificity of the activity type and its particular institutional embedding. What happens concerning roadside signposts can be termed as a social

activity, what Verschueren (1999:157-158) termed 'language use from real life'. Our analysis will show what happens in that circumstance which cannot be accounted for unless we assume interaction of some kind. This is what Verschueren would like to demonstrate given the fact that meaning generation is always dynamic and interactive. Meaning generation has to be counterbalanced by a methodology re-attachment of meaning to empirically observable facts of language.

In a layman's way of understanding meaning ambivalence, an inspirational speaker said at a gathering:

**'The best days of my life were the days I spent with another man's wife...'**

The audience was in shock, and silence prevailed. The speaker added: **'and she is my mother'**. A big round of applause and laughter followed. One man who listened to the speech decided to crack the same joke at home. After dinner, he said to his wife: 'The best days of my life were the days I spent with another man's wife.... 'After a moment he tried to recall the second line.... By the time he regained his senses, he was on a hospital bed, recovering from burns from hot water poured by his wife.

What an unfortunate scenario! The perlocution (effect) of the inspirational speaker's statement and that of the man who wanted to achieve a similar humour at home were purported to be similar; but eventually, the issue of relative distance between the initiation of a speech and its completion played out differently. Even if the temporal plane between the inspirational speaker's first statement and the additional clause (... and she is my mother) was wider than the one attempted by the man at home, reaction by the audience would never be the same as the man's wife's reaction, given the fact that context of situation differs. While defeasibility of initial proposition occurs on the completion of the utterance by the inspirational speaker, the relative distance attendant between the first statement by the man and the 'silence fillers' has the resultant perlocution of a factual presupposition of promiscuity as inferred by the man's wife.

Another instance relates to a report from *The Nation's* correspondent (Damola Kola Dare, *The Nation*, Nov. 7, 2019, p.9) with the caption:

## **Baby factories thrive against all odds (2)**

### **A tour of a baby factory**

This reporter visited one of the ‘factories’ in Ikotun area of Lagos State.

The house ... had previously been used as a hotel. A non-descript signpost with the inscription: **Helsmotic International Hotel Limited**, fixed on the giant fence apparently to disabuse people’s mind concerning what is being done in the building.

In the first place, the crafting of the caption is ambiguous. A discerning mind might want to question the possibility of a factory producing babies, or was the factory dealing in materials meant for babies’ use. The inscription ‘**Helsmotic International Hotel Limited**’ and what the message entails in juxtaposition with the ‘activities’ that went on inside the ‘Hotels’ is another level of meaning ambivalence. It is the question of assumption versus reality that the reporter intended to capture through his narrative thus:

Baby factories’ may appear new as a ‘business’, but the illicit trade like a rampaging fire has continued to boom, despite the crackdown by security agents. But it keeps taking new forms, involving young girls and women sheltered under quasi-orphanages where they are encouraged to get pregnant, sell their babies to desperate and or willing childless couples at ridiculous fees,

.—Damola Kola Dare reports. ---*The Nation*, Thursday Nov. 7

The outbreak of a deadly disease named ‘CORONAVIRUS’ was changed to ‘COVID-19’ in consideration of the kind of meaning ambivalence the name can generate with respect to the stigmatizing effect on the city of Corona in China, the location of its first occurrence. Interpreted meaning goes beyond inferred meaning, accommodating also the relevant social-context information (Schneider and Barron, 2014:43). In essence, meaning is not a static construct situated in the text, nor is it context-independent.

## **Methodology**

This study is descriptive and qualitative. Data for the study were gathered from roadside signposts along Oyo-Ibadan, Ibadan-Lagos highways including the intra-city road network. We chose the highways because of its importance as a link between the South-west and the North, and Ibadan, owing to its largeness as a mega-city where many people reside or pass through, and are expected to view the signposts. The signposts were four in number and a leaflet with the headline ‘The Joy of the Lord’, purposively selected with consideration given to the aesthetics and level of digital mediation. ‘Mediated link’ which is an indirect connectedness is concerned with connection between social reality and discourse (van Dijk 2008, 2009).

Impressions of the signposts visuals/print messages were taken using a digital camera. Alternatively, leaflets of some signposts were sourced from the sponsors and through the Internet, especially that of GOLDBERG. The signposts contents referred to as texts were subjected to a semiotic discourse analysis using insights and theories of pragmatics and point of view.

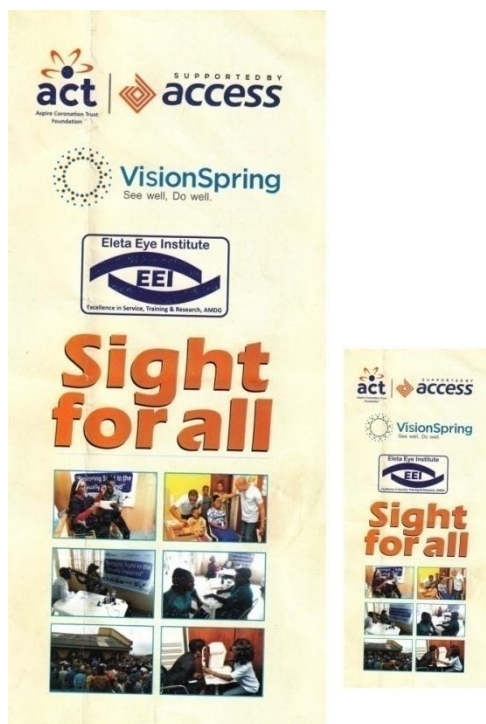
## **Analysis and discussion**

The analysis of different texts culminating in multiple meaning resources or at least ambivalent meaning to individuals is presented in this section.

Consideration is given in turn to the semiotic values of five (5) texts on eye care institute (EEI) (sight for all), a bank advert (Stanbic IBTC), Goldberg, house-ownership, and a song album-launching signposts, bringing to the fore how the notion of relative distance was brought to bear on each text courtesy of computer mediation.

The analysis and discussion of texts will be in the order of visuals followed by the analysis.

**Text 1:**



The message contained in text '1' read at a far distance shows only 'act', 'access', 'Vision Spring' 'Sight for all' following a speech act classification sequence of 'directive', 'directive', 'representative' and 'representative' respectively. A close reading of the first segment of information on the signpost (probably through magnifying glasses) automatically reveals that the word 'act' is not even a verbal element (directive) but a nominal, a proper noun for that matter signalling a 'Foundation' i.e. ACT Foundation, or its full meaning – Aspire Coronation Trust Foundation. The choice of the lower case for 'act' is obviously a deliberate violation of acronyms (an abbreviation consisting of initial letters that are read like an ordinary word, Haspelmath and Sims, 2010:318) which ordinary should read 'ACT'. This is for symbolic reasons, more so with the mind-set of 'flagrance' suggested by the picture of a 'flower' on top of 'act'. The notion of a 'directive' initiated by 'act' continues to affect "access", which of course is not also a directive, when read along with the phrasal antecedent "SUPPORTED BY...". This is to further strengthen the thrust of this paper, which is, 'creation of multiple meanings (meaning ambivalence) through relative distance maintained between road-side sign-posts and the reader at

different points in time. The word ‘access’ is also a nominal when read along with the antecedent phrase ‘SUPPORTED BY’. The complete message then reads:

**act (Aspire Coronation Trust Foundation) SUPPORTED BY access.** Grammatically, the message turned out to be ‘representative’ and it is pragmatically informing, the alternation of lower case with capitalization and the varying font size of letters notwithstanding.

The essence of the ‘act Foundation’ is realized with the trade mark name “**VisionSpring**” coupled with the underneath slogan – “see well, do well. Eleta Eye Institute” – inscribed in the rectangular box that follows has its acronym –EEI embedded in a figure that, when viewed from a relatively long distance has a resemblance of the ‘eye’ ball, the main preoccupation of the Foundation cum Institute. The comparatively boldest print of all the inscriptions in the sign-post advert – **Sight for all** – serves as the crux of the entire message (theme) intended for the readers/audience. The six pictures under the thematic statement, (sight for all), representative speech act, are performatively informative of activities that go on in the Institute, a make-believe, which ‘VisionSpring’ metaphorises. The slogan, *See well, Do well*, belongs to the directive speech act in the sequence of information contained in the signpost.

The totality of the message in Text 1 relates to the field of medicine, particularly, a specialization in eye care, which the pictures demonstrate. Without the pictures and other clue words like ‘foundation’ ‘institute’, the statement ‘Sight for all’ could easily pass for a call to a crusade where miracle workers under the name of a given religion or sect promise a re-enactment of what Jesus Christ (called Prophet Issa by Muslims) did in the Holy Book(s).

## Text 2:



Text 2 conspicuously shows the visuals where one's thinking may be in the direction of costume manufacturing, going by the uniformity of the bag, the purse and the open-toe, slingback shoe. The sharp blue background colour, the black stripes and the red stars that dotted the blue are certainly part of the aesthetic values of the "things that go together". In this text (2), the costume can be regarded as indexical signs. This is in line with Cook's (2001:74) definition of index as "a sign which points to something else by virtue of casual relationship". The wearing of these costumes by a lady is suggestive of the fact that the wearer of the attire got everything she needed in "one colour", meaning that all banking services required of a customer can be achieved in one bank – Stanbic IBTC. Wearing items that match one another in terms of colour combination is an attitudinal meaning with the impression that the wearer is trendy.

Obviously, the combination of the three items is the SOMETHINGS (that) GO TOGETHER when it comes to a lady's attire for any important occasion or the need to appear gay, radiant and inviting to any on-looker. The white colour of the advert headline 'SOMETHINGS GO TOGETHER' against the orange background is a good foregrounding device; the orange colour then fades away into a whitish background towards the centre where 'the bag, the purse and the open-toe, slingback shoe' show conspicuously even from a relatively far distance. The headline and the materials (SOMETHINGS GO TOGETHER), that is, the script and the visuals are in a sym-biotic relationship and may be the only two items visible on the sign-post in the evening

time when the weather is becoming dark. On a closer look, other pieces of information appear clearer, thus giving clue to thinking otherwise that SOMETHINGS (that) GO TOGETHER are really not in line with costume manufacturing/wearing but rather an allusion and a metaphor for the operations of the Stanbic IBTC, a commercial bank. Somethings that go together are therefore explained in the words that come immediately under the advert headline:

STANBIC IBTC CARDS AND  
STANBIC IBTC ATM/POS MACHINES

Linguistically, the two lines above serve as a parenthesis to the headline. It is not surprising then to see below the text above a reiterative device thus:

*When you match things that go together, they work better for you,  
Like using Stanbic Cards and Stanbic IBTC ATM.*

The suspense initiated by the headline is unravelled in the complex sentence below it. The pictures therefore turn out to be analogical to the import of the advert by Stanbic IBTC. The benefits of such conduciveness are therefore itemized under the visuals of things that go together. The advert is representative speech act dominant. Further information concerning the ‘celebration of 30 Years of Stanbic IBTC existence’ is backgrounded due to the space, font size of letters and location of the said information with the coverage of the advert. This is an implicature of the priority given to ‘... using Stanbic IBTC Cards and Stanbic IBTC ATM’ over the issue of 30 Years Celebration. At times, when information is offered about the year of establishment of the sponsors, the essence is to prove that they are mature in the act. Secondary meanings that can be read into the signposts are the use about iconographical figures. For example, through the iconic image of Stanbic IBTC, information is revealed about the sponsors of the signposts.

### Text 3



The text (3) on Goldberg (an alcoholic) portrays meaning ambivalence from different points of view. From the religious angle especially Muslim faithful whose religious injunction forbids the consumption of alcohol, the extra-ordinarily conspicuous signboard on the highway (for it stretches across the dual-four lane road) showing from afar off – **RESPECT Goldberg** – is an abomination. To the addict of alcohol, it is a welcome idea. A close range perusal of the whole text (advert) reveals that the information contained on the board is more than the big bottle of Goldberg (visual) and the bold print –**RESPECT**, more so when the colour of the print is white against a black background; whereas, the small print before respect –**THE MARK OF** – as well as the #tag –**Omoluabi** – after **RESPECT** is in red. The colour separation is a deliberate attempt to make some piece of information blurred and probably not noticeable to some readers at a time when the weather is not bright enough. Moving on from the meaning of a single colour, Leeuwen develops the theory that many different features shape the way we attach meaning to the colours we see in front of us, and the idea that colour schemes are more important than individual colours (Leeuwen 2011). From the non-religious perspective and reading the full text at a close range, the speech act classification changes from ‘directive’ (respect Goldberg) to ‘representative’ (Goldberg, the mark of respect). The ‘#Omoluabi’ that concludes the full text is

a code-switching device that takes cognizance of the locale of the advert. The ‘#Omoluabi’ is a Yoruba code (word) meaning ‘the virtuous’. There was a reversal of choice of code pertaining to which code was to be foregrounded. The Goldberg advert gives prominence to ‘RESPECT’ in terms of font and size and boldness in a location purported to be largely populated by the learned, reverts to giving prominence to ‘OMOLUABI’ whereby ‘the mark of respect’ becomes backgrounded. Such a signpost is designated for areas populated almost always. The choice of which code should be given prominence in a multilingual setting regarding signposts is in tandem with Anderson, Boeriis, Maagero and Tonnessen’s (2015) submission that language is context-sensitive, both in the sense that its categories are motivated by the (social) context in which language has a function, and in the sense that its categories reflect back on context by imposing a certain understanding of reality.

#### **Text 4**

Similar to Text 3 above is the one concerning house ownership.

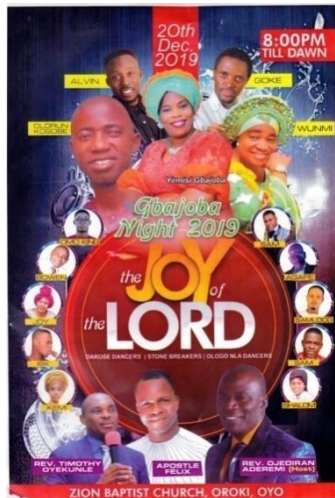


With the notion of relative distance, the information that first appeals to a passer-by viewing the sign-post is ‘LANDLORD’, and as one draws near, the other text –“With all the needs & accessories” – BECOMES glaring. The two taken together (LANDLORD with all the needs & accessories) is, potentially, a piece of information that belongs to the representative speech act. The message is enough to make someone envious. However, with the full text read as “**How to become a landlord with all the needs and accessories**”, the information changes to a ‘commissive’ speech act. Rather than feeling envious of being one of “those landlords with all

the needs and accessories” thought about initially, the ‘commissive’ opens the door for an opportunity that is not yet lost; hence, the ‘directive’ – **Contact us .....**– that follows on the signpost.

Unlike a signpost identifying a company or an enterprise, which does not require much ‘location’ information , signposts erected at conspicuous locations but different from the “home” of their sponsors contain information about how to locate sponsors .such information like ,mobile number, Gmail address ,etc. is contained at the bottom of the signposts with relatively smaller and lower case prints. Hence, the information about ‘contact us’ as demonstrated under Text 4.

### Text 5



Meaning ambivalence occurs as well at the level of grammaticality. With the Text 5, the printed words that appear to a viewer given the idea of relative distance is ‘JOY LORD’, which is gibberish; the full message however is ‘the JOY of the LORD’ which makes sense to the reader, more so when a close attention is given to the identity of personalities that aesthetically adorn the circular platform containing the theme of the advert.

Another noticeable fact is that information contained on a signpost on the highway is usually bolder and scanty, especially on a large ‘board’ with the sponsors’ consciousness of the speed at which the road users would pass by. Within the city, at places where the traffic is usually heavy

and particularly T-junctions where road users are expected to maintain a low speed, sign-posts contents are usually clumsy, and detailed with smaller size board on display.

## **Conclusion**

Going by the analysis and discussion so far, it is pertinent to opine that ‘meaning ambivalence’ is part of human nature. Only God is omniscience. The kind of meaning ambivalence or more than one interpretation to situations manifests in many human endeavours. In the legal practice, for instance, provision for both ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ opinions cannot be overruled, and on some occasions, the minority viewpoint ultimately wins over the majority, probably on technical ground. News reportage is often characterized by the phenomenon of meaning ambivalence, likewise the audience perception of information. As far as signposts’ adverts are concerned, meaning ambivalence is purportedly created or computer-mediated to achieve an end. This is because the authors of the messages on signposts are quite aware of the antics of advertising as well as the peculiarities of the traffic condition in Nigeria.

One should therefore be cautious about hasty conclusion on any issue whether it is personal or of public interest; two individuals may not always see things from the same point of view at a given time or moment. Respect for each other’s opinion is the imperative for forging a peaceful co-existence in an ever-changing world that is subject to mediation courtesy of technology.

Like in Halliday’s analysis, there is a tendency for verbalization to go with different meanings from those realized by visuals/gestures. With pragmatics looking at language as a form of action anchored in a real-world context, it is consequential to say that it must pay attention to types of meaning that go beyond what is given by the language form itself, or what is literally said. The essence of this investigation under the general term ‘implicit meaning’ becomes inevitable given the patterns and practice related to roadside signposts (Verschueren, 1999: 25). A critical discourse analysis of the sign-post as a text is a demonstration of multiple meaning interpretation utilizing a variety of tools that depart from purely linguistic and speech-act based examinations to the consideration of other semiotic resources like colour, typography or images pertaining to written communication.

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