

## **Semiotic Analysis of Vehicle Inscriptions on Selected Shuttle Buses in Oyo Town**

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### **Abstract**

Vehicle inscriptions are letters, numbers and designs pasted up or written on vehicles to communicate specific meaning to the public. Previous studies on inscriptions in Nigeria have focused on semantics, semiotics and pragmatics features and investigated genres such as cloth inscriptions, posters, banners and car stickers. However, none of these studies has significantly explored the modes and common themes in meaning negotiation. The semiotic model used in this analysis is Halliday's (1978) multisemiotics theory. The study found that the modes of the inscription in the selected shuttle buses are multimodal. Some inscriptions comprise of linguistic and visual, even spatial semiotic systems. All the linguistic semiotic systems are in written forms and they appear in English, Yoruba and Arabic languages. Common to all the shuttle buses is the colour; the plate numbers; and their brand. The vehicles selected have the unique colour cream and brown, which the people of Oyo town use to identify the buses as commercial vehicles. Also, all the shuttle buses under study are of the same brand – Suzuki, and the same engine capacity-Carrier 1.3 which are boldly written at the back door. The study concludes that the inscriptions on shuttle buses in Oyo town has been used successfully by their owners (drivers) to communicate sensitive meanings to the public.

**Key words:** Semiotic Analysis, Vehicle Inscriptions, Shuttle Buses, Oyo Town

### **Introduction**

Semiotics is the academic field dedicated to the study of signs and their meaning in the society. A sign is something that stands for something else – in other words, a sign is anything that can convey meaning. Words, drawings, photographs or traffic light can be signs. Modes and style of dress, the type of bag one carries, or even where one lives can also be considered as signs, in that they convey meaning. Just as syntax is the study of the relationship between signs; and semantics is the study of the relationship between signs and the things for which they stand; and pragmatics being the relationship between signs and their users, semiotics therefore studies signs and sign system and its components can be linguistic or non-linguistic. Generally, it has been acknowledged that semiotics as a science that studies signs focuses on how meanings are produced, encapsulated and encoded in signs recognized by all members of the society. We may not realize it, but in fact semiotics can be applied to all sorts of human endeavours including cinema, theatre, dance, architecture, painting, politics, medicine, history and religion. That is, a variety of gestures (signs) in everyday life is used to convey message to people around us.

It has been observed that shuttle buses drivers place inscription on their buses and it is a general opinion that people do things on purpose but most times, motorists write inscriptions on their vehicles which sometimes may portray meaningless messages to their audience and even to them. A study from these perspectives would illuminate the expression of beliefs, mood, socio-semiotic status and roles expressed by inscriptions on shuttle buses.

The present study analyses texts of inscriptions on shuttle buses from semiotic perspective of multimodal discourse. The data derive from socio semiotic analysis of the inscription. This research work introduced the idea of vehicle signs, how they function within systems and as tools for communication, and situate signs within codes. Consciously or unconsciously, inscriptions on vehicles have messages to pass across to readers or observers.

### **Statement of Research Problem**

Many scholars have pointed out the benefits of semiotic analysis to a comprehensive analysis of texts, especially multimodal texts (Noth 1995, Lemke 1998, Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001, Mathiessen 2007, Kress 2010). Studies on inscriptions in various forms and modes from the semiotic and related perspectives include graffiti (Noble 2004), adverts (Sarah 1998), posters and banners (Li 2014, Tri 2008), vehicle stickers (Chiluwa 2008). Faleke (2013) recent study on car inscription is carried out from Semantic perspectives. Lastly, Adeniyi (2014) analyses inscriptions on the clothes of selected students of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria in undergraduate project from a general semiotic perspective. However, none of these studies has significantly explored the common themes in vehicle inscription and the semiotic modes used to communicate meanings in the shuttle buses in Oyo town. This is the vacuum this paper intends to fill.

### **Aim and Objectives of the study**

This work aims at describing the inscriptions of some selected shuttle buses in Oyo town and it focuses on analyzing and interpreting the verbal and visual meaning of some of the inscriptions and finding common themes in the analysis of all those shuttle buses inscriptions.

### **Significance of the study**

The study of the buses' inscriptions will reveal a lot of information about the social and cultural contexts of communication, and more specifically, about the drivers' identities, beliefs and attitude. This study will enable students, teachers and general public to understand the behaviour and motive behind the buses' inscriptions.

### **Scope of the study**

This research study is carried out in Oyo town and it covers the semiotic description of the inscriptions found on some selected shuttle buses in Oyo town. It has been limited to the shuttle buses alone and Oyo town because of factors such as time, space, financial and material resources.

### **Models of Semiotics**

There are different models of semiotics, they include Cultural Semiotics, Literary Semiotics, Cognitive Semiotics, Structural Semiotics, Musical Semiotics, Computational Semiotics, Socio-semiotics and so forth.

- Cultural Semiotics

This is a central part of semiotics that is taught in traditional humanities and socio sciences programme such as language and literature, musicology and art and history. It is a model of semiotics that has

culture as a subject. It has the following two tasks:

- i. The study of sign systems in a culture with respect to what they contribute to the culture.
- ii. The study of culture and sign system with respect to the advantage which an individual experiences in belonging to a specific culture.

### **Literary Semiotics**

It is a branch of semiotics which has literature as its subject. Literary semiotics studies literary text as processes and product of signification and communication. The whole idea is to show how language defines the way writing can be represented in literature to a certain extent and how literature depicts the manner in which language functions and what purposes literary representation cites. The particular work of literature is originally meant to caution, to urge or to sensitize the society but when semiotic theories are applied to literature, it helps reader to understand the text, sociocultural background of the writer, characterisation which will help to arrive at a meaningful interpretation.

### **Cognitive Semiotics**

Cognitive semiotics is a subfield of cognitive linguistics in which cognitive linguistics views linguistic knowledge as part of general cognition. In other words, cognitive linguistics is of the opinion that linguistic behaviour is not separated from other general cognitive. Cognitive semiotics investigates linguistic principle and takes into account the different levels of linguistic analysis (Syntax, phonology and semantics). Similarly, cognitive Semiotics shows that language is symbolic in nature because it is based on the association between semantic and phonological representations. The first person to suggest the integration of cognitive science into semiotics is Thomas C. Daddesio (1994). There are five basic characteristics of cognitive semiotics which are combinations of semiotic theory and empirical research. These basic characteristics are: methodological triangulation, dynamism, influence of phenomenon and inter-disciplinary.

### **Structural Semiotics**

This involves the study of both the structural organization of text and the different social meaning that this text may generate. Structural semiotics looks beyond the text, the more obvious the structural organization, the more difficult to see beyond the surface feature. Structural semiotics emphasizes the role of signs in the construction of reality and demonstrates how the real world can be challenged or changed ultimately. Structural semiotics can help people understand how identity are constructed and structured.

### **Musical Semiotics**

This is the study of sign as it pertains to music on a variety of levels. Signs meaning in music happens essentially through the connotation of sounds and through the social construction, appropriation and amplification of certain meaning associated with this connotation. Musical semiotic was introduced by Roman Jakobson and Kofi Agawu.

### **Computational Semiotics**

This is an interdisciplinary field that applies conducts and draws a research in logic, mathematics and on the theory and practice of computation. It also relies on formal and natural language. It also looks at issues of artificial intelligence. Many of its application lies in the field of human computer interaction and fundamental devices of cognition. Computational Semiotics provides a mathematical frame work for the concept of knowledge processing. This type of semiotics also demonstrates the relationship between intelligent system and cognition.

## **Social Semiotics**

Socio-semiotic theory is interested in meaning making, in all its forms. Meaning arises in social environments and in social interactions. Social semiotics includes other modes of communication such as multimodality, music, dance, gesture, dress and everyday objects, among others which can as well enhance meaning production in a text or discourse. The core unit of semiotic is the sign, a fusion of form and meaning. The genesis of signs lies in actions. In semiosis, the active making of signs in social (inter) actions- signs are made rather than used. The focus on sign making rather than sign use is one of several features which distinguishes social- semiotics theory from other forms of semiotics.

Bateman (2008) observes that Halliday's social semiotics theory provides a framework from moving beyond "running commentaries" about multimodal phenomena to empirical validation of claims because the theory is concerned with the underlying design ("or grammar") of semiotic resources and their relations with each other, specified as inter-related semantic systems which are seen to fulfil four functions:

- (a) Experiential meaning to construe our experience of the world
- (b) Logical meaning to create logical relations between experiential meaning
- (c) Interpersonal meaning to enact social relations
- (d) Textual meaning to organize meanings into coherent messages in text

## **Theoretical Perspective**

Semiotics serves as the linguistic framework on which this study rests as it focuses on the use of language in real linguistic situations. In practical terms, semiotics can be more effectively captured as a sub-field of the semantics discipline that deals with meanings in the context of human activities and interaction. (Godwin 2015). Today, semiotics has established itself within the field of media, film, advertising, theatre practice, architecture, music, law, criminology, psychology, fine arts, fashion designs, anthropology and the natural sciences. It is a discipline that examines how meanings are produced, encapsulated and encoded in "signs" recognized by all members of the society (Godwin 2015)

Generally speaking, several semiotics theories and concepts have been developed, and several explanations have been offered on the nature of the phenomenon of semiotics, its scope and relationship with other field of study and its application to general phenomenon of life. We should note that the objects of semiotics are actions and artifacts that we use to communicate, whether they are produced with our vocal apparatus or by means of technology. Out of the many semiotic theories is the two most recognized theories which are; the Saussure's semiology and Peirce's Semiotics.

According to Peirce (1992), trichotomy is the act of making three-fold divisions. His trichotomy include:

- (a) Icons: according to him icon signifies resemblance. Icon is a sign that is made to resemble, simulate or reproduce its referent in some ways. Photograph may be an icon because it can be seen to reproduce its reference in a visual way.
- (b) Indexes: this signifies casual connection. It refers to something or someone in terms of its existence and location in time or space, or relation to something or someone.
- (c) Symbols: this signifies convention. Symbol is a sign that stands for its referent in an arbitrary and conventional way. Symbolicity is what set human representation apart from other species, and allowing human species to reflect upon the world separately from stimulus response situation

According to Saussure, sign relation is dyadic, consisting only of a form of sign (the signifier) and its meaning (the signified). Saussure saw the relation as being essentially arbitrary. That is, they are purely psychological; they were formed rather than substance. The signifier refers to the sound or image while the signified refers to the concept represented.

### **Multisemiotic Approach**

The theoretical framework for this study is the multisemiotic theory developed by Halliday. The choice of this semiotic theory was based on the relevance of the subject matter and the intention to limit the focus of the work. Multisemiotic is a recent development within Hallidayan systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and the expansion of the SLF theory from traditional linguistic and discourse issues to consideration of the meaning-making semiotics as a combination of and negotiation between different modal realizations. (O'Halloran 2015)

A text may be defined as multisemiotics or multimodal when it combines two or more semiotics systems. There are five semiotic systems in total:

- i. Linguistic semiotic system comprises of aspects such as vocabulary, structure, grammar of oral/written language
- ii. Visual semiotic system comprises of aspect such as colour, vectors and viewpoint in still and moving images
- iii. Audio semiotic system comprises of aspects such as volume, pitch and rhythm of music and sound effects
- iv. Gestural semiotic system has to do with aspects such as movement, facial expression and body language
- v. Spatial semiotic system comprises of aspects such as proximity, direction, position of layout, organization of objects in space.

### **Research Methodology**

The data for this study is inscriptions on shuttle buses in Oyo town. The selected data consists of seven shuttle buses with inscriptions. The qualitative research methodology is adopted for the analysis of data. The study adopted multisemiotic theory developed by Halliday. Data were collected by duly taking permission from shuttle bus owners. Some inscriptions on shuttle buses were randomly selected in Oyo town. During the collection of the data, it was observed that there were some buses that have more than one inscription; the inscriptions on such buses were all recorded while those buses with similar inscriptions that have already been recorded were ignored. The data is subjected to semiotic analysis. Also, each sentence is labelled figure 1, figure 2, figure 3 and so forth for ease of reference. The choice of selecting just seven buses was necessitated by the fact that studying more than these populations would not be plausible in a study like this due to some logistic reasons, which include time constraint. The purposive sampling technique was used to arrive at the selection of these vehicle inscriptions:

### **Data analysis**

Inscription according to Oxford Advanced Learner's (11<sup>th</sup> Edition) are words that are written or cut in something which often has a message on it. In other words, an inscription is a device of passing messages across to a reader, that is, from a writer to a reader in form of written text. For the purpose of this research, multisemiotic theory is used to analyse the data.

**Figure one**



On this vehicle is an inscription “bintin laye”; a Yoruba word that is interpreted as “the world is small”. He is probably using this to tell the society to take things easy as the world is a small place. CR7 is another inscription on this vehicle; CR7 stands for Cristiano Ronaldo, a Portuguese professional football player who plays on number seven (forward) for an Italian club Juventus. A picture of an umbrella is also found on this vehicle. The driver may have put this inscription to tell passengers that they are covered being onboard this vehicle.

**Figure two**



On this vehicle is the logo the inscription “oja sope”, a Yoruba statement that means “it ends in praise”. This driver is grateful because a particular situation attached to the vehicle ended in praise. Though one may not know which situation it was but we can deduce this with the elipsis “...” before the “ojasope” in blue colour that shows that words have been omitted to indicate the experience of the bus owner in the past.

Also, on the vehicle is the sticker of the National Union of Road and Transport Workers (NURTW) which is a kind of the driver's identity as a member of this association.

**Figure three**



This vehicle captured from the back view has about 15 inscriptions on it. This may simply mean that the owner is artistic and loves playing with colours, words and symbols. **80** is a figure written on a reflecting slate. This slate is a reflector to other vehicles at night. Even if the vehicle is not ignited or on motion, once there is a ray of light, the slate reflects and acts as indicator or notice that there is a vehicle ahead or packed. It is also a notification of the speed limit of a vehicle. Figure 80 also serves as indicator of the speed limit of the vehicle. Surrounding this 80 is the inscription “not as you think”. These words surrounding it serve as caution that despite the limit of the vehicle one should not underestimate its ability. There are two statements above and below the plate number of this vehicle, “bintin laye” and “sebiotimo” which means “the word is small” and “act according to your limit”. This is like a warning statement that means that the word is not worth living extravagantly.

“Olohun lugo” is another inscription on this vehicle; this is interpreted as “God is watching”. Just below this inscription is another inscription “eda olaropin” which is interpreted as “man cannot be written off”. If the two are joining together, we can interpret it to mean that “God on ones side, one will make it”. Also, on this bus is the picture of a bird with a twig in its mouth and surrounded with stars. This may symbolize peace.

**Figure 4**



The main inscription on this vehicle is the the Arabic word “warafahanau” that is interpreted is mean “highest exhortation for God”. This serves to identify this bus owner as a Muslim and the type that exhort God. There is also a drawing of the islamic icon on this vehicle. There are several reflectors on the bus.

**Figure 5**



“no food for the lazy” written on this vehicle show that the owner believes in hard work. Below “no food for the lazy” is a Yoruba statement “asiri ewa” which means “the secret of beauty”. If the duos are joined, we can interpret it to mean “hard work is the secret to beauty”. The folded hand signifies “strength” and “support” which also buttress the fact that the owner of this bus loves hard work.

There is also a picture of an unidentified man who is assumed to be an upcoming singer (index).

There are some figures (23, 50/50 and 24) which are coined and have become a slang to explain that life is equal. It was coined from a song by the popular musician Adewale Ayuba. It shows that this driver believes in Adewale's ideology of life.

**Figure 6**



“Ola Al Quran” can be interpreted as “the grace of the Holy Quran”. This person is communicating that he has enjoyed certain grace through the “Holy Quran”. “Hasara ilao” is another inscription on the vehicle. It is an Arabic word that means “death”. This driver may have placed this as a warning sign to vehicles coming behind that hitting him may lead to death. These two inscriptions show that the driver is a Muslim

Other inscriptions on the bus have been interpreted above.

**Figure 7**



“Remember” is an inscription on this vehicle and it may be interpreted to mean that the driver is communicating that audience should remember something which he did not specify; audience have to self-complete it.



Also, on the bus is the colour of the Nigerian Flag (green white green) which depict that the driver is a Nigerian. On the first green colour is the Arabic inscription “Allahu” which depict that the driver is a Muslim.

### **Summary of Findings**

The study has investigated the semiotic modes and common themes in the selected vehicle inscription and showed the following findings:

The modes of the inscription: the inscriptions are multimodal. Some buses comprise of linguistic and visual, even spatial semiotic systems. All the linguistic semiotic systems are in written forms and they appear in English, Yoruba and Arabic languages. All the inscriptions appear in one form or the other. Most of the inscriptions are written with slate materials. These slates are reflectors to other vehicles at night. Even if the vehicle is not ignited or on motion, once there is a ray of light, these slates reflect and act as indicators or notice that there is a vehicle ahead or packed. The form with which the word “Olohun” (God) is written instead of “Olorun” shows that most of these drivers are Muslims Yoruba Most of the messages incorporated in the inscription are not restricted to inform the driver and passengers alone, rather, they communicate to the society in general. These inscriptions inform, warn, praise, direct and many more social functions

Common to all the shuttle buses is the colour; the plate numbers; and their brand. The vehicles selected have the unique colour cream and brown, which the people of Oyo town use to identify the buses as commercial vehicles. Each bus has a unique government plate number, which is their unique identity. Therefore, if there are a thousand of these buses in Oyo town with the same colour, the plate number cannot be the same. Also, all the shuttle buses under study are of the same brand - Suzuki, and the same engine capacity- Carrier.

### **Conclusion**

The inscriptions on shuttle buses in Oyo town have been used successfully by their owners to communicate sensitive meanings to the public. It is from these that attempt has been made to bring to light (by using multisemiotic approach) on how we use inscriptions to perform different functions such as to warn, inform, praise, direct, advise and to encourage. Also, the remarkable ability of motorists to communicate more than their words was brought to the forefront. Drawing insight from these, it becomes quite logical to conclude that inscriptions go beyond the mere description of state of affairs. They also include both covert and overt manipulations, which dominate the complex art of discourse.

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