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# WHAT THE NIGERIAN DRIVERS DO WITH SIGNS: A SEMIOTIC EXPLORATION

BY

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Semiotics is generally defined as the science of signs (Oloruntoba-Oju, 1999:158). Its preoccupation lies with meaning conveyed through any medium (Hiz 1977:41) as it is concerned with the investigation and description of signification. According to Eco (1976:7), "a sign itself is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting something else". He argues further that all signs are processes of communication, which are meant to mean or convey a message. To Charles Pierce (1834-1914), a pioneer in the field of semiotics, a sign is "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (cf. Eco, 1976:15).

As communication is a central activity to any human existence (Oyewo, 2000:148) and semiotics serves as the rallying point for all communication-related and culture-based disciplines (Lawal, 1997:17), it is our intention to bring out how the Nigerian drivers communicate with signs within the Nigerian cultural milieu. This is because, as noted by Alabi (1996:100), attempts at oral communication (which itself is not exclusive to signs) are not always successful, drivers resort to the employment and deployment of signs to communicate with one another. Our concern in this paper is to put to the fore that more than identified by previous scholars, Nigerian drivers explore a far range of semiotic network through the activation of signs for effective communicative purposes.

## 2.0 SIGNS UPON SIGNS: A REVIEW

Signs constitute the focus of study in semiotics which analyzes their systems and uses in different cultures (Wales 1989:419). In fact, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) who is regarded as the father of semiotics, views language as a "deposit

of signs". Pierce, the American philosopher and logician, divided signs into three categories: the icon, the index and the symbol. These three are interactive and overlapping, yet they are still definitive.

The icon is a resemblance or a representative of an object. For instance, a photograph and a map are iconic signs. An index is a sign that has some connection or association with its object--an indicator, as smoke is an index of fire and cloud is an index of rain. The symbol, which Abram (1988:237) defines as the "sign proper" is an arbitrary entity, existing by convention, rule or assent, which may have no resemblance whatever to the object or idea it represents. It means something beyond itself. Examples are linguistic signs and extra-linguistic codes like jerking heads and casting looks. (Watson and Hill, 1993:173; Lawal, 1997:16). Signs employed by the Nigerian drivers are mostly symbolic ones as buttressed by the studies of Lawuyi (1993), Alabi (1996) and Odebunmi (2000).

Lawuyi (1993) discusses the indispensability of symbols at the societal and individual levels in the modern society. He identifies such signs as 'flashing', 'honking', 'parking', 'hazard lighting', 'hand-waving' and 'bowing' as symbols used by automobile drivers in "a Nigerian University community" to "reflect social status and cultural patterns of seniority" (p.65). These are done through the manipulation of such gadgets like the horn, the lighting system, the hazard light and the brake.

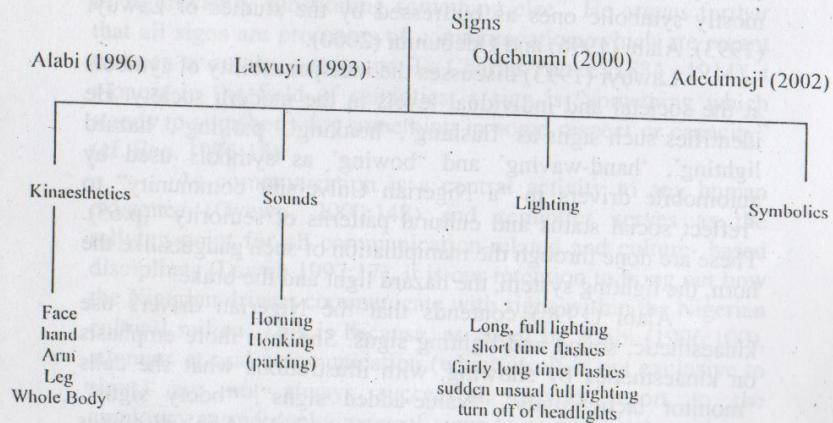
Alabi (1996) contends that the Nigerian drivers use kinaesthetic, sound and lighting signs. She lays more emphasis on kinaesthetics by showing, with illustrations what she calls "monitor tactic signs", "value-added signs", "booty signs", "hazard signs" and "signs of salutation". She discusses elaborately how honking and head-lighting are used to exchange greetings, to warn against overtaking, collision and to communicate such sorts of messages.

Odebunmi's (2000) grouse with Lawuyi's and Alabi's works is that both do "not provide elaborate information on the semiotic resources of headlights". He therefore expands the temporal scope of the lighting sense to cover both night and day. He expatiates on "long full lighting", "short time flashes" and "fairly long-time flashes" as instances of day time lighting while



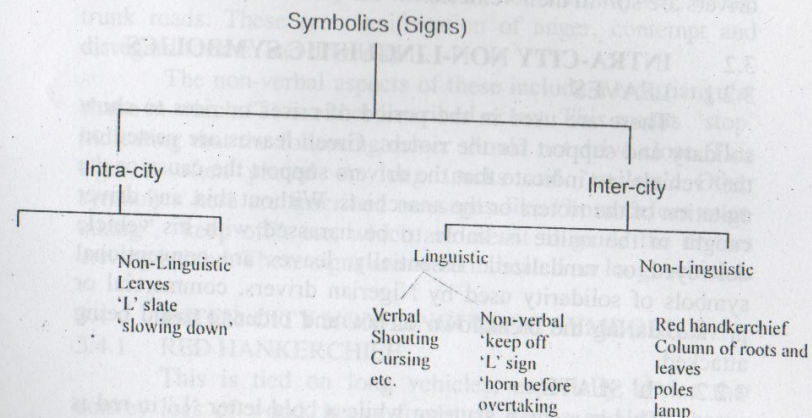
he discusses at length the semiotic resources of "sudden, unusual full lighting" and "turning off of headlights" as night time lighting.

It is our opinion that the frontiers of communicating with signs transcend the scope presented by the previous scholars who have forayed in to this field. Beyond kinaesthetics, sounds and lighting, Nigerian drivers do communicate with symbols, which we hereby call *symbolics*. These symbolics, which are complex, as well as the accompanying colours, inscriptions and pictures constitute the crux of our paper. These co-occur with the earlier identified signs and thus form the fourth arm of the semiotics of signs among the Nigerian drivers. Our attention is on 'symbolics as well as signs of colours, inscriptions and pictures.



### 3.0 SYMBOLICS

Symbols are those signs whose meanings are governed by rule or convention and whose relationship with the thing signified is arbitrary (Oloruntoba-Oju, 1999:165). In other words, a symbol is any object, person or event to which individuals have learned to accept as representing something other than itself. Symbols are always almost culture-bound (Watson and Hill, 1993:185). The dynamics of the Nigerian drivers' symbolics are schematized as follows, after which a discussion of the schema is undertaken.





### 3.1 INTRA-CITY LINGUISTIC SYMBOLICS

These are signs used within the city. These often include hooting, shouting, hissing, cursing, abusing, lamenting, condemning etc. other road users. All these may be classified as noise. As every driver tends to believe that he knows how to drive better, the tendency is to fire verbal missiles in form of the above at his other colleague who either overtakes him at a wrong place or drives in any way that is dangerous. These signs are always mutual as it is difficult to know the accused from the accuser. These signs are manifestations of contempt, disregard and reprisal for the other. They occur interestingly while the drivers are still in their vehicles.

### 3.2 INTRA-CITY NON-LINGUISTIC SYMBOLICS

#### 3.2.1 LEAVES

These are used in the period of crises or riots to show solidarity and support for the rioters. Green leaves are pasted on the vehicles to indicate that the drivers support the cause or the agitation of the rioters or the anarchists. Without this, any driver caught in the millie is liable to be harassed with his vehicle destroyed or vandalized. Essentially, leaves are conventional symbols of solidarity used by Nigerian drivers, commercial or private, during the breakdown of law and order to avoid being attacked.

#### 3.2.2 'L' SLATE

This is a small slate on which a bold letter 'L' in red is inscribed. This when hung on a vehicle indicates in Nigeria that the driver of the vehicle is a 'learner' and should therefore be excused. This sign prepares an up-coming vehicle or a following driver to know that he is dealing with an inexperienced driver. With this knowledge, such a driver is careful to avoid collision or accident with the 'L' slated vehicle.

#### 3.2.3 "SLOWING DOWN"

For commercial drivers, this is a sign of seeking the destination of the would-be passenger standing by the road-side. If the destination coincides with where the driver aims at, the driver stops and allows the commuter to board the vehicle. For a private driver, this can serve the purpose of acknowledging a

greeting or knowing the destination of a known person standing by the road side. It is a conventional symbolic that when a driver 'slows down' the movement of the vehicle besides one, it is to know if one's destination agrees with his so that he may convey one there, for a fare or without a fare.

### 3.3 INTER-CITY LINGUISTIC SYMBOLICS

These can be verbal or/and non-verbal. The verbal inter-city linguistic symbolics, just like those of the intra-city, are mere hopla occasioned by wrong/dangerous driving by a fellow driver. In Nigeria, it is 'normal' to hear curses and shouts (which the driver for whom they are meant do not hear, anyway) on the trunk roads. These are manifestation of anger, contempt and disregard for the bad driver(s).

The non-verbal aspects of these include a red triangular shape in which 'T' is either inscribed or not. This means 'stop' indicating that the following driver should not drive close. This sign is often placed on long trucks and 'trailers'. Other symbolics here are inscribed messages like "horn before overtaking", "keep off", etc, which are meant to guide the drivers driving behind. These signs are often indicated on long vehicles.

### 3.4 INTER-CITY NON-LINGUISTIC SYMBOLICS

#### 3.4.1 RED HANKERCHIEF

This is tied on long vehicles, especially lorries that convey logs of wood, heavy foodstuff. Cattle and such heavy loads. This symbolizes 'danger' and that the drivers should maintain relative distance from such vehicles in case of any unforeseen development. Red-handkerchiefs on such are to warn or caution the road users. In place of handkerchiefs, some drivers use a slate on which 'C' meaning 'caution' is inscribed.

#### 3.4.2 COLUMNS OF ROOTS AND LEAVES

These are often laid on the road at a distance from which a vehicle breaks down by the roadside. The essence of this symbol is to acquaint an approaching driver that a vehicle has broken down by the roadside and he should reduce his speed to avoid accident. These columns are always about thirty to fifty metres long. The essence is to fore-warn or fore-tell the presence of a possible danger along the road.



#### 3.4.3 POLES

These are temporarily mounted on specific areas where unwary drivers may have accidents. These symbolics are erected where an erosion, for instance, has caused a gully on the road and an unsuspecting driver would drive into it. They are thus meant to warn drivers of a likely danger zone.

#### 3.4.4 LAMPS

These are night symbolics which often indicate that there is a wreck, or a damaged vehicle nearby. As drivers on top speed may not know there is any vehicle that can block their way, the lamps serve as signals of caution. Such lamps are positioned at a distance from the damaged vehicle and consequently guard against collision that the absence of such may cause.

### 4.0 COLOURS INSCRIPTIONS AND PICTURES

Nigerian drivers also use colour to articulate certain messages, deliberately or inadvertently. While it is possible to use car brands such as Mercedes Benz, Volvo or Peugeot etc as symbols of status and therefore of socialization, as Lawuyi (1993:65) contends, we may assert that drivers do pass messages across through the colour of their vehicles. According to Awoniyi (1982:4), colour is a veritable means of communication.

At road junctions, traffic lights speak to us; red lights mean *stop*, green lights mean *go*. To some people, white means peace and blue signifies love.

Commercial drivers, taxi drivers, road transporters in general use colour to tell us that they are commercial. This is noticeable in many states in Nigeria where commercial drivers, especially the taxi cab drivers, maintain a peculiar colour with which their cars are identified. And based on the frame of Awoniyi above, drivers who prefer white are assumed to be holy or peace loving, drivers of red and black vehicles could be assumed to be sadists and dangerous people etc. This assumption is however relative to different contexts within Nigeria.

Also, inscriptions on vehicles have semiotic imports in the Nigerian context. Based on messages inscribed on vehicles and stickers pasted thereon by vehicle owners and drivers, the religious, political social and psychological trappings of such drivers can be worked out easily. For instance, vehicles 'preach' and they 'campaign'; others 'advertise', 'promote' an idea while some just 'project' one philosophy or the other.

Finally, Nigerian drivers communicate with pictures as discernible on many vehicles. Drivers who have their vehicles plastered with pictures of musicians, women, religious personalities, political leaders, animals, plants, etc are passing across different messages through those non-linguistic means. The more acquainted one is with the vagaries of the Nigerian cultures and contexts, the more meanings swim into one's ken about the various signs portrayed in all strata of the society, especially among the drivers.

### 5.0 CONCLUSION

Signs are pervasive factors in human societies. The reason behind signs is essentially for "bringing forth and transferring to another mind, what is conceived in the mind of the person who gives the sign" (Clarke 1987:20). Nigerian drivers are at the forefront, as our findings reveal here, of communicating with signs. Their use of signs ranges from evoking sound systems (Lawuyi, 1993) kineasthetics (Alabi, 1996), lighting (Odebunmi, 2000) to the appropriation of symbolics which this paper majorly address, to achieve meaning, the essence of signification.

We have attempted in this paper to define the nature and scope of signs especially as they relate to the Nigerian drivers. While agreeing with the various signs earlier addressed by the previous scholars, the paper contends that the symbolics have always been over-looked. It is therefore advanced that linguistic and non-linguistic devices at the intra-city and inter-city levels are in force in the manipulation of signs by the Nigerian drivers. It is also highlighted that certain icons like pictures, indices like colours and symbols like inscriptions are also meaning-bearing semiotic strategies employed by the Nigerian drivers.



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