



Vehicle Inscriptions in Nigeria: A Medium of Constructing Identity and Social Practices

Mohammed Sada Bature & Ibrahim Sani

Department of English and French

Umaru Musa Yar'adua University

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the discursive practices presented in the form of inscriptions written on vehicles in this context tricycle, which are popularly known as kekenapep in Nigeria. The paper employs a qualitative approach to examine the inscriptions as texts written on the tricycles. These inscriptions that comprise words, phrases and sentences form the unit of analysis. Critical Discourse Analysis, CDA is used as the framework of analysis to explore how owners of these vehicle (in most cases the drivers) construct their identity and express their feelings emotions and opinions about their society. 100 written inscriptions were collected from 100 tricycles in Katsina

metropolis between October to December, 2015. The data was analysed using the Hallyday's (1985) Functional grammar and Fairclough's ideational view of language as form of social practice. The findings indicate that drivers express their emotions through adages words and phrases that comment on social values and their personal opinions about their society. They use the back side of the vehicle as a medium of self-expression on social issues in the Nigerian social context.

Key Words: Vehicle, Inscription, Medium, Construction, Identity, Social Practices, CDA

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Introduction

The kekenapep or tricycles have pervasively dominated the streets of major cities and towns in Nigeria, thereby providing portable and affordable means of transportation within the metropolis states of Nigeria. They form a considerable part of many commercial passenger vehicles. These tricycles like any other commercial vehicles bear mottos, names, phrases and sentential expressions, which are boldly written on their bodies usually at the back side. The pervasive nature of these inscriptions would seem to construct a distinctive pattern of an occupational behaviour, comprising norms, values and attitude that form a sub-culture indicating their identity as a particular group of people within a society.

'Critical linguistics' within the scope of CDA serves as the theoretical framework underpinning the study. Thus, Critical linguistics is a type of discourse analysis which is based upon 'systemic' linguistic theory ((Halliday, 1985). The analysis looks into the grammatical structure that is specifically employed to identify syntactic properties used in the inaugural speech to create a good impression and hope in the current political turmoil in Nigeria

The unit of analysis, from the perspectives of systemic functional linguists, is the text (Chapelle, 1998). Halliday focused on the communicative function of language, that is to say, what people do with their language in a particular discourse or medium in a particular language community determines their linguistic choices in accomplishing a communicative activity or event. The analysis reveals linguistic differences in the type of language appropriately used in different contexts and situations. According to Halliday (1985) language serves three main functions: the ideational function, to understand the environment; the interpersonal function, to act on the others and the context; and the textual function, which breathes relevance into the other two. These components form the semantic feature of the language. The grammatical system of the language is assigned to the three different functions. For instance, tense and aspect form the available options in the ideational component of the language code, while systems like transitivity and modality provide options in the interpersonal component, and elements like conjunction and ellipsis are options in the textual component of language.

The semantic system of language comprises these components which are related in meaning (Fairclough, 1995). For example, the ideational or experiential meanings of the text indicate the field, the interpersonal meanings reflect the tenor, and the textual meanings reflect the mode of discourse. Thus field, tenor and mode are the actual selections from the ideational, interpersonal and textual components of the language code derived from a particular language activity or event.

The analysis of any text focuses on two main aspects of representation (Fairclough, 1995). The first is mainly concerned with the structuring of

propositions, that is, how events, relationships and situations are represented in a linguistic unit. The 'clause' is the term that linguists use to refer to a grammatically simple sentence. A clause usually contains a single proposition. The point of analysis will examine how the clause is structured in terms of the communicative process realized in its verb, participant, realized in its nouns and nominal groups, and circumstantial realized in its adverbials. Another thing to consider is the choices that have been made from possible types of process, participant and circumstance contained in the clause. For instance, a text may appear as a relational process without an agent or subject as in "life gets harder". Another thing is causative process with an agent for example the poor economic condition is making life harder". The second aspect is mainly concerned with the combination and sequencing of propositions which (Van Dijk, 1988) refers to as local coherence relations. This is a kind of relations concerned with the way clauses are logically combined together to form complexes of clauses as well as the relations of cohesion that tie up such complex clauses in a particular text. The focus of the analysis is to unfold the linguistic devices used in composing the inaugural speech in the realm of political discourse depictions used to create impression in the political and social satire context.

Literature review

In recent years, there has been a considerable research development in the field of Discourse Analysis, especially on vehicle inscriptions. For instance, Date-Bah, (1980) in his classical work focuses on the inscription on the vehicles of Ghanaian drivers: a sociological analysis. He claimed that passengers were able to distinguish easily one vehicle from the other by the means of these well inscriptive recognizable inscriptions. They address the common belief and attitude of passengers and public. In another perspectives, Nyoni & Nyoni, (2010) examines semiotic expressions of the inscription on public vehicle walls. The study focuses on what public vehicles owners decide to write on their vehicles. They claim that vehicles have a brand name and combination of specific colours. In his study, Van der Geest, (2009) presents an interesting title "Anyway! Lorry inscriptions in Ghana". He opines that drivers express their worries and anxieties in lorry inscriptions thereby making a medium of expression and identity of an occupational group in the society.

In the same vein Lawuyi, (1988) explores an interpretative approach to vehicle slogans. The author uses a qualitative approach in his interpretation based on observation on taxies and interviewed drivers. The purpose of his paper centres around the analysis of slogans, which are so prominent on motor vehicles as expressions of social stratification among the Yoruba of South-west Nigeria.

In another development, Hibbert, (2013) explores visual evidence of self-inscriptions of identity by marginalised in Mitchell's plain, South Africa. The article

presents a selection of photographs as evidence of community engagement at the local level in an area near Cape Town, which is heavily stigmatized. He also explores municipal inscriptions on vehicles

Chiluwa, (2008) conducts a study entitled “Religious Vehicle Stickers in Nigeria: A discourse of identity, faith and social vision”. He uses post-structuralist model of discourse analysis. His findings indicate that through stickers people define their individual and group identity.

Given the prolific use of inscriptions on vehicles, there is still paucity of research, especially the “kekenapep (tricycles), therefore, this paper contributes to body of knowledge towards the role of such inscriptions in constructing identity using language as a vehicle of making such discursal practices.

Theoretical framework.1 Systemic Functional Approach to Language

Linguistic analysis looks at important aspects of discourse, including aspects of lexis which are the vocabulary choices that language users make, as well as syntactic aspects. Thus, the analysis is used to explore linguistic features within a given discourse in order to determine how language is specifically used in that discourse to present ideas and views while communicating important messages to a particular audience. The analysis uses linguistic models within the realm of systemic functional linguistic (SFL) to reveal salient linguistic features specifically used in constructing satirical representation of social and political issues in presidential speech. The unit of analysis based on the perspectives of systemic functional linguists is the text (Chapelle, 1998). The analysis focuses on how presidents creatively use language to present policies and reforms in order to resonate with the public and seek their support.

Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar is recognized as the main foundation of Critical Discourse Analysis as well as other related theories in the field of pragmatics. Systemic Functional Grammar comprises two components: Systemic Grammar and Functional Grammar. These aspects form the integral framework of linguistic theory (Wang, 2010). Systemic grammar focuses takes into account the internal relations in language as a system or meaning making. This network provides the available choices that learners make while using the language. Functional grammar main concern is to reveal that language is a means of social practice through interaction. Halliday proposes three logically interrelated functions which are inherent in every language: ideational, interpersonal and textual function. Ideational function has to do with the speaker or writer’s experiences of the real world embodied in his use of the language. Interpersonal function looks into the relationship the writer or speaker creates to his targeted audience through his attitude, comments and evaluations of the communicative role that he explores in informing the audience. Thus through this function, language is used to express social and personal relations. Textual Function refers

to the way of making any stretch of spoken or written discourse into a unified and coherent text using language mechanisms.

Hence, Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) is concerned with the analysis of the sequence of parts such as words, word groups, clauses, clause complexes and paragraphs, which form the stages in the development of a text (O'Hallaron, 2008). Through the work of Halliday and his associates, systemic functional linguistic is increasingly recognized as a strategic meaning-making resource. Systemic linguists advance four main theoretical claims: (i) that language use is functional; (ii) that its function is to make meanings; (iii) that these meanings are influenced by the social and cultural context, in which they are exchanged; (iv) that the process of using language is a semiotic process, a process of making meanings by choosing (Eggins, 2004 p. 3). These four points that language is functional, semiotic, contextual and semiotic can be summarized by describing the systemic approach as a functional-semantic approach to language in two respects: (i) it focuses on how people use language and (ii) how language is structured.

Methodology, Data Presentation and Analysis

The paper uses a qualitative approach used to investigate how vehicle inscriptions form a vehicle for constructing social identities and self-expressions among the operators of kekenapep in Nigria. The researchers purposively selected 100 commonly written inscriptions from 100 tricycles in katsina metropolis from October to December, 2015. These inscriptions were grouped into three: (a) sentences, (b) phrases (c) words for easy analysis, the inscriptions were presented in a table.

Analysis

The data was analyzed using the Hallyday's (1978) SFL in the realm of CDA. Critical Discourse Analysis is a kind of discourse analytical framework that studies the way social power, dominance, and inequality are reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political contexts. Thus, the focus of CDA is based on exploring exposing and equally resisting social inequality (Van Dijk, 1985). Systemic grammar aims at describing internal relations in language that provide potential or system network for making meaning. This network enables language users make choices while expressing their views. Functional grammar attempts to reveal that language is a means of social interaction. Halliday divides stylistic analysis into three dimensions explaining the logical idea of metafunctions of language: ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function. The ideational function enables the speaker or writer to embody in language his experiences of the phenomena of the real world; this includes his consciousness, perception, cognition and linguistic act of speaking and understanding. Thus, the ideational function helps the speaker to convey new information to communicate his views

and feelings about himself and the society. The interpersonal function has to do with the way a speaker expresses himself to his listener as well as the relationship he establishes and maintain between him and his listener. That is the communicative role he adopts while informing, asking or persuading his listener. In short, interpersonal function is inherent in interpersonal communication. Textual function accounts for the way that information can be expressed and transmitted in a discourse in both spoken and written forms.

The analysis will be based on the ideational function, because it is mainly presented by the transitivity model in grammar. In this model, the meaningful grammatical unit is clause, which expresses events, situations and actions.

The sentences comprise thematic contents, such as religion, romance, social status, business and social ethics. *For instance, there is no king as God, Praise be to God, Do you pray, God case no appeal and Depend in God.* All these sentences indicate religious belief. Through these sentences, the vehicle owners tell the world that they have religion and religious belief and they should be identified and recognized as such. Grammatically, the sentences are all simple sentences comprising only one verb and expressed in active voice construction.

The inscriptions also identify the vehicle owners identity as a particular group of people, youth, who in most cases fall in romantic relationship with the opposite sex (males versus females). For instance, *Never trust ladies, Love your lover, Love is blind, Sorry babe no service, When shall we meet, Kiss me baby, Love is true.* Also, these sentences are all simple sentences. They are also expressed in active voice; and most of them are constructed with transitive verbs, as *love* in the sentence *love your lover*; *trust* as in the sentence *Never trust ladies*; *kiss* as in the sentence *kiss me baby*.

In fact, the social status is a distinct feature of social relationship among community members, which is obvious in most communities of the world. Most societies are naturally grouped into social classes, such as the rich, the poor, the working class and so on. This kind of social stratification is also indicated in the inscriptions written on tricycles. The inscriptions construct a representation of the vehicle owners, who recognise such social stratifications as expressed on their vehicles. For example, *What go up must come down, The little you have, Is good to be rich, No condition is permanent, Who is free, Try harder.* These sentences express the feelings and emotions of the vehicle owners in relation to social position. They hope to excel or climb to higher position through their job. For instance the sentence *is good to be rich* expresses hope and the only way to accomplish such hope is through hard work as indicated by the sentence *Try harder*. All the sentences are simple sentences, even though some sentences are subordinate as *The little you have*, where it is left hanging with the assumption that the listener completes the remaining expression. For instance, *the little you have is your wealth*.

In terms of business, which describes their job as commercial vehicles, some inscriptions contain information about their daily business. For instance, *Pay before service, Drive carefully* and so on. These two sentences indicate the type of their job and also their commitment to it. They are also simple sentences, which are expressed in active voice construction.

Social ethics indicate norms and cultural heritage of a particular people, which people are expected to obey. The inscriptions contain such cultural norms and ethics to guide the conduct and behaviour of vehicle owners as a group of people. For instance, *99 days is for the owner, No hear say, No back biting, No friend no enemy, Time never wait for you, Go to farm*. The sentence *99 days...* is used to give a stark warning particularly to thieves, who steal other peoples' property to desist from doing so, for one day they will surely be caught up as long as they steal. Backbiting is considered a social vice not only in the Nigerian social context, but almost anywhere in the world. That is the reason for the inscription expressed or conveyed in a negative form in order to discourage people from doing so.

Wasting time without doing anything is becoming a trend among the teeming unemployed youth in Nigeria, especially graduates at different educational levels. In order to discourage them from such an idle habit, the vehicle owners use their vehicle as a medium for disseminating information and public opinion to remind the teeming youth to use time judiciously. The vehicle owners also call for social justice and equity while dealing with people, hence the sentence, *no friend no enemy*. In addition, the inscriptions also encourage people, especially the youth to engage in farming activity as an alternative to remaining idle and getting employed given the fact that Nigeria is blessed with huge and fertile land suitable for all kinds of crops, fruits and vegetables both cash and food. Thus, the sentence *goes to farm* is expressed in imperative form to call people to farm as a way of being self-reliant.

The other segment of the data comprises phrases, which are string of words that functions as a grammatical unit within a clause or sentence. Like the sentences, the phrases also contain themes that have been identified above to construct the identity of the vehicle owners and convey their emotions, feelings and views in the realm of the public opinion. To demonstrate the theme of religion, the following phrases were inscribed on tricycles: *Oh God, The faithfull, Islam only*. The phrases are all noun phrases, with nouns as the headwords in both phrases, *God* and *Faithfull*. In the first phrase, the writer exclaims by uttering the word *God*; and the other phrase identifies the writer as someone who has faith in a particular religion. Phrase such as *Lover Zone, 10 girls one man, Lover boy, Silent predator, My love* indicate romantic relationship or attachment. These phrases fall within the grammatical unit of noun phrases. Phrases such as *2 boys, Rich man, Big boy, Man of the peoples, City boy elephant, Jungle man* construct the social

identity of the vehicle owners and their recognition of social stratification within their society. For instance, *Big boy* and *city boy* are associated to youth who are passionate and can easily convince his opposite sex through flirting and other forms of alluring. While *Rich man and Plenty money* are used to express hope of attaining such a high social position in the society; and the king is used to recognise the existence of royal position and also a means of self-admiration, which is a common behaviour among youths.

In terms of business, the vehicle owners use their inscriptions to advertise their business. This is the reason why phrases such as *Kabo air*, *A star*, *Air force 1*, these phrases are connected to air services or air companies, for instance *Kabo air* is a renowned airline in Nigeria; and *Air force* is related to the military plights, but the vehicle owners use them to advertise their tricycles to gain more costumers or patronage from them. Phrases like *Katsina to anywhere* and *Town service*, are used to indicate diligence in service delivery and at the same time phrases like *Cash down* and *Cash only* are also used to urge the customers to pay for their service strictly in cash not in any other forms of payment.

Phrases like *No bad* and *No problem*, convey ethics of social interaction and harmonious coexistence, especially among a particular group of people. These phrases (*No bad* and *No problem*) are expressions commonly used by the vehicle owners to convey self-contentment with the little resource they acquire from their job; and the phrase *All together* is used to indicate sense of belonging and togetherness among the group. All the phrases constitute noun phrases or nominal group position within clauses or sentences contained in the vehicle inscriptions.

The last segment of data comprises words which constitute the smallest unit of any grammatical analysis. All the words used in the inscriptions are content words; they are specifically used to express or convey meaning, information or message in a shortest possible way. The grammatical class or parts of speech include: nouns, adjectives, and verb. Most of the words are nouns. In their capacity, words such as *Powerfull*, *Social*, *Chairman*, *commander*, *Warrior*, *Major general* indicate social status in society. So far, the words indicate only social status and this indicate the significance the vehicle owners attach to the social stratification as a natural division of honour and positions.

Conclusion

The paper examines the inscriptions written on tricycles, which are popularly known as kekenapep in Nigeria. The inscriptions used include simple sentences, phrases and words which comprise thematic contents, such as religion, romance, social status, business and social ethics. The sentences are in active voice with transitive verbs even though some sentences are subordinate clauses hanging with the assumption that the listener completes the remaining expression. All the words used in the inscriptions are content words, most of which are nouns. The

analysis reveals that the vehicle owners tell the world that they have religion and religious belief and they should be identified and recognized as such. The discussion also establishes the vehicle owners identity as youth, who in most cases fall in romantic relationship with the opposite sex (males versus females). Furthermore, it was identified that the inscriptions construct a representation of the vehicle owners, who recognise such social stratifications as expressed on their vehicles. These sentences express the feelings and emotions of the vehicle owners in relation to social position. Similarly, the analysis shows that some inscriptions indicate the type of their job and also their commitment to it. Also some inscriptions are seen to contain such cultural norms and ethics to guide the conduct and behaviour of vehicle owners as a group of people.

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