

# Addressing insecurity on Nigerian roads through literacy, language and semiotics

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## ABSTRACT

Language plays significant role in human relations and this language can be verbal and non-verbal. Among the forms of non-verbal communication are kinesics (the use of body signs), proxemics (the use of space) and the use of signs in communication. The appropriate and adequate interpretation of signs is expected to bring peace and harmony. There have been series of carnages and accidents on Nigerian roads and these, among other factors, are connected to disregard of road users to road signs. The paper is quasi-empirical through the use of unstructured interview with union leaders and their members. The findings from this unstructured interview reveal that superstitious belief in the power of Ogun, Yoruba god of iron and war, to avert road accident, illiteracy and inability to read road signs contribute to the regularity of traffic accidents on Nigerian roads. It is recommended that government and its designated agency should increase media advocacy and literacy activities for all road users. It is believed that these recommendations will assist in reduction of accidents on Nigerian roads.

**Keywords:** Semiotics' language, sign system, superstition, human communication.

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## INTRODUCTION

The centrality of meaning to human communication cannot be disputed. Different theories and models of meaning have been provided by linguists, particularly, the semanticists, the semioticians, the pragmatists and discourse analysts. The core of the arguments of these linguists and language scholars is that meaning in human communication can be generated through how language is used and the level of cognition of the recipient of the information. There is usually the verbal and non-verbal use of language and for this reason, the communicators are expected to have a good understanding of the codes and signs used in communication.

Humans communicate verbally and non-verbally through series of signs that are inter-related and inter-connected. The participants in communication encounter are, therefore, to have the same semantic orientation before meaning can be arrived at. Therefore, mutual intelligibility can be attained only when all barriers to language codes are removed (Sesan 2008:23). Barriers to all forms of communication should be removed for peace and harmony in the society. Humans do need communication, through the verbal and non-verbal

resources of language.

In human communication, there is use of signs that implicitly or explicitly communicate meaning. The breakdown of communication exists in human interactions owing to the inability to adequately interpret signs. What is however important to note is that signs do not have universal meaning. Thus, it can be said that universalism is not an attribute in the interpretation and analysis of signs. Social and cultural contexts determine the adequacy and appropriateness of the sign interpretation.

The use and understanding of signs is culture-specific and this is why the interpretation of signs is conventional and arbitrary. In a pre-dominantly speaking culture, the interpretation of signs may not be seen as a simple task. This may be connected to the lazy attitude to reading signs and codes. The specific reference to Nigeria, by considering various literatures on reading and literacy, reveals that most Nigerians have lazy attitude to reading and literacy. The consequence of this is the ineffective interpretation of codes and signs. There is a nexus between reading and literacy as well as between literacy

and security. A sustainable good literacy level will impact positively on the level of security of a nation. Our view on the connection between literacy level and the state of security in a nation is therefore consistent with the view of Sesan (2014:4) that:

A nation in search of sustainable development should increase the level of literacy to meet the local needs. In this instance, there is a need for the identification of the felt need and the actual need. Most African countries and other third world countries have the felt need for technological development, human-capital development and socio-economic development without being mindful of the actual need for national security. Most African countries are plagued with series of ethno-religious crises and civil wars. These internal strives and the civil wars have created the sense of insecurity in the minds of individuals in the country, and by extension, the foreign nationals in such African countries plagued with the problems of ethno-religious crises and civil wars.

The core issue in the position of Sesan, as given above, is that nations of the world should not misplace priority in the search for sustainable development and security. The priority of the government should be on literacy for internal and external security as well as national development. It is quite disheartening that Nigerian government and the road users have not paid serious attention to the carnages and destructions on nearly all Nigerian roads through motor accidents. Some of these carnages and destructions are avoidable if the road users have sustainable literacy level in the interpretation and understanding of traffic signs. The effect of the inability to read and understand road signs is that human population of road users are being decimated by series of road accidents involving motorists, motor cyclists and pedestrians. This paper, therefore, makes a point for semiotics (the science of signs) in the interpretation and understanding of the traffic signs. This is inclusive of all road users: the motorists, the cyclists and pedestrians.

The argument on the significance of literacy in the interpretation and analysis of signs is made because it literacy makes individuals act and perform actively and functionally in the society. With literacy, individual road users will become cautious of their responsibilities to respect other road users and this, in the process, will reduce the extent of the road accidents. Literacy goes beyond schooling. It is a practical knowledge that makes individuals live a fulfilled life. To this end, this paper corroborates the view of Arnove and Arbolade (1973:4-7) on literacy that:

Definitions of literacy range from a set of mechanical skills to the quality of an individual

consciousness from skills of encoding, decoding and reproducing written symbols, to the reading and writing skills equivalent to so many years of primary schooling... to the competence and knowledge required to perform adequately in the adult roles in the society; to the critical consciousness and understanding of the fundamental issues which characterized a society.

With functional literacy, the carnages and accidents on our roads will reduce. The point is further made that with literacy, individual road users will have adequate semiotic capability to interpret traffic signs for safety and security on our roads.

### Statement of the research problem

There have been alarming cases of road accidents on Nigerian roads. These accidents are largely attributed to the recklessness and low level of literacy about the use and interpretation of road signs. Most Nigerian road users (motorists, cyclists and pedestrians) have little or no knowledge about the semiotic signs that guide the use of roads. The result of this low level of literacy is avoidable road accidents that do claim lives and properties.

### METHODOLOGY

The data for the study are gathered through the anthropological approach of ethnography. Major areas in Ibadan where there are always heavy traffic are visited for observation and closer study of how the road users (motorists, cyclists and pedestrians) adhere strictly to traffic signs and other traffic regulations. Among the areas visited for data collection are Mokola Round About, Total Garden and Bere. These three areas are chosen because they have roundabouts. Besides, these three areas do record a very large number of daily road users. Besides, traffic wardens are interviewed for their experience with road users on the strict adherence to road signs. Some leaders of National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) are interviewed for their position and the position of their members on the traffic signs. Some of the questions asked are given below:

- i. Do you show respect for traffic rules and regulations, particularly the traffic signs?
- ii. Do you hold talks with your members on the need to obey traffic rules and regulations?
- iii. Do you believe that years of driving experience have significance in the reduction of road accidents?
- iv. Do you see any utilitarian value in the use of traffic signs in the reduction of road accidents?

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are some issues that arise from the unstructured interviews that were administered on the union leaders and some other members of the union. The matters arising from the interviews reveal the socio-cultural

variables that also contribute to road accidents apart from the inability to appropriately and adequately interpret road signs.

In the first question, it was deduced that union leaders and some of their members do not show respect for the traffic signs and other rules for the use of the road. The only signs that public transport operatives vividly know of are the traffic lights that are installed in some strategic places in the metropolis. They do not observe and respect other traffic rules such as keeping a safe distance from the vehicle in the front, avoidance of calling while driving, avoidance of drinking while driving and a host of other rules. The interviewees also gave the opinion that they hardly respect traffic signs because they see doing that a waste of time. The response here is similar to what is got in the fourth question. Apart from seeing the obedience to the traffic signs as a waste of time, they also see it as having no value in reducing heavy traffic and road accidents that are found on the major roads in the metropolis. These interviewees support their argument with the presence of traffic warden controlling traffic where these traffic lights are installed. During the field investigation of the present researcher to the points where these traffic lights are installed, it was observed that the road users (motorists, motor cyclists and pedestrians) are impatient while using the road. What can be inferred from this situation is that the road users are always in a hurry to arrive their destination (offices, shops, schools and other work places). This impatient also contributes to some road accidents that are recorded. The road users, in their moments of hurry do consciously breach traffic rules in order to arrive their destination in time.

In the second question, it is discovered that union leaders hold regular meetings with their members. Among the agenda of the meeting, centre on the need to progress the meeting and how to maintain sanity on the road while driving. What can only be said is that there is a gap between policy formulation and its implementation. Some of the public transport operators do show disregard for traffic laws and these have been causing road accidents. The meetings on road safety between the union leaders and member can yield positive results if the designated task force of the union see to the proper implementation of the rules.

The response from the third question reveals that drivers of public transports have regard for years of driving experience. These drivers become bloated with ego based on their years of driving experience. With this bloated ego, these drivers become reckless with their driving and this recklessness results into road accidents.

The fourth question reveals the superstitious beliefs of the interviewees. The drivers that were interviewed are of the view that traffic signs are not necessary and that road accidents are recorded because union leaders and their members have neglected the worship of Ogun, the god of iron and war. This is why it is not uncommon in some

major parks to see a day in a week or some days in a month set aside for the worship of Ogun. These drivers and the members of the union do have the belief that when they worship Ogun, there will be reduction on the carnages and accidents on our roads.

The four questions raised in this study are reflections of the attitude of public transport operators to the use of traffic signs. The negative attitude of the public transport operators need to be checked in order to maintain sanity on our roads. Most of the road accidents are caused by the recklessness of the drivers. There is a need to dissociate superstition from literacy on the use of traffic signs to reduce road accidents in the country.

### Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is semiotics. Semiotics, as a scientific study of meaning through signs and icons, has been helpful in the interpretation and understanding of verbal and non-verbal discourses. The primary objective of communication is to exchange meaning between or among the interlocutors. Since the conceptualization of the study of sign system through the seminal work of Ferdinand de Saussure on the place of signifier and signified in the interpretation and understanding of signs and meaning, different scholars have come up with their various theoretical positions on the subject matter of semiotics. Beside Ferdinand de Saussure, other semioticians such as Umberto Eco and Charles, Sanders Pierce have made outstanding contributions to discourses on semiotics.

Despite the different theoretical positions of these semioticians, they have a consensus view that the study of semiotics should include signs, icons, symbols and index. All these variables are mutually inclusive in the interpretation and understanding of texts (verbal or written). Considering the nature, pattern and the use of semiotics in textual interpretation, this paper, therefore, shares the view of Eyeh (2011:148) that:

*Semiotics* is a set of syntactic, semantic and/or pragmatic properties of an object sign. Syntactic properties, sometimes called syntactic relations or functions, are those relations that occur between signs with regard to their shape only, semantic between a sign and its meaning and/or reference.

(Emphasis in the original)

What can be deduced from the view of Eyeh is that semiotics thrives on referential meaning. Thus, it can be said that semiotic interpretation of a text does not yield to simple and direct meaning.

Of all the different models of semiotics that are available for linguistic and literary studies, this paper adopts Pierce's model. This model is adopted because it

has transcended meaning in the interpretation of iconic signs, symbolic signs and indexical signs. Besides, the model is adequate and appropriate in the interpretation of any text (verbal, linguistic, literary and social). Thus, this model is chosen for the analysis and interpretation of traffic signs for sustainable security for road users. The choice of this model is made owing to his triad relationship of the index, icon and symbol. The significance of Peirce's model of semiotics is seen in its centrality of epistemology in the interpretation of signs. In his review of Peirce's model, Hawkes (2004:104-5) is of the view that:

This means that one of the most important areas in which his notion of signs will usefully operate will be that of epistemology: the analysis of the process of 'knowing' itself; of how knowledge is possible. Both for simplicity's sake, and because of its centrality to our experience of the real world, most interpreters of Peirce have so far tended to limit their attention to the application of his theories in this area. According to Peirce, the framework for the existence of knowledge derives from the assertion of propositions through the second 'triad' of signs: *icon*, *index* and *symbol*. Their importance thus requires us to take a closer look at them.

The transcended signification of Peirce's model of semiotics reveals the significance of extra-textual reference in the interpretation of signs. Traffic lights and other road signs communicate with the aid of signs. These signs are taken from the cultural experience of the people. The color of the traffic signs communicate significantly based on the cultural epistemology of the people. In the traffic signs, red signifies stop, amber signifies ready while green signifies go. The commuters and other road users demonstrate a fair knowledge of the traffic signs based on the cultural knowledge about the signification of the signs. For instance, it is a common cultural knowledge that red connotes danger. It is the cultural knowledge that red connotes danger that makes commuters and transporters stop at the indication of red light in the traffic signs.

## Findings

From the analysis of the data, the findings reveal that the insecurity that is witnessed on Nigerian roads can be traced to low level of literacy about traffic signs and laws among the road users.

Beside, some public transporters (commuters) have the erroneous belief that no evil will befall them if they worship Ogun (the god of iron). This is why some major parks in Ibadan and its metropolis have a day set aside for the worship of Ogun to avert accident among the members.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper recommends that government through its designated agency should embark upon appropriate and efficient advocacy programmes to re-educate and re-enlighten the numerous road users in the country. Traffic signs should be taught with effectiveness in schools, motor parks and markets. The law enforcement agents should carry out their duties and responsibilities with trust and integrity. All these will contribute meaningfully to the reduction of carnages and destructions that are recorded daily on Nigerian roads. There should be media advocacy that raise the level of consciousness of the road users. This media advocacy should all be inclusive in order to ensure that the right results are got. Federal Road Service Commission (FRSC) should show commitment and dedication to duties by taking traffic campaigns to motor parks and markets. Besides, road safety clubs should be encouraged in our primary and secondary schools.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the place of literacy, language, communication and semiotics in efforts to reduce traffic accidents on Nigerian roads. The paper was concerned with the study of the interplay of language, communication and the literacy in the reading and interpretation of traffic signs in the reduction of road accidents. The paper is quasi-empirical by adopting unstructured interview for the gathering of data for analysis and discussion. Since the concern of the paper is on the significance of traffic signs in the reduction of road accidents, the theory adopted was semiotics with its triad structure of index, icon and symbol. The paper, therefore, concludes that level of literacy, particularly in the ability to use road properly, influences the state of security of a country.

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