

When Tricycles Speak: Language Practices and Ideology in Tricycle Texts in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article investigates the sociocultural aspects of street-related linguistic practices on commercial tricycles in Uyo metropolis, south-eastern Nigeria. Marginal urban texts on tricycles reveal a process of identity construction and the quest for ideological distinctiveness of the grassroots in articulating their spatial street wisdom. The study offers contextual analyses of tricycle texts to unpack how they reflect riders' social conditions, and problematise how riders relate their subjectivities to the audience in the mobile urban space. We conclude that tricycle texts bring to light creative aspects of a local subculture that lends a voice to a marginalised segment of the society.

Keywords

Tricycle, automobile texts, linguistic ideology, identity, ecosocial semiotics, public transport

Introduction

There are many manifestations of visual communication in the urban landscape. Most visual cultures are represented as multimodal codes (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). They integrate information received by different senses. Basically, they denote the use of different communicative resources such as language, image, sound and music in communicative texts or discourses. These are often seen in traffic light, billboards, shop signage and architectural designs with varying symbols, styles and sophistication. The cultural production of mobile graffiti is another aspect of visual artistic domain in the urban space which unfortunately has not attracted much scholarly attention

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in the social semiotic literature. This is also a city 'sign' because it can be interpreted as signifying something other than itself (Aiello, 2020; Bal and Bryson, 1991). In other words, automobile texts and images are semiotic resources with layers of significations based on the subjective interpretations of their creators. This evidence shows that signs can only acquire meaning through interpretation (Semetsky, 2019).

In some literary and socio-semiotic traditions, automobile texts are often contextualised and analysed as essential components of street arts. As Riggle (2010) puts it, they are in the public space, and 'the public space is the street' (p. 255). The designers of these texts use the publicly accessible space to articulate their thoughts and sentiments to provoke reorientation and respond to their social conditions. This justifies the claim by Boyer and Lowrie (2014) that the street functions to generate ambient environment of everyday life. Automobile texts involve the production and consumption of artistic forms and in the process interact with space, people (audience) and meaning (Conklin, 2012). They can offer 'an alternative reading of the urban space' (Rowe and Hutton, 2012), and make people to pay attention to specific burning issues. The street, therefore, constitutes what Hua et al. (2017: 411) call a 'communicative zone' and is also a platform for the consumption of these automobile texts. In this way, it presents alternative outlet for the creation and expression of urban art forms. There is also a cognitive dimension in the way these texts communicate emotion and how the audience reacts or responds to them. This may be in the form of laughter or playful quality (Faniran et al., 2021), gaze, or complaint depending on the social imagination of their producers. Significantly, they are also largely unsanctioned like most street art (Mensah and Nyong, 2022).

As a cultural practice, tricycle texts are manipulated to interact with the environment, enrich experience and develop new forms of social life (Conklin, 2012). These are new learning processes that will enhance the conception of the past and the shaping of the future. They encode culturally shaped understanding of the clear messages they project to the society. According to Chandler (2007), such texts offer symbolic modes that create stories, portray lives and share emotions, and their messages are inspired by social connections and cultural experiences that promote awareness about a variety of topical issues and ideologies. The automobile texts may also be evaluated as acts of performance. The writings are manipulated and acted out before an audience (the consumers of the message), and have the propensity to generate some reactions. This means that they were created for consumption; to engage the larger society in social conversations thus reinforcing their spatial, aesthetic and discursive relevance in the transformation of the urban space.

This study investigates automobile tricycle (popularly known as *Keke NAPEP*) texts as an important aspect of mobile graffiti. We conceptualise texts as semiotic objects with material and symbolic boundaries and structural autonomy in which a whole forms a semantic unit (Aiello, 2020: 368). The study is concerned with meaning-making processes in participants' everyday lives which are mediated through automobile texts that we considered as 'street wisdom'. Data for the study were sourced through ethnographic fieldwork using participant observations and semi-structured interviews with 30 participants ($N=30$) who were riders of commercial tricycles and members of the public who constituted the audience. The analysis is anchored on linguistic ideology and ecosocial semiotic frameworks to uncover how language can help in the construction of social reality. The study interrogates social perceptions that underlie participants' interpretation and performance of communicative action based on local conditions of language use (Leech, 1983). It aims to demonstrate how semiotic resources and textuality on tricycles are meaning-making resources that represent the dynamics of everyday life. The study will provide new insights into local language practices that highlight contemporary societal problems to gain attention and create impact through verbal art form on tricycles. This will enrich popular culture discourses and promote spatial transformation of the urban landscape.

Previous studies

The study of mobile graffiti is a concern within an emerging sub-field of socio-semiotics. A socio-semiotic analysis of automobile graffiti deals with signs and symbols and their interpretations as human signifying practices in specific social and cultural contexts. The study of graffiti as automobile phenomenon is scanty in the literature of mobile graffiti in spite of the fact that this public art is on the rise as an alternative way of injecting vibrant writing culture into the city. This is why Jaworski and Wei (2021) remark that 'cities are diverse sites of semiotic production' (p. 3). They provide the artistic platform for the production of mobile texts and add visual interest to their development as mainstream practice. Spier (2019) investigates slogans on minibuses popularly called *Daladala* in Tanzania and identifies these texts as discursive sites for metalinguistic commentary on salient everyday conversations. This implies that vehicle slogans provided opportunity for public communication while navigating the urban space in a meaningful way. A similar study by Faniran et al. (2021) in Ibadan, south-western Nigeria examines vehicle writings as conveyors of humour, slang and witticism which help to douse tension and create fun for their consumers. The study reiterates that these vehicles carry light-hearted and amusing messages which are part of the linguistic repertoire of the community of practice they were created and consumed. The article further argues that the writings depict everyday life experiences, and connect identity, cultural environment and space. The position of these authors reveals that beyond the artistic value of vehicle writings, they have deep humorous contents, and are essential part of popular culture.

Faniran et al. (2020) investigate writings and stickers on vehicles in south-west Nigeria that convey moral and cultural values to their audiences. The study argues that such messages help in redirecting and re-orientating the public. This submission also shows the interaction of mobile texts with the physical environment and engagement with the society thus portraying them as important aspects of urban creativity that spread socially acceptable messages. In Kenya, Oganda and Mogambi (2015) explore the intentionality, contextuality and communicative expressivity of mobile graffiti in public transport vehicles from a lexical pragmatic account. A pragmatic perspective on automobile graffiti examines implied meaning of the creator and the inferred meaning of the consumer based on the context of use. The study concludes that automobile graffiti reflects the multilingual environment of Kenya, and their interpretation is facilitated by shared socio-pragmatic background by both producers and consumers of the message. In addition to these, such automobile texts highlight social, historical and economic issues. In a related study, Date-Bah (1980) investigates inscriptions on commercial vehicles in Ghana, and maintains that the mottos, slogans and proverbs on such vehicles form a significant occupational subculture among vehicle owners and drivers, and represent a pattern of behaviour or norms which reflect the unique identity of the drivers and the sociocultural environment within which they operate. The study concludes that inscriptions on commercial vehicles provide veritable windows through which vehicle drivers and owners view their work and self in Ghana. Quayson (2010) has, however, admitted that many of the slogans in the Ghanaian context are derived from other vectors of social life, although they generally celebrate the social variety of urban life.

The scenario reported in Liberia takes a similar form and structure. According to Guseh (2008), mottos and slogans on commercial vehicles mirror Liberian culture, history and philosophy. They reveal strong emphasis on religion, God and morality and attempt to highlight low ethical standard like corruption which has characterised public administration in that country. The author suggests that commercial vehicles can provide an outlet to propagate information and promote public policies by the government. Other studies like Bature and Sani (2019) see vehicle inscriptions as a medium of identity construction, self-expression and articulation of emotions. The authors maintain that drivers use such medium to express social values and personal beliefs on contemporary

issues in Nigeria. Significantly, Mgbemena (2013) also examine inscriptions on tricycles in Nigeria basically from a sociolinguistic perspective. The study discovers that diverse issues of national importance are usually thematised in these inscriptions and demonstrate a study of language use that reflects the communicative needs and subculture of a professional group. This study diverges from a broad contextualisation of tricycle texts and focuses on what it regards as 'street wisdom' in an attempt to x-ray how subjectivities of their creators and consumers add to the meaning-making resources of everyday life.

Theoretical considerations

This study adopts linguistic ideology and ecosocial semiotic frameworks in driving the analysis and discussion. We are concerned with linguistic ideology as a social practice 'held by immediate participants in a local sociolinguistic system' (Irvine and Gal, 2000: 35–36). It entails beliefs and conceptualisations about language in a particular social context. It links language with identities, institutions and values in all societies, and 'connects discourse with lived experiences' (Woolard, 1998: 27). Attitudes and feelings about language use connect to the social, cultural and historical system language users belong. This often relates assumptions about language to personal experience and may represent the dynamics of everyday life. Irvine (2012) further argues that linguistic ideology is influenced by moral, economic and political interests, and is mainly shaped in a cultural setting. In the context of this study, it is a socially and culturally oriented micro approach to the use of language as a cultural artefact whose social perception underlies participants' interpretation and performance of communicative action (Leech, 1983). Inscriptions on tricycles are an aspect of communicative use of language in which meaning is intentionally communicated to the audience and knowledge of the relationship between linguistic forms, sociocultural context and situational variables are useful in their interpretations (Chakrani, 2007; Harlow, 1990; Taguchi, 2011). In other words, the social interpretation of these mobile texts requires the intersection of social dynamics, and a set of shared values to understand their locally constitutive meanings. In this study, we explore automobile texts as discourse practices and tools for communication based on the premise that they have propositional character in which meaning is shared between the writers and their audiences to reinforce the claim that that language is not just an abstract structural system but a material communicative practice situated in and creating social contexts of use (Woodard, 2021).

Ecosocial semiotic theory, however, maintains that 'people shape their environment through the use of signs, and these signs in turn shape them as part of the complex dynamics and non-linear process in which the environment and its meaning are actively coproduced' (Iddings et al., 2011: 5). This theory explores the semiotic nature of the meaning-making process and how it interfaces with the physical environment. Thibault (2004) captures it more aptly when he states that human beings make sense of their environment in different social and cultural settings, and the environment in turn shapes such meaning. There are enormous semiotic features which are embedded in automobile texts and which are used to 'generate public discourse about various social practices' (Lee and Chung, 2009: 21). This meaning-making process is believed to influence certain actions, attitudes and perceptions of the targets of the message, provide a platform for learning life lessons and attempt to influence political, social and religious beliefs. The ecosocial theory, therefore, provides a more reflexive way of understanding mobile texts and other street art practices more broadly. Participants in this study equally utilised the socio-ecological mobile space to highlight personal ideologies and philosophical values which are important dimensions of their subjectivities and identities.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative ethnographic research design towards data collection, analysis and discussion. The study area was situated in the Uyo metropolis, the capital city of Akwa Ibom State, south-eastern Nigeria. Thirty participants were recruited for this study. They were mainly tricycle riders, passengers and members of the public. Twenty-five participants were males and five participants were females. This unequal proportion was hinged on the fact that the public transport sector in Nigeria is dominated by men as the key operators (Mensah et al., 2023). Participants were selected based on their knowledge and ability to interpret tricycle texts in addition to their willingness to participate in the research voluntarily. The socio-demographic characteristics of participants such as gender, age, occupation, education and religion were documented. The age range of participants varied between 18 and 65 years. Fifteen participants (50%) were tricycle riders, eight participants (27%) were tricycle passengers and seven participants (23%) represented members of the public. The educational background of participants also varied. Eight participants (27%) were graduates from higher institutions. Eighteen participants (60%) were products of secondary school as holders of senior secondary school certificates and four participants (13%) did not school beyond the primary level. They claimed to be educated informally. In terms of religion, 25 participants (83%) professed Christianity and five participants (17%) did not belong to any organised religion as a result of their agnostic view of God. Participants gave informed consent for all interviews, observations and recordings in writing. For participants who could not read or write, the consent statements were read to them to sign. The research was approved by the Ethical Committee of the University of Calabar.

Two ethnographic approaches: participant observations and semi-structured interviews were adopted in the data collection exercise. Participant observation allowed the researchers access to the urban landscape where some participants operated commercial tricycle transportation business. The researchers' positioning was those of passive participants and objective observers. We gained insights into participants' world of work through extensive involvement in their natural environment and observed the various mobile semiotics on their tricycles. These were mainly in the forms of graphic images and texts. We also observed the various social themes that resonate in the figurative texts and symbols on their tricycles. Participant observation enables the researcher to study the group (of tricycle riders) in greater detail and to gain access to varied information that would not be accessible to outsiders. It also helped to develop rapport and foster open speaking. The researchers gained deep perspectives in understanding a phenomenon of mobile semiotics, the situation, setting and behaviour of participants (Fetterman, 1998). Semi-structured interviews enabled the researchers to initiate guided conversations mediated by open-ended questions. Questions were posed on the nuanced subjective meanings participants ascribed to their automobile texts; the motivations for the texts, audiences' perceptions of the texts and the targets of the texts. The elasticity of this interview approach helped the researchers to facilitate a more cordial relationship with participants as well as to identify new experiences shared by them.

One hundred and eighty mobile graffiti were collected in the field. Digital audio recorder and a still camera were used in collecting the data. Field notes were useful in documenting transcripts of interviews as well as schedules of interviews including, names of participants (anonymised), date, time and place. Data were coded based on the relevant thematic categories, transcribed and translated. The descriptive method of analysis was adopted for the analysis and interpretation of data. This approach enabled the researchers to summarise data in a meaningful way to see patterns that may emerge. It also aimed to interpret the main features of the data and offers in-depth explanation based on the nuanced perspectives of participants, and in their own words.

Data presentation and analysis

In the analysis that follows, we examine the various layers of signification participants give to their automobile texts from the accounts of linguistic ideology and ecosocial semiotic frameworks. We have identified the major threads in which the dominant themes in automobile texts on tricycle resonate. We consider subthemes under ‘street wisdom’ which are based on localised philosophical thoughts and common sense and rooted in participants’ lived experiences in greater details.

Leave Buhari alone, face front

This tricycle text is targeted at Nigerians who ceaselessly blame their President Muhammadu Buhari for the hardship that has greeted every aspect of life and which has unleashed untold suffering on hapless Nigerians. This set of Nigerians has also described the Buhari administration as a failed government, and a regime of suffering that has registered Nigeria as the poverty capital of the world. According to participants in this study, this hardship and pain is often contradicted with the high level of corruption in the system perpetuated by politicians. Consequently, there are no employment opportunities for the teeming school leavers in the country: there are rising cases of insecurity occasioned by Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, cattle rustling and kidnapping for ransom, challenges which the government is incapacitated in addressing. Participants regretted that the high cost of living in Nigeria is beyond the reach of the common man as the prices of goods and services continue to surge and basic amenities and infrastructures such as power, fuel and gas are scarce. Some participants also talked about the rising inflation in the country which is threatening food security and increasing living costs. This is having a telling effect on business returns and household income. As a result of the grim socio-economic situation in the country, many youth are constantly on a blame game and found a reason not to engage themselves in meaningful activities that can generate income for them. The message of this tricycle is directly meant for this crop of young people. They are admonished to overlook the gloomy socio-economic reality in Nigeria and find something worthy to do (face front). A participant also argued that the expression ‘face front’ means to work for one’s future since Nigeria has no future for its teeming youthful population. A participant explained this tricycle text more lucidly thus:

This message is telling the public that there is life after Buhari’s government. It is a warning to all discerning minds that Nigeria will not recover soon from its bleeding economic woes under this administration. So the solution is to move on rather than piling blames and lamenting. (Etebom, 45 years)

This account starkly points to the struggling economy of the Buhari’s administration and the hopelessness it portends for the Nigerian masses. This state of affairs has deepened existing concerns about rising living costs and amplified calls for alternative economic and development model. However, the participant provided a leeway on how young people and Nigerians more broadly can navigate the murky water of Nigeria’s economic hardship to chart new paths of survival for themselves. This tricycle text therefore encourages the Nigerian people to empower themselves meaningfully in economic terms as entrepreneurs in small-scale businesses in order to weather the storm of harsh economic system than to perpetually complain and heap blame on Buhari’s incompetence and cluelessness in managing the economy.

If you no work, you no chop

This Nigerian Pidgin tricycle text translates as ‘If you do not work, you do not eat’ and is meant to discourage laziness and promote hard work among the target audience. Participants acknowledged that unemployment is one of the growing issues that stems from the country’s systemic failure. Most

of the challenges facing the country today such as violent crimes, youth restiveness, kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery and advanced fee fraud (popularly known as 419) are attributed to the rising cases of unemployment in Nigeria. It was also argued that the malaise of unemployment has social, economic and psychological consequences on the individual and the society. A participant narrated that a situation where growing number of graduates from higher institutions in Nigeria are churned out yearly without any deliberate plan to absorb them into any sector of the economy is alarming, and is responsible for the explosion in the unemployment rate in the country. According to the writer of this mobile text, it is a subtle message that expresses common sense for people to find something doing to earn a living. He reiterated that he shared his personal experience in the message. There was a time he co-habited with a girlfriend who was providing for him to the envy of the neighbourhood people until words got to the girl's parents that she was harbouring a gold digger in her house as a boyfriend. The girl's family consequently mobilised to the house and evicted him, and then dropped the message with him as he was leaving the premises. The participant reiterated that the shameful manner he was evicted from his girlfriend's house and the mocking remarks by her parents compelled him to redefine his life and give meaning to it. He expressed it in this way:

It was a day I can never forget in my life. The shame and 'unfair' treatment were unbearable. That was how I borrowed money to buy this *keke* (tricycle) and to inscribe my tale of woo on it so that others can learn from my experience. It is not good for a man to depend on anybody for survival; find your hustle. (Uwem, 36 years)

This participant believed that anybody who is able should also be willing to work else he or she should be starved. He said that in spite of the critically poor state of the economy, people should thrive to put food on their tables rather than being liabilities to others. He appreciated his encounter with his former girlfriend's family which has been a turning point in giving meaning to his life. He maintained that his message is not all about working and eating but for people to engage in activities that will shape and brighten their future. The message of this text is synonymous with the Nigerian Pidgin proverb, No food for lazy man 'There's no food for a lazy person' and prompts people to endeavour to engage in productive activities to empower themselves economically, improve their livelihood and guarantee their future well-being.

Obedient man is not a fool

This tricycle text aims to instruct the audience on the virtue of obedience which is lacking in everyday life of the present generation. According to a participant, obedience offers a sense of accomplishment and acts as a springboard for greater success and happiness in life. He submitted that this virtue ought to be cultivated at very early stage in life but unfortunately, the present generation is taking it for granted. According to this narrative, many people ignore rules and regulations in the society and see it as a norm. This is mainly attributed to degenerated value system and the belief that when you disobey rules and regulations, it increases freedom and liberty. The participant further reiterated that such law breakers seem to evaluate the obedient person as a fool. On the primary motivation of this mobile text, this participant averred that

Honestly, some people, especially this X-generation, regard you as a fool when you are obedient. They always seem to be on the speed lane in getting things done, and in the process break law and order. Asking them to do what is right is like restraining their freedom, and they forget that freedom comes with a responsibility. Obeying the law is a legitimate civil responsibility. (Etuk, 54 years)

This account reveals that being disobedient (to people in authority, parents, bosses, etc.) has some dire consequences, and does not provide the protection law enforcement has to offer. The message

charged its consumers to be law abiding because it pays off in the long run, and has greater reward for the future. It emphasised that the person who obeys the law is not a fool because he or she is doing an action the law requires. When this participant was further probed to talk about areas where laws are broken, he mentioned disobeying traffic light, jumping queues to refuel, fighting for passengers and the imposition of illegal taxes by the municipal authority among others. The writer of this message justified why he harped on obedience on his tricycle. According to him, the attitude to breaking law and order has long been taken for granted and the society has paid no attention to it. He believed that it was his modest way of calling to attention the need for people to exercise and fulfil important civil and legal obligation that comes with moral responsibility because every law has social purposes. If everybody obeys the law, the society will be a better place to live. It will birth a mutually beneficial and collaborative society. This ideology reflects the primary tenets of political philosophy. The participant also maintained that sanctions should be reinforced to ensure that people do not get away from breaking the law, and every member of the society should have a fair share of the burden to transform the society through obedience to its laws.

Man die go

This tricycle text is rendered in Nigerian Pidgin (NP). It translates as ‘When a man dies, he’s gone’ and depicts the temporality or vanity of life. This message is targeted at every human being to be circumspect with life since no one has control over it. According to a participant, this message is a warning to people to proceed carefully in life. He maintained that some people act and behave as if life has duplicate. This participant reiterated that there is a culture of people dropping dead in unusual places in Uyo, and Nigeria, more broadly, in recent times. In this regard, he believed that many people work under life-threatening conditions, and do not take adequate care of their health needs. As a tricycle operator, he cited incidences of many traffic collisions where people have been injured and lives lost. Many factors, according to him, have been responsible for these accidents like over speeding, drunken driving, red light jumping, dangerous overtaking and violation of traffic rules. The participant admonished road users to take precautionary measures to promote a culture of safety. The message, *Man die go* was interpreted by a participant as follows:

Man die go means that the moment you die, it is finished. Nothing can bring you back to life. So, while you are alive, don’t take unnecessary risks; don’t subject yourself to circumstances that will lead to stress; seek medical assistance when you are ill and live a worthy life. (Unyime, 49 years)

This narrative details the fact that the concept of death represents a situation that is helpless and hopeless. It therefore maintained that life should not be treated with too much seriousness because work life could be stressful. People should endeavour to punctuate their lives with play, fun, humour and better interpersonal relationships to reduce stress and improve mood. Another set of participants also recounted that *Man die go* can reflect one’s lackadaisical attitude towards life especially when such a life holds little or no promise of being eventful. Such people see death as the destination of life’s ultimate journey, and a disaster that must befall every mortal.

Chop make I follow chop

According to the creator of this automobile graffiti, it was aimed to condemn existing culture of greed among Nigerians. Participants argued that greed is a common feature of a consumer economy like Nigeria but the dimension it has taken is quite alarming. The text translates as ‘Eat let me also eat’ which is an advice to the political class and elites to be wary of concentrating too much resources in

very few hands. Participants submitted that greed is a social problem in their community of practice because it makes the elites to be ignorant of the needs of the masses. This has resulted in infrastructural deficit and shortage of amenities occasioned by corruption. They maintained that greed makes them to think only of themselves and families, and ensuring only their survival. A participant summarised the degree of greed in the Nigerian polity that justifies the above text as follows:

Our leaders are very selfish and self-centred. All they do is the primitive accumulation of material possession and power. Imagine the former Accountant-General of the Federation embezzling over a hundred billion Naira (\$238, 519, 022. 88). He's merely holding onto money he cannot exhaust for the rest of his life. What else would you call that if not extreme greed? This message is for such people. (Aniefiok, 50 years)

The participant further reiterated that such obsession with getting more money from the Nigerian commonwealth and patrimony can only widen the gulf between the haves and the haves-not. It can only be driven by a selfish motivation than any economic logic. This only accentuates the craze for material wealth which is often a source of conflict in the society. Beyond the desire to accumulate large amount of money and power, participants also explained that the automobile text above is speaking to the dynamics of equitable distribution of resources, especially of the oil wealth in the Niger-Delta region where this study is located. Certain interest groups want to grab everything at the detriment of other groups. When this happens, the multiplier effect of such largess cannot be felt by the grassroots, and there is always tendency for a breakout of violence attacks on oil installations and other forms of protests and agitations. This tricycle text is therefore rooting for the opposite spectrum of greed which is generosity or giving. In this way, peaceful co-existence of the neighbourhood and security of pipelines in the area can be guaranteed.

Fear people

This tricycle text was based on the rider's personal experience in his interpersonal relationships with people. The participant recounted that in the course of his life's sojourn on earth, he has been betrayed, embarrassed, humiliated and judged negatively by people. He said that he would have gone further than where he was in life but people were constantly pulling him down. This state of affair has often triggered sadness and anxiety, and derails one from living a successful life. He narrated how he was kind and supporting people to stand on their feet in their businesses. He claimed to lose count of the number of people he had rendered assistance to get them established. However, when his own business crashed, he got no support from people he had trusted. He continued his story thus:

It was really frustrating because I have invested in people in my whole life, both family and external people. When I lost all my investment to an unfavourable business climate, I was thinking my friends and family will assist me to recover but alas, no one. Now I am beginning life afresh like a starter. When I got this *keke* (tricycle), I decided to use this write-up to tell my story. (Aniekan, 57 years)

This participant believed that the general public may learn a lesson or two from his predicament and experience. It is a risky venture to build one's expectations on people because they may not be there to return any goodwill when you need them most. He averred that broken promises and disrespectful treatments engender negative emotions and trauma which got him frustrated and depressed. He therefore urged his potential audience to be self-reliant and self-dependent to be able to protect themselves in event of disappointment and betrayal from people. On how he was able to surmount the problem of betrayal and disappointment by people, the participant emphasised that because he is finding it difficult to regain trust, he has to set boundaries that have enabled him to restore self-worth and

respect in addition to being emotionally stable. He is also careful in seeking new relationships and building emotional walls that prevent people from getting too close to avoid any possibility of future emotional disaster. On how this message sits well with the public, another participant argued that the message is an observation which contains a general truth (aphorism) because there is nobody who has not had his or her share of ugly experience in their personal relationship with people.

Ètòk idèm idóhó ùdọ ñọ

This tricycle text is rendered in the Ibibio language which is the language of the immediate environment these tricycle riders operate. It translates as ‘A tiny physical frame is not illness’. This expression is used to appreciate hard work and unusual abilities of people with diminutive stature. They enjoy able-bodied privileges, and are not limited by physical impairment (Hendricks, 2003). Under normal circumstances, such people are often considered physically challenged, weak, or less capable but when they are able to demonstrate ability in their ‘disabilities’, performing tasks of daily living and earning income, they are often used as reference points to teach some lessons on hard work and worthy living in spite of their challenges. According to a participant, the message conveyed by this mobile text is to inspire able-bodied young men and women to brace up the challenge of engaging themselves in worthwhile ventures that will empower them economically. He argued that if people who are physically limited are not encountering any barriers due to their limitations how much more people with ability privilege. Another participant explained the message of this text in this way:

This message aims to inspire hard work and discourage laziness. People always have excuses to justify their unemployment status. Everybody is waiting for government or the private sector for work. These are able-bodied people, they do not want to be creative yet people who are assumed to be less capable are pushing hard and earning a living. This message is meant to hail such people and challenge others to follow suit. (Iniobong, 54 years)

From this account, there is need for young people to improve their life skills in order to enhance the quality of their lives and free themselves from the claws of poverty. Due to lack of employment opportunities, young people should create structures to support themselves by engaging in productive activities and developing sustainable enterprises. The preponderance of opinions in this regard by participants was that since most able-bodied youth are already armed with education and skills, they should engage in alternative and more proactive approaches to their productive empowerment by creating and expanding income generating activities. They maintained that when young people are left to be idle, they become social parasites and increasingly vulnerable, and will eventually find attraction in crime, drug addiction and prone to violence. These are all sources of potential risk to the society. This tricycle text is, therefore, a clarion call to able-bodied persons to engage themselves positively, and for the government and the private sector to improve their employability.

Íké gá gwù ndi ásiri

This tricycle text was inscribed in Igbo, a neighbouring language in terms of proximity to Ibibio and Anaang in Akwa Ibom State. It means ‘Gossipers, you will get tired’ and it is meant to portray social vices like gossip and jealousy in negative light. Jolly and Chang (2021) describe gossip as complex communication which is one of the distinguishing features between human and animal communication. A participant narrated how gossip in the past used to be associated with women, but it is now more fashionable with men. Self-disclosure and discussion about others is seen in the context of this study as a social problem where competitors deliberately tell false stories about other people to

undermine and destroy their reputation and to achieve positive self-representation for themselves. Another participant argues that gossiping is a prevalent practice in their workplace because of competition and the desire to outdo one another by every means. There are many reasons people gossip in this community of practice: first, they invent make-believe stories to grab people's attention; they make wrong accusations to set people's heads against each other which often results in conflict and division. These are designed to create disruptions and gain undue advantage over the other.

Relating his experience with gossips, a participant narrated his story as follows:

There are many tale bearers in this park my people (researchers). There was once they said my wife had left me because I could not pay her dowry. I heard I used juju to get passengers more than other riders. They have also said I bought my tricycle on hired purchase and lied to them about it. What have I not heard from desperate people? (Andem, 47 years)

This participant emphasised that due to the spate of rumour peddling and gossip in their place of work he had to deliberately send the message on his tricycle to all gossips because gossiping is a corollary of jealousy and envy. From this narrative, it was observed that it is people who lacked maturity and confidence in themselves that peddle gossip just to discredit others and showcase themselves to their best advantage (Mensah et al., 2022). Participants maintained that if one is not able to handle gossips, they may cause depression and anxiety which are threats to one's health and well-being. The message of this text is for people to desist from gossip and other social vices and mind their business.

I go make am

This tricycle text is a self-professed conviction that is rendered in Nigerian Pidgin. It translates as 'I will make it (in life)' and reveals a positive mind-set and a sense of future accomplishment by its writer. Participants acknowledged that riding tricycle as a means of livelihood is considered as a menial job in the perception of some people. They maintained that they are often looked down upon as never-do-well in the society, and are not treated with respect. They argued that their current business as transporters is a humble beginning that should not be despised. Consequently, the message *I go make am* offers hope and confidence for a future that is brighter than the present. They defined success in the context of their society as improved life, good job, a family and control of wealth, and having the right opportunity to uncover one's dream. Giving further justification for this tricycle text, a participant averred as follows:

In a capitalist society like ours, everybody strives to achieve success and make an impact in a competitive world. *I go make am* means that we at the rung of the social ladder are equally committed to be successful in life. No condition is permanent, and with focus on a positive attitude, anybody can make potential steps on the journey to success. (Udofia, 31 years)

This participant believed that tricycle operators can be successful if they can define their goal properly, have realistic expectations of themselves and think positively. Significantly, they must also have dignity in what they enjoy doing in order to dispel the various stereotypes against them. Generally, this tricycle text expresses an aspiration of participants to align their capacities with opportunities and match their talents with interests to realise their full potentials that will result in a meaningful and satisfying future. It also connotes one's ability to discover one's dream and opportunities and work towards them. It is self-assuring conviction that the future holds greater promise for career development and wealth creation. It also has the prospect of providing security, confidence and a sense of well-being. This tricycle text also displays a positive mind-set that

envisages opportunities to live a better life in the future. Finally, it projects a vision that tends to transform the mind and give hope and optimism to the grassroots when they think about future which seems scary and uncertain. It is our belief that if such enthusiasm is encouraged, it can bring about positive outcome in young people's lives.

Discussion and conclusion

From the account of linguistic ideology, participants used many language mediums like English, Nigerian Pidgin, Ibibio and Igbo in representing mobile texts on their tricycles, although existing evidence clearly shows hegemony of English and Nigerian Pidgin going by the 'hierarchy of language' principle (Weber and Horner, 2012: 16). English is conferred with greater power, prestige and influence at the detriment of the indigenous languages. Nigerian Pidgin is the language with wider communication. This evidence further reveals the multilingual nature and linguistic landscape of the environment which participants operated their business. The choice of each linguistic form was based on how well it was able to project a particular message. Language in this respect becomes 'a site for social practice' (Zeidi, 2012: 71). Through automobile texts on tricycles, participants were able to rationalise existing social structure and dominant linguistic practice in the urban landscape of Uyo. Put more broadly, participants have adopted language-inclusive ideology (Lemmi et al., 2019), which permits multiple forms of language to broaden understanding and involvement in the conversations. This approach finds synergy in the notion of translanguaging in semiotic practices (Hua et al., 2017), which promotes simple communication and inclusiveness. Participants also employ the strategic use of style such as indirectness and creativity to convey attitudes and emotions which are embedded in their messages. The messages highlighted on tricycles promote conversations and foreground social, economic and moral issues. In this way, the normal course of language use has been manipulated to define a sense of agency which producers of tricycle texts have exercised.

An ecosocial semiotic account of tricycle texts reveals semiotic potential across the urban landscape, constructing coherent meaning and reinforcing cohesive ties. Participants construct culture-specific meanings through a system of social practice thus establishing an interface between the meaning they create and the perception the audience in the environment have about them. Themes of poor economy, unemployment, obedience and gossip are ignited to shape the environment through the materiality of visual texts. Ecosocial features involving future aspiration, empowerment and reciprocal support are also meant to provide awareness and responses to influence the social environment and lead to social action that may produce change of attitudes. In this way, automobile texts on tricycles mirror everyday challenges of life through their production and circulation which have visually though informally transformed the urban space. Automobile texts have, therefore, provided a new form of comprehending social perceptions and local attitudes, and offered access to cultural literacy through the growing public appreciation of this art medium.

We have interrogated how tricycle riders who belong to the lowest social rung of the Nigerian society use verbal texts on their tricycles to make social commentaries about socio-economic challenges people are facing in the country. They express their thoughts on positive virtues (like hard work, resilience, cooperation) and social vices (like greed, obedience, gossip). These symbolic tags represent their local attitudes and beliefs which are broadly classified as 'street wisdom', and which is an essential skill or knowledge that is necessary for their survival in a harsh work environment that they find themselves. Some of these verbal texts are indirect ways of drawing attention to their predicaments or talking back to authorities. They also use their alternative platforms to promote acceptable social behaviour and value categories. Mensah and Nyong (2022) reiterate that verbal

texts on tricycles provide new modes of understanding social perceptions and local attitudes, and offer access to cultural literacy. In this way, the study has developed a richer understanding of the nuances and subtleties of a marginalised segment of the Nigerian society, and also nourished our understanding of how they give meaning to their social world. We acknowledge some limitations we encountered in the course of the fieldwork. First, it was difficult to track down research participants for interviews given the nature of their work. As a result, more participants were excluded and others were recruited to fill the gap. Significantly, none of the researchers is a native speaker of Ibibio which was the language of the immediate environment, and of most research participants. We relied on native speakers translators as a way to remedy this deficiency.

In conclusion, this study has interrogated how tricycles have provided a discursive platform and visual vocabulary for their owners and riders who are at the margins of the society to articulate 'street wisdom' (based on common sense and lived experiences) in communicating sociological and material understanding of their social universe to their audience. We have identified many conceptual themes ranging from the promotion of hard work, economic empowerment, virtues (like obedience and truth) and indispensability of death among others. They have created language activities and construed reality based on their lived experiences (Inyabri et al., 2022). There have been deep engagement with the socio-economic context of Nigeria in addition to broader societal concerns thus elevating individual feelings and thoughts to public discourses. Based on the findings, these textual materials are essential elements of urban subculture with layers of signification which are mainly coming from a marginalised segment of the society. For this set of people, producing textual materials on tricycles is a way of adding creative voices to issues of public concern and an act of moving with time. Future studies may explore visual images in automobile graffiti to unearth the meaning-making processes embedded in them.

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