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'One \$ dollar saved my life': A case of kombi text inscriptions on Zimbabwean roads.

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Abstract

Language is used in various contexts to achieve various communicative goals some of which are very much subtle. Textual inscriptions as discourse surround us in various environments for readers to decode volumes of meanings which by and large reflect people's struggles, identities and wishes. Office text inscriptions have been studied and were found reflecting the emotions and struggles of office manners and their respective trades. This article reports an investigation on text inscriptions on selected Harare and Gweru commuter omnibuses and how far they go in reflecting commuter and operators' identities, emotions, relations and nature of their daily lives. The article employs discourse analysis where texts are considered here as discourse rather than isolated units of language. The article analyzes kombi texts written in English and Shona.

Key words: Omnibus, Kombi, Discourse, Discursive Practices, Culture

Introduction

Commuter Omnibuses are the most common means of transport for Zimbabweans and the same could be said of people in the third world countries who cannot afford to buy personal vehicles. In Zimbabwe, they have come to be known as 'Kombis' and are at the service of commuters either long distance and or largely domestically as within the city, ferrying commuters from their places of residences to their places of work and back. While this means of transport is another form of business for some individuals and companies, texts ascribed to them by their owners, operators or companies is the focus of this article. Zimbabweans are a very creative people, ready to reveal their capabilities, personalities and

way of life in different ways. Zimbabweans have showcased their culture in music and dance, in film and sculpturing; in street theater, paintings and literature, but one way which has not received much attention but of cultural and social significance has been the Kombi text inscriptions creatively inscribed on our Commuter Omnibuses we use on our way to and from work and various other places. Paintings have been recorded and discussed, sculptures have received enormous attention in the media and books have been written in these areas. Winter-Iving (2004) for example, published a number of articles and books on Zimbabwe's sculptures and one book that quickly comes to mind is her *Pieces of Time*. These have revealed and presented the richness of Zimbabwe's way of life, the struggles of ordinary people, their relations, joys and pains in sculptures for example.

An area which in my view needs attention and even intensive study is a very important sphere of Kombi inscriptions. Inscriptions appear more like graffiti. Thus, language is quite visible on these vehicles, and through them the sensibilities of the Zimbabweans are reflected. Then there are meanings we invest in our own and other people's social positions and attributes –selfhood, personal and social identities, social

stereotypes, prejudices, conflicts and boundaries. Language provides the salient fields of action for so much of social and cultural life.

It is not clear how many people notice them and those who do are often fascinated and are made to partake in the beauty of another form of art that moves about; an art and a whole discourse that moves with the people –commuters as they struggle and celebrate from one day to the next; from one city to the next and from one residential area to another. One would have thought these inscriptions are for marketing purposes but we are quick to realize that marketing ceases to be an issue or factor as even the plain inscribed Kombis are as operational as those heavily inscribed.

Looking at some of the inscribed Kombis that rank at Fourth Street, Copacabana in Harare and those that trade the Bulawayo, Gweru, Harare routes, one is often mesmerized by the poetic jargon or inscriptions, and the varying messages of the Zimbabwe's story, not only on the roads but on ordinary people's lives and their varying long and short journeys. But inscriptions on Kombis are not a new phenomenon. Textual inscriptions have been largely through three basic ways which are names, adverts and general 'graffiti-like' inscriptions.

Methodology

The methodological framework is largely qualitative incorporating ethnographic and case study strategies. Research tools employed were participant observations in the two cases in Harare Copacabana Omnibus Rank and Forth Street omnibus rank. In Gweru the TM Omnibus Rank and Kudzanai Bus Terminus were used as cases. Interviews were also conducted through random sampling of respondents systematically grouped into touts, drivers, conductors, commuters and owners of Kombi buses. Telephone interviews were carried out for cases of Kombi owners whose contacts were taken from the Kombis themselves. This was done for time and financial reasons and proved fast and economical. However, authenticating as to whether the voice on the other end of the telephone were the real people in question became challenging as in some cases Kombi drivers would not give accurate information with regards to their bosses.

The researcher would straw through the rank, recording in a journal inscriptions from Kombis ranking in these said terminuses. Interviews where used as complimentary data collection to which respondents were expected to shed more light or explain

various meanings or origins of these inscriptions. Questions asked where unstructured.

Conceptual Framework

This article employs discourse analysis (henceforth DA) as its conceptual framework. Discourse Analysis has come to have terminological confusions abounding the definitions due to concurrent developments in various disciplines such as psychology, sociology, linguistics, media and communication studies to mention but a few all of which use 'a panoply of theoretical perspectives' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, 6). The starting point perhaps is to try and conceptualize the whole idea of 'discourse' itself before we move into the 'analysis' part of DA.

Stubbs (1983, 1) views discourse as 'language above the sentence or above the clause'. This is a formalist view of discourse basically pointing towards the linguistic form-function relationship. Brown and Yule (1983, 1) are of a different conviction however, for they find discourse as 'the analysis of language in use' unrestricted, 'to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which these forms are designed to serve human affairs'. Grant and Hardy (2004, 6 in

Fairclough 2005, 919) conceive the term discourse as having '...been defined as sets of statements that bring social objects into being'. In this regard 'texts are seen as manifestations of discourse' and analyzing discourse is tantamount to 'the systemic study of texts' (Fairclough: 2005, 919). This then takes us to Fairclough's definition (1992, 28) who conceives DA 'more than just language use' but 'a type of social practice' (ibid).

Fairclough (1992) finds discourse as figuring in three broad ways in social practice. First, is part of the social activity within a practice for example doing a job is basically using language just as commuting from one residential area to work and back is in itself use of language. Secondly, discourse figures in representation¹ and thirdly discourse is cultural where we are able to identify the discursive culture of the Kombi operators and commuters themselves. Fairclough (2003, 18) found culture as 'a signifying system' which is constituted as well as an articulation of representations, values and identities. Social analysis in this regard is seen following Fairclough (ibid) as concerned with the dialectical interrelations between the signifying systems and other separable systems

like the economic, political, kinship, family systems to mention but a few. In this regard, one finds cultures as existing as discourses as well as a form of consciousness. Fairclough (2003, 19) thus concludes by saying 'a given form of social life is a particular networking of social practice.' This leads us to Coupland and Jaworski (2001, 134) conclusions regarding DA that it is 'an important aspect of our social lives...constructed in and through language'.

There is value in looking at discourses. According to Roberts and Sarangi (2005, 632) the value of discourses allows allow us to broadly view language as a way 'in which many everyday activities are conducted.' Following Parker (2005, 164) discourse analysis has been concerned 'primarily with written texts.' And even though analysts have attempted to go beyond speech and writing, the representation of the texts is still invariably as something written. The notion of 'text' is this tradition of work therefore 'encompasses all forms of socially structured signification' (Parker, ibid). In investigating Kombi text inscriptions there is no doubt that one sees DA as enabling understanding of a people's culture and everyday

¹ Social construction of practice.

negotiation of spaces. Texts or text inscriptions on these Kombis are themselves a written text. But where they are written and how is also an important factor as they appear as deliberate visually constructed text designed to move from one residential area to another and in areas in which human mobility is but inexorable.

DA itself adopts 'constructivist' as its theoretical position; constructivist theory makes the radical claim that realities and scenarios we take to define our social circumstances and ourselves in a given set up at a given time are to a larger extent socially constructed (Coupland and Jaworski 2001). Through Kombi text inscriptions one reads acts of social construction in which the everyday woes, successes and discursive practices of the Zimbabwean people is made as they move from their places of residence to work and back or as they cut across residential areas for various social reasons.

Omnibus text inscription a discursive practice

Texts inscribed on kombis are themselves instances of language use. One reads them not as formalist constructs but as discursive. There are a number of inscriptions which may be identified but a few will be discussed in this article and an

inscription '*Why you cry*' draws one's attention. This reads more of a rhetorical question '*Why do you cry?*', thrown poetically to a traveller who probably is overburdened by stress due to various challenges characteristic of life, for example a heart break, financial issues and so on. If one imagines a traveller being a Zimbabwean civil servant, salary woes could be read as the cause of stress leading to this kind of 'lament' since in Zimbabwe according to Steve (2010) 'Civil service unions have for long demanded a pay hike...' (Steve, 6 November 2010).

Every single day is characterized by troubles of life and as passengers/travellers go and come back from work, such reminders seem necessary as one passenger pointed out, that a silent reminder does work as a source of inspiration for one to continue the journey of life. This question also interrogates the reasons behind probably unhappiness, emotional pain and any related matters. Boarding such a Kombi, and their operators transporting a troubled traveller to his/her destination seems to be a metaphoric sanctuary for the traveller, a comforter and the traveller feels as if he/she is being taken to a land where life's solutions are.

These inscriptions are highly dialogic, in other words, they are in some kind of a dialogue with each other all

carrying the burden of motivating travellers. One finds a Kombi inscribed with messages such as 'Never Give Up' parked close to 'Why u cry' loading passengers bound towards different destinations. The same traveller, even eventually getting into one of these two, is automatically encouraged to face life troubles/challenges no matter what they are. Thus, undertaking a journey using such inscribed public transport a traveller is inspired to face the next day with its challenges; the traveller undertakes the next journey with a glimpse of hope and a feeling of being close to success.

'King of the jungle' is another inscription one comes across. The city is metaphorically portrayed as a traffic and human jungle. The inscription suggests a 'ruler' and an absolute leader and perhaps decision maker within this jungle. Passengers/travellers seem to be given an assurance of safe passage in this jungle and boarding such a kombi makes one feel as if he/she is travelling with 'royalty'. But culturally, it could mean simply that the lion is probably the totem of the owner of the Kombi. Discursively, one finds cultural awareness in which the African belief system and practices in totems is not long lost but is now being celebrated and upheld in modern spheres of people's lives.

Team greatness: tisu anhu acho (we are the people) points towards achievers, greatness and a portrayal of a people whom the city talks about or news/gossip makers. Popularity is the key here. Zimbabweans are fond of or desire to be 'popular' in other words they desire fame and become individuals who can be subjects of 'greatness' talk. *Model MAN* becomes an inscription which perhaps explains why being '...anhu acho' (the people) is important. The idea of setting up standards and be followed by the rest seems to be the calling here. In Kombi business these could be direct messages directed at travellers that travelling with these inscribed Kombis assures one that he/she is in touch with modern standards of travelling. However, one reads how street lingo 'tisu anhu acho' is being popularized thereby speaking of the grand notions of the ordinary Zimbabwean and the streets as well as their varying meeting places, work, social, religious and even political.

'Guess who is back' may mean that the Kombi may have been taken off the road or the owner once got broke and became the talk of town and now is reasserting dominance or introducing his or her re-comeback into the business. But the same message carries quite a lot of public history and daily happenings. When the Zimbabwe's political, social and economic crisis worsened in the 2006,

2007, 2008, a number of people left the country for neighbouring countries. With the Government of National Unity (GNU) and the introduction of the multi-currency system, the political, social and economic standoff began to improve mostly in 2009. This made Zimbabweans begin to return to their country and they are in the process of returning mostly from South Africa and Botswana. This inscription 'Guess who is back' appeals to this very scenario, as once it had become a norm for missing friends and relatives and now it has become a norm of updating each other as to who has returned home.

Messages of romance and relations are also captured in these inscriptions such as '*Zvakaoma Dhiya*' (It is hard my darling). The inscription is conclusive, as if reached after some love-life experiences given that much happens to people in love, *Quality time* is another which points to relations, romance and acts as a reminder to travellers. Reminders are important in life especially after a hard day of work men and women are reminded to be with their hubbies and encouraged to spend some time together or think of bringing 'quality time' to reality.

Kombi operators (Owners) as ordinary Zimbabweans are not spared from various criticisms that come from either friends or relatives due to their successes. Zimbabweans believe that

buying a vehicle, no matter how small, is a sign of success and even a sign of having accrued wealth and fame especially if the purchased vehicle is a Kombi. One therefore reads how these Kombi Owners respond to various criticisms levelled against them. '*All eyes on me*' is a case in mind. It seems to mean that the world has refocused its attention to the 'owner' of a particular Kombi who now is a businessman/woman. The notion of extended family as practiced in the country is given attention here. It is common practice that if a member from the extended family assumes an influential position, especially one that involves accruing money, the rest of the extended family often look up to him/her for financial assistance and even favours. Travellers do read these inscriptions with a sense of brotherhood in the sense that whatever their successes they too have relative and friends' eyes on them. In other words, there are high expectations and even responsibilities expected from them.

Some inscription read more like dedications and thanks giving or appreciation. '*My Father*' for example, reveals honour or a dedication, aligned to, or could be singing praises to both the earthly father for teaching, raising and even pointing the right directions for the realized success. But it could also refer to the heavenly father 'God' who religiously,

specifically Christian, points to the most high, praise and thanks giving. For the operator and the passage, memories or recollection and even appreciation of the gifts and successes that life brings about.

The successes of life are propagated to travellers as gifts given to us by God or by the unwavering support and precisions of our parents. Because close to 75% of Zimbabweans are Christians, religious anecdotes are a feature in these Kombi inscriptions. 'Thank you God' is self-explanatory and one comes across even verses from the Bible as inscriptions for example 'I shall not die but I shall live (Psalms 118)' or just 'Psalms 118'.

These religious inscriptions seem to act as reminders travellers to repent or even offer prayers regularly as they struggle through life. Given the numbers of people suffering from HIV/AIDS both the infected and affected, reading 'I shall not die but I shall live', speaks volumes to these people. Hope, inspiration and comfort remain visible messages that travellers carry with them as they are coming from HIV/AIDS testing centres, Hospitals and even graveyards from which Kombis ferry them to and fro.

It would appear that the Zimbabwean story would not be complete without humour. Laughter is clinically found

to be a remedy to some social problems as it allows lightening up. 'One \$ Dollar Saved my life' as an inscription made most travellers seeing it for the first time have a light moment. In Harare, this was the talk by most travellers interviewed on Kombi inscription and it did catch the attention of most travellers/passengers. Despite the humour, most pointed out that the owner may have used a dollar to play lotto from which luck came his/her way and got enough cash to buy the Kombi or he saved each dollar he made and explains his success today. But it reflects largely Kombi drives, touts and even ordinary people's tales concluded on their behalf. This could mean a dollar used for transport to and from (since most domestic routes are 50c therefore \$1 for going and coming back) work having brought gains or success or a dollar used to 'juice-up' a cell phone with a call having changed somebody's life. This inscription stands as perhaps directed to the 'doubting Thomases' in our world for they are reminded that a dollar could be too little but has rather a life-saving potential. This may also subtly or tactfully forces people to make journeys they may have doubts to undertake. Importance is taken away from the fare of the Kombi and attention made to the journey itself.

It is important to note that the poor and ordinary people are the ones who

use this mode of transport while the middle and upper class mostly use private vehicles. Thus, messages carried in these inscriptions are not only for or directed towards this ordinary person. The inscriptions carry the character and voice of the lower class individual. The same Kombi uses the same road or route that the middle or upper class citizen in a private car uses. The message overlap to include these individuals as they too engage the inscriptions as they overtake or are overtaken by the inscribed Kombi especially along routes of common ground that link the city or cities.

'Unstoppable' is another interesting inscription that calls to appreciation hordes of issues. The inscription suggests a degree of speed and conqueror of any delays that may present themselves along the way. In other words the traveller is reminded of efficiency and reliability and assurance that one reaches his/her destination safe and sound. With traffic police behaving like mushrooms at every point and sections of the roads especially those linking the Zimbabwean cities, and stopping and ticketing every Kombi that passes the section or point, delays are a common factor. This reveals a culture on the roads where public transport is subjected to heavy scrutiny while private cars are rarely stopped unless for over speeding and

routine driver's license check. For long distance say from Bulawayo to Gweru, Bulawayo to Harare ordinary passengers prefer private transport to using Kombis because of delays at very traffic police control check point. Thus, boarding *'unstoppable'* one has a sense of travelling with a Kombi that has been tested and tried on the roads, one that has seen it all; a Kombi which assumes that any check point is no cause to worry. The irony and a sense of humour one gets is witnessing the inscribed *'Unstoppable'* Kombi, being stopped by the traffic police and subjected to ticketing for overloading.

One also reads a close connotative that links with Denzil Washington's movie *'Unstoppable'*. The movie is about a train that threatens to destroy a city by explosion because it moves without a driver and at every point it gains speed destroying anything in its path. It is the brevity of two engineer-drivers whose sacrifices bring it to a stop. This reflects the taste of films Zimbabweans are exposed to and perhaps equate the character of the Kombi driver as they negotiate routes infested by the traffic police.

Inscription on public transport also speak tales of their owners as well as reflect the sensibilities of the passengers who far from anything else have purpose and cash/business to these operators. Owners

communicate or respond to criticisms through use of inscriptions. Kombi Owners are ordinary men and women most of whom stay with the public in the locations. But an inscription like 'All eyes on me' speaks volumes of the journeys of life of these people. There is a tendency by the general public or by a sect of the population to be curious about one's life should one begin to make money or succeed in life. This kind of attention has no boundaries—for it siphons family members, close friends and strangers in one's life. One therefore reads a Kombi owner's consciousness towards this kind of behaviour and curiosity that may be levelled against him/her. Shadrek Mavhuka, a Kombi driver manning the Warren Park¹ route, at the time of this research, pointed out that owners of these kombis are the ones who come up with these inscriptions as a way of luring potential customers. But one also reads deep seated personal messages from the Kombi owners themselves directed towards family members, close friends and possible enemies such as 'All eyes on me'.

Mavhuka, however, says that inscriptions are meant to make commuters adhere and develop some relationship with the kombi there-by guaranteeing cash inflow for the owners of the kombis. Thus, inscriptions should reflect character. For example, 'Sanchez' as reported by

Mavhuka, pointed out that customer care is superb and the researcher confirmed this by boarding one of the kombis. Sanchez is a musician and reflects reggae/ragga music. Sanchez omnibuses are loaded with state of the art radios/music systems that mostly play reggae/ragga music.

Most commuters agree that travelling should be safe and enjoyable and choice of omnibuses is due to how customers are treated. Some commuters pointed out that they had developed an attachment with certain specified kombis identified by these inscriptions. This point confirmed Mavhuka's notion.

Discussion

Kombi inscription noted in this article are a piece of the larger cake of a whole body of inscriptions one comes across on Zimbabwean roads. They are an example of how inscriptions make up a discourse of their own very much alive and visible on the roads and are part of the Zimbabwean cultural landscape. Van der Geest (2009,6) noted that the 'automobile has become central in African culture' and its neglect as an object of discourse analysis can show how discourse analyst researchers in Zimbabwe and beyond are far sighted. For instance, Fairclough (2005, 2003, 1992) would focus on power related discourses as they manifests themselves in the

media, political speeches and so on. Rodgers (ed.) (2004) focuses on the extra dimension of discourse analysis –Critical discourse Analysis (CDA) as manifesting itself in education. In the Kombi inscriptions, however, one sees evidence of negotiation of cultural space enacted and constructed discursively.

Van der Geest (2009, 6) makes a very important observation that ‘what originates from our culture (traditional African culture emphasis mine) is too familiar to be visible in another setting: schools, factories, hospitals, pharmaceuticals....’ as such discourse analysis should not overlook the very important settings where space and power are negotiated in rather subtle and cultural ways such as in Kombi inscriptions.

While acquisition or engagement in commuter business could be read as the manifestation of Zimbabwean popular and material culture for there is a strong cultural communication through vehicles exposed on the public arena. Kombi inscription would thus be seen as an act of discursive practice following Fairclough (2003) and inscriptions become what Van der Geest (2009, 9) calls ‘visualization of wisdom and proverbs’ in religious and traditional as well as contemporary modern Zimbabwean forms of social life and practices.

In as much as the inscriptions are visible they are also enigmatic as they speak out and are meaningful to transcribers and commuters but they could also be silent especially to external members of the Zimbabwean society. This is so because inscriptions are created or constructed only from Zimbabwean social and cultural experiences. Inscriptions vary from modern/contemporary Zimbabwean philosophical sayings, the bible, newspaper reports, sports, social and political events. As commuters, they may not be aware as to who or what the inscription applies but the collective envisage of these inscriptions tell personal histories of Kombi owners but extended to comment on public sentiments, experiences and desires – culturally, religiously, economically and socially. As such creators and drivers of these inscribed Kombis are cultural heroes in the contemporary Zimbabwean cultural landscape for ‘the general impressions they convey is not one of concern and anxiety about an insecure undertaking, leading to paranoia...but rather the note struck is one of bravura and self-awareness in spite of many dangers’ (Van der Geest 2009, 11) in the operation of the Kombi business itself. One major communicative goal for these inscriptions is negotiation of space. The construction of reality on the roads and in the contemporary society follows structures and entities where people interact everyday.

Conclusion

Inscriptions, as has been noted, fall in various categories such as, politics, social, economic, historic and religious realms. Collectively, these inscriptions evolve around success recalling that in Africa owning a small business is considered a degree of success in life and success is measured by how individuals gain assets, popularity, property and fame. They also point to the journeys of life that brought about these successes, but sometimes they are responses to criticisms.

Kombi operation business is sometimes believed in Zimbabwe as a risky business hence connected with the use of charm and *juju* that involves rituals as well as human killings. Success hence is not readily accepted by some members of the society who may assume foul play in the business dealings of these kombis. It is difficult to empirically get proof to the use of charm but some commuters believe that some kombi operators actually use these and sometimes they hide behind religious inscriptions to make commuters unsuspecting or give confidence to commuters that they will not be victims of sacrificial prey from which 'fortune' can be obtained since the city is a 'jungle' from which rules of the jungle apply where one speaks the language of money/cash. But who

knows? In the city life a dollar could save one's life.

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