

The Language of graffiti on Public Transport Vehicles in Kenya: Issues and perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a linguistic study in graffiti on Public Service Vehicles (PSVs) in Kenya using a Lexical Pragmatics framework. The main purpose of the study was to investigate and analyze the linguistic elements in graffiti perspective on PSVs in the Kenya. The paper sought to analyze intentionality, communicative effectiveness and the role of context in understanding graffiti on PSVs and to establish whether Lexical Pragmatics theory can be used in the analysis of graffiti on PSVs. The study revealed that Lexical Pragmatics theory adequately accounts for the successful interpretation of graffiti on PSVs in Kenya. The results revealed further that effective communication in graffiti rely on context for effective interpretation. At the same time, the data also revealed that graffiti can be analyzed in any multilingual set up-English, Kiswahili, and Sheng.

Key words: Graffiti, Language, Public Service Vehicles, Lexical pragmatics, Kenya

1.0 Introduction

Crystal, D.(1995:181) observes that graffiti is typically obscene or political in character, but a great deal of humour and popular wisdom content has formed the basis of several collections by folklorists, artistes and humorists.

Coulmas (1996) describes graffiti as writing or drawing scratched on a wall or other surface such as inscriptions that contain quotations from poets, salutations, idle words, obscenities, love addresses and satirical remarks.

Daniels and Bright (1996) attributes the historical background of graffiti to the alphabet which had more than one hundred inscriptions and graffiti from the 5th and 4th centuries B.C.E., which was also based on a variant of the ancient Greek script of Gothic. The later will be of little significance to this study, that is, Gothic.

Crystal (1997:181) describes graffiti as any type of public markings that may appear in the forms of simple written words to elaborate wall paintings. Crystal (1995) further notes that two of the longest

standing graffiti are 'Kilroy' and 'Chad' both of world War II origin, and still being drawn around the world in the 1990s (p. 181). 'Kilroy and Chad' were the first graffiti to have been written. 'Kilroy' began in America and may have been a Massachusetts shipyard inspector, James Kilroy, who in 1941 was marking the phrase on equipment to show that he had checked it. On the other hand, he may have been a sergeant, Francis Kilroy whose arrival at a Florida air base was anticipated by the notice, 'Kilroy was here next week.' 'Chad' also known as Mr. Chad appeared in Britain early in the war, always accompanied by a standard phrase of the type 'Wot, No---'. The name 'Chad' was chiefly 'Royal Air Force', 'Private Snoops', 'The army equivalent' and 'The watcher', often found in the navy. This study deals with words or fragment sentences (texts) that are found on PSVs.

1.1 The Public Service Vehicles and Graffiti in Kenya

The Public Service Vehicle industry (PSV) in Kenya has morphed from the 1950s when it was illegal, to 1973 when Kenya's first President Jomo Kenyatta, officially recognized the industry. Initially even after recognition, the Industry ran without Transport Licensing Board (TLB) and public transport service (PSV) licensing for a time, a dangerous precursor. This would later make the industry a problem child for the Kenyan government, when it later grew to be the dominant public transport industry in the country.

With its preeminence the industry formed an association, the PSV Vehicle Owners Association (MVOA), which became a magnet for political groups to engage with especially during the late 80's and early 90's as Kenya entered a period of agitation for political reforms. The association was disbanded and control was left to smaller PSV route-based associations.

There was a turning point in the early 1990s in Kenya, when more and more youth in Nairobi (to begin with) joined the international hip-hop bandwagon. It was an international phenomenon. For the first time the youth could collectively express their rebellion against the confines of society. In certain public service routes in Nairobi, PSV owners discovered that they could attract these young people as they went to school or came back home by playing this music loudly and having resplendent graffiti plastered on their PSVs. A competitive streak for passengers ensued to a point where school-going students would wait for hours at a bus stop just to take the PSV they preferred. The best PSVs were the ones with the best and loudest sound, awe-inspiring graffiti, and a superb interior. These were the 1990s that I remember. Some routes had better-looking PSVs and their 'street cred' was higher than others. Kids wanted to move to estates that had better PSVs. The competitive streak degenerated to a point where plasma screens were installed on any space available on PSVs, even the emergency windows. The situation had grown awry and unchecked for too long. It was time for the government to step in.

2.1 Literature Review

The conceptual core of lexical pragmatics demands a straight formulation of conversational implicature. Paired with the idea of semantic under-specification in the lexicon and an appropriate representation of contextual and encyclopedic knowledge, this conception avoids both unmotivated lexical ambiguities and coercion mechanisms (Blutner 1998:2). Words are grouped into semantic classes, organized in the occurrence of semantic properties, and organized from the presence or absence of a feature (Munge 2009:16).

The theory of conversational implicatures, was developed from William James lectures (1965). Grice, in his paper "logic and conversation" (1975) endeavored to outline it as a theory of implicatures. Grice's theory is an attempt to explain how the learner gets meaning from what is

meant [intention], from the level of expressed meaning [explicit] to the level of implied meaning [implicit].

Grice, therefore, provided a framework for the interpretation of utterance where he points out that, knowing what the speaker actually said in producing a particular utterance, knows what sense or referent was intended (Levinson 1983: 101). Grice then came up with four conversational maxims that help one to determine what the implicature might be. These refinements then in conversational implicatures theory led to Neo-Gricean theory. The conversational maxims through integration and unification were reduced to Q-principle and I-principle, Atlas and Levinson (1997:75).

Lexical pragmatics will provide an explanatory way and try to give a systematic account of the phenomena under discussion, especially in this present study of graffiti. Daniels and Bright (1996) notes that overlaps of lines in poetry graffiti indicate in which order and direction the signs were drawn...uneven distribution of the text on the available writing space... They go further to depict the Lydian alphabet, attested in more than 100 inscription and graffiti from the 5th and 4th centuries B.C.E, and is based on a variant of the ancient Greek script of graffiti. This will form a strong basis in this study especially on the appropriate choice of graffiti text. Coulmas (1996:170 171) talks of ancient graffiti in Latin from a wall in Pompeii, 1st Century CE. The four lines on the wall are fragmented verses...which command a watchman to keep the door closed to him who begs but to open it to him who gives-a reference to a Roman brothel. This is important to the current study, as it will help in generating correct texts or sentence fragments in graffiti. Coulmas (1996) further gives a concise definition of graffiti as writing or drawing on a wall or other surface...as the wall inscription...contain quotations, salutations idle words, obscenities, love addresses and satirical remarks. This is quite insightful to this study guiding us on specifics on graffiti on PSVs.

Yieke (2001, 2002, 2003, and 2006) has done extensive research using graffiti as an avenue of data collection. Her works are extremely insightful and fundamental to this study. However, she has used CDA and Socio-cultural approach in her studies. A lot will be borrowed from her study. The works only provide an entry point into this paper but also provide entry words of graffiti nature. Kinyatti (2002) in her studies on gender and language. She explores on how male university students and PSV crew depict women as subjugated. She uses PSV graffiti to demonstrate on how women are demeaned. Her study will also act as an entry point too to this present study.

Coulmas (1989) says that writing greatly enlarges the range of communication, and consequently power. He further proclaims messengers [PSVs] that have no idea what the message is all about and who needs not even understand the language in which it is phrased, that is, graffiti may carry that written message over thousands of miles. Therefore, writing is a system of more or less permanent marks used to represent an utterance in such way that it can be recovered more or less exactly without the undue intervention of the [speaker]. All these findings will add some resourceful insight into the present study of graffiti writings on PSVs.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The aim of linguistic pragmatic is to provide an explicit account of utterance– interpretation, how sentence fragments and ungrammatical (texts) are interpreted, how contextual and encyclopedic knowledge is brought to bear, (Sperber and Wilson 1981). For example, the I-principle, which states that ‘Do not make your contributions more informative than is required’. This was later fine-tuned by Levinson in what he called informativeness principle.

The speaker’s ‘intended point’ refers to the speakers’ overtly intended meaning and hence to either narrowing or broadening processes involved in this theory. It is arguably seen that there is a distinctive borderline between lexical and pragmatics thus combining the interface of semantics

under-specification in the lexicon with a theory of pragmatics i.e. context. It is therefore made up of lexical semantics and lexical pragmatics, Blutner (1998).

It is against this backdrop that the theory of Lexical Pragmatics handles notions such as Lexical semantics, nature of concepts and role in communication and cognition, acquisition of word meanings and their processing, and the development of lexical-pragmatic abilities. This theory therefore has the capacity, relevant concepts and appropriate descriptive tools in the analysis of the graffiti data in the study.

3.0 Data Analysis

3.1 Properties of Graffiti Writings in Kenya

According to Crystal (1995), some characteristics of graffiti have been given that shows a great deal of straightforward praise or invective for or against particular gangsters. The symbols and logos used often play a prominent role in the discourse, though; in this paper, we confined ourselves to text only.

‘Hot shot’ in some of the ‘PSVs’ could mean a form of praise while in others could be an abuse depending whether it is lexically broadened or narrowed. In most instances, it could be an invective or praise if it is lexically approximated, metaphorically or categorically extended in meaning.

‘We lead others follow’, from the assessment of this graffiti, we could say that ‘lead’ and ‘follow’ can be lexically narrowed to encode a more specific sense of ‘leading on the road’ while the rest(competitors) ‘follow’. This satisfies the explanation that ‘this’ PSV crewmembers are ahead in businesses compared to their competition.

Secondly, a common tactic is to respond to a well-known quotation or slogan as Crystal (1995: 181) puts it. These may involve Biblical or catch phrases. In this paper, Biblical and slogans are predominantly used. Examples of data taken from different PSVs include words used like ‘Babylon’, ‘Paradiso’, ‘Paradise’ ‘Simba wa Yuda’ (Lion of Judah), ‘Beer is always wet’ which all depict instances of Biblical denotation.

Thirdly, graffiti dialogues and [monologues] also exist as writers react to each other. ‘Delamere is back’, ‘Try it loose job’ are examples which are either dialogues or monologues seemingly seen to respond to ‘invisible voices’.

Fourth, puns and word play abound that is, words of a popular song or character are execrable, Crystal (1995:181). For example, ‘Delamere is back’ and ‘Annan’ depict characters that were once known in Kenya’s history for different reasons.

What these examples show is that graffiti writings in Kenya’s Public Service Vehicles (PSVs) serve the language needs of the observers because PSV crew use it to communicate their ideas, feelings and intentions. Like any natural language, a graffiti writing as a language have sound which can be represented linearly from left to right, up-down or down-up, either way and is readable. The graffiti text has developed into a system of symbols such as letters of the alphabet, numerals, and emoticons, which can be combined in different ways to communicate meaning. PSV crews have come up with conventions of combining these symbols with fancy colours to convey information (message).

3.2 Uniqueness of Graffiti on PSVs in Kenya

Graffiti writings have a unique and peculiar style of writing. The style is adopted due to the kind of medium involved in the communication process. The fact that the space involved is immensely large makes writers to employ a unique style of writing coupled with the fancy paintings. This is referred to as text montage; where artistes have begun to, or resumed mixing image and text,

Coulthard and Toolan (2005: 3). Writers simply write the words over an image where the words constitute a connected message and can be read as a text (ibid: 4), this study will deal with written text and leave out greater chunk of images and paintings. (Illustrations of text montage are at the appendix). Both the writer and the receiver of the message are not restricted linguistically by the nature of the PSVs' graffiti surface area. The artistes are freely becoming creative to maximize this linguistic unrestrictive.

3.2.1 Use of Short Words

Graffitiists employ use of short words in the communication process try to convey a message. Some text graffiti are just made up of one word, which could indeed convey a 'loaded' message. In texts like 'Confused', '...looks younger' the writers of PSV graffiti in Kenya do not use normal grammatical expressions. Sentences are predominantly characterized by simplicity or reduced syntactic complexity. The sentences or words are incomplete. Both content and functional words may not be overtly seen. The graffiti text is short, brief and void of grammatical and punctuation marks that the artiste does not ponder are necessary in putting the intended message across. To many of the graffiti texts on PSVs, the subject and the object are overtly left out as demonstrated in those words.

3.2.2 Use of Fragmented Sentences

In the graffiti text style of writing, there is no clear concept of well formed syntactic structures. There are no clear-cut boundaries between words, phrases, and clauses so that a sentence is automatically thought of, as having a complete thought or idea. Most of the sentences are just fragments. There are no specific morpho-syntactic structures involved, but the order is linear as any natural language. For example, 'Soon to bedroom near you', 'Your friend next', the sentences are fragments but convey a message that there is a 'somebody' inferred to in the graffiti text.

3.2.2 Lexemes

Algeo and Pyles (1982: 260) state that processes of forming new words are made by creating, combining, shortening, blending or shifting the uses of old words..." Creation, shortening, combining, blending will be appropriate in this paper. Crystal (1995), has the temerity to demonstrate that a single lexeme simultaneously contain information relating to several linguistic dimensions.

According to Cruse, a lexical unit should be "at least one word", or elements under consideration are parts of words, words or sequences of words. He further points that, a word is typically the smallest element that can be moved around without destroying the grammaticality of the sentence (ignoring any semantic effects). Thus, words are creatively manipulated to suit the audience. Words are created or constructed to a new lexical item (neologized). It is a strategy used in extending the lexical richness of a language. For example, in 'Shaft' and 'Final cut', are lexemes shall determine expected meaning after being either lexically broadened or narrowed. Since the stereotypical shaft is a metal, the properties of this category can include any other metal when narrowed, In the PSV context; 'shaft' when broadened will be interpreted as a vehicle in good condition.

3.2.3 Constrained Spelling

Graffitiists evolve a unique way of words construction. They use several alternatives of spelling. Thus, there is no standard manner of spelling as one observes from one PSV to another. It is interesting to note that one word, takes several modes of spelling. For example, words like 'akdmks

(academics), ‘akademiks’(academics), ‘akademi’ (academy). Sometimes, it is difficult to interpret some symbols or words unless you decide the register, phonetic and phonological interpretation used, or know the artistes’ style of writing. From the examples above, different symbols and words are observed in words, which do not necessarily follow any set standard of spelling, though the message is same.

3.2.4 Anonymity Element in Graffiti Text

Graffiti text message is meant for private reading. The graffiti is written with the intent of passing a message to either a single individual, authority or the public. In all this case, there is usually a high degree of anonymity in graffiti text writings. The authors do not want to identify themselves, especially when the text is highly inflammatory and by inflammatory we mean sensitive and against state laws. However, PSVs are a public means of transport; the explicit graffiti on them needs a thorough scrutiny of the message and the intended ‘audience. Either their dialogue is thus much less of cognitive explicitness or makes far more assumptions than would be found in writing meant for public reading in advertisement or entertainment display. For example, data like ‘Try it loose job’ ‘Ameze wembe’ (swallow a razor blade) depict a high degree of anonymity as they emanate from angles of obscurity, subjugation or fear of reprisal as they also demonstrates, outright denial of continued poor working conditions and is more of a rebellion than sheer irony.

3.3 Strained Style of Graffiti Writing

The graffiti text style of writing is so unconstrained that it falls between standard and non-standard type of English. However, there is largely the code-mixing element and communication is highly achieved. The rules of Standard English grammar are flouted. Some of the words are greatly and intentionally miss spelt. General rules for punctuation and capitalization are ignored, with many achieving the explicit fancy writing style. This style of writing is equated to calligraphy, or gothic style of writing. For example, data like ‘exortica’ (exotic) (written invisibly unclear) is because of the style of writing.

3.4 Use of Phonetically and Phonologically Written Graffiti Text

The authors of graffiti text have immensely developed a written form of sounds that replaces spoken utterances. Words are written phonetically, for example, ‘kam’ (come), and ‘sori’ for (sorry), ‘akademka’ (academic). The author may be thinking of the utterance in its spoken forms even though the message is transmitted in a written form. This adds also to the uniqueness of the style of graffitists. ‘akademka’ (academic) is a matter of phonetics and phonology. The written is pronounced as the spoken.

3.4.1 Ellipses

Graffiti texts exhibit some kind of telegraphic style of writing, which is in our view constrained. An elliptical style of writing is resembled to what people used to use in the writing of telegraphs. It is viewed in most instances as the intentional avoidance of functional and content words. These are prepositions, pronouns and demonstrative. Nouns, verbs or word classes are generally elliptical. Elliptical discourse is most often response to questions. Elliptical styles are not only economical in production but also respect the needs of receiver by being quantity significant. The ‘audience’ is expected to fill in the information to enrich the written discourse. The hearers are constrained by the immediate context and relevance. The information for enrichment may be taken from the short and long-term memory, coupled with the background information or encyclopaedic entries. In examples

taken from PSV route no.19/60 'we call them they run', 'Girls like it out way', 'Can sleep on their stomachs' there is a left out element of the 'initiator to the responses' while in example 'we call them, they run' does not indicate specifically the caller, similarly to the others in this examples which depends on context interpretation.

3.4.2 Use of Abbreviations, Contractions and Acronyms

The graffiti text is predominantly rich in abbreviated words, contractions and even acronyms. The meaning is expressively retained. Seemingly, at this instance, there are no specific rules for writing graffiti text as yet. It is abundantly evident that there is a wide and rich repertoire of such graffiti words on PSVs.

To some PSVs, the graffiti text has letters in place of words, for instance "you" becomes "u", "see" is 'c', single digit (figures) can replace words, as in 'ate' for 8, 'for' becomes '4' and 'to' becomes 2. It is apparent that these forms of words are used for impressionistic purpose and intentioned departure of deviance, and of course for convenience purposes. Examples like 'Banjuka' tu', and 'Dance 360 'dance all round', are explications of 'figures' instead of words in use. 'Banjuka 2' is a known a hip-hop lyric in Kenya.

All messages are multimodal since messages make use of multiple modes. Graffiti texts on PSVs are archetypal examples of multimodal messages. The authors use semiotic resources to communicate identities. The graffiti chosen and displayed all signify symbolically different aspects of those identities. The PSV choice helps to create a particular identity (as we will see in later chapters). Graffiti has evolved into a pop culture existence often related and associated to underground hip-hop music and break dancing creating a lifestyle that remains hidden from the public. Message in these can be got depending on how lexically they are adjusted.

3.5 Humour in Graffiti Structure

Any of the recognized domains of language structure and use can be manipulated in order to provide the input to a joke Crystal (1995:409). Graffiti cannot be discussed as just text without having to look into it from a humorous perspective. Comic effects as is sometimes referred to can be linguistically categorized. This is deviation from the norms of spelling, punctuation, layout and typography. It greatly motivates a great deal of written humour as explicated in misprints, misspellings and many graffiti. It is inextricably workable and involved only in the written mode. In examples from PSVs include 'Too much sex makes you shortsighted', 'Bakers knead to do it', 'Nobody gnu', graphological humour is felt when the text is explicitly looked at and not merely read out aloud. The examples are adapted from (Crystal 1995:409) The above examples illustrates humour through the choice of the words that is, 'makes you shortsighted'; 'knead', 'gnu' are the phonological realizations of the humorous graffiti. 'Knead' and 'know' are 'correct' versions intended.

3.5.1 Morphological Humour

The manipulation of elements of word structure combine elements into novel forms, or divide words in unusual places. According to Crystal, (1995:81) graffiti sequences often play with word boundaries as shown in the data below. The example is borrowed and used in the Kenya context as a catch phrase in the PSVs. In an example like; 'Ass, gas or cash – no one rides free', would depict abuse, free ride or must pay when travelling on.

3.5.2 Syntactic Humour

Graffiti chains work in this way by adding or removing variable endings to a fixed opening, or a variable opening to a fixed ending Crystal (1995:181). Most graffiti jokes rely on syntax in the sense that they have a fixed form. Examples like ‘Frakass’ (fracas), ‘Wizzy’ (wizard) show this.

3.6 The Language of Graffiti on PSVs

Language is tool of influence on people and their way of life. The use of Sheng’, English and Kiswahili in Kenya is appropriate to certain ‘audience’. Sheng (a mixture of English and Swahili) is appropriate to the youths and those professing to be in the youth’s culture. English and Kiswahili have extensively a repertoire of vocabulary. To these (languages), meaning of a word is a website. The meaning of these words may differ slightly and in a subtle way. Therefore, it is important to understand the connotation of a word, the feelings or ideas that are suggested by a word, rather than the actual meaning of a word. Take for instance, ‘kama mbaya, mbaya’, taken from a PSV route no.9 and 6, glossily translated as, ‘if bad, it is bad’.

This suggests, ‘badness’, whereas to some no particular feelings or ideas is experienced. The ‘intentioned target audience,’ of course also assigns its own meaning of certain words in a subtle way. In a lexically adjusted process of metaphorical extension, it could mean ‘amorous person’. In view of what we have said, the language of graffiti is constrained by a range of contextual factors. Thus, ideally speaking, graffiti employs Sheng, English, Kiswahili and to a limited extent the vernacular. In examples like ‘Street love’, ‘Vuta hewa pole pole usishikwe na homa’ (Breath slowly so as to avoid catching flu), ‘Mo faya’ (More Fire) different languages are evidently used in graffiti on PSVs. In this case English, Kiswahili and Sheng are largely used. Graffiti exploits a multi-lingual set up in Kenya.

Some of the graffiti texts are grammatically ambiguous. A graffiti text on a PSV had this sign “hitchhikers may be escaping konvikts”. Now, what are the hitchhikers fleeing from, convicts or jail? This is grammatically ambiguous. In this sense, a PSV is either a hitchhiker or a convict escaping from jail and ‘jail’ in this sense is traffic police officers when subjected to lexical broadening process of meaning extension. [Thus]...words a speaker speaks may not tell us everything. We want to know about the background from which that act of speech arises (Gauker 2003:14). This will inform the intention and communicative interaction of any discourse. Once a text is found, the next choice is to position the text within a context. According to Brummet (2006:110), texts do not just occur and they are not ‘read’ in a vacuum they are based on context; context can be made up of the room or library, reading assignment where text is read from original contexts, or defined by the intentions of those who make or who use texts. In this study, our context is the matatu that carries this text or the seat in the matatu where the text is found. The new context and text should ‘fit’ and the new placement of text should teach us more about what both text and context can mean.

4.0 Conclusion

English, Kiswahili, Sheng and to a limited extent vernacular featured in our study on graffiti and these were used creatively to catch the attention of the target audience. This improves diversity on the readers, although the study was based on a cosmopolitan location. These languages could be described linguistically at lexical, phonetic and phonological or morphological levels. English was the single most favoured language selected in graffiti texts due to its prestigious status as compared to other languages.

The data analysis revealed that although graffiti uses fragmented words or sentences, the audience involved in the communication process is able to interpret successfully the intentioned meaning. The intentioned meanings of the words enhance the relevance of the information in graffiti, thus, contributing to the audience's successful interpretation of graffiti message. The study also revealed that the context of the utterance that is the background information shared between the graffitiists and the reader plays an important role in the communication process of graffiti. Finally, the study showed that Lexical Pragmatic theory could adequately account for the successful interpretation of graffiti message on PSVs.

The data analysis showed evidence for Lexical Pragmatic processes of narrowing and broadening, although broadening processes sufficiently handles much of the graffiti data as opposed to narrowing. Broadening divides further into approximation, metaphorical extension, category extension and neologism. It was revealed that context plays a crucial role in getting meaning and communicative effectiveness of graffiti texts. It was also evident that intentioned meaning in graffiti text on PSVs is widely ignored, but results of data analysis ascertained the existence of meaning.

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