



THE HORN SPEAKS: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF HORN HONKING AS A NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION AMONG NIGERIAN ROAD USERS

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Abstract

Most studies describe honking as a social problem; a source of environmental pollution and psychological disturbance. However, there is a linguistic relevance that has been overlooked because of this one-sided view to horn honking. Man as a social being constantly interacts with his environment. Sometimes, there may be barriers to this essential relationship, one of them being proximity. It is very difficult for people who are not within the same space to effectively communicate physically as is the case with communication between motorists and pedestrians. To bridge this gap, Nigerians code their messages into their honking patterns and styles. The study investigated the sociolinguistic use of horn honking for communication on the Nigerian roads. It used the survey method which comprised primary and secondary data. Data was generated through questionnaires and specialized interviews. The study revealed that aside from sounding the horn, mostly in states of emergency, to warn of danger, complain or elicit right of way, Nigerians also use the horn for the purposes of greeting, asking questions and seeking clarification/confirmation, wooing, expressing desperation/frustration or merely registering their presence on the roads. The paper concludes that, horn honking is a medium of non-verbal communication in Nigeria and that there is a rich unwritten vocabulary of horn honking known and understood by Nigerian road users. The study recommends that horn honking be considered and listed as a channel of non-verbal communication and be documented.

Key words: Horn honking, Vehicle, Communication, Sociolinguistics, Noise pollution

1.0 Introduction

Communication is essential and dynamic, evolving in line with the sociocultural needs and technological advancements of society. The primary tool for communication is language which is organic; it grows and develops with time to meet the rising communication needs of the human communities. For instance, sign language was developed and have advanced over time to meet diverse needs including communication with/between speech impaired people and security agencies for discretion. Language and communication consists of arbitrary codes/patterns generated by a few people which become adopted and accepted over time for use.

Car horns are an important tool for communication on the road, and they can be used in a variety of ways to convey different messages to drivers and other road users such as warning, frustration and appreciation. Horns are installed in vehicles for the safety of drivers and other road users. To this end, the situations in which drivers should use horns are stated in the traffic regulations of various countries with systems or regulatory bodies put in place to ensure that the established traffic rules are

observed. Road Traffic Act in Japan for instance, states that a vehicle horn should be used only in an emergency or in dangerous locations where there is a sign allowing horn use, such as on a blind curve. However, there are many situations in which a horn is used other than those mentioned above. In Nigeria, drivers arbitrarily use horns for communicating emotions such as frustration, desperation as well as for greetings. One remarkable feature anyone would notice while on Nigerian roads is the annoying, confusing and sporadic honking by motorists. Foreigners, especially those from the western cultivation would be constantly on edge or even terrified at the first instance and perhaps for a couple of months because of the very unconventional way drivers use vehicle horns.

The usage of car horns vary across regions and continents. In New York and other cities of the world, it is illegal to honk your car unless it is emergency. While this seem pretty and orderly, in Nigeria, honking has a multi-level usage depending on which part of the country one resides.



It is against this background that this paper analyses the non-verbal communication patterns among Nigerian road users with regards to the use of horn honking.

2.0 Review of Literature

Media of communication are the tools/channels through which we reach out to other people. In time past, the mediums were peculiar to each culture. Traditional mass media of Africans were predominantly symbolic and musical where instruments such as the drums, gong, flute and gunshots were used to send message of celebration, call to be battle ready or announce decrees and invitations. African sociocultural etiquettes encourages communal living and as such, everybody is expected to look out for everybody else. Hence, provisions were made for the communities/villages to be easily alerted in any case of invasion or any other form of danger. In eastern Nigeria for instance, it was smoke and the Ikoro (Bass drum) while in the West, it was Ilu-Gangan (the Talking drum).

Modern communication mediums which entail the use of new technology such as internet include social media, TV/Radio stations, and print media such as newspaper. Horn honking refers to the act of using a vehicle's horn to communicate messages or signals to other drivers and road users (Smith, 2015). It serves as a nonverbal means of expressing one's intentions, emotions, or warnings in traffic situations where verbal communication may be limited or ineffective (Johnson, 2018). In different societies, the interpretation and significance of horn honking are influenced by cultural and contextual factors (Garcia, 2020).

Inherently, the sociocultural tendencies of a person/people will find expression in how they do whatever they do. As a people who traditionally believe in collaborative efforts and togetherness, it is only natural to utilize available instruments as a medium of expressing it. As earlier highlighted, is difficult to relate with other road users especially from the confines of a car. To break through this barrier to necessary communication, Nigerians resort to using the instrumentation of car horns, car lights in addition to hand gesticulations. Over the years, a rich and almost universal/national honking patterns developed. In the course of carrying out investigations for this study, it was discovered that some honking patterns had uniform meaning across cities whereas others were peculiar to some cities. Although there are no conventional formal horn

vocabulary, both horn users and those being honked at including pedestrians and cyclists seemed to comprehend and accurately decode the meaning/message of the horn, except foreigners. In the light of the above, honking serves as a sort of modern medium for expression of cultural traits and belief. As Mansov (2016) observed, "Nonverbal cues used as part of communication encompass a rich tapestry of opportunities to understand and debate the scope and nature of social behaviour." The honking culture of a people gives a rich insight into their cultural as well as social values. Mathla (2021) argues that communication through the channel of horn honking is cultural and essential in the daily lives of people in many countries.

In today's fast-paced world, effective communication plays a crucial role in maintaining order and safety on the highways. While verbal communication is the most common method of expression (thoughts and emotions), there are moments when nonverbal communication becomes the prevailing and only possible form of interaction such as when commuting the highways. Horn honking is one of such nonverbal communication tool that has evolved over time to convey various messages on the roads.

3.0 METHODS

This study used the survey method which comprises of primary and secondary data. Data for the study were generated through questionnaires and specialized interviews. Ekiti state is the study area with a projected population of 3,592,200 in 2023 according to the National Population Commission. The state has 16 local governments but the data for this study was collected in Ado-Ekiti, the Capital city, with a projected population of 469,700 in 2023 because of its metropolitan nature. For the quantitative data a sample size of 400 respondents was used. This was arrived at by adopting the Krejcie and Morgan table for determining sample size.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Out of the 400 questionnaires administered on the respondents, three hundred and ninety (390) were duly completed and returned. Therefore, the analysis was based on the number of returned questionnaires.

Table 1: Socio – Demographic Distribution of respondents.

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Female	134	34.3%
Male	256	65.7
Total	390	100

Field Survey: 2023

As indicated above, majority of respondents were males amounting to approximately 66% while females constituted 34%. This however does not mean that men are more in number than women in Ado-Ekiti, instead it only shows that males were more accessible in the study area.

Table 2:

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18 - 25	26	6.6%
26-35	54	13.9%
36-49	104	28%
50 – above	201	51.5
Total	390	100

Field survey 2023

Data shows that respondents cut across all age groups with majority (51.5%) being within ages 50 – above, and a little above one quarter of them between 36 – 49 years, 13.9% were within ages 26 – 35, while 6.6% were within the age bracket of 18-25 years. This demonstrates that majority of the respondents had reached legal driving age and probably own a car or have access to one, to wit, have used vehicle horn at some point as a means of communication.

Level of education	Frequency	Percentage
Primary	08	2.1
Secondary	109	27.9
Tertiary	273	70
Other	-	-
Total	390	100

Field survey 2023

The distribution of respondents confirm that with 70% of them having attained tertiary education and 27.9% with secondary education amounting to about 98% educational attainment rate, the respondents were in good position to know about the horn as a tool of communication and also be able to share their experiences.

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Civil servant	188	48.2
Religious leader	53	13.5
Unemployed	43	11.1
Self employed	106	27.2

Field survey 2023

Do men honk differently from women?

Yes	253	64.9%
No	137	35.1%
Total	390	100%

From the data gathered, it was discovered that over 64% respondents think that men honk differently from women. Previous studies prove that there is a behavioural distinction between men and women arising from their genetic makeup; Traits such as aggression, dominance and authoritativeness are often associated with men while women are often soft-spoken. Flowing from the above, we align with Rana's (2015) assertion that the driving behaviour of men differ from that of women, particularly young men. This to an extent explains why men's car horn speak differently from that of women.

Do you think honking pattern is uniform across Nigerian cities?

Yes	321	82.3%
No	69	17.7%
Total	390	100%

Responses from respondents reveal a similarity index of 82% and dissimilarity index in honking patterns across Nigeria. It was also gathered from the interviews that the dissimilarity in the honking patterns was due to slight variations in the traffic situations across cities in Nigeria as well as the level of adherence of citizens to traffic regulations, in addition to effectiveness of traffic wardens. An interviewee while comparing Lagos state, which she described as 'a no man's land' to Abuja, the Federal Capital of Nigeria, stated that inhabitants of Abuja behave and drive civilly and use their vehicle horns sparingly and responsibly. Another interviewee mentioned Ibadan, the capital of Oyo state where drivers, especially commercial drivers, use hand gesticulations instead of horns to request right of way.

Do you see horn honking as an aspect of people's way of life?

Yes	230	59%
No	160	41%
Total	390	100%

Findings shows that about 59% of respondents view horn honking as a culture that has come to stay, while 41% of the respondents think otherwise. Different cultures and regions have their own rules and customs regarding the use of car horns. According to the prevalent sociocultural beliefs and trends, every culture is unique and their peculiarities can be seen in their mode of dressing, food and language. Therefore, the social systems of each society are built according to their way of life. This includes making regulations that guide honking and other traffic related actions. It would be understood that although there are universal traffic rules, traffic behaviours across countries vary, hence, the socially acceptable honking culture of societies constitutes an aspect of their culture.

Horn honking as a Non-Verbal Means of Communication Among road Users in Nigeria

The usage of car horns vary across regions and continents. In New York and other cities of the world, it is illegal to honk your car unless it is emergency. While this seem pretty and orderly, in Nigeria, honking has a multi-level usage depending on which part of the country one resides

Figure 10: To greet people

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	117	30.0
Disagree	27	6.9
Strongly agree	206	52.8
Strongly disagree	40	10.3
Total	390	100

Field survey, 2023

Similarly, about 82% of respondents were of the view that frequent use of car horns on the road has become the norm among Nigerians as it is used to greet people. Corroborating this position, Okonkwo (2017), posits that honking is used to offer or acknowledge greetings from road users be they motorists or pedestrians.

Figure 11: To hurry people up

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	130	33.3
Disagree	48	12.3
Strongly agree	176	45.2
Strongly disagree	36	9.2
Total	390	100

Field survey, 2023

More than 78% of the respondents unanimously agreed that honking is used to hurry people up. According to one interviewee, "I honk to hurry family members up when running late as I sit and wait in the car". In fact, "this is common practice among Nigerian families" he added.

Figure 12: To obey instructions

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	138	35.3
Disagree	50	13.0
Strongly agree	164	42.0
Strongly disagree	38	9.7
Total	390	100

Field survey, 2023

77% of the respondents were of the opinion that horn honking is used to obey instructions particularly those of heavy duty trucks with the warning "honk before overtaking". The indication from this distribution is that the use of car horn is for adherence purpose. The interviewees' responses substantiated the above viewpoints. For instance, one of them argues that " heavy duty cars by their sizes have the right of way and their fear is the beginning of wisdom especially with the warning inscription boldly written" (interview, September, 2023). Akinwumi, (2023), avers that horns honking can help avert head-on collisions and promote safety on the highway. This assertion gives further credence to the view that the horn is an important tool for nonverbal communication

Figure 13: To indicate frustration

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	136	34.8
Disagree	50	12.8
Strongly agree	178	45.7
Strongly disagree	26	6.7
Total	390	100

Field survey, 2023

From the table, respondents were asked if horn honking is used to express frustration. About 80% of respondents opined that blaring of car

horn was an expression of frustration probably as a result long hours spent in traffic, haste or anger. Corroborating the above, Okonkwo, (2017), submits that Nigerian drivers often honk their horns aggressively in congested traffic areas or when they feel that other drivers were delaying or obstructing easy flow of traffic.

Figure 14: To entertain

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	176	45.2
Disagree	36	9.2
Strongly agree	130	33.3
Strongly disagree	48	12.3
Total	390	100

Field survey, 2023

Also, 78% of the respondents unanimously agreed that honking is used to make musical beats. This is in sync with the submission of one of the interviewees that motorists, particularly commercial bus drivers (Danfo) use honking to entertain passengers in their buses.

Figure 15: To show dominance and authority

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	201	51.5
Disagree	104	28
Strongly agree	26	6.6
Strongly disagree	54	13.9
Total	390	100

Field survey, 2023

About 58% of the respondents were of the opinion that honking is used to for competition among motorists to determine the loudest honking on the road. Owning a car with a loud and distinctive horn can be seen as symbol of affluence and power (Olaide and Bakare, 2018). Those who have higher social standing may use their horns more frequently and assertively to show their dominance.

5.0. Conclusion

There is no contention that the horn can be used to communicate basic conventional road traffic messages, where the contention lies is in what the horn is used to communicate outside the conventional traffic messages of; mind your lane; give right of way; you are too slow can you move faster; an oncoming vehicle please be warned; I am negotiating a bend and I want to overtake.

No doubt, honking can be discomfoting to road users and residents but there is a rich repertoire

of meaning encoded into horn tooting worthy of comprehensive study and documentation. From the data presented and analysed above, it can be seen that 356 participants see horn honking as a form of non-verbal communication employed by vehicle drivers to communicate with other road users. During the course of the study, it was discovered that apart from communicating urgency/emergency, Nigerians use different honking patterns for interpersonal communication on the road. Sometimes, these honking patterns are combined with hand gestures to buttress and drive home the message, be it greeting, warning, dominance or frustration.

It is a local believe that it is safer to drive without brakes than without horn in Nigeria. This is because in states of emergency, horns are not only handy, but more communicative. For instance, a long blare of the horn is a danger alarm warning people within the perimeter to- run for their lives because the approaching vehicle cannot or will not halt. Instances of such lengthy blares are usually when a driver loses control of the vehicle due to brake failure or any other mechanical fault, medical emergencies, robbery/kidnap attack and when government officials are passing through. People do not second-guess this type of honk, to hear it is to make sure you are as far away from the route as possible. While the locals, over time, have developed and assimilated the various horn languages following their day-to-day experiences, a foreigner may not be able to make sense of the noises nor understand their import. As Martin (2017, para. 3) in Mahmood (2021) rightly noted, "Ignorance of this cultural nuance can lead to unwarranted stress, prangs, fights and injury when driving abroad". Thus, understanding this form of non-verbal communication has become really important in the wake of globalisation.

Much as it is true that car horns are meant primarily for cautionary purposes on the road, the fact that it is also used to convey extra traffic messages cannot be overlooked. There is a rich repertoire of meaning encoded in horn honking. Mahmood (2021) observed that the patterns and meanings differ across cultures/localities.

In recognition of the peculiar road communication culture of horn honking by Nigerian road users, it is important to carry out a holistic and more in-depth study of horn honking as a form of non-



verbal communication, document and adopt it officially as one of the non-verbal means of communications. It should also be incorporated into the nation's traffic guidelines.

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