

A Pragmatic Analysis of Car Nicknames in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigerians have a unique set of names for popular car brands that are used in the country. These names, most times, have no correlation with the original name the manufacturer has given to the cars. The focus of this paper is to examine these nicknames within the Nigerian context, examine the contextual features that have made the names acceptable to Nigerians and investigate the motives behind the naming. Participant observation method and interviews were used to gather data for this study. Jacob Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory was adopted to unveil the contextual features that underlie the naming processes. Data were elicited from car dealers and from vehicle owners. The study reveals that Nigerians do not name cars haphazardly but select some features that guide the naming process and that these names reflect the socio-cultural realities of Nigerians. The features identified in the study are shared situational knowledge, reference and metaphors. The praxis of condemnation/abuse, informing and commendation were observed in the data. It is believed that if vehicle manufacturers factor in these features into naming their cars, they will be more acceptable to Nigerians.

Key words: *Analysis, car, pragmatic, nicknames, Nigeria*

Introduction

The act of renaming vehicles in Nigeria is not a recent phenomenon. It has been a tradition that has held sway since the early nineteen sixties when we had the *Bolekaja*, translated as 'alight and let us fight'; *sa laake* 'Cut it with axe' and more recently the *Molue*. *Bolekaja* is the Nigerian name given to the Bedford Lorry. The vehicle, originally manufactured to carry goods only, was modified by Nigerians to carry passengers. Due to the modification, the bus is usually very tight. Whenever passengers have altercations, they have to alight to settle it. Hence, the name *Bolekaja* which is translated as, 'alight and let us fight'. The researcher took the liberty of asking a few people including car users if they could recognize a Toyota Camry 2003. Many replied in the negative saying they had no idea of which of the Toyota Camry brands is 2003.

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However, when further questioned if they knew ‘Big Daddy’, they replied in the affirmative. This shows how popular the Nigerian names given to cars are among Nigerians. These names are based on contextual features that average Nigerians can relate with. However, beyond the names and what they mean, this paper looks into the contextual features that influence the naming of the cars. It is important to investigate this because; it may be a guide for car manufacturers in giving names that will be acceptable to Nigerians.

Linguistic Innovation: Nicknames

To try and pin down the definition of nicknames to a single one is an onerous task which may change the focus of this research paper. It is a very broad concept that research has been done to look at it from various sides and angles. Such studies have been domiciled in the sub-field of Linguistics called Onomastics. However, the Cambridge Online Dictionary defines a nickname as, ‘an informal name for someone or something...’ Nicknames are usually given to people or things based on certain qualities they possess, and how they behave/ the things they do. Fowler and Fowler (1938:764), defines nicknames as a “name added to or substituted for a person’s, place’s, or thing’s proper name.” Ashley (1989:47) describes nicknames as *eke* (extra) names issued to ridicule or show preference, and which sometimes, are unofficial forms of personal names or family names, and they can replace either personal names or family names. DeKlerk and Bosch (1997) further explain that nicknames are indicative of the attitude that one has towards what has been nicknamed. This view is corroborated by Seppala (2018), who opines that car nicknames indicate an emotional connection with the vehicle brand or lack of it. This means that some nicknames could be endearing while some are to ridicule the car. For example, the Toyota Camry 2003 has two nicknames in Nigeria. For those who have an emotional connection, it is ‘Big Daddy’ while those who do not like the car refer to it as ‘Big for nothing’. This means that nicknames can be to either enhance face or attack it (Face here is as defined by Goffman 1960). Therefore, without recourse to context, it may be difficult to classify nicknaming as either a polite or impolite act.

The bulk of research carried on nicknaming (especially in Nigeria) has been focused on people and not brands. Scholars have preoccupied themselves with address forms and naming in different Nigerian languages such as Yoruba (Oyetade 1995), Ajileye and Ajileye (1997) and Adebileje (2012). It has also been studied in the area of Applied Linguistics as Odebunmi (2008) examined naming

patterns and functions in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*. One of the rare studies of nicknaming that is focused on brands is Adejumo and Odebunmi (1999) which examines the nicknaming of Nigerian currency notes. However, this paper makes a departure from the norm by looking at nicknames given to cars by Nigerians. There has been scant research in this area but the notable one is that of Olaosun (2013) that explores Stylo-rhetorical study of car appellations in Nigeria. Gathering data from retail shops and questionnaires, he opines that car rebranding practice significantly affects the purchase behaviours of car owners in Nigeria. He also submits that Nigerian youths are innovative in making car products appeal to people. This work has been able to establish itself in an area the researcher called car rebranding discourse.

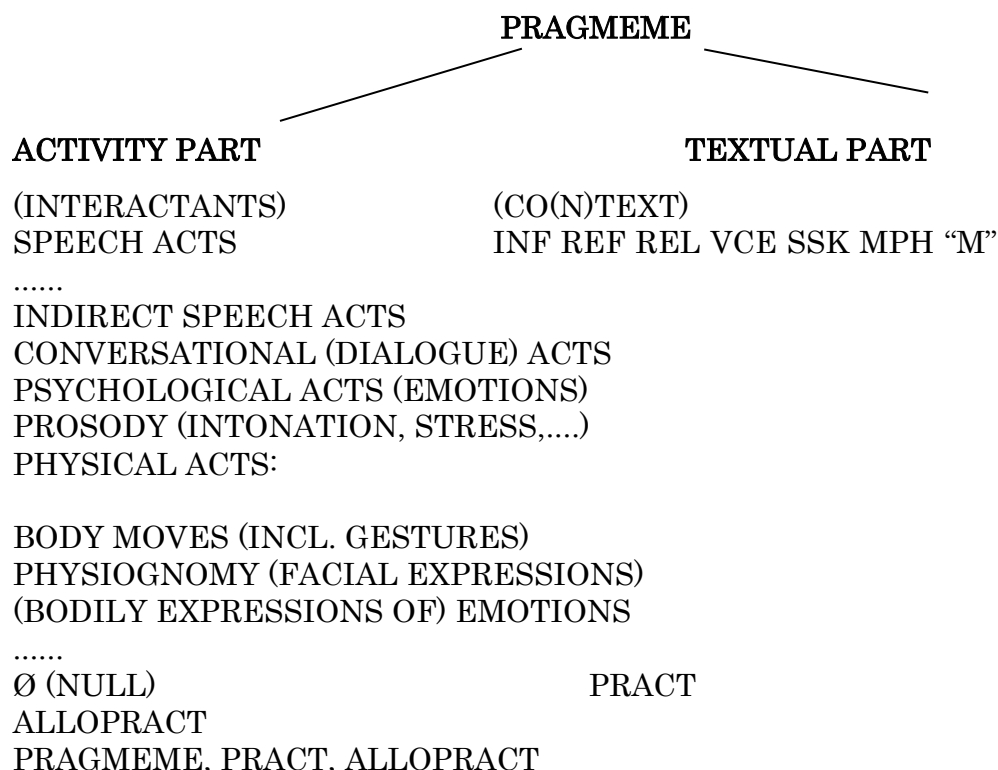
This study, though similar, is different from the earlier one because rather than place the focus on how rebranding affects the purchase of the cars, it looks into the conception of the Nigerian names; looking at why those names appeal to Nigerians and how they have been able to make sense of them. Also, the motivation behind the nicknaming of the cars is also discussed. Seppala (2018) submits that car nicknames are best studied from a metaphor based analysis of how cars are seen and the motives for name giving. In her investigation of Finnish nicknames for cars, she observed that targets words tend to form groups: cars are metaphorically seen as humans, animals, boxes and machines. She explains that new names can be formed from official brand names such nicknames are called secondary forms e.g. Toyota Camry. Toyota while they can also be invented spontaneously based on the vehicle's appearance. She describes such nicknames as primary nicknames.

In Nigeria, even though the secondary form of nicknames is used, the most fundamental nickname used is the primary type. Cars are described based on their shapes, weight, economic values and so on.

Theoretical Issues

This work adopts the Pragmatic Acts Theory proposed by Mey (2001). The Pragmatic Act Theory has been seen as an intervention for the inadequacies of Speech Acts Theory. One of the strong points of Mey (2001) is that speech act theory is non-situated, hence the need for the Pragmatic Act Theory. Needless to say, the Pragmatic Acts Theory focuses on the analysis of a text in its context. To buttress his point, he presents a pragmeme. A pragmeme can be

described as a situated speech act that combines the rules of language and society in the determination of meaning.

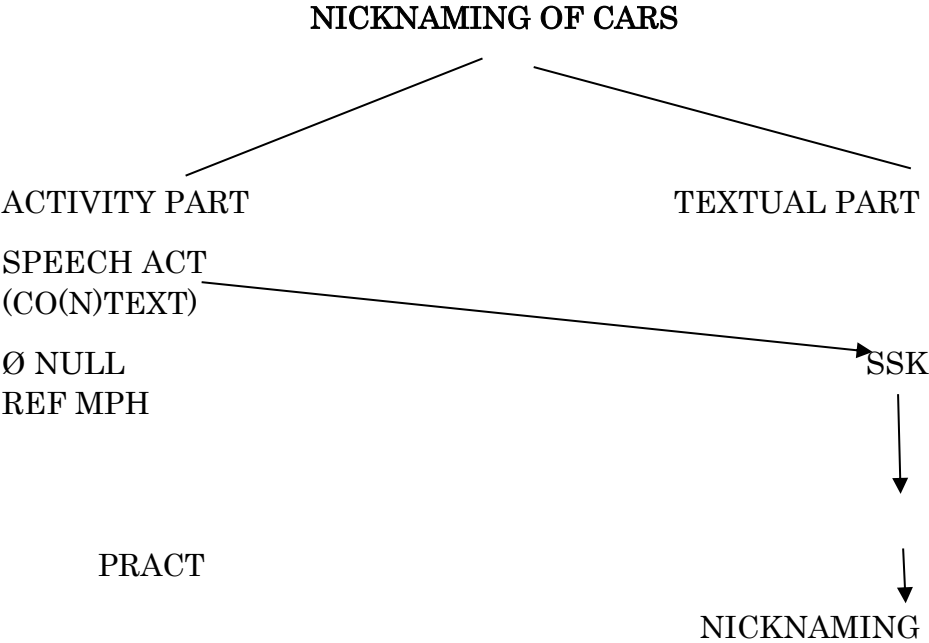


In the schema above, inf stands for inference, ref for reference, rel for relevance, vce for voice, ssk for shared situational knowledge, mph metaphor, and m for metapragmatic joker

From the schema given above, it is evident that there are two categories involved in the production of a pragememe. Odebunmi describes a pragememe as a generalized pragmatic act regarded as the only force associated with making utterances (Odebunmi 2008:76). The pragmatic act is instantiated through an *ipra* or a *pract* which realizes a pragememe. The activity part represents the choices the speaker can select from to perform any function he/she wants. To achieve this, the textual part comes in handy to communicate his intention. He/she may use the inference (inf), reference (ref), relevance (rel), voice (vce), shared situational knowledge (ssk), metaphor (mph), or metapragmatic joker (m). Mey opines that the pragmatic act theory focuses on "the environment in which both the speaker and the hearer find their affordances, such that the entire situation is brought to bear on what can be said in the

situation, as well as what is actually being said" (Mey 2001). This shows the importance of context in meaning realization in any discourse. When a particular pragmeme has been concretely instantiated, it can be called a pract. The participants' knowledge of the situation and the possible effect of pract in a particular context is what determines a pract.

Odebunmi (2006) modified the schema proposed by Mey (2001) by including SCK (shared cultural knowledge). He included SCK to be able to adequately account for the cultural factor in the use of proverbs in "The Gods Are Not To Blame", a novel that reflects the socio-cultural life of the Yoruba. For the purposes of this work, the pragmatic act model of Mey will be applied as shown in the schema below:



In the schema above, SSK stands for shared situational knowledge, REF for reference, and MPH for metaphor.

Data Presentation and Discussion

In Table 1, the list of Nigerian names of cars is presented and the motivation for them is also presented. For those that have Yoruba nicknames, the gloss is presented.

Table 1: Nigerian Car Names

S/N	Manufacturer's name	Nigerian name	Gloss	Quality
1	Volkswagen Type 1	<i>Beetle, Ijapa, So ki n so, Fojo poloore, yeri-n-beto</i>	Tortoise, alight so that I can alight, make rain beat the benefactor, shift your head, I want to spit	Based on the shape of the car. Also based on the fact that it has only two doors which necessitates the alighting of the person in front whenever the passenger at the back needs to alight.
2	Cadillac Escalade	<i>Chairman</i>		The luxurious shape of the car. The fact that chairman even though means someone who chairs an event, in Nigeria, it has come to mean any man of means. Since the car is associated with wealthy people, it is called chairman.
3	Infinity fx35	<i>Dwarf</i>		The size of the car
4	Toyota Starlet/ Nissan Micra	<i>Rabbit</i>		Structure of the car
5	Toyota Avalon	<i>Long John</i>		The length of the car
6	BMW 5 Series 05	<i>Cobra</i>		The structure of the car
7	Nissan Xterra	<i>Lego Jeep</i>		This SUV unlike some other ones lack contours. This is why the nicknamers have compared it to 'lego' a block game where blocks are stacked on one another

8	Mercedez Benz W 123/ Benz 200	<i>Regular Benz/Mesi Oloye</i>		This car brand is called regular to differentiate it from the other brands. It is also called <i>Mesi Oloye</i> because it was one of the cars that came with the air conditioner
9	Mercedez Benz W 124/ Benz 300	<i>V boot/ V nyansh/ German mistake</i>		The structure of the booth of this car is what has earned it the nickname. The booth has a 'v'shape. This distinguishes it from the other brands of Benz cars
10	Mercedez Benz Benz 190 E	<i>Baby Benz</i>		This is called baby Benz because of its size. It is smaller than the other Benz brands.
11	Benz E class	<i>Oju Opolo</i>	Frog Eye	The distinctive headlights of this car are the ones that make it is called <i>frog-eye</i> . The lamps look as if they are bulging like the eyes of a frog.
12	Toyota Camry 1995	<i>Orobo</i>	Thick/big	Predictably, the nickname came from the size of the car. In Nigeria, <i>orobo</i> means someone who is on the big side. The car looks big and grand.
13	Toyota Camry 1999-2001	<i>Pencil light/ Envelope</i>		This is another car that got its nickname from the structure. It is called pencil for two reasons. One of

				the reasons is the fact that it is thinner compared to the previous edition of the vehicle. Also, the rear-light of the car is thin. All these make it is called pencil light.
14	Toyota Camry 2003-2005	<i>Big for nothing/Big Daddy</i>		This car has two names based on its features. Those who wish to highlight its positive features call it big daddy. As at when it was introduced, it was the biggest of the brands of that make. Those who wish to highlight its negative feature call it big-for-nothing. This is because even though the car is big, they argue that its performance is not in correlation to its size.
15	Toyota Camry 2007	<i>Muscle</i>		The sleek features and the curves of this vehicle is why it has been called muscle.
16	Toyota Corolla 1996	<i>First lady</i>		The shape of the car looks feminine. This combines with the fact that the car was mostly used by women when it was in vogue.
17	Toyota Corolla	<i>O won ju owo e lo</i>	It is more expensive than its cost.	This car is small but expensive. This is the reason for the name.

18	Honda Accord 1990	<i>Alla</i>		This Honda Accord was very popular in the Northern part of Nigeria. Due to due to its sleekness and durability, whenever an Hausa man wanted to describe the car, he would say <i>My car Allah!</i> This is why it began to be called <i>Honda Alla</i>
19	Honda Accord 1995	<i>Bull dog</i>		The shape of the rear of the car is what has earned it its <i>bull dog</i> nickname. The structure of the car looks like that of a dog.
20	Honda Accord 1998	<i>Baby boy</i>		This car was made popular by a movie of the same name Produced by John Singleton. The main actor, Tyrese Gibson was seen driving the car in many scenes. Hence, the nickname came from the movie
21	Honda Accord 2003	<i>End of Discussion</i>		This nickname came from the tag line of the advert for the car. The advert simply reads: 'The new Honda Accord. The End of Discussion'. Nigerians simply turned this tag line to the name of the vehicle. It is sometimes shortened to EOD.

22	Honda Accord 2006/2010	<i>Discussion Continues</i>		After the debut of the previous edition that Nigerians tagged 'EOD', the next edition was naturally tagged the next one 'Discussion Continues'.
23	Honda Accord 2009/2012	<i>Evil Spirit/Beast</i>		The shape of the headlamps of the car has been reputed to be very scary. Hence, since evil spirits and beasts are scary the car has been given both names.
24	Honda Accord 1994-1996	<i>Honda Bullet</i>		The size and speed of this car is what has earned it the name <i>bullet</i> . It has been reputed to be very fast despite its not so big size.
25	Honda Accord 1986	<i>Pure water</i>		This car was very common in the late nineteen nineties in Nigeria. Hence, it was equated to pure water which is seen as very affordable and common.
26	Honda Element	<i>Pali Isana</i>	Match box	The structure of this car is what has made Nigerians nickname it matchbox. Some have claimed that it has a close resemblance to a match box.
27	Volkswagen	<i>Bug/Roach</i>		This modern Volkswagen also derived its name

				from the shape. Just like the former one called <i>Beetle</i> , which looks like a bug.
28	Mazda	<i>Sha laake</i>	Cut it with an axe	This car is usually modified to fit its Nigerian use. Nigerians have to 'butcher' it so that they can add additional features.
29	All SUVs	<i>Jeep</i>		In Nigeria, every sports utility vehicle is called Jeep. Most Nigerians are unaware that <i>Jeep</i> is a brand name. This is due to the fact that <i>Jeep</i> is one of the first and earliest sports utility vehicles in Nigeria. Hence, Nigerians see every vehicle that has that shape as a <i>Jeep</i> .
30	Bedford Lorry	<i>Bolekaja</i>	Alight and let us fight	This vehicle which is originally a truck is usually modified to be able to carry passengers by the addition of wooden planks that people can seat on. This leaves no room for people to stretch their bodies. Hence, when there is a fight, people choose to alight first then settle their scores.

From Table 1 above, it is evident that the Nigerian names given to cars reflect the socio-economic situation and realities of the Nigerian people. The contextual features that are characterized in the naming will be discussed below:

Shared Situational Knowledge

This is the perception that a group of people share within a given context of time and space that impacts how they view the world and how they interpret discourses. Most cars in Nigeria are renamed based on the shared situational knowledge. This knowledge allows Nigerians to link the name given to the car. Examples are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Original Names and Nigerian Car Names

S/N	Manufacturer's name	Nigerian name
1	Honda Accord 1986	<i>Pure water</i>
2	Volkswagen Type 1	<i>Beetle, Ijapa, So ki n so, Ojo poloore, yeri-n-beto</i>
3	Cadillac Escalade	<i>Chairman</i>
4	Mercedez Benz W 124/ Benz 300	<i>V boot/ V nyansh</i>
5	Nissan Xterra	<i>Lego Jeep</i>
6	Toyota Camry 1995	<i>Orobo Camry</i>

It is said that water is life. Therefore, it is just expected that everyone should have free access to water. In Nigeria, water comes in different packages and sizes. However, the most common and affordable is the sachet water which is called 'pure water' in the Nigerian parlance. That water is cheap and affordable for almost every Nigerian. Hence, when a car like the Honda Accord 1986 is called 'pure water', it strikes a chord in the hearts of Nigerians as a cheap and affordable car. This is what 'pure water' means to Nigerians. It can be said that due to the pocket-friendly nature of the car at that time, it also became very common on streets. This also further widened the appeal of the name given to it. Pure water is very common in Nigeria so much that the used sachets litter the streets. Since Nigerians can draw a parallel between the economic similarities between pure water and the car, the name sticks. It should be noted that while the name of the car makes sense to Nigerians, it would not make sense to people outside Nigeria who have no shared knowledge about pure water in Nigeria. The car finds its meaning in the Nigerian context as pure water to an outsider only means water that has no impurities; but to the Nigerian, it means

more. Nigerians refer to whatever is cheap and common as pure water.

The Volkswagen Type 1 is one of the earliest cars used by the elites in Nigeria. It is one of the cars that Nigerians have given several names depending on which part of Nigeria one decides to look at. It has been called the *Beetle* because of its structure. It has been called *Ijapa* which also means beetle in the Yoruba language. However, of interest in this context is the name some people from the South-west call it. *So ki n so* (Alight so that I can alight), and *Fojo poloore* (make rain beat your benefactor) are names that the vehicle has been given based on the deficiency of the structure. The Volkswagen Type 1 is a vehicle with two doors. This means that before a passenger can alight, the person seated at the front must also alight. This may cause some inconvenience to the person seated at the front as he/she has to alight as many times as many other people want to alight. This is why it is given the hilarious name, *so ki n so*. As inconvenient as this may seem, it gets worse when the rain is falling. This means that whoever is seated at the front seat (sometimes, it could be the driver) would have to be beaten by the rain because of his/her act of kindness. This is why it is called *fojo poloore*. This name even though it does not bear any resemblance to the manufacturer's name, Nigerians especially of Yoruba extraction can relate with it through shared situational knowledge.

Even though it is said that owning a car is not a luxury, the type of car one can afford shows how economically buoyant he/she is. Owning a Cadillac is a big deal in Nigeria because it is only the influential people that can afford it. Little wonder why the car is called chairman. In the proper English definition, a chairman is the one who presides at the meetings of public functions. However, in Nigeria, the term 'chairman' has been extended to the *crème de la crème* of the society. Those who are people of means are called chairmen in Nigeria. Therefore, when a car is called *chairman*, it clearly implies that it is for the rich and famous and it is out of reach for the lower and the middle class. It is because of shared situational knowledge that an average Nigerian can relate with the term.

Mercedes Benz W 124/ Benz 300 is popularly referred to as 'V boot' or 'V nyansh'. This is because the boot of the car is 'V' shaped. When it is called 'V nyansh', it is only a person who understands Nigerian Pidgin who can relate to the name. 'Nyansh' is pidgin for buttocks. The boot is figuratively called buttocks using Nigerian pidgin.

The last but not the least in this category is the Toyota Camry 1995 that has been called the *Orobo*. To a Nigerian, an *Orobo* means someone who is big/thick in an attractive way. Therefore, it is needless to say that the *Orobo Camry* is so named because of the fact that it is big. Compared to the previous Camry car brands, the 1995 model stands out because it is the biggest. To show their admiration for the car, they call it *Orobo*.

Reference

Nigerians name vehicles based on reference. These names mostly come from reference to adverts and to films. For example, Honda Accord 1998 popularly known as Baby boy is thus called, because of an American film, 'Baby boy'. The car was driven by a famous actor, Tyrese Gibson, in many scenes of the movie. Since many young Nigerians saw the film, they naturally began to call the vehicle *Baby boy* so much that the real name faded into oblivion. Another example of reference is the Honda Accord 2003 called 'End of Discussion' (EOD). This name was picked from the advertisement of the car which was aired on major television stations in the country. The advertisement read, 'The new Honda Accord: 'The end of discussion''. This tag line became the nickname by which Nigerians called the car. Any Nigerian that has seen the advert finds it easy to relate with the name. In fact, there was a rumour that the EOD was the last car Honda was going to produce going by the advert. This was not true as not too long after, Honda manufactured Honda Accord 2006/2010 which Nigerians naturally tagged 'Discussion Continues'. Nigerians naturally tagged the car 'Discussion Continues' since it was produced after the 'End of Discussion'. To them, the production of another vehicle signalled that the discussion is far from over.

Metaphor

Nigerians also name cars based on their significant features. As said earlier, some cars are metaphorically seen as humans, animals, boxes and machines and even spirits. Hence, Nigerians name them after these things. Examples are given in the Table 3.

Table 3: Original Name and Metaphorical Car Names

S/N	Manufacturer's name	Nigerian name
1	Volkswagen Type 1	<i>Beetle</i>
2	Toyota Camry 1998-1999	<i>Pencil</i>
3	Toyota Starlet/Nissan Micra	<i>Rabbit</i>
4	Honda Accord 1995	<i>Bull dog</i>
5	Honda Accord 1994-1996	<i>Bullet</i>
6	Honda Accord 2009-2012	<i>Evil spirit</i>

The cars above have a link to the Nigerian names that they have been given. Of particular interest is the Honda 2009 that has been named 'Evil spirit.' It is widely believed that spirits are invisible to the eye. However, there are certain attributes that are given to them. For example, they are perceived to be terrifying. This attribute is the motivation behind the nickname given to the Honda Accord 2009. The front view of the car has been described as very terrifying. Hence, Nigerians based on metaphysical beliefs of the evil spirit they have describe the car as evil spirit. Another car of interest in this group is the Honda Accord 1994 called 'Bullet' by Nigerians. The bullet though small is very fast and dependent on achieving whatever it is aimed at. The same goes for this particular vehicle that Nigerians feel is smaller than the other Hondas in its category but is very fast and efficient.

To answer why the Nigerian names of the vehicles are more acceptable than the manufacturer's name, some vehicle owners were interviewed. They gave two major reasons:

First, the Nigerian names reflect the Nigerian experience. This makes them easy to relate with. This is the case especially when the cars are named based on physical feature. For example, it is easier for a Nigerian to remember 'orobo' than Toyota Camry 1995 model.

Second, most of the names of the brands especially Toyota and Honda are differentiated by the year of production. The respondents felt the names to be monotonous. They believe that it is more hectic trying to follow the year of production of a car than giving it a simple name. Hence, they find solace in their own names given to the vehicles as they are easier ways to make reference to the cars.

Practs in the Naming of Cars in Nigeria

Nigerian vehicle users combine contextual features and speech acts to nickname cars. These nicknames can only be properly analysed

within the Nigerian context by making recourse to the practs that underlie the users' naming processes.

Pract of Condemnation/ Abuse

The nickname they give vehicles sometimes shows the disapproval of the users. This may due to the shape of the vehicle or other features that it possesses that does not catch the fancy of some Nigerians users. Their disapproval is what leads to condemnation and abuse. For example, Toyota corolla 2003 model is referred to as *Big for nothing Camry*. This is because it is bigger than the previous models particularly the Toyota 1999 model fondly called the *pencil light*. Some query the size of the vehicle stating that the engine it has does not justify the size. Therefore the name, *big for nothing*, shows the disapproval of some Nigerian users. It is worthy of note that this same vehicle is called *big daddy* by those who like its size. This is an endearing name for the vehicle. Another example is the Benz E class that is referred to as *oloju opolo* translated as *frog eye*. The distinctive feature of this car is that it has very prominent headlamps. This, in the Nigerian context is not a commendable feature. This same term, *frog eye*, is used to abuse people who have very big eyeballs. The vehicle is given this nickname to ridicule its seemingly disproportionate headlamps. Other examples include Infinity fx35 that is called *Dwarf* because of its size. The Volkswagen is called *fo jo po'loore* which can be translated as 'make rain beat the owner'. This vehicle is so named because has two doors. Therefore, if a passenger at the back wants to alight when it is raining, the person seated at the front seat has to alight first hereby predisposing him to rain. This is considered a great disadvantage that the car has. This is why many Nigerian car users will prefer to buy vehicles that have four doors.

Pract of Informing

Another pract observed in the naming of cars in Nigeria is informing. Sometimes the nicknames that Nigerians give cars perform the role of informing. These names give more information about the car and its features. A notable example is the Honda Accord 2006/2010 that is called *Discussion Continues*. Nigerians had already named the Honda Accord 2003, *End of Discussion* which many construed to be the last Honda Accord that was going to be produced. However, when Honda came out with the 2006/2010 model, they naturally named it *Discussion Continues* to inform all those that thought discussion had ended that discussion still continues. Another vehicle that was named with the aim of informing is the Mercedes Benz W 123/ Benz

200 called the *Mesi Oloye* which translates as the Mercedes with air-conditioner. Both nicknames given to the vehicle have the role of informing. The nickname given to this car differentiates it from the other Benz cars. The name informs the hearer that the benz being talked about is the one that has air-conditioner. From the nickname, this information is provided.

Pract of Commendation

The nickname given to a car sometimes show that Nigerians are pleased with the car and its features. Hence, they commend it. An example is Honda bullet (Honda Accord 1995-1996). This car is called *bullet* because of its speed. This nickname shows that it is admired for its speed. Another example is the *German Mistake* (Benz 300). This Benz car has been described to be unexplainably efficient and reliable. Hence, Nigerians refer to it as German mistake because they believe that the Germans, who are the manufacturers of the car have made it too strong. Hence, buyers will have no need to change their vehicles often.

Conclusion

This paper has been able to provide insights into the nicknames that Nigerians give popular car brands in the country and the reason why such names are acceptable to Nigerians. Nigerians are very socially active people, hence they like to make everything thing around them reflect their social consciousness. Also, the nicknames given show how Nigerians are innovative in their language use. They use the pract of condemnation/abuse, informing and commendation in the naming process.

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