

# Language on the Road: Semiotic (Mis)Representations of Road Signs in the Nigerian Sociocultural Context

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## Abstract

This paper examines (mis)interpretations of the semiotic components of road signs by road users within the Nigerian sociocultural environment using global standards as an evaluative framework. The selected roads were two Trunk A highways: Calabar-Uyo and Calabar-Ogoja in Cross River State, Nigeria. The study adopts insights from Geosemiotics theory to account for drivers' (mis)interpretation of road signs as influenced by their shared cognitive sociocultural knowledge. The data was generated using participant observation, semi-structured interviews with digital photographs, and field notes in a two-year fieldwork involving 32 drivers who plied the roads regularly. Findings indicate that motorists along the selected roads maintain a consistent road signs culture that contains mixed global and indigenous semiotic components. While certain road signs align with global standards and meanings, others represent index local comprehension derived from Nigerian ethnocultural backgrounds. The localised standards are prominent in warning and informative signs that are characteristically symbolic, iconic, and indexical, and are combined for the dissemination of messages. These mixed practices call for a blended road signs system that attends to the information needs for the safety of both Nigerian indigenous and foreign road users.

**Keywords:** *Language, Semiotics, Road signs, Sociocultural context, Nigeria.*

## Introduction

A close-knit relationship exists between language, semiotics, and communication in addressing the affairs of human existence, and the safety and survival of people.

O'Connor and Zentz (2016) argue that such an intertwining relationship situates the connections between semiotic elements, particularly the link between signages and the mobility of people within space and time. This relationship also arises from the contact between the English semiotic system and features of

indigenous languages and signages that stimulate communication in several discourse domains. Brame and Karasaliu (2015) posit that language and communication could be verbal, nonverbal, written, or visual. The visual dimension of communication is achieved through messages via photographs, signs, symbols, maps, colours, posters, and RTS, among other forms. These instruct viewers about the use and meaning within the conventional interpretation of the consumers. In this connection, semiotics deals with (linguistic) sign interpretation while language is a semiotic tool used in communication in situated and expanded contexts. Communication is also linked with language and semiotics. This is because it is concerned with linguistic and semiotic tools to transmit information meaningful to the participants in a given situational context. Language (linguistic and non-linguistic signs) are therefore frameworks of semiotic explication (Brame & Karasaliu, 2015; Kozintsev, 2018). This assertion broadens the scope and dimensions of language use in interpersonal communication within the environment.

Language is viewed as a broad and multifaceted phenomenon, and it subsumes verbal and nonverbal aspects of communicating human activities and the events around man's environment. Language is a vital innate human trait used as a tool for social interactions. There are circumstances where communicators adopt the nonverbal medium through signs and signals. In such instances, the interpretation and mutual intelligibility are often drawn from and socioculturally determined by the language conventions of

the communicating partners. The interactants in this circumstance rely on using 'something' that stands for 'something' (sign) which is meaningful and understandable as aspects of language within a social group to pass on vital information (Dobrovolsky, 2011). Signs, in this category, bear communicative features and extra-linguistic elements that communicate messages within a situated social context. They are aspects of symbolic language and their value is user and interpreter-dependent, they are conceived as a representation of something within the social context of the consumers (Chandler, 2007; Mahmud, 2013). The meaning of a sign in the semiotic conceptualisation of a people is therefore socioculturally acquired or learned across time and cultures, and interpreted within the social context of the communication partners (Wales, 2001). Signs are thus, sociocultural components that perform vital roles in human communication. It is further established that communication through signs or verbal cues "is pivotal to the functioning of individuals and institutions as they rely on it to make meanings out of the series of activities that advance the existence and survival of man in the society" (Uwen & Ebam, 2019: 163). Signs incorporate a series of nonlinguistic elements (including road traffic signs, henceforth RTS) that convey different messages that are interpretable by the users within the situated contexts of usage of their value. RTS are among the general components of signs that convey messages that propagate the survival and safety of road users.

RTS, aside from hand signals and other signals from vehicles, are conventionally

placed or pasted on the road; or erected visibly by the roadside to “transmit safety messages to all segments of road users: pedestrians, bicyclists, motorcyclists, tricyclists and motorists” (Uwen & Ebam, 2019: 164). A road is viewed as “a path established over land for the passage of vehicles, people, and animals. It provides a dependable pathway for moving people and goods from one place to another” (FRSC, 2016: 1). RTS, as components of nonverbal language on the road, “are nonlinguistic forms of communication that give road users specific information, instructions, and precautions on the use of the road” (Jolayemi & Olayemi, 2017: 4). Some of the RTS are a complex and socioculturally derived creation, but are operationally used in this study to capture the (un)conventional RTS, vehicles (light) signals, and inscriptions for vehicles that bear mutual intelligibility and call for expected response from road users valued within the Nigerian context. In this study, conventional and unconventional RTS are used to describe those that conform to global standards and others devised and derived from the Nigerian sociocultural environment. RTS are used and appreciated on the road where they perform the function of language and serve the situational purposes of safety and direction. Therefore, appropriate interpretation of RTS helps to reduce road traffic crashes (henceforth, RTCs). To adequately utilise the signs, road users must be properly orientated and enlightened on the meanings of RTS within the specific roads (and environment) before embarking on journeys. The role of enlightening all categories of road users to inculcate safer road use culture to minimise RTCs falls

within the core mandates of the Federal Road Safety Corps (henceforth, FRSC). FRSC is the lead agency in road traffic management in Nigeria. The agency’s compliance with the statutory prescription of the 1968 United Nations Convention on Road Signs and Signals led to establishment of a signage plant in its national headquarters in Abuja. The agency produces RTS to ensure uniformity across the roads in Nigeria, and by global best standards that form aspects of interpretable language on the roads.

Also, the key function of local signage on the road described as unconventional RTS, is to communicate safety information to prevent RTCs. This aspect of language and information dissemination is vital because RTCs have accounted for a loss of lives, human capital, and properties across Nigeria. Despite renewed synergy and sensitisation programmes, RTCs have not been completely eradicated in Nigeria (FRSC, 2010; Edet, 2011). The signage standards introduced by FRSC are meant to acquaint road users with the knowledge of RTS, the uses, and the need to obey the rules. In Nigeria, road users tend to use socioculturally related RTS. This form is in addition to the existing standard RTS on the roads, devised particularly to capture the local semiotic system which operates side-by-side with the global best practices.

Given this background, the study is anchored on the premise that contradictory and unconventional RTS along Calabar-Uyo and Calabar-Ogoja highways (could) pose comprehension problems. The misunderstanding of the (safety) messages by (some) Nigerian and

non-Nigerian road users who do not have the sociocultural orientation to decrypt the meanings, could stimulate inappropriate judgment on the road that could cause avoidable RTCs. Going by these envisaged problems, the study is aimed at decrypting the misrepresentations by the local RTS to present their equivalents among those standardised globally. By using the global standards as a basis for evaluation, it is believed that the study would be of immense benefit to all (Nigerian and foreign) road users on the selected highways in particular, and those plying another network of Nigerian roads in general.

### **Literature Review**

Nonverbal aspects of language include signs which communicate meaning within the semiotic conceptualisation of a social group or speech community. Language embedded in RTS falls within this category of communication. Scholars have investigated semiotic communication, semiotic interpretation, semiotic analysis, and the regulating roles of RTS (Wagner, 2006; Simpson, 2009; Kirmiziloglu, 2010; Hamid, 2015). Some studies have found that RTS as an aspect of visual semiotic components specifies the rules on road usage and guides road users within the domain of such social communication (Wagner, 2006; Simpson, 2009). Others have found that the semiotic content of RTS disseminates messages on different roads and environmental conditions in various forms and signs with or without embedded texts (Kirmiziloglu, 2010; Hamid, 2015) and that some conventional RTS take the text-image format which serves as a complementary creation for meaning comprehension. These text-image

co-occurrences according to Kirmiziloglu (2010) and Hamid (2015), provide 'affordances' that develop meaning materially, socially, culturally, and historically using semiotic resources (van Leeuwen, 2005). It is expected therefore that such signs "that convey the semiotic constructs should have some level of uniformity ... which ultimately determine how they are construed in line with existing social conventions" (Uwen, 2019: 2). RTS, whether they are the conventional or socioculturally devised category, should have acceptable levels of uniformity to convey the desired meanings through the messages they transmit.

In Nigeria, studies on the causes of RTCs attribute the increase to inadequate RTS and ignorance of road users (Asogwa, 1996; Ezeibe et al., 2019; Awoniyi et al., 2022). Johnson and Adebayo's (2011) study on road behaviours of motorcyclists in Uyo blames the riders' noncompliance with safety rules on inadequate orientation on RTS. Bashir and Umar (2019) argue that road users in Kano have a fair knowledge of RTS that is commensurate with the rate of RTCs in the city. Other scholars contend that adequate orientation of all categories of road users could reduce RTCs in Ondo, Lagos, and Anambra States (Makinde & Opeyemi, 2012; Anebonam et al., 2019; Imoh et al., 2021). This position implies that the adequate presence of RTS on the road and road users' literacy levels have a corresponding impact on the rate of RTCs within the environment. This is because the drivers have specialised knowledge of RTS. This category of literacy explains the notion of literacy as a fluid concept beyond the ability to read and write to include the

expression of situated or expanded competencies in different domains of discourse.

Other studies view RTS as linguistic and extralinguistic components of human communication (McGregor, 2009; Jolayemi & Olayemi, 2017). These authors argue that RTS serves as semiotic communication and linguistic representations that communicate the conditions and directions on the road which are interpretable by road users. The signs are conceived as "components of the linguistic system, and road users with such literacies know that they could be translated, written and analyzed into meaningful constructions which road users depend on for safety" (Uwen, 2019: 3). This position presents RTS as contours of semiotic imports that share some features of language such as arbitrariness, semanticity, learnability, displacement, cultural transmission, and contextuality, and therefore perform some functions of language. However, Nigerian road users are yet to have an adequate grasp of the semiotic components of the unconventional RTS on the highways, a deficiency that has often resulted in preventable RTCs (Akinyoseye, 2015; Danhusi & Owoeye, 2016; Victor, Adebambo & Olusegun, 2016). The insights from the above scholars focused on the relevance of RTS, the relationship between road users' literacy on RTS and RTCs' rate, RTS as (non)linguistic components on the road, and the conception of RTS as semiotic resources within the concept of linguistic landscape studies.

Linguistic landscape studies are concerned with the display of billboards, advertisements, RTS, and other signs in situated geographical spaces that provide information to consumers. In connection to this, Stroud and Mpendukana (2009) have argued that linguistic and non-linguistic forms change along with the emergence of new contact varieties within a place. The authors add that the new perceptions within the space and time often converge on emerging multilingual spaces that evolve in the hybridisation of English and localised practices in given situations. Also, Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck (2005) demonstrate that such situations often stimulate the configuration and representation of space and place, and connect the message conveyed to instantiate how different social groups use language. This representation provides knowledge on how space and place are utilised in interpreting language in signage and RTS. It is further established that emerging signages (including RTS) in the social circulation of (non)linguistic forms are in different stages of enregisterment in many climes (Agha, 2003, 2005). Enregisterment is where devised forms of communication are adopted for use, and thus become vital aspects of the language system of a speech community. The research gap is hinged on the inaccessibility or nonexistence of studies on local RTS, the semiotic contents, and the comprehension level by road users vis-a-vis standard RTS designed in line with global best practices. This study thrives to fill this gap by relying on the global standards as an evaluative framework for the local variants of RTS which are combined to transmit safety messages to road users.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical foundation of this study is anchored in the field of semiotics. According to Eco (1979), semiotics is the study of all forms of signs and their meanings within a social context; it involves inferring meaning from signs within the assigned meanings by the users and interpreters. Semiotics is therefore encapsulated in the cooperation of three subjects: the sign, its object, and the interpretant. Semiotics, in these descriptions, encompasses acoustic signals, RTS, nonverbal signs, gestures, and general signs that vary in shape, colour, size, and substance in visual images. On this, Barthes (1968) has earlier conceived that visual images (with or without inscribed texts) and what they stand for, are significations describable at the connotative and denotative levels for the expression of the situated worldview of a people within a given space and place.

Given this background, the theory adopted in this study is Scollon and Scollon's (2003) theory of geosemiotics. Geosemiotics accounts for the situated meanings of signs given the environment and space TRS are placed and the sociocultural beliefs of the users and interpreters. It is concerned with the social meaning of the material placement of signs, the discourses, and our actions in the material world" (Scollon & Scollon, 2003: 2). The conception of the theory clarifies that signs are linked to the sociocultural background of the users which forms the basis for appropriate placement and interpretation. The theory is anchored on three attributes: interaction order, visual semiotics, and placement

semiotics. The interaction order, according to Scollon and Scollon (2003), accounts for the relationship that exists between the signs, the space, and the interpreters. Visual semiotics highlights the visual representations and the meanings in the space and sociocultural context. Placement semiotics, on the other hand, is concerned with the appropriateness of the signs such that they could convey the sociocultural meaning within the semiotic system of the interpreters and the physical environment where they are located.

Going by the conceptualisations of the theory of geosemiotics, RTS is construed as linguistic components and communication tools that are interpreted by road users with similar sociocultural orientations. RTS, where erected, pasted, or placed on, or by the road, conventionally become symbolic languages that communicate one or more safety messages to road users. Aligning with the traditional communication channel, Uwen (2019) suggests that the appropriately located sign in this context, performs the role of the addresser, while the road users have the sociocultural knowledge that decrypts meaning function as the addressees. The appropriate meaning of such a sign is location-specific and situationally interpreted. It is argued that signs, language, and space intermingle for the right meaning in a given context exposes the shared features of language and RTS (Uwen, 2019; Uwen & Ebam, 2019). Based on this, three competencies are required in the appropriate decryption of the semiotic content of RTS. The competencies (knowledge) are procedural knowledge, conceptual or informative knowledge, and performative knowledge

to integrate the situated meanings of RTS and the safety implications (Blau, 2003; Han, Singh & Zhao, 2010). Sequentially, road users (drivers inclusive), are expected to know and follow the procedure for safer road use enabled by earlier orientation (procedural knowledge), which strengthens the capacity to interpret the messages transmitted by the RTS (informative knowledge) that further stimulates the impulse to respond appropriately on sighting a particular RTS on the road (performative knowledge). These competencies are embedded in the conception of geosemiotics which situates space and place as relevant components in the explication of RTS. Space, place, time, and the sociocultural background of the interpreters are elements required in the configuration and representation of messages on how people use and understand different dimensions of language (Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck, 2005). These form aspects of linguistic landscapes that describe signages as (non)linguistic systems that convey information on the safety and survival of the consumers. Therefore, nonverbal language as represented by RTS and as operationally defined in this study is a vital component of the human communication system utilised in certain contexts for the safety of travellers. The theory of geosemiotics is therefore relevant to this study because it captures the indices applied in assigning meanings to signs taking into account the social, spatial, sociocultural, and situational contexts of the location and the prior socio-cognitive knowledge of the creators, users, and interpreters.

### **Materials and methods**

This study employs a qualitative research approach in two years of fieldwork involving 32 experienced drivers who plied the roads regularly. The drivers were sampled from Ogoja, Ikom, AKTC, and Etim Edem parks in Calabar. The selected roads were Calabar-Uyo and Calabar-Ogoja highways with a distance of 87.4km and 303.6km respectively. The criteria for selection include a minimum of five years of experience as a driver on the selected roads and an in-depth understanding of the semiotic imports of RTS and their conventional and sociocultural explications. The participants' ages ranged between 30 and 52. There were five females and 27 males with educational qualifications ranging from Senior School Certificate to University degree. Data were generated using participant observation, semi-structured interviews using digital cameras, and field notes as research tools. The participants were purposively selected, consulted, and recruited as a representative sample upon consent. Participant observation enabled the researchers (drivers and travellers on the roads) and the participants to take an eye-witness position of the semiotic content of the RTS along the selected roads because they are consumers of the meanings within the sociocultural context of road users in the geographical region. The semi-structured interviews served as complementary instruments used in the elicitation of the needed information on the semiotic value of the RTS from the drivers and road users. The digital cameras helped in taking still photographs of the selected RTS to assess the mutual meanings while field notes were used to document transcripts of semi-structured interviews

and metadata of participants including time and location of interviews relating to the expectations of road users on sighting the particular RTS on the roads. During the research, the researchers met five times with different sets of participants to harmonise relevant data, the mutual meanings, and the expectations of road users. The data were then transcribed, coded, and analysed using a qualitative analysis method.

### Results and discussion

This section discusses the findings of the study. The analysis is anchored on the operational definition of RTS in this study and the conception of the Theory of Geosemiotics. Based on the above, the analysis is categorised into four subheadings: (mis)representations of C-caution, road hazard sign, partial road block sign, and vehicle light signals. The analysis is combined with a discussion of road users' opinions on the RTS for complementation.

#### 1 (Mis)representation of C-caution

The C-caution, a red triangular shape often made with synthetic plastic, is conventionally a warning sign. It is (mis)represented on Nigerian roads, particularly the Calabar-Uyo and Calabar-Ogoja highways. Section 10 (4e) of the *FRSC Act 2007* makes it mandatory for all vehicles plying Nigerian roads to have the C-caution sign. The Act prescribes penalties for drivers' whose vehicles do not carry the warning sign. The C-caution, according to FRSC (2016), is used to alert other road users whenever there is a breakdown vehicle that is stationary on the road. FRSC, aligning with global best practices, recommends that the C-caution

be placed 50 metres behind the broken down (stationary) vehicle on a single carriageway, It has to be placed about 100 metres behind the car in the same condition on the expressway. Through this practice, the C-caution becomes a stationary semiotic instrument that transmits linguistically transcribed safety messages to road users.

Although there were a few cases where the C-caution was used on the designated roads, the common practice was heaping fresh tree branches behind vehicles that broke down on the selected roads. In most instances, the branches were abandoned even after the affected vehicles had been removed from such points. Although there was no uniform distance between the dumped branches and the faulty vehicles, road users (particularly drivers) appeared to have procedural, informative, and performative knowledge of the safety signification of such symbolic language. A 45-year-old male driver who has driven on Calabar-Uyo highway for 15 years argued this way:

We know the C-caution but what is prominently used to represent the functions of the C-caution here is a fresh tree branch. The branches convey symbolic safety messages to oncoming vehicles to avert a collision with the stationary vehicle. Drivers sighting fresh branches behind a car on the highway know the signals being passed on. Such stationary vehicles are often avoided to avert any unforeseen circumstances. Fresh branches are cultural items that pass on different messages



depending on where they are placed, such as those that convey safety information.

The participant's opinion instantiates the sociocultural relationship with the local RTS that is interpretable within the cultural conceptualisation of the road users that ply the selected roads under study. This interpretable localised variant becomes an aspect of the (non)linguistic identity of the creators and consumers (Uwen & Ekpang, 2022; Uwen, 2023a), which show the significance of locality in the navigation of space and how signage discourses are enacted, understood, performed and disseminated in local performatives of place (Stroud & Jegels, 2014). Drawing on the insights from Scollon and Scollon's (2003) geosemiotic theory, the heaps of fresh branches were appropriately positioned behind, or in front of a vehicle that has a problem, in such a manner that it communicates the conventional message within the sociocultural context and beliefs of the road users. The researchers also observed that the instantiation of the domesticated RTS is influenced by sociocultural practices with situated intelligibility among road users.

## **2. Representation of Road Hazard Sign**

A road hazard sign alerts drivers and other road users of dangerous road conditions ahead. It indicates to the driver that there is a bad spot close to where the sign is located. In some instances, the danger may not be immediate or at the point, the RTS is erected or pasted. It is generally meant to alert drivers to change driving patterns to avert the foreseen danger. According to

FRSC (2016), road hazard signs are in the category of warning signs. They are usually triangular with red perimeters. The RTS in this description includes the "YIELD" sign (the only warning sign in an inverted triangle) used to slow down drivers and to possibly yield to oncoming traffic, to warn for dangerous (double) bends, narrow roads, narrow bridges, falling rocks, among other conditions that are a danger to travellers. In some instances, and aligned with standard practices, traffic cones or red tape are used to cordon off the spot to guide the road users ahead of the danger.

On the contrary, the participants' opinions suggested that road hazard signs on the roads under study are often replaced with fresh leaves or red flags which convey the same indicators of dangerous road conditions either where the semiotic materials are kept or a little away from the spot. A 37-year-old male driver who has travelled from Calabar to Ogoja for 11 years reported that:

The fresh leaves or red flags are used more frequently than the conventional RTS. Once the signs are sighted on the road, the driver understands the messages signified and has to respond appropriately. The driver exercises caution in such spots and drives slowly to avoid being involved in an accident. The red colour represents danger, evil, and something bad in African culture. This is what makes it even easier to understand.

Corroborating the participant's opinion, it was further reported that such replacements are the local semiotic equivalents of the different types of hazard signs. The difference is that, while road hazard signs in the standard versions denote different degrees of danger the local semiotic provisions (equivalents) are used to prompt drivers on any (or all) dangerous road conditions. Space and place are vital components of geosemiotic theory combined and overtly represented in this context. This is because the exact positioning of these local equivalents of road hazard signs (where fresh leaves or red flags are used) to indicate dangerous spots matters extensively in communication among these particular road users. The researchers also observed that the items and the spots where they were placed are the local indices and significations for meaning orientation among travellers in the region.

### **3. (Mis)Representation Of A Partial Road Block Sign**

Conventionally, roadblock signs serve as barriers. It also communicates to drivers to slow down reasonably to use the narrowed road that is partially blocked or to indicate a diversion in the event of total blockade. The barriers are usually made of collapsible steel or plastic. Roadblock signs are also used by security agencies at checkpoints with additional road signs indicating the type of security agency that does the checks at the particular spot on the road. The signs are usually made of illuminating materials that reflect at night to alert drivers of the presence of security officials.

The participants reported that the local replacements for partial roadblock signs

are logs of wood, bags of sand, used tyres, and other objects usually assembled and heaped at such points by security operatives to create partial roadblocks to enable them to check vehicles. The researchers have observed that these make-shift items/signs on the roads were at variance with global standards. On this, A 47-year-old male driver who have travelled on the Calabar-Ogoja highway for 21 years captured the unconventional representation this way:

Roadblock by uniformed men along the Calabar-Ogoja highway takes the local practice. All the partial roadblocks erected by uniformed men at different spots on the road are made up of different objects. Since the objects do not reflect at night, they sometimes burn objects to produce fire close to such spots at night to alert oncoming vehicles of their presence.

Although this category of localised partial road block sign is understood by the drivers, the researchers observed that this practice portends danger to travellers particularly at night, and especially for drivers who are first-timers on such roads. For this practice to work and for meaningful communication to occur, drivers require previous familiarization with the various security points to respond appropriately where they approach the same. However, drivers who were regular travellers affirmed in the semi-structured interviews that they were aware of such points and often slowed down for security checks whether it was day or night. Despite danger it portends to non-regular users of the selected roads, the strand of

RTS is internalised by the road users and has become an integral aspect of symbolic language on the road.

Going by the explanation above, it is obvious that the principles of the theory of geosemiotics are overtly rehearsed where partial roadblock signs are placed along the roads under investigation. For instance, the three attributes of interaction order, visual semiotics, and placement semiotics are combined here to provide situational knowledge and contextual meaning to travellers along the axis. The knowledge and meaning comprehension also evoke the utilisation of the competencies observed in the procedural, informative, and performative knowledge to appropriately respond to the message this set of RTS transmitted to road users. The researchers further observed that motorists along these roads were often careful enough to slow down at such points to submit to security checks to avoid any embarrassment.

#### **4. (Mis)Representation Of Vehicle Light Signals**

The two sets of vehicle lights that are often misrepresented among drivers on the selected roads are the headlights and the double indicators. The primary function of the headlight (positioned at both front ends of the vehicle) is to improve visibility at night or during foggy, rainy, or snowy weather. Mele (2019) posits that the headlights could perform the function of horns, that is, to signal oncoming vehicles that their headlights are turned on, a signal to proceed, and to inform waiting pedestrians to cross at zebra crossing or other permissible points on the roads. The scholar adds that once all the double

indicators (located at the front and rear left and right sides of the vehicle) are turned on, they are conventionally transmitted as hazard warning lights. The hazard warning lights inform other road users that the particular vehicle emitting signal is either faulty or is broken down in a halted position, thus warning travellers of the danger of a stationary car.

On the contrary, according to the participants, the flashing of headlights on the roads under study could transmit multiple messages to other drivers. Depending on the context and prevailing circumstances, the flashing of the headlights could mean compliments on the driver of a vehicle in the opposite traffic, it could be an alert on a security threat or used to inform drivers of the presence of uniformed men ahead who could extort them. The researchers also observed that the hazard warning lights in this context, were erroneously misrepresented and used in adverse weather conditions, when parked illegally or dangerously, or while on towing. A 40-year-old female driver who has driven along the Calabar-Uyo highway for five years reported that:

We do not know the origin of the meanings of flashing headlights and the use of hazard warning lights along this highway. We experienced the same while driving on this road and had to familiarize ourselves with the meanings. For instance, on this road, flashing headlights two to five times and double indicators transmit messages understood by drivers who ply this road. The information may be different in other climes but they mean a lot to drivers and

could save them from danger and embarrassment.

The extended meanings of the vehicle light signals described above were interpretable within the social context of the drivers. The response to such signals is derived from the drivers' pre-existing knowledge. Uwen (2023a) argues that the knowledge in this context provides the cues for meaning appropriation. The light signals conceived by the drivers on the selected roads bear semiotic imports that appropriate linguistic explanation of the signification. It is the prior sociocultural knowledge that provides the decrypting keys that interpret meanings in this context by participants with the same cognitive knowledge of localised RTS.

As highlighted above, vehicle light signals, whether emitted to indicate meanings in the global or localised standard, are visual signs that are interpretable within the framework of geosemiotic theory. With the sociocultural context of the travellers, there is an existing relationship between the signals, the mobile space and the place the vehicle travels to, and the interpreters. The visual representations convey the sociocultural meanings such as compliments, and caution ahead of danger that are comprehensible within the space and semiotic system of the drivers.

### **Conclusion**

The study, aside from broadening the scope and possibilities of RTS, particularly in this study, has interrogated the multifaceted concept of language and the various forms of communication among road users. Drawing on insights from the theory of geosemiotics, the study has investigated the embedded semiotic imports of standard RTS and the local equivalents that jointly

transmit different safety messages to drivers and other road users. The study has demonstrated that the local variants of RTS are vital and are as meaningful as the standard versions to the creators, users, and interpreters. Both the global and localised standards perform safety functions, such that the latter equally demand appropriate reactions to the messages they transmit from drivers and other road users for their safety.

The study, like the created Nigerian variant of English usage, has brought to the fore the Nigerian Indigenous variants of RTS devised by Nigerian road users for their safety to minimise the cases of RTCs on the roads. These local safety message dissemination forms, which according to participants, have been in use on these roads for decades, were seen to be the transfer of sociocultural practices of the people, particularly the translation of the local information and semiotic system to guide commuters on the roads. Such symbolic elements are indigenous information systems that are meaningful in specific contexts (Mensah et al., 2024). The result of this study is that these signs are already enregistered local practices that are alternative expressions of RTS locally created in line with the road users' sociocultural beliefs that function in similar ways or have similar advantages like the global standards. Drawing from participants' views, this system of communication on the road has gone a long way and remained a major guide that travellers rely on in their journeys. Given the entrenchment of these forms, it is recommended that they should be regular orientations of travellers on the selected roads by relevant agencies and concerned

drivers' associations in the motor parks. This would stimulate an adequate understanding of the local RTS for the safety of travellers, particularly those outside the sociocultural context where the local signs are used. Based on the findings, it is also necessary to encourage similar investigations of other roads in Nigeria to support or refute the claims of this study. Such studies would form the basis for the blending and hybridisation of the RTS system in Nigeria which would be indigenous and more comprehensible.

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