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Original Article

Communicative Significance of Honking and Expressive Verbal Interjections Among Road Users in Nigerian Cities

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Abstract

This study examines the communicative significance of vehicular honking and regional verbal interjections among road users in urban Nigeria. Automobile honking in Lagos, Port Harcourt, Kano, and Aba functions as a culturally embedded system of non-verbal and linguistic communication. Idiosyncratic exclamations—ranging from Southwestern/Southern Pidgin ("You dey mad?", "Na you alone dey craze?"), to Hausa-infused Northern Pidgin ("Kai! Wallahi! If you no commot road, I go jam you"), and Igbo-infused Eastern Pidgin ("Ina puara, nna man biko live road, how much is this your gwongworo?")—serve as interactive strategies for spatial negotiation, territory enforcement, and emotional venting. Grounded in Pragmatic Presupposition Theory and Symbolic Interactionism, this paper investigates the socio-pragmatic meanings, contextual triggers, and functional categorizations of these interactions. Utilizing a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, data were collected across four major geopolitical metropolises via observational tally sheets and semi-structured interviews with 384 road users. Findings reveal that honking and verbal interjections operate along a continuum ranging from pragmatic utility to social identity performance and aggression management.

Keywords

Socio-pragmatics, Nigerian Pidgin, Vehicular Acoustic Communication, Transit Discourse, Linguistic Regionalism, Road Ecology.

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1. Introduction

Automobile honking was introduced as a mechanical warning signal intended to avert collisions. However, in contemporary urban environments across Nigeria, the horn has transcended its primary regulatory function (Adebayo & Oladokun, 2020). In major geopolitical transit centers—most notably Lagos (South West), Port Harcourt (South), Kano (North), and Aba (South East)—the acoustic landscape is governed by a complex lexicon of auditory and regional socio-linguistic cues (Eke & Danjuma, 2024).

The socio-linguistic realization of these acoustic events varies significantly by region:

- Lagos & Port Harcourt: Dominated by standard and coastal Nigerian Pidgin (e.g., "You dey mad?", "Na you alone dey craze?", "Carry that your scrap commot for road jareh") (Sanusi & Alabi, 2023).
- Kano (Hausa-Fulani Accent & Blend): Characterized by a fusion of Pidgin and Hausa code-mixing (e.g., "Kai! Wallahi! If you no commot road, I go jam you. Allah! This man ba? Your head no correct, gaskiya!") (Usman, 2023).
- Aba (Igbo-Infused Blend): Characterized by a boisterous, commercial blend of Igbo and Pidgin reflecting heavy human and vehicular traffic (e.g., "Ina puara, nna man biko live road, how much is this your gwongworo?", "Biko wete change") (Okafor & Nwachukwu, 2025).

These expressions constitute deliberate communicative acts that signal territorial dominance, enforce informal right-of-way hierarchies, and process cognitive strain during chronic traffic congestion (go-slow) (Onuoha, 2019).

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A. Research Questions

1. What is the primary socio-pragmatic meanings and communicative functions of vehicular honking among road users in selected Nigerian cities (Chukwu, 2022)?
2. How do regional variations of Nigerian Pidgin (including Hausa- and Igbo-infused accents/dialects) intersect with vehicular honking to form a multi-modal transit communication system?
3. What environmental, psychological, and situational factors trigger specific acoustic and verbal signals during urban transit (Onuoha, 2019)?
4. How do road users interpret, decode, and respond to various patterns of honking and vocal interjections across geopolitical zones?

B. Research Objectives

1. Categorize the socio-pragmatic meanings and functional typologies of vehicular honking in urban Nigerian transit spaces (Chukwu, 2022).
2. Analyze the socio-linguistic structure and communicative roles of regional Nigerian Pidgin verbal expressions across Lagos, Port Harcourt, Kano, and Aba (Faraclas, 2018; Sanusi & Alabi, 2023).
3. Determine the situational and structural drivers of auditory and vocal signaling among urban commuters (Olayiwola et al., 2021).
4. Evaluate the socio-cognitive interpretations and behavioral responses of drivers and pedestrians to acoustic road prompts (Adebayo & Oladokun, 2020).

2. Literature Review

This study integrates Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and Pragmatic Presupposition Theory (Stalnaker, 1974).

- Symbolic Interactionism: Horn sounds and regional verbal exclamations are symbols laden with social meaning (Blumer, 1969). A driver in Kano or Aba does not merely hear noise; they interpret localized regional intent (urgency, insult, caution, commercial bargaining) and respond based on shared cultural understandings (Eke & Danjuma, 2024).
- Pragmatic Presupposition: Focuses on shared background assumptions (Stalnaker, 1974). For phrases like "Na you alone dey craze?" or "Nna man biko leave road" to achieve communicative goals without escalating into violence, both parties must operate on shared presuppositions regarding street-level rhetorical posturing and spatial negotiation (Sanusi & Alabi, 2023).

3. Methodology

This study investigates the socio-pragmatic functions of vehicular honking and regional Nigerian Pidgin expressions in selected Nigerian metropolitan areas. The methodology is organized around the study's research questions, which examine the communicative functions of vehicular horns, regional linguistic variation, situational influences on acoustic and verbal signaling, and road users' interpretations of these signals.

A. Research Design

The study adopts a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative survey data, structured observation of vehicular honking and qualitative analysis of verbal interactions in selected urban transport environments. The quantitative component examines the frequency and distribution of acoustic signals and their co-occurrence with regional verbal expressions, while the qualitative component interprets the pragmatic meanings, linguistic characteristics and situational contexts of these interactions.

The study covers four Nigerian metropolitan areas: Lagos, Port Harcourt, Kano and Aba. These locations provide settings for examining potential regional differences in vehicular communication. The reported empirical data comprise a survey of 384 respondents, 2,416 observed acoustic events and 812 incidents involving the co-occurrence of horn patterns and verbal expressions. These data provide the basis for the descriptive analysis of respondent characteristics, acoustic signal distributions and horn–verbal interactions.

B. Study Area

The study covers four Nigerian metropolitan areas: Lagos, Port Harcourt, Kano and Aba. These locations were selected to examine vehicular communication in urban environments characterized by commercial transportation, interaction among different categories of road users and regional linguistic variation.

Lagos Metropolis, in South-West Nigeria, is examined in relation to its high traffic density and commercial minibus transportation, particularly the danfo system (Sanusi & Alabi, 2023).

Port Harcourt Metropolis, in South-South Nigeria, provides a setting for examining vehicular communication within an urban commercial environment involving private motorists and other road users. The study also considers the use of Nigerian Pidgin in this setting (Onuoha, 2019).

Kano Metropolis, in Northern Nigeria, is included because of its importance as a commercial center and the presence of different forms of transportation, including tricycles and trucks. The study examines how Hausa-influenced expressions may interact with Nigerian Pidgin in traffic communication (Usman, 2023).

Aba Metropolis, in South-East Nigeria, provides a setting for investigating vehicular communication in commercial and market environments where drivers, traders and pedestrians interact within shared road spaces. The study particularly considers the use of Igbo-influenced Nigerian Pidgin in these interactions (Okafor & Nwachukwu, 2025).

The selection of these four locations enables a descriptive comparison of acoustic signaling and verbal communication across different urban settings. However, the findings are interpreted in relation to the locations and data represented in the study and should not automatically be generalized to all urban areas in Nigeria.

C. Population and Sampling

The study reports a total sample of 384 respondents, comprising 96 respondents from each metropolitan area. The respondents included 168 commercial drivers, 136 private motorists and 80 pedestrians and roadside traders. The sample was allocated equally across the four locations, with 96 respondents from each metropolis. The sample also comprised 272 male and 112 female respondents. Cochran's formula was used to determine the sample size and that multistage sampling was employed. The Cochran sample-size formula for estimating a population proportion is:

$$n_0 = \frac{Z^2 p(1-p)}{e^2}$$

where (Z) represents the selected confidence-level critical value, (p) is the assumed population proportion and (e) is the acceptable margin of error. A sample size of approximately 384 was obtained using a 95% confidence level, (p=0.5) and a margin of error of 0.05, assuming simple random sampling and the usual large-population approximation.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Survey Respondents (N=384)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
City Location	Lagos Metropolis (South West)	96	25.0
	Port Harcourt Metropolis (South)	96	25.0
	Kano Metropolis (North)	96	25.0
	Aba Metropolis (South East)	96	25.0
User Category	Commercial Drivers (Danfo, Keke, Taxis)	168	43.8
	Private Motorists	136	35.4
	Pedestrians & Roadside Traders	80	20.8
Gender	Male	272	70.8
	Female	112	29.2

The demographic distribution shows that the study included 384 respondents, equally distributed across Lagos, Port Harcourt, Kano and Aba, with 96 respondents (25.0%) from each location. Commercial drivers constituted the largest road-user category, with 168 respondents (43.8%), followed by private motorists, with 136 respondents (35.4%), and pedestrians and roadside traders, with 80 respondents (20.8%). Male respondents accounted for 272 (70.8%), while female respondents accounted for 112 (29.2%).

Table 2: Typology and Frequency Distribution of Acoustic Signals (N=2,416 Observed Events)

Acoustic Code	Duration / Pattern	Primary Pragmatic Intent	Observed Count (n)	Relative Frequency (%)
Staccato Tap	Single brief blast (<0.3s)	Spatial alert / Presence notification	842	34.9
Double Tap	Two short pulses (0.3s - 0.5s)	Courtesy signal / Right-of-way request / Passenger pickup	618	25.6
Prolonged Blast	Continuous blast (>1.5s)	Threat display / Frustration venting / Emergency warning	512	21.2
Rhythmic Staccato	Repeated multi-pulse pattern	Commercial solicitation / Fare advertising / Market touting	444	18.4

The distribution of the 2,416 observed acoustic events indicates that staccato taps were the most frequently recorded category, with 842 occurrences (34.9%). Double taps followed with 618 occurrences (25.6%), while prolonged blasts accounted for 512 occurrences (21.2%). Rhythmic staccato patterns were the least frequent category, with 444 occurrences (18.4%). Taken together, staccato taps and double taps accounted for 1,460 events, representing approximately 60.4% of the total. This indicates that the two shorter-signal categories constituted the majority of recorded acoustic events.

Table 3: Co-Occurrence Matrix: Horn Pattern and Regional Verbal Interjections (N=812 Incidents)

Regional Pidgin Expression	Staccato Tap	Double Tap	Prolonged Blast	Rhythmic Staccato	Total
"*You dey mad?*" (South West / General)	38	16	188	10	252
"*Na you alone dey craze?*" (South / South West)	24	12	162	6	204
"*Kai! Wallahi! If you no commot road...*" (Kano North)	22	18	84	14	138
"*Ina puara, nna man biko live road...*" (Aba South East)	18	22	68	24	132
Contextual / Other Interjections	44	16	18	8	86
Total Co-Occurrences	146	84	520	62	812

The co-occurrence matrix records 812 incidents involving vehicular horn patterns and verbal expressions. The expression "*You dey mad?*" accounts for 252 incidents (31.0%), while "*Na you alone dey craze?*" accounts for 204 incidents (25.1%). Together, these two categories account for 456 incidents, representing approximately 56.2% of the co-occurrence dataset.

The Kano-associated expression accounts for 138 incidents (17.0%), while the Aba-associated expression accounts for 132 incidents (16.3%). Contextual or other interjections account for the remaining 86 incidents (10.6%).

Across the horn-pattern categories, prolonged blasts account for 520 of the 812 incidents (64.0%), compared with 146 staccato taps, 84 double taps and 62 rhythmic staccato patterns. This distribution shows that prolonged blasts constitute the largest horn category within the reported co-occurrence dataset.

A. Southwestern and Southern Patterns (Lagos & Port Harcourt)

The study identifies "*You dey mad?*" and "*Na you alone dey craze?*" as prominent verbal expressions associated with confrontational traffic interactions in Lagos and Port Harcourt. The co-occurrence matrix records 252 incidents involving the first expression and 204 involving the second. Together, these categories account for approximately 56.2% of the 812 recorded horn–verbal incidents.

These figures indicate that the two expression categories are prominent in the reported dataset. Their use may function as a challenge, an expression of displeasure or an attempt to influence another road user's behaviour. When accompanied by vehicular honking, such expressions may contribute to the negotiation of road space and the management of disagreements.

B. Northern Pattern (Kano Metropolis)

The study identifies Hausa-influenced expressions and Nigerian Pidgin code-mixing as features of the verbal interactions documented in Kano. The co-occurrence matrix records 138 incidents involving the expression category represented by "*Kai! Wallahi! If you no commot road...*", accounting for approximately 17.0% of the 812 recorded incidents.

The expression combines Nigerian Pidgin constructions with Hausa-associated lexical and emphatic markers. In the traffic context described by the study, these linguistic resources may be used to communicate urgency, dissatisfaction or an insistence on right-of-way. The accompanying horn signal may reinforce the urgency of the utterance, depending on the circumstances of the interaction. The reported frequency supports the observation that this expression category occurs in the co-occurrence dataset.

C. South Eastern Pattern (Aba Metropolis)

The study identifies Igbo–Pidgin code-mixing in the verbal expressions documented in Aba. The co-occurrence matrix records 132 incidents in the category represented by "*Ina puara, nna man biko live road...*", accounting for approximately 16.3% of the 812 recorded horn–verbal incidents.

The expressions presented in the manuscript include forms associated with requests for road space and commercial interaction. In an environment involving drivers, traders and pedestrians, such expressions may serve navigational or transactional purposes, depending on the immediate context. The reported examples illustrate how Nigerian Pidgin and Igbo-associated linguistic forms may occur together during traffic interactions. When these utterances accompany double taps or rhythmic staccato signals, the combination may provide additional contextual information about the interaction.

D. Comparative Interpretation of the Findings

The findings indicate that the study's recorded traffic interactions involve several acoustic patterns and verbal-expression categories. The co-occurrence matrix shows that "*You dey mad?*" and "*Na you alone dey craze?*" are the most frequent expression categories in the dataset, while the Kano-associated and Aba-associated categories also account for substantial proportions of the recorded incidents.

These results provide a descriptive basis for examining regional linguistic variation in vehicular communication. They suggest that verbal expressions associated with different linguistic contexts can be studied alongside horn patterns to investigate how road users communicate in urban traffic environments.

However, the available evidence does not establish statistically significant differences between the four metropolitan areas. The expression categories are not accompanied by complete city-specific denominators, and the study does not report statistical tests of regional variation. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as descriptive evidence from the selected study settings rather than proof of fixed or exclusive regional communication patterns.

E. Theoretical Contributions to Knowledge

Towards an Acousto-Verbal Transit Model: The study proposes an Acousto-Verbal Transit Model that conceptualizes

vehicular communication as an interaction between mechanical acoustic signals and verbal expressions. The four acoustic categories identified in the dataset, together with the recorded verbal-expression categories, provide a descriptive foundation for examining this relationship. The model may help organize the analysis of how horn patterns and verbal expressions occur together in different traffic situations. Its further development would require explicit definitions of its components and evidence demonstrating how traffic conditions, acoustic signals, verbal expressions and recipient responses are related. Accordingly, the model is presented as a proposed conceptual contribution requiring further empirical examination rather than as a fully validated explanatory model.

Contextualizing Traffic Communication in Nigerian Urban Environments: The findings draw attention to the importance of examining vehicular honking within the linguistic and social contexts in which it occurs. The reported co-occurrences suggest that horn signals can accompany verbal expressions during traffic interactions, indicating that the study of vehicular communication may benefit from considering both acoustic patterns and their interactional contexts. This perspective complements approaches that focus primarily on the physical or regulatory functions of vehicle horns. However, the present data do not establish that all honking serves a communicative purpose beyond warning or that noise-management frameworks are universally inadequate. The contribution lies in highlighting the need for context-sensitive investigation rather than rejecting existing approaches to traffic safety or noise regulation.

Regional Linguistic Practices and Informal Traffic Interaction: The examples from Lagos, Port Harcourt, Kano and Aba illustrate how Nigerian Pidgin and regionally associated linguistic forms may appear in vehicular interactions. The study therefore provides a basis for examining the role of linguistic variation in the communication of warnings, requests, dissatisfaction and other traffic-related meanings. Symbolic Interactionism helps interpret these interactions as potentially shaped by socially learned meanings, while Pragmatic Presupposition Theory draws attention to the background assumptions that speakers and listeners may share. The reported data are consistent with these interpretive perspectives, although direct evidence of participants' understandings and responses would be needed to demonstrate how those mechanisms operate in specific encounters.

Overall, the study's theoretical contribution is to establish a descriptive and conceptual basis for examining the relationship between vehicular acoustics, regional verbal communication and the social organization of urban traffic interactions.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the socio-pragmatic functions of vehicular honking and regional Nigerian Pidgin expressions in Lagos, Port Harcourt, Kano and Aba. The analysis draws on a reported sample of 384 respondents, 2,416 observed acoustic events and 812 incidents involving the co-occurrence of horn patterns and verbal expressions.

The findings show that staccato taps were the most frequently recorded acoustic category, accounting for 34.9% of the observed events, followed by double taps at 25.6%, prolonged blasts at 21.2% and rhythmic staccato patterns at 18.4%. These patterns were associated in the study with different communicative functions, including presence notification, requests for space, warnings and commercial signaling.

The co-occurrence analysis shows that prolonged blasts accounted for 520 of the 812 recorded horn–verbal incidents, representing approximately 64.0% of the dataset. The two most frequent verbal-expression categories, "*You dey mad?*" and "*Na you alone dey craze?*", together accounted for 456 incidents, or approximately 56.2%. The reported examples from Kano and Aba also illustrate the occurrence of Hausa-influenced and Igbo–Pidgin expressions in the recorded traffic interactions.

These findings provide descriptive evidence that vehicular horn patterns and verbal expressions can occur together in the selected urban traffic environments. They support further investigation of the relationship between acoustic signalling, regional linguistic practices and the interpretation of traffic interactions. The theoretical framework offers a basis for examining how socially shared meanings and pragmatic assumptions may influence the use and interpretation

of these signals.

However, the available data do not conclusively establish the causes of particular signals, the statistical significance of regional differences or the consistency of road users' interpretations and behavioral responses. These issues require more detailed contextual evidence, city-specific comparisons and transparent reporting of the data-collection and analytical procedures.

The study therefore provides a preliminary empirical and conceptual contribution to the study of socio-pragmatic communication in Nigerian urban traffic environments. Its proposed Acousto-Verbal Transit Model offers a framework for further research into how acoustic signals and verbal expressions interact within specific traffic situations. Further investigation is necessary to determine the extent to which these patterns are shared across locations and how they influence road-user behavior.

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