

# Use of New Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions among the Agbèrò: The Lagos Bus Conductors

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In Yorùbá studies, outside the borders of what is called “standard language”, spoken and written by the educated classes, there are other forms of expression in existence about us; for instance, there are special jargons of various trades, sports and occupations; there are also the rich vocabularies of ribaldry, of imprecation of slang and of new idioms which is the subject matter of this paper, all full of vitality and interest. New idioms consist of words, expressions and meanings that are informal and used by people who have the same interest. As a matter of fact, they straddle idioms, metaphors and euphemism and also serve as replication of the established Yoruba idioms both in form and meaning. Also in this paper, new idiom and idiomatic expressions is seen as a sociolect which shows that it is used primarily for in-group communication by the Lagos bus conductors popularly called *Agbèrò*. *Agbèrò* as used in this paper refers to the bus conductors and the NURTW Task Force members who collect union levies at the various motor parks and bus stops in Lagos State.

This paper is motivated by our observation of the Lagos bus conductors who in the process of performing a professional duty of bus conducting want to express ideas, information and messages based on the nature of their business while on the bus and at the various motor parks using new words and expressions that are not only peculiar, distinct and strange but also in contrast to the standard language. This paper therefore investigates the nature and form of new idioms used by the Lagos *Agbèrò*, their uses and interpretation. The objective is to highlight the stylistic (if any) and communicative potentials of the new idioms. The theory of Standard Language propounded by Mukarovsky (1970), complemented with other necessary information is adopted for our analysis to enable us to know the ingenious and deviant nature of new idioms as well as knowing whether such expressions are Standard Language (SL) or Literary Language (LL).

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Apart from the occasional students’ final essays, few studies have been made on this subject matter in Yorùbá. Perhaps, the fact that it is difficult to explain because of the overlapping tendencies of its semantic realizations as claimed by Olátéjù (2005) who happened to be the first scholar to have referred to this subject matter as new idioms may have been responsible for the slight interest of scholars in Yorùbá studies. Meanwhile, Olúnládé (2000) who is of the view that new idioms are coded expressions for the in- group communication compiled a scanty number of these expressions and their

meanings but such effort needs constant updating since sociolinguistic terrain of the expression is constantly changing.

On his part, Adéoyè (2004) gives this expression a nomenclature that oscillates between new expression and slang of any class, always colloquial, short in life span language with words and usages not accepted for formal use. This position does not address new idioms and idiomatic expressions that are more or less become permanent to the point of being accepted into standard language.

The foregoing summarily expressed ‘informality,’ ‘group identification,’ and short life span of new idioms; however, we may add that the development of these expressions are a sense of intimacy and solidarity as expressed by innovative and jocular language conveying a sense of liberation from a rigid observation of rules and the formal standard form of Yorùbá in order to create a relaxed social atmosphere for free peer interaction.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The data used in this paper are recorded expressions obtained from the *Agbèrò* (bus conductors) both at bus stations and on the bus. Words or expressions that constitute the data for this study are collected from Osòdì, Mile 2, Iyànà Ibà, Àgbàrá and Badagry axis of Lagos State. These areas are chosen because of the huge concentration or heavy presence of the *Agbèrò* group. Randomly, a sizeable number of commercial bus drivers and *Agbèrò* at the various bus stations were interviewed orally in order to elicit data on the subject matter of the paper. The unstructured interviews took note of the degree of awareness of new idioms, their origin, the various socio-linguistic contexts of usage and semantic realizations. This participant observation method made it possible to observe and partake in linguistic conversations that involved the use of new idioms and idiomatic expressions. Through this, a lot of data in natural settings of verbal interaction were elicited.

## IV. STANDARD LANGUAGE

According to Mukarovsky (1970), Standard Language (SL) is the language of everyday conversation. Its purpose is effective communication between the speaker and the audience. It involves certain linguistic norms which must be strictly adhered to for a meaningful communication. He believes that language must be properly used and should be in conformity with the entire linguistic norms. When this is fairly done, meaning will not be hidden to listeners because of the regularity in its usage. Concept or term crucial to the theory of Standard Language is *backgrounding / automatization*.

### -Backgrounding/Automatization

The term 'backgrounding/automatization' is what Fabb (1997; 13) and Crystal (1997;21) called 'unmarked form' which simply means the form of the surroundings that is relatively unnoticed. It is non-aesthetic because of its ever familiarity as a result of constant usage in everyday communication. In backgrounding/automatization, the linguistic elements are automatized and do not attract attention. Language is not aesthetically explored; rather, the norms of the language are strictly adhered to. The excerpts below from the conductor of a bus to some passengers are quoted from the novel *Òdòdó èyè* as an example of backgrounding/automatization:

*Oṣòdì Òkè!*  
*Oṣòdì Òkè ló ñ ló*  
*Oṣòdì Òkè wà.* (Oyèbáńjí Olájúyín, 2010:35)

It is clear from the excerpts that no single element needs additional explanation as regards meaning especially when it is used in example as the above; every other words serves as its background. Expression of this nature is not difficult to notice because of its constant usage in the bus as a shout or explanation of the destination of the bus with emphasis on the side of the destination. 'Oṣòdì Òkè' is a particular bus stop on the bridge of Oṣòdì in Lagos State. Meanwhile, the same expression is freely used by the Agbèrò for comic effect to refer to a bursty female passenger.

## V. LITERARY LANGUAGE

According to Havranek and Mukarovsky (1970; 32), Literary Language (LL) is the language of literature and it is remarkably different from Standard Language (SL). Olátéjú (1989) avers that LL is the stylistic variant of SL. Its priority is aesthetics. It is believed that Literary Language is differently ordered or arranged in such a way that it produces effects that ordinary language does not produce. This, he said is possible with the introduction of unusual departure and elements of surprise, which are achieved through *foregrounding/de-automatization* and *deviation*.

### -Foregrounding/de-automatization

Crystal and Derek (1969; 32), Mukarovsky (1970; 27), (Fabb 1997; 19) define foregrounding/de-automatization as a technique for 'making strange' or a method of 'defamiliarization' in textual composition. It is the use of devices of language in a way to attract attention and is perceived as uncommon. Another name for foregrounding is *de-automatization*; it is the opposite of automatization. Automatization schematizes and it is a feature of SL whereas, de-automatization is the violation of the scheme. Foregrounding/de-automatization is a feature of LL or poetic language. Its use is deliberate and aims at achieving both stylistic and semantic effects. Foregrounding/de-automatization is also a form of textual patterning which is motivated specifically for literary aesthetics. Typically, it involves a stylistic distortion of some sort, either through an aspect of the text which deviates from the linguistic norm or, alternatively, where an aspect of the text is brought to the fore through repetition. Consider the excerpt below from a driver who after a full load of passengers at the bus station instructed his conductor thus:

*Àwé, ó yá, jeun sápo*  
*Àwé, eat into the pocket now*

From the above, there is no expression like *jeun sápo* (eat-into-the-pocket) but *jeun síkùn* (eat into the stomach) in the Yorùbá language. *Jeun síkùn* is the automatized version and the background from which *jeun sápo* as a foregrounded version is created. Deviant though, '*jeun sápo*' is a new idiom used in the above context by the driver to mean *collect the fare*. Used in other contexts, it could mean various things, but basically it connotes an idea of collecting *money-fare, bribe, gift* etc and putting it in one's pocket.

### -Deviation

Mukarovsky (1970: 51) defines Deviation as the violation of rules and conventions, by which a poet transcends the normal communicative resources of the language and awakens the reader, by freeing him from the grooves of cliché expression, to a new perceptivity. For instance, consider the excerpt below:

*Ya iṣu* (tear yam)

The above is a clear example of deviation because, it has violated the norms of the standard Yorùbá language in such a way that it produces stylistic/aesthetic effect which ordinary language cannot produce grammatically and in terms of meaning. Grammatically, it is absurd to use the verb *ya* (tear) for yam instead, *gé* (cut) or (slice) is more appropriate. Literally speaking, the excerpt gives the impression of tearing yam as if it is a paper whereas; the underlying meaning is *spray money/spends generously*.

## Linguistic Strategies Involved in the Formation of New idioms used by the Lagos Agbèrò (bus conductors)

As far as the new idioms used by the Agbèrò is concerned, its creation and usage exhibit the creative propensity of the users (Agbèrò), who in the process of performing a professional duty of bus conducting use new words to express particular thoughts. Here, discussion on how they are generated is presented thus:

### Neologism (Coinages)

Neologism or coinages could be better described as technique for following regular patterns (phonological and derivational) of language to produce a unique string of naturally arranged phonemes (Bámgbóšé 1984:53). The major linguistic methods involved in coinages or lexical creation includes the following: compounding of words/lexical items, nominalization, borrowing, and other linguistic manipulations.

### Compounding

According to Awóbúlúyí (1992), compounding entails the combination of two or more independent words to form another word with an entirely different meaning. In other words, two separate words are joined together to produce a single form.

The structure of words or expression formed through compounding could be in form of:  $N_1 + N_2$  (where  $N_2$  is usually a noun, numeral or another noun functioning as qualifier). For instance, consider the use of the expressions below where a bus conductor was trying to call a passenger to his bus:

*Olòṣì òkè!* (olòṣì on top!)

From the above, *Olòṣì* (pauper), is  $N_1$  while '*òkè*' (*top/up*), is  $N_2$ . It is a corruption of the name '*Oṣòdì*' and a shout out of the destination of the bus.

## VI. NOMINALIZATION

Olátéjú (2005) describes nominalization as a linguistic process where a noun phrase is derived from a matrix sentence

by means of transformational rules. It may be a process in which a noun is formed from another noun class or some other lexical category such as adjectives and verbs, by means of nominalization morphs e.g.

*Olòṣẹkòṣẹ*                      *Oní+oṣẹ+kí+oṣẹ*

(Owner/User-of-bad-soap): a nominal use to refer to someone who is considered ill-fated or who goes with ill-luck. It is derived from *oṣẹ àwúre* (soap for good luck).

*Sérékódé'*                      *'Ó + ẹ + eré + oko + dé'*

(One-who-has-just-come-from-the-village): a nominal used derogatorily to refer to someone as uncivilized.

## VII. BORROWING

Borrowing can be described as the taking over (absorbing) of new words from other languages (Bámgbòṣé 1984:31). Sometimes borrowing takes place when a particular language comes in contact with another but the first one lacks the necessary vocabulary to express some concepts that are present in the latter. For instance, *yàwúyàwúù* (*yahoo-yahoo*), in Yorùbá is borrowed from the English expression *yahoo* to express the idea *internet fraud*. Consider also the examples below:

*Sádò wọn*                      (Shadow them)

Combination of loaned English *shadow* and Yorùbá *won* to mean *search for passengers*.

*Kébù lọ*                      (Cable go)

(A combination of English *cable* and Yorùbá *lọ* to mean *move on with speed/speed on*. The wire/cable inside the vehicles' throttle represents movement.

### Phonaesthetic Coinages

Coinages of this nature are what Olátéjù (1989:132) refers to as a situation whereby words, by virtue of their sound composition imitate or suggest their meaning. By nature, they are idiophonic or onomatopoeic, and they express close relationship between the sound component of the word and its meaning. A few examples of such words used by conductors include:

*Bèbétò* (*being too audacious*): from the verb *bẹ* (*to be wayward*) and the name *Bèbétò* (*a Brazilian international footballer* whose tactics unsettled his Nigerian counterparts in Atlanta 96 Olympic Soccer Competition scoring three goals before his substitution which eventually made Nigeria to equalize and win the match. It is used to refer to a wayward conductor or passenger. It can also be interpreted to mean *sharp, smart* and *enterprising* in the right context.

Other examples in this category are: *làù làù* (*being too proud*), *gòòbe* (*confusion/chaotic situation*) and *pàlasà* (*fake/inferior*).

### Factor Involved in the Interpretation of New idioms used by the Lagos *Agbèrò*

New idioms and idiomatic expressions used by the *Agbèrò* in Lagos State are sometimes elevated to a greater literary height thereby making them go beyond the established possibilities in the Yorùbá language. This invariably makes them unique, unfamiliar and highly specialized forms of expression. In order to interpret these unique forms of

expression of the bus conductors, one requires more than linguistic knowledge because of their idiomatic and metaphoric traits. Factor such as context of usage is considered for interpretation. Also at the level of interpretation, socio-semantic classification of communicative events is considered. The communicative events were categorized into the following ideas:

*-Abuse*

1. *Ojúelégba* – *ojú + elégba* Literal meaning: *a location in Lagos metropolis* (*face+with cane marks*)  
underlying meaning: *rustic/uncivilized person*

The above is frequently and derogatorily used by the conductor to refer to somebody especially a commercial bus driver/ *Agbèrò* at Motor Park/ passenger with a facial tribal mark when such a person engages in any altercation with them. Traditionally, tribal marks used to be a fashionable mark of identity and beautification among the Yorùbá. Ironically, today, it is seen as a barbaric act and anybody sighted with tribal marks is derogatorily referred to as *Ojúelégba'* (uncivilized and rustic person). Metaphorically, the expression is not only derogatory but also embarrassing and can elicit laughter especially when one remembers that somebody with tribal marks looks like someone who has been flogged with the cane; hence, the name *'ojú tó ní egba/àpá'* (*eyes/face with cane-marks*).

*-Air-conditioned vehicle*

2. *Oyé'*                      Literal meaning: *harmattan*

Underlying meaning: *air conditioning system in a vehicle/house*

This is also an example of an expression that is metaphorically used as new idiom among the *Agbèrò* and by extension, other members of the society. Naturally, and literally speaking, '*oyé'* is the Yorùbá word for 'harmattan'. However, as new idiom, '*oyé'* is used to refer to the air conditioner in a vehicle or a house especially when it is highly effective or cool; one often hears expressions as: *báwo ni oyé inú è*, (*how is its air conditioning?*) *oyé inú è nẹgba* (*it's air conditioning is superb*). As reiterated earlier, contextual situations are very crucial to the interpretation of new idioms. New idioms and idiomatic expressions do not have meanings on their own; they only have meaning when they are used in context. In other words, they can be understood not in isolation but only in context. Consider other categories of communicative event below:

- *Slow it down/be patient for passenger*

3. *Ó lóyún ó pọnmọ!*                      Literal meaning: *she is pregnant and she backs a baby*

Underlying meaning: *slow down/be patient*

The above expression is used by the bus conductor to alert the driver that a particular passenger, mostly pregnant woman requires more patience either in coming aboard or in disembarking. Sometimes, the same expression is used for a passenger with two or more luggage who cannot catch the bus while on motion as the usual practice in Lagos. It is used to sensitize the driver about the peculiar nature of the passenger. On getting the signal, *Ó lóyún ó pọnmọ*, the driver knows he

has to apply the brake and stop for the passenger to enter or come down. Because of the hurried and impatient nature of the bus conductors and drivers in Lagos, the expression is used to indicate the exception to the rule. In other word the usual hurried approach is suspended to allow the commuter (who is considered delicate) to enter or get off the bus. It can be interpreted as *slow down, be patient or stop*.

-Concentrate/move on

4. Má wojú Uche!                      Literal meaning: *don't look at Uche's face*  
Underlying meaning: *concentrate/move on*

This is one of the new expressions used by the bus conductors in Lagos to assure the driver to move on and concentrate as there is no cause for alarm, especially when a commuter is trying to prove difficult over issues relating to either space or fare. 'Uche,' an Igbo name is used to mean a *recalcitrant passenger* of any tribe who foments trouble in the bus. Igbo name is chosen because of the linguistic barrier; some Igbo living in Lagos don't understand Yorùbá whereas, the bus conductor's language in Lagos is predominantly Yorùbá. It is assumed that at a slight provocation with them (Igbo), they are offended and get enraged to the point of distracting the driver who also knows that he has to move on, concentrate and remain focused the moment he hears the expression *má wojú Uche*. Therefore, the expression can be interpreted to mean *move on, concentrate and don't get distracted*.

- Watch

5. Ègbé ẹ! (Short form for wègbé ẹ!) Literal meaning: *your side/look at yourside*  
Underlying meaning: *check if I can cross over*

The above is a short phrase that is deliberately ellipted to create communicative effect especially when what is intended is to *observe his side to see if it is safe to cross over, overtake or park*. It is used whenever the driver is trapped in the traffic or on the high speed trying to change to the other lane.

There are also communicative events involving the bus conductors and the other road users in which the following ideas are expressed:

- Plea for safe passage

6. Fílẹ̀ fún un!                      Literal meaning: *leave it for him*  
Underlying meaning: *Allow him safe passage*

The above expression is a short phrase used by the bus conductor to seek for cooperation of the other road user who is trying to contest the right of who should have access to the road at that given time with him to allow him a safe passage. It can be interpreted to mean *please, give me chance to go/allow me to go/let me go* respectively.

- Caution

7. O ti kú rí?                      Literal meaning: *have you died before?*

Underlying meaning: *be careful/drive carefully*

Expression of this nature is an interrogative one used by the bus conductors to warn someone (other road user) of the danger of his or her use of the road. It is abusive and derogatory to other road user especially car owners whereas, it can be interpreted to mean *be careful/drive carefully*.

-Vigilance

8. Lajú ẹ!                              Literal meaning: *open your eyes*  
Underlying meaning: *be critical/observant/perceptive*

The above is also an example of a short phrase ellipted for communicative effect to warn other road user to be critical, perceptive and observant in order not to cause accident. It is also abusive and derogatory especially when it is directed at the elderly person. It can also be interpreted to mean *be careful/concentrate/mind your business*.

There is another communicative event involving the Police, *Agbèrò*, and union / levy collector to the bus conductors where the idea below is expressed:

-Inducement

9. Ègúnjẹ                              Literal meaning: *that which is pounded and eaten*

Idiomatic: *bribe*

This is an example of new idiom used by the police, bus driver and *Agbèrò*. For instance, at *Ìyàná Ibà* bus stop, an *Agbèrò* stopped a bus driver and demanded for *ẹgunjẹ*. The use of '*ẹgunjẹ*' can be interpreted to mean '*settlement*' or '*bribe*'. The bus driver is expected to pay certain sum of money at every check point to avoid being delayed unnecessarily by the police. '*Ègúnjẹ*' is a corrupt coinage from the Yorùbá word '*Ágúnmu*' (that which is pounded and drunk/ a traditional powder medicine). '*Ègúnjẹ*' is one of the few expressions in Yorùbá that has almost been absorbed into the lexicon of the Yorùbá language. This is because; it is frequently used by members of the larger society in context different from bus conducting even, in place of the standard form. As much as corruption is still very much endemic in the Nigerian system our feeling is that, the word *ẹgunjẹ* is likely to remain in the Yorùbá lexicography.

There are also examples of new idioms and idiomatic expressions used by the bus conductors to denote obscenity. These expressions are concealed in metaphor, idiom and euphemism; they are used in context like:

*Mo jẹ dódó ẹ* (I eat your plantain: for 'I love you'),

*Mo se ti ẹ* (I have done yours: for 'I love you'),

*Oşòdì òkè* (an area: for breast)

*Jẹ n dé bẹ* (let me get there: for 'sex')

*Bá sùn/gbé sùn* (sleep with /carry sleep: for 'have sex with').

Other examples that are not in the category of obscenity include:

*Múgùn* (take and climb: for a fool'),

*Gòòbe* (chaos),  
*Tẹ́ é mólẹ́* (apply brake),  
*jamblan* (meaningless utterances),  
*Suẹsue* (gently),  
*Túálẹ́* (with respect)

And those that are used to denote the Nigerian currencies-

*Kálá* (five naira), *Fáibà* (ten naira), *Shandy/green* (twenty naira), *Wazo/white* (fifty naira), *Hundi/Áwò* (one hundred naira).

As can be seen from our discussion so far, it is obvious that identification of newly invented expressions by the *Agbèrò* (bus conductor) are difficult because words and expressions constituting them are far from being the language of ordinary discourse (Standard Language); they are foregrounded in a way that they instantly call attention to themselves and as a result of this, all the linguistic elements written are elevated. Consider the expressions *ojú ẹ̀lẹ́gba* (eyes/face with cane marks: for a rustic/uncivilized person) and *má wójú Uche* (don't look at Uche's eyes: for move on/concentrate). Expressions like these are not easy to identify because they are foregrounded. For *Ojúelẹ́gba*, a very popular area in Lagos, it is a case of semantic transfer where the use of the existing words in Yorùbá language is used to convey other meaning while '*má wójú Uche*' is used idiomatically. Situations such as this make identification and comprehension of new idioms and idiomatic expressions difficult.

It can be deduced also that new idioms endangering the Yorùbá language is based on the puritanical views of some linguistic moderates who believe that some of the expressions, especially those that are used by the *Agbèrò* for obscenity are dangerous to the moral values of society. In this regards, we agree with this view to some extent as there are many of such expressions collected as data which we considered not dignified enough for analysis and our consumption. However, we are also of the view that some of these expressions undergo sifting processes. Language style of this nature, being aesthetically created, are not to define a thing but to say something funny about it, keep as a rule their idiomatic attitude, while those among the standard terms which are genuine and useful lose little by little their vulgar association; e.g. *gbé sùn* and *je dódò ẹ*. Therefore, the idea of explicit obscenity expressed with the use of new idioms by the *Agbèrò* in this paper may only serve as reinforcement to carry them along.

The extent to which the lexicon of the Yorùbá language is actually enriched by new idioms is also addressed. Although, some of the new idioms analysed in this study are frequently 'expressed in the business of bus conducting, some of them have influence on the language use of the larger society and this is reflected in the way meanings are expanded in the semantic field of lexical items. Expression like *ẹ̀gúnjẹ*, *múngùn*, and *je dodo ẹ*, are now freely used by other members of the larger society in talks, familiar letters, news and even other forms of literature thereby gradually gaining entrance into the lexicon of the Yorùbá language. Meanwhile, some of the new idioms and idiomatic expressions are not intelligible enough because they are not situated in their social contexts; they remain largely ungrammatical and socially unacceptable to the public. Therefore, they do not qualify to enter the

lexicon. For instance, expressions like: '*suẹsue*' (gently), '*gòòbe*' (chaos), '*túálẹ́*' (your excellency), '*Jamblan*' (meaningless utterances) and several others are not intelligible to the public, and so, they could not find an easy entry into the vocabulary of informal discussion.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

The language of the *Agbèrò* (bus conductors) in Lagos State replicates the uses of new idioms as discussed by Olátẹ́jú (2005). The language is used primarily not just for the fun of it but also for the purpose of bus conducting (communication) especially when they (*Agbèrò*) are in good mood or under the influence of alcohol. Its use is not totally stylistic which is for aesthetic but to some extent, pseudo-stylistic because it is creative. It is used to induce intimacy and also to identify with membership of a certain group, trade or profession.

Finally, the study of the language of *Agbèrò* in Lagos State has been able to emphasize the idiosyncratic and peculiar nature of the language with a view to describe and highlight its stylistic and communicative effects. It is hoped that the study will definitely open up other challenges in the quest to demystify the mystery of language and its use in the society. It is also hoped that this study will spur more interests in new idioms and idiomatic expressions as a medium of communication in some other Nigeria indigenous languages.

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