

**Media Anthropology Network
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E-Seminar 43

["Cry your own cry": On popular visual media of life experiences in Ghanaian mottonyms.](#)

by

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Discussant

**[Jerry Eades](#)
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26 March - 9 April 2013

Stephen M. Lyon <s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk>

March 26th, 2013

Dear List,

This is it! The e-seminar is now officially on. For any newcomers to these e-seminars, we start with the discussant's comments on the paper, then give the author a chance to reply. After this little exchange, we open up the discussion to everyone on the list.

Best,
Steve

Comments on Joseph Oduro-Frimpong, "Cry your own cry: On popular visual media of life experiences in Ghanaian mottonyms"

Jerry Eades:

Reviewing this article is something of a trip down memory lane: over forty years ago, I carried out fieldwork in northern Ghana on Nigerian migrants, most of whom left the country in dramatic circumstances at the end of 1969.ⁱ They had been among the leading entrepreneurs in what soon became known as the "informal sector",ⁱⁱ and transport, along with urban rental property, was one of the main areas of investment for those with spare capital to invest. However, transport, even though lucrative, was less stable than urban property as a source of income, subject to a combination of poor roads, high rates of accidents, corrupt officials, and a constant shortage of parts. The backbone of the system was the converted Bedford truck or "mammy lorry" (which makes a cameo appearance in this paper) and the newer Benz busses which were faster and more comfortable on the main roads, but less durable in the bush. These vehicles also presented dangers – I remember evacuating from one rapidly as it caught fire at night on the Kintampo Road from Kumasi to Tamale. The state of one of the vehicles described in the article suggests that it, too, was

a potential disaster waiting to happen. To judge from the paper therefore, the uncertainties of the informal sector are as alive and well in present-day Ghana as they were then – as is the fine art of vehicle decoration and the construction of “mottonyms”, even though painted art-work seems to have given way to plastic lettering on front and back windscreens which can be more easily removed as owners, fashions and ideologies change.

I mention all this simply because the implicit context of the paper is provided by the dynamics of Ghanaian small-scale enterprise and its informal sector transport industry which form the backbone of the nation’s logistics. Transport is still risky in unexpected ways – several of which are illustrated in the rich case material which lies at the heart of this paper. To this reviewer, it is precisely this case material which is the most arresting and important feature of the paper. The media-related questions which are raised along the way are certainly important, and deserve more discussion than they receive here. But it is the structure and perils of small-scale transport entrepreneurship in developing countries which provide the matrix from which this material springs, and hopefully the author will be willing to explore these in more detail as the research progresses.

As it stands, the paper starts off with a brief discussion of “Big [i.e. verbose] English” and its use by officialdom and the media. I suspect that, even though this is an important topic, it would best be explored separately. The paper then moves on to its main topic, vehicle inscriptions as a class of media representations. I’m not sure that the argument about the status of these inscriptions as a popular medium matters very much. They are certainly a genre of textual communication, probably common to many developing countries, and as a genre they can be analyzed in a number of ways: as folk art forms; as expressions of “traditional” culture; as verbal communication of innuendo or philosophical ideas (as here); or as products of a service industry providing employment for local artisans. It is also clear from this paper that they are an important form of branding and market differentiation in an industry dominated by a large number of small enterprises using a small range of otherwise similar vehicles. This is not dissimilar to North America, Europe or Japan, where similarly anonymous commercial vehicles identify themselves with company logos. Like the author, I noticed in my own research that the logos on their vehicles could become nicknames for their operators. As one example, a Nigerian-owned taxi in Tamale in a state of terminal disrepair had the ironic inscription “Why Worry?” and this became a nickname for the driver, more widely known than his real name.

This brings us to the main question discussed: how the drivers and operators select the mottonyms under which to ply their trade. Clearly these brief texts have caught the attention of a number of writers since Independence, from the classic work of Margaret Fieldiii onwards. I would agree with the quotation from Meyer and Houtman given here, that “approaches that take ideas, concepts, ideologies, or values as immaterial abstractions that are regarded as prime movers of history” are unsatisfactory.iv Ideas do not do things on their own, rather, people do things with ideas, and it is the ideas of the operators that are explored in much of this paper. However, I am not sure how such a critique helps to “de-Westernize” the discipline: there is a long tradition of humanistic and interpretative anthropology and sociology in the West as well.

As for the methodological issues of investigating these mottonyms, the author quite rightly points out the limitations of previous studies. Some of these criticisms are obviously legitimate, though I am less sure about the critique of Date-Bah.v The author states that she “surveyed 384 vehicle inscriptions and ‘on the basis of the interpretation given by the drivers’ ... she categorized these inscriptions into nine classificatory groups. Date-Bah did not expound on interpreting the nine classifications types ‘in the phraseology of the informants’” However, what the author of this paper does seems to be rather similar: he interviewed 20 drivers about their inscriptions and then classified them into two categories, innuendo and philosophical, based on his analysis, which, like that of date-Bah, is his own terminology, not the “phraseology of the informants”. In quoting

Polikinghorn, he states that “I used an inductive process that allowed me to “capture commonalities across individual experiences.”^{vi} On the surface, this also sounds rather like what he describes Date-Bah as doing. Perhaps the differences between his work and hers could be made more explicit.

Given that categorization involves a search for commonalities, it is not clear how the author arrived at the classification in terms of innuendo and philosophical mottonyms presented here. Given that they do not seem to be mutually exclusive, perhaps the distinction could be phrased as follows.

1. Innuendo and philosophy are two different dimensions of statements involving speech or text.
2. Philosophy provides the underlying (logical) meaning of the statements, while innuendo provides an instrumental rationale for their use: the statements are aimed at particular people to be interpreted in particular ways.
3. The two are not necessarily separable in practice and some statements might have elements of both.
4. Those closer to the innuendo pole have meanings which are less easy to separate from the circumstances in which they were formed, while those closer to the philosophical pole are more likely to state ideological or religious commonplaces (e.g. “Don’t overlook little things” or “Praise be to God”).

The most important part of the paper reports the results of the interviews with the drivers and their rationales for their selection of mottonyms. Here there are several issues to be addressed, and perhaps the author could take some of these up in more detail, either here or elsewhere.

1. The author mentions that he interviewed 20 drivers, though only six cases are discussed in detail, which raises questions of why these particular ones were selected, and the ways that they are treated. It could have been that some were clearly closer to the innuendo or philosophical poles than others, and were selected for this reason. But what about the others? Here, the point made above, that innuendo and philosophy are separate dimensions and not mutually exclusive, could be relevant.
2. His emphasis is on a phenomenological approach, an attempt to understand meanings from the actors perspectives. As a result, he takes the explanations given him as expressions of the reality to the actors, as “experiential narratives” situated within the actors’ personal experiences and free from the researcher’s own interpretative explanations.
3. But surely there is another dimension: these are also performances for the benefit of the interviewer, and in some cases they look suspiciously like actors’ rationalizations or justifications of their own actions and careers. To give two examples:
 - 1) In the first case, Kofi Abrefa’s vehicle was clearly in a terrible state, a potential disaster waiting to happen (like the bus I travelled in on the Kintampo Road), so his colleagues’ reported concern for his potential passengers had a basis in rationality, in addition to their own self-interest in competing for passengers. Kofi’s attitude that they should mind their own business actually ignored this very real danger. The appearance of vehicles as an index of safety does matter to prospective passengers, where they have a choice.
 - 2) In the case of Abukari’s vehicle, the narrative of his relations with his brother looks somewhat abbreviated, presenting only Abukari’s view of himself as victim and his revenge through his choice of inscription. In the real world things are rarely as simple as this, and it would be good to know in more detail what really happened. Generally, this comes most

easily from triangulation in community-based fieldwork, rather than isolated interviews with a sample of actors.

4. It must also be said that the relationship between the innuendo mottos and the circumstances which gave rise to them is still not clear despite the explanation. It could be difficult for Abukari's brother to see the phrase "Even this" as a critique of his own behavior, even if he could read English, and the same could be said of Kwaku's "You just assumed" and its intended audience. Significant meaning seems to have been lost in translation, so further clarification would be useful. Could it, for instance, be that these phrases have a meaning grounded in local proverbs which needs to be further explained?

Conclusion

To summarize, this paper raises a number of theoretical and empirical issues: the theoretical issues may need to be developed further, and that could form the basis for the web discussion to follow. From this reviewer's perspective, the main issues would appear to be (a) how far the paper represents an advance on earlier work in extending our understanding of these kinds of texts; (b) how the innuendo and philosophical categories were arrived at from the data (including the data not included in the paper); (c) the relationship between these categories, and how far they are useful dimensions in understanding this kind of phenomenon more generally; (d) the advantages of an interpretative approach, based solely on the informants' statements, as opposed to, for instance, a performative approach, which sees actors as playing roles and projecting images, to justify and give meaning to their own actions and careers and influence the perceptions of the interviewer.

Empirically, the material presented in the case studies about small scale enterprise in developing countries in general, and the transport industry in particular, is very rich and suggestive. The major issues include (a) the difficulty of raising capital to start the enterprise; (b) problems of collaboration and division of profits if capital comes from other actors; (c) the constant risk of fraud (as in Kofi's case); and (d) the insecurity of the transport business, given the dangers of the roads, the problems of vehicle maintenance, the relations between owners and drivers, and even (in the final case of Kwame Danso), the dangers of picking up dodgy passengers with criminal intent.

It is by consideration of this background that the role of mottonyms both in brand differentiation for the clientele and the construction of meaning for the actors themselves can be most easily seen. This also raises the interesting comparative question of whether the use of similar texts on vehicles in other developing countries, outside West Africa, plays similar roles and reflects similar preoccupations, given that the uncertainties and dangers of road transport may be very similar in other parts of the world as well.

i For accounts, see Margaret Peil, 'The expulsion of West African aliens,' *Journal of Modern African Studies* 9.2: 209-225 (1970); J.S. Eades, *Strangers and Traders*, Edinburgh University Press, 1994.

ii Keith Hart, e.g. 'Informal income opportunities and urban employment in Ghana', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 11.3: 61-89 (1973).

iii Margaret Field, *Search for Security*, Faber & Faber, 1960. Field's original research dated back to the pre-war period.

iv The author's citation is B. Meyer and D. Houtman, eds *Things: Religion and the question of materiality*. Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2012 p. 5.

v The author's citation is E. Date-Bah, 'The inscriptions on the vehicles of Ghanaian commercial drivers: A sociological analysis', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 18:3: 525-31 (1980).

vi The author's citation is D. Polkinghorne, 'Validity issues in narrative research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10 (10), 1-16 (2007).

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong <josh60@siu.edu>

March 27th, 2013

Dear List: First off, join me to thank Prof. Jerry Eades (JE) for taking the time to read my paper and offer his comments as well as suggestions to strengthen aspects of the paper. So below are some of my reactions for the moment.

Jerry rightly points how my discussion of Date-Bah's work does not seem to be different from what I have done and I need to make the distinction clear. So here we go. First, as mentioned in the paper, Date-Bah's work on the mottonyms, unlike my paper, is not situated within any explicit theoretical framework. Second in her paper, she does not discuss any explicit methodological approach as guiding the work. Another key difference is that I provide/discuss the narratives that drivers said motivated them to write the inscriptions, and it is from these narratives that forms the basis of the presented two interrelated themes in the paper). In Date-Bah's work, the author does not provide us with any contextual information regarding the narratives about how the mottonyms yet asserts that "on the basis of the interpretation given by the drivers, their inscriptions could be classified as follows . . ." (527). So here, it is possible that Date-Bah might have used an inductive process to arrive at her classifications. But the the basis on which such process might have been based is not clear in her work.

In paragraph 3, Jerry notes that he is "not sure that the argument about the status of these inscriptions as a popular medium matters very much" due to the myriad ways through which the mottonyms can be analyzed as for example "folk art forms"; or "expressions of "traditional" culture" as well as how the mottonyms are not "dissimilar to North America, Europe or Japan, where similarly anonymous commercial vehicles identify themselves with company logos".

Perhaps the mottonyms can be dismissed on the above-mentioned grounds. However, in view of current debates, for example, in media studies (for a holistic understanding of the notion of 'media' that moves beyond its narrow traditional definition), I argue that the mottonyms matters as a popular medium. One importance of the mottonyms in these discussions is that it highlights the notion of 'media' (broadly conceived) as the means through which "people do things with ideas" (to borrow JE's words).

In paragraph 4: Jerry takes my quotation of Meyer and Houtman 2012: 5 (which is on page 5 of my paper) as my rationale to use the mottonyms to contribute the project of de-westernizes media studies. What I actually say in that paragraph is that "this research on popular visual media, from a country in the Global South, is inspired by calls in the global/international media studies to de-Westernize the discipline".

In terms of how far this current paper extends our understanding of these kinds of texts, I argue that it firmly establishes that these texts matter to people. As such, although on the surface, the practice might seem trivial, they constitute "matters of deep interest and concern" (Barber 1997: 2) to the drivers who take time to reflect on the experience and, coin/borrow the right phrase (which he later pays an artist to visually represent to 'audiences').

Cheers,
Frimpong

Stephen M. Lyon <s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk>

March 27th, 2013

Ok, thanks very much to both Joseph Oduro-Frimpong and Jerry Eades for giving us such a great start.

The floor is now open for all!

Esther de Bruijn <esther.debruijn@utoronto.ca>

March 28th, 2013

Dear List,

First off, I'll introduce myself: my name's Esther de Bruijn, and I'm finishing up a PhD in English at the University of Toronto. My project is on current Ghanaian popular fiction (mostly since 2000) and its intersection with other cultural texts.. So despite my rooting in literary studies, my work is necessarily deeply engaged with anthropological and media studies.

Thank you, Frimpong, for this fascinating work on Ghanaian mottonyms and their 'owners' intended meanings. Thanks also to Professor Eades for his helpful initial assessment. Several of my thoughts extend from the points he raises.

I think I'll jump right into it!

To start, I like your term mottonym (which you might more explicitly associate with pseudonyms when you discuss the term), and I'm wondering to what extent they *do* serve as pseudonyms. For instance, in your example of Kofi Abrefa, do people more commonly refer to him as "Efa Wo Ho Ben" or as 'alatsa,' after what they think of his car?

This leads into my central point, which echoes that of Dr. Eades, which has to do with readers' interpretations. Since we are discussing this as a form of media, presumably we are interested in how these mottonyms are transmitted and what happens to them in that transmission process. Analyzing the meaning the audience makes of the mottonyms does not detract in the least from your aim to follow Meyer and Verrip in their assertion that media studies scholarship should attend to "media users'" "sensory experience of the world and [their] sensitive knowledge of it" (qut. on 19). Do these "media users" not include both the writers and the audience? It would seem that extensive fieldwork into how both draw on their "embodied" experience to invest the phrases with meaning is important.

It seems to me that there is a fertile middle-ground between one mottonym-owner's rationale and one researcher's "own speculative interpretation" (9), and that is the interpretation of the wide audience that views these mottonyms. How do they personalize what they read? What does their speculation about the meaning reveal about how such phrases are used, and what other popular cultural forms they refer to? Since what you are interested in is "a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of the phenomenon being investigated," surely investigating the meaning for readers as well as the authors is essential.

Ultimately, what I am suggesting is that your work on the 'owners' meanings complements (and, I think) is usefully complimented by, work on readers' interpretations.

One other article on inscriptions you might like to add to your list is Ato Quayson's "Signs of the Times: Discourse Ecologies and Street Life on Oxford St., Accra," in *City and Society* 22, no. 1 (2010): 72-96. Referring to the African street as "an archive of discourse ecologies," he talks about

how vehicle mottos "circulate and resonate with a host of other cultural inscriptions."

On that subject, as well as hearing more about how inscriptions are drawn from indigenous proverbs and traditional practices, as both Dr. Eades and Steve would like, it would be valuable to know how these phrases resonate with other media and popular cultural forms. I am thinking of the mottonym "Aseda Nka Nyame" (Praise Be to God), an obviously Christian phrase, and one that is commonly used in a proverbial sense in the Ghanaian context. It may be interesting to think about how this particular phrase is associated with the charismatic Christian testimonial as a narrative form, which aims, not just to remind the 'owners' of their stories of how God rescued him, but to convince others that God will similarly rescue them as well. As Dr. Eades said, the performative aspect of these mottonyms seems essential.

To return for a moment to my thought above about how these mottonyms function as pseudonyms, it may be valuable to think about how the association of mottonym with 'owner' is related to common naming practices in Ghana. I am thinking of how the publisher George A. Prah is known by all but his close associates and family only as GAPO, after his George Appiah Prah Organization, with no awareness that that's what the acronym stands for; or, in a case that exemplifies the practice of indirection, how a little girl I know is called "MTN" because she's always following around people in her house; MTN's motto is "Everywhere You Go."

On that point (I'm almost done, I promise!), it would be helpful to explain that by "innuendo," you are referring to the common Ghanaian rhetorical practice of 'akutia' (indirection), as you do in your article on Akosua's cartoons. (I also agree that this needn't be a separate category from philosophical mottonyms since most proverbs -- which are inherently philosophical -- are used as a form of indirection.)

Finally, the criticism of anthropologists like Date-Bah for not explicitly announcing their methodologies may be misplaced. Many scholars find drawing blatant attention to the theoretical grounding of the work to be overly pedantic. One may quickly identify a scholar's methodology in the way the material is analyzed.

I'll be very interested to see your further work on this subject, Frimpong, and I greatly appreciate the cultural sensitivity, awareness, and understanding that you bring to the study of cultural texts in Ghana!

Stephen M. Lyon <s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk>

March 28th, 2013

Hi,

Thanks for the clarification on a few of Jerry's points, but I wonder if you could respond to something else that Jerry said in his discussant comments:

" It must also be said that the relationship between the innuendo mottos and the circumstances which gave rise to them is still not clear despite the explanation. It could be difficult for Abukari's brother to see the phrase "Even this" as a critique of his own behavior, even if he could read English, and the same could be said of Kwaku's "You just assumed" and its intended audience. Significant meaning seems to have been lost in translation, so further clarification would be useful. Could it, for instance, be that these phrases have a meaning grounded in local proverbs which needs to be further explained?"

I find this an intriguing angle to explore. Given that these mottonyms are in English and we know that the global English spoken by non-native English speakers takes on something of a parallel existence with sometimes pretty dramatic deviation from what native native English speakers might

guess, are there possible local proverbs which might also help us to understand the rationale for some of these metonym choices?

Thanks,
Steve

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong <josh60@siu.edu>

March 29th, 2013

Dear List: Below are further thoughts on Jerry's, Steve's and Esther's comments.

A. So regarding the two thematic distinctions that I make in the paper, it is now clear to me that the manner in which I frame them sounds like they are mutually exclusive. I definitely should have specified that the analytical distinction, under which I situated the mottonyms, is in practice blurry. Thus, as JE rightfully points out, I have to frame the distinction, among other things, to show that they are on a continuum rather than clear absolutes. Here, JE's suggestions as to how to go about reframing that aspect of the paper are definitely going to be reflected in revisions to come.

B. JE questions the validity of using the phenomenological approach to investigate the mottonyms as it gives limited understanding into the motivations that inspired the inscriptions. The basis of questioning this approach is the possibility of these narratives as being 'performances' which the researcher 'naively swallowed', and also how the narratives "look suspiciously like actors' rationalizations or justifications of their own actions and careers". Thus he proposes "a triangulation in community-based fieldwork, rather than isolated interviews with a sample of actors".

First, it seems JE's basis for questioning the phenomenological perspective stems from using a different methodological yardstick to judge the approach used here. Here, the practice of the mottonyms is likened to a religious ceremony/ritual. Thus the diligent researcher (whether foreign or local) investigating this ritual practice will have to take time to observe/participate in such practice, and interview key participants to fully grasp what is going. The mottonyms are of a different 'ritual' because in the very least, key aspects of what occasioned them cannot be re-enacted, as for example, in Kwame Danso's example. Here, eliciting narratives that taps into people's experiences about their experience is one way to account for researchers' inability to witness people's prior experience in real time. Of course the researcher should not be sloppy and eager for any willing participant's account. In this research (which forms part of a ten-month field research on Ghanaian popular media), I specifically approached drivers and asked if I could interview them on the motivations behind their inscriptions. There were many drivers who simply indicated that they did not want to partake in the research. Those who agreed, I sensed, were genuinely interested talking about what occasioned the mottonyms. Thus, what I am saying is that the methodological prescription of 'triangulation' to rectify the perceived flaw in this work, applies to a different 'ritual' context.

Steve, thanks very much for your comment. So regarding the 'innuendo mottonyms', it is part of Ghanaian 'indirect communication' practice which manifest through *kasakoa* 'metaphor'; *akutia* 'innuendo' and *ebe* 'proverb' (Yankah 1995). This type of communication forms part of the general repertoire of being a communicatively competent person. Here, a 'speaker' should be capable to deploy insinuated reproofs without specifically identifying a target because such a person "is expected to be aware of the subliminal frame of interpretation" (Yankah 1995, 52). However, as is known in communication whether one's intended meaning is 'decoded' accurately depends on several factors as even ability to understand the message deployed. Underlying all indirect communication, including *akutiabo* (communicative act of ambiguous innuendo use), is to

avoid escalating an already existing conflict. The framing of *akutia* can take several forms, as in 'innuendo mottonyms in English'. And here I am reminded of one that I encountered at the 37 lorry station in Accra which was a rendition of the Akan proverb (about negative repercussions related to greed/cheating): *se woama wo yonko antwa nkono a, wonso wontwa du* 'if you don't allow your friend to take a ninth morsel, you can't take the tenth'. This owner had rendered proverb as "no 9, no 10" (and here 'no' is not abbreviation for 'number'). So some of the mottonyms are 'creative renditions' of existing proverbs, while there are others which borrow from popular highlife songs (for example: *Ebe Te Yie* 'some are favorably seated' from Kwame Ampadu's sung-tale metaphor about abuse of democratic principles).

Reply to Esther's Comments

Hello: Thanks very much in drawing my attention to explicitly address the 'mottonyms' in relation to pseudonyms. Double thanks for alerting me to broaden the discussion on the mottonyms within Ghanaian naming practices. I am now in possession of Obeng's (1998; 2001) and Agyekum's (2006) works and I am surely moving in that direction.

Regarding the extent to which the mottonyms 'do' serve as pseudonyms, I want to discuss this within the context of Newell's (2010) 'anonymous and pseudonymous naming practices'. My understanding of pseudonyms from this perspective is that they stem from people's conscious decision to choose 'a false name' to either represent an artistic/professional identity and/or possibly to avoid perceived repercussions. As far as I know, the mottonyms are not meant to express a conscious "voluntary condition of being other" (Newell 2010:11). In other words, the resultant effect of being called by one's inscription is not (as in a pseudonym) meant to hide the identity of the owners. So here, pseudonyms have an express goal of suppressing/hiding one's original name from the very onset of deciding on that particular pseudonym. Thus, there is an aura of 'deception' associated with pseudonyms, whereas with mottonyms this is not the case.

Please let me know if you have questions.

Cheers,

Frimpong

Stephen M. Lyon <s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk>

April 2nd, 2013

Dear List,

We are now halfway through our e-seminar. I should apologise to Joseph and Jerry for the timing of this e-seminar-- I must admit that in my almost entirely secular universe, I forget that things like Easter are actually big occasions for many people and I should have anticipated an almost complete shutdown of professional activities over this weekend.

Now that we've had our break, though, hopefully we can get back to this issue of mottonyms in Ghana!

Best,
Steve

Zeynep Gursel <zgursel@umich.edu>

April 3rd, 2013

Dear List,

Thanks to Joseph Oduro-Frimpong for this interesting paper. I second what several of the comments have already mentioned that the most compelling part of this paper is the rich "narratives that motivated drivers" to inscribe their vehicles with particular mottonyms. By that I don't mean that I didn't find the theoretical discussions or methodological asides interesting - which I did - but I will ask questions about that separately. I do think the article would be strengthened if we got to the narratives sooner and if the rationale for the two categories was made more explicit. In other words what do we gain from thinking of these mottonyms as innuendos and/or philosophy.

A few questions:

1. In the discussion you mentioned that the drivers pay artists to visually represent these mottonyms. Could you say more about this process and how it continues in the age of "carved plastic" (are these like customized decals?) When do people get this inscription? As soon as they purchase a vehicle or once they earn enough money to pay the artist or once they know they'll be driving for a while or...?
2. Do people change their mottonyms or do drivers keep the same mottonym throughout their career? If people change vehicles do they use the same mottonym for their next vehicle or does the mottonym stay with the vehicle? I know that you declined to interview drivers who did not personally originate the inscriptions on their vehicles, but it strikes me that having conversations with drivers about the appropriateness of a driver changing mottonyms mid-career or taking on the mottonym that came with his vehicle would yield very interesting ethnographic data on who "owns" the mottonym - the driver or the vehicle.
3. Following on Esther's questions about pseudonyms I wonder what kind of a naming practice this is - like a ship being christened or like an individual driver being given a nickname or both in some way. Perhaps if it is indeed so common that drivers are referred to by their vehicle inscriptions that too would determine the mottonym. Were his colleagues referring to Kofi Abrefa as *alatsa *as well or only using this derogatory nickname for his vehicle? Especially because you focus on drivers' motivations it may be worth teasing out how consideration of what the driver himself would then come to be called entered into their choice of an inscription. For example the abbreviated No 9, No 10 reminded me that length is an issue if it has to fit in a particular space.
4. Did you interview any drivers who had not yet chosen their inscription? If you are going to keep the methodological information in the article, I think it might be worth reflecting on what types of narratives you might get if you asked the drivers to tell the story of their inscription at the moment they are asking an artist to make it for them rather than recollecting it later.
5. Are the meanings of mottonyms fixed or can they change over time?

I think what is so interesting about these mottonyms as media objects is how they interpellate multiple audiences including the original "writer" (driver who came up with the mottonym not the artist who painted it or carved it). Considered as media that interpellate many audiences it becomes interesting to think of the many ways one could study them. The strength of this particular article is the focus on drivers' intentions but as I believe some of the earlier comments have hinted at these are circulating media texts. Therefore they also interpellate other audiences such as pedestrians, other drivers, passengers and anyone else who might be exposed to them while the vehicles are parked or in motion. This paper seems to imply that mottonyms mean more to drivers than to others. Or that mottonyms meanings are not situation within the personal experiences of others. However the opening example of No Big English is precisely an example where an inscription inspired a writer to make meaning of it. I do think the drivers' narratives are important and

interesting but their meaning making practices do not necessarily exhaust how these mottonyms are part of meaning-making within Ghanaian popular media.

It seems to me that what makes these mottonyms so interesting as a site for anthropological research is the richness of topics that they intersect with (as this discussion has shown) - from road safety and transportation jobs to naming practices in Ghana to religiosity. Why privilege only the self-reported origin stories of the drivers? I am excited to hear that this is part of a larger project on Ghanaian popular media and wonder if (as in the No Big English example) you have found other situations where these vehicle inscriptions appear in other media.

Thank you for a very interesting article. In many ways it reminded me of Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache *but a version of it circulating in urban traffic and traversing landscapes - Wisdom on the Go perhaps!

Zeynep

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong <josh60@siu.edu>

April 4th, 2013

Hello Zeynep:

Thanks very much for your contributions and questions. I apologize for not responding promptly. I am currently in Ghana and not in the United States, so I lack regular access to the internet. So below are some responses to some of the questions you raised. I am retiring for the night. I will bring the next segment of responses tomorrow.

Cheers,
Frimpong

1. So regarding the benefits of what we may gain by these two distinctions, in the very least, it helps us to realize that these mottonyms (sometimes with all their grammatical mistakes and 'imperfect' translations of local idioms in English, etc) are work of serious thought and thus deserve our scholarly attention. In taking these mottonyms seriously, we can begin to investigate, for example, how those that fall into the religious domain visually materialize religious beliefs (and contributing to recent projects in understanding the material and visual dimensions of religion).
2. About the process of how drivers pay artists to visually represent their chosen mottonyms, there are different permutations. There are some drivers who drive other people's vehicles and have in mind a particular inscription that they want to put on a vehicle (provided there aren't prior inscriptions) but the vehicle-owners do not allow the driver's inscriptions. On other hand, some drivers who enter into a 'work and pay' contract [a notion similar to 'rent to own'] have the liberty to put their inscription on their vehicles anytime they want. I also know of drivers whose owners, as a result of a cordial relationship with their drivers, have allowed such drivers to put their inscription on the vehicle. From my conversations with drivers, I am aware that the price for writing such inscriptions (which, at most, is about 20 Ghana Cedis [10 dollarsequivalent]) is not a concern but rather choosing a 'suitable' inscription.
3. So with your question about whether drivers change their mottonyms or keep the same mottonym, what I do know now is that most drivers rather *add* an inscription or two to an already existing one. However, with those who have more than one (or two), they are known by the very first that was written. On the question as to whether people stay with the same mottonym when they change their vehicle, I know of many drivers keep 'transferring' their original mottonyms to new cars that they drive (see pictures 1 and 2). I have also come across drivers, and in fact the current

taxi driver that I use for my rounds in Accra, who are known by their former mottonym, but currently don't have any inscriptions on their vehicles.

4. With the question of what type of naming practice the mottonym constitutes, it is certainly not like a ship being christened. Thus, whereas a ship **must** be named (in my limited understanding of ship naming tradition), this requirement is not the same for commercial vehicles. Regarding the term 'alatsa' it is a derogatory term within the commercial vehicle industry that is invoked (passengers and colleague-drivers) to tease and/or insult 'owners' of such vehicles. In all of the above cases, the term doesn't become a 'name' for one particular person or group of persons. 'Alatsa' is akin to the phrase 'one gallon' (or one liter) reserved for drivers who usually do not get full or half tank of gas. These drivers, sometimes on their way to the next destination, often get short of gas and it is common to hear people derisively shout out 'one gallon'. These names don't 'stick', so to speak, but are invoked when people want to make the point that such drivers are stingy or not 'forward-looking'.

Cheers,
Frimpong

Richard Vokes, U of Adelaide

April 4th, 2013

I enjoyed reading Joseph Oduro-Frimpong's lively paper on vehicle 'mottonyms' in Ghana. The piece contributes to an emergent body of work looking at visual signage in Africa, which has seen recent contributions on shop names, on billboards (I am thinking in particular of the work of Katrien Pype in the DRC), and on various sorts of (both public and private) 'wall-hangings' (the best known example of which is surely the work of South African photographer Zwelethu Mthethwa). The importance of all of these studies has been to explore the sometimes quite complex social and political implications of what might at first appear to be quite mundane and quotidian symbols, and to examine the often detailed personal histories and memories which may be referenced by them. Oduro-Frimpong's paper contributes to this growing body of work, by showing how Ghanaian mottonyms, some of which are only a few words (or even syllables) long, may similarly reference complex stories of identity, ownership and belonging - and this is convincingly demonstrated in the stories of Kofi Abrefa, Abubakari Seidu, and the others.

I do however have a number of questions about how these mottonyms fit into the wider visual economies, and discursive domains, of which they are a part. In relation to the former, I wondered how the fact that these mottonyms are essentially mobile (in that they are all written on vehicles, which are constantly moving around the urban space), effects their 'status' vis-a-vis other types of signage? In other words, does the fact that they are being constantly circulated, and projected outwards into the public domain, result in their having greater affective force than more static types of signs (shop signs, wallhangings etc.) - and if so, what might this tell us about how the drivers relate to them as elements of personal biography and/or as symbols of status? In relation to discursive domains, I am generally convinced that these mottonyms are, from one perspective at least, a mode of naming (for naming both people, and the vehicles themselves). Yet if they are, then how do they relate to other sorts of names that people both take on themselves, and have ascribed to them, throughout their lives (clan names, nicknames, 'pet names', and so on)? I am reminded of David Parkin's classic study of the politics of naming among the Giriama, in Kenya (1989), which draws our attention to the way in which all forms of naming, both of the self and of others, both reflects and produces multiple types of social ties.

In relation to the paper's claim for the 'experiential' dimensions of these Ghanaian mottonyms I also wondered how people actually relate to them, other than discursively (i.e. other than by referring to

them as elements in stories)? For example, do people stare at them for extended periods, or else touch them, or else feel some presence, or some other affective force, whilst in their presence? The question is of most relevance in relation to the more 'philosophical' types of mottonyms to which the paper refers (although I think that we could just call these as 'religious' in character). It is quite common - in fact, I imagine it is the norm - for those Christian, or Muslim, taxi drivers in Africa (and elsewhere) who hang biblical, or quranic, verses from their rear-view mirrors to speak of the 'comfort' that they derive from such symbols, and/or of the immediate 'connection' with the divine that they objects confer. I therefore wondered if Oduro-Frimpong's driver-respondents experienced similar feelings in relation to their mottonyms - and again, does the fact that these signs are mobile, and projected outwards alter their affective force in this regard?

Finally, given the extent to which commercial slogans have become ubiquitous across all forms of signage throughout Africa in recent years, I can't resist asking the author if he has also now started to see mottonyms which implore the viewers to 'drink Coke', to 'use Vodafone', or to 'try a Gulder'?

Richard Vokes

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong <josh60@siu.edu>

April 4th, 2013

Reactions to Richard Volkes

Hello Richard: Glad to hear that you enjoyed reading the paper, and thanks very much for your questions.

So to be honest, I do not know if the 'mobility' of the mottonyms tends to let them have greater affective force than the 'immobile' shops signs. I say this because some shops with signs are located near key places with lots of vehicular and human traffic and as a result one can argue that these shop signs potentially get more viewing. Also, there are some vehicles with mottonyms that for various reasons (such as to avoid police harassment) limit their 'services' to new and developing residential areas with not so many people and by this logic get limited viewing. With the mottonyms, what I do know from talking with drivers is that they are proud to fully 'own' such inscriptions because of how the inscriptions capture a key moment in their lives, as well as the significant effort to coin an inscription that they feel aptly captures the experience they want to inscribe on their vehicle. I will argue that it is this dual aspect of the inscriptions (the element of personal history, and/or symbols of status) that make some drivers on the road to enthusiastically respond (by honking and wave) when people (even if they are complete strangers) shout out their mottonyms.

I definitely share the view that the mottonyms are a mode of Ghanaian naming because it is consistent with 'ground rules' of naming practices in Ghana. One of such rules is that names (whether ascribed to people or those they personally take) are tied to, for example, changes in people's status be it personal, social, economic etc (Obeng 1998). As well, there is the cultural expectation that one 'lives' one's name in the sense that one is not simply X, one is X (Obeng 1998; Sarpong 1974). Also, the mottonyms relates to other names in the sense people use the different names that people have in contextually appropriately distinct spheres of life.

In terms of how people actually relate to these mottonyms, what I have experienced is how some people quote them to reinforce their point. For example, it is uncommon on radio to hear some preachers say something like 'as someone has written on his car 'fear not'. Therefore in Jesus name, I say fear not the enemy!' Some drivers have told me that there have been times when passengers have informed them about how they like their mottonyms. What the above reveals is that perhaps I should devote time to fully explore this aspect of the mottonyms

Regarding your last question, I am yet to come across commercial slogans/motonyms that urge viewers to 'try Samsung phones' or 'drink Gulder'. But I recently witnessed what seemed like a summary of Jesus' crucifixion that said "3Nails + 1 Cross = 4Given" (see below)

Cheers,

Frimpong

Sally Applin <saa26@kent.ac.uk>

April 4th, 2013

Hi,

I'm a Ph.D. Candidate of Dr. Michael D. Fischer at Kent, with a special focus on Mediated/PolySocial Reality.

This was a fun paper to read! There is much to learn from here and to apply to all sorts of ways people select naming conventions. I often see names of commercial vehicles (not advertising of company name, but things like, "Road Warrior of Tuscon" or something that mostly large transport trucks) here in the US and have wondered about their stories. The fact that these drivers use the motonyms as both a name on their vehicles and something that they themselves are also called by can almost invoke Cyborg theory of sorts (if you care to go that way) as the driver and vehicles merge through the motonyms.

I'm also really curious about Ghanaian culture and the "innuendo" category. Knowing nothing about the culture and having given the paper one rapid read, I apologize if this covers territory you'd already considered. My curiosity is about motonyms being some social acceptable general way to get a message across to someone without having to be direct about it and draw attention/shame/dishonor/whatever upon family, work, etc... particularly as this relates to someone being verbally addressed by their motonym: that the person, by being called by the motonym, is actually always perpetuating this message of inner feeling without ever having to express it. This goes beyond the idea of "innuendo" and sort of veers towards passive aggression or some kind of expression of a socially forbidden and repressed thought that is desired to be expressed indirectly, apparently in perpetuity.

My last thought has to do with shared vehicles and shared or combined motonyms, which you touched on briefly. I wonder if when cars are jointly used/owned and have two different motonyms on them, how easy it is for people to tell the difference between them, and if they cover the person's motonym who isn't using the car when they are driving.

There is much talk of identity in the Internet research at the moment and there may be something there that is useful to add to this research as the subject matter extends to how people are addressed in communication -- and also with the obvious legacy of traffic being a parallel to modern communications infrastructure.

Erkan Saka <sakaerka@gmail.com>

April 7th, 2013

Hello list,

I have been away for a long while and as usual I have missed the initial discussions and many theoretical positions are already discussed. Thank you all for all those great contributions. Just to spice things up then, I want to share a photo i have taken recently:

https://fbcdn-sphotos-f-a.akamaihd.net/hphotos-ak-prn1/p480x480/554899_649030951789672_1240689850_n.jpg

Here is quite an ideological statement in favor of Turkish secularism via the founder, Atatürk.

Most Atatürk related imagery on vehicles include Atatürk's signature like this:

<http://i884.photobucket.com/albums/ac44/smyrnads/09101P1.jpg>

The latter seems to be seen mostly at upper-middle class citizens' vehicles but mottonyms like in the first photo's vehicle, which is a commercial and definitely not upper middle class one- would mostly be either islamist or like the ones found in Prof. Frimpong's paper.

As there has been a decade long policy elite transformation in Turkey, in which pro-Islamic elites emerge, one can detect a slight change of content in mottonyms. Oppositional take by the secularists now... This is hard to generalize, and I don't claim to be scientific at all, just anthropologically sensitive everyday life observations...

Cordially,
Erkan

Katrien Pype <Katrien.Pype@soc.kuleuven.be>

April 7th, 2013

Dear all,

I regret only coming in at the end of the discussion. And, I hope I am not sending this too late.

So far, I have enjoyed the paper and the discussion. It is a welcome addition to the study of public culture in urban Africa. The article attempts to unravel some "banal" dimensions of public culture; but, as Dr Udoro-Frimpong shows us, these are far from meaningless. The mottonyms, much like graffiti, convey meaning and the space on which the signs are being placed are significant as well: the literally inscribe the drivers, their passengers and the others on the street within the city's urban space. As signs, the mottonyms not only represent driver's characters and life worlds, rather, they are also productive tokens: these are signs that aim at changing or intervening in reality: some need to protect the driver (and his passengers); others remind the driver about the past and thus hence inform his behavior. These inscriptions bring personal voices into the public arena. And, given the fact that cars continuously change from owner or from driver, there is a continuous renewal in these mottonyms, that keeps pace with the changes in urban lifeworlds. These mottonyms are immediate vectors of personal experiences and desires. The study of these mottonyms thus literally personalizes Ghanaian public culture and show us an intimate and immediate glimpse into societal and cultural changes as they are being experienced by Ghanaians themselves, "from below".

Other discussants have already raised a number of compelling issues. I will not repeat these here. I would like to push the analysis a bit further by asking Dr Udoro-Frimpong to integrate the following dimensions in his paper:

- I think the choice for a phenomenological approach is totally warranted. Nevertheless, in order to contextualize the mottonyms we need some more historical background information, certainly content-wise. So, my first idea is that the text would certainly benefit from a historical analysis of the content of the mottonyms. The literature review you offer us in the first part of the text describes the various research questions that have guided the analysis of Ghanaian mottonyms since the 1960s, yet what texts were put on the vehicles is not mentioned. In the beginning of the article, you mention a change in matter (from the Bedford trucks to the Nissan and Toyota vans/ from the oil paintings on wood to stickers) – but what about the ornamentation, decoration and meaning of the

metonyms? Do you see a difference? Have themes changed? And what does it say about Ghanaian society? This information does not necessarily have to come from personal research, but the author could compare the mottonyms he studied with those mentioned in the literature he consulted.

- My second question deals with the dialogic character of these mottonyms. Mottonyms address an audience: others in the streets. These mottonyms are kinds of conversation openers: they bring the driver into a dialogue with others. In his discussion of stickers and inscriptions on Nairobi matatu's Mbugua Wa Mungai (2009) mentions that these matatu's function mostly within the urban youth culture, and that many inscriptions are socially transgressive. He identifies vulgarity and obscenity as characteristics of the matatu stickers. "Nearly all matatu stickers evince an offensive aspect, an aggressive quality that will almost always provoke passenger reaction to its wording and meaning" (2009: 272). Mbugua situates the matatu within a subculture, where ridicule, laughter, protest and alternative discourses can be vehiculated. A comparison between the inscriptions on Accra's vans and Nairobi's matatu's would allow to differentiate between contemporary urban popular cultures in Africa. In particular, the questions emerges about what the absence of subversive talk on Accra's cars (if so) says about Accra's public sphere in contrast to other African urban spheres?

- My final question deals with the vehicles; in particular I am interested in the symbolic and social meanings of the position of the mottonyms on the vans themselves. Is there something we can learn from the places on the vehicles where these mottonyms are being put? This question is informed by a recent reading of two articles on the Bedford truck decoration in Pakistan (Elias 2003 and 2005). It appears that there is a striking difference in content of the decoration in front of the Pakistani Bedford trucks, on the sides and on the back – some inscriptions cannot be made on the front of the truck but should be mentioned on the back (humorous phrases, romantic verses, etc.) and vice versa. Equally, Elias notices that the decorations on the sides of the trucks are part of –what he calls– implacement strategies – they inscribe the trucker within a larger social universe. The phrases and drawings on the side (which thus have a different content than what is written on the front and also on the back of the truck) refer to geographical spaces and thus could be read as (real, imagined or desired) inscriptions of belonging. My question would be: did Dr Udoro-Frimpong see a similar difference in the mottonyms placed on the back window or on the front window? What about texts that are being put on the sides? And, in fact this question immediately follows the previous one: is there a difference in the messages as they are put inside or outside of the van? On the front desk or inside on the door, etc.?

This could lead to an analysis of emic approaches towards "the car" as vehicles of messages and status (car brands, car colors, mottonyms, etc.). The inside/outside distinction is relevant because the "imagined audience" of the inside decoration is different from the "imagined audience" of the outside decoration (police, etc.). Elias shows that the front/back distinction is also important given the ways in which truck drivers put their trucks when they are taking a break (they position themselves in front of the car, so the truck front becomes part of their "front stage behavior", and the back is a space where less serious messages, more informal meanings and even subversive texts can be displayed).

Thank you again for an inspiring paper!
Katrien

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Stephen M. Lyon <s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk>

April 9th, 2013

Dear List

We are now on the last day of the e-seminar. We usually wind these things up at some indeterminate time in evening on Tuesday, so there are still a few hours for some comments or responses to earlier comments/questions.

Thanks very much,
Steve

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong <josh60@siu.edu>

April 9th, 2013

Dear List:

Apologies for the break in communication. Several issues have conspired that affected me to not respond as quickly as I had wished: intermittent power, slow internet connection and sometimes both. Below are my responses to the latest contribution by Katrien Pype.

Hello Katrien: Thanks very much for your close reading of the paper and the key suggestions to further strengthen the paper. So regarding some of the differences in the ornamentation and decoration of the mottonyms, one key observation relates to the design and colors of the lettering used. Whereas now, as a result of the use of ‘sticky-plastic’ mottonym(s) is/are written in one main color (e.g. yellow or red, etc), previously one observed mottonyms written in different design colors. Also whereas previously ‘religious mottonyms’ were accompanied with painted images of Jesus or Mary, now one observes that such ‘complements’ come in the form stickers of these images. Another key difference that I have observed in contemporary mottonyms relates to the (near-?) absence of negative portrayal of women (like ‘Fear Woman’; ‘Fear Woman and Live Long’; ‘No Money No Wife’ etc). In terms of what continue to persist in the practice of mottonyms, one can definitely say that it is definitely the religious-based ones. However, with these mottonyms one can say that it is the (Pentecostal-?) Christian variety than dominates.

On the issue of the character of the mottonyms, generally one can assert that they are not explicitly offensive or subversive compared to the matatu stickers. To speculate why this is the case, I am tempted to say that perhaps it is due the Ghanaian communication ethos that relates to indirect communication that manifests in proverbs, metaphors and innuendos.

On the symbolic and social meanings of the position of the mottonyms on the vehicle, this is not an angle I actively pursued. From your questions, it definitely looks like a profitable slant to pursue to enrich the work. With that said, I can say that, in general, Ghanaian mottonyms are not written on sides of taxis or trotros.

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong <josh60@siu.edu>

April 9th, 2013

Hello Sally:

To address your question on innuendo use:

So in Ghana, the artful use of innuendo in communication is part of the general repertoire of good communication aesthetics. This indirect communication style, stereotypically assigned to women, involves speakers' insinuated reproofs without specifically identifying a target because such a person "is expected to be aware of the subliminal frame of interpretation" (Yankah 1995, 52). This strategy is employed by communicatively competent interactants who seek to prevent being branded as having malicious intent (Yankah 1995). In spite of the recognition of innuendo communication, this does not mean that people cannot be direct in certain communicative circumstances as evident in the Akan proverb '*if you are not explicit about your preference for a particular haircut to your barber, you get a bad haircut*'

On the issue of identity in internet research, I will kindly ask that you send me some reference to help frame that angle you pointed out.

Sally Applin <saa26@kent.ac.uk>

April 9th, 2013

Thank you for your response.

If innuendo is mostly assigned to women, how do you know that the male drivers are using it for mottonyms? Is it fully absorbed in the culture now?

I'm not an identity scholar, but those who I follow on Twitter have been talking about this at great length.

Here are basic search results from just this year:

http://scholar.google.com/scholar?as_ylo=2013&q=identity+internet&hl=en&as_sdt=0,5

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong <josh60@siu.edu>

April 9th, 2013

Hello Sally: Innuendo use, although stereotypically assigned to women, is definitely not 'a woman-thing'. In practice, it is used by both men and women. In terms of your question as to how I know how male drivers use this communicative feature in their mottonyms, I know it through the narratives about what occasioned their mottonyms and the intent behind their inscription on the vehicles. Thanks for the link.

Stephen M. Lyon <s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk>

April 10th, 2013

Dear List,

It's now nearly midnight continental European time (where I am the moment), so I shall go ahead close this e-seminar. It remains for me to thank Joseph Oduro-Frimpong for contributing a very interesting paper and to Jerry Eades for his stimulating discussant comments which kicked off the e-seminar. In addition, I would like to thank all of you who participated in the discussion. There were some interesting comments and queries and, as always, I have learned a great deal from lurking in the background! And finally, I'd like to thank Philipp Budka and Nina Grønlykke Møllerup for all the work they do behind the scenes to make these things happen.

We will be sending out an email soon about the next e-seminar, but please keep a little time in June available for the next e-seminar!

Thanks
Steve

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong <josh60@siu.edu>

April 10th, 2013

Dear List: Kindly join me to thank Steve moderating this session, as well as agreeing for me to present the paper in this forum. Also sincere appreciation to Jerry Eades and all those who contributed to the discussion. I am sure people still have questions/suggestions about the paper. Please feel free to contact me off-list to continue the discussion.

Sincerely,
Frimpong

E-seminar closed