

"CARRY GO": A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF THE LANGUAGE OF BUS CONDUCTORS IN LAGOS (NIGERIA)

E. A. Adedun

**Department of English
University of Lagos, Akoka, Nigeria**

Abstract

Lagos is a cosmopolitan Nigerian city with an elaborate transport system which is built around commercial buses of different types. Each of the commercial buses maintains a bus conductor whose use of language is distinct, peculiar, dialectal and highly idiosyncratic.

This paper examines the language use of bus conductors in Lagos with a view to unearthing the sociolinguistic underpinning conditioning such use. A combination of notes taken through personal observation and discreet tape recording of two hundred and twenty-one communicative interactions involving the bus conductors constituted the methodology for the investigation.

The outcomes of the investigation reveal that the language of Lagos bus conductors is creative, attitudinal, emotional, group-directed, solidarity-conscious and a manifestation of the nation's sociolinguistic imperatives.

Recent advances in language studies have indicated two clear ways of exploring language. The first is to study it as a stable structural system and the second is to study it in relation to its social context. While the first is labelled linguistic study, the second is called sociolinguistic study. As Adeniran (1987:23) rightly observes, 'the sociolinguistic angle will be seen as an inevitable complement to linguistic theory and one that is perhaps indispensable for the analysis and understanding of effective human communication'. It is within this context that we situate our study of the bus conductor's language in Lagos (Nigeria).

The language is a sociolect which shows that it is used primarily for in-group communication especially in the process of performing a professional duty of bus conducting. In this regard, there is a lot of connection between the language and slang but the social function it performs also identifies it as register (Okparanachi, 2000). The way we identify the register of Banking, Accounting, Medicine, Engineering etc is also the way we can talk about the register of Bus Conducting. While expressions like 'behind the counter', 'look into the books', 'general check-up' and 'decline the declivity with excessive velocity' will be regarded as the register of Banking, Accounting, Medicine and Engineering respectively, 'carry go' is also a register of Bus Conducting.

'Carry go' is a register and a metaphor for Bus Conducting in Lagos. The expression symbolizes and embodies the language of the bus conductors in Lagos, a cosmopolitan city of Nigeria. The expression means different things depending on the situational context of its use. It may be used to mean 'the vehicle is filled up'. It may be used to mean 'it's unsafe to wait' (if it is an unauthorized place to wait and the law enforcement agents are around or if it is dangerous to wait

because of an oncoming vehicle). At the deeper level of meaning, it is used to refer to the danger inherent in the job of transportation as indicating 'go to the world of the unknown where it is not certain that one may return'. Thus, the expression 'carry go' encapsulates the language of Bus Conducting in Lagos. Though it is difficult to say whether the expression is a slang or pidgin, the fact that there is no substrate feature that marks off pidgin (Osoba, 2000) in the expression favours its consideration as a slang.

2.0 Methodology

Bus Conductors constituted the subjects of this study: A total of two hundred and twenty one communicative interactions involving the bus conductors in Lagos were carefully documented through a combined approach of notes made from observed communicative interactions and discrete recording via tape of the speech events. These speech events were randomly selected and they spread across the major bus-stops in Lagos. Oral interviews were also conducted to confirm the data collected. The data were collected over a period of five months (February to May, 2001).

3.0 Data Analysis

The method of data analysis follows a socio-semantic classification of communicative events. The communicative events were categorized into five as follows:

1. Bus conductor to the driver
2. Bus conductor to the commuter
3. Bus conductor to the park/bus stop worker
4. Bus conductor to other road users
5. Others to the bus conductor
 - (a) the driver to the bus conductor
 - (b) the passenger to the bus conductor
 - (c) police/park/bus stop worker to the bus conductor

Under each category, the bus conductors' expressions are stated, first order meaning provided (where necessary) and the intended meaning or standard equivalent given.

3.1 The Bus Conductor to the Commuter

3.1.1 Calling the Commuter

Oshodi!: A shout of the destination of the bus and an invitation to the commuters going to that route.

Oshodi Oke! Also a shout of the destination of the bus but with emphasis on the side of the destination.

Oshodi kan! (one Oshodi or one Yaba):

Or Yaba kan! There is only one more space for Oshodi or Yaba commuter

Olosi kan! a phonological corruption of Oshodi!

(one pauper): Kan

Eko straight! A vital piece of information that only commuters (Lagos direct): whose destination is Eko (Lagos) are needed and not half-way commuters.

Eko straight! Anthony ma wole! (Lagos straight, Anthony don't enter): a warning that commuters going to Anthony or intending to stop at Anthony (half way) should not board the bus because the bus will only welcome those commuters whose destination is Lagos.

Mile Two one yansh! (Mile Two one buttock): One more space for commuter going to Mile Two.

Iyana Ipaja two more chance! There are two more seats (chances)
for commuters going to Iyana Ipaja

Ketu-Mile 12 N20! A call inviting the commuters going to the rout
of Ketu – Mile 12 with the information of the fare they
will pay.

Ikeja! Enter with your chance! A call declaring Ikeja as the route of
the bus and also instructing the commuters to be with
their correct fares.

3.1.2 Addressing the Commuters

Wole pelu change e (Enter with your change): Be on board with your
exact fare.

Eleyi o ni change o: This one (the bus) does not have change) smaller
currency denominations.

No standing: Standing (within the bus) is prohibited.

No hanging: Clinging to the door or bus entrance is not allowed.

No lapping: No passenger is allowed to carry another on his/her
lap.

E sunmora or e sunmorara (Shift or move closer to one another): Give
more space to accommodate another passenger.

My money: Pay your fare that is due to me.

Your money: Pay your fare

No story: I won't welcome unnecessary story that will not make
you to pay your correct fare.

Bring 40 take 50 or bring 50 take 60: A mathematical calculation to solve the problem of currency exchange.

Kpaakpaakpa (Sharply or swiftly): Indicating to the commuter to be fast and smart (in coming aboard or in disembarking).

Gbogbo ero (All passengers): Every passenger is required to come off the bus as it has got to the final point.

The bus conductor also calls out each of the bus-stop (Anthony! Palm Grove! Onipanu! Etc) as a way of sensitizing those who are concerned to be ready to alight at their respective destinations and to enable the driver to plan ahead.

3.2 The Bus Conductor to the Driver

Carry go: Proceed on the journey either because it is now safe to do so, it is unsafe to tarry, the bus is filled with passenger or it is the normal risk of the profession to do so.

Ma rose (Don't be sluggish): Drive smartly and swiftly

Wole (Enter): Merge from the service lane to the major road or change lanes.

Wole sowo e (Enter to your side): merge to the main road but keep to the lane on your side.

Owo e (Your side): Keep to the lane on your side

Wole kanle (Enter fully): It is safe for the driver to change about two lanes at once.

Wole one-time (Enter one-time): Change your lane smartly at once.

Ma na (gere) (Don't be sluggish): Drive with full alertness.

Ma fi para (Don't rubbish yourself): Be smart and sensible.

Ma go/ma gora e: Take advantage of the situation.

Cable lo (Continue cabling): Drive at high speed.

Gbe won rin (Carry them go): Drive on the passengers.

Go on finally: the bus is filled so on hindrance to the journey.

Lega-lega: Slowly

Solo-solo: Slowly

Gbese le (March it): Press either the accelerator pedal (increase the speed) or the brake (reduce the speed or halt).

Go on soun (Go on there): Progress in the journey.

Carry waka (Carry go): as interpreted above.

Soji life (Wake-up): Be sensitive

Gba lara e (Take it by his side): Take advantage of his laxity

O wo o (He/it has entered): A vehicle is on the lane where the driver intends to be.

Duro gbe (Wait and pick him/her): Stop to pick a passenger.

Egbe e (Your side): A vehicle is by your side or keep to your side.

Your side: A vehicle is by your side or keep to your side.

My side: A vehicle is by my side or keep to my side.

Te mole fun (march it for him/her): Slow down for a passenger to disembark.

Wake up: Be watchful and sensitive.

O loyun, o ponmo, o fa bag (She is pregnant, has a baby on her back and also carries a bag): Informs the driver about the delicate nature of the passenger and the fact that he/she needs more than the usual casual attention to alight.

O lori ponmo (she has a hide and skins head): 'A corruption of 'O loyun, c ponmc'.

Kala: N5 (five naira)

Faiba: N10 (ten naira)

Shandy or green: N20 (twenty naira)

Wazo or white: N50 (fifty naira)

Hundi or Awo: N100 (one hundred naira)

The Bus Conductor to other Road Users

Gbori e (Remove your head): Clear away from the road.

Ma gbemu (Don't bring your nose): Don't attempt to come to my lane.

To ba gbemu (If you bring nose!): A threat not to risk changing lanes by coming in front of my vehicle.

No story (I won't welcome unnecessary comments or apologies): a

warning to be careful not to hit another bus.

Shine your eye: Be watchful, sensitive and critical

File fun (leave it for him): Give him the chance of a safe passage.

Lif am for am (Leave it for him): Allow him to have his way.

Baba agba (Big daddy): An endearing expression to receive favourable consideration.

Maintain (Relax, be co-operative): An expression used to seek the co-operation and understanding of another driver especially in crossing to his lane.

Omo olope (A blessed one): An endearing expression to seek favourable consideration.

O ti kuri? (Have you died before?): An expression used to warn someone of the danger of his/her use of the road.

Oloshe/oloshekoshe (One who owns or uses soap): An expression used to refer to someone who is considered ill-fated or who goes about with ill-luck.

Laju e (Open your eyes): Be observant, be critical or be perceptive.

My car: A derogatory expression used to describe a car owner.

I go drive myself (I will drive myself): Also a derogatory expression used to describe car owner who drives himself/herself.

Ma Jedi e (I will eat your buttock): A threat to hit the rear of another car that is in the front.

3.4 The Bus Conductor to the Park/Bus Stop Workers/Police

File fun/lif am for am (leave it for him): An expression seeking the co-operation of the park bus stop workers either in not paying the correct stipulated charges or in dodging them altogether.

Father: The respectable one / the one with authority.

Baba agba: Bid daddy

Baba alaye: The daddy that owns the world

Alaye (the one that owns the world): An endearing word.

Ko si were (no madness): An expression used to assure one that all is well. It is also used to threaten and sound a note of bellicosity.

Area: A (mobile) policeman

Officer: A policeman

Askari: A policeman

Askari to moje (a policeman who is cunning or tricky): An expression used to describe a policeman who co-operates in illegality with the bus conductor and his driver.

Oga (an officer): A police officer

3.5 Other to the Bus Conductor

Since language is a means of communication and communication is a two-way affair, it is desirable to point out the features of the language of those who interact with the bus

conductors with a view to ascertaining the extent of convergence or divergence between the language of the bus conductors and those who interact with them.

3.5.1 The Driver to the Bus Conductor

Egbe e wegbe e (Your side): Check your side to see if it is safe (to cross over).

Your side: As interpreted above.

Kawe e lo (Read your book): Collect the fares from the passengers.

Sewe e lo (Produce your book): Collect the fares from the passengers.

Shadow: Observe whether (1) It is safe to change lines. (2) There are passengers to be picked and (3) whether there are no law enforcement agents to disturb or arrest us.

Ki lo n'happen?: What is happening?

Gbori wole (bring your head inside): Don't hang by the door.

Wetin sele (What is happening?)

3.5.2 The Passenger to the Bus Conductor

Staff: A self-identified person who is supposed to enjoy the privilege of not paying fare.

O wa (There is): An expression used to indicate that a passenger has got to the point of disembarking (his destination).

Onbole (He/She is coming off) (the bus): The same meaning as 'O wa'.

Emi o nsero e (I am not your passenger): An expression used by a

commuter who wants to enjoy the status of a 'staff' (as above).

Awon tie ni (I am one of your own): A solidarity-seeking expression the purpose of which is to lead to non-payment of fare.

Saju nu (Turn somewhere else): An expression indicating that the bus conductor should forgo the fare.

Fiyen le (Leave that one): Also an expression that encourages the bus conductor to forgo the fare or part of it.

Kileo n worry e? (What is wrong with you?)

I no send you message (I didn't send you on an errand): It's your business and not mine.

O loyun, o ponmo, o fa bag (She is pregnant, she carries a baby on her back and she is also carrying a bag): an expression indicating that the passenger requires more patience from the driver either in coming aboard or in disembarking.

3 The Police/Park/Bus Stop Worker to the Bus Conductor

Ohun da? (Where is it?): An expression used to request for either the bus stop rate or bribe.

Wey am? (Where is it?): As above

Wey your paper? (Where are your vehicle documents?)

Finding and Interpretation

Without doubt, the bus conductor's language in Lagos is predominantly Yoruba. This is due to the fact that Lagos is a Yoruba area. Though the land is a potpourri of people and languages and is a melting-pot for all the tribes in Nigeria, it is believed that many people

understand Yoruba either consciously or unconsciously. For instance, every commuter in Lagos understands 'o wa' (there is), an expression used to indicate that the commuter has got to his or her destination and is willing to come off. Other Yoruba expressions in this regards are 'ibo?' (where?), to enquire about destination, 'wole' (enter) and 'owo' (money). It is believed that one does not need to be in Lagos for long before he understands these Yoruba words.

Another reason for the predominance of Yoruba in the linguistic repertoire of the bus conductors is that quite a large number of the bus conductors (more than seventy percent) are Yoruba. People from other tribes who are into the profession either speak the language fluently or imitate it and this is the reason 'e sunmora' (shift or move closer to one another) can be reduplicated to become 'e sunmorara'; even though, to some conductors who use it consciously, it is stylistic. Also, 'o loyun, o ponmo, (she is pregnant and she carries a bag) can be corrupted to become o loyun ponmo (she is carrying a pregnancy of hides and skin).

Pidgin is another feature that characterizes the language of the bus conductors. Pidgin is a lingua franca in Nigeria and it is the form of language that is used to communicate among the many tribes that are resident in Lagos. Expressions like 'one yansh' (one passenger), 'wetin' (what?), 'I go drive myself' (I will drive myself) and 'I no know person' (I refuse to accord personal recognition) are pidgin expressions used by the bus conductors in Lagos. To underscore the importance of pidgin in the language of the bus conductors, most of the Yoruba expressions have their standard pidgin equivalents e.g. 'file fun – lif am for am' (allow him to have his way) 'laju e - shine your eye' (be perceptive), 'owo e' – 'your money' (where is your fare?) 'egbe e' – your side (Is it safe to move to your side?).

English words and expressions are also used in a domesticated manner, Awonusi (1990:33) views the domesticated varieties of English

as 'spatial variations or linguistic deviations which should not be confused with mistakes which can occur in either native or domesticated varieties. This is not so in the case of the English used by the bus conductors because the language exhibits both spatial variations and mistakes in domesticated variety. For instance, 'two more chance' is a grammatical mistake in domesticated variety with the absence of the 's' morphological plural ending while 'enter' (come abroad) is a spatial variation which agrees with the observation of Awonusi (Op.cit) that the choice of lexical items in Nigerian English is usually influenced by culture. 'Enter', a direct translation of Yoruba 'wole', is an example of this.

The multilingual nature of Lagos makes it possible for words belonging to two languages to be combined in the same expression. Such code-mixed expressions are 'cable lo' (drive at high speed), 'soji life' (be sensitive), 'kilo n'happen? (what is happening?), wole pelu change e' (come in with your exact fare). Apart from combining English and Yoruba words as seen in the above examples, expressions like 'no tata for yanyan' (to be totally broke or impoverished), 'carry waka' (go on with the passengers) and 'wetin sele?' (what is happening?) are special combinations of English and Hausa, English and Pidgin and English and Yoruba, respectively.

There are also special coinages like 'lega-lega' and 'solo-solo' which are used to express gradual movement or slow speed. These words are not found in any Nigerian language but they are etymologically related to the Yoruba word 'die-die' (slowly). Words used to denote the Nigerian currencies are also special coinages – 'kala' (five naira) 'faiba' (ten naira), 'shandy/green' (twenty naira), 'wazo/white' (fifty naira) and 'hundi/Awo' (one hundred naira).

The use of language by the bus conductors has an 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. Though expression like 'carry go', 'go-slow' (traffic jam), 'yellow-fever' (traffic

warden), 'kill-and-go' (anti-riot policemen) and 'kola' or 'particulars' (bribe) are linked to the bus conductor, they are freely used by members of the larger society in contexts different from bus conducting. This situation makes 'carry go' to assume meaning different from the ones ascribed to it by the bus conductors thereby widening its connotations.

Grammatically, the language is made up of single words, short phrases and simple sentences as in 'wole' (your side) and 'lif am for am' (allow him to have his way). The sentences are mostly ellipted as in 'egbe e (your side) when what is intended is 'check your side to see if it is safe'. 'O loyun o ponmo o fa bag' (she is pregnant, carries a baby on her back and carries a bag) is the only example of a non-simple sentence found in the bus conductors' language and this is communicatively functional. Unlike other expressions which shortness reflects the hurried and impatient nature of the bus conductor and his driver (Ipakpakpa), 'o loyun, o ponmo, o fa bag' is used to indicate the exception to the rule. That is, the usual hurried approach is suspended to allow the commuter (who is considered delicate) to get off the bus. The expression can be used by the conductor to sensitize the driver about the peculiar nature of the commuter. It can also be used by the commuter to alert the driver about the need to be more patient and cooperative in his less than usual attempt to get off the bus. The language is mostly imperative but sometimes declarative and interrogative. The language can be described with such labels as register, jargon and slang.

Phillip Howard (1984) defines slang as:

the special vocabulary or phraseology of a particular calling or profession... a district bounded on the north by jargon, on the south by argot, on the east by dialect, and on the west by poetry.

This definition is relevant to the language used of the bus conductors in Lagos. The language satisfies the meaning of the four components of slang identified by Howard and as defined by Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1999). According to the Dictionary:

Jargon is a technical word or expression used by a particular profession in (in this case bus conducting). Argot is a set of words used by a particular people (bus conductors) and not easily understood by others. Dialect is the form of a language used by a class of people with grammar, words and pronunciation that may be different from other forms of the same language (register). Poetry refers to a beautiful and graceful quality of language use (creativity).

5.0 Conclusion

The language of the bus conductors in Lagos falls in line with the uses of slang as enumerated by Erick Patridge (1933). The language is used when the conductor is in high spirit (the young in heart) just for the fun of it. It is also used as an exercise in wit and ingenuity. It is used to be 'different' or to be novel. It is used to be picturesque, to be arresting, to escape from cliché, to induce either friendliness or intimacy of a deep and durable kind. It is used to show that one belongs to a certain trade or profession.

In conclusion, our study of the language of the bus conductors in Lagos has been aimed at pointing attention to the peculiar nature of the language with a view to describing it and to use sociolinguistic parameters to offer explanations regarding its use. This is by no means an exhaustive study of this language but the study will certainly throw up other issues and perspectives in the ever-increasing quest to unravel the mystery of language and its use in the society. Of note is the pedagogical implications of this brand of language in Nigeria. It is hoped that language scholars, sociologists, philosophers, psychologists, and education experts will see this study as a veritable foundation for further research.

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