Communication within the Mini-Bus Taxi Industry of South Africa: A Case Study of Lenyenye (Limpopo Province) and Tembisa (Gauteng Province) Locations

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ABSTRACT Traversing the townships of South Africa invariably lands one into the realm of minibus taxis; both in their splendour and irritation. A ride in a minibus taxi unravels a fascinating reality. The present paper is an exposition to the communicative culture prevailing within the sector. It is an extract from a study conducted at two different locations, Lenyenye and Tembisa (correct spelling and pronunciation is Thembisa), that attempts to document communicative behavioural patterns that define the South African Black experience. Amongst other beneficiaries, policy makers and tourists would find the study helpful in corrective planning and in navigating the interesting landscape of Black South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The mind-set behind urban planning in Africa has its roots in the colonial era, which in the South African context was compounded by apartheid. Whereas White residential areas were conceived for families with ample amenities in place, those of the Blacks and Africans in particular, were designed as compounds that would primarily house the labour force. As Davenport (1969: 95) recounts, "White South Africans look upon [their] towns as places which White people live in and Black people work in on sufferance." This reality is a relic of the 1922 Stallard report, which gave rise to the Urban Areas Act of 1923; an act which became the foundation for the establishment of Black townships or locations (Beavon 1982; Younge 1988). During the apartheid era, laws such as the Group Areas Act, No. 41 of 1950 were mainly legislated to keep Blacks, in particular Africans, out of towns; especially after they shall have administered their job obligations in White areas and to the White man's needs. With the African workforce conveniently confined to these locations, apartheid laws ensured that the surplus (of Africans) were banished to the reserve settlements, which later became known as homelands (Smith 1992). To achieve this, a plethora of legislations was devised to control the influx of those wishing to move from these homelands to towns (Davenport 1969; Beavon 1982).

The social engineering master plan was complete with the design of the transport system that would ferry township-confined-Black -workers in and out of their places of work in the so-called White areas. State operated train and bus services were preferred in this regard (Khosa 1992, 1994, 1995). Regardless, several other independent modes of transport alternatives emerged, which according to the LeRoux Commission report of 1929 created "one great confusion and disorder" (Khosa 1992: 234). In response, the Motor Carrier Transport Act, No. 39 was passed in 1930, in order to mitigate against this development, and local road transport boards were set up to license operations in an attempt to bring the situation under control. This intervention did not succeed in stamping out independent operators, though. Pirate taxi operations persisted with a few incidental Black taxi operators managing to acquire licences to carry the passengers. At the time, the limit of the number of passengers a taxi could ferry was five (Khosa 1992).

More than anything, the limitation to five passengers was attributable to the capacity of available vehicles that could be used as taxis. In Tembisa, for instance, the Plymouth Valiant a sedan by its nature was the *sine qua non* of the Black taxi operation.In the late 1970s, however, and soon thereafter, when a few Blacks could afford the newly introduced minibuses, the number of permissible passengers increased to eight.

Thus the Toyota Hiace and, shortly thereafter, Nissan E20 replaced the Valiant in popularity amongst taxi operators and commuters alike. From this point onwards, the economic viability of the sector became unquestionable. Sympathetically, the number of licences also increased dramatically (Khosa 1992).

The Black taxi industry flourished as people increasingly found the then new minibus taxis to be a decent alternative to the overcrowded and often unreliable state-operated train and bus services. Furthermore, the endearment and indispensability of the Black taxi industry increased with operators strategically aiding anti-apartheid related actions and exhibiting a sense of social responsibility towards the Black community by reducing fares for school children and the elderly, especially during off pick hours. It is significant to note that over the years this mode of transport has grown into being the mainstay of the South African public transport system, imposing itself first as an urban feature akin to the London Black cab (Bobbitt 2002) and/or the New York yellow cab (Mathew 2008), and then as a national passenger carrier of choice. Amongst most Black South Africans today, a minibus is synonymous with a taxi, and many still, especially in rural areas, know no other form of taxi.

But, not all about the minibus taxi industry was glorious. Many scholars have documented the attendant route and rank related violence eruptions (Khosa 1992; Dugard 2001), road accidents (Brysiewicz 2001; Botha and Van der Walt 2006), bad mannerism by minibus taxi drivers (Sauti 2006)**,** and many other ills. Fortunately, most of these problems have since been brought under control. The minibus taxi industry is now a South African phenomenon, and through its sheer popularity it has developed a sub-culture, unique with accompanying communication systems that are couched in what could be call *township intelligence.* By township intelligence the researchers refer to "the resultant of the processes of acquiring, storing in memory, retrieving, combining, comparing, and using in new contexts of information and conceptual skills" as defined by Humphreys (1979: 115).

This township intelligence manifests in many forms including modes of communication and/ or pidgins crucial in fostering understanding in the day-to-day lives of township dwellers. Of these, an example could be the *tsotsitaal a lingua franca* that was spoken predominantly in townships, especially in and around the Reef (Molamu 1995). The minibus taxi *lingua franca* constitutes a significant addition to the arsenal of unofficial languages or modes of communication, forming part of township intelligence. Suffice to say the communication system evolving from interactions amongst operators, commuters, township dwellers, and Black South Africa at large, invested in working knowledge of commonly devised hand signals, disembarkation hails and the crystallisation of landmarks in the psyche of communities.

The minibus-taxi communication system can be better understood when broken into two categories, namely communication among the drivers, and communication among the drivers and commuters. Hand signals corresponding to destinations and a thorough knowledge of landmarks including common disembarkation spots form a greater part of this type of communication system. A functional knowledge of these communicative tools, when using minibus taxis in South African townships is crucial for ease of travel. And in a way, taxi communication could be regarded as the language whose understanding makes moving from one point to the next less confusing.

METHODOLOGY

In conducting the study yielding this paper, the researchers used desktop research, participative observation coupled with interviews. The first step was to understand the historical foundation of locations and then the legislative framework within which the taxi sector took root. In this regard, the researchers' strategy involved a survey of government documents, particularly laws that governed the settlement of people including those that govern the taxi industry. After years of not using this mode of transport, it was imperative for the researchers to spend time in the streets observing and talking to passengers as they use different kinds of hand signs to flag their different destinations to on-coming taxis. Lastly, a few minibus taxi trips were undertaken to refresh the researchers' own commuter-driver experiences, paying special attention to the shared knowledge of landmarks and the disembarkation hailing.

Whilst aware of the colour coding or numbering innovations (Oosthuizen and Baloyi 2000) or sticker form variants that identify taxis or their destinations. It may be argued that these were

mainly meant to solve problems associated with feuds over routes, and the commuter as a participant in the design and the implementation of the strategy is normatively factored out. This development then fell out of the scope of the study. Rather, the researchers elected to focus on communication strategy that is organic amongst the taxi drivers themselves, the commuters and the drivers. The ensuing discussion focuses on the role of taxi drivers and commuters in a communicative situation. In doing so, the researchers focused mainly on the taxi headlight flicking, taxi flagging hand signals, commuter disembarkation hails, which implicates knowledge of routes, destinations and landmarks.

The study was conducted in two localities, namely Lenyenye, a township east of the Tzaneen town in Limpopo province, and then Tembisa, a township on the outskirts of Kempton Park, a modest town just a few minutes' drive from the OR Tambo International Airport. While this is not necessarily a comparative study, the idea of observing the semi-rural township (such as Lenyenye), with homogenous language and urban township (such as Tembisa) in the Reef with a multiplicity of cultures and languages help clarify certain aspects which are affected by, among other factors, semirural, multicultural tendencies representative of the two localities. Whereas urbanisation in the Reef might happen at a much faster rate compared to a semi-rural township development some mannerisms previously identifiable with the populace in the Reef are rapidly finding their way into the rural areas.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Hand signals constitute a type of communication system capable of carrying messages; perhaps differently so from common verbal communication. Often, this system complements verbal communication. For the deaf, this system is developed and refined to a level of a language (Eichmann 2009). Youth in particular, be they in sport, music and other spheres of life, transmit all manner of messages using hand signals (Ruble and Turner 2000). Stylised hand signal gestures affirm belonging or allegiance to certain societies (Hurst and Mesthrie 2013). In general, the hand signal system is a powerful tool for communication. It should not be surprising to see how well this communication device is put

to use within the minibus taxi industry; that it has captured the imagination of some tourists (Rule et al. 2001) and artists such as Susan Woolf (2013). Headlight flicking and hooting are some of the arsenals the drivers utilise to communicate. But communication in this sector is not restricted to drivers only. Also put into this communicative circulation are commuter-hailing systems.

Communication amongst Drivers

In the face of hardships epitomised by the demanding taxi owners (Khosa 1994), the alleged harassment by the traffic officials (Sonderling 1992), and other pressures in their line of duty, minibus taxi drivers, as a kind of society, also utilise not only custom hand signal system to communicate, but also to affirm a sense of solidarity. In these kinds of environments, genuine friendships are formed along with communication behavioural patterns designed to beat some of the trepidations they face. Amongst these, are hand signals, headlamp flickering and hooting.

Hand signal system can be used by taxi drivers to alert one another of roadblocks and to communicate other job related information. For instance, in the advent of roadblocks, which is signalled by a tap on the roof frame of the vehicle (Tshishonga 2013), a driver may need to alter his or her normally delinquent behavioural pattern. He or she may buckle up or observe the speed limit to go past the roadblock just ahead. Other drivers, who may not be properly licensed to drive and/or those who operate vehicles that are not roadworthy (Barrett 2003) make a U-turn or use alternative routes upon receiving these hand signals to avoid driving into the roadblock. Further, drivers are able to communicate an unusual demand for their service. Through certain hand signals, drivers are able to communicate the fact that the train is delayed or dysfunctional on a particular day, and as such, prompt one another to service passengers stranded at the train station. Furthermore, there may be a need for a driver to communicate the fact that he or she is carrying a mix-destination of passengers (Kempton Park and Isando for example) and would therefore seek to sort them according to destination so that one taxi services one instead of all destinations. That way, each driver, is left to service one or two destinations, thus avoid-

ing covering excessive distances for the sake of a few passengers. Lastly, it may be desirable for a particular taxi to park for a moment, especially around midday when the business is slower. All these situations can ably be communicated using hand signs. So complex are these hand signals that drivers are even able to differentiate between the police or traffic-official administered roadblocks.

Although not as elaborate as hand signs, the flicking of headlights and hooting are some common communicative arsenals at the taxi drivers' disposal. When drivers become aware of a speed trap or a speed camera spot, they have a way of flicking the headlights in addition, or as an alternative to using specific hand signals alluded to in the foregoing section, thereby prompting the other taxi drivers to change behaviour or obey the speed limit.

Communication between Drivers and Commuters

Hooting, which is frantic in the morning, is primarily used to draw the passenger's attention and to inform him or her that the taxi is not full yet and therefore can still accommodate some passengers. Communication between drivers and commuters revolves around a thorough knowledge of destinations, which may translate into knowledge of main routes and landmarks. The most common destination variants are *local, town*, and/or *station*. Depending on the size of the township, and whether it is in the urban or semi-rural area, the destination variants can range from simple to complex. In Lenyenye, two hand-signal communication variants were observed; one for local commuting and the other for town (Tzaneen). The same study was replicated in Tembisa, where it became more complex. Apart from the two variants *local* and *town*, the local featured the third variant, which is the train *station*, one of the major drop-off points in daily commuting. In other words, the three variants in Tembisa have traditionally been *local*, *town* and *station*.

A semi-rural township such as Lenyenye, for instance, may not have the variant of the *station,* or a complex permutation of the *local*. Also crucial in the discussion is the disembarkation hailing. In urban areas where there is a train station(s), the hand signal of the variant *station* (a5, in the appendix) is used.

From most towns, the taxi has several routes to enter into the township. For example, Tembisa boasts three of these route options: They are *Main-line* represented by signal (b2, in the appendix), *Rabasotho-line,* signal (b3, in the appendix) and *Straight-line,* signal (b1, in the appendix). *Main-line* refers to a route that joins mainly Nguni-speaking sections of Tembisa collectively known as *S'godiphola*, whereas *Rabasotho-line* links the Sotho-speaking area across the railway line through Maokeng to Sedibeng sections. *Straight-line* refers to the busiest and newest route of the three. Unlike the aforementioned two, there is no ethnic connotation to its conception. Rather, it takes its name from the fact that it, comparatively speaking, runs through the township almost in a straight-line fashion.

Similarly, while entering Lenyenye from Tzaneen (town), the choice is between the Shopping Center and the Industrial routes. The Shopping centre route is the main road and roughly divides Lenyenye Township into the east and western parts. The industrial route runs on the outskirts, passing the stadium, through Mamphele Ramphele road, connecting the nearby villages. Otherwise, for other destinations such as the Plaza, the commuter points roughly in its situational direction. Expectantly, hand signals in Lenyenye are not as elaborate compared to those encountered in urban townships such as Tembisa. This also explains the lack of dedicated hand signals to these few routes.

Apart from routes, a thorough knowledge of landmarks along a particular route (to a particular destination), is crucial. Amazingly, a plethora of these landmarks forms a common knowledge amongst residents. According to Pale (2013), every Mamblican (a youth-coined township reference to Tembisa residents), should know land marks such as Sports Bar, Caprivi Night Club, Hippo's Place, Mehlareng Stadium, Makhulong Stadium, Swazi Inn, Ground Seven or Sangweni Taxi Rank.

Understanding Variants:
Local, *Station* and *Town*

The simple *local* variant is usually represented by hand signal (a1, in the appendix) and it seems to be universally applicable irrespective of the rural or urban nature of the context. But since 1994, with the free movement of people,

the *local* variant has changed dramatically with the mushrooming of new formal and informal settlements. It has splintered into many more sub-variants. The number of hand signals used in Tembisa, for example, reflects the proliferation of new and almost self-containing settlements; such as Phomolong (far end) and Mayibuye (a3m, in the appendix), Winnie Mandela (a2, in the appendix) including Mthambeka section (a4, in the appendix), which has lately developed into a somewhat gateway to the sprawling settlements namely Ivory Park and Rabie Ridge. Taxis that operate in Tembisa do not enter Ivory Park which has its own route networks.

This means that the variant *local* has given rise to other *local* sub-variants. In bigger townships with train station(s), the sign of locomotion (a5, in the appendix), in addition to the local sign, is used to flag down local taxis. Suffice to say, in these environments, it takes an extensive knowledge by the commuter and the driver, of not only the new sections, but also the hand signals used in order to ease communication about destinations.

Where the variant *town* exists, it is almost always represented by hand signal (c1, in the appendix) and has also proliferated as more Black people moved into previously Whites-only suburbia. The development translated into many more new taxi routes and destinations, altering the variant *town,* as well. The rapid growth of Halfway House (c2, in the appendix), for instance, and the closing distances from places such as Esselen Park (c3, in the appendix) and Tembisa accounts for a rather complex variant *town*.

Suffice to say, there seems to be no consideration as to whether the signalling hand is left or right. What is important is what the hand or fingers signify in order to stop the correct taxi.

Hailing Disembarkation Intentions

Upon arrival on his or her destination, the commuter will only communicate the drop-off point, which typically is by way of hailing *Short Right! Short Left! After the Robot* (meaning traffic light)! *Bus Stop* or *Taxi Rank!*

Due to bad town planning, most roads in the townships do not cater for the minibus taxis. In the worst-case scenario, the taxi stops in the middle of the road to pick or to drop-off a com-

muter (Cervero and Golub 2007). To minimise the inconvenience to other road users, taxi drivers use the adjoining or side roads as pick-up and drop-off zones. Although this maybe an inconvenience to a motorist intending to turn into a side road, or who, from the side road, intends joining the main road, it is better than stopping on the main road that normally carries more traffic. A small hand signal of apology by the taxi driver is often assumed enough to quell any agitation by the inconvenienced fellow road user. Thus, a *short left* hail from the commuter to the drivers means the driver should stop in the next side road.

There are instances where the next side road is on the right, in which case the commuter will hail *short right*! Since in South Africa traffic keeps to the left of the road, it is neither safe nor desirable for the driver to cross the lane in order to use the right side road as a stopping spot. Rather, at any point, it could even be on the sidewalk, opposite the immediate sight road; for as long as it is safe to do so, the driver will stop. *Before robot or after robot* may also not be a designated spot for the taxi to stop. But in this case the robot is a landmark that minimises misunderstanding between the commuter and the driver.

CONCLUSION

Obviously, the complexity of communication devices such as the flickering of headlights, hooting, hand signals and disembarkation hails would differ between urban townships such as Tembisa, and semi-urban townships such as Lenyenye, where this research was conducted. Nonetheless, the mushrooming of new settlements, sections and zones in urban townships, leading to the opening of new routes, speaks to a socio-communicative dynamic phenomenon begging for scholarly attention. The need for communicative competence within the minibus taxi environment is further heightened by the need to connect these new areas of knowledge to the country's major economic sectors, especially tourism. Had there been adequate studies in this area, the experience of hosting the World Cup in 2010 would have surely had a wider benefit to the sector than the country had mastered. Besides, communication of whatever kind amongst peoples warrants more understanding.

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APPENDIX

Table of hand signs associated with the variant local

(a1) Local

Explanation
This refers to short trips within the location. Started as a cycling motion, the signal has become static. It is viewed in contrast to the town signal.

(a2)Winnie   Mandela

Explanation
Winnie   Mandela settlement is a clenched fist. Winnie   Mandela is a struggle icon in Townships. During the struggle a clenched fist held above one's head signalled power and the will to fight the system. This is the signal made by Nelson and Winnie   Mandela as they walked hand in hand through the prison gates. The signal is punctuated by the *Amandla* slogan.

(a3)Mayibuye

Explanation
The sign represents the number 7. This sign refers to Mayibuye section.

(a4)Mthambeka

Explanation
The sign represents the number 6. Mthambeka has lately developed into a somewhat gateway to the sprawling settlement called Ivory Park and Rabie Ridge
.

(a5)Station

Explanation
The signal for the station is a fist doing the locomotive motion.

(a5) Sangweni

Explanation
The signal of a number 2 denotes Sangweni section, especially the taxi rank which is a connecting hub to southwestern desinations such as Johannesburg and Alexandra township.

Table of hand signs associated with routes

(b1) Straight line

Explanation
Straight-line refers to the busiest and newest route of the three. Unlike the aforementioned two, it has no ethnic connotation to its conception. Rather, it takes its name from the fact that it, comparatively speaking, runs through the township almost in a straight-line fashion

(b2)Rabasotho line

Explanation
A hand curving to the left represents Rabasotho-line which links the Sotho-speaking area across the railway line through Maokeng to Sedibeng sections.

(b3)Main line

Explanation
A hand curving to the right represent Main-line a route that joins mainly Nguni-speaking sections of Tembisa collectively known as *S'godiphola*

Table of hand signs associated with the town destinations

(c1)Town

Explanation
A hand pointing upwards or at an angle represents Kempton Park. Form a Tembisa point of view this is a sign for town. A slight variation of pointing seems to be universal in referring to the town destination.

(c2)Halfway House

Explanation
The hand signal suggests half. It refers to the Halfway House destination.

(c3)Esselen Park

Explanation
The sign of an elbow refers to Esselen Park, a suburb next to Kalfontein and Tembisa.