

CREATING NEW BRAND IDENTITIES: A STYLO-RHETORICAL STUDY OF CAR APPELLATIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper analyses twenty-six appellations of some popular cars in Nigeria. The data were gathered through visits to some retail car dealer shops in Nigeria, the participant observation method and a questionnaire. Analysis of the data shows that the appellations are a form of material honorifics which capture the youth's sentiments for such car qualities as size, speed, durability, efficiency, luxury and affordability. Analysis also shows that car rebranding discourse practice is an evaluative epithet, a socio-historic documentation and a rhetoric of competition, distribution, endorsement, and demeaning humor, which portrays the youth's passionate sentiment concerning fashion in automotive technology. The paper demonstrates how the discourse practice explicates the grammatical notion of epithet and the concept of branding/rebranding, as an aspect of the rhetoric of advertising. It indicates that car rebranding practice significantly affects the purchase behaviours of car owners in Nigeria. It concludes that Nigerian youths are as effective in linguistic innovativeness as automotive marketers in making car products appeal to emotions.

KEY WORDS: Car Rebranding (CR), Car name (CN), Epithet, Advertising

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1. Introduction

The youth, with identifiable beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, norms, values and ideologies, constitute an important unit of a culture and they play significant roles in transforming, promoting, changing or modifying the content of the local culture. Unlike in the past when agents of the local culture, such as the family, the school, religious institutions, etc. were the primary and sole determinants of youth socialization, the modern day youth influence the structure of the local culture as much as they are influenced by these agents of the culture.

The aspect of the contemporary Nigerian youth culture that is particularly of interest to linguistic research is its linguistic innovativeness. The youth demonstrate linguistic creativity in discourses involving such subjects as sports (especially soccer),

sexualities, music, (especially hip hop), western films and new fashions in shoes and clothes. They also exhibit linguistic solidarity through the restricted codes for talking about these things.

Language scholars and anthropological linguists, in and outside Nigeria, have shown tremendous interest in the study of youth culture in the areas of language, identity and politics. The works of such scholars as Whyman (2012) and Alim, Ibrahim, and Pennycook (2008) are significant in this field. In Nigeria, Babalola and Rotimi (2011), and Akande (2012 and in press) have researched into some aspects of discourse behaviour of the Nigerian youth in the area of hip hop music. An important aspect of youth discourse in Nigeria, which is yet to be researched and, which, therefore is the subject of this paper, is a discourse I refer to as car rebranding (CR) discourse.

The paper, which aims at foregrounding the discourse significance of car renaming practice in Nigeria, relates to linguistic anthropology in two ways: First, its object of study, the linguistic component of youth culture, is an interesting object of study for linguistic anthropology. Secondly, the paper adopts some of the methodological approaches, involving interview, questionnaire, participant observation, etc. which are the cornerstones of anthropology generally, and by extension, linguistic anthropology, a discipline which studies the interactions between linguistics and culture (both group and social culture).

As a study in linguistic anthropology, I personally interacted with a handful of youths, comprising students from Obafemi Awolowo University where I teach, roadside mechanics, and car dealers who are the most active producers of the discourse under study. I also contacted *The Crush Chronicle*, an online youth forum, where I gathered useful information in respect of the reasons why some cars are given the names they are given. My data exploration methods yielded twenty-six (26) re-branded car names, which served as data for this study. Except those car names in the Yoruba language (which of course have equivalents in other Nigerian languages), the data apply to all of Nigeria.

As a text-based study, these data were subjected to close reading. After interacting with some of their active creators, who supplied the car rebranding names (CRNs) and reasons for such names, I visited some retail car shops in Osogbo and Ile-Ife, where I took photographs (see appendix) of some of the cars rebranded. With this method, I was able to correlate these names with the actual car products labeled.

Thereafter, with the assistance of my graduate students, I administered a one-item questionnaire to some one thousand car owners that were contacted at social gatherings, filling stations, car wash points and public parks in the study areas. This research method gave me the opportunity to substantiate my intuitive perceptual

reading of the data with facts from the agents, the authentic sources of the discourse, and to be able to comment on the effects of the discourse practice on the purchase behaviour of people. Therefore, the analysis carried out in this paper is a synthesis of information from different sources, including my personal intuitive interpretation of the data.

2. Theoretical/ Conceptual Foundation

The theoretical framework for this study is Stylo-rhetoric. This is a framework that unites the principles of two genetically related disciplines: Stylistics and Rhetorics. This raises the question- why stylo-rhetoric? To answer this question requires a brief historical review of the relationship between the two disciplines.

Stylistics relates to three classical disciplines: rhetorics, dialectics and poetics, which are concerned with the art of creating speech, the study of methods of creating and principles guiding a dialogue, talk or discussion and the study of artistic creation respectively (Miššíková, 2003:9). Out of these three disciplines, it was dialectics and rhetorics that actually developed to Stylistics because according to Miššíková (2003:9), poetics went its own way to create field of study known at present as Literary Criticism.

I have chosen to unite rhetoric with stylistics in this study because I consider the discourse practice as a language style, a form of youth speech or talk, which has contextually embedded meaning(s). Though this paper has its grounding in Stylistics and Rhetorics, it also relates to onomastics (because it studies a social act of naming), which overlaps with the subject matter of such fields as anthropology, business, cartography, folktale, genealogy, history, politics, psychology, linguistics and history (Algeo and Algeo, 2000). Reflecting the multidisciplinary nature of this paper, my discussions of the data will benefit from the concepts of branding, appellation and honorifics. Therefore, I briefly explain the concepts in what follows.

2.1. Branding

The concept of branding has its primary association with the field of marketing, where it is considered as an important advertising strategy. Beyond its primary association, the concept has now a new direction, associated with Anholt and Wally (see Nadia, 2009) where it becomes a political register. In contemporary academic research, there is a growing interest in this new direction in the phenomenon of “nation branding”, seen as a mode through which nations “advance their political, economic, and cultural agendas” (Nadia, 2009). The marketing techniques of branding and rebranding, according to Agba and Agba, Ushie and Akwara (2009), “have been imported by some countries in their bid to market their cities, services,

regions to the rest of the globe thereby increase their international profile, attract or improve their foreign direct investments and earnings from tourism and trade”. Today, branding, with such genres as place branding, city branding and personality branding, has almost developed to a full-fledge academic field as there are several authors and publications on the concept. These publications include for example Florek (2005), Baker (2007), Moilanen and Rainisto (2008) and Dinnie (2008).

Taiwo (2011), thinking in terms of its primary association, describes branding or rebranding, quoting Hankinson and Cowking (1996), as a marketing concept which is traditionally associated with products and services. Similarly, the American Marketing Association (AMA) defines a brand as a "name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of other sellers. Branding plays a significant role in influencing customers' purchase decisions. In the words of Fitzsimons, Chartrand, and Fitzsimons (2008), the type of brand and consumers' perceptions of the brand can influence their behaviour.

In view of the importance of branding highlighted above, every manufacturing or marketing industry depends on it for the sales of their products. Manufacturers of cars, for instance, give brand names to their products, targeting such values as luxury, elegance, size, durability and affordability. My assumption in this paper is that car rebranding in Nigeria, though not commercial oriented, is as effective as corporate/institutional branding in fulfilling the functions of branding enumerated above.

2.2. Appellation

As reflected in some of its synonyms such as christening, cognomen, cryptonym, epithet, eponym, euonym, tautonym, terming, title and trinomen, the word 'appellation', which derives from Latin *appellātiō*, is not easy to nail down to a single definition. However, *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language* (2009) offers an apparently simple but comprehensive definition of it as “a name, title or designation and the act of naming or giving title to” someone or something.

This definition, taking appellation beyond its inventive connotation, suggests that appellation captures or defines all sort of names, labels, designations and descriptive phrases used for persons and non- persons- real or imaginary.

2.3. Honorifics

Most definitions of the notion of honorifics point to those expressions in language that “mark relationships of respect” (Agha, 1998) and are grammatically marked by being prefixed or appended to people's names. Also, *Encyclopedia of Language &*

Linguistics (online) describes honorifics as referring to special linguistic forms that are used as signs of deference toward the nominal referent or to the addressee.

As instantiated in the data for this study, honorifics are not only addressed or limited to human or animate beings; they are also extendable to material or inanimate objects (like cars under study). I am coining a new concept ‘material honorifics’ to describe the situation wherein people develop address terms or labels to convey their esteem for material/inanimate objects. The analysis that follows clarifies this sub-category of honorifics.

3. Analysis 1: Textual

In what follows, I first present in the table below the data gathered for this study. Some of the re-branded car names in Yoruba are rendered or glossed in English. Based on my personal response to the naming practice and personal observation of the cars rebranded and interaction with some retail car dealers in Nigeria, I summarize the evaluative denotation of each of the rebranding names listed. Thereafter, I treat in depth the rhetorical significance of rebranding names (RN) under four main headings.

S/N	Re-branding Name	Car Brand	Evaluative Denotation
1	First lady	Toyota Corolla 1.4 or 1.6 model	Feminine elegance
2	Big daddy	Toyota Camry 2002/2003 Model	Masculine superiority Big size
3	Baby boy	Honda Accord 1998 model	Small Size.
4	Pencil	Toyota Camry 1998/1999 model	Sharpness (tiny rear light)
5	Envelope	Toyota Camry 2001	Shape of the boot
7	Pure water	Honda Accord 1986 model	Ubiquitousness/ Cheapness
8	“Allah”	Honda Accord 1990 model	Greatness
9	Muscle	Toyota Camry 2007 model	Powerfully built
10	End of discussion	Honda Accord 2003 model	Fullness/ completeness
11	Discussion continues	Honda Accord 2005 Model	Advancement on 11 in rear light
12	<i>Ijapa</i> (tortoise)	Volkswagen	Dome- shaped
13	<i>Igala</i> (The antelope)	Volkswagen	Speed

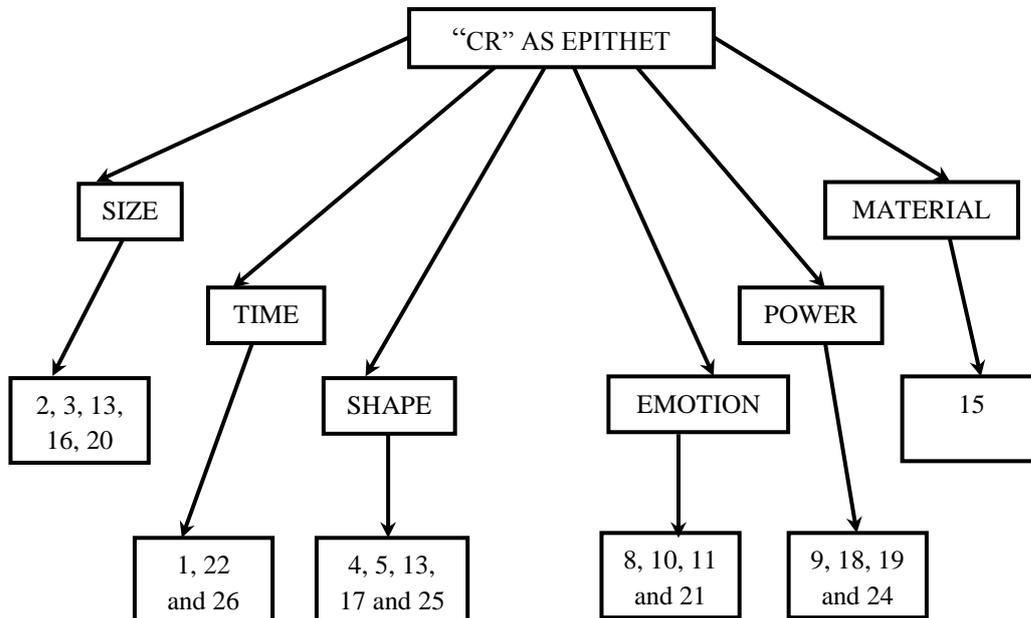
14	<i>Yerinbeto</i> (Adjust your head for me to spit)	Two door cars	Narrowness/ smallness
15	<i>Jagi</i> (The wooden one)		Roughness/ ruggedness
16	<i>Orobo</i> (The big one)	Toyota Camry 1992 model	Thickness
17	<i>Oloju opolo</i> (the frog eyed)	Mercedes Benz 1998/1999 Model	Firmness/ powerful headlight
18	Bullet	Honda accord, 1997/98	Swiftness of speed
19	Bulldog	Honda Accord 1995 model	Firmness
20	Baby Benz	Mercedes Benz 190 E	Modesty/Smartness (smaller in size to v-boot)
21	Anaconda/Evil Spirit	Honda Accord 2009 Model	Exceptional/ Tempting
22	'Millenium'	Toyota Camry 1998 Model	Freshness/
23	Big for nothing	Toyota Camry 2004 model	Outsized
24	Beast	Mercedes Benz 600 1995 model	Powerful
25	V Boot/ V Nyansh	Mercedes Benz 300 1990 model	Bottom heavy
26	COJA	BMW 325i 2i001 series 3	Special for an occasion

3.1. CR as Epithet of Value

In the words of Beller (2012), the term 'epithet' traditionally refers to a class of noun phrases that tend to have strong expressive or emotive content. Simply put, an epithet is a characterizing word. In relation to these descriptions of epithet, the CR discourse under study qualifies to be described as epithet as it performs the basic functions of epithet which include evaluative, expressive, descriptive and individuality. It provides such information which relates to or captures the car needs of people in the aspects of size, elegance, durability and speed power. In Figure 1 below, I categorize the CRNs in the table above under different categories of epithet and thereafter discuss them more explicitly.

The analysis indicates that CRNs 2, 3,13,16,20 and 23 as labeled in the table above are nominal adjectives of size, CRNs 1, 22 and 26 are nominal adjectives of age or time and CRNs 4,5,13.17 and 25 are nominal adjectives of shape. CRNs 8, 10 11 and 25 are emotive epithets; CRNs 9, 18, 19 and 24 are epithets of power, while CRN 15 is a material epithet.

Figure 1: Categories of CR epithets



Though a CRN generally performs functions similar to the functions of grammatical epithets by reflecting certain sorts of value, we can talk about some that are humorously derogatory and some that are enthusiastically eulogizing. CRNs in these two categories will be discussed later in this paper.

3.2. CR as Rhetoric of Power Competition

CRNs in this category apparently reflect the sense of competitiveness among the Nigerian youths, particularly those who own or whose parents own a car. Youths are exploratory; they sacrifice their time in investigating things that might not be very important. They compete over their parents' possessions to the extent that they express class sentiments in the associations they keep. Especially among the yahoo fraudsters called 'yahoo boys' (meaning, cyber fraudsters) in Nigeria, a car is a means of power competition. In competition with the adult society, which might have taken some pride in certain cars, the Nigerian youths play down the integrity of certain cars and construct an extravagant image of some others, especially those they consider fit for the youth.

For instance, when the youths find that the Honda Accord 1990 model has become the favourite car for most people, they arrogate superior power to the 1998 model, which they nickname “baby boy”. The primary denotation of this name is the smallness of its size compared to the 1990 model. Beyond this primary denotation, this epithet is a rhetorical extension of the vigor commonly associated with youthful age as opposed to slowness associated with old age. Also, the RNs 10, 11 and 12 above are epithets of competition. The RN, “End of Discussion” is a hyperbolic epithet which implies that all car products manufactured before the car so named were not as wonderful as to call for public talk. The RN therefore connotes that the car product in question is the end of astounding automotive innovation. There is an expression of more superior automotive power in the RN “Discussion Continues” which, suggests that the car is a continuation of advancement in automotive innovations.

Through the discourse practice of CR, the Nigerian youths extend the general class sentiment which spread through Nigeria by allocating the fitting cars for different categories of people and sexes. With the car naming practice, the CR enunciators in Nigeria create superior and inferior images of car users in the country.

3.3. CR as Rhetoric of Demeaning Humour

The CR in this category performs the rhetorical function which relates to what Rampton (1995:171) describes as “jocular abuse”. This is an area where CR differs from normal branding, which is usually a favourable representation of products. One of the examples of cars in this category is the Honda Accord 1996 model nicknamed “Pure Water”.

“Pure water” in Nigerian parlance means drinking water sold in a plastic sachet. It is one of the few products that can be bought with the lowest naira denomination (five naira). “Pure water” in sachets is cheaper than bottled water and hence used by more people. In the context of car rebranding discourse under study, this term has been appropriated to connect the Honda product with the qualities of being cheap and ordinary. Though this nickname is demeaning, it is favourable to the promotion of the product in the Nigerian nation, where people judge a product good by the number of people that use it, believing that if the product is bad, it will not enjoy impressive patronage.

Other examples of CRNs in this category are *ijapa* (tortoise/ beetle) and *yerinbeto*. The two nicknames lower the quality of the car in terms of shape and space. The kind of liberty which back sitters in other cars enjoy to do whatever they like, including such dirty things as spitting through the window and getting rid of orange peels and sugar cane chaff, is not possible in two-door cars that *yerinbeto* indexes. *Ijapa* (the beetle) connotes lack of room and elegance. In Yoruba culture for example, the tortoise is the symbol of stinginess. The nickname is therefore a metaphorical

extension of this mythical attribute of tortoise to the space economy in the car products.

3.4. CR as Allusive Rhetoric

CR in this category relates to important social and political events. CRN 27 is an example. This model got its name after it was purchased for ministers and delegates at the COJA games in Abuja in 2003.

COJA is the French acronym for Comité d'Organisation des Jeux Africains, meaning Committee for the Organisation of the African Games, but Nigerians refer to the game itself as COJA. The car nicknamed COJA was the official car of the event and became popular after the event. Another example in this category is CR 1, “first lady”, which is a reference to the military political era in Nigeria when the military head of state as well as the state governors gave special power to their wives through the creation of the office of the first lady. It was this car that was the official car for this esteemed office of the first lady. Similarly, ‘Baby boy’ for the Honda Accord 1998 (RN 3) is an allusion to John Singleton’s film titled ‘Baby Boy’.

3.5. CR as Rhetoric of Endorsement

CRNs in this rhetorical category are epithets of approval. Such CRNs are expressions of heightened emotion of admiration. For instance, CRN 8 above, which developed in the Northern part of Nigeria, where Honda products are mostly cherished, is an exclamatory epithet of passionate admiration. “Allah” is the Arabic word for God. The word is used as the seal of facts or truths in Nigeria, particularly among the Hausa, where it is an epithet of finality in discourses.

According to Afronuts (2010), the Honda Accord 1990 model acquired this name because it is supposedly said that when a Hausa man boasted about this car product, he would exclaim in the pidgin exclamatory statement *Na my Honda, Allah!* (That is my Honda). There is plentiful evidence that this car is extremely popular in northern Nigeria.. For instance, it is common knowledge in Nigeria that stealers of this Honda Accord model from any part of the country often target the Northern part of the country where there is a steady market for this car, even for the most heavily used. In view of this, the Nigerian police most often spotlight their search to the North whenever there is a car theft involving Honda Accord brands of cars in any part of the country.

Other CRNs which relate to the rhetorical function of exaggerated endorsement include “End of Discussion” (Honda Accord, 2003 model), “Evil Spirit” (Honda Accord, 2009 model), “Beast” (Mercedes Bonze, 600, 1995 model), “Bulldog” (Honda Accord, 1995 model) and “Bullet” (Honda Accord, 1997/1998 model).

The car nicknamed “Evil Spirit” is said to be very tempting considering the driving pleasure it offers its users. One retail car dealer interviewed about the name of this car responded by saying “the car is TOO BAD because all its inner facilities are as pleasing as those found in a rich man’s sitting room”. The CN is therefore a paradox or a metaphorical extension of the mischievous quality of the devil on the car product. Similarly, “bullet”, “beast” and “bulldog” are eulogies or honorific appraisal of the speed quality of the cars and their ability to withstand hard use and bad road conditions. There is animal imagery in the CRs “beast”, and “bulldog” suggesting that the cars so nicknamed are as powerfully built as the animals from which they derive their labels.

4. Analysis 2: Empirical:

Effects of CR on Consumers’ Behaviour

Car renaming discourse in Nigeria can be regarded as informal, unpaid-for advertising because, like formal advertising, it has significant impact on the attention, comprehension, exposure, awareness, recognition and attitude of prospective car buyers in the country. To determine how CR produces these impacts, questionnaires administered to some one thousand car owners in major cities in Nigeria were analyzed. The question was: *To what extent is your choice of cars affected by the appellations given to them?* The questionnaire had four guided responses: (A. Not at all (NE) B. To a less extent (LSE) C. To a large extent (LE) D. To a very large extent (VLE). NE recorded 130 (13%); LSE had 115 (11.5%); LE had 305 (30.5%) and VLE recorded 450 (45%). The chart below presents the result obtained from the questionnaires:

Figure 2 Effects of CR on consumer’s behaviour

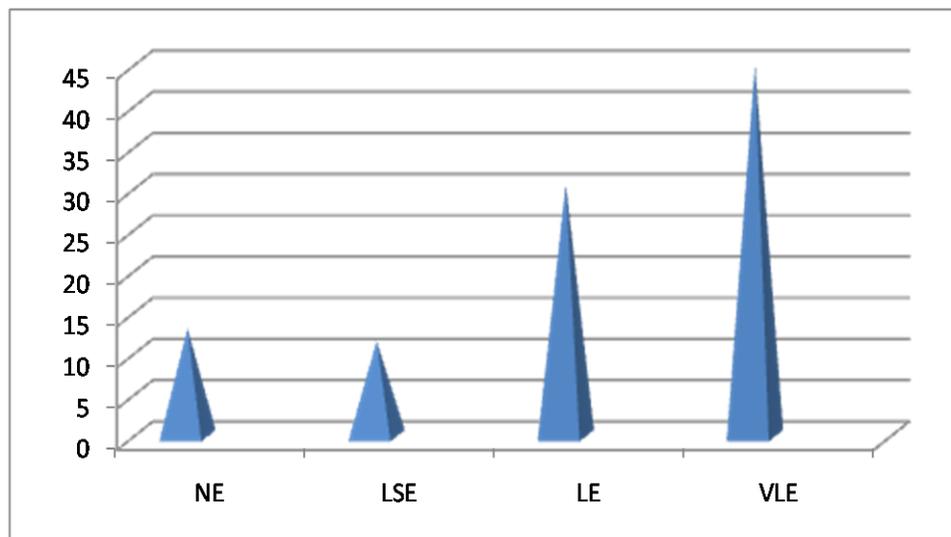
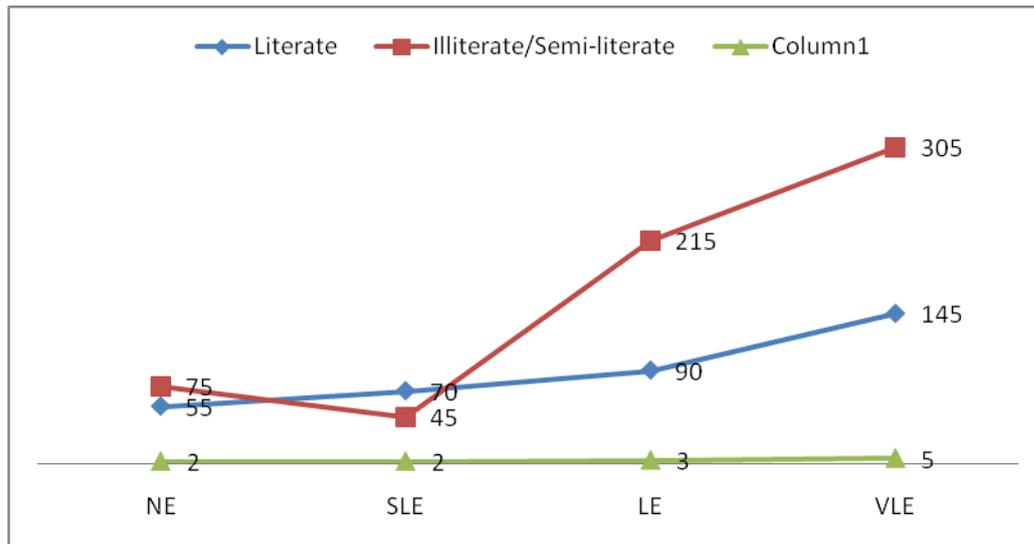


Figure 2 indicates that while 83% of the subjects agree that car nicknaming affected their purchase behavior, only 13% claimed that the practice of car-rebranding does not influence their choice of car. Out of the 103 subjects with the latter claim, 75 were illiterates/ semi-literates while the remaining 55 were literates. Figure 3 represents this variation and others more explicitly:

Figure 3: Effects of CR on illiterate and illiterate consumers



6. Conclusion

This paper has indicated that car re-branding in Nigeria is primarily a discourse of youth emotional claims or attitudinal epithets, which although it appears playful is highly stylized. It has also shown that car rebranding discourse is indexical of youth micro-world value. The discourse practice is reflective of the ways in which Nigerian youths construct their social world through language. These youths are unpaid advertisers, whose ‘local’ branding practice produces as much impact on car consumers as strategies of brand marketers.

Appendix: Sample Cars and their Call Names



HONDA ACCORD, 1986 model (Pure water)



HONDA ACCORD, 1990 model (Alla)



HONDA ACCORD, 1995 model (Bulldog)



TOYOTA CAMRY, 1992 model (Orobo)



HONDA ACCORD 2003 (End of Discussion)

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