Culture on Wheels: A Social Semiotic Insight into Bangladeshi Vehicles

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing my degree at Brac University.

2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.

3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.

4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

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Abstract

Vehicular art is a phenomena found in many parts of the world. Like many South Asian nations, Bangladeshi vehicles too have phrases and drawings painted on them. In the capital of Dhaka, millions of commuters make their way daily in these expressive modes of transportation. Being incredibly visible in the public space, these vehicles provide a multimodal presentation wherever they go. This study uses Kress and van Leeuwen's framework of Visual Grammar (2006) to make a social semiotic analysis of this phenomenon. The objective of this paper is to discuss the features and functions of the semiotic resources found in the writings and drawings on Bangladeshi vehicles, and with it to see what insights they provide into the linguistic, cultural, and social dimensions of Bangladeshi society. Moreover, since no previous research on the social semiotics of Bangladeshi transportations has been found while conducting this research, an attempt to address this gap in research is also made.

Keywords: Linguistic analysis; multimodality; social semiotics; vehicular art; vehicular

discourse.

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Introduction

Vehicles provide a prominent social site for art and messages in Bangladesh's urban landscape. Containing texts and drawings, designs on the bodies of vehicles provide a colourful and expressive multimodal presentation. Currently, in the capital city of Dhaka, there are more than 1.8 million registered vehicles that transport over 10 million commuters daily (The Business Standard, 2022). Colourful rickshaws are ubiquitous here and attract the attention of every visitor to the country (Lahiri-Dutt and Williams, 2008. p-15). Vehicles ranging from public transport - local buses, *tempos*, rickshaws; to freight vehicles such as trucks, are all incredibly expressive in this South Asian nation.

Around the world vehicular art can be seen in many different varieties. Sometimes it flourishes as spray-painted graffiti art, like in Russia, or the West, but there it comes with the negative tag of 'vandalism' (Scollon & Scollon,2003; as cited by Gonçalves and Milani, 2022; p-436). Other times, like in Nigeria, South Africa, and South Asia, it is societally welcomed, and becomes part of the culture, flourishing with humorous messages and colourful brush strokes (Mensah & Nyong, 2022; Matsabisa, 2020; Madan, 2018). The spread of this unique trend can be traced back to Afghan truck art, and surprisingly, the Cold War. When Afghani refugees migrated to Pakistan during the Soviet Invasion of 1979, their craftsmen arrived with them and slowly spread the trend throughout greater South Asia (Elias, 2011; as cited by Lahiri-Dutt & Williams, 2008. p-51). It is perhaps this common root that makes vehicular art so similar in style to the regions it spread to. However similar, each region being influenced by their own values, beliefs, and preferred aesthetics

evolved the art into slightly different styles, each becoming a snapshot of its own society. Numerous social semiotic papers were found exploring art on vehicles from India and Pakistan, but none were found on the social semiotics of Bangladeshi transportation.

The objective of this study is thus to explore Bangladeshi vehicles as multimodal compositions and see what insights they provide into the linguistic, cultural, and social dimensions of society. This research aims to find what kind of messages are spread and reinforced across Dhaka's urban landscape knowingly or unknowingly, by simply being written in these vehicles on the move. This study is an attempt to address the gap in linguistic and social semiotic research of Bangladeshi transport. This paper focuses on the composition of five different vehicles found within the capital of Dhaka. Michael Halliday's (1978) theoretical framework of metafunctions and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006; as cited by Jusslin et al., 2020 p-48) extension of it - modified to study multimodal compositions - is used to analyse the data set within this paper. With this, I delve into the linguistic landscape found on the back of Bangladeshi vehicles.

Literature Review

Vehicular art is a phenomenon that has emerged in various places in the world, we find so as we explore work by a number of different authors (Mensah & Nyong, 2022; Matsabisa, 2020; Madan, 2018). Kress and van Leeuwen's framework of Visual Grammar is perfect for analysing the effects of vehicular art on society because of the multimodal nature of these vehicles (2006; as cited by Jusslin et al., 2020 p-48). Kress and van Leeuwen modified the metafunctions found in Halliday's framework, and developed 'Visual Grammar', using it to analyse different elements within any multimodal presentation - be it images, video, or in our case: art and texts on wheels. In the present Visual Grammar has become essential to conducting any social semiotic analysis, all

with the power of its three metafunctions. The representational, interactive and compositional metafunctions (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; as cited by Jusslin et al. p-52).

Providing a very insightful look into the social semiotics that surround truck art in India, Ashima Madan writes her paper *Visual Semiotics of Truck Art in India* (2018). She explores the history of truck art in India and discusses research and books on truck art around the world. The earliest studies about this topic can be traced back to the 1970s in Afghanistan. Madan notes that these early studies focused only on the praise of the visual aspect of art on wheels, without looking into its effect on society or language (2018. p-17). An important point that Madan makes is how, unlike Pakistan, truck art in India is often 'utilitarian' rather than purely aesthetic. This is because Indian painters and owners must adhere to regulations by the Central Motor Vehicle Rules of 1989 (Madan, 2018. p-3). We later explore in this paper that Bangladesh too has certain mandatory rules to follow when it comes to painting vehicles, for example, as shown in Data 1., all CNG auto rickshaws owned by companies must be painted green, and have emergency Police Contact Room numbers in full display written in their bodies (Data 1).

Thoroughly quoted by Madan is the 2011 book by Jamal Elias titled *On Wings of Diesel*. This book is written based on a study spanning over a decade. It is the first of its kind as it takes into account ethnographic statements of truck owners and design makers in Pakistan, at a time when the study of any vehicular art focused on its aesthetics only. It also is an interesting read as it explores how truck art is perceived in a country that is so Islamic in nature - with its expressive images and symbols - for the Islamic world is generally perceived to be opposed to visual representations (Elias, 2011; as cited by Madan, 2018. p-18). Pakistani vehicles are immensely expressive, and one thing that I noticed when reading Rafia Bilal and Wasima Shezad's *Discourse Analysis of Written Text on*

Pakistani Public Transport Vehicles (2018)*,* is that Pakistani vehicles often have more text than drawings on them when compared to Bangladeshi vehicles. Both in length and in number. Common themes in Pakistani vehicles include quotations about morality, witty-humorous remarks on socio-economic problems, and an immense desire for upward mobility. Though not discussed enough, misogyny is one of the themes in the data set. One of the eight texts that they analysed targeted 'girls nowadays days', criticising them for not being religious enough and taking pride in speaking in English (2018. p-509). Just like in Pakistan, we find Bangladesh also has a lot of religious messages presented on its vehicles (Data 1, Data 4, Data 5).

Lastly, a paper from Nigeria is examined. Mensah and Nyon examine writings on vehicles in the city of Calabar, South-eastern Nigeria (2022). What is striking looking at the artworks on the vehicles is that they resembled vehicular art from South Asia in style with their use of bold colours and lettering style. They state that their social semiotic paper found a number of functions by writings of vehicles. For example, they serve as a platform for representation of one's beliefs. Religious - as many writings were found related to God and Jesus - but also life lessons, and 'sexist ideologies' (2022. p-19). It is an interesting finding because this proves that these writings are similar to what has been found both in Pakistan and Bangladesh, visually, but also thematically: focusing on religion and wise quotes (Data 1, Data 2, Data 3, Data 4, Data 5).

In this paper we will also be exploring Cultural Memory, and how reinforcements help keep traditions alive. In any society, cultural memory is a collective concept for all of the knowledge that directs behaviour and experience (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995. p-132). Another way to say that cultural memory is dependent on reinforcements is to say that it is practice-reflexive. It interprets common practices in terms of proverbs, and maxims. We will explore in this paper how vehicular art

in Bangladesh is also used as a mode of reinforcing religious traditions, and thus quote this concept (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995. p-132).

Methodology

The objective of my study is to explore Bangladeshi vehicles as multimodal compositions and see what insights they provide into the cultural, linguistic and social dimensions of Bangladeshi society. For this, a qualitative research method has been used to conduct this study. I used both primary and secondary sources of data as methodological tools to achieve my research objectives.

For primary data, I collected photos whenever I was in the busy streets of Dhaka. Messages and artwork on the backs of Bangladeshi vehicles have always been something that caught my eye. In the span of the last four years, even before I knew I would be conducting this study, I have accumulated numerous photos of vehicular art from various places in Bangladesh. When the topic of this paper was chosen, photos were retrieved from my personal online cloud. In the end, I incorporated some of those old photos along with the new ones I took in the months leading up to the analysis. The images were clicked within the years 2019-2023. Out of over fifty photos, five images were chosen to delimit the study. Locations of the photos were all within Dhaka city and taken in the following areas: Gulshan-1, Tejgaon, Panthapath, Banglamotor and Mohakhali.

Retrieving secondary data consisted of browsing online journals. Many social semiotic papers used in this research are retrieved through online open journals. However, not much literature is available about social semiotic research on South Asian vehicles. Renowned journals such as JSTOR could not provide any results. I relied on Google Scholar to find some of the papers cited in this study.

Social Semiotic Analysis

This study aims to deconstruct the visual components of Bangladeshi vehicular art, in an attempt to uncover hidden narratives that are disseminated within society, either directly or indirectly. Michael Halliday's theory of metafunctions was created to dissect the functions of language(1978). It is using this theory that Kress and van Leeuwen brought forward ' Visual Grammar' to analyse multimodal forms of communication (2006; as cited by Jusslin et al., 2020 p-52). This is the perfect methodology to use to analyse Bangladeshi transport as it exhibits multiple modes. Before we begin I explain in detail the various metafunctions that we use in this study.

Visual Grammar

Representational Metafunction

The representational metafunction explores how semiotic modes portray objects and how humans experience these portrayals (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; as cited by Jusslin et al.,2020 p-52). This metafunction encompasses two primary processes: narrative and conceptual processes. Narrative processes involve representing patterns of phenomena and experiences by considering participants, circumstances, actions, events, and processes of change. In simple words, narrative processes involve representing through stories and linguistic means. This process conveys information chronologically. While conceptual processes involve representing structures related to classification, analysis, and symbolism. (Jusslin et al., 2020. p-52).

Interactive Metafunction

The interactive metafunction portrays the social connections among the producer, the viewer, and the object being represented. (Jam et al., 2016. p-52). Examples of this in our study can be found whenever we see that there is 'STOP' written on the back of vehicles (Data 1, Data 3), or

instructions such as আগে নামুন (Get down first), and পরে উঠুন (Get up later) are present. This is because they are asking for actions from the viewer. It consists of several categories: Contact, Social distance, Gaze, Attitude, and Modality (Kress & van Leuween, 2006; as cited by Jam et al., 2016. p-41).

Compositional Metafunction:

The compositional metafunction focuses on how 'elements of representation and interaction are integrated into a meaningful whole' (Kress & van Leuween, 2006; as cited by Jam et al., 2016. p-41). It consists of three categories:

Information value. This category considers the relative positions of different elements to each other. The positions can be centred or polarised. In centred information value, the main information is placed in the centre with supporting elements surrounding it (circular arrangement). In polarised information value, the information is organised horizontally (given/new) and vertically (real/ideal) (Kress & van Leuween, 2006; as cited by Jam et al., 2016. p-43).

Framing. This category determines the degree of connection or disconnection between the verbal and visual layers of communication.

Salience. Salience refers to the importance or prominence of elements concerning each other. It is determined by factors such as size, colour contrast, tonal contrast, and sharpness of focus. Larger objects, sharper focus, and higher tonal and colour contrasts make elements more salient (Adham, 2002; as cited by Jam et al., 2016. p-43).

With all of this in mind, in the following section, we finally dive into the analysis of the five different data.

Data Analysis

Data 1

The back of a CNG auto-rickshaw.

Here is the first composition to be analysed, it is a CNG auto-rickshaw.

Representational System

We first look at how people interacting with the vehicle perceive its composition. Bangla being the dominant language it is clear that anyone who can read it is the target audience. The composition represents a common experience of Bangladeshi society, which is the practice of Islam. Just as in Dhaka five times a day the call to prayer reminds people to pray; the vehicle too reinforces the importance of Islam in society wherever it goes. The viewer is instantly given numerous religious reminders by looking at the back of the vehicle. আল্লাহ তুমিই মহান ('Allah you are great') is written in the biggest font. Its assertive tone makes it part of the narrative process at play in the composition. This is an example of a narrative representational process. Then the second reminder is that they should pray, for praying is the 'key' to heaven. In this second example prayer is connected through the symbol of being 'the key to heaven', thus being an example of the conceptual representational process. The majority of commuters in Dhaka city are Muslims and the writings in the vehicle align with the majority's beliefs. We can see that the word 'Allah-u' written in Arabic, is a conceptual process present in the composition since any Muslim looking at it would have no difficulty recognising the name of Allah. The writing is universally recognised by all Muslims, despite their proficiency in Arabic.

Road safety is also represented in the composition. The word 'Stop' is written in Bangla on the bottom left side, and its contrasting colours are eye-catching too. It is a reminder for any vehicle behind them to press on their brakes if in too close a proximity. Next written on the vehicle, is 'P.C.R.' followed by a phone number representing the Police Control Room. P.C.R. stands for Police Control Room and is a safety number, but the numbers aren't highlighted as the other writings in the composition, as its typography is rather bland in comparison. The frame

with the telephone numbers is the only element written in English. The number plate and its copy are both written in Bangla, and they are very straightforward, looking at it the viewer knows that the vehicle is registered under the Dhaka division and not outside.

Interactive System:

We now look at the social connections among the producer, the viewer, and the object being represented. Most of the writing is in Bangla in the back of this vehicle. The producer has targeted people who can read Bangla and who are Muslims. The language used in the writing নামাজ কায়েম করুন, নামাজ বেহেস্তের চাবি। (Pray Salat, Salat is the key to heaven) is formal using the Bengali formal way of addressing ' করুন' (korun). This honorific shows a distance between the producer and reader and is a way they show respect to the reader of the text. Even the Bengali sign on the bottom left that says one to থামুন (Stop) is in the honorific 'Thamun' and not the informal 'Thamo'.

However, when addressing Allah, in the phrase আল্লাহ তুমিই মহান ('Allah you are great') the producer refers to God informally using 'তুমিই'. This indicates the closeness they feel towards Allah. This after all, is not uncommon, as the use of honorifics according to Japan's National Language Report is often based on the 'degree of intimacy' instead of any hierarchical relationship (Bunkacho, 1996; as cited by Okamoto, 2011 p-3676).

Compositional System

Informational Value: Purnanto and Ardhian, argued that the streets in cities are 'the city's showcase'(2020, p-93)**.** It is arguable that all of the information put on display in these countless vehicles serves as a reinforcement of existing culture. I would say that this vehicle is an example of Cultural Memory being reproduced. One of the qualities of Cultural Memory is

that it becomes common practice through proverbs and maxims, and here it is being 'practice reflexive by reinforcing prayers and আল্লাহ্ তুমিই মহান ('Allah you are great')(Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995.p-132).

In this section, we look at the relative positions of different elements in the composition. As pictured in Data 1, there are several things written on the back of this vehicle. The CNG is painted green, with the top half of the CNG - the walls and roof - being made in a dark green waterproof material. The steel body is painted in a vibrant, much lighter shade of green. At the very top, mirroring both on the right and left side, contrasting on the dark green plastic cover there is a white patch with the word *Allahu* written on it in Arabic, which is Allah/God's name.

The most noticeable writing that has the most importance in the composition comes in between these two writings. In very big letters is written: আল্লাহ্ তুমিই মহান ('Allah you are great'). The colour yellow is used to paint the top half of the three-word phrase. Red, green and then again red are used to paint the bottom half of the three words. The font used is considerably rounded in style and is bold. There is not much spacing between the words.

Right below this the abbreviation 'P.C.R.' is written followed by telephone numbers. P.C.R. stands for Police Control Room, and the number following are telephone numbers one can use to contact the police. Next, right below the window on the back are the words: নামাজ কায়েম করুন, নামাজ বেহেস্তের চাবি। (Pray Salat, Salat is the key to heaven). This is written in a smaller size font than the writing আল্লাহ্ তুমিই মহান ('Allah you are great') above. A similarity remains however in style, and how it is written in the same bold font, multi-coloured way. White is used to paint the top half of the words, while the bottom half of the words are coloured red or green alternatively. Below the lights on the right side, we can see the information on the number plate

written again, this time painted on the body of the vehicle, in black and white. On the exact opposite side, below the lights on the left side, is a white rectangle with a red border. Inside the box painted boldly in red is a single word: থামুন (Stop). Under the number plate is a worn-out sticker that has the letters TARA written on it. But we know the word that is written on this tattered sticker is a remnant of the word 'Uttara'. Despite being the name of a place in Dhaka, it is also the name of a popular vehicle distribution company, 'Uttara Motors'. Signalling the CNG was sold through the company.

Salience

The topmost writing of আল্লাহ তুমিই মহান ('Allah you are great'), seems to be in the foreground, as it is what catches attention the most. Next, the bottom left writing of 'Stop' is what catches everyone's attention the most, for it is very brightly painted in a bold contrast of red and white. The use of multiple colours to write the religious phrases certainly makes the writings very captivating to look at. Even before we look at the various emergency numbers given in the back of the vehicle, our attention as readers reaches the other writings because the colours yellow, green, red and white have been used to write them. The 'Allahu' written in white patches also is striking, as it is written boldly in black above a white background. The most noticeable aspect of the vehicle and its writings is thus the religious aspect of most writings. Mostly white has been used to write in this green CNG - to provide a stark contrast with the background. Even the phrases painted in multicolour have a white border in each letter.

Framing

The viewer can identify 8 frames in the back of the vehicle. The frames can be set apart with different frame lines, dividing lines, differences in colours and fonts, and sizes. One of the

first frames noticeable is a product of the bent cover of the roof in the CNG. It compartmentalised the writing আল্লাহ তুমিই মহান ('Allah you are great'), making it frame one. Next to it, on both left and right, 'Allahu' is written in white squares that frame the words. This makes frames two and three. Because of how far apart the writings are, 'P.C.R. …' makes frame four, and নামাজ কায়েম করুন, নামাজ বেহেস্তের চাবি। (Pray Salat, Salat is the key to heaven) is frame five. The word 'Stop' is framed in a red-bordered rectangle with a white background that instantly calls for the viewer's attention, it's frame six. Next, the information on the number plate is copied and written again under a white background - making it frame seven. Lastly, the worn-out sticker of 'UTTARA' is frame eight, as it separates the name of the distributor from other writings. Half the frames in the composition: four out of eight, have Islamic sayings in them.

Data 2

A pickup truck.

Representational System

By looking at the mini truck we can see that it has a moral message. The blue and white paint used in the truck is calm, cold colours that counter the heat in Dhaka city most of the year. A thing to note would be the use of passive voice. There is no mention of the subject, rather it is implied that it is a good thing to be searching for the 'truth', and that 'they' are searching for it. Moreover, the message is ambiguous since what 'truth' is, is open to interpretation. It serves as inspiration to onlookers to look for 'truth'.

Interactive System

We can learn a lot about a message from the language it is written in, the phrasing, and the font size. Firstly, we observe that the message is written in Bangla. This means the intended audience for interaction consists of Bangla-speaking individuals. Moreover, the font size is very big and bold. We can also conclude that those who have written the message must wish the message to be seen from a long distance - hence they have made sure the writing is so big in size and bold so that many people may see the message.

Compositional System

Informational Value: This pick-up/mini truck was spotted in Tejgaon, Dhaka. The entire truck is painted a vibrant blue, with the front having a yellow stripe. The rather simple truck has on its side written: সত্যের সন্ধানে প্রতিদিন (In search of truth every day). It's written in white, and in a bold typeface, the writing dominates the body of the vehicle. The strong contrast, in font size and colours makes the writing visible from a very long distance. The information in the truck is very straightforward. The phrase সত্যের সন্ধানে প্রতিদিন (In search of truth every day) is a statement. It is not tied to any brand or religion but instead delivers a message to onlookers

wherever the truck goes. It perhaps works as a reminder and wishes to inspire its onlookers to be in search of truth.

Salience: The phrase সত্যের সন্ধানে প্রতিদিন (In search of truth every day) is written using white paint in a blue background by the side of the mini truck. It is the only message on the visible side of the vehicle and stands out because of its contrast and big font size. There is no other writing that comes in the back or foreground of the phrase.

Framing: There is only one frame visible in the composition. The phrase has no other writing that distracts attention away from the phrase.

Data 3

The back side of a leguna

The composition is on the back side of a popular Bangladeshi mode of transport which is locally called 'leguna' or 'tempo'.

Representational System

'Tempos' can be very packed, and getting on one can be quite chaotic with so many people wanting to get on the vehicle before anyone else. The demand for cheap transport is very high, and the things that are written on the body of the vehicle simply help create order. All of

the words are directed to people who may interact with the vehicle. Be it passengers, or drivers driving right behind the tempo. There is an emphasis on the orderliness expected by the service provider, customers reading what is written on the body of the vehicle are likely to conform to what is written. আগে নামুন (Get down first), and পরে উঠুন (Get up later) thus are part of the narrative process of the composition. It offers a form of narration which people may follow and interact in an orderly manner with the vehicle. On the other hand, talking of conceptual processes, Red is a universally recognized symbol of danger or attention (Kuniecki; 2015. p-). All of the writings being in red instantly call attention to viewers.

Interactive System

The writings are all in Bangla and are directed to people who can read and understand the language. All of the writings are instructions to people interacting with the vehicle that command people to follow through with the things asked. Reading the instructions people would know a bit more about how to interact with the vehicle. Both আগে নামুন (Get down first), and পরে উঠুন (Get up later) and গাড়ীরর/ পিছনে/ ঝুলবেন না (Don't hang in the back of the vehicle) help organise the interaction people have with the vehicle. They are also using honorifics to address their customers.

Compositional System

Informational Value

This is a photo of a 'leguna' (sometimes called tempo) in Dhaka's Green Road, while stuck in traffic. The colour of the vehicle is a sandwich of yellow, and white. These being the main background colours, a number of things are written on it using the colour red. গাড়ীরর/ পিছনে/ ঝুলবেন না (Don't hang in the back of the vehicle) is written at the very top, in red. Next,

between the exit way are the phrases: আগে নামুন (Get down first), and পরে উঠুন (Get up later). These are written in a font size slightly smaller than the other writings in the vehicle. থামুন **(Stop)** is written on the bottom left side of the vehicle, and notably, it is the largest written word in the composition. Lastly, above the pedestal that passengers would use to step in or out of the vehicle is the single word ধন্যবাদ (Thank you). This is written in red with a yellow background, just like the topmost writing of গাড়ীরর/ পিছনে/ ঝুলবেন না (Don't hang in the back of the vehicle).

Salience

In the composition, all of the writings are in the foreground. The background is composed of plain colours - white or yellow. The word থামুন **(Stop)** catches the most attention because it is written in the biggest font. Being written by hand, all of the writings seem to be of slightly different sizes and are positioned in different parts of the back of the vehicle without overlap. Though most of the writings are of a similar size in font আগে নামুন (Get down first), and পরে উঠুন (Get up later) is slightly smaller in size than the other writings, and it noticed later than the other writings.

Framing

The composition has eight frames in it. At first sight, there seems to be just one clear frame with a border. The word থামুন (Stop) is put in a rectangle that has a red sinuous border/frame. But we may count all other words and phrases as separate frames, for they each are positioned away and separate from each other. This makes the composition have an altogether number of eight frames in it. Firstly, because of the obvious rectangular framing, frame 1 in this composition is 'থামুন (Stop)'. Next, with a yellow background on the very top, 'গাড়ীরর/ পিছনে/ ঝুলবেন না (Don't hang in the back of the vehicle)' catches the eye the most. I have put these

three words into three different frames because of their spacing, however because of their common yellow background, and because they are part of one sentence, we can also add them in one single frame. আগে নামুন (Get down first), and পরে উঠুন (Get up later). Are positioned on opposite sides and are each given their own frame numbers. They are frames 6, and 7 respectively. Lastly, ধন্যবাদ (Thank you) is frame number 8.

Data 4

A Bus

Here is a composition on the backside of a 'Soukhin Paribahan' bus, travelling to Mymensingh from Dhaka.

Representational System

In social semiotics and Visual Grammar, narrative and conceptual processes play significant roles in the representational system. At very first glance we can see that a narrative process is on display in the bus. It is so as it mentions the route by which it travels. By looking at the bus lookers know that it is an inter-city vehicle. Moreover, Shoukhin Paribahan is a popular bus in Bangladesh, and the brand is shown in the glass of the vehicle and works as an advertisement throughout the route it travels - the brand name thus being part of the conceptual process. The logo reminds people of the prestige that the company has built over the years of good service. These two top writings are intended for potential customers to see. There is also a lot of religious connection in the phrases written on the bus. The phrases that connect the journey to religion, by the various phrases that bless the journey or person reading it, and moreover with the instructional 'নামাজ কায়েম করুন (Establish prayer/salat)' represents the importance of religion to the sign maker. Lastly, the viewer sees an English phrase: *Cod bless you* (Misspelt, God). This phrase wishes blessings to the onlooker. But with the misspelt word, it also provides humour to anyone with a knowledge of English. Moving on to conceptual processes, the phrase ফি-আমানিল্লাহ (With the safety of Allah) has become a symbolic phrase to all Muslims in Bangladesh. The phrase is symbolic in nature because everyone has become accustomed to seeing it used in all sorts of vehicles travelling through highways. Also being written in red, the phrase instantly catches the attention of viewers, as red is a colour used to catch attention universally.

Interactive System

The writing is directed to potential customers and travellers who may see the bus during its inter-city travel. It advertises its brand and wishes blessings of God/Allah to anyone reading what's written on the back of the vehicle. Most of the writing is directed to people who can read and understand Bangla. It is also directed at Muslims, as much of the writing is related to Islam. There is also the use of English in one phrase.

Compositional System

Informational Value: In the composition, we see the backside of an inter-city bus. The entire bus is painted in a dominant white. We see other colours present in the design, and after white navy blue is prominent. Red, orange and yellow are also used in various parts of the composition. There are no pictures in the design, instead, a number of things are written on it. Yellow, red and navy blue are used for these writings. Orange is used in one of the perpendicular stripes on the sides of the bus. If we focus on the very backside of the bus, we see that the writing starts on the back glass. Bright yellow is used to write the name of the bus company name: সৌখিন (Shoukhin). Below it, the route is mentioned on glass in white. It reads: ঢাকা - ময়মনসিংহ - ঢাকা (Dhaka-Mymensingh-Dhaka). On the body of the bus in a big font, and using red are the Arabic words ফি-আমানিল্লাহ (With the safety of Allah) written, however, this is written using Bengali letters, thus making it a transliteration. Below this, in a smaller sized font and in navy blue is written নামাজ কায়েম করুন (Establish prayer/salat). Below this, there are navy blue and red stripes painted as designed on the bus. Lastly, below all of the above in navy blue, with a fancy font, and caps locked in English is written: *Cod bless you* (Misspelt, God).

Salience

In the composition, there is no overlap in writing. সৌখিন (Shoukhin) the bus company's name stands out the most because of its large-sized font. ফি-আমানিল্লাহ (With the safety of Allah), and *Cod bless you* (Misspelt, God) are the second most eye-catching writings in the composition as their size is also relatively bigger than the other two writings. নামাজ কায়েম করুন (Establish prayer/salat) and the route both are written in a smaller font than the rest and thus are one of the least prominent features in the composition. There are a number of stripes present in the design of the vehicle, and those are the least notable aspects of the composition.

Framing

There are five frames in the composition. The first frame comprises the brand name and route. Frame two has ফি-আমানিল্লাহ (With the safety of Allah) written on it. Frame three has নামাজ কায়েম করুন (Establish prayer/salat) and frame four has *Cod bless you* (Misspelt, God) in it. The fifth frame consists of navy blue and red stripes above the last writing.

Data 5

A Rickshaw

This composition is on the back side of a rickshaw. Rickshaws are some of the most expressive vehicles in Bangladesh.

Representational System

The composition is very ornate. The biggest element in the design represents gratefulness to God - আল্লার দান (Allah's gift/grace/donation/offering). The rickshaw also advertises the telephone numbers of the rickshaw owner and artist and thus represents them through advertisements for their businesses. Love for mothers and family members is also represented in the composition through the mentioning of মা (mother), গফুর (Gofur), and আরাফাত (Arafat). The bottom banner with movie heroes and heroines is a cultural tradition/phenomenon that is deeply tied to Rickshaw Art.

Interactive System

All things written on the back of the vehicle are in Bangla, with the exception of phone numbers, which are written using English numerals. The writings are targeted so that people who know Bangla may interact with them - namely so that they're reminded of their religion and loved ones. The phone number is written in English because most telephones have English numerals as well. We must also take into consideration the drawings in the rickshaw. The modality in the composition has very high saturation. Everything that is painted in it, be the roosters, birds, flowers or actors, is very brightly coloured. This is a depiction of a colourful beautiful alternate reality, a dream perhaps to the sign maker, and onlookers. This aligns with one of the common themes present in Afghani truck art in the 1970s, which is the predecessor of today's rickshaw art. In his book ' On Wings of Diesel' Jamal J. Elias writes about how 'Idealised Elements of Life' are a common theme in vehicular art (2011. p-193). These lovely drawings of fertile peacocks, roosters, and actors with nourished faces, all serve as symbols of 'Idealised Elements of Life', and are part of this composition's conceptual processes.

At this point, to look at how these symbols of 'Idealised Elements of Life' were popularised, we must talk about the phenomenon of cultural memory. It is through cultural memory that members of a society act as a collective, it is because of cultural memory that traditions flourish, through repeated imitations (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995. p-132). Oftentimes, wars and tragic events of its ilk create cultural memories. In the case of Bangladesh, it is colonisation, war and famines. Bengal has seen two great famines in the past 100 years, and there is a cultural memory about it that the Bengalis share. With the cultural memory of famine, giving extra food to your loved ones has become a way to show love in Bengali culture. Another way cultural memory has made its way into society is through the mass media. Popular Bangladeshi cinema in the decades after liberation has shown all types of riches: with an abundance of food, money and overweight actors… This, in turn, inspired rickshaw artisans and brought the theme of bringing 'Idealised Elements of Life'(Elias, 2011. p-193), from Afghani truck art to Bangladeshi vehicular art too. All of which is the opposite in health from the many thin malnourished people residing in Bangladesh in the 1970s-2000s. It was also during that period that cinema banner art emerged as a distinct style in vehicular art in Bangladesh. Hence, the banner showing actors has corpulent actors and is an example of the imagined dream that rickshaw art creates. The actors in the banner are stout in comparison to the mass people - an example is the very rickshaw-wala who pedals and pulls the rickshaw all day. Perhaps looking at the lovely colours in the rickshaw, the soft pink tones in the actor's caricatures and the colourful birds, this composition's 'System of Attitude' is warm, and inviting. The intricate ornaments invite onlookers to marvel at the rickshaw.

Compositional System

Informational Value

The composition is very colourful and has multiple elements in it. First of all, the hood of this rickshaw is red but looks pink because of how it has been designed with very fine white lines. Mirroring each other, there are two panels that make the back of the rickshaw hood. The two panels mirror each other in design. The border of the panels is decorated with flowers made out of plastic. Green, yellow, blue and white - are the colours used for this. Starting at the top of each panel, there is a yellow bird. A little lower is a white circle with yet another green bird the name গফুর (Gofur) written on it. More yellow, blue and white designs that look like wings/ butterflies are seen on the hood. The entire rickshaw design is maximalist in style and we can even see flowers that have navy blue stars in them. As a steel frame starts under the hood, we can see two tigers coming from opposite directions opening their mouths to show a phone number. It is the number of the artist that painted the rickshaw, it serves as an advertisement for future rickshaw painting opportunities. Looking lower into the rickshaw frame we can observe how the number ১ (1) is written right in the middle of it. Again mirroring each other, there are two circles in the steel panel. In it are two colourful roosters: red, yellow, green and blue are used to paint. In the middle of them is a diamond-shaped box adorned by two red water lilies and a yellow rose is the name আরাফাত (Arafat), and a different phone number. There is another panel right below this. The word: আল্লারদান (Allah's gift/grace/donation/offering) is written on it. Yellow, and green are used to paint it above a red background. By its border are two pink flowers on opposite sides. There are two upside-down hearts made out of steel that are placed where lights would've been if rickshaws had lights. The word মা (mother) is written on it. However, on top of the words are

tiny silver cup-like objects that hide most of the writing. This rickshaw has a painting of a hero with a gun and two heroines on it. Depicting the scene of a movie. The actors painted mostly cannot be recognized, but resemble ever so slightly popular actresses Shabnur and Purnima. Below that panel is again the name আরাফাত (Arafat) painted. This time it is bordered with two peacocks - though their colour has been altered to yellow red, and blue. More ornamental designs can be observed in the steel body of the rickshaw. These are designs of flowers.

Salience

In the composition, আল্লারদান (Allah's gift/grace/donation/offering) catches the most attention. Next, the hood with the red panels and circles is noticeable because of the contrast it creates. The other panels are noticed next. The telephone numbers are visible when one pays attention, as the font they are written in is small in size, and are hard to read from a distance. There are very fine details in the composition: flowers, birds, the movie banner - and they are the least notable in the composition.

Framing

There are fourteen frames in the composition. Frame one and two are the hood's panels that mirror each other. আল্লারদান (Allah's gift/grace/donation/offering) has a panel of its own, and that's frame three. The name গফুর (Gofur) is mentioned twice, and they both have two different frames: thus making frames four and five. The sixth frame is for the name আরাফাত (Arafat). The first telephone number has two frames, making frames seven and eight. Frame nine comprises the big panel near the end of the rickshaw with the drawing of film stars. Frames ten and eleven have two mirrored drawings of roosters. Frame twelve consists of the number one in Bangla: '১'

right in the middle of the vehicle's backside. The love for one's mother flourishes in frames thirteen and fourteen as mirrored but on opposite sides, is the writing: মা (mother).

Discussion

The aim of this paper is to explore multimodal compositions found in Bangladeshi vehicles and to see what insights they provide to society from a linguistic, cultural, and social point. Many messages are spread and reinforced across Dhaka's urban landscape through these vividly painted vehicles. Spreading messages sometimes willingly, and sometimes not. Literature on the social semiotics of Bangladeshi transportation is scarce, and this research aims to also fill this gap. I looked into five different vehicles through Kress and van Leeuwen's(2006) Visual Grammar using the three metafunctions.

The analysis of messages written on the body of vehicles is important because it reflects cultural values, beliefs and norms of a society. Gonçalves and Milani, (2022. p-437) citing various other authors argue that even though streets are considered to be the most 'egalitarian, democratic' and 'inclusive space', urban space is never neutral, and city walls are hardly public - meaning that messages of the majority rule in public spaces (Järlehed 2022; Jaworski & Gonçalves 2022; as cited by Gonçalves & Milani, 2022. p-437). If that is the case, we must look at vehicular art too, for they serve just as a unique form of communication, and travel long distances within the urban landscape sharing whichever ideas are painted on their bodies. From an Indian point of view, Madan in her paper elaborated on how the Indian identity is highlighted on trucks. Messages such as 'Jai Hind', and 'India is Great' make rounds all over the country, reinforcing nationalism (2018, p-31). Similarly, this research shows that Bangladesh has put a similar importance on identity, but an identity based on religion. Three vehicles out of the five

we have analysed incorporate religious messages (Data 1, Data 4, Data 5). Instead of 'India is Great', in Bangladesh we have আল্লাহ তুমিই মহান ('Allah you are great', Data 1). Islam is the dominant religion in Dhaka city, and writings such as 'Allahu' and ফি-আমানিল্লাহ (With the safety of Allah) have acquired symbolic significance, the letters being recognisable as Islamic symbols to both Muslim and non-Muslims in the city. This is an example of the conceptual process in the data analysed. Islamic writings like this serve as reminders of faith to the Muslim population and have become iconic symbols. Despite the lack of knowledge of Arabic among many Bangladeshi Muslims, various Arabic phrases are used in day-to-day life, and the use of them to embellish vehicles is one such example of them working as symbols.

Another conceptual representational process observed is the presence of advertisements on the back of vehicles. Whether it's the 'UTTARA Motors' (Data 1) sticker or the 'Shoukhin Paribahan' (Data 4). Lamazares (2014, 321; as cited by Gonçalves and Milani, 2022. p-437) says that like branding, advertisements contribute to the representational metafunction by 'showcasing brand prestige and promoting companies'. Public places are saturated with schemes to increase public visibility and recognition. Just as big companies advertise by placing their brand stickers on vehicles, a different kind of branding, a more personal one can be seen in the bodies of rickshaws. Both the personal mobile numbers of rickshaw artists and owners are put in the bodies of the vehicles. As shown in Data 5, rickshaw artisans flaunt their work and leave their telephone numbers in big digits as an advertisement, impressed with their work one may call them for more work.

By analysing vehicular art we can also uncover how people interact with public spaces and texts written on vehicles. We have explored this in depth through the use of the interactional metafunction. Many messages on the bodies of the Bangladeshi vehicles commanded safety and regulation. A sense of orderliness during interaction is wanted by the signmakers, as we see in Data 2, where the tempo's body has instructions on who should get down first in the vehicle. Madan (2018. p-3) explored how Indian trucks have to follow the Central Motor Vehicle Rules of 1989. Bangladeshi vehicles too are regulated, and an example of this is in the mandatory allocation of P.C.R. - Police Control Room - emergency contact number on the back of all CNG autorickshaws (Data 1).

In Bangladesh, languages used in vehicles are largely dominated by Bengali. Second comes Arabic, with its ties to Islam, while third is the use of English. Paramarta, M. S. in his social semiotic study of Balinese road signs notes how a certain language is made more powerful simply by being spotlighted on the road signs to achieve the sign makers' ideology (2021, p-93). In Bangladesh, this is done with Bangla as it is given utmost importance.

Vehicular art is a rich source of visual semiotics, and we may analyse its effects by looking at the compositional metafunctions of each of the vehicles. Even colours, shapes, and other visual cues communicate with us. Damrau (2007. p-511) discusses the association of squares in graphics with order and construction. This notion is evident in Data 1 and Data 3, specifically with the CNG auto rickshaw and tempo compositions. Rectangles are employed in these compositions to fulfil the same purpose, effectively highlighting the cautionary messages of 'Stop' and 'থামুন (Stop)' by setting them apart from other elements within the compositions. The use of red is noteworthy too as it is a colour with associations to danger. According to

Kuniecki et al. red is one of the most attention-grabbing colours (2015), and in Bangladesh vehicular art, we see plenty of its use.

All of the points above show how the way people choose to decorate their vehicles can be an act of self-representation. One thing that is similar to Nigerian and Pakistani art on wheels, is that Bangladeshi vehicles offer words of wisdom for passersby to see (Mensah & Nyon, 2022, p-24; Bilal & Shehzad, 2018, p-511)(Data 1, Data 4, Data 5). Moreover, like Pakistani vehicles, Bangladesh's vehicles feature the names of loved ones. This is shown in Data 5 of this study but is a very common phenomenon in Bangladeshi vehicles. Vehicular art can act as a form of messenger. Another example of this can be found during the SARS-COVID-19 pandemic when it was mandatory to wear face masks (Dhaka Tribune, 2021). Suddenly buses in Dhaka had a new message written near their entry door মাস্ক পড়ে উঠুন (wear a mask and enter) for all passengers in public buses. I could not find a photo of it so it is not included in this study. But it is very interesting to see how easily new rules can be assimilated in society, using buses as an apparatus to spread ideas.

In the West, at the turn of the 20th century, European and Western standards of urban design were preferred, which had a preference for unmarked surfaces. The simpler the design, the more elegant it is perceived (Scollon & Scollon, 2003; as cited by Gonçalves & Milani, 2022; p-436). This standard is ignored in Bangladesh, our public transport consists of vivid rickshaws, buses and trucks painted in the brightest of colours. Perhaps this use of colour has to do with economic fulfilment. Writers such as Dresser commented on the ornamental feature of rickshaws: 'The beautiful rickshaws(are) making up for all the dirt, congestion and crowd through which the frail frames are pedalled along by equally frail men'(Dresser, 1977;

Lahiri-Dutt & Williams, 2008. p-52). At present in Dhaka city, more affluent areas have averted from the colourful rickshaw hoods. Rickshaws from Gulshan, Baridhara, and Banani are all plain yellow. This change was made to only 'posh-areas'(Dhaka Tribune, 2016).

Conclusion

Bangladesh is home to some of the most expressive vehicles in the world, and it has been surprising to find that this may be the first paper that looked into Bangladeshi vehicles through the lens of social semiotics. The aim of this research has been to investigate Bangladeshi vehicles as multimodal compositions and to see the perspectives they offer on the linguistic, cultural, and societal aspects of Bangladesh while addressing this existing gap. This qualitative research studied five distinct types of vehicles, and it did so using Kress and van Leeuwen's approach of Visual Grammar. The analysis was conducted looking into the three metafunctions, namely: the representational, the interactive and the compositional.

First, quoting a number of authors I explained how public spaces are never neutral (Järlehed 2022; Jaworski & Gonçalves 2022; as cited by Gonçalves & Milani, 2022, p-437). Many of the writings on vehicles are regulated. For example, in India, it is done so by the Central Motor Vehicle Rules (Madan, 2018. p-3), and in Bangladesh too as shown in Data 5. A major representational finding includes the emphasis on the Islamic identity in vehicles from Dhaka. Three out of the five vehicles analysed in this paper have Islamic sayings in them. Comparing this with Indian trucks through Madan's study, we see a major difference in the kind of identity pushed for representation in the two countries. In Bangladesh, the representation has to do with religion, while in India, a more nationalistic ' India is Great' kind of way (2018. p-31). Vehicles are also a medium for representations, serving space for advertisements and contributing to brand prestige. (Lamarez,

2014, 321; as cited by Gonçalves & Milani, 2022. p-437). Branded stickers and artisan names are often displayed in Bangladeshi vehicles. A sweet similarity between Pakistani and Bangladeshi vehicles is that they both feature the names of loved ones, and words of wisdom (Bilal & Shehzad, 2018, p-496) (Data 5). Shapes and colours have also been discussed under the compositional metafunction. The use of rectangles was discussed. Under this, we also discussed the use of red, and how it is noticeable among Bangladeshi vehicles. We talked about how the colour is that of blood and fire associating it universally as a symbol of attention (Kuniecki; 2015. p-2). We have also talked about the difference of how the West prefers 'signless' surfaces, but Bangladeshi vehicles do not adhere to this Western/European standard of 'elegance'. A connection was made to economic prosperity and lesser ornamentation (Scollon & Scollon, 2003; as cited by Gonçalves & Milani, 2022; p-436).

To conclude, out of 1.8 million vehicles in Dhaka city alone, I have analysed merely five. A limitation of this study is perhaps that it is so small-scale. I encourage more research in the field, for Social Semiotics in the Bangladeshi context is scarcely explored territory. Social semiotics is important, for we get to decipher the layers of meaning embedded in all kinds of communication with it. I believe this study has shown how an everyday object such as a vehicle can, and is, a vessel of complex communication. Exploring how vehicular art disseminates messages in this study has led me to believe that it can be a player in advocacy and positive social change, and perhaps if policy-makers noticed this, vehicular art and messages could become a tool to mobilise positive change in our societies.

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