

## Lifestyle, Worldview and Identity: Names on Customized Vehicle Registration Plates

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### **Abstract**

Local provincial authorities in South Africa responsible for the licensing and registration of vehicles, introduced a system fairly recently whereby vehicle owners can acquire a personalized or individualized registration plate at extra cost. This is proving to be popular.

This contribution takes a look at the motivation for the choices that go onto the plates with particular emphasis on lifestyle or worldview names. It is argued a) that this phenomenon should be seen as an integral part of popular culture in South Africa; b) that such manifestations should be considered as names and hence form part of the onomastic discipline, and c) that whatever choice is made, it in one way or another suggests a link to the preferred identity of the vehicle owner. It then also provides a welcome alternative to the somewhat dull numerical and impersonal option.

The examples are mainly from the Western Cape, but data from other provinces also feature. The data was collected through personal interviews with vehicle owners. Information so gleaned was then transferred onto a basic questionnaire for further interpretation and analysis.

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### **Introduction**

The option of acquiring an individualized or personalized registration plate for one's vehicle in South Africa is catching on and is growing rapidly. Ever since the local provincial authorities introduced this possibility, vehicle owners have exploited the options and are continuing to do so. It is a win-win situation: these registration plates come at a price, and hence the authorities are receiving extra revenue which could be put to use fruitfully within the transport and roads maintenance context. The vehicle owner, on the other hand, can now choose an option that would set him/her aside from other vehicle owners, achieving a sense of individualistic uniqueness in a sea of similar looking and rather dull numeric registration plates. It is also a lifetime choice that the owner can transfer from vehicle to vehicle as required.

The purpose with this contribution is to highlight and interpret a particular category type of registration appearing on vehicles that has to do with lifestyle and worldview, and that at the same time is intimately linked to aspects of identity. Data come mainly from the Western Cape Province, but occasionally examples from other provinces are also included. I would like to argue the following three main issues regarding all the different categories manifested in the data: a) that this phenomenon is squarely situated in the domain of popular culture; b) that the options exercised by vehicle owners can be considered as names, and hence form part of the onomastic discipline; and c) that all the choices can, in one way or another, be linked to a preferred identity aspect of the vehicle owner.

## Popular Culture

Popular culture is a relatively new field of study not because the manifestations thereof only surfaced recently, but simply because these manifestations were not reflected upon critically. One could argue that popular culture serves as a mirror wherein society can better see itself. Listing all the possible manifestations is not possible: I will quote from a website that calls itself the 'Popular Culture Appreciation Society' : 'Popular culture surrounds our everyday life in the form of the arts (music, literature, film, etc.), media, advertising, artifacts, fads, movements, crazes and hobbies. It's eclectic, personal, pervasive, cultish, faddish and often fun.' (<http://home.vicnet.net.au/popcult/>) This definition suffices, in my opinion, to give one an idea as to the scope. It could, of course, be extended to include many more categories. One irony about the customized registration plates is that because of the price tag that comes with it in South Africa, one could ostensibly consider it as somewhat elitist, perhaps even a status symbol, and not really a feature of the 'common people', a link that is often made regarding popular culture. I initially carefully documented the type of car and model carrying such an individualized registration plate, but soon discarded that line of investigation. It was reasonably clear that one could make a connection between affluent society and these registration plates. One seldom sees an old model car with such plates. In theory though, this option is available to every car owner, and hence the practice is situated in the field of popular culture. My impression is that vehicle owners enjoy the freedom of choosing what goes onto a registration plate: the possibilities are endless and even if somebody else had registered what you wanted, there are always other options. One sure sign that this phenomenon belongs to the popular culture domain is that amusing anecdotes are already doing the rounds about these. One could ostensibly refer to these as 'urban legends'.

## Manifestations as names

It is relatively easy to accept that what is displayed on these registration plates belongs to the domain of onomastics when first names, surnames, nicknames, business names or other coded names make their appearance. When one sees these manifestations all around one, one realizes that the colloquial term 'number plates' that has been in use in South Africa for such a long time, is no longer applicable to these: there is often not a numeral to be seen. There are, however, many instances where a name or initials combine with numerals, or even cases where only numerals are used. The particular category highlighted in this contribution is also somewhat problematic, in that lexical items, sometimes appearing as phrases that are not generally accepted as 'names', may feature. I argue that these should also be considered as names, in that they identify, just as ordinary names do, the drivers of these vehicles. These manifestations highlight another aspect of the drivers' identity, and not the 'ordinary' one represented by names.

## Personal identity

The last and possibly most important point I wish to argue (already mentioned above), is that the choices have to do with an aspect of personal identity. In recent years, particularly also in multicultural contexts, it has been stressed that identity is not a fixed construct but rather an elusive concept: it is forever shifting and adjusting, and most people exhibit trends or features of a multiple identity. Wasserman and Jacobs (2003:15-28) very aptly describe identity as a journey, and not a destination. This metaphor is particularly apt then when dealing with vehicles that constantly take identity bearers from one point to another. One can even take this further and say that the identity aspect displayed on the registration plate might be more significant in certain locations compared to others. In the context of the registration plates, this identity aspect could obviously refer to the actual names of the vehicle owners, but more interestingly, also to the way in which owners identify with an aspect of their lives that play an important role in their everyday

existence or in the way they view themselves, life, or even others. This often gives one a glimpse into multicultural and multilingual South Africa. Individual vehicle owners opt for choices that would in one way or another reflect their identity, their worldview or philosophy, or what they value in life.

### Research methodology

In terms of research methodology, I devised a basic questionnaire, and initially appointed a few student assistants to help. The most frustrating aspect of the research was to see one's ideal respondents just driving by, totally unaware of the burning need to interview them! One had to 'ambush' the unsuspecting respondents in parking lots. I personally followed motorists for kilometers in suburbs, hoping they would soon stop somewhere and fortunately it mostly paid off. I have, over 2 years or so, collected quite a big data base although I do regard it as an ongoing project. Approaching total strangers yielded strange reactions at first, women in particular clutching their handbags, etc.! Once I had explained the purpose, everybody opened up quite happily, also suggesting that most people took pride in their choice and were happy to share it with others.

In this contribution I will only focus on those examples that reflect some indication of lifestyle and worldview and which are also closely linked to a particular aspect of personal identity.

### Category 1: Lifestyle/Worldview

In the following examples it seems as if vehicle owners in this category want to emphasise the fact that they subscribe to a particular lifestyle or worldview, and wish to display that in the registration. One obviously has to have a certain kind of disposition to do this as Geyer (2005) in an Australian context remarks: 'Personalised number plates aren't exactly an introvert's territory'. In certain parts of the world, the term 'vanity plates' is also used. One could distinguish a number of qualities in the choices car owners make. There is often a playful element suggesting a good sense of humour, sometimes even self-ridicule, good self-esteem, exuberance, strong identification with the particular vehicle and the image it projects, sexual orientation or sexual overtones, as well as gender issues, and other 'attitudes' influenced by a number of quite different aspects and circumstances. A common feature is the use of a numeral in representing a lexical item, e.g., 2 for 'too', 8 for 'ate', or one letter representing a word, e.g., u for 'you', c for 'see', etc.

**OLDFART** drives a nice car. This not so young male driver suggests that he should not be taken seriously, and it is clearly a case of self-ridicule. Many car owners play on the age aspect, suggesting that they will not grow old, or that they are having fun at this point. **4EVR YNG** (< Forever young) is such an example as well as **38tilidi** (> 38 till I die). Others play on the sexual or erotic, such as **SEXY**, **2HOT4U** (< Too hot for you), a possible reference to the car or the driver, **DONJUAN**, a BMW driver, **NAUGHTY** in a fancy new Audi A4, **4U2CME** (< For you to see me), a tongue in cheek choice, **6A4EVA**, (< Sexy forever) from the movie *Jeepers Creepers* in which a vehicle with the same registration featured, **BAD24 7**, a female projecting a particular image, and another **PMS 24 7**, a hot girl suggesting a certain lifestyle while driving a Mini Cooper Convertible. The registration **125HAG** (< One to shag) plays on sexual intercourse with the 5 looking like an 'S'. The same strategy is used in **OO 5HIT** (< Oh Shit). Sexual orientation is clear in **GAY1** and **GWM** (= Gay white male). **MOJO** suggests charm, power or touch, probably inspired by the Austin Powers movies. A husband and wife took their cue from an advertisement of a popular chain restaurant in South Africa: the husband's vehicle has **HOWZIT**, the typical South African greeting (< How is it?), with the response (in the advertisement) of **LEKKER** (nice) the nearly untranslatable Afrikaans term also used widely in

South African English, on his wife's vehicle. They were clearly having fun. Another husband and wife reflect the Chinese philosophy of **Yin** and **Yang** respectively on their vehicles. A young female driver has **TUF KUKI** (< Tough cookie), suggesting that she is independent, and can make it on her own. **Whateva** (< Whatever) suggests a careless and even reckless attitude towards life. An interesting Afrikaans one concludes this section: **WINDGAT** features on the Volvo C70 of a Dutch gentleman. This middle-aged man suggests that the term reflects his philosophy in life. It says something about him and how he views life. It approximates the English 'a lovable rogue'. In Afrikaans though, it could have a negative connotation such as a 'braggart'.

The wide ranging selection clearly illustrates the independent thinking of individuals as to how they see themselves and the life they live. It is a wonderful mosaic of worldview.

### Category 2: Identification with vehicle

Many car owners responded positively to the question whether they see their vehicles as an extension of their identity, projecting a certain type of image and lifestyle. One could argue that the 'vanity' issue is strongly manifested in these choices although it did not really come through in the interviews.

The owner of a Jeep Cherokee (4X4) chose **UR NR 1** (< you are number one). He jokingly remarked that some people might think it is a reference to him as the owner. The driver of a sports car chose **4U2NV** (< For you to envy). The 'competition' between BMW and Mercedes Benz is playfully alluded to by the Benz driver who chose **12BABMW** (Want to be a BMW), whereas **I8BMW** (I ate BMW) suggests that the Benz driver feels he has the better of the BMWs. **ARMGAT** (Afrikaans for 'pauper'), driving a BMW, satirically suggests the sacrifices he had to make in acquiring his vehicle, and a Benz 500ML owner expresses the same sentiments with **BANK SIN** (Afrikaans for 'It is the bank's'). **VASTRAP** (Afrikaans for 'grip', 'stand firm') is another Afrikaans expression for a 4x4, suggesting that it could move over any terrain. A new Audi carries **2LIV4** (< to live for). An attractive female has **Ah Yeah** to express her satisfaction with the car and life. Another young female drives **ONLY 4 ME**, suggesting her proud ownership of the Mini Cooper. A similar one is **Yeeeeha**, the cowboy cry, expressing exuberance at driving a Mazda X5. A M-Benz SLK Coupe has **JUST42** (< Just for two), suggesting the intimate space of the two-seater. A driver wishing to make his car 'visible', has **4U2C** (< For you to see). This is extended further by the driver of a C2 Citroen: **C24U2C** (a C2 for you to see). Some car owners clearly enjoy the ability to acquire their dream car: One black gentleman has **4 DA SELF** on the registration plate of his luxurious black sedan. Another boldly declares: **UNVME** (You envy me) and the driver of a Lexus has **Lextacy**, cleverly combining the name of the model with 'ecstasy'. The driver of a black Jeep has **Baa Baa**, exploiting the Baa Baa Black Sheep children's song. Some owners clearly have faith in the ability of their vehicles particularly regarding speed: **By By Cop**, **Vangmy** (Afrikaans for 'Catch me'), **2FAST4U** (Too fast for you), etc.

This category is generally characterized by relatively new and 'smart' cars. Others with more 'humble' vehicles overcome this through innovation: a small inconspicuous sedan has **VIRARI**, a contamination of and a play on Ferrari. An exception to the relatively new and fancy car image is a really old VW Beetle with the Afrikaans term of endearment **POPLAP** ('my darling'), a trusted vehicle close to the heart of the owner.

### Category 3: Religious beliefs

Religious beliefs and affiliation, often intimately and directly linked to identity and worldview also feature. Amongst believers of the Muslim faith the numeral series 786 is immensely popular, and just in Cape Town and surrounds there are many vehicles displaying this, sometimes in combination with a name or initials. In the Abjad numerical system, the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet are assigned numerical values. The opening verse of all 114 chapters of the Qu'ran,

commonly known as the Bismillah, i.e., ‘In the name of God, the Compassionate and Merciful’, adds up to 786. A few examples:

**786 JAZZ** is the vehicle of Jasmina, a Muslim lady who is affectionately known as *Auntie Jazz*, coupled then with 786. **ABH 786** represents the Muslim lady driver’s initials and first letter of family name, i.e., **Ay**esha **B**ibi **H**arnakar and then again followed by 786. The original **CA** (= Cape Town) **786** belongs to the father of an erstwhile Arabic lecturer at the University of the Western Cape. His father has been offered astronomical sums of money to sell the registration, but he simply refuses.

From a Christian point of view there are two examples from the Psalms: **Psalm 91** is all about the protection by the Almighty (...no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent...), and this lady driver, a steadfast Christian, believes that God will then take care of her when she ventures onto the road. **Psalm 34** is similar in intent: it is about a God who smiles on the righteous and protects from all harm. A somewhat obscure one is the Xhosa **Nyani**, a shortened form of *inyani/inyaniso* ‘the truth’. It is supported by further signage **Enkosi Bawo** (Thank you, Lord/Father). I only saw this vehicle in passing, and could not speak to the driver, but it appears then also to be some kind of public testimony as regards religious conviction.

#### Category 4: Political affiliation/Identity

There is only one example that displays political identity and affiliation, and it is a very clever one. The car is registered in the Northern Cape, which has NC as its official acronym on registration plates. And the owner then simply added **VOTE A** in front of **NC**, and you have **VOTE A NC**, representing the African National Congress, the ruling party in South Africa.

#### Category 5: Miscellaneous

Some choices defy any classification but clearly show the originality and innovative thinking of some vehicle owners.

A uniquely South African expression that originated in the Nguni grouping of the Bantu languages has taken root in many other communities. It is **Eish**, an expression that is more or less equivalent to the English, ‘Oh my goodness, no’, i.e., an expression of some concern. It was popularized in a TV advertisement for a well known SA brandy when a young white Afrikaans speaking male encounters a black couple along the roadside who are merely enjoying the view. He mistakenly thinks they had a breakdown and summarily tows them to his farmhouse where his wife invites them to stay for dinner. While the women seemingly prepare the meal, the two men sit on the veranda and have one drink after the other of the brandy. When the black man’s glass is empty again, he is offered another drink. He smiles helplessly and says ‘Eish!’, suggesting that he has had enough. The white man interprets that as the Afrikaans ‘Ys’ (Eng. ‘ice’), and the white guy smiles, and pours, saying, ‘Met ys, ja, met ys’. (‘With ice, yes, with ice’). It was therefore not surprising that **Eish** made its way onto the registration plates: there is **Eish**, a black man driving a nice car but expressing subtle commentary on the big monthly instalment, there is **Meteish** (lit. ‘with ice’) a company that delivers ice to all establishments that need it, and finally a driver with the family name Uys, well known in South Africa and also pronounced as ‘ys’, who chose **MetUys** (lit. ‘With Uys’), suggesting that he enjoys that (or another) drink too.

There are those that are so cryptic that although what is displayed makes sense linguistically, the context is totally unknown with no clues offered. A lady, who found herself in a blind alley job as personal assistant to a director, was persuaded by him to study further. Under very trying circumstances she eventually attained an M degree in Business Administration. A friend was so impressed with her courage and determination, that he told her ‘You did it’, and she confirmed, ‘**I did it!**’ He then gave that registration to her as a gift. And few months later her husband came home with ‘**So did I**’ jokingly displayed on his vehicle. The couple has endless fun with all the

enquiries from curious people coming their way. One could ostensibly interpret this as a ‘vanity’ plate, but it is rather more an example linked to personal achievement during difficult times and a concrete manifestation of perseverance that paid off.

### Conclusion

The popularity of this phenomenon is growing daily, and vehicle owners exploit the possibilities fully. It would be interesting to monitor the situation to see if new categories of the type described above emerge in the immediate future. It is again a manifestation that the everyday person is quite keen to participate in naming if offered the opportunity, and vehicle owners are often creative and innovative. I regard this field as an important ‘newcomer’ to onomastics in the South African context that enriches the discipline, and at the same time displays a wonderful barometer of identity and worldview in multicultural and multilingual South Africa.

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