

CROSSROADS OF ANGER

Tensions and Conflicts in Traffic

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This article focuses on drivers involved in various modes of personal transport in Ljubljana, Slovenia, and describes their interactions and conflicts, often resulting in verbal or nonverbal expressions of anger. Using various approaches, ranging from semi-structured interviews to “participant driving,” it describes in great detail a small part of traffic infrastructure, that is, a crossroads in the city centre, which is a daily meeting point for thousands of people and their vehicles. Through an analysis of driving habits and reflections on daily language and media, the article sheds light on some key questions, which have, so far, only briefly been discussed by anthropologists: How do people habituate their driving? How do they comprehend vehicles as an indispensable part of their identity? And how do they express feelings and emotions on the road?

Keywords: traffic, vehicles, driving habits, expressions of anger, Ljubljana

“Come on, you idiot, step on it, for crying out loud! Can’t you see it’s turned green? Ah, finally we’re off! Now let’s get going ... Oooops, watch out! What’s wrong with you, are you blind? Come on, lady, let’s get a move on!” This is a reconstructed excerpt from the stream of comments by a driver stuck in a morning traffic jam in Ljubljana, a silent string of thoughts, which might escalate into various verbal or nonverbal expressions of anger. The main goal of this article is to pinpoint such emotional engagements and interactions on the road – either in verbal or nonverbal form – and analyse them from an anthropological perspective.

The ethnographic study was carried out within the research project Drive Green: Development of an Eco-driving Application for a Transition to a Low-Carbon

Society.¹ The purpose of the project is to prepare a comparative study of driving habits in urban centres of South-eastern Europe; it takes into account the influence of educational institutions, the media, traffic regulations, penalties and various other external factors – from climate to infrastructure – which define and influence how people drive. The main goal of the project is to develop and design a mobile application that will help change driving habits and encourage ecological driving. The study of anger on the road is an important part of the project, since negative emotions in traffic and their public expression significantly influence driving style, fuel consumption, and consequently also emissions of greenhouse gases. In addition, tensions and conflict on the road reduce safety and make our daily driving – and living – less pleasant.

Intersection as a Living Laboratory

In the initial part of our research, carried out in Ljubljana, Slovenia, we focused on a micro-location, an intersection in the city centre, as a “living laboratory,” enabling us to observe up close how people express their feelings in vehicles passing by. On the one hand, we chose this location for our study for a practical reason: we simply expected that most interactions would occur at an intersection. On the other hand, we were aware that a crossroads has several symbolic and metaphoric meanings, including arriving at the unknown and making key decisions, which might entail unease or even a sense of thrill (Chevalier & Gheerbrant [1969]1993: 278–280). This has proven to be valid also from a literal perspective: the crossroads is where the most action and unexpected situations occur in traffic, and these can provoke various expressions of anger. This article presents an analysis of such verbal and nonverbal expressions, which are – as we will see – dependent not only on drivers’ characteristics and temperaments but, in fact even more so, on the vehicles used, which may provide new communication possibilities for the road user while simultaneously disabling others. We use theoretical findings about assemblages of drivers and vehicles to explain both how people express their anger in their vehicles and how they might use their vehicles to express their anger. We also present metaphors and other rhetorical devices used in daily speech and in media discourse, which reinforce and re-establish an intimate relationship between people and their machines, and which may also be a reason for drivers expressing anger on the road.

Theoretical Framework

Even though driving is a normal part of most of our daily lives, in several aspects it is understudied in anthropology (see Yazıcı 2013: 518). Therefore this article is based not only on anthropological studies, but also on empirical findings of sociologists and other social scientists, including John Urry and other researchers writing about global (auto)mobility (e.g., Featherstone, Thrift & Urry 2005; Urry 2004, 2007; Yago 1983). We also relied on works on the use

of vehicles in different socio-cultural environments (Árnason, Hafsteinsson & Grétarsdóttir 2007; Conley & Tigar McLaren 2009; Freudendal-Pedersen 2009; Miller 2001; Özkan et al. 2006; Paterson 2007; Redshaw 2008; Vanderbilt 2008) and considered the findings of anthropologist Genevieve Bell (2011) from the Intel Corporation, who compared vehicle use in different locations around the world and used those findings to develop new technologies. Finally, we have also taken into account the recent findings of anthropologists who have studied transport and mobility in Slovenia (e.g., Lamut 2009) and researchers from other disciplines, such as psychology, psychiatry, traffic engineering, and others, which often focus on anger and emotions on the road (e.g., DeJoy 1992; Lupton 1999; Parkinson 2001; Sagar, Mehta & Chugh 2013; Sullman, Stephens & Kuzu 2013).

One of the key terms used in this article is “driving habitus.” A relevant recent research project on this topic was presented by Giseline Kuipers (2012), who follows Norbert Elias’ notion of the “national habitus” as the “soil in which personal, individual differences can flourish” (Elias [1939]1991: 210; see also Elias [1939]1994), and who writes about the Dutch cycling culture, which is neither a lifestyle nor a political statement. As Kuipers explains, most people in the Netherlands use bicycles “simply because this is what one does when going from one place to another” (Kuipers 2012: 18). Riding a bike – or driving a car – in a certain context contributes to the formation of standards and practices that have become an integral part of daily lives; the practices therefore feel “natural” and “self-evident” (Kuipers 2012: 20; cf. Bourdieu [1976]1990). The findings of Tim Edensor (2004) on the connection between driving habits and national identities in the UK and India are similarly relevant here. Edensor draws on spatial, symbolic, and phenomenological ideas about the driving identity and follows John Urry when he explains that automobility is constructed as a “hybrid assemblage” or “machine complex,” comprising people, machines, roads and other spaces, representations, regulatory institutions, and so on (Edensor 2004: 102). Automobility and traffic, which are in his words a constitutional element of “motorscapes,”

structure an unstable and fluid matrix, which commonly intersects with the similarly fluid matrix of the nation. Edensor further elaborates that driving is “a culturally bound procedure organised around which manoeuvres, forms of etiquette and gestures of annoyance are ‘proper’ in particular contexts” (2004: 112). In this article, we follow these findings and try to identify which gestures and expressions of emotions are proper or improper, acceptable or unacceptable, in the context of Slovenia or, more specifically, Ljubljana.

Since relationships between people and technologies are very important in interactions with vehicles, we use actor–network theory (ANT) as a theoretical starting point (Law & Hassard 1999; Latour 2005). We believe that the line dividing society and technologies is becoming less and less clear and that vehicles and their users are actually inseparably intertwined. Tim Dant (2004) also follows the key concepts of ANT and works with the concept of assemblage when he describes the “driver-car” as a form of social being – neither a thing nor a person – that is capable of producing several kinds of actions which would be impossible for a vehicle or a human alone, for example, driving, parking, polluting, etc. Similarly, Deborah Lupton (1999: 59) explains the form and function of vehicles serving to direct human action, embodiment, and thought. In this way Dant and Lupton build on the concept of “cyborgs” (Haraway 1991) as collaborations of people and machines, and of “hybrids” (Latour [1991]1996), which refer to permanent combinations of objects, which can at least temporarily improve and change human agency and identity. In Lupton’s opinion such merging of boundaries between the bodies of humans and vehicles has a central role in understanding the “road rage” phenomenon, which can range from thumping the car steering wheel, swearing to oneself, beeping the horn, chasing other vehicles, or even killing another driver on the road (Lupton 1999: 57, 59).

Using ANT and similar theoretical approaches that attempt to surpass the dichotomy between the creativeness of the individual and social structure, it is also easier to understand how the actions of individuals, that is, drivers (actors), are intertwined with

the traffic system and infrastructure (network). This topic was discussed also by Berna Yazıcı (2013), who focuses on the social stratification on the roads of Istanbul, and Tatiana Argounova-Low (2012), describing Siberian narratives on roads and driving.

The “conceptual metaphor,” introduced by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), is another term used to explain how people feel about vehicles and how they verbally express their emotions on the road. Metaphorical concepts that “govern our everyday functioning to the most mundane details” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 3) explain a lot about our way of life in different cultural settings. Ethnolinguists have further contributed to an understanding of stereotype formation around objects, that is, how the collective consciousness and history are reflected in language, and how concepts of reality are manifested in cultural texts.² In this manner Stefan Wiertlewski (2009) wrote about conceptual metaphors in the Polish “bike sociolect,” looking at the conceptual metaphors of the cyclist as a pilot, the bicycle as a plane, and riding a bike as eating. We attempted to identify such metaphorical concepts in interviews, carried out with drivers, and also in media representations of vehicles and traffic.

Methodology

Our study on traffic was carried out in late 2013 and the first half of 2014. First we took into account a general overview of the traffic situation in Ljubljana. Then we focused on a micro-location, that is, an intersection in the city centre. At this location we observed and recorded traffic events at critical times (e.g., during morning and afternoon rush hours). The observation of traffic and participation in it was supplemented by a semiotic analysis of various expressions of anger, rage, and other emotions. Finally, we identified and analysed conceptual metaphors about traffic in media reports. The analysis helped us to shed light on the conceptual map of the cultural surroundings in which traffic operates.

We used semi-structured interviews as the main ethnographic approach to obtain information about driving habits. We carried out 15 interviews with drivers of both sexes and from different parts

of Slovenia, most of them living and driving in the capital city. Their ages ranged from 20 to 65 and all but one had a driving licence. We tried to determine how drivers behave on the road, how they express anger, and how they perceive other people's expressions of emotions. In several interviews we also tried to invoke emotions and reflect upon actions using hypothetical situations on the road (e.g., approaching an intersection and having to wait behind a car which is not moving even though the lights are green).

Another research approach was more sedentary. In the spring and summer of 2014 we regularly sat on a bench next to a crossroads (see ill. 1) and observed the dynamics on the road: what the traffic "flow" was like, how drivers reacted in certain critical situations, how they interacted with each other and so on. We recorded activities by photography and video-documentation and used our mobile phone cameras to quickly capture the most interesting and relevant traffic situations.³

An important part of our field research took place in vehicles, where we carried out what we dubbed "participant driving." Usually we simply travelled

in cars as drivers or front seat passengers on our daily routes and observed and recorded the habits and practices of car drivers, cyclists, pedestrians, and other traffic participants. When driving, we devoted special attention to verbal and nonverbal expressions of anger (gestures, exclamations, signalling, etc.).

In addition, we carried out an overview of media presentations of traffic and vehicles in Slovenian newspapers, for example in the weekly supplement *World of Vehicles* (*Svet vozil*), published in the national daily newspaper *Dnevnik* and in specialised magazines on cars and other vehicles (*Avto fokus*, *Avto magazin*, *Avto*, and *Auto Bild*). We analysed articles, columns, and professional opinions about traffic, as well as descriptions of traffic-related conflicts and traffic accidents in the news sections of newspapers. Through an analysis of metaphors and other rhetorical devices, we attempted to identify a subconscious position on traffic in national and local perceptions and concepts.

Our research had several limitations of which the most important one was that we were, for the most part, only observers of driving habits, "from the



Ill. 1: Researched micro-location: a crossroads in the centre of Ljubljana, including the bench used during the observation of driving habits. Ljubljana, August 27, 2014. (Photo: Dan Podjed)

outside,” and we could not see or hear in detail what people were actually saying in critical situations. We are also aware that it is difficult to record “authentic” expressions of anger due to the “observer effect”: our own act of observing from a distance, for example, from the bench next to the intersection, occasionally distracted participants in traffic. Sometimes they realised that they were in fact not hidden in the privacy of their vehicles; consequently, they modified their behaviour.

Traffic, Driving Habits, and Attitude to Vehicles

Ljubljana is the capital of Slovenia, which lies in southern Central Europe (or on the north-western edge of South-eastern Europe). The city, with a population of about 285,000 inhabitants, is at the centre of the national road network. Motorways connect the city to other parts of the country and other cities in the region (e.g., Trieste in Italy, Graz and Klagenfurt in Austria, and Zagreb in Croatia). Over 130,000 vehicles arrive in the city each day to join the 170,000 vehicles already there. Buses are the most frequently used form of public transport. Cyclists also have a notable presence in traffic, particularly in the summer months.

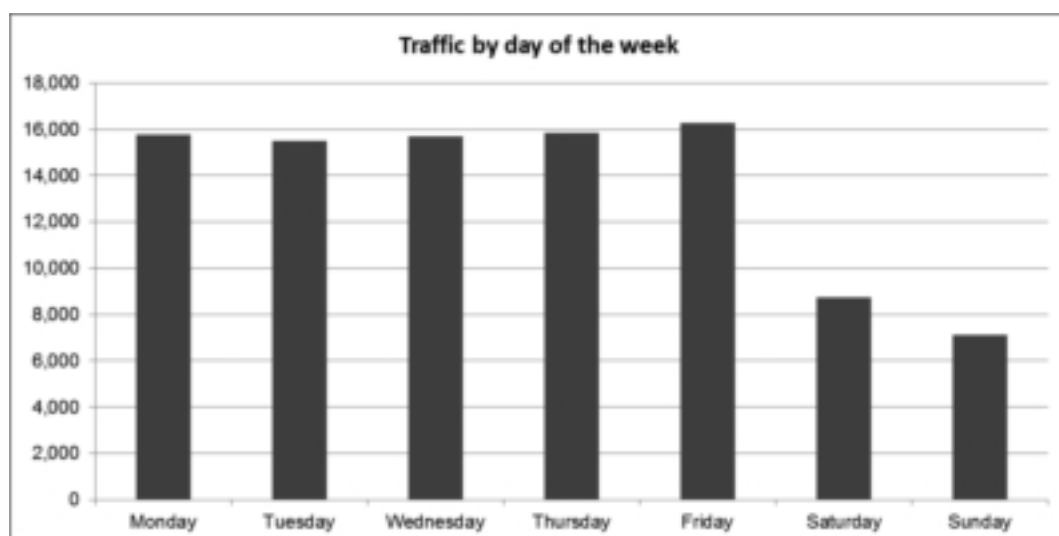
The crossroads which was the main micro-loc-

tion of our study is situated in the city centre next to the Trg mladinskih delovnih brigad (Engl.: Square of Youth Work Brigades), where one of the main city streets, Aškerčeva Street, crosses Prešernova Street, which in turn leads to Groharjeva Street (see ill. 2). In the vicinity of the intersection there is a pharmacy, an office building of the City Municipality of Ljubljana, one of the faculty buildings of the University of Ljubljana, several restaurants and pubs, small shops, private houses, and apartment blocks. The crossroads is not among the largest in the city, but it is a very busy one, especially on weekdays (see ill. 3).

So what is driving through the intersection like? If we drove through it at 3 a.m. or 11 p.m. (or virtually any time during the weekend), the traffic would run smoothly. But the situation is completely different at around 8 a.m., when the roads are full of vehicles with impatient drivers, cyclists, and passengers who are due at any moment at their workplaces or are rushing to drop their children off at schools or kindergartens. Suddenly, the intersection becomes totally clogged, like a blocked drain. Nothing can get in; no car or bus can leave. In a situation like that, cyclists and pedestrians appear to be the privileged “class” on the road, since they can “flow” at a different pace from other vehicles, as they manoeuvre



Ill. 2: Location of the researched intersection in Ljubljana city centre, May 18, 2015. (Source: Google Maps)



Ill. 3: The traffic flow on the Tivolska Street, in the vicinity of the researched intersection, shows the differences in the number of vehicles passing by on weekdays and during the weekend. The data was captured January 21–27, 2013, and includes passenger cars, commercial vehicles, and motorbikes. The presented week is a random choice for this article. (Source: Municipality of Ljubljana)

on their separate lanes and pavements. Occasionally, an emergency vehicle arrives – be it a police car or an ambulance – and makes the situation on the road even more intense. Drivers become confused;

they do not know where to move their vehicles and their driving abilities appear to become somewhat reduced. Then, all of a sudden, the “clog” is released. The traffic starts to flow again and cars and buses



Ill. 4: Traffic on the Tivolska Street in Ljubljana on January 23, 2013. The date was chosen at random for this article. The number of passing vehicles (passenger cars, commercial vehicles, motorbikes) is presented in 15-minute intervals. (Source: Municipality of Ljubljana)

leave the crossroads. By around 8:30 a.m. the roads leading to the intersection are again almost empty. Then gradually the tension starts to build once more until approximately 8:50 a.m., when we witness another, though milder, bout of congestion, caused by people whose occupations at work and other morning tasks begin an hour later, that is, at 9:00 a.m. Another peak is witnessed from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., when people begin their voyage home from work. Congestion begins to worsen again, reaching a daily peak at 4 p.m. (see ill. 4).

Driving Habitus

Driving along the same route – and this may include our crossroads – becomes an integral part of an individuals' "habitus" (Bourdieu [1976]1990), that is, a part of learned practices and habits which become so automatic and intuitive that the drivers we observed often chatted, listened to music, switched radio stations, made telephone calls, ate, smoked, and performed other activities while steering their vehicles. Driving, of course, is more than a habit of the individual – it is also a social practice. Drivers imitate and "teach" one another the formal and informal rules that exist in traffic; they adapt to the situation on the road and communicate with one another, both verbally and nonverbally, all of which helps to establish a "driving habitus." What drivers learn as members of the "driving community" becomes a part of their "embodied practices" (Merleau-Ponty [1945]2002; Csordas 1990) or an "embodied skill that becomes a taken-for-granted way of moving through space" (Dant 2004: 73).

Traffic education has an important role in terms of the transfer of driving habits to an individual. It often starts in primary or secondary school and continues as people learn how to drive at a driving school. Before the final rite of passage that marks the entry into the community of car drivers, that is, the driver's test, learner drivers are taught how to correctly shift gear, accelerate, decelerate, read the traffic signs, and communicate with other participants in traffic (by using turn signals etc.). Holding a steering wheel is an interesting example of such a culture-dependent "technique of the body" (cf. Mauss

[1934]1973) gained in driving school – and later (re) adapted through experimenting in traffic, communication with other drivers, and even peer pressure. A driving instructor from Ljubljana told us that his students have to hold the steering wheel in the "fifteen minutes to three" position (hands on the opposite sides of the steering wheel), since this is the "only right way," and that he always corrects them if their hands are in the wrong place. However, several Slovenian drivers told us they were taught in the past to hold the wheel in the "ten to two" position (i.e. with hands towards the top of the steering wheel). According to the driving instructor, such a grip is still used, for example, in Macedonia and Kosovo, where drivers hold the steering wheel in "the incorrect" position, which makes them look "like hamsters" when they drive on Slovenian roads. In addition, several drivers from these countries tend to shake the gearstick while driving due to the poor state of the roads there. "This habit exists in their heads, because they were taught to do so," the instructor said, explaining how an uncommon driving habit was transferred to Slovenia, which has a better road infrastructure: "The older driver taught the young one. The son saw his father shake the stick, and gradually he started to repeat that gesture."

Driving habits are not only learned from others and transmitted from generation to generation of drivers, but are also influenced by several external factors: the state of the infrastructure, the age of the vehicles, traffic regulations and penalties enforced in a specific country, the condition of vehicles, and so on. The driving instructor told us that Slovenian driving habits (or "driving culture" in his words) even reflect the political situation in the country. "What occurs in the parliament is later seen on the road," he summarised, further elaborating that the government decides on investments in traffic infrastructure and through such decisions indirectly influences driving habits: "If the road is damaged, you are shaken while driving. If everything is arranged well, the environment forces you to behave in a different way," he explained and concluded, "if the social situation is good, people drive better. If the situation is bad, you get chaos on the road."

To paraphrase Norbert Elias and his notion of “national habitus” (Elias [1939]1991: 210; see also Elias [1939]1994), several external factors influence the formation of a “national driving habitus” that is different from those in other parts of the world. We can see that each national habitus is different simply by taking our car across the border. The general opinion among drivers is that the habits of different regions within a single country are different as well, which is – as we will see below – an opinion conveyed through stereotypes about “bad drivers” from neighbouring towns or other municipalities. A very important role in forming such a habitus is played by the vehicle, as the “medium” through which driving habits are actually transmitted.

Assemblage of Driver and Vehicle

“The medium is the message” is a famous phrase coined by Marshall McLuhan ([1964]1995), a philosopher of communication theory. In our case we can rephrase this into “the vehicle is the message,” since the mode of movement shapes and influences driving habits. The change that occurs when a person enters a vehicle is vividly presented in Walt Disney’s cartoon *Motorman* from 1950. This shows how the main character, Goofy, in the role of kind and polite Mr Walker, undergoes a change in personality to the aggressive and rude Mr Wheeler when he gets behind the wheel of his car. On leaving his vehicle, he reverts to being the mild-mannered Mr Walker, whereupon he is the victim of other drivers’ habits on the road, but once he returns to his car, he again becomes Mr Wheeler, seeking to impose his own will on the traffic (see also Vanderbilt 2008 and his elaboration on the presented cartoon).

Several interviewees confirmed how their behaviour actually changes when they get in the car: some of them – especially new and unskilled drivers – become more careful and attentive, but many of them become less patient and more egoistic or even aggressive. In a vehicle, expressing an opinion about other people on the road becomes less self-censored – people quite commonly start to use insults and swearwords that would be socially unacceptable and not tolerated in other settings. In addition, driving

habits seem to correspond to the type of vehicle: if it is more expensive and has better driving characteristics, for example, the driver may drive faster and act more aggressively, while if the same driver is in a compact multi-purpose vehicle (a “family car”), his driving habits may change and he might act in a manner corresponding to the new “outside appearance.” In this way the human agent (the driver) is in fact transformed by his possession of the vehicle, but the car is also transformed by being in the hands of someone willing to use it: “The programme of action of both subject and object,” explains Tim Dant, “is transformed once they come together – combined they may act towards a quite different goal than either could have achieved independently” (2004: 70).

The creation of a new social entity (an “assemblage”) can also be noticed in the language of drivers, especially through the metaphors they use. They often say that their car operates as a “shell” or a “shield,” which simultaneously limits and demarcates the new form by functioning like an “exoskeleton” (Graves-Brown 2000). They also commonly use expressions such as “somebody’s stuck to my arse,” meaning that a vehicle is driving too close to the back of their car,⁴ or “someone’s bumped into me,” which does not describe an actual collision with the human body, but rather means that someone has crashed into their car.⁵

Erving Goffman (cited in Handler 2014: 50) follows a similar metaphor and categorises vehicles by the thickness of their “skin” (ranging from the “hardest” and “toughest” skins of a submarine or a tank to the “softest” of a bicycle). A comparison with a shield or armour, as used by several of our interviewees, operates in a similar way – the more massive it is, the less possibility there is for getting hurt. On the other hand, a skin – no matter how thick it is – can be hurt and can bleed, which is an apparent sign that the body is damaged.⁶ Nevertheless, we agree with Goffman that “the more protective the shell, the more ... the unit is restricted to simple movements” (cited in Handler 2014: 50). Someone with stronger armour is also generally less aware of weaker actors, and such lack of sensitivity on the part of “armoured driver-cars” can cause anger among the “soft-shelled” cyclists and pedestri-

ans (Michael 2001: 71). In addition, Deborah Lupton draws upon the notion of a car as that of a “protective mother,” which generates a private enclosure with a metal frame in otherwise public space. “This tends to result in a somewhat illusory feeling of safety,” adds Lupton, “of being isolated in one’s own little capsule from the harsh realities of the world outside” (Lupton 1999: 60).

Personification and Emotional Attitude to Vehicles

Given the omnipresence of vehicles and their relevance in daily lives, it is not surprising that a commonly used type of metaphor for vehicles is personification. Looking at this more closely, it becomes clear that what happens is not so much the personification of an independent object as it is the vehicle becoming part of the driver. When getting into it – or, in the case of a bicycle, onto it – the driver gets, as we have explained, not only an actual but also a symbolic shell, shield, or armour, which protects him or her from the outer reality and, at the same time, enables faster movement. With such an extension of the body and its agency (cf. Hanson 2004, 2008) human behaviour changes and enables not only faster movement but also new modes of interaction. When we drive a car or a bicycle, we become “enhanced humans” (Gray & Mentor 1995: 223) and the vehicle becomes an “amplified part of our body” (Lupton 1999: 61).

Conceptual metaphors about the vehicle as a part of the body or an outer protection also show that a vehicle is not merely a mode of transport – it is commonly perceived as an indispensable part of an individual’s self. An attachment and emotional attitude to a vehicle usually makes the difference between its being merely a practical moving tool and a valued and important object, used to construct and express our subjectivity. Lupton (1999: 59) explains how we attribute personalities to our vehicles, give them names, “fall in love” with them, and sometimes even attribute agency to them, as if they have their own will or mood.

Lakoff and Johnson explain that personification is the most obvious ontological metaphor, since a physical object is “further specified as being a per-

son” (1980: 33). A conceptual metaphor therefore explains that a car is a person with an ability to talk. In a weekly section on cars and traffic published in a Slovenian daily newspaper, it is, for example, explained that a “Citroën *addresses* different feelings” and that “horses of steel [itself a Slovenian metaphor for the car] *say a lot* about their owners” (Vrabec 2014: 18; our emphasis). Such personifications are even more highlighted in specialised magazines on automobiles, which tend to describe vehicles as beings with human characteristics, for example, “a show-off with a discrete behind,” “he has a diploma in elegance,” “when a Clio puts on boots,” “uptown girl,” “arrogant show-off,” “electric clever clogs,” “round-cheeked athlete,” and “guardian angel.” Such titles characterise cars with various metaphors: on the one hand, personifications emphasise how important cars are not only in society but also for the individual; on the other, journalists try to establish contact with readers through using pleasant, attractive, and familiar language to show how they might be perceived while driving certain vehicles.

Personification of vehicles can also be observed through imagined “communication” between drivers and their vehicles. A 25-year-old female driver, for example, told us that she regularly talks to her car (which in fact belongs to her parents) and occasionally even pets it when, for example, it is not working properly. Even more personal is her communication with her bicycles, which even have human names. As she explained, she discusses traffic with them and especially the state of the bicycle, for example if it starts to make an unusual noise. A similar personal attachment to his vehicle was expressed by a 55-year-old male driver from a rural environment. He replied to our question about whether or not he feels safe on the road by saying: “I trust the car and the car trusts me.” His answer depicts a tight connection between driver and car, although he actually denied this, telling us that the car was, to him, “merely a transport tool.”

Several informants similarly claimed that they were not emotionally attached to their vehicles and that they were merely a “means of transport” or “consumption product,” as one 42-year-old driver

from Ljubljana assured us. However, they were not entirely convincing in this, since they also adorned their vehicles with toys and emblems, listened to their favourite music in them, and in a few cases even enjoyed being behind the wheel so much that they would occasionally go for a purposeless drive round the city. Thus, vehicles actually become personalised and cosy places, in which, as Malene Freudental-Pedersen explains, “one feels at home and can relax.” Freudental-Pedersen further elaborates that in that way “the car is no longer only a medium for coming to and from ‘home,’ it is a home in itself, a place for dwelling” (Freudental-Pedersen 2009: 7; see also Urry 2000; Sheller 2004). And home is a place worth fighting for – as often occurs in traffic.

Road as Battlefield

Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 62) explain that we are “rational animals” and therefore have institutionalised physical conflicts and developed more sophisticated and effective means to solve tensions. However, the basic structure of conflict remains essentially unchanged: two subjects challenge each other and fight over territory. On the roads of Ljubljana, such metaphorical and actual “clashes” occur on a daily basis: drivers “fight” for their place and privileged position on the road and in the car park; they argue using signs (gestures, light signals, car horn, bike bell, etc.), they feel threatened and – in the worst cases – they even become victims of road rage.

In our (auto)ethnography we observed countless quarrels and battles for a better position on the road, for example during the summer holidays, when many people travel from Ljubljana to the seaside.⁸ One particular incident in such extreme traffic conditions occurred when one of us was driving on a congested motorway to Ljubljana. In front there was a vehicle from Slovenia and another one from Austria. The Slovenian driver wanted to overtake the Austrian, but the Austrian driver apparently did not notice and maintained his position in the fast lane. The Slovenian then drew closer to the Austrian car and overtook it on its right side, which is a clear traffic violation. Once he finally got in front of the other car, the Slovenian driver suddenly stepped on the

brakes and started driving very slowly in order to prevent the Austrian driver from moving at a normal pace. This blockade lasted for several minutes; it was apparently an expression of anger, a sign of protest, and also, in a way, both punishment and a provocative gesture.

The crossroads in the city centre where we carried out most of our observations is also a place of frequent confrontations and tensions, especially during rush hours. In such situations, cars – and the people in them – start to “argue” by honking, overtaking, or cutting each other off. Initially, we expected to be able to identify such tensions and conflicts with either national or regional provenance, as people from many other places regularly commute to the city. Our expectations were based on a stereotypical image of “bad drivers” from certain regions or cities, which is a common prejudice all over the world. Tom Vanderbilt, for example, mentions several “traffic targets” in various settings: Greeks think that Albanians are the worst drivers, Germans think the same about the Dutch, New Yorkers complain about New Jersey drivers and so on (Vanderbilt 2008: 28). Similarly, Mike Michael analysed an article on cross-cultural differences in understanding and avoiding road rage, published in *The Sunday Times*. In the article it is explained that in Italy the most important thing is not to catch the eye of another driver, as it will be taken as a sign of weakness. In Germany, on the other hand, the worst mistake you can do on the *Autobahn* is to block someone’s “all-conquering path,” which will be immediately challenged by a “ferocious glare of headlights.” “If you are going to overtake a Spaniard,” it is advised, “first check who it is. If it is a woman, you should be all right. If it is a man on his own, less good, and if it is a man with his family, forget it. From the average hombre’s point of view, being passed by another car is a humiliation, all the more keenly felt if one’s wife and children are watching.” In France, however, road rage is easily provoked by “four-star Anglophobia”: having British number plates on French roads can in itself be understood as a form of provocation. Finally, in Greece “everybody is violating every imaginable rule.” However, Greek road rage rarely boils over into violence,

since people “let off steam on a regular basis” (cited in Michael 2001: 67–70).

Prior to our observations at the intersection, we identified many Slovenian stereotypes about drivers “from outside.” Drivers from Celje (a town in the Styria region and the third largest Slovenian town) and Koper (situated in the coastal region and the sixth largest Slovenian town) are often perceived as being the worst drivers, as they are said to be aggressive, unpredictable, and thoughtless.⁹ In addition, interviewees mentioned that drivers from neighbouring countries, for example Italians, “have a very specific driving culture,” several complaining about difficulties on the road when they travel to Italy. Romanians were also labelled as dangerous drivers and as people who commonly get lost and block city roads. Many people also complained about the driving habits of people from other – more southern – countries of the former Yugoslavia, who we were told tend to be ignorant, rude, aggressive, and prone to ignoring traffic rules. One of our interviewees told us there was a simple formula which explains driving habits: “The more southern you are, the worse your driving habits.” Thus, from such a perspective, Austrians and Germans are generally better drivers than Slovenians, Slovenians are better than Croatians, Serbs, and Macedonians, and so on.

However, in our observations of traffic, clashes between local drivers from Ljubljana and outsiders from other towns or countries were not apparent – they remain on a more declarative or stereotypical level. A car with foreign number plates does not seem to cause actual tensions. Instead we identified a different kind of “culture clash,” linked to the topics mentioned above, that is, emotional attachment to vehicles and the establishing of new social entities on the road through an “amalgamation” of vehicles and drivers. Car drivers, for example, mentioned that cyclists cause the most problems on the road, as they ride impulsively or unpredictably, do not follow traffic rules, and even sometimes listen to music with headphones or check their mobile phones while cycling. Rivalry between car drivers and pedestrians is also very common. From both sides we noticed a lot of forcing one’s way: either pedestrians cross the

street where it is not allowed or cars overlook pedestrians on the crossing. In all cases, common results of such inconsideration are impolite gestures, swearing, and insults.

Another kind of clash on the road occurs due to inequality between drivers of the same class of vehicle. “Large black cars,” as certain expensive makes or models are commonly referred to by drivers of less prestigious cars, are thought to have more informal privileges on the road and are “allowed” to park in prohibited places, for example on the pavement, in front of building entrances, and in spots reserved for the disabled. In congested situations, such vehicles, which are of course not necessarily black, actually manage to make their way through traffic very smoothly. When we observed such privileged individuals in their expensive vehicles, which are commonly made in Germany (e.g., BMW, Mercedes, Porsche, and Audi), and watched how they manoeuvre through crowded streets, find the best spots to park their cars, squeak with their tires while driving, and consequently irritate other drivers with their on-road behaviour, it reminded us of Berna Yazıcı’s findings from Istanbul, where the richest or most influential individuals can even hire so-called ambulance taxis, that is, illegally operating ambulances which are used, for example, to take businessmen to the airport (Yazıcı 2013: 530). Yazıcı also explains that “the mode of transport one chooses or type of car one drives is an obvious mechanism of identity and distinction,” adding that traffic jams make the experience of social inequality and class distinction even more personal (2013: 522). When people in less privileged positions observe such social exclusions, privileges, exemptions, and undesired behaviour on the road, they commonly react and show their anger in various ways.

Expressions of Anger and Impatience

In 2013, the Automobile Association of Slovenia (AMZS) carried out a study of 669 drivers in which road-related impatience was addressed. The study tested the claim that a driver’s perception of other drivers’ behaviour is selective: drivers tend to undervalue the desired behaviour of other drivers and

attribute negative intentions to them, which likely results in increased traffic impatience and aggressiveness. The majority of drivers (74%) think that Slovenian drivers are generally impatient. Even more (81%) believe that there are fewer expressions of kindness on Slovenian roads than abroad. 85% of the drivers questioned mentioned that, in the week before, a driver in front of them had driven too slowly, 83% commented on the “stupid” behaviour of another driver, and 36% had witnessed an angry flashing of lights. However, results of the study somewhat paradoxically show that drivers tend to perceive others’ behaviour in traffic as less tolerant and patient than their own; 80% of drivers included in the study considered themselves to be tolerant on the road. Results of the study also showed that poor behaviour on the road is more easily noticed than good behaviour (or, alternatively, that there are fewer instances of positive gestures and words): 77% of the drivers reported they had been made angry by another participant in traffic in the past week, while only 38% had observed an expression of kindness, and only 33% had witnessed something on the road that had contributed to their happiness (AMZS 2013; Svetina 2014).

In our study we also observed more negative expressions of feelings. These are commonly provoked by activities considered as rude behaviour in traffic, such as approaching too close to the rear of another car, forcing one’s way, or, in more severe cases, violating traffic rules and regulations (e.g., driving through a red light). Our informants told us that the rudest and most unacceptable traffic manners, in their opinion, included tailgating, inappropriate use of the horn, sudden changing of lanes, flashing headlights, speeding, forcing one’s way, and overlooking other traffic participants. Such informally defined “rude activities” on the road commonly evoke strong responses from other road users, and they consequently react with reciprocal signals (e.g., using their horn or lights if driving or their bell if cycling), gestures, and verbal expressions.

Verbal Expressions

In Ljubljana, frustration and anger in traffic are quite commonly expressed by verbal expressions, which are generally not heard by other drivers. This is why swearing in traffic does not function as an insult to the addressee; rather, it operates as a “filter,” as a way of releasing negative emotions. From the lexical point of view, swearing and curses are commonly derived from the lexis of sexuality, with general Slavic root morphemes (Nežmah 1997: 21–46), and certain words or phrases from English. Interviewees told us that they most often express and release their anger with such short sentences or with single expletives and insults. They tend to use this kind of vocabulary most when they are driving alone or when there are only adults in the vehicle. When children are in the car, drivers usually adapt their vocabulary – in intense situations on the road they may mumble or swear in their mind, through a “stream of consciousness” similar to the one at the beginning of this article, instead of swearing out loud. In addition to swearing, drivers may also use euphemisms, in most cases lexical approximations to actual swear-words. For example, instead of the Slovene word *pizda* (meaning “twat”), euphemisms like *pismo* (“letter”) or *pišuka* (“flute”) are used. Occasionally, such euphemisms are used in meaningless short sentences or phrases. For example, a 39-year-old cyclist told us that in critical situations or confrontations on the road she usually uses the phrase *Pismo rosno, gozdna pot!* (a somewhat confusing “A dewy letter, a forest path!”). Several euphemisms used in vehicles are words or phrases modified with different lexical units. Such euphemisms still carry the meaning or the original, but couch it in milder language. Thus *Tristo kosmatih hudičev* (“Three hundred hairy devils”) is transformed into *Tristo kosmatih medvedov* (“Three hundred hairy bears”), and the phrase *Je bela cesta* (“The road is white”) is used instead of the similar sounding swearword *Jebemti* (“Fuck”).

Although swearing is not a widely accepted or tolerated part of daily communication in Slovenia (Nežmah 1997: 11), it seems that in traffic it is considered to be almost normal and acceptable. Even those drivers who claim not to use any insults or swear-

words in their everyday communication may use such expressions when they are alone and inside a vehicle. If they have passengers or if they are on a bike, self-censorship is stronger, though still not as strict as in face-to-face communication not involving vehicles. It thus seems that the vehicle provides a kind of shelter not only from a physical but also from a psychological perspective. A driver is hidden and protected in a “shell” where undesirable behaviour is not perceived by the “outer world.” Thus, a car becomes an individualised “thought area,” a kind of alternative reality, and an extension of personal territory (Michael 2001: 62). Drivers therefore often act as if they were “hidden in public” – or in Goffman’s (1959, 1963) sense, as if they were “back-stage,” even though they, in fact, appear and perform on the “front-stage”: they shamelessly pick their noses, talk on their mobile phones, check text messages and emails while driving (even though this is prohibited by law), sing along with music on the radio, and so on.

Nonverbal Expressions

Many drivers believe that swearing in a vehicle is in fact harmless, especially since their words do not reach the addressees. They also describe a kind of catharsis after using so-called strong language, which helps them to re-establish a “normal” state by releasing tension and stress. Interestingly, drivers do not perceive verbal insults and swearing to be as aggressive as gestures. It seems that swearwords and insults in the private context of a car are deemed acceptable, since they remain “inside.” Gestures, on the other hand, are perceived, understood – and often misinterpreted – outside the vehicle. They are a form of visual communication, which can be seen by other participants in traffic, and are also depicted in the media as the most offensive way to express anger on the road.

There are two common types of gestures in traffic. The first is used to express gratitude by waving or a quick raise of the hand from the steering wheel, for example when another vehicle gives way. The second, however, includes expressions of anger or frustration. When a road user feels threatened, this can be expressed by impulsive waving or, in more extreme

cases, by showing the back of the hand (with the palm turned towards the driver’s face), a clenched fist, or even an extended middle finger. In rare cases, such gesturing turns into a verbal quarrel and, even more rarely, into an actual physical confrontation, that is, when both drivers stop their vehicles, step out of them, start yelling at each other, and occasionally even start to fight. One of our interviewees, a driver in his mid-forties, who claims to be a “choleric” in everyday life, described one such situation that almost escalated into a fight. He drove into a parking space in Ljubljana and accidentally cut off another driver, who was “immediately ready for action and even to fight.” The interviewee tried to calm the situation and finish the nonverbal quarrel with a quick wave above his head, which in his words meant “Let’s move on!” It seems that the other driver correctly interpreted this gesture, as the situation was defused and the altercation resolved without any words being exchanged.

Other relevant nonverbal expressions of anger are enabled by the equipment of the vehicles themselves, especially the horn, headlights, and indicators. In Slovenia, the use of sound and flashing headlights is allowed only in exceptional situations, that is, when a driver or another participant in traffic is endangered or when someone is overtaking outside a settlement (Official Gazette 2010). This article of the law is in large part overlooked, however, and drivers often use their horns and flash their lights not only to express their feelings, but also to send messages to other drivers. At our crossroads, for example, the vehicle in the front often failed to move forward when the lights turned green. In such cases the car behind initially warned the driver at the front either with a short flash of the headlights (especially at night) or with a very short sounding of the horn (more commonly by day). If the driver in the front still did not move, blasts of the horn became longer, lasting over a second, occasionally interrupted by shorter breaks between longer blasts of sound. In some cases such warning signals, here expressing anger, began to spread and people in other vehicles started honking in a non-orchestrated cacophony. This all contributed to the “soundscape” (cf. Bull 2001) of the city,

which is most intense during rush hours and contributes to the impression that anger in traffic can spread far away from the actual location of the tensions and conflicts.

Conclusion

In this article we have presented how cars, bicycles and other means of personal transport enable human mobility and simultaneously establish an assemblage of vehicle and driver as a new social entity which is neither a person nor a thing. In fact, it “takes on properties of both and cannot exist without both” (Dant 2004: 74). Such an assemblage enables a range of both positive and negative emotional expressions which could not be expressed by the driver alone, as a person, nor by the vehicle itself. The agency of the assemblage is, as we explained, different in various combinations. Compared to drivers of passenger cars, for example, cyclists are more disempowered and vulnerable on their bicycles, yet have better mobility in traffic jams.

The “driver-cars” do not create a unified group, as we can notice several differences between them, especially between users of different vehicle brands and types which are again intertwined with drivers and their specifics. The agency of such “driver-car” assemblages is not static; on the contrary, it can be changed and re-created as people move from one vehicle to another. As we explained, vehicles – especially passenger cars – also operate as protective shields and provide a provisional personal or intimate space on the road, that is, in public. Such a shield provides a feeling of safety and anonymity on the road. It influences the driver’s confidence and results in expressions of anger either from an empowered (dominant) or disempowered (subordinate) position.

We have pinpointed a set of such expressions of anger, both verbal and nonverbal, and put them in the context of our micro-location and in a broader socio-cultural context. As we found out, verbal and nonverbal expressions of anger are commonly expressed in stressful moments in traffic and operate as instant relief for drivers. Other relevant nonverbal expressions of anger are carried out not only by

drivers, but rather in combination with vehicles. A driver can, for example, express his or her anger by beeping a car’s horn, flashing with headlights, signalling with blinkers, or even through aggressive movements of the vehicle, for example, by preventing someone from changing the traffic lane. In this way anger is expressed *through* a vehicle as a hybrid form of a human body and the metal body of a car or other means of personal transport. Actors in traffic, with their expressions of emotions, should therefore be perceived as the “products of networks of heterogeneous factors interrelating with one another, incorporating both the human and the non-human” (Lupton 1999: 59). Another relevant factor that can influence the driving habits and rude behaviour is the cultural environment, which frames what is permitted and prohibited in “private-public” settings in traffic, for example, in passenger cars operating as protective shells. As we noticed, some gestures and verbal expressions of anger are tolerated in traffic (and prohibited in other settings), while others are sanctioned by other drivers in Ljubljana. Our interviewees told us that the same behaviour on the road can easily be misinterpreted when used abroad or even in another city. In addition, even distances between vehicles seem to be meaningful and resemble rules of “proxemics” as defined by Edward T. Hall (1963, 1966), that is, uses of body and space in various cultural environments and their consequences in interpersonal communication. Driving is, as we aim to argue, a “culturally bound procedure” (Edensor 2004). Its formal and especially informal rules are therefore constantly negotiated and (mis)interpreted.

To broaden the findings of this article, we advise further cross-cultural comparisons of anger on the road in order to identify and analyse a broader spectrum of gestures, signals, and other kinds of emotional expression. Our study namely suggests that traffic operates as a special system within a broader socio-cultural framework: it has its own formal and informal rules and communication modes, which establish the “driving languages” with communication codes differing in various contexts and local environments. We also believe it is high time to pre-

pare a comparative anthropological study of traffic and driving habits, especially since the car will apparently undergo a dramatic transformation within the next few decades. It can be expected that the car will take over much of human agency (in the form of driverless cars) and in that process emotions in traffic might eventually be minimised. The expressions of anger on the road, presented in this article, could thus soon become a relic of the twentieth century – the “century of the car” (Dennis & Urry 2009) – and the early twenty-first century, a century which might mark the beginning of a post-driver era.

Notes

- 1 The three-year interdisciplinary applied research project (2014–2017) is being financed by the Slovenian Research Agency and carried out by the fleet management company CVS Mobile, the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, and the Faculty of Electrical Engineering at the University of Ljubljana. For additional information about the project, see <http://www.drivegreen.si/en>.
- 2 Ethnolinguistics developed in two main streams. Moscow ethnolinguistics (e.g., Nikita I. Tolstoi and Svetlana M. Tolstaia) is oriented in the worldview, established in folklore, while the Lublin ethnolinguistics (e.g., Jerzy Bartmiński) attempts to answer the question how collective consciousness present in language and manifesting in cultural behaviour conceptualises the reality (Bartmiński 2004, 2005; Tolstoi 1995). For this article we follow the Lublin stream and analyse stereotypes, created around objects, which have an important role in the contemporary world; in our case these are concepts and stereotypes about roads, cross-roads, cars, bicycles, buses, pedestrians, etc.
- 3 Since we are aware of the importance of the protection of privacy in research on driving habits, ensuring privacy was emphasised throughout our research. All information about the drivers and their behaviour on the road was made anonymous and no personal information was disclosed without their knowledge and consent. We also ensured privacy in photographs and video footage. We erased or obscured all information that could allow the participants or passers-by to be identified (e.g., licence plate numbers and the faces of drivers and pedestrians).
- 4 In Slovenia, the front of a car is often called its “nose.” We found this kind of metaphorical use not only in spoken language, but also in articles published in car magazines.
- 5 Metaphors also operate the other way around: in other

words, terminology about traffic and vehicles has penetrated into our daily language and describes several conditions and activities, e.g. the common expressions “step on it” and “shift it up” mean that a person should hurry up, and “to run out of gas” is an expression explaining that someone has no energy left. Such expressions show how important vehicles are in our lives and that they are intertwined into our conceptions and functioning to the extent that almost technical terminology has permeated into our metaphorical daily language.

- 6 However, in our research we noticed that people identify so much with their vehicles that they actually feel pain if their car is scratched or damaged in some other way.
- 7 The examples were taken from the car magazine *Avto fokus* (No. 5, 6 and 8/9 2014).
- 8 Such extreme situations on the road are also presented by metaphors in media discourse, explaining that the summer is a time of the “migration of nations” and that in that period highways simply cannot “digest” so much “iron” (Zupančič 2014: 15).
- 9 On the other hand, drivers from places like Celje and Koper often claim that drivers from Ljubljana are in fact the worst, or they pinpoint other cities and regions where the worst “driving culture” originates.

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