

# Names, Registration Plates and Identity

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Provincial authorities in South Africa responsible for the licensing and registration of vehicles have introduced a system whereby vehicle owners can acquire a personalized or individualized registration plate. I look at the motivation for the choices that go onto the plates and argue that this phenomenon should be seen as an integral part of popular culture in South Africa, that such manifestations should be considered as names and therefore part of onomastics, and that the particular choice suggests a link to the preferred identity of the vehicle owner and provides a welcome alternative to the somewhat dull impersonal numerical option.

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The option of acquiring an individualized or personalized registration plate for one's vehicle in South Africa is catching on and 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 since 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, and vehicle owners can choose an option that would set them apart 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 data come mainly from the Western Cape, but occasionally examples from other provinces are also included. I would like to argue three main issues: that this phenomenon is squarely situated in the domain of popular culture; that the options exercised by vehicle owners can be considered as names and hence form part of the onomastic discipline; and that all the choices can, in one way or another, be linked to a preferred identity aspect of the vehicle owner.

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Popular culture is a relatively new field of study not because the manifestations thereof surfaced only 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 manifestations is impossible. According to 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" ([www.home.vicnet.net.au/popcult/](http://www.home.vicnet.net.au/popcult/)). This definition suffices to give one an idea as to the scope of popular culture. One irony about a personalized registration plates is that because of the price tag that comes with it, 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. It did appear to me as if one could make a connection between affluent society and these registration plates since one seldom sees an old model 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 your first choice, there are always other possibilities.

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. There are, however, many instances where a name or initials combine with numerals, or even cases where only numerals are used. To see these, then, as names, is somewhat more complex, but I would argue that their underlying "coded" forms represent names. This should become clear from the examples which follow.

The last and possibly most important point I wish to argue is that the choices in just about all cases have to do with an aspect of personal identity. In recent years, particularly in multicultural contexts, it has been stressed that identity is not a fixed construct but rather an elusive concept which 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.

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This metaphor is particularly appropriate when dealing with vehicles that 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 refer to the actual names of the vehicle owners, or the way in which owners identify with an aspect of their lives that plays an important role in their everyday existence or in the way they view themselves, life, or even others. Particularly interesting is the fact that what is displayed on the registration plates affords a glimpse into multicultural and multilingual South Africa. Individual vehicle owners opt for choices that in one way or another reflect their identity, their worldview or philosophy, or what they value in life.

As a research methodology, I devised a basic questionnaire and initially appointed a few student assistants to help. The most frustrating aspect of the investigation was to see one's ideal respondents just driving by, totally unaware of the burning need for interviewing them! One had to "ambush" the unsuspecting respondents in parking lots. I personally followed motorists for kilometers in suburbs, hoping they would soon stop and fortunately it usually paid off. I have, over two years or so, collected quite a large data base. Approaching total strangers yielded strange reactions at first, women clutching their handbags and the like, but once I had explained my purpose, everybody opened up quite readily, suggesting that most people took pride in their choice and were happy to share it.

A number of categories present themselves from the data, not all of which will feature here. The most obvious and probably the largest, are those that reflect the owner's identity through first names, family or surnames, first name initials plus the surname, a nickname, a clan or group name, or "coded" identity through initials, and sometimes with added numerals. There is nothing unusual about these names; one may make certain assumptions about them in terms of cultural origin, ethnicity and identity, which was then confirmed when talking to the owners. We are living in a world where anonymity is cherished and often jealously protected. The obvious question then to these vehicle owners was "do you feel comfortable in displaying your identity so publicly and boldly on your vehicle?" As Geyer (2005) puts it, "Personalized number plates aren't exactly an introvert's territory." The general response was

probably predictable. Vehicle owners were quite outspoken about displaying their identity and had no problem with extending their identity to the vehicle itself. From a psychological point of view, one could then reason that these owners are all extroverts. Only two respondents expressed reservations. One, *Jerry*, said that he was basically an introvert, and when strangers greeted him with “Hi Jerry” when he got out of his car, he realized that he did not like it. A similar response came from *Arno*.

Another perception I gathered from my interviews was that females appeared to be more “visible” than males. It was as if females relished the option of having their own name on the registration plate. Maybe it is a form of emancipation, displaying total independence, and taking full ownership. At the same time it could be interpreted as a covert invitation: “This is my name (and car); if you are interested, you can follow this lead.”

A few of the illustrative, characteristic, and unusual examples follow. Quite a number commemorate the composition of the vehicle owners’ families either by combining parts of given names or surnames or through the combination of initials:

*Patron* < *Patrick* (husband) + *Sharon* (wife)

*Eljero* < *Elmarie* (wife) + *Jeronimo* (son)

*Granita* < *Grant* + *Nigel* (two sons) + *Tanya* + *Tasha* (two daughters)

*ZZZ 333* < *Zizipho* (son) + *Zukile* (husband) + *Zimasa* (wife) + play on threesome

*007 BRF* < *Brett Richard Fleming* (connection with *Ian Fleming*, the creator of *James Bond*)

*Saraka* < *Sandhya* + *Raksha* + *Kaja* (three daughters)

*AMTHKK* < *Alan Michael Theunissen* (father) + *Hayley*, *Kim*, *Kensey* (three daughters)

*FAB JI* < *Fabricius Joubert* (“fabulous” connection)

*303 DSS* < *Denise Sherwen Slater* (born on 30 March)

*KOLI MT* < *Koli* (surname) + *Moses* + *Thembinkosi* (first names)

*DENTOM* < *Dentist* (profession) + *Tom* (first name)

Call names or nicknames abound, three of which deserve special mention:

*NAZI*: When *Shanaaz Ismael*, affectionately known as *Nazi*, put that on her registration plate the South African Jewish Board of Deputies objected

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and the authorities asked Shanaaz to change the plate, offering to pay for the change. The committee appointed to look after the proposals to see that they were not religiously or politically offensive, had let it slip through.

*BOM 123*: This converted VW Beetle was caught speeding at 183 kilometers (114 miles) per hour. The driver was a paraplegic by the name of Allistair *Bombshell* Fredericks, clearly an explosive type of driver. *Bomb* is *Bom* in Afrikaans.

*FUZFAC*: At a petrol filling station I saw an M-Benz Kompressor with this registration. The two passengers looked decidedly mean in studded black gear, wearing bandannas and with tattoos all round. Being in a public place, I plucked up courage to ask the driver, who was quite cooperative. Wearing a beard, his nickname is *Fuzzface*, but he had to drop two letters.

The next category is that of identification with the vehicle. Owners are proud of their vehicles and suggest this in the registration, at times coupled with an aspect of personal identity. Without fail these respondents agreed with the notion that they see their vehicle as an extension of their identity, an element of their lives they associate with quite strongly.

An engaged Afrikaans couple drive around in *AITSA* (an MG ZR) and *OUGAT* (a Hyundai Getz). Both these expressions are difficult to translate. *Aitsa* is often used as an exclamation expressing admiration, and *Ougat* (more or less) means 'cute'. *TOPLESS* is a convertible driven by a female driver, who consciously exploits the erotic undertones. Females are not shy in projecting this image. A sports car carries *2HOT4U* with the ambiguous interpretation—a hot woman and a hot car. Likewise a female driver has *MBBABA* (< M-Benz + Babe). *CAT 7* is an old Jaguar XJ6 exploiting the feline image. *MOMS TOY* and *MOM'S JOY* are both 4x4's; *4US5* (< for us five) is the 4x4 for this family of five. *BDRAGON* is a smallish black car with images of a fire-spewing dragon on the sides and with the wording "Black Dragon." *GROWLER* suggests the sound of the V12 Jaguar engine. *OPSYKOP* is a Toyota Yaris. The Afrikaans expression means 'of the first class, excellent'. 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. The owner of a BMW *X5 4-6 I-S* chose to represent the model name on his registration plate, saying it is the only one of its kind and

he is very proud of his vehicle. 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). *BY BY COP*, also a BMW, suggests that no traffic officer will ever be able to catch him. Another Benz owner is so proud of his vehicle, that he chose *MY C180*, referring to the C180 model. *VASTRAP* is another Afrikaans expression for a 4x4, suggesting that it could move over any terrain. A VW Beetle owner so badly wanted *BEEETLE* on her registration plate, that she eventually registered the car in the Northern Cape, because the Western Cape version had been taken. An Afrikaans equivalent is *Besie*. 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 name is *Yeeeha*, 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 new Audi A4 has *000A4*, linking the model with the Audi emblem of the four rings. This category is generally characterized by relatively new and “smart” cars. Two exceptions are a really old VW Beetle with the Afrikaans term of endearment *POPLAP* (‘my darling’) and an old Nissan Skyline with *BIGSKY*. This is a big category with many more examples.

The next category includes vehicles which are seen as effective advertising agents. Many businesses therefore make use of this option. At times the advertised service or product is clear, at times not, raising the question whether or not this is a good investment. The registration *K9STARS* (< Canine Stars) refers to a company working in the film industry with dogs. In the home loan industry there are many *SAHL* vehicles, an acronym from *South African Home Loans*. *LOLEC 1* is a combination of *LO* (< Afrikaans *loodgieter* ‘plumber’ and *LEC* (< electric). A financial broker simply has *BROKER* on his Mercedes. *IZIKO* is the representative name for a group of museums in Cape Town where the Xhosa name refers to the hearth, but is metaphorically interpreted as ‘the centre of cultural activity’. The well known African *UBUNTU* concept, roughly equivalent to ‘humanity, sharing’ was chosen by a tour operator. In the area of real estate, quite a few names are found. *SBE* represents Sulet Bluhm Eiendomme whereas *TALK TO T* refers to a real estate agent by the name of Trevor. A real estate agent

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also dealing with accommodation, carries *SOLD 'U' SO* on his vehicle, a play on "told you so." An invitation comes from *CALL ME*, backed up by signage along the side. A rather cryptic example is *KRSW*. One wouldn't know what that represents unless one reads the signage on the side of the truck: *Kuilsrivier Staalwerke* (Kuils River Steelworks). An interesting example is *WVO 1*. Supplemented by small script, it stands for Wellington Very Old Brandy, considered the number 1 brandy by the marketing people. *CADT* does not tell one anything until you hear that it represents *CA du Toit Consulting Engineers*. The acronym is used in formal documentation. Another example from this category is that of a pilot who is involved with spraying insecticide on the harvest: *Iflylo* (I fly low). A builder with the name Vonk van Vuuren operates under the name *TRIPLEV*, and a company that specializes in transporting forklifts and similar equipment has *FORK ALL* as a registration. It is at the same time describing its business but then also tongue in cheek plays on the Afrikaans *fôkol* and the English *fuck all* 'nothing'. Companies clearly exploit the various options available to them and this category is constantly expanding.

The next category has to do with lifestyle or worldview. It seems as if vehicle owners want to emphasize the fact that they subscribe to a particular lifestyle or worldview, and wish to exhibit that on the registration. One of the interesting examples is that of *OLDFART*, a male from Somerset West. This is clearly a case of self-ridicule, where the owner suggests that he should not be taken seriously. Many owners play on the age aspect, suggesting that they will not grow old, or that they will continue to have fun throughout their lives, with registration plates such as *4EVR YNG* (forever young) and *38tilidi* (38 till I die). Many play on the sexual or erotic, including *SEXY*, *2HOT4U* (too hot for you), a possible reference to the car or the driver (or both); *DONJUAN*, a guy in a BMW; *NAUGHTY* on 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 *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" taking the place of "s." *HELLOMAN* suggests a friendly greeting to all motorists, so named after a talking parrot. *CU TWO* (see you too) suggests a friendly disposition to other road users.

*MOJO* suggests charm, power or touch, probably inspired by the Austin Powers movies. *LUVYA* (love you) extends a very friendly greeting to others on the road, whereas *B SMART* clearly gives free advice. A husband and wife reflected 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. Sometimes a choice is exercised simply to have some fun, such as *345SES* (< 3456). Two interesting Afrikaans examples will conclude this section: *ARMGAT* ('pauper'), driving a BMW, satirically suggests the sacrifices the owner had to make to acquire his vehicle. *WINDGAT* features on the Volvo C70 of a Dutch driver, suggesting that the term says something about him and about how he views life. *Windgat* means something like 'lovable rogue' and in Afrikaans it could have a negative connotation such as 'braggart'.

This 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.

A small but interesting category reflects religious affiliation. Amongst Muslims 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, "In the name of God, the Compassionate and Merciful," adds up to 786. Examples include *786 JAZZ*, the vehicle of Jasmina, a Muslim woman affectionately known as *Auntie Jazz*, who coupled her name with *786*, and *ABH 786*, which represents a female Muslim driver's initials and the first letter of her family name, *Ayesha Bibi Harnakar* followed by *786*. (The original *CA 786* [CA=Cape Town] belongs to the father of an erstwhile Arabic lecturer at the University of the Western Cape. The owner of that particular plate has been offered considerable sums of money to sell the registration, but he simply refuses.)

There are two examples with Christian associations: *Psalm 91* and *Nyani*. Psalm 91 is all about the protection of the Almighty ("no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent"). The owner is a steadfast Christian woman who believes that God will take care of her when she ventures onto the road. *Nyani*, a somewhat obscure Xhosa



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word, is a shortened form of *inyani~inyaniso* 'the truth'. The message is supported by the 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 also to be a public testimony regarding religious conviction.

I have only one example of a category that displays political affiliation, and it is a very clever one. The car is registered in the Northern Cape, which has *NC* as its official designation on registration plates. 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.

The popularity of personalized registration plates is growing rapidly and vehicle owners exploit the possibilities fully. This is again an indication 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, one 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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