

## Language and Semiotics: Safety on Nigerian Roads Perspective

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Doi: 10.23918/ijsses.v9i3p57

**Abstract:** The thrust of this paper is to find out how literate and illiterate drivers are able to identify and act accordingly to unworded traffic signs on Nigerian roads. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select 20 private (seemed literate) drivers and 20 commercials (believed to be illiterate) drivers at Jabi lorry park, Abuja, Nigeria. 20-item-road traffic signs with no inscriptions were used as instrument for the respondents to orally state what those signs stand for when found on high ways. The instrument was given to two road safety personnel (FRSC) and two vehicle inspection officers (VIO) upon whose advice the final draft of the instrument was done and administered. The reliability index was determined via test re-test method using Pearson r statistics at 0.05 level of significance, thus producing 0.79 reliability index. The data collected were analysed using Mean and Standard deviation statistics for research questions 1 and 2, while Pearson r was used to test the 2 null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. Results of the findings indicated that the Mean score of 78.68 and Standard deviation of 1.38 by the literate drivers was very high, and the Mean score of 99.89 and Standard deviation of 0.99 by the illiterate drivers was also high, but higher than that of literate drivers. The calculated r value of 6.153 is greater than the critical r value of .711 thus, rejecting the null about relationship between literacy and identification of road signs. The findings also revealed that inability to read and write was no barrier to identifying road signs by illiterate drivers as the calculated r value of 6.153 is greater than the critical r value of 0.011 thus, rejecting the hypothesis. Based on the findings, it was concluded that being educated should not be seen that one will automatically be able to identify, describe and state how and what some road signs stand for, and also one's inability to read and write is not an impediment to being able to identify, describe and understand how and what a symbol stands for, this could be probably be due to many years of driving experience on most major roads in Nigeria by the illiterate drivers. It is therefore recommended that Diver Licensing Unit of the Nigerian Road Safety should thoroughly interview and drive-test any-would-be driver's license applicants in that education is important though, it must not be assumed that all educated driver's license applicants are conversant with all road traffic signs.

**Keywords:** Language, Semiotics, Safety on Nigerian Roads, Road Signs and Pidgin English

### 1. Introduction

Language is a system that consists of the development, acquisition, maintenance and use of complex systems of communication, particularly the human ability to do so; language is any specific example of such a system. Questions concerning the philosophy of language, such as whether words can represent

Received: June 6, 2022

Accepted: July 27, 2022

Yekeen, B., Oyeniyi, A.F., & Rabiati, F.O. (2022). Language and Semiotics: Safety on Nigerian Roads Perspective. International Journal of Social Sciences and Educational Studies, 9(3), 57-72.

experience, have been debated extensively by Gorgias and Plato in ancient Greece. Bello (2017) also surmises that language is arbitrary vocal symbol that allows a group of people to communicate. Language originated from emotions, rational and logical thought. Most 20th century philosophers such as Wittgenstein contend that philosophy is really the study of language. Estimates of the number of human languages in the world vary between 5,000 and 7,000. However, any precise estimate depends on a partly arbitrary distinction between language and dialect. Natural languages are spoken or signed, but any language can be encoded into secondary media using auditory visual or tactile stimuli, for example, in whistling, signed, or braille. This is because human language is modality-independent. In another development, depending on philosophical perspectives regarding the definition of language and meaning, when used as a general concept, “language” may refer to cognitive ability to learn and use systems of complex communication, or to describe the set of rules that makes up these systems, or the set of utterances or signs that can be produced from other rules. Oladotun (2015) refers to language as cognitive ability to learn and use systems of communication to describe the set of rules that makes up set of utterances. Oral, manual and tactile languages contain a phonological system that governs how symbols are used to form sequences known as words or morphemes, and a syntactic system that governs how words and morphemes are combined to form phrases and utterances. All languages rely on the process of semioses to relate signs to particular meaning. Bauer (2003) posits that languages are utterances as well as signs that are produced and understood by humans.

Human language has the properties of productivity, articulation, phonological internalisation (semantics) and displacement (interpretation), which relies entirely on social convention and learning. Its complex structure affords a much wider range of expressions than any known system of animal communication. Language, according to Oladotun (2015), is thought to have originated when early homoninies (sub- is thought to have originated when early hominines (sub- sub-family of hominidae that include humans, gorillas, chimpanzees, and some extinct relatives) started gradually changing their primate communication systems, acquiring the ability to form a theory of other minds and shared intelligibility. This development is sometimes thought to have coincided with an increase in brain volume, thus making linguists see the structures of language as having evolved to serve specific communicative and special functions. Language is processed in many different locations in the human brain, especially in the broca’s and wernicke’s areas. Bello (2017) contends that humans acquire language through social interaction in early childhood, and children generally speak fluently by approximately three years old. The use of language is deeply entrenched in human culture. Therefore, in addition to its strictly communicative use, language also has many special and cultural uses such as signifying group identity, social stratification, as well as social grooming and entertainment. Comrie (2018) maintains that the English word Language derives ultimately from Proto-Indo-European “dngweh2s” “tongue” speech, language” through Latin lingua, “language, tongue”, and old French language. The word is sometimes used to refer to codes, ciphers, signs, and other kinds of artificially constructed communication systems such as formally defined computer languages used for computer programming. Unlike conventional human languages, a normal language in this sense is a system of signs for coding and decoding information. In Bauer’s (2003) contribution, submits that as an object of linguistic study, “language” has two primary meanings which are aspects of concept, and a specific linguistic system. A Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, defines the modern discipline of linguistics, first explicitly formulated the distinction using the French word language for language as a concept, langue as a specific instance of a language system, and parole for the concrete usage of speech in

a particular language. When speaking about language as a general concept, definitions can be used to stress different aspects of the phenomenon. These definitions also entail different approaches and understanding of language usage, and also inform different and often incompatible schools of linguistic theory. In another development, Austin and Sallabank (2011) contend that debates about the nature and origin of language date back to the ancient world, and that Greek Philosophers such as Gorgias and Plato debated the relation between words, concepts (signs) and reality.

Language could represent neither the objective experience nor human experience, and that communication and truth were therefore impossible, while Plato maintains that communication is only possible when language represents ideas and concepts that exist independently of, and prior to language. This implies that the role of language is shaping our experiences of the world in that language reflects the objective structure of the world and it creates concept that it in turn imposes on our experiences on the objectives of the world. This leads to the question of whether philosophical problems are really linguistic problems or otherwise. The resurgence of the view that language plays a significant role in the creation and circulation of concepts, and that the study of philosophy is essentially the study of language, is associated with what has been called the linguistic turn and philosophers such as Wildenstein's 20th century philosophy. These issues about language in relation to meaning and reference, cognition and consciousness remain active today (Baker, 2001).

While corroborating the above, Bett (2010) affirms that language primarily is the mental ability that allows humans to undertake linguistic behaviour to learn, produce and understand utterances and even signs. This explanation stresses the universality of language to all humans, and it emphasises the biological basis for human capacity for language as a unique development of the human brain. Language acquisition is innate in human, and that all cognitively normal children raised in an environment where language is accessible will acquire language without formal instruction. Languages may even develop spontaneously in environments where people live together or grow up together through other means such as experience, without a common language such as the Creole languages and spontaneously developed sign languages like that of Nicaraguan sign language (NSL). This view according to Bett (2010) can be traced back to the philosophers Kant and Descartes, understands language to be largely innate, for example, in Chomsky's theory of universal Grammar, or American philosopher Jerry Fodor's extreme innatist theory, these kinds of definitions are often applied in studies of language within a cognitive science framework and in neurolinguistics.

Similarly, Bloomfield (1914) sees language as a formal system of signs governed by grammatical rules of combination to communicate meaning. This means that human languages can be described as closed structural systems consisting of rules that relate particular signs to particular meanings. These rules are considered to be an innate feature of the human mind and to constitute the rudiments of what language is. In the philosophy of language, the view of linguistic meaning as residing in the logical relations between propositions and reality was developed by philosophers such as Alfred Tarski, Bertrand Russell and other formal logicians.

In another development, Chomsky (1957) and (2000) postulate that language is a system of communication that enables humans to exchange verbal or symbolic utterances. This stresses the social function of language and the fact that humans use it to express themselves and to manipulate objects or

symbols in their milieu. Functional theories of grammar explain grammatical structures by their communicative functions and understanding grammatical structures of language to be the result of an adaptive process by which grammar was “tailored” to serve the communicative needs of its users. This view of language is associated with the study of language in Pragmatics, cognitive and interactive frameworks as well as in Semiotics, Sociolinguistics and Linguistic anthropology. Languages are used by those who speak them to communicate and to solve a plethora of social tasks. Many aspects of language use can be seen to be adapted specifically to these purposes. Due to the way in which language is transmitted between generations and within communities, Chomsky (1957) posits that language perpetually changes and diversifies into new languages or converging due to language contact and use. The process therefore, is similar to the process of evolution, where the process of decency with modification leads to the formation of a phylogenetic tree.

On usage and meaning of language, Guessa (1981) is of the view that the semantic study of meaning assumes that meaning is elation between sign and meanings that are firmly established through social convention. However, Semantics does not study the way in which social conventions are made and affect language, rather, when studying the way words and signs are used, it is often the case that words have different meanings, depending on the social context of use. An important example of this is the process called deixis, which describes the way certain words refer to entities through their relation between a specific point in time and space when the word is uttered. Such words are, for example the word “I” which designates the person speaking, “now” indicating the moment of speaking, and “here” that shows the position of speaking. Signs also designate and change their meanings overtime, as the conventions governing their usage gradually change. The study of how the linguistic expressions change depending on contexts is called pragmatics. Deixis is an important part of the way that we use language to point out and interpret entities in the world. Pragmatics is concerned with the ways language use is patterned and how these patterns contribute to meaning. For example, in all languages, linguistic expressions can be used not just to transmit information, but to perform actions and acts according to how the signs are patterned.

The concept of Semiotics according to Bello (2018), is the theory and study of signs and symbols, especially as elements of language or other systems of communication. Semiotics can also be referred to as semiology, semasidogy and semeiology. It is usually viewed as the science of signs. It is concerned with communication or signification systems, and it seeks to account for “any system of signs whatever their substance”. Since semiotics is an element of language, it could therefore be inferred that individual’s level of literacy, that is ability to read and write aids signs’ identification.

The semioticians are concerned with the system of the functioning totality, the kinds of relations; contrast or oppositions between signs (paradigmatic relations) and possibility of combination through which signs create larger units (syntagmatic relations). In other words, semiotics attempts to elaborate the signification process in a given system. It attempts a systematic lay-out of the structure underlining various signifying occurrences in a given system or sub-system, and then to show the relationship between the various signifying patterns. The semiotics framework that is model/patterns/scope of analysis is attractive because it helps to account for complex signification patterns. Semiotics is also seen as an integrated science, it assimilates various insights from the various disciplines that are concerned with the problems of communication (Culler, 2019). Semiotics particularly helps us to “broaden our understanding of other

critical” framework, e.g. dramaturgy and aesthetics; it as an “integration of poetic, linguistics, discourse analysis and other disciplines within the overall study of semiotic practices. Unlike other disciplines, semiotics does not concern itself with just discrete elements of signification, but with the totality of signification in a given system. It is usually concerned with how the various communicative elements in a given system combined to express this totality (Pavis, 1982). In another instance, Sekoni’s (1989) study on the semiotics of Nigeria discourse, also notes that semiotics” emphasises the communicative characters of all manifestation of culture. Semiotics provides an unusual opportunity for recognising the interpretation of the objective/scientific and subjective understanding in the construction and maintenance of cultures.

Shannon and Weaver (1948) in Olaoye (2008) view semiotics as objects of systems as well as elements and discrete entities but they all combine to produce the whole system for instance communicating or giving a sign, thus leading to comprehension as a system. Three main elements are considered as constituting this system: Sender- message - receiver. This configuration has been variously modified, for instance in the information theory of Shannon and Weaver (1984) in Olaoye (2019) has the following configuration:

Information source - transmitter - channel - receiver - destination. Whatever the configuration, a system is constituted by a whole and its parts, thus signaling the interaction of the parts that constitute the whole. As a system, Olaoye (2019) argues that the totality of system of art comprises:

signifier elements as “artifacts”

aesthetic objects evoked by this artifact and

a relationship with that which is signified.

Although semiotics can be applied to any given system, its specialty is the communication or sign system. Its application is the explication of specific sign systems. This is achieved by elucidating the network or relationship within the system. In this, Olaoye (2019) asserts that the system has a structure which semiotics attempts to elaborate, and that the question of structure is central to structuralism/semiotic thought. There are three main ideas of structure, and they are derived from the work of Jean Piaget who postulated the main properties of structure as wholeness, self-regulation and transformation. Wholeness implies completeness; it also indicates internal coherence in the sense that constituent parts of the structure have intrinsic links with the whole, meaning that the parts have no authentic life without the whole. By transformation, it means that the structure has mechanism for constant internal regeneration. For instance, a language is capable of transforming or varying its basic sentences, while self-regulation implies that a structure has its own internal rules with which to regulate the behaviour of the structure. Olaoye (2008) also expresses that another element of semiotics is substance which refers to any tangible entity. For instance, a phoneme is a substance such as a leaf, a tree, a sign, a grain of sand, and several other things. Substance is anything that has a definite and describable configuration no matter how small.

Similarly, icons, indices and symbols are also considered as other elements of semiotics and that icons are images such as photographs, sculptures, paintings, mental images, to mention but a few, that gives near-identical representation. Indices, according to Bello (2018), are things, facts or ideas that signify being

closely related conceptually to the object, or by “forcibly” intruding on the perceiver’s mind in relation to the object, such as a pointing hand, knock on the door, smoke, etc., while symbols are those signs whose meanings are governed by rules or convention, and whose relationship with the thing signified are arbitrary.

In a similar vein, qualisign, which is a sign whose referent is indicated in its quality, is sacrosanct to semiotics. For instance, a pen is a pen but a golden pen might be a sign of affluence, or of royalty. As well, sinsign, also an important element in semiotics is a thing or an event which individually or singly constitutes a sign. For example, a rainfall may give an indication of the current ecological period, or even a house giving a sign of habitation, while another element legisign is a rule or law that acts as a sign. For instance, white stripes painted on the roads signify or constitute a sign of regulated people that would be crossing the road. Other signs such as traffic lights are legisigns pointing to the concept of traffic regulation.

The sign, the main element of semiotics is anything that stands for something; a sign may be a word, an alphabet, a whole book, a bunch of flowers, etc. In art generally, everything is a sign, each element of a text is a signifier that discretely creates a signified and a concomitant sign while contributing to the overall sign of things in human life. Bello (2018) and Olaoye (2019) surmise that overall sign may be comprehended in terms of message or series of messages or information.

Language and semiotics combine to function on roads for human safety thus talking about traffic signs or road signs which are signs created at the sides of, or above roads to give instructions or provide information to road users. The earliest road signs were simple wooden or stone milestones, but later, signs with directional arms were introduced. With traffic volumes increasing since 1930s, many countries have adopted pictorial signs or otherwise simplified and standardised their signs to overcome language barriers, and enhance traffic safety. Such pictorial signs use symbols (often silhouettes) in place of words, and are usually based on international intelligibility and protocols. Such signs were first developed in Europe, and have since been adopted by most countries of the world in varying degrees ([https://en.org/road/traffic\\_sign](https://en.org/road/traffic_sign)). In the United States, Canada, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand signs are categorised as follows:

1. regulatory signs
2. route marker signs
3. express way signs
4. freeway signs
5. welcome signs
6. informational signs
7. recreation and cultural interest signs
8. emergency management (civil defense) signs
9. temporary traffic control (construction or work zone) signs
10. school signs
11. railroad and light rail signs
12. bicycle rider’s signs, to mention but a few.

Later, in the United States, the categories, placement, and graphic standards for traffic signs and pavement markings are legally defined in the Federal Highway Administration's manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices as the standard. All the "language item signs" 1–12, among several others were later translated into signs instead of writing a lengthy statements or sentences or phrases on road sign boards. Examples of such languages that are transmitted in signs include:



Other road signs that practically do not have language interpretations include the following:

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

The importance of language, meaning and semiotics in any human society cannot be underrated in that language is a formal system of signs governed by grammatical rules to communicate meaning. Chomsky (1957) and (2000) surmise that language is a system that enables humans to exchange verbal or symbolic utterances. Pavis (1982) is of the view that semiotics helps man to broaden his understanding of other critical frameworks such as dramaturgy and aesthetics. Contention of Roland (1968) sees symbols, images and the elements depicted and expressed in people's moral, religion and spiritual thoughts as well as their complex outlook about natural events. These figures and semantic images (depictions) are explicit in themselves. There have been several studies about language and semiotics, but thus far, no study has been carried out to the best knowledge of these researchers in respect of how literate and illiterate drivers respond to unworded road traffic signs on high ways. This gap in research is what this study aims to fill.

### 1.2 Purpose of the Study

This study aims at finding out:

1. How literate drivers respond to road signs that have no wordings?
2. How illiterate drivers respond to road signs that have no wordings?
3. If there is any relationship between literacy (ability to read and write) and identification of road signs.
4. If there is any relationship between illiteracy (inability to read and write) and identification of road signs.

### 1.3 Research Questions

1. What is the level of understanding of literate drivers about road signs?
2. What is the level of understanding of illiterate drivers about road signs?
3. Is there any relationship between literacy (ability to read and write) and identification of road signs by Nigerian drivers?

4. Is there any relationship between illiteracy (inability to read and write) and identification of road signs by Nigerian drivers?

#### 1.4 Research Hypotheses

Ho1: There is no relationship between literacy (ability to read and write) and identification of road signs.

Ho2: There is no relationship between illiteracy (inability to read and write) and identification of road signs.

## 2. Methodology

The study is a quantitative descriptive survey research. It is carried out at Jabi lorry park, Abuja, Nigeria. The population for the study is all drivers at Jabi motor-park. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select 20 private (seemed literate) drivers and 20 commercials (believed to be illiterate) drivers. 20-item-road traffic signs with no inscriptions were used as instrument for the respondents who orally state what those signs stand for when found on high ways. Every correct identification of the road sign-items is scored 1mark, while any wrong identification is scored 0 mark. The instrument was given to two road safety personnel and two vehicle inspection officers (VIO) upon whose advice the final draft of the instrument was drawn and administered. The first 2 research questions were answered using Mean and Standard Deviation statistics whole the 2 null hypotheses were tested using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient at 0.05 alpha level of significant. To get the reliability index for the study, the instrument was re-administered after three weeks, and the two exercises were subjected to test re-test using Pearson r statistics at 0.05 level of significance, thus producing 0.79 reliability index. The instrument is shown in the appendix.

### 2.1 Data Analysis

#### Questions One

1. What is the level of understanding of literate drivers about road signs?

Table 1: The level of understanding of literate drivers about road signs

N	Obtained score	Mean score	Standard Deviation	Decision
20	19	78.68	1.38	Very high

2. What is the level of understanding of illiterate drivers about road signs?

Table 2: The level of understanding of illiterate drivers about road signs

N	Obtained score	Mean score	Standard Deviation	Decision
20	20	99.89	0.99	Very high

## 2.2 Hypotheses Testing

Ho1: There is no relationship between literacy (ability to read and write) and identification of road signs.

Table 3: Pearson r analysis of the relationship between literacy (ability to read and write) and identification of road signs

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Df	Critical r value	Calculated r value	Decision
Literate drivers	20	78.68	1.38				
Ability to read and write	20	78.68	1.38	19	.711	6.153	Rejected

Ho2: There is no relationship between illiteracy (inability to read and write) and identification of road signs.

Table 4: Pearson r analysis of the relationship between illiteracy (inability to read and write) and identification of road signs

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Df	Critical r value	Calculated r value	Decision
Literate drivers	20	99.89	0.99				
Inability to read and write	20	99.89	0.99	19	0.011	6.153	Rejected

## 3. Discussion of Findings

The results of the analysis presented in table 1 indicate that the Mean score of 78.68 and Standard deviation of 1.38 by the literate drivers is very high. This finding is in line with the submissions of Bett (2010) who surmises that primarily, language is a mental faculty that allows humans to undertake linguistic behaviours to learn languages and to produce and understand utterances and interpret even signs. This finding also falls within the submission of Pavis (1982) who argues that semiotics particularly helps to broaden our understanding of other framework such as dramaturgy and aesthetics. The results of analysis in table 2 show that the Mean score of 99.89 and Standard deviation of 0.99 by the illiterate drivers is also very high. This finding is in consonance with the submission of Olaoye (2008) who expresses that semiotics is a substance which refers to any tangible entity such as a phoneme, a leaf, a tree, a sign, a grain of sand. A substance is anything that has a definite and describable configuration no matter how small. Similarly, Mukarovsky (1983) icons, indices and symbols are also considered as other elements of semiotics and that icons are images such as photographs, sculptures, paintings, metal images that give near-identical representation. With traffic volumes increasing since 1930, many countries have adopted pictorial signs or otherwise simplified and standardised their signs to overcome language barriers, and enhance traffic safety. Such pictorial signs use symbols (often silhouettes) in place of words, and are usually based on

international intelligibility and protocols. Such signs were first developed in Europe, and have since been adopted by most countries of the world in varying degrees ([https://en.org/road/traffic\\_sign](https://en.org/road/traffic_sign)).

The results of the analysis presented in tables 3 indicate that the calculated  $r$  value of 6.153 is greater the critical  $r$  value of .711 at 0.05 alpha level of significance, and this is a significant relationship. Thus, the null hypothesis that says there is no significant relationship between ability to read and write and identification of road signs is rejected. This finding is in agreement with the submission of Bello (2018) who subscribes to the theory and study of signs and symbols, especially as elements of language or other systems of communication, and that is usually viewed as the science of signs which is concerned with communication or signification systems, and it seeks to account for “any system of signs whatever their substance”. And since semiotics is an element of language, it could therefore be inferred that individual’s level of literacy, that is ability to read and write aids signs’ identification.

The results of the analysis shown in table 4 is an indication that the calculated  $r$  value of 6.153 is greater than the critical  $r$  value of 0.011 at 0.05 level of significance. This is indicating a very high relationship between ability to read and write and identification of road signs, and as such, the null hypothesis that says that there is no significant relationship between ability to read and write and identification of road signs is rejected. This finding is in agreement with the submission of Bello (2018) who subscribes to the theory and study of signs and symbols, especially as elements of language or other systems of communication, and that is usually viewed as the science of signs which is concerned with communication or signification systems, and it seeks to account for “any system of signs whatever their substance”. And since semiotics is an element of language, it could therefore be inferred that individual’s level of literacy, that is ability to read and write aids signs’ identification.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Through the findings of the study, it was concluded that the responses received from the seemed literate drivers was very high about the identification of road signs, the responses received from the illiterate drivers was also very high but higher than that of the literate drivers. It was therefore concluded that being educated should not be seen as being able to identify, describe and state how and what some road signs stand for. It was also concluded that inability to read and write is not an impediment to being able to identify, describe and understand how and what a symbol stands for, especially in high ways, and this could probably be due to many years of driving experience on most major roads in Nigeria by the illiterate drivers.

#### **5. Recommendations**

As a result of the findings and conclusion of the study, it is therefore recommended that Diver Licensing Unit of the Nigerian Road Safety should thoroughly interview and practically drive-test any-would-be driver’s license applicant whether educated or not. Being educated should not be taken or accepted as capable of identifying some road signs. Even though education is important, it must not be assumed that all educated driver’s license applicants are conversant with all road traffic signs.

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## Appendix

Below are some of the traffic signs with no inscriptions:

1. The road ahead curves to the right



2. There is sharp right turn in the road ahead



3. There is sharp bend to the left in the road ahead



4. The road divides into two ahead



5. The divided road ends ahead



6. The road narrows ahead



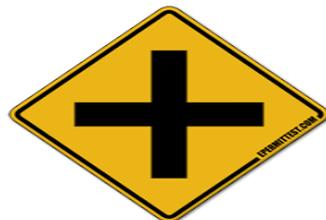
7. A side road meets the road you are travelling on



8. There is winding road ahead



9. There are crossroads ahead



10. Stop sign ahead



11. Pedestrian crossing ahead



12. Pedestrians may be crossing ahead



13. Look for bicycle riders ahead



14. Road is slippery when wet



15. There is a hump in the road ahead (a hump is a sudden slop up and then down)



16. Look out for Kangaroos



17. Narrow bridge ahead



18. Stock may be crossing ahead



19. Workers ahead



20. Look out for loose stones

