

What's in a Political Slogan?

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Abstract. Despite their efficiency and their – practically – mandatory use in political campaigns, slogans are a largely under-researched area of political discourse. This paper focuses on political slogans and investigates them from a cognitive perspective. It aims to provide a description of the conceptual structure underlying political slogans, which could also serve as a stepping stone for further investigations of their 'witty', 'catchy', and 'quotable' character.

The paper demonstrates that the conceptual elements in the scenario prototypically employed in political slogans are the ones of **leader, people being led, a social issue/ a solution to a social issue/ a goal, time, and space**. The analysis demonstrates how these scenario elements function prototypically.

This hypothesized conceptual structure is tested against a dataset specifically compiled for the present purposes. The dataset includes 25 slogans used within UK and USA political contexts over the last 70 years. The analysis conducted is qualitative.

Key words: slogans, political discourse, cognitive, scenarios.

Нели Тинчева. КАКВО ПРЕДСТАВЛЯВА ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЯТ СЛОГАН?

Резюме. Въпреки доказаната си ефективност и практически неизменна употреба във всяка политическа кампания, политическите слогани рядко са обект на академични изследвания. Настоящата статия се насочва към политическите слогани като основен обект на изследване и подхожда към тях от когнитивна гледна точка. Изследването цели да установи концептуалната структура, която обуславя употребата на политически слогани. Това от своя страна би могло да допринесе както теоретично, така и аналитично за бъдещи изследвания върху обекта, предлагайки например обяснение на „духовития“ и „запомнящ се“ характер на политическите слогани като специфичен жанр.

Статията разкрива концептуалните елементи, на които е базиран когнитивният сценарий, прототипно използван при комуникацията чрез политически слогани, а именно когнитивният сценарий, съдържащ елементите **лидер, водени, социален проблем/решение на социален проблем/цел, време и място**. Анализът в статията илюстрира и доказва как тези концептуални елементи функционират едновременно и спазват принципите на прототипологията.

Хипотезата относно конкретната концептуална структура на въпросния сценарий се тества върху дейтасет, събран специално за целите на настоящото изследване, който съдържа 25 слогана, реално използвани в контекста на британската и американската политика през последните 70 години. Методът на анализ е квалитативен.

Ключови думи: слоган, политически дискурс, когнитивен, сценарий.

Research/Научно изследване

I. Introduction

From Robespierre's 1790 "*Liberty, equality, fraternity*", through U.S. President Eisenhower's 1952 "*I like Ike*", to U.S. President Donald Trump's 2016 "*Make America Great Again*", or, the so-called MAGA, political slogans have consistently proved to be an efficient instrument in pre-election campaigning. The last example especially can be argued to have proven successful twice in U.S. history as President Ronald Reagan used the very similar slogan of "*Let's make America great again*" in his 1980 presidential bid. A similar cultural phenomenon can be observed in the use of "*Yes, we can*" first as the Scottish National Party's slogan in the 1997 UK general election, and then as Barack Obama's 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. Despite their (sometimes even repetitive) efficiency and their – practically – mandatory use in political campaigning, political slogans are a largely under-researched area of political discourse (see Hartig 2018). In contrast, business slogans enjoy considerable scholarly attention (e.g., Kohli 2007; Kohl 2011; Dass et al. 2014; Briggs, Janakiraman 2017).

Furthermore, the investigations of political slogans in existence typically set out to tackle how and why political slogans are successful. Also, rather typically, they adopt a viewpoint fully coincidental with or closely related to rhetoric analysis (e.g. Newsome 2002; Young 2006; Hodges 2014, 2019). Thus, research on political slogans can be generalized to focus on "the phrasing of the slogan, the connotation and association of the words used within them, and the motivational quality of slogans" (Newsome 2002: 21). Occasionally, related studies may veer closer toward sociolinguistics (e.g., Amălăncei et al. 2017; Tsangaris 2018) and to discourse analysis by, for example, testing the persuasive potential of emotions in political slogans (as in Vaes et al. 2011). Even more rarely, investigations may employ a neural or psycholinguistic perspective on political slogans (e.g. Maksymenko et al. 2019). Overall, the existing investigations depart from or arrive at conclusions similar to Hodges's (2014: 356), which states that "[p]olitical slogans are designed to be witty, catchy, and most importantly, highly quotable". How one should understand the notions of 'witty', 'catchy', and 'quotable' is not a question addressed, nor resolved in the relevant literature.

The present paper aims to provide a cognitive description of the conceptual structure of political slogans. That would, hopefully, serve as a stepping stone for further investigations of their ‘witty’, ‘catchy’, and ‘quotable’ character. The hypothesized conceptual structure is tested against a dataset specifically compiled for the present purposes. The dataset includes 25 randomly selected slogans used in UK and USA political contexts. The slogans appeared within the span of the last 70 years. The analysis conducted is qualitative.

II. Theoretical background

II.1. Scenarios

The relevance of the cognitive notion of ‘scenario’ to the present investigation was prompted by Musolff’s claim that, in the domain of politics, “[i]t is not the side with ‘the most’ or ‘best’ facts that wins but the one which provides the most plausible, i.e. seemingly intuitively reliable scenarios” (2017: 14).

In cognitive linguistics, scenarios were originally discussed by Sanford and Garrod (1981; for a discussion, see de Beaugrande, Dressler 1981) and were viewed as only one of the types of, let us call them, cognitive models, or mental ‘products’ of conceptualization and categorization processes. The differences among the various general types of cognitive models are summarized aptly by de Beaugrande and Dressler as follows:

Frames state what things belong together in principle, but not in what order things will be done or mentioned. Schemas are global patterns of events and states in ordered sequences linked by time proximity and causality. [...] Schemas are always arrayed in a progression, so that hypotheses can be set up about what will be done or mentioned next in a textual world. Plans are global patterns of events and states leading up to an intended goal. [...] Plans differ from schemas in that a planner (e.g. a text producer) evaluates all elements in terms of how they advance toward the planner’s goal. Scripts are stabilized plans called up very frequently to specify the roles of participants and their expected actions [...] Different pattern types might share the same basic knowledge in a variable perspective (e.g. a frame for ‘structure of a house’ versus a plan for ‘building a house’).

(de Beaugrande, Dressler 1981: 91)

As far as the relevance of these types of cognitive models specifically to the genre of political slogans is concerned, de Beaugrande and Dressler provide yet another helpful viewpoint by maintaining that cognitive models control “how a topic might be developed (frames), how an event sequence will progress (schemas), how text users or characters in textual worlds will pursue their goals (plans), and how situations are set up so that certain texts can be presented at the opportune moment (scripts)” (1981: 91).

Later cognitive linguistic investigations upgraded and enhanced their interpretation on scenarios particularly, or, in Musolff’s words, they ‘enriched’ the concept

of ‘scenario’ (2006: 27). Drawing on mathematician Putnam’s investigation of scenarios (1975) and on Fillmore’s research on conceptual ‘scenes’ as “any kind of coherent segment of human beliefs, actions, experiences or imaginings” related to an underlying conceptual frame (1975: 124), Musolff re-defined scenarios and upheld the claim that they are constructs conceptually related to whole domains, whose parts are not equally important and are not equally represented in text and discourse (2006).

Such an interpretation resembles considerably Minsky’s original idea of ‘frames’ as a cognitive construct consisting of default slots (term by Minsky 1975). Those slots reflect and correspond to conventionally salient situational elements typically highlighted in a text. Truly, to Minsky, a frame ‘contains’, to use the generally-adopted metaphor, obligatory and optional slots, which is a premise running counter to the general prototypical principles (Rosch 1973, 1975; Taylor 2003; Ungerer and Schmid 2006) adopted in the present investigation. Following the principles of cognitive prototypology, the present investigation maintains a viewpoint on scenario elements, or slots, as being of non-obligatory character. That viewpoint rests on the premise that some slots will typically be activated across most of a scenario’s instantiations, but there will be few occasions on which all default slots will be explicated. In other words, for every scenario (or any other type of cognitive model for that matter), there can be determined a default element/slot combination, which can be statistically tested and proven as its actual prototypical default structure. The activation of only one element/slot from that cognitive model, however, can be sufficient for the activation of the whole cognitive model.

Furthermore, the configuration of scenario elements/slots need not be interpreted from a ‘right’ vs. ‘wrong’, or a ‘true’ vs. ‘false’, perspective. As Rosch’s research has demonstrated (*ibid.*), conventionalized layman’s interpretations of a stereotyped situation are at least as valid and at least as powerful socially (see Lakoff, Johnson 1999) as those of experts. This is a point of special significance in any discussion of the manipulative potential of political discourse. Musolff also highlights the importance of this peculiarity of the operation of cognitive models. In his words, scenarios “include conventionally required assumptions, which may be revealed by experts to be empirically wrong but are still the default expectations that underlie the folk-theories held by nonexperts” (2006: 27).

Admittedly, Musolff’s interpretation of scenarios is deeply embedded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Regardless, there are two major aspects of his interpretation that can be generalized to fit the purposes of any cognitive discourse study and those need to be highlighted here. The first aspect posits scenario elements, or slot fillers, to be so coordinated in a text that they can be seen as enacting “whole mini-narratives” (Musolff 2006: 27). Musolff’s example of such a ‘narrative’ scenario involves COURTSHIP, MARRIED LIFE, and FAMILY-BUILDING as source

structures for understanding the general target domain of POLITICS. That ‘narrative’ scenario, in his words, “seems to make the configurations of domain elements prime sources for [...] conceptualizations of large-scale political processes involving whole nations or international Communities” (*ibid.*). If transposed onto Minsky’s notion of slots and their concept ‘fillers’, Musolff’s interpretation would mean that, first, a scenario’s slot fillers are interconnected in a more or less stereotyped conceptual network, and, second, that network will not represent a static ‘frame-like’ picture. Instead, in scenarios, conceptual configurations simulate dynamic ‘narrative-like’ progressions. Simply put, conceptually, scenarios depict, or tell, whole stories. In the case of political slogans, they need to depict, or tell, whole politically-relevant stories. What exactly could function as a ‘politically-relevant story’ is one of the target questions of our discussion below.

The second generally valid aspect of Musolff’s treatment of scenarios concerns their evaluative potential. Scenarios, Musolff argues, serve to evoke cognitive structures related to “levels of goodness, certainty, necessity, and probability of situations” (2006: 28). Thus,

[...]we can characterise a “scenario” as a set of assumptions made by competent members of a discourse community about “typical” aspects of a source-situation, for example, its participants and their roles, the “dramatic” storylines and outcomes, and conventional evaluations of whether they count as successful or unsuccessful, normal or abnormal, permissible or illegitimate, etc. (*ibid.*)

The present investigation subscribes exclusively to this perspective of the cognitive notion of a scenario.

II.2. Prototypical political discourse scenario elements

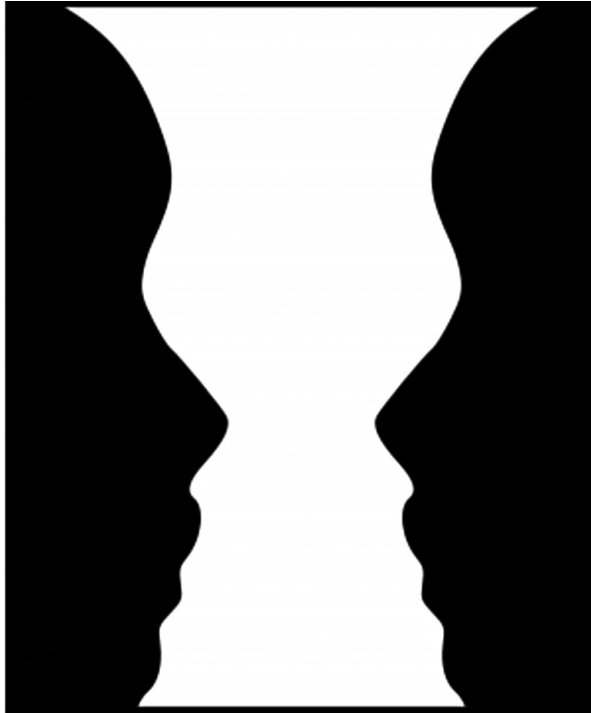
As argued above, a scenario can be represented as a configuration of stereotypical slots to be filled. A textbook example of such a scenario would be GOING TO A RESTAURANT, which typically ‘contains’ slots such as **waiter, client, food, ordering**, etc. These elements are, first, realized through their being filled with specific concepts or conceptual complexes. Then, the chosen elements and their configuration can be signalled by linguistic structures. In this process, crucially, the role of language is the one of signalling if, how and which prototypical elements have been realized in a specific text. In other words, language signals serve to guide the text receiver in filling the same slots the text producer has.

In previous studies (e.g. Tincheva 2012a, 2012b), I have argued that the prototypical elements, or slots, characterizing political discourse are the ones of **leader, people being led, a social issue/ a solution to a social issue/ a goal, time, and space**. Different political discourse genres, however, can organize and coordinate differently the elements in the political discourse scenario. For instance, political

speeches, tend to employ the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL image schema in configuring their conceptual structure, thus maximizing the narrative effect of the scenario employed. News items, in contrast, do not display a three-part structure and do not employ this particular image schema, instead, they draw on the CENTER-PERIPHERY image schema (Tincheva 2012a). These generalizations about the prototypical conceptual elements in all political discourse scenarios echo Lakoff's claim that scenarios are "structured by a SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema in the time domain" and consist of "people, things, properties, relations and propositions" such as "causal relations, identity relations [...] and a purpose structure" (Lakoff 1987: 285).

A second peculiarity of political discourse is that it invariably displays a high degree of overlap, or coincidence, between its discourse worlds and text worlds (Tincheva 2017). 'Discourse world' and 'text world' are notions borrowed from de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) and Werth (1999), who defines a discourse world as "the situational context surrounding the speech event itself". To Werth, a discourse world "contains the participants and what they can see, hear, etc." as well as all the incomplete informational input they can process on the basis of their previously-stored background knowledge (1999: 83). A text world, on the other hand, is defined by him as a situation "distinct from the immediate one of the language event"; it represents "the 'story' which is the subject of the discourse, together with all the structure necessary to understand it" (1999: 87). As participants in political discourse worlds are typically presented as characters in political text worlds (i.e. the **text producer** and the **text receiver** in a discourse world are the same people who are constructed in the text world as **leader** and **people being led**), it can be safely argued that, when people communicate on a political issue, the discourse world being constructed and the text world being constructed significantly overlap.

The last point to note in respect to general political discourse characteristics concerns the possibility for the elements in a political scenario to function in accordance with some of the principles of gestalt perception and profiling. Profiling, originally proposed by Rubin (1921), associates with gestalt principles (Koffka 1935; Wertheimer 1938) and with the distinction between a figure and its background. This cognitive mechanism derives from the innate incapacity of the human mind to work with homogeneous information flow and the resulting need to isolate and bring into focus some information bits, while suppressing others to the background. Clearly, profiling is a highly dynamic cognitive technique in that what serves as background at one moment could become a profile less than a second later, while the part profiled earlier becomes suppressed to the background. This mechanism is illustrated by Rubin himself in what is known as Rubin's vase:



The present investigation expects political slogans to trigger the profiling of some of the prototypical political discourse scenario elements, or slots (i.e. **leader, people being led, (solution to) a social issue/ goal, time, and space**), and to suppress others to the background.

III. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of the dataset in accordance with the prototypical political discourse scenario elements reveals political slogans can be grouped into several categories. These categories may overlap and can reveal more central or more peripheral uses of the basic political discourse scenario conceptual structure (on the terms of ‘central’ and ‘peripheral’ see Rosch 1973; Taylor 2003; Ungerer and Schmid 2006).

The slogans analyzed here prove to draw on the prototypical political discourse scenario in which **political leaders** and **citizens** (or, **people being led**) engage in **solving a political issue** and/ or in achieving a **political goal**. Additionally, the narrative characteristics of the scenario structure tend to be evoked through the use of the prototypical scenario elements of **time** and **space**.

Political slogans profiling a social goal

Examples of such scenario uses are:

“Prosperity and progress”

“A chicken in every pot and a car in every garage”

“Kinder, gentler nation”

“The great society”

“Real plans for real people”

What these examples reveal is that, first, this type of political slogans typically suppresses to the background all other prototypical scenario elements but the **social goal**.

Second, in them, the profiled element is typically signalled linguistically through the use of a Noun Phrase.

Third, the combined force of the first two characteristics may sometimes result in ambiguity, as the “Real plans for real people” example demonstrates. In this example, the plans in question could be either seen as fillers for the **goal** slot or, more likely, for the **solution to an issue** slot. Moreover, this is the only slogan in our dataset which, in addition to the **goal** element, profiles a category of voters who are part of the **people being led** (**signalled by real people**). In other words, this is the only slogan in our dataset which focuses on the **goal** slot but also profiles a second slot from the prototypical political discourse scenario. Yet, the slogan employs a Noun Phrase as a linguistic signal similarly to all the other slogans in this category. Thus, “*Real plans for real people*” can be argued to be peripheral as to this type of political slogans but also as still exemplifying the type.

Political slogans profiling a solution to an issue

Examples of such scenario uses are:

“Take back control”

“Keep America great”

“Don’t swap horses in the middle of the stream”

“Vote for Epton — before it’s too late”

What these examples reveal is that, first, this type of political slogans typically evokes an ACTIVITY as a **solution to a social issue**.

Second, in them, the linguistic signalling of the profiled elements is typically realized by an Imperative structure.

Third, the combination between the above two characteristics implies that, in the scenario, the ACTIVITY is connected with the **people being led** slot. In other words, the slogan implies the active role of the citizens in solving the common social issue. The leader element is suppressed to the background and is not connected to solving the social issue. What is more, by using imperative structures, this type

of political slogans profiles the discourse world in the communicative process and suppresses the text world to the background. In the discourse world, the LEADER tells the PEOPLE BEING LED what to do in order for the (common) social issue to be resolved. The leader commits to performing no ACTIVITY as a **solution to the social issue**.

Fourth, two other prototypical political discourse scenario elements can be also profiled in this type of political slogans. In “*Vote for Epton — before it’s too late*”, the slot **time** is also signalled as profiled (by before it’s too late). In “Don’t swap horses in the middle of the stream”, the slot **place** is also signalled as profiled (by in the middle of the stream).

Political slogans profiling an issue

“Labour isn’t working.”

This is the only example of this type in our dataset. In it, all other prototypical scenario elements but the **social issue** are suppressed to the background. In the scenario, the issue is connected with the concept of a POLITICAL ENEMY (in this case, the ENEMY is UK’s LABOUR PARTY, and the slogan was used in the UK’s 1978 Conservative Party campaign).

The linguistic signalling of the profiled elements is realized by a whole clausal structure.

Political slogans profiling time and/ or place

Examples of such scenario uses are:

“It’s time for a change!”

“It’s morning again in America.”

“Happy days are here again.”

“Our day will come.”

What these examples reveal is that, first, this type of political slogans typically suppresses to the background all other prototypical scenario elements but **time** and/ or **space**. The exception is “Our day will come.”, in which our signals the construction of a common identity including both **leader** and the **people being led**. Alternatively, *our* could be seen as performing an ‘exclusive’ pronominal function (Bolinger 1980), i.e. as referring only to a specific party and not to the whole of society.

Second, the examples suggest there may exist a tendency for political slogans typically to conceptualize time in terms of separate days rather than as an unsegmented continuum.

Third, in the examples, the linguistic signalling of the profiled elements is typically realized by a whole clausal structure.

Political slogans profiling a leader

Examples of such scenario uses are:

“A compassionate conservative”

“Reformer with results”

“Ross for Boss”

“The better man for a better America”

“Not flash. Just Gordon.”

“He kept us out of war.”

“We stand for men and measures rather than for party”

What these examples reveal is that, first, this type of political slogans typically suppresses to the background all other prototypical scenario elements but **leader**. The exception in our dataset is “He kept us out of war.”, in which it triggers the profiling of a common entity including all **political actors** but the **leader**.

Second, in them, the profiled element is typically signalled linguistically through the use of a Noun Phrase. Moreover, this type of political slogans in our dataset displays the greatest focus on the form of the linguistic signals used. “*A compassionate conservative*”, “*Reformer with results*”, and “*Ross for Boss*” employ alliteration. “*The better man for a better America*” employs lexical reiteration.

In this respect, “*Not flash. Just Gordon*” and “*He kept us out of war*” represent non-prototypical uses. “*Not flash. Just Gordon*” does employ Noun Phrases as linguistic signals but, additionally, it resorts to intertextuality techniques in order for the message to be fully decoded (i.e. it contains a reference to a 1930s protagonist of a space opera adventure comic strip). In its turn, “*He kept us out of war*” not only triggers the profiling of a common entity including all **political actors** but the **leader**; it also signals that conceptual structure through the use of a whole clause.

Another example from our dataset, “*We stand for men and measures rather than for party*”, could be seen as belonging within this category as it profiles a whole PARTY as a filler for the **leader** scenario slot. However, for this particular reason the example can be also argued to be peripheral for this type of political slogans. Moreover, this particular slogan also contains what could be interpreted as a reference to some of the **people being led**, namely MEN; it also atypically signals its conceptual structure through the use of a whole clause.

Political slogans profiling both a leader and people being led

“In your heart you know he’s right.”

“I like Ike.”

“Yes, we can.”

This type of political slogans in our dataset, first, displays the greatest variety and the most significant absence of uniformity.

Second, this is the only type of political slogans in our dataset which profiles and views members of society (i.e. **people being led**) as individuals. Such an interpretation is suggested by the use of *your* and *you* in “*In your heart you know he’s right*”, and by *I* in “*I like Ike.*” The leader element is profiled through the use of *he* and *Ike* respectively for the two examples.

Third, “*I like Ike*” stands out not only within this category of political slogans but also within the whole dataset. Not only does it trigger non-prototypical profiling of individual members of society; it also is the only political slogan in our dataset which reverses the prototypical viewpoint within its political discourse world. In its discourse world, it is the individual who does the ‘speaking’ and ‘declaring’, and not the LEADER. This pattern lies in stark contrast to prototypical uses such as “*Take back control*” and “*Keep America great*” discussed above.

Fourth, this type of political slogans typically signals their conceptual structure through the use of whole clauses. The clauses are all declarative.

The slogan of “*Yes, we can*” displays the least prototypical use of the political discourse scenario across our dataset. It not only triggers the profiling of a common entity which includes all **political actors** (through the use of *we*), but it also signals that conceptual structure through the use of a whole clause. Moreover, it suppresses to the background all other prototypical scenario elements so much so that even the ACTIVITY evoked (through the use of only the verb phrase operator *can*) is unspecified and, thus, (intentionally) vague. Crucially, the use of *we* can be also argued to be ambiguous and, consequently, vague. Is the *we* used of the so-called inclusive type (Bolinger 1980) or is it of the exclusive *we* type? In other words, does *we* definitely refer to the whole nation or could it be interpreted as referring only to the party running in the elections?

IV. Conclusion

The paper discusses political slogans and the conceptual scenario underlying their uses. By adopting a cognitive perspective, the present investigation provides a novel interpretation of political slogans, which, on the rare occasions they attract scholarly attention, are almost invariably analyzed in terms of rhetoric.

The paper demonstrates that the prototypical elements, or slots, in the scenario employed by political slogans are the ones of **leader, people being led, a social issue/ a solution to a social issue/ a goal, time, and space**. The analysis demonstrates how those scenario elements function prototypically.

As the conclusions drawn concern their conceptual structure, which, presumably, pre-conditions any characteristic feature of political slogans, the results obtained here could serve as a stepping stone for further investigations of slogans. Such further investigations could focus on, for example, their ‘witty’ (i.e. conceptually atypical and unexpected), ‘catchy’ (i.e. psycholinguistically plausible), and ‘quotable’ (i.e. highly efficient in language signal choices) character.

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