

Political Slogans and Logic

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1. Politics and slogans

The English word 'slogan' has two corresponding words in Chinese: 'slogan' and 'poster'. Slogans are designed to be chanted, exclaimed or shouted by people in public, thus appealing to people's sense of hearing. Posters are designed to be written, and hence appeal to people's sense of vision. Audio slogans are only used on special occasions, such as public gatherings, conditioned by such factors as time and place, amongst other things. Comparatively speaking, posters go beyond such conditions. However, 'visual impressions' hardly affect people's ways of thinking, speaking and behaving unless they are transformed into 'audio impressions'. As soon as we hear people chant and shout slogans in the street, our cerebral nerves are excited, hence quickening our heartbeat, pulse and blood circulation.

All slogans are intended for the public, and subsequently are not meant to function on the basis of personal relationships. However, they are extensively used in politics, since the latter is a typical form of public behavior. As is well known, politics cannot be effective without mass mobilization, and slogans are the most convenient and practical means of mobilizing people. Mass mobilization requires ideology. For example, it requires such expressions as 'fate', 'divine will', 'universal reason' and 'historical law' in order to establish its legitimacy. Slogans are the very embodiment of ideology. Many a political slogan or poster is still fresh in the memories of those who experienced the years of war or revolution in China. Nowadays, though, commercial advertising has more of an effect on the generation which has grown up in the period of peace and construction. It goes without saying that commercial advertising differs from political slogans and posters in both content and form. They do, however, share certain similarities, being presented in a variety of different ways, be it in written form with ink and paper, or in media such as radio, cinema, television and the internet. It is rare to see commercial advertising being shouted out in public for the purpose of drawing people's attention and interest towards consumption. It has no need to carry out its campaigns by means of ideological concoctions, since it

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is geared towards satisfying personal needs. However, nowadays, commercials do tend to imitate political slogans or posters in their attempts to lead fashion trends, and to build up a certain 'commercial ideology' through media technology.

Slogans have always been highly popular in China. Rulers of all dynasties proclaimed their own slogans before and after they took power, so as to arouse the people to overthrow incumbent rulers or to enhance their own supremacy. It is not difficult to come across examples of this; nor would it be so to write a history of China from the perspective of their use. The most familiar slogans for people these days are those of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Of course, they date from the recent past; but we should not forget the enormous influence they exerted on people's lives. 'How does the proletariat use its political party to achieve political leadership among all revolutionary classes in the country? . . . It is through basic political slogans in accordance with historical developments and by developing new motivation slogans for each stage and every major milestone, in order to realize these slogans' (Mao Zedong, 1991: 262). This is what Mao once declared. It was based on this understanding that Chairman Mao proposed to present fitting slogans at every stage of the revolution and construction under the leadership of the CPC. Mao's tradition has been carried on by the ensuing power in China.

It is therefore extremely important to study such slogans, which have been particularly significant for the nation's progress. This research could be carried out from a variety of different perspectives, such as psychology, linguistics and semiology. Our intention here is to explore political slogans from the viewpoint of logics.

2. Slogans and hypothetical propositions

Hypothetical propositions are statements frequently used in everyday life. Political slogans also make use of them, in phrases such as 'a heroic man fathers a good son, or vice versa' and 'the harvest depends upon the people's mettle'.

Hypothetical propositions are not always true. It is impossible for a true hypothetical proposition to have a true antecedent and a false consequent. Therefore, the consequent must be true when its antecedent is known to be true. That is to say, a true hypothetical proposition is the equivalent of an inference with the antecedent as its premise and the consequent as its conclusion. For example, 'if $a \geq b$ and $b \geq c$, then $a \geq c$ ' can be described as ' $a \geq b$ and $b \geq c$, therefore $a \geq c$.' This inference is valid because it is impossible for a true antecedent to give a false conclusion. In fact, this is what measures the validity of a hypothetical proposition.

Let us take a look at the slogan 'a heroic man fathers a good son, or vice versa'. It can be interpreted as meaning 'if a father is a hero, then his son must be a brave man; if the father is a reactionary, then his son must be a scoundrel'. Obviously, this inference cannot be valid for too many negative examples. A heroic man might not father a well-behaved son; and a good son might not necessarily have a heroic father. In reality, one such example would suffice to invalidate the inference.

We could elaborate our analysis even further, since this slogan involves a universal quantifier which has been omitted. Suppose we set 'men' as the domain, with $R(x,y)$ as 'x is y's father', $f(x)$ as 'x is a hero', and $g(y)$ as 'y is a brave man, thus

' $x'y((R(x,y) \wedge f(x)) \rightarrow g(y))$ '. In fact, this proposition can be valid if and only if, for any father and son, the value of $g(y)$ is true if that of $R(x,y) \wedge f(x)$ is also true. We all know that in fact this is not so. In other words, this slogan is logically flawed. And how could a logically-flawed slogan expect to be long-lasting?

'The harvest depends upon the people's mettle' was the most typical political slogan used during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1959); 'Mountains, we want your head, would you dare not to bow? Rivers, we want you to give way, would you dare not to do so?' (Xiwang Chang, 2006: 202). This reflects the zeal and determination of Chairman Mao. Admittedly, it was a good way of encouraging his people and enhancing their confidence in reform and the fight against nature. Those who propose such slogans often only pay attention to results, leading to unexpected boasting and exaggeration in the way people work. Let us look at this slogan from the perspective of propositional logic, using 'p' for 'mettle' and 'q' for 'high yield', thus obtaining the logical form ' $p \rightarrow q$ '. If we take this proposition as being one premise, and ' $\neg q$ ' as being another, the result is inevitably ' $\neg p$ ', meaning 'a low yield is the result of insufficient mettle'. If somebody lacks mettle, then he is definitely of limited use, with outmoded ideas, and hence unresponsive to the demands of the Central Government; and with turning one's back on the government being no happy matter at all, the yield inevitably ends up being high. To mark their achievements, governmental officials at all levels set ever-higher goals for grain output, in order, so to speak, 'to keep up with the Joneses'.

It is thus clear that a well-grounded hypothetical proposition in political slogans is not simply a proposition. Rather, it reveals the direction inferences take. A well-grounded hypothetical proposition must therefore match the logic of the proposition when it is used in a slogan.

3. Slogans and stipulative definitions

'A stipulative definition specifies what meaning is to be given to new symbols by agreement. This definition can mostly be expressed by simple language. Some simple words can express other, more complicated terms' (Wenjian Song and Shiming Guo, 1998: 353). Slogans, especially CPC slogans, are closely related to stipulative definitions, even though they are not actually defined in any form.

Numerous CPC slogans have been expressed as abbreviations, such as 'Three Devotions, Four Absolutes' (1966); 'Adhering to the Four Cardinal Principles' (1979); 'Five Emphases and Four Points of Beauty'¹ (1981); 'Three Things to Face' and 'Four Possessions'² (1983); 'Three Emphases for Education'³ (1995); 'Three Things to Represent' (2000) and 'Eight Honors and Eight Shames' (2006). Relevant definitions for these abbreviations are needed if others are to understand what they mean. However, a pithy definition might be inversely proportional to abbreviations weighed down with trivial details. No one would deny that pithy slogans are the easiest ones to remember.

Let's compare the following three definitions.

- a. 'Three Things to Face' refers to the fact that 'education must face modernization; education must face the world; and education must face the future'.
- b. 'Three Things to Represent' refers to the fact that 'the Party must always represent the requirements of the development of China's advanced productive forces, the orientation of the development of China's advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people in China.'
- c. 'Eight Honors and Eight Shames' refers to: 'Honor to those who love the motherland, and shame on those who do her harm; honor to those who serve the people, and shame on those who are divorced from them; honor to those who quest for science, and shame on those who prefer to be ignorant; honor to those who are hard-working, and shame on those who detest having to work; honor to those who unite and help people, and shame on those who gain at the expense of others; honor to those who are honest and trustworthy, and shame on those who forsake good for the sake of gold; honor to those who are disciplined and law-abiding, and shame on those who violate laws and discipline; and honor to those who uphold hard struggle, and shame on those who indulge in a dissipated life.'

It is difficult to determine which abbreviation is the easiest to memorize, since they all consist of four Chinese words. However, the definitions for each abbreviation differ considerably: c is the most complicated; b is more complicated than a. As a result, a, b and c are gradually more difficult to memorize.⁴ Slogans are used as propaganda, with the objective of encouraging the targeted group to put them into practice. We may therefore assume that those on the receiving end know what the abbreviations mean. However, that is not actually the case. Consider, for example, the frequently-heard slogan 'Three Things to Represent'. Though a lot of people know this type of abbreviation, few would be able to define it accurately: they are more likely to just repeat it than actually be interested in learning more about it. There are more occasions for people to hear the expression than there are to read its complete description. The function of such slogans is thus significantly weakened, since they rarely appear in conjunction with relevant abbreviations. Could one possibly expect somebody with no idea of the meaning of 'Three Things to Represent' to actually put it into practice?

Furthermore, since every abbreviation of a slogan implies a stipulative definition, and the abbreviation is always used to express other more complicated terms, such an abbreviation could have various different stipulative definitions. In other words, the same abbreviation could logically mean something totally different. This also means that you may understand one thing whilst others understand something else. As a result of this, it is not unusual to see solemn political slogans being used in a tongue-in-cheek way.

For example,

- d. The slogan 'Three Things to Represent' has been used to talk about SARS: 'SARS must always represent the requirements of the development of the virus, the orientation of the development of a terrorist virus' advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of wild animals.'

- e. 'The Eight Honors and Eight Shames' have been used from the perspective of those given to drinking: 'Honor to those who love heavy drinking, and shame on those who prefer red wine; honor to those who drink from a big cup, and shame on those who sip from a small one; honor to those who insist on drinking beyond their capabilities, and shame on those who don't; honor to those who drink to ease time away, and shame on those who drink in moments of loneliness; honor to those who get others drunk, and shame on those who only get themselves drunk; honor to those who drink in the company of somebody of the other sex, and shame on those who only drink with members of the same sex; honor to those who don't go home after drinking, and shame on those who return home before the last "bottoms up"; honor to those who beat their wives after drinking, and shame on those who are beaten by their wives after drinking.'

We could find many other similar examples. Though this seems to be mere bantering, it is undoubtedly a form of social progress, proof that China has become more democratic, at least as far as freedom of speech is concerned. We could hardly expect everyone to take political slogans seriously, or to consider them sacred. However, we do notice that not all political slogans, such as 'Serve the People' and 'The fundamental task of socialism is to develop the productive forces', are subject to bantering. Those that are targeted tend to be abbreviated political slogans with variable stipulate definitions. In terms of their effect, it would therefore seem unwise to abbreviate political slogans.

4. Slogans and presupposition

What is presupposition? As Zhou Liquan explains in *Logic – Correct Thinking and Successful Communication Theory*, 'In a social communication context C, when speaker S addresses listeners by means of an obedient phrase U (FA), words, phrases or the "B" clause predetermined by S, refer to an object or real situation if and only if: (1) Under the default rules, S believes in the existence of the object or situation referred to by "B", as does H; (2) S believes H knows (1) (Zhou Liquan, 1996: 460). Consider for example the sentence 'leave the door open'. The speaker believes that the door is open and that his listener also believes this to be true. 'Leave the door open' presupposes that it is true that the door is open. There might be two reasons for the speaker saying this. One is that someone is about to close the door; another is that the speaker believes that there is such a possibility, even though nobody has the intention of doing so. The speaker talks nonsense if nobody has the intention of shutting the door, and the door would not have been shut anyway. That is not all. Though nobody was going to shut the door, and there was no possibility of its being shut, the sentence 'leave the door open' might in fact stimulate people's desire to close it. As a result, this imperative sentence produces a negative effect unless the speaker has ulterior motives, hoping that someone would indeed shut the door.

Similarly, in the case of imperative sentences in political slogans, when CPC members are required to 'serve the people heart and soul' it means that there are members who 'don't serve the people heart and soul', or that such a possibility

exists. When they are asked to 'go through thick and thin together with the masses' it means that there are members who 'don't go through thick and thin together with the masses' or that such a possibility exists. When Party members are forbidden the 'practice of personal privileges' it means that there are some of them who do 'practice personal privileges' or that such a possibility exists. When they are called upon to participate in an 'anti-corruption campaign' it is obvious that 'corruption' has 'already existed' or 'might exist' in the near future. In fact, such political slogans actually strengthen the presupposition of the imperative sentence. If the authorities want to have something done, they suppose that nothing has been done so far or vice versa. 'Serve the people heart and soul' presupposes that there are members who 'don't serve the people heart and soul'. Even if this is not the case, such phenomena are highly possible sooner or later. These slogans, on the other hand, mirror the conduct of Party members at all times. This conduct would appear to have gradually deteriorated, which would explain why a new slogan, 'Education to Maintain the Advanced Nature of Party Members', was proposed in 2005.

Can this work? For those who have always 'served the people heart and soul' or who have always 'gone through thick and thin together with the masses' and have never 'practiced personal privileges' or ever been corruptible, would it be of any help to know that there are Party members who have done precisely the opposite? Therefore, the decision of whether or not to carry out the campaign of relevant education within the CPC depends on just how much slogans have been respected by Party members. Personally, I do not think that the majority of what has been proposed in slogans has been left undone, or that its opposite has been more prevalent.

5. Slogans and demonstration

Slogans should be linguistically concise. That means that when we use them, on banners for example, they should not be accompanied by any other explanation. Our objective is to have the slogans accepted. However, this does not imply that they need not be explained. On the contrary; and the best way to do so is to ask oneself whether or not they are reasonable, giving them sufficient deliberation before making them public, so that they may be longer-lasting.

'Surpass Great Britain and Catch up with the United States' was a slogan that reflected the great ambition of the Chinese people during the Great Leap Forward. In November 1955, in the Sixth Session of the Seventh CPC Central Committee, Chairman Mao first put forward the idea that within the space of 50 to 70 years, China would catch up with and surpass the United States. One month later, Liu Shaoqi, vice-chairman of the People's Republic of China, asserted, on behalf of the CPC Central Committee, at the Eighth Trade Union National Congress, that 'In 15 years, the Soviet Union's industrial and agricultural production would catch up with or overtake that of the United States' and that in the same period 'we should make steel and other important industrial products to catch up with or surpass the output of the British' (*People's Daily*, 3 December 1957). Such slogans were not sufficiently analyzed before they were made public. Therefore, it is perhaps wiser to consider slogans in a rational way prior to publicizing them, so as to avoid undesirable consequences.

The publication of slogans is closely linked to demonstration. For example: 'It is good to only give birth to one child.' Why only 'one child'? Isn't it better to 'have a great gathering of children and grandchildren'? For farmers, it is hard to accept such an idea, even if you shout at them every day or write the slogan on their walls, especially when their first child is a girl. This goes against deeply-rooted tradition, with such ideas as 'Among the three most un-filial things, the worst is not to have a son' and 'The more sons one has, the happier one is.' The reaction towards one-child slogans is predictable, if they are not sufficiently well demonstrated. This explains why the family-planning campaign has not progressed smoothly in many rural areas, even though it is a basic state policy which has to be carried out. This situation has led to the use of threatening slogans, such as: 'Your house will be pulled down if you do not accept being sterilized', 'Your cows will be confiscated if you do not accept abortion' (popular in some counties in Sichuan Province) and 'Your family will be broken up if you do not follow family planning policies' (popular in some counties in Hunan Province). Such slogans are not in line with the national goal of 'building up a socialist political civilization'. Family-planning workers should work harder on how to rationally encourage farmers to accept such ideas, and how to prove the validity of having only one child, rather than just forcing them to comply.

6. Conclusion

As time goes by, people care less and less about political slogans which in the past used to be sacred. They begin to evaluate in a more rational way the slogans put forward by the government. Some even develop aversions to them. This means that more rational slogans are required.

There are good and bad slogans, in terms of content and form. In regard to its contents, a good slogan should aim at being practically-minded and beneficial for the people. According to Liu Shaoqi, 'When a slogan is proposed, we should be very careful to examine all aspects of the situation, clearly understanding people's needs and demands and knowing the tasks involved . . . We can neither simply use our imagination to come up with arbitrary slogans that do not truly represent people's needs and are even contrary to popular demand . . . nor come up with slogans based on the needs of a small group of people at one particular moment, or assume that the emotional reports of some leaders present the demands and emotions of all people . . . [since] such slogans are powerless and useless for the people. They will not function at all' (Liu Shaoqi, 2004). In regard to form, good slogans should be free from logical fallacy, easy to remember, and rationally demonstrable.

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Notes

1. The five emphases stress decorum, manners, hygiene, discipline and morals; the four points of beauty are beauties of the mind, language, behavior and the environment.
2. Four Possessions refer to a new generation of people with lofty ideals, moral integrity, good education and a strong sense of discipline.
3. The Three Emphases for Education stress theoretical study, political awareness and good conduct.
4. The order has no particular meaning, and merely reflects which one is easier to memorize.

References

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