

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN POLITICAL AND COMMERCIAL ADVERTISING: *THE SLOGAN*

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Abstract

The present paper analyses the similarities between political discourse and the discourse of advertising, focusing on a particular instance of communication: the slogan. The corpus includes mission statements that have been used in the USA, France and Romania in recent years. Our aim is to highlight some strategies that appear repeatedly in both types of communication, such as the invitation to form a team with the target audience, the compulsory optimism of discourse, invoking a necessity or the use of buzzwords. It appears that most strategies trigger an emotional response from the recipient, and "consumers" of political messages react the same way as people who are influenced by advertising.

Keywords: slogan, political discourse, advertising, target audience, persuasive strategies.

1. Introductory remarks

Since we live in an ever more competitive world, there are voices that have emphasised our increasingly consumerist reactions to the various situations we come across in our lives, and also our increasingly consumerist beliefs and choices. We seem to respond in similar ways to people and to objects, we seem to "consume" politics the same way we consume food; in the present paper, we shall analyse a specific type of discourse, the *slogan*, and we shall look into some characteristics that commercial and political slogans have in common. Political marketing is similar to commercial marketing in that political organizations, just like companies, have to *target* the public they need for support; therefore, the strategies they employ are very much alike (McNair, 2007: 23-25). The corpus consists of both political and advertising mission statements that have emerged and have been used in the USA, France and Romania in recent years.

2. The general context of discourse

The recent fashion of television advertising, both for commercial and political "products", seems to be oriented towards an audience that has become indifferent,

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even sceptical. Thus, in their desire to succeed, advertisers make use of means that may be controversial, but nonetheless seem to work. For instance, **creativity** is more important than credibility, the same way in which, in politics, charisma is more important than argumentation. In order to decode an artifice, in order to decipher all the implications of an instance of discourse, two things appear to be of crucial importance:

- The intention of the discourse (which can be explicit or concealed);
- The external context in which discourse occurs.

Thus, the “illustrated discourse” that television provides, generally speaking, to sellers of commercial or political “products” is, to a great extent, elliptical. The image becomes the carrier of a significant part of the persuasive process, while its clarification is left to the viewer. Consequently, this type of hybrid discourse, verbal and audio-visual at the same time, becomes a relatively developed, relatively autonomous and modern communication act. The other context in which the slogan appears, the poster, also puts forward the mission statement alongside a visual setting aimed at completing the message.

2.1. Political discourse and the discourse of advertising

There are numerous strategic similarities between political discourse and the discourse of advertising, and most of them also appear at the level of the slogan. As voters as well as consumers, we have to be persuaded to support candidates or to purchase certain products; therefore, we become subject to persuasive messages on a daily basis (Larson, 2003: 19).

2.2. Similarities between political and commercial advertising

Broadly speaking, we can say that the following elements frequently occur in both types of discourse:

- The creation of an artificial paradise; reassuring the public, bringing it to a state of euphoria where they will believe everything they are told, as if hypnotized;
- The fabrication of artificial desires which may not be our own; huge financial interests hide behind the advertising message, while the accepted mentality and the pressure of society as a whole may play an important part in our choices;
- Both commercially and politically, we are interested in “purchasing” a consumer product; the audio-visual industry, the mass-media and the internet represent the main channel by means of which mentalities are instilled, leading to a choice which is often only apparent. Real differences between one product and another, between one candidate and another

rarely exist, while in most cases turn out to be only a projection of the human mind, directly and profoundly influenced by the messages it is submitted to;

- Psychologically, both types of discourse rely on our tendency to act upon a subconscious, emotional reaction to a message, which overrides all rational processes;
- Both types of discourse draw on the **competitive nature** of modern society. Competition manifests itself more and more intensively in all strata of society, and is found at the basis of any persuasion process.

2.3. The slogan

The slogan stands out due to its concise, concentrated nature; according to Weaver's grammatical categories cited in Larson (Larson, 2003: 139), simple sentences usually express either a judgement or a complete, singular aspect, they need to have at least a subject or a noun and a dynamic word or a verb. Persuasive agents who prefer simple sentences do not perceive the world as a complex place.

Similarly, in Thoveron's view (Thoveron, 1996: 129-131), the political slogan has to be short, in order to be remembered, sonorous, credible, complete, up-to-date, and most importantly, it has to meet the public's expectations. All the features mentioned above also apply to the commercial advertising slogan; we can say that, in politics, the mission statement must summarize the entire doctrine of a political faction or candidate, while in advertising, the same mission statement must highlight, in a few words, all the essential features of the product or service that the seller wants potential customers to remember.

Simple, concentrated expressions such as slogans are sure to be effective, both in political and in commercial advertising. Their brevity ensures maximum impact, while the use of such expressions feeds on the public's tendency to prefer clear facts and to avoid investigating a situation in detail. Political slogans, in their turn, are meant to capture and summarize, in a few words, all the messages put forward throughout the elections campaigns. The downside of this state of affairs stems from the fact that an unfortunate slogan may compromise an advertising or a political campaign altogether. By contrast, the truth value of such an expression appears completely irrelevant. Briefly speaking, the best slogans are those which tap into an emotion and bring about the desired response.

3. Common persuasive strategies

In light of what we have said so far, the following strategies appear to be extremely common in both political and advertising slogans:

3.1. Invoking a problem or a necessity

Both types of discourse appeal, at the rational level, to the existence of a real or imaginary necessity, to a certain need of the target audience. The strength of this appeal and the extent to which it is convincing and effective depends on the initiator's talent. For televised commercials, image adds further power to the informativity of discourse itself.

This necessity may be undeniable, in both cases, when the need is real and beyond question. For instance, in commercial advertising, if we take bread, detergent or soap, it is obvious that the invoked necessity is real, since we all use bread and soap. In this case, the purpose of advertising is to differentiate between one product and another and to make us choose in favour of the product in question. By contrast, in the case of products such as, for instance, air fresheners, there are people who might argue that this is not a real need, that it is artificially created and therefore, the advertiser's task is more difficult and complex. Not only does he have to instil in our minds the idea that we truly need an air freshener in our homes, but he also has to convince us that his product is the best to choose.

Similarly, in the case of political discourse, a need may be real and so acknowledged by everyone (for instance, eliminating unemployment, restoring a decent living standard or providing health and education services to a nation's citizens are all genuine needs), while in other cases (such as convincing people that a nation must go to war), one might challenge the real necessity of the invoked cause.

The line between real and artificial necessity may be blurred; it is not always stable, clearly established and similar for all members of the target audience. The extent to which a need is real, both for politicians and for advertisers, varies according to the target audience; it is the task of opinion polls to identify these variations. For example, in commercial advertising, a product such as hair conditioning may be perceived as a real need by some members of society, especially young women with medium to large income in urban areas, while the same product may be perceived as completely useless by people in other social strata (such as poor, elderly women in rural areas). Likewise, soy products may be viewed as strictly necessary by certain groups of people (religious people who often fast, or health-conscious vegetarians), while appearing as completely unnecessary to other people. At the level of political communication, each candidate tries to adapt his speech to the needs of the social groups he is targeting for their vote (left-oriented candidates will place emphasis on social protection programmes, going for the vote of public employees, farmers in rural areas and elderly citizens, while right-oriented candidates will generally come forward with a "survival of the fittest" approach, aiming for the vote of young business people and

employees in the private sector, mostly in urban areas). It is obvious that the needs of these different social groups often clash, forcing politicians to make a clear-cut choice of whose interests to address in their campaign.

From the political campaigns of the last years, we have selected the following slogans, which we think reflect the strategy of invoking a problem or a necessity:

România bunului simț (A commonsensical Romania) – a slogan from Crin Antonescu's 2009 campaign for the Presidential Elections, invokes an abstract, ethical need – that of a decent environment of common sense on the political arena, carrying the implication that the given quality is absent at the moment. Political discourse is often centred around moral values, which are perceived as part of the common good (see Rousseau, 1762). The 2012 slogan of the Social - Liberal Union, *România puternică* (A strong Romania), aims at obtaining a similar impact. By contrast, Jacques Chirac's 1981 slogan – *Le Président qu'il nous faut – Jacques Chirac maintenant* (The President we need – Jacques Chirac now) – puts forward a concrete need, that of electing the proposed candidate.

The need for *change* is a common theme in the discourse of opposition candidates (Scurtulescu, 2006: 48-53), the obvious implication being that the change will bring along a better future. Emil Constantinescu's 1996 slogan, *Votați schimbarea* (Vote for change), seems to have been inspired from Lionel Jospin's mission statement, *Avec Jospin c'est clair, le Président du vrai changement* (With Jospin it's clear, the President of true change) which occurred in France one year before, in 1995. In politics, the need to change the status quo frequently appears in the discourse of opposition candidates, capitalizing both on the shortcomings of the people or parties in power, and on the phenomenon of power erosion, natural in all democratic regimes.

In political discourse, in democratic regimes, the slogan generally conveys a message related to an abstract necessity, since in politics what we “buy” is doctrine and ideology.

In commercial advertising, the principle of invoking or even creating a necessity is the same, although the needs are usually more concrete, related to a better quality of life of various kinds: beauty, comfort, pleasure, etc. For example, the Alpo dog food slogan, *Doesn't your dog deserve Alpo?* carries the implication that your dog has a problem, he is not getting the high quality food he deserves, alongside the obvious solution to that problem, a certain product. Similarly, the slogan *No more tears* (for Johnson's baby shampoo) conveys the implication that at present there is a problem, the shampoo you are using makes your baby cry, but that problem can be solved if you purchase what we sell.

Both political and commercial actors act according to AIDA or the hierarchy of readiness. The concept refers to a sequence of cognitive events leading to a

purchasing decision, or to another action. Voting for a candidate or another also applies. For instance, in an elections campaign, a future voter will first become aware of the existence of a certain candidate; after gathering further information, he develops an interest in that candidate. At the moment when the future voter comes to the conclusion that the respective candidate best corresponds to his expectations, a desire to see him elected emerges. This desire materializes itself in the vote cast in favour of that candidate.

The AIDA model is used by sellers as a means of communicating with the target audience, of seducing them and making them act accordingly. They start with the identification of the existing target audience or, in special situations, with the creation of one; very much like in the case of political communication, we first become aware of the existence of a product. Clever advertising will subsequently trigger our interest in buying it (if we discover that it responds to one of our needs, either active or latent). Desire comes next, followed by the concrete action of purchasing the respective product.

We must also say that, by definition, any instance of advertising has the purpose of presenting a product as a solution to something. For a solution to be necessary, the existence of a problem is of the essence. Problems, in their turn, range from simple to complex, from real to artificial, from easy to difficult. It is the advertiser's or the politician's task to identify or create them and provide a solution; it is our task to identify our real needs, to prioritize them and act accordingly.

In this respect, the persuasive process presents two phases:

- The initial phase, where the initiator identifies a problem;
- The final phase, where they propose a solution.

We can see that the final phase of the persuasive process is a conditional one, of a compulsory nature; at a mental level, we are pushed into joining the initiator's camp, for our own good. We are either explicitly told, or we are left to infer that our previously highlighted problem will only be solved if we buy a particular product, or if we vote for a specific candidate. No other choice will do.

Thus, in politics, our freedom of choice is dramatically reduced; solidarity and the common good are often invoked to demand a certain course of action. In advertising, our own personal well-being appears to be the reason behind the choice that we are pushed into.

3.2. Creating an illusion

The illusion that only one product or candidate is perfect and irreplaceable also includes combating the most dangerous competitor. If, in commercial advertising,

the legislation in force forbids explicit reference to competing products, it is more difficult to ban hints and innuendoes.

Things become more clear-cut in politics, where explicit reference to the opponents is not against the law. Clearly, there are boundaries in the political world as well, because of the possibility of a libel suit; however, speakers have more freedom of expression than in the world of commercial advertising, and this freedom may become apparent also at the level of the slogan.

The creation of an illusion includes the following aspects:

- The illusion of the superiority of the product/ candidate in question to all other products or candidates;
- The illusion that the product/ candidate in question is unique;
- The illusion that the product/ candidate in question is flawless;
- The illusion that the product/ candidate in question is extremely efficient;
- The illusion that the product/ candidate in question is needed above and beyond everything else;
- The illusion that the product/ candidate in question is supported by the entire community (jumping on the bandwagon is of the essence, since community pressure plays an important part in our choices).

In advertising, illusion functions successfully with cosmetics, cars, beverages, cleaning products etc. For instance, the famous L'Oreal mission statement, *Because you're worth it*, carries the implication that no competing product will do you justice, since they are all less than what you really deserves. Similarly, higher upmarket, the Porsche slogan, *Porsche – there is no substitute*, conveys the idea of uniqueness, whereas in the world of computers, the Apple slogan, *Think different*, carries the implication that the respective products are better than the main competitor's and if you buy them you will be different from the rest, you will stand out. Interestingly, standing out from the crowd can be invoked as successfully as the opposite urge (to do what everyone else is doing), according to the commercial strategy of the advertiser.

In a similar way, political discourse attempts to persuade potential electors that the candidate or party in question is better than all the others. For example, Philippe de Villiers' 2007 slogan, *La fierté d'être Français* (The pride of being French), capitalises on an important and all-encompassing national value, the French people's pride, implying that the given candidate is the only one who can live up to his co-nationals' expectations. George W. Bush's 2000 slogan for the US Presidential Elections, *Kinder, Gentler Nation*, issued after 8 years of Democratic leadership at the White House, was meant to uphold the idea that the current regime needed to be replaced by another one, superior in every respect.

3.3. *The invitation to form a team*

The creators of both commercial and political advertising sometimes reach out to the audience, in that we are invited to form a team with the company/ politician in question. We are told, either implicitly or explicitly, that the desired purpose can only be attained by our joint effort, and we must be part of that team. Needless to say that the desired purpose is always presented in a good light, as being completely and entirely to our benefit.

For example, the British army slogan *Join the professionals*, devised during a 1980s recruitment campaign, implies that by enlisting, you will become part of a national elite. The idea of togetherness appears to be widespread in political discourse; thus, Jacques Chirac's 1988 mission statement, *Nous irons plus loin ensemble* (We shall go on together), Barack Obama's 2012 Presidential elections slogan *It begins with us*, as well as numerous slogans on the Romanian political arena (for instance Mircea Geoană's 2009 motto, *Învingem împreună* – Together we shall win) all convey the same idea, that of inviting the audience to form a team with the speaker for the benefit of both parties involved.

The same message appears in advertising, although on fewer occasions; for instance, Norwich Union's mission statement, *Together we're stronger*, is tailored to the needs of an insurance company and it sounds perfect for the product they are selling, since insurance itself is an investment in the mental comfort of a safer future; from the world of technology, Olympus' mission statement (*Your vision. Our future*) also emphasises the idea of producer and consumer working in collaboration, while the famous Nokia slogan, *Connecting people*, encourages a different type of connection, where the producer is not explicitly referred to.

3.4. *The consumer-oriented discourse*

This is a pervasive and very ambiguous technique, common to both types of discourse, and it goes hand in hand with the previous one. The audience's interest is cleverly diverted from the real purpose of the emitter (selling his product/ winning votes) to the purpose that the recipient himself has in mind, on his own agenda (that is, a very concrete interest in his own wellbeing, of whichever type). Ambiguity is triggered by the fact that a certain degree of sincerity may be present in the initiator's discourse (namely, he may really also take into consideration the recipient's interest); however, this degree of sincerity is always difficult to assess and fades when compared to the speaker's huge interest in winning.

The idea of deserving a better life in every respect may be invoked explicitly, or it may be conveyed implicitly, by turning the recipient's attention towards himself. The recipient of discourse is flattered by strategies ranging from mild to downright

aggressive. This aggression is meant to act as a psychological incentive, facilitating our return to our own needs, often in their turn artificially created.

On the political arena, the 1997 British Labour Party slogan (*Britain deserves better*), George W. Bush's 2000 Presidential elections motto (*Real plans for real people*) as well as Bill Clinton's 1992 slogan, *Putting people first*, are all meant to place electors centre stage and emphasise their needs, completely effacing the speaker's own agenda.

In advertising, the strategy may function either by highlighting the fact that the potential buyer deserves a better life in some respect (as reflected in the already mentioned L'Oreal motto, *Because you're worth it*), or by flattering the consumer and implying that the company is there to cater for their needs (as in the Marks and Spencer slogan, *The customer is always and completely right!*), or by placing emphasis on the benefits that the customer might have from purchasing a certain product (as reflected for instance in the Energizer slogan, *Keep going and going and going*).

Needless to say, therefore, that the idea of deserving the best implies not only the compulsory choice of a particular product or candidate, but also the inherent rejection of all others, that fall short of the recipient's expectations.

3.5. The compulsory optimism of discourse

An optimistic perspective is a must in both commercial and political persuasive techniques. Since promising and the persuasive discourse are intrinsically linked to the uncertain world of the future (Enache and Militaru, 2013: 41-45), our hope for, and expectation of a better future is of the essence. Thus, discourse initiators must be careful when raising our hopes and creating an unbreakable link between the fulfilment of our expectations, and their product or candidate alone.

The future-oriented approach presents a world better than the present one, for reasons which may be either abstract (usually in politics) or concrete (usually in advertising). For instance, the famous Philips and Orange slogans (*Let's make things better* and *The future's bright, the future's orange*) both imply that the future will be better due to the advent of technology and communications and, implicitly, of certain products or services, while in political discourse, the mission statements belonging to George W. Bush (*Yes, America can!*, 2004) and Barack Obama (*An economy built to last*, 2012) capitalise on the electors' hope for an improvement in their forthcoming situation in general, with no reference to particular aspects or details.

3.6. The use of buzz-words

Not only are buzz-words important in political communication, they also represent a must in commercial advertising. Their significance derives from the initiators' appeal to a set of mental stereotypes we are most likely to respond to. Thus, when exposed to political messages, we will respond to a series of "positive" words we identify as part of our wishes, such as "prosperity" or "booming economy". Likewise, when we are submitted to commercial messages, we unconsciously expect a different, but equally effective set of buzz-words, which vary depending on a product (we expect terms such as "beauty" related to a face cream, terms such as "clean" related to detergents, terms such as "tasty" related to food, etc.)

As far as the public's hopes related to products or candidates are concerned, it seems that our enthusiasm has decreased and we no longer expect everything we hear to be true. Having lived in a democracy and in a consumer society equally, a minimal life experience has shaped our mentalities and beliefs as to how high our aspirations should be. Therefore, if a product or a candidate fails to meet our expectations, we are no longer taken by surprise. We still have a certain degree of hope, the extent of which is hard to assess; however, we seem to have a more realistic approach to life in general, and we no longer expect miracles to happen overnight.

In most cases, buzzwords promote abstract constructs, even in commercial advertising. Slogans such as *Power, beauty and soul* (Ashton Martin), *Success. It's a mind game* (Tag Heuer) or *Open happiness* (Coca Cola) show that even the most concrete objects can benefit from the association with abstract notions like success and happiness, since, as we have said in the beginning of this article, our response is mainly emotional and advertisers skilfully turn that to their advantage. Some of the concepts used in advertising may overlap with concepts used in political discourse (*change* and *success* for instance), while others appear to be more specific. In politics, slogans such as *For people, for a change* (Bill Clinton, 1992), *Building a bridge to the 21st century* (Bill Clinton 1996), *Prosperity and progress* (Al Gore, 2000), *A safer world and a more hopeful America* (George W. Bush, 2004) all show that the ideas we respond to are relatively limited in number and highly predictable, depending on the country, on the epoch, and on who the candidate is.

In some cases, various strategies may be used to cover an ideological void (in the case of political communication) or a shortage of quality (in the case of commercial communication), if any. Among these strategies, satirical, even sarcastic attacks against competing products or candidates, negative strategies, or diversion (turning the public's attention from the low quality of your product /

faults of your candidate to something else, in order to make him forget) are paramount.

Equally, on occasion, the creative nature of advertising may serve the same purpose – that of replacing the alleged quality of the product, or the alleged moral standing of a politician (often affected by scandals of corruption, embezzlement, power abuse or other forms of official misconduct, etc). The creativity of a commercial also diverts attention from how real a need is, or how much electing a certain candidate will actually help us.

In case the recipient of discourse ends up disappointed, there are a number of disclaimers aiming at clearing the discourse initiators, such as: in politics, we can blame the system, the context, the domestic and international environment, the obstacles generated on purpose by other political factions etc. In commercial communication, however, it appears more difficult to exonerate yourself than in the world of politics.

4. Conclusion

In the present paper, we have provided an analysis of the similarities that exist between political and commercial advertising, focusing on one particular instance of communication: *the slogan*, with a view to showing that the two types of discourse have in common an impressive number of strategies. The corpus we have used includes relatively recent political and advertising mission statements from the USA, France and Romania. The purpose of this paper has been to draw a general outline of consumer expectations (where a *consumer* is envisaged as interested in either a political or a commercial *product*), and to conduct research into the way in which both political campaign advisers and commercial advertisers adapt their discourse in order to respond to these needs.

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