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## RELEVANCE THEORY, EPISTEMIC VIGILANCE AND SOCIAL SLOGANS

### **Abstract**

The article contains an analysis and conclusions concerning the meaning of contemporary social slogans in the light of Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (1995) and the so-called Epistemic Vigilance discussed amongst others by Mascaro and Sperber (2009). The text begins with a presentation of the state of art of the contemporary research of slogans commonly existing in the social, economic and political spheres of life of modern societies. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of selected social slogans originating from billboards of the most popular social campaigns emphasising the innovative character of research and the significance of new theories in linguistic practice. The conclusion states the role of Epistemic Vigilance in comprehension of the often deceptive character of advertising campaigns.

### **1. Introduction**

Relevance is understood as the opportunity of attaining a certain cognitive result. It is an issue of degree. Relevance diverges with two aspects; optimistically with cognitive effects, and contrariwise with a processing effort. As for Epistemic Vigilance, it is an aptitude intended to separate out disinformation and misleading information from the conveyed message. A common understanding of the word *slogan* encompasses a word or phrase that is easy to remember, used e.g. by a political party or in advertising to attract people's attention or to suggest an idea quickly (Hornby 1995). It seems that relevance and Epistemic Vigilance play a crucial role in establishing the pragmatic meaning of social slogans and help to understand their nature.

## 2. Slogan: definition

The word *slogan* comes from *slaugh-ghairm*, which is Gaelic for ‘battle–cry’. While examining slogans’ definitions found in literature devoted to the subject (Safire 1972, Lewicki 1995, Kamińska-Szmaj 1996, Budzyński 2000) three basic elements reappear. First, the formal aspect, which shows that only effective and characteristic slogans are noticed, understood and remembered. Second, the communicative aspect, which manifests itself in the fact that slogans convey a certain meaning. The third element which reappears in slogans’ definitions is the perlocutory aspect. This aspect demonstrates the intention of provoking a particular action with the use of a slogan (Kochan 2003: 19–20, Dybko 2009).<sup>1</sup> One can distinguish advertising, political and social slogans according to their main purpose and their recipients.

## 3. Situation of communicating with the use of slogans

In order to establish the concept of a slogan one has to acknowledge the elements of the situation of communicating with the use of slogans. First, the one who speaks is the message originator. Second, the product that is the entity or an action about which the message originator is speaking. Third, the creator who is the author of the slogan and the message itself. Next, the idea that is communicated to the recipient, which is the target group. Moreover, one needs to take into consideration the message, which is the slogan itself and the intention, which is the planned effect of the act of communication. While communicating with the use of slogans a crucial role is also performed by the context. There is a distinction between the internal context which includes the text accompanying the slogan, the image, possibly also music and the external context which is the discourse within which the slogan reaches the recipient. It can include the whole reality, for instance other messages, commercials, the present situation in the country or current events etc. Clearly, the acknowledgement of the above mentioned aspects is vital for a broader understanding of the concept of a slogan (Kochan 2003: 22–45, Dybko 2007).

## 4. Types of advertisement slogans

While considering advertisements, three positions where slogans appear in a message can be distinguished: the headline, the actual slogan, and the *slogo*, which is also called a signature line or a baseline (Kochan 2003: 84–85, Dybko 2007).

The headline appears at the top of the text in press advertisements or at the beginning of the message in television or radio commercials. It can take

the form of a large heading, the title containing a question or a general statement with the aim to catch attention, provoke interest and promise benefit.<sup>2</sup> The headline presents a witty-provoking style and it concerns a particular idea. It is related to a single message, which changes between various stages of the same advertising campaign and between campaigns.

The actual slogan appears in the middle or in the second part of the message. It is distinguished through its size, font, colour or in radio commercials through a distinct manner of speech.<sup>3</sup> Its tone can be either witty or serious expressing general features of the product or service advertised. The actual slogan is a combination of words or a short sentence that encourages people to buy a product. It expresses a certain mental shortcut which aims at both accurate addressing potential customers and emphasizing the advantages of a product or a service advertised (Budzyński 2000: 108, Dybko 2007). Its function is to sum up the main message.<sup>4</sup> The actual slogan is permanent in one campaign related to a particular product, but it changes between campaigns.

The *slogo*, or the signature line (baseline), appears right next to the logotype of the company, the brand or the product, at the end or at the bottom of the message. It is graphically distinct through the font type, colour and background. The *slogo*, which has a relatively small size, lacks the relation with the image.<sup>5</sup> Having a rather serious style the signature line is not strongly related to a particular message. It concerns the world of messages of one message originator or different products of the same company. The baseline is the most general among the three types of slogans because it expresses the global mission or the motto of the company. The *slogo* can be permanent between campaigns, attributed to the company for years, or permanent for the company offering various products (Kochan 2003: 84–85, Dybko 2007).

## 5. Types of political slogans

As regards political slogans, one can distinguish the main slogan or the actual slogan (the programme-ideological message) or the *slogo* (values) and other slogans of more occasional character, supplementing and supporting the main slogan. If the main slogan resembles the *slogo*, the supplementing slogan or slogans add the programme-ideological message. When the main slogan is similar to the actual slogan the supporting slogans fill the needs related to the candidate's presentation, bringing him or her closer to the voters and direct winning of support (Kochan 2003: 85–87, Dybko 2009: 2).

In politics, slogans usually change totally between campaigns. It is due to their aspiration to be politically actual and valid. They are supposed to express

the programme which is most suited to the needs and feelings of the voters at a particular moment. Therefore it is difficult to expect that the same candidate or the party will be using the same slogan two times. Such literal repetitions may have an intercultural character only: one can use the slogan of a different candidate or of a different party again soliciting for votes in another country (Kochan 2003: 85–87, Dybko 2009: 2).<sup>6</sup>

## 6. Types of social slogans

Social advertising resembles classical advertising. The number of slogans depends on the subject. Because a specific person or institution is less frequently advertised, the *slogo* almost never occurs. Most often it is the case of a campaign led with the use of one slogan, which summarises the main message. When there appear more slogans, then one slogan usually reappears – it is then the actual slogan (the summary of the message). Furthermore, when such situation happens, the rest of the slogans do not change. They behave in a similar way to headlines which occur in classical advertisements. The headlines are most frequently related to changing the visual stimulus (Kochan 2003: 87).

In the case of the slogans which are used by the social groups who express their views (striking, protesting, demanding and the like) there can be both. There usually occur several or even between ten and twenty slogans, among which one is sometimes acknowledged as the main slogan – the one which best expresses the idea of manifestation or the one which is the most popular<sup>7</sup> (Kochan 2003: 87).

In social advertising the message either promotes certain values, a certain lifestyle (limitation of alcohol consumption, safe driving), or it is targeted against a particular person “Balcerowicz musi odejść” [Balcerowicz has to go away]. In a way this is also a political slogan, but it is used in the context of manifestation, which is a social situation or a particular thing or an action, i.e. it points to the rightness of certain actions, which is very close to the intention.

In social propaganda manifestations are often an act of expression, directing the attention to the issue. Similarly in social advertising sometimes the aim of the campaign is not to change the behaviour of the recipients but to make particular attitudes public or to popularize an idea. In social propaganda<sup>8</sup> the message originator is often absent in the message although it is possible that the institution, which provides patronage for an action<sup>9</sup> puts its name on the billboard. This situation is sometimes more complex than in advertising messages.

If one regards the obligatory inscriptions “Smoking tobacco causes cancer and heart diseases” as social advertising then the Minister of Health signed below them is in a sense the message originator and his presence can have an influence on the persuasiveness of the message. It is both the case which allows for a totally different interpretation: since this law was adopted by the parliament, than the actual message originator is perhaps the parliament.

Social slogans can reach the recipients in a direct contact (passers-by, observers of a manifestation) simultaneously by eyesight and hearing. It happens more rarely in television broadcast: if one can hear slogans, they are not shown and vice versa. Some slogans are destined to chanting and others are seen on banners. In social propaganda the intention is not always to make the recipient take action, even though the expectations of such kind could be formulated straightforwardly.

## 7. Data presentation

- (1) (a) Nie pakuj się do trumny, zrób cytologię.  
[‘Don’t pack yourself into a coffin, have cervical smear done’.]  
(b) Chroń się przed rakiem szyjki macicy.  
[‘Protect yourself against cervical cancer’.]
- (2) (a) Podaruj swój czas.  
[‘Give your time’.]  
(b) Hospicjum to też życie.  
[‘Hospice is also life’.]
- (3) (a) Depresję można pokonać.  
[‘Depression can be beaten’.]  
(b) Zmień perspektywę.  
[‘Change your perspective’.]

## 8. Relevance theory

The Relevance Theory (Sperber – Wilson 1995) though based on Grice, departs from his account of the expectations that guide comprehension process (Noveck – Sperber 2004: 2–7, Dybko 2009: 3).

Table 1. The comparison of Gricean Pragmatics with Relevance Theory (adapted from Noveck – Sperber 2004: 2–7)

Griceans and neo-Griceans	Relevance Theory
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Expectations derive from principles and maxims. They refer to principles of behaviour that speakers are expected to obey. However, the speakers might violate these regulations.</li> <li>– Such violations may be inescapable because of clash of maxims or principles, or they may be perpetrated on purpose to signify the hearer’s implicit meaning.</li> <li>– The implicit content of the utterance is habitually deduced by the hearer in his endeavour to find an interpretation which upholds the postulation that the speaker complies with the CP.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The act of communicating creates in the intended audience precise and predictable expectations of relevance, which are enough on their own to lead the hearer towards the speaker’s meaning.</li> <li>– Speakers may fail to be relevant, but they may not, if they are communicating at all, produce utterances that convey a presumption of their own relevance.</li> <li>– Relevance theory encompasses a detailed account of relevance and its role in both communication and cognition.</li> </ul>

The input is relevant to an individual when it interacts with background knowledge to yield new cognitive effects e.g. answering a question, correcting a mistake etc.<sup>10</sup> Inputs which yield greater cognitive effects and involve a smaller processing effort are more relevant and more worth processing (Noveck – Sperber 2004: 2–7, Dybko 2009: 3). Cognitive effects can be perceived as changes in an individual’s set of assumptions resulting from the processing of an input in a context of previously held assumptions<sup>11</sup> (Noveck – Sperber 2004: 2–7, Dybko 2009: 3).

As regards the role of relevance in cognition and in communication, one can distinguish two principles: “Cognitive Principle of relevance” and “Communicative principle of relevance”. The former states that “Human cognition tends to be organised to be geared to the maximization of relevance”, whereas the latter claims that “Every act of communication conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance” (Sperber – Wilson 1995: 266–278).

Moreover, it is believed that “the presumption of optimal relevance conveyed by every utterance is precise enough to ground a specific comprehension heuristic”, which means that “The utterance is relevant enough to be worth processing” and that “it is the most relevant one compatible with communicator’s abilities and preferences” (Sperber – Wilson 1995: 266–278).

In relevance theory it is suggested to “Follow a path of least effort in constructing an interpretation of the utterance”. This concerns particularly resolving ambiguities and referential indeterminacies and going beyond

linguistic meaning, by computing implicatures. The advocates of Relevance Theory advice to “stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied”, which is understood as Relevance-guided comprehension heuristic (Sperber – Wilson 1995: 266–278).

## **9. Epistemic Vigilance**

Epistemic Vigilance is an aptitude intended to separate out disinformation and misleading information from the conveyed message. Epistemic vigilance comprises three separate components. The first capacity concerns the penchant for the testimony of a benevolent communicator. The second component is related to the comprehension of the epistemic aspect of deception. The third one involves the grasp of its premeditated element (Mascaro – Sperber 2009).

Humans rely heavily on two dimensions to characterize other people and predict their behaviour. First, benevolence which encompasses their perceived good or ill intentions. Second, competence which encompasses their perceived ability to execute those intentions.

These two dimensions can be seen as critical in identifying good co-operators that is people who are willing to help. This refers to competent informants who are the individuals able to provide relevant information and benevolent informants who are the individuals willing to provide the relevant information. One of the key issues in this subject matter is the notion of incompetence which produces accidental information or mistakes. Another notion of great significance is malevolence which produces intentional misinformation or deception.

## **10. Connection between Relevance Theory and Epistemic Vigilance**

The theoretical assumptions of Relevance Theory i.e. Cognitive principle of relevance and Communicative principle of relevance and the assumptions of Epistemic Vigilance can be combined. One theory does not exclude the other. However, relevance comes first and only then Epistemic Vigilance comes into play.

## 11. Results and discussion

Table 2. Selected social slogans' meaning within the combined framework of Relevance Theory and Epistemic Vigilance

Slogan's text	Institution	Type of slogan	Meaning (contextual implication)
1 (a) Nie pakuj się do trumny, zrób cytologię. ['Don't pack yourself into a coffin, have cervical smear done'.]	Polska Unia Onkologii (Polish Union of Oncology)	Headline (catching the recipient's attention, provoking interest, promising certain benefit)	If you have cervical smear done, you will live.
1 (b) Chron się przed rakiem szyjki macicy. ['Protect yourself against cervical cancer'.]	Polska Unia Onkologii (Polish Union of Oncology)	Actual slogan (summary of the message)	Polish Union of Oncology advises women to protect themselves against cervical cancer.
2 (a) Podaruj swój czas. ['Give your time'.]	Fundacja Hospicyjna (Hospice Foundation)	Headline (catching the recipient's attention and provoking interest)	Give away your time and spend it helping in the hospice. The hospice needs volunteers.
2 (b) Hospicjum to też życie. ['Hospice is also life'.]	Fundacja Hospicyjna (Hospice Foundation)	Slogo (the global mission and the motto of the foundation)	Hospice is not only an institution for terminally ill people but also a place where one can enjoy life. Become a volunteer and help the ill to enjoy life.
3 (a) Depresję można pokonać. ['Depression can be beaten'.]	Wyższa Szkoła Handlu i Prawa im. Ryszarda Łazarskiego (Lazarski University) Firma Eli Lilly Sp. z o.o. (Eli Lilly and Company)	Headline (catching the recipient's attention, provoking interest, promising certain benefit)	There is some hope for the people who suffer from depression. It does not have to last forever. One can fight with it and beat it.
3 (b) Zmień perspektywę. ['Change your perspective'.]	Wyższa Szkoła Handlu i Prawa im. Ryszarda Łazarskiego (Lazarski University) Firma Eli Lilly Sp. z o.o. (Eli Lilly and Company)	Actual slogan (summary of the message)	Change your attitude . You need to look at your illness from a different perspective and have more distance to yourself and all your problems.

In (1ab) the message originator is the Polish Union of Oncology. Both the headline and the actual slogan are designed to prevent women from cervical cancer and to protect their life. Since Epistemic Vigilance is the capability used to detach disingenuous and false information from the communicated idea, the conveyed message will be scrutinised by the recipients of these social slogans. The mental process will be carried out in order to detect the untruthful content. Due to the fact that Epistemic Vigilance comprises three separate mechanisms the process will be performed in three stages. The first stage will relate to the first capacity concerning the penchant for the testimony of a benevolent communicator. In (1ab) the communicator that is the Polish Union of Oncology is viewed as truly benevolent. The second stage will concern the second component encompassing comprehension of the epistemic aspect of deception. The third stage will involve the struggle for understanding of its premeditated element (Mascaro – Sperber 2009).

As mentioned earlier, individuals depend heavily on two dimensions to describe other people and predict their behaviour. First, benevolence which includes their good or ill motivation. Second, competence which includes their capability to accomplish the motivation and their goal.

The Polish Union of Oncology seems to be a competent informant which is able to provide relevant information on the significance of having ‘cervical smear done’ and the importance of protecting oneself “against cervical cancer”. Moreover, it is a benevolent informant who is willing to provide the relevant information without having any benefit for itself whatsoever. The benefit can be attained by the recipients themselves namely the women who see the social campaign and apply the methods suggested. In other words, they have a greater chance to sustain their lives.

In (2ab) the message originator is Hospice Foundation. As for the level of benevolence and competence one can admit that it is relatively high. It is because hospice in general is an institution where the terminally ill people and their families receive help and moral support. The social campaign’s cry for volunteers and their time is of great relevance considering the context of sustaining the life of the patients. Even though on the surface the benefit for the recipients of the conveyed message seems to be very small, in fact after reconsideration one might reach the conclusion that actually by helping the others one forgets about his or her problems and does some positive actions which are obviously the source of happiness and the feeling of satisfaction. The cognitive effects achieved after processing the content of the headline and the *slogo* are truly and inevitably great for the individuals who are not focussed so much on themselves but rather on the well being of the others.

In (3ab) the message originator is Lazarski University and Eli Lilly pharmaceutical company. As regards the competence of these two institu-

tions one could say that it is of a relatively high degree. Both employ numerous experts and carry out extensive research in the field of fighting with depression. The social campaign containing the headline “Depression can be beaten” and the actual slogan “Change your perspective” was organized together with a scientific conference devoted to the subject of depression. As for benevolence, however, one might suspect that since a pharmaceutical company was involved in organizing the conference, perhaps it wanted to gain some benefit for itself, namely to promote its medicaments for fighting with depression. This, certainly does not have to be the case, but a vigilant recipient can obviously have such suspicions.

## 12. Conclusions

Relevance and Epistemic Vigilance play a crucial role in establishing the pragmatic meaning of social slogans and help to understand them in a better way. Social slogans are inputs which yield numerous cognitive effects and involve very small processing effort. They are created in such a way to seem most relevant and worth processing among other inputs available. In (1–2) the speaker is both benevolent and competent. In (1ab) the focus is put on the benefit of the recipient. In (2ab) the recipient is asked to give his or her time and help, however, in the end, he or she can achieve some satisfaction from his or her volunteer work in the hospice, therefore attaining some benefit as well. In (3ab) the speakers seem to be competent, although vigilant target groups might suspect that they are not absolutely benevolent. The reason why the recipients can have such suspicions is the context of the situation. On the surface the recipients should gain some benefit, namely to find out how to fight with depression, but after a thorough analysis of the whole social campaign and the role of its message originators they might discover that it is the message originators who want to gain benefit themselves. Obviously, it is the recipient who has the chance to decide to which extent the speaker is benevolent and competent and very often even the messages conveyed by malevolent and incompetent communicators can contain some relevant information. Discovering any deception is of the greatest relevance possible. Being able to develop the skill of detecting misinformation is the issue which definitely requires further research.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kochan (2003: 244–245) defines slogans as follows: “[Slogans are]... short messages, which constitute a closed entirety, [they] either stand out from an advertising or a propaganda text, or exist by themselves, [they] are characterized by a brief, often poetic form. Slogans have a certain meaning (information or a promise and an encouragement to take an action), which is most often implicit and uses largely emotional and paralinguistic means. Slogans contain ‘perlocutory aspirations’, i.e. the intentions to provoke actions pertinent to the direction set by the message carried by them, implementing those intentions only in the primary situation context and on the grounds of accepting the postulated by it common emotional identifications and expectations”.

<sup>2</sup> Among the techniques of editing the headline several most crucial ones can be listed such as reference to current affairs, transforming a well-known saying, reference to celebrities and evoking the recipients’ needs and wants. One can distinguish questioning, informing, provoking, ordering and narrative headlines. They can also advise or highlight the feature of the product or service advertised (Budzyński 2000: 101–105).

<sup>3</sup> The actual slogan usually has the form of a gerund clause, an adverbial or adjectival structure, also a paraphrase or a rhyme.

<sup>4</sup> Among the actual slogans one can list declarative, humorous, interrogative, raising interest, communicating novelty and imperative slogans. Furthermore, the types of actual slogans include prestigious, identifying the product, evoking emotions, ambiguous and contrastive ones. They can also promote quality and highlight originality or the attractive price of the product (Budzyński 2003: 109–111). In addition, Russell – Lane (2000: 515–517) propose the division into institutional and sale slogans.

<sup>5</sup> Sometimes the English language is used, frequently personal forms and pronouns, rarely rhyme.

<sup>6</sup> However, this does not always end with a success. If the same person or the same group somehow copies a slogan the repetition may regard the main message of the slogan. Still, the linguistic form has to be at least partly changed.

<sup>7</sup> Which is the easiest to chant and has the biggest values of encouraging the demonstrators (Kochan 2003: 87).

<sup>8</sup> Social advertising and protests of particular social groups, for example environmentalists or workers.

<sup>9</sup> For example a foundation which takes care of a certain social problem.

<sup>10</sup> These inputs include external stimuli, which can be perceived and attended to and mental representations, which can be preserved, recalled or used as premises in inference (Noveck – Sperber 2004: 2–7, Dybko 2009: 3).

<sup>11</sup> Three types of cognitive effects can be distinguished, namely: derivation of new assumptions, modification of the degree of strength of previously held assumptions and deletion of previously held assumptions (Noveck – Sperber, 2004: 2–7, Dybko 2009: 3).

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