

## Chapter 2: Slogans

### “Talking the Talk?”

*'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I chose it to mean— nothing less, and nothing more.'*

*'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'*

*The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master — that's all.'*

— Lewis Carroll

This chapter explains how slogans promote apparent agreement while, in fact, undermining practical cooperation. It also lays out specific techniques for using this knowledge to best advantage in analyzing controversies.

Americans, when faced with choices, often disagree. But as successful politicians know well, slogans are a way of temporarily avoiding these stubborn disagreements. Sufficiently vague to mean different things to different people, slogans are easy to agree with — provided we don't ask what the slogans mean in detail. That's when we often find that others interpret them in ways we find objectionable.

### Defining Slogans

*Slogans are vague statements whose ambiguity conceals potential conflict while promoting broad but shallow consensus.* Consider the traditional wedding vows. They are sloganistic. Both bride and groom promise to "love and honor" one another, for instance. After the honeymoon, however, many couples find themselves struggling to reach agreement about what "love" or "honor" means in specific cases. That is how it is with slogans; their characteristic vagueness, encourages a shallow but vital initial unity of feeling and spirit. But the very vagueness that makes them appealing also makes them potential points of conflict.

Here is another example, this one dealing with multicultural education. To find a slogan for analysis we entered “multicultural education” into a World Wide Web search engine. It identified over 2,600,00 references and the second-ranked *New Horizons for Education* reference, offered the following specimen, “*Multicultural education harbors a place for a multitude of voices in a multicultural society and a place for many dreams.*”

This slogan's appeal to easy tolerance initially may seem appealing. But to begin unraveling that attraction we need to consider only the status and rights of females in different cultures around the world. Some cultures, for example, tolerate wife beating if the husband thinks it is needed to preserve his "manhood." Does that mean we should tolerate wife thrashing by “macho” culture males if the US is to “...harbor a place for a multitude of voices?” Similarly, in some cultures pregnant women frequently have ultra-sound testing to determine the sex of their unborn; female fetuses are then aborted because they are unwanted. Female infanticide is also widely practiced for the same

reason. In both cases the parent's "dream" is to have a boy. But should the US accept these practices in order to become more "multicultural?"

Continuing in this vein, how tolerant should we be of cultures that practice genital mutilation as an initiation into womanhood? Does listening to other culture's "voices" require Medicare officials to fund the surgical removal of the clitoris of pubescent females if their parents desire it? Likewise, there are cultures where feminist authors are imprisoned, even executed, for "offending the pious." Should America's female writers be legitimate targets for religiously motivated assassins in order to fulfill the "dream" of another culture's spiritual leader?

To be sure, much can be learned from other cultures. Moreover, intolerance often fosters misery and injustice. Nevertheless, many difficulties lurk in the slogan "*Multicultural education harbors a place for a multitude of voices in a multicultural society and a place for many dreams.*" Unfortunately, the ambiguity of the slogan obscures them all. That's what, at the outset, makes it appealing.

## Slogans Mean Something But...

Slogans are not so vague as to be meaningless. On the contrary, they are powerful persuaders precisely because they do mean *something* to people. Crucially, however, what that "something" is differs dramatically from person to person. Consider a school district that adopts the slogan, "Every school a good school!" Everybody agrees that "good" schools are desirable; but we often do not agree on what "good" schools should be like. Do they emphasize math and science, or languages and art? Should they be fun? Should everyone get a diploma, no matter what? Any experienced principal will tell you that one person thinks is a "good" school another regards as "mediocre," even "awful." Why, then, is "Every school a good school!" initially persuasive? It's convincing because the slogan's vagueness obscures these, and similar, disagreements.

### Here are some possible indicators that a statement is a slogan.

- **The statement is difficult to disagree with without sounding perverse.** For example, "Take a bite out of crime!" "Support our troops!" "Protect the environment!" "Just Say 'No!' to Drugs!"
- **Multiple interpretations can be given for key terms.** For example, the term *law* in "The *Law* is too soft on criminals." Also, *peace* in "Peace-keeping Force" or "Peace-loving Nations."
- **The statements are used at political or ceremonial get-togethers,** e.g. "A thousand points of light!" or "Contract with America!" or "with Liberty and Justice for All!"
- **The statements are part of a media "sound bite,"** e.g. "The Trial of the Century!" "Deficit Reduction", "Liberals" and "Conservatives!"

## A Caution

We have to be careful not to identify every vague statement as a slogan. Some imprecise statements are simply generalizations or summaries that do not mask important options. Imagine, for example, someone saying, "New cars are expensive!" So far as "new cars" are concerned, there is a substantial difference between the price of a Hyundai

and a Ferrari. And what “expensive,” means is also vague. What *is* clear, however, is that the statement does not obscure dissensus or preempt important options in the same important way a slogan like “Every school a good school!” does.

## Slogans in Motto Form

The most obvious slogans are those in motto form. “Every child can learn!” is an example. But can every child, even the most profoundly handicapped, learn to read, for example? No, not really. In fact, there actually are very few things that every child can learn. Why doesn’t this get discussed? The motto’s vagueness obscures critical details.

“It’s time to put government on a diet!” works the same way. This motto generates broad enthusiasm. Few object to trimming “fat” from “government.” Enthusiasm diminishes, however, when we have to decide which is “fat” and which “lean.” Then we quickly discover that what one person sees as waste, another sees as compassion for the homeless, prudent investment in military preparedness, minimal consideration for the elderly, and so forth.

*...The Devil can cite scripture for his purpose.*

— Shakespeare

## “Try Harder” Mottoes

Try harder mottoes, such as “When the going gets tough, the tough get going!” often serve to pass the buck to subordinates for problems created by the people in charge. Such mottoes are based on the assumption that people could, if they only tried harder, do better. Politicians proclaim, for example, that “Every Child Can Learn!” The implication is that if teachers tried harder, every child would learn. But because of political neglect or indifference, those same teachers might toil with inadequate equipment in dilapidated, over-crowded schools destabilized by violence. Try harder mottoes lend themselves to this sort of buck passing.

## Here Are Possible Indicators that Statements are Mottoes:

- **It is an emotionally stirring maxim.** “Remember the Alamo!” Remember Pearl Harbor,” “Save the Children,” “Be All You Can Be,” “Never have so many, owed so much to so few.”
- It is the statement of a guiding principle. “**Taxation without Representation is Tyranny,**” “**Be Prepared,**” “**In God We Trust,**” “**Caveat Emptor**” (Let the Buyer Beware), “**Carpe Diem**” (Seize the Day).
- It expresses the spirit or purpose of an organization or other group, often inscribed on a badge, banner, etc. “**Semper Fidelis**” (Always Faithful), “**United We Stand,**” “**Support Your Local Police,**” “**Don’t Tread On Me,**” “**The Mounties Always Get Their Man.**”

## The Humpty Dumpty Principle -- power through slogans

At the beginning of this chapter we quoted Lewis Carroll *"When I use a word," said Humpty Dumpty, "it means just what I choose it to mean."* - Humpty's assertion points to a specific difficulty with slogans. Those in charge usually get to decide what a slogan means in specific cases. That gives those who use slogans a great deal of arbitrary power.

Imagine a chain of restaurants owned by a very conservative, born-again Christian. (The term "conservative, born-again Christian" is itself sloganistic, but at least it distinguishes this type of Protestant from main line Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and so forth; as well as Catholics, Jews, Muslims and others.) Our "born-again" owner insists that employment contracts include this statement, *"I agree to always conduct myself in accordance with Christian principles."* This is a slogan. Why? Because of there is fundamental disagreement among Christians regarding what, specifically, "Christians" principles amount to; although most people will assign their personal meaning without taking into account that others understand "Christian principles" very differently.

Suppose, for example, that a religiously devout manager of one of this firm's restaurants is arrested for criminal trespass. Motivated by Christian principles, she has broken into a defense plant and splashed blood on nuclear missile warheads. (Such an incident actually happened in the Philadelphia area.) Will this devout manager get fired if the restaurant chain's owner decides she violated *his* sense of "Christian" principles? It's a good bet.

The rule is: When it comes to slogans, sooner or later those in power get to be Humpty Dumpty and say, "... that means just what I choose it to mean." So, with slogans, always ask, "Who gets to decide what things mean?"

### A Procedure

When considering how slogans might be involved in a controversy the following steps may help.

- Step 1) **Identify slogans being used to support positions by looking carefully for vague key terms.**
- Step 2) **Also look for mottoes that might conceal disagreements and serve manipulation.**
- Step 3) **List different meanings people might assign to the vague key terms in 1 and 2 above.**
- Step 4) **Consider how those different meanings would change the nature of the dispute.**

### Chapter Highlights

Analyzing controversies requires an appreciation for the subtleties of language; and slogans are a crucially important aspect of that subtlety. While there are characteristic forms for slogans, e.g., mottoes, it is the way they *function* that is crucial. Sloganeering is what people do to encourage superficial agreement. But this superficial agreement often covers over profound depths of controversy. (See *Chapter 3: Reification*)

### Other Related Chapters in This Text

- 3. Reifications                      12. Authority
- 5. Pseudo-solutions            14. Inquiry

## 8. Presuppositions

**Keywords for Further Data Base Search**

programmatic definition	stereotype	prejudice
propaganda	consensus	motto
generalization	dissensus	catchword or catch phrase

**Test Yourself**

Although slogans mean *something*, what that something is differs significantly from one person to another. Still, you may find it difficult to imagine more than one interpretation. That demonstrates why slogans are so convincing. It is hard to imagine any other interpretation than our own. This is what causes consensus to dissolve when slogans are interpreted. Different interpretations commit us to different expectations, different claims on resources, and so forth.

As vague as they are, however, slogans cannot be interpreted in just any way. Certain possibilities are ruled out. For example, if somebody says, "We have to get things moving around here," no one will take that to mean, "Let's all go home and go to bed." Knowing what a slogan rules out is as important as knowing that a slogan says little specifically.

Here is a list of sloganistic statements. Make them more specific by creating two different acceptable interpretations. Also create two examples of non-acceptable interpretations. Follow the examples.

<b>Slogan</b>	<b>Acceptable vs. Unacceptable Interpretations</b>
"Support quality education."	<i>Acceptable:</i> 1. Pass the school tax increase.
	<i>Acceptable:</i> 2. Require everyone to take two years of algebra and a foreign language.
	<i>Unacceptable:</i> 1. Slash school taxes so that taxpayers can use the money for other things.
	<i>Unacceptable:</i> 2. Allow more illiterates to graduate.
"Require excellence in all things."	<i>Acceptable:</i> 1. Bench baseball players who bat less than .250.
	<i>Acceptable:</i> 2.

	<p><i>Unacceptable:</i> 1. Count basketball shots near the rim the same as those that go through it.</p> <p><i>Unacceptable:</i> 2.</p>
Just say "no" to drugs."	<p><i>Acceptable:</i> 1.</p> <p><i>Acceptable:</i> 2.</p>
	<p><i>Unacceptable:</i> 1.</p> <p><i>Unacceptable:</i> 2.</p>
"Reduce government interference in our lives."	<p><i>Acceptable:</i> 1.</p> <p><i>Acceptable:</i> 2.</p>
	<p><i>Unacceptable:</i> 1.</p> <p><i>Unacceptable:</i> 2.</p>