The Language of Resistance: A Cross-Cultural Linguistic Analysis of Protest Effectiveness

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Introduction

This study investigates how linguistic features, namely rhetorical, phonological, and semantic characteristics, contribute to the success of global protest slogans and, consequently, the movements that they represent. It focuses on both written (hashtags) and auditory (chants) forms of slogans, analyzing various expressions of resistance that have been widely adopted and translated across movements throughout history. To capture a broad and representative set of slogans, this research will leverage publicly available digital data sources, including Twitter, social media archives, and news repositories, spanning the past 15-20 years. By determining common patterns in protest language, this project aims to identify which slogan strategies produce greater memorability, resonance, and spread.

Background and Context

Protest is a vital mechanism for transformation and communication in society, present for the entirety of human existence. Keeping non-verbal actions aside, protests employ compelling forms of discourse, including slogans, rally chants and cries, manifestos, physical posters and banners, to advocate for their mission. Intentional usage of language and linguistic characteristics within movements serve as resources that shape individual and united identity, influence public perception, mobilize widespread support—directly contributing to social change. In particular, slogans emerge as potent points of analysis of social movements. Crucially, these phrases succinctly express dissent while retaining memorable and persuasive qualities. Moreover, the presence of slogans across diverse social movements highlights their significant role in shaping protest discourse.

Problem Statement

While there exists ample literature studying the discourse of a particular social movement or multiple contemporary movements, there is a gap in comparative analysis that explicitly connects specific linguistic features such as semantics, rhetorics, and phonology, to the effectiveness of protest slogans that transcend time, language and culture. Many studies detail what language is used in protest or how it functions within a specific sociopolitical context. However, there is not a comprehensive understanding of why certain linguistic choices consistently lead to greater effectiveness across diverse cultural landscapes.

A challenge that arises is defining and measuring "effectiveness" in protest as outcomes can range from immediate mobilization to media visibility to lasting policy change. Current research lacks a framework to account for and link features with such diverse outcomes in a way that allows for cross-cultural comparison.

Research Questions

1) Which specific linguistic devices are most frequently adopted in protest slogans across different cultural and geographical contexts?

2) How do the features in RQ1 interact to enhance (a) persuasive impact, (b) mobilization potential, and (c) policy-level influence of protest slogans?

Relevance and Importance of the Research

This research will provide a nuanced analysis of how linguistic functions contribute to the success of protest slogans and their respective movements. It will also foster a more integrated

understanding of protest communication and collective action. These insights are exceptionally relevant given that the world has witnessed a historic surge in protest activity: recent movements include the "No Kings" protest and the demonstrations against ICE, mass climate rallies in the UK, to Gaza solidarity marches in The Hague and anti-corruption protests in Mali, Iran, and Mexico. In this picture, slogans become critical strategic tools: they encapsulate collective grievances, spark emotional resonance, and frame public discourse in simple, memorable phrases. From a practical standpoint, the findings will offer valuable guidance for activists, social movement organizers, and policymakers. Understanding which linguistic features resonate most effectively in global contexts can inform the crafting of more impactful protest messages, enhancing strategies for public engagement, and policy advocacy.

Literature review

Speech Act Theory:

Formed in the work of J.L. Austin and further developed by John Searle, Speech Act Theory posits that language is not merely used to describe information but also to perform actions. This research will leverage the concepts of locutionary acts (the literal utterance), illocutionary acts (the intended meaning or force of the utterance), and perlocutionary acts (the actual effect produced on the listener). Protest slogans, with this background, are powerful speech acts where the illocutionary force (e.g. expressing disapproval or petitioning for change) and the perlocutionary effect (e.g. mobilization or persuasion) are important factors in their effectiveness. Mary Lynne Gasaway Hill's The Language of Protest: Acts of Performance, Identity, and Legitimacy introduces a comparative framework based on Speech Act Theory to analyze several forms of protest language, including slogans. Hill argues that when an utterance

is recognized by the audience as a “speech act of protest,” it acquires pragmatic legitimacy, empowering it to shape public discourse. Moreover, by defining who belongs “with us” versus “against us,” protest speech acts split listeners into distinct camps, deepening collective identity while othering opposition.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):

CDA offers a framework for understanding language as a form of social practice, connected to power dynamics, ideology, and broader social contexts. This approach allows for the systematic investigation of how protest slogans, as public discourse, are created and employed to challenge societal norms and power structures. CDA can uncover implicit ideologies embedded within this language, revealing how movements use specific lexical choices, grammatical structures, and rhetorical strategies to amplify their missions and goals. For instance, analyses of protest signs from the Women's March on Washington demonstrate how linguistic and multimodal forms of expression (e.g., short, imperative sentences, specific iconography, color choices) are used to convey assertive messages and reappropriate terms, heavily relying on context for their full meaning. Similarly, corpus-based discourse analysis of social media discourse in movements like the #WomanLifeFreedom protests in Iran reveals how collective identities are formed and expressed through specific speech acts, such as the use of first- and second-person plurals.

Rhetoric of Social Movements:

This area of study helps examine the persuasive strategies employed by protesters of various movements. Classical rhetorical appeals, including Logos (appeal to logic), Ethos (appeal to

credibility), and Pathos (appeal to emotion), are highly relevant in understanding how protest messages are designed to influence audiences. Dana L. Cloud's A New Rhetoric of Social Movements introduces the *Hegemony-Formation-Pressure* model, a framework that links the rhetorical construction of collective identity with the pursuit of institutional change. She argues that social movement discourse operates in a cyclical relationship: first, it challenges dominant ideologies (hegemony) by using language to build oppositional identities (formation), and then channels these identities into actions (pressure) such as protests, demands, or confrontation.

Linguistic Features in Protest Slogans:

To conduct a detailed linguistic analysis, specific features of protest slogans will be examined:

Semantic Fields: Semantic fields are groups of words or expressions that are related in meaning, sharing a common theme or topic. Analyzing these fields in protest slogans can reveal the core themes and underlying concerns of a movement (e.g., justice, freedom, unity, change). The study of semantic fields also reveals how vocabulary is organized within a language and how meanings are constructed and influenced by cultural differences. For instance, emphasis on collective harmony versus individual rights might be shown in the prevalence of semantic fields related to community or autonomy.

Rhetorical Functions and Devices: Effective protest slogans employ a multitude of rhetorical devices to increase their impact and memorability. These include parallelism, rhyming, repetition, metonymy, humor, and mirroring (using an opponent's words against them). Beyond these, rhetorical questions are often used to draw attention to something or to persuade an audience to align with the protestor's stance, while imperative moods directly invoke action. The

effectiveness of these devices is often tied to their ability to evoke emotional responses (pathos), establish credibility (ethos), or present logical arguments (logos) within the specific cultural context.

Phonological Features: The sound patterns and structures of language, known as phonological features, are crucial for the spoken, chanted forms of protest slogans. These features include voicing, place and manner of articulation, stress, and intonation. They contribute significantly to the memorability and chant-ability of slogans. For example, the meter and rhythm of a slogan can make it easier to remember and repeat in a crowd, facilitating successful collective action. Studies have also indicated a correlation between certain phonological patterns (e.g., vowel and consonant frequencies) and cultural values or social structures, suggesting a deeper symbolic connection between sound and societal phenomena. This is particularly relevant for understanding how slogans resonate emotionally and foster collective identity through their auditory qualities.

Research Methodology

Research design

This study adopts a mixed-methods, comparative framework, combining computational analysis with qualitative strategies to investigate how linguistic features contribute to protest slogan effectiveness across cultures. It will first describe and categorize the linguistic features present in slogans, then explore statistical associations between these features and points of analysis of effectiveness.

Methods and Sources

1) Corpus construction

- Source from publicly available social media platforms (mainly Twitter), online news archives, and digital protest repositories
    - Select a restricted timeframe (e.g. 15-20 years)
- Slogan Collection -Automated scraping and classification models to identify slogans from digital data.
- Metadata - Log for each slogan:
    - Gloss: Original utterance/text, morphemes, precise English translation
    - Source type: e.g. Social-media post, chant audio, sign photo
    - Date and geographic location of usage
    - Engagement metrics (likes, shares, retweets, mentions)

2) Annotation & Feature Detection

- Manual Annotation - A small subset will be manually annotated for validation
- Feature Set - Capture manual judgement of features based on previous literature on effective parts of slogans and other forms of discourse.
    - For example, this may include repetition (e.g. “No justice, no peace”), parallelism (matching syntactic structure), rhyme / alliteration (sound devices), imperative mood (commands),and primary semantic field.
- Automated Linguistic Analysis - NLP tools will identify semantic fields via embeddings and clustering, rhetorical patterns, and sentiment / emotional tone using tools such as VADER.

- Phonological analysis will be applied to auditory data (chants)
    - Praat measurement - Per sample, extract various metrics based on previous literature on phonological patterns. For example, syllable rate (syllables per second) or rhythmic pattern (e.g. trochaic, iambic)

4) Effectiveness Proxies

For every slogan, collect 3-5 accessible metrics to represent effectiveness. These metrics will be further determined based on previous literature and findings. Some example include:

- Online reach (frequency, hashtag, retweets)
- News mentions (# of appearances in news sources)
- Longevity (duration of active usage)

5) Data Analysis

- Examine frequency and distribution of linguistic features, cross-linguistic patterns, and temporal trends.
- Modeling - Use machine learning models to test associations between features and effectiveness metrics.

Practical Considerations

- The large-scale computational method allows for the analysis of slogans from 15–20 years without manual bottlenecks.
- Tool accessibility: All computational methods will rely on freely available resources (Python, NLTK/spaCy, VADER, Praat, Excel/Sheets).

- Ethical compliance: Only publicly available data will be used and the creators of social media posts used in the study will not be tracked. Any participant interview (if added) will follow standard protocols.
- Data reliability: Multiple researchers confirming data as well as piloting the codebook on an initial subset will refine definitions and improve consistency.

References

Gasaway Hill, M. L. . (2018). The Language of Protest: Acts of Performance, Identity, and Legitimacy. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77419-0

Cloud, D. L. (2024). A New Rhetoric of Social Movements (1st ed.). Cognella Academic Publishing.