

Literal and Contextual Meanings in Coca-Cola's Slogans

Felicia Novriella Surjadi¹, Ivonne Muliawati Harsono²

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA
E-mail: a11210006@john.petra.ac.id¹, iharsono@petra.ac.id²

ABSTRACT

This study aims to reveal the literal and contextual meanings of Coca-Cola's advertising slogans. This study uses a qualitative method. The writers collected and analyzed the literal and contextual meanings of Coca-Cola advertising slogans, focusing on how each slogan conveyed both literal and contextual meaning. The literal meaning was defined based on the denotative meaning of the words, while the contextual meaning was defined based on the major historical events that happened at the time of the slogan release. The findings show that Coca-Cola utilized their slogans not just as a promotional tool but also to reflect the socio-cultural, political, economic, and business contexts of the time. This study concludes that Coca-Cola has creatively used language to align itself with the situations of the time, which help strengthen the connection with their customers. This validates Coca-Cola's claims on their website that their slogans were created to reflect the time.

Keywords: literal meaning, contextual meaning, context, slogan, Coca-Cola

INTRODUCTION

As a promotional tool intended to introduce a company, advertising slogans need to be easy to understand and associated with a specific brand (Stewart & Clark, 2007, as cited in Abdi & Irandoust, 2013). Advertising slogans are created to engage personally with customers through language.

In this study, the writers aim to analyze the literal and contextual meanings of Coca-Cola's advertising slogans. The writers use Coca-Cola's slogans due to their flexibility in making slogans. Coca-Cola is able to create slogans which allow the company to stay relevant without losing its powerful brand presence. A study reveals that Coca-Cola's slogans have always shown significant flexibility which allow them to continuously evolve while still maintaining their core identity (Rodrigues et al., 2018). Therefore, the strategy of using dynamic slogans allows Coca-Cola to create slogans that are relevant from time to time (Rodrigues et al., 2018).

Moreover, Coca-Cola states that "Throughout the years, the slogans used in advertising for Coca-Cola have reflected not only the brand, but the times" (History of Coca-Cola Advertising Slogans, 2024). This means that Coca-Cola did not only create slogans to advertise their products but also engage intimately with their customers through current events relevance.

Coca-Cola is a Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) company that produces beverages that are enjoyed in more than 200 countries (History of Coca-Cola Advertising Slogans, 2024). Founded in 1886, they are known as a manufacturer of soft drinks and other beverages (History of Coca-Cola Advertising Slogans, 2024). Throughout the years, Coca-Cola has made claims about producing extraordinary slogans that did not only represent the brand but also the time (History of Coca-Cola Advertising Slogans, 2024).

In analyzing Coca-Cola's advertising slogans, the writers used different theories. First, the writers used theories from Recanati (2003) and Leech (1981 as cited in Pratiwi et al., 2020) to analyze the literal meaning of the slogans. Literal meaning or denotative meaning, according to Leech (1981), is the meaning of a text based on what is written. Second, the writers used theories from Recanati (2003) and Greenblatt (1982) to analyze the contextual meaning of the slogans. Greenblatt (1982) argues that a text cannot be separated from the historical and cultural conditions of their production. Therefore, every text has a contextual meaning that is shaped by the social or political conditions of the time.

METHOD

In this study, the major instrument is the writers themselves. The writers were the one who gathered the necessary data for this study. The data were collected in the first week of February 2025. After collecting the data, the writers analyzed the literal meaning using the theories from Recanati (2003) and Leech (1981) and the contextual meaning using the theories from Recanati (2003) and Greenblatt (1982).

The data source is Coca-Cola's advertising slogans, which were collected from Coca-Cola's official website (History of Coca-Cola Advertising Slogans, 2024). There are some limitations to the data that the writers use in this study. First, the writers collected slogans that Coca-Cola released between 1906 and 2009 from their official website. Other slogans that Coca-Cola released on other platforms were not used in this study. Second, the writers chose the slogans that have contextual meanings in business, economic, socio-cultural or political contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the results of the data analysis. The writers analyzed the data based on its literal and contextual meanings. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section discusses the literal meanings of Coca-Cola's advertising slogans while the second section discusses the writers' findings and analysis of the contextual meanings of Coca-Cola advertising slogans in relation to the events that happened at the time.

Literal Meanings in Coca-Cola's Slogans

No	Release Year	Slogan	Denotative Meaning	Literal Meaning
1	1906	The National Temperance Beverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Great: markedly superior in character or quality - National: of or relating to a nation; belonging to or maintained by the federal government - Temperance: moderation in or abstinence from the use of alcoholic beverages - Beverage: a drinkable liquid 	Coca-Cola prides itself as the celebrated nationwide non-alcoholic drink

2	1927	Pure as Sunlight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pure: unmixed with any other matter; containing nothing that does not properly belong - Sunlight: the light of the sun; sunshine 	Pure as sunlight
3	1949	Along the Highway to Anywhere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Highway: a public way, especially : a main direct road 	You can find Coca-Cola along the highway to any destination
4	1976	Coke Adds Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adds: to perform addition; to serve as an addition; to make an addition - Life: the quality that distinguishes a vital and functional being from a dead body; one or more aspects of the process of living; a way or manner of living; the period from birth to death 	Coca-Cola gives life
5	1986	Red, White & You (for Coca-Cola Classic)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Red: of the color red - White: having the color of new snow or milk 	The colors red, white, and Coca-Cola drinkers

Literal meaning, according to Recanati (2003), refers to how a sentence is understood based on what is written, without considering any context behind it. Therefore, this section provides the literal meanings for each of the Coca-Cola advertising slogans in detail.

In order to understand the literal meanings, the writers need to provide the denotative meanings of the key words in the slogans. These dictionary-based definitions were taken from Merriam-Webster's website (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The paragraphs below presents the writers' analysis of the literal meanings of Coca-Cola advertising slogans.

The first slogan is "The Great National Temperance Beverage". Based on the dictionary definition, the keywords "Great" means superior in quality; "National" means related to the whole country; "Temperance" means avoiding any alcoholic beverage; and "Beverage" means a drink. Based on those words, the literal meaning of the first slogan is how Coca-Cola presents itself as a highly superior, widely recognized non-alcoholic drink.

The second slogan is "Pure as Sunlight". Based on the dictionary definition, "Pure" means uncontaminated or unmixed, and "Sunlight" means natural light from the sun. Therefore, the literal meaning of the fifth slogan is that something is deemed as pure and natural as the sunlight. It is safe to assume that the "something" in question is Coke, but more context is needed to form the conclusion.

The third slogan is "Along the Highway to Anywhere". According to the dictionary, "Highway" refers to a major public road that connects parts of a town or cities. Therefore, the literal meaning of the eighth slogan is that Coca-Cola is widely available during travel, especially along the highway, no matter where one is headed.

The fourth slogan is "Coke Adds Life". According to the dictionary, "Adds" means to give something additional and "Life" means a way of living. Therefore, the literal meaning of the twelfth slogan is that Coca-Cola is adding enjoyment or energy to one's life.

The fifth slogan is “Red, White & You”. According to the dictionary, “Red” means the color red, “White” means the color of snow or milk, and “You” refers to the audience. Therefore, the literal meaning of the sixteenth slogan is red and white colors, and the consumers of Coca-Cola. The intended meaning of this slogan cannot be fully understood without the right context, as the third noun is not directly related to the first two.

Contextual Meanings in Coca-Cola's Slogans

According to Greenblatt (1982), every literary text is shaped by the social and political force of the time and cannot be separated from it. Therefore, this section provides a detailed explanation of the contextual meanings that each slogan carries based on the socio-cultural, political, or business events that happened at the time of the slogan creation.

In order to understand what the slogans wish to convey, we must consider the contexts behind them. Without considering context, we might lose its intended meaning, making it just like an ordinary phrase rather than a strategic advertising tool. Therefore, understanding contextual meaning is very important because slogans are often created to represent specific situations like socio-cultural, business, political, or economic events. By analyzing contextual meaning, we gain insight on how Coca-Cola's message aligns with the time, making its slogans more impactful and relevant.

Socio-cultural Context

No	Release Year	Slogan	Contextual point of reference	Contextual Meaning
1	1906	The Great National Temperance Beverage	Third wave of the Temperance Movement	Form of support for the Temperance Movement
2	1976	Coke Adds Life	1. US Bicentennial celebration (200th anniversary). 2. New Jersey Supreme Court granted the right to die to Karen Ann Quinlan	Coca-Cola positions itself as the go-to drink for multiple celebrations held during the Bicentennial. Karen Ann Quinlan continued to live (albeit in vegetative state) for over 9 years after her ventilator was disconnected without any means of support.

The first slogan is “The Great National Temperance Beverage”. This slogan was made in 1906, reflecting the brand's support for the Temperance Movement. In order to understand the deeper meaning of this slogan, the socio-cultural context plays a crucial role. As mentioned before, the slogan was made to support the Temperance Movement, a social movement that encouraged people to reduce or completely avoid alcohol consumption. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this movement was popular in the United States. Therefore, by branding itself as the “Great National Temperance Beverage”, Coca-Cola positioned itself as a suitable alternative to alcoholic beverages, promoting its drink as a socially-responsible choice. As a

result, It allowed Coca-Cola to appeal to a broader audience, especially those who seek a similar drinking experience. Therefore, this slogan highlights Coca-Cola identity as a beverage that could be enjoyed by anyone, securing its place in the market during the time.

The second slogan is “Coke Adds Life”. This sentence seems simple and easy to understand literally. However, the phrase 'to add life' is not commonly used in comparison to 'to boost life', 'to give life', or 'to spice up life'. In this example, the socio-cultural events that happened in the same year would allow us to understand the slogan better. The first contextual point of reference is the US Bicentennial - a celebration of the nation's 200th anniversary. Naturally, the nation celebrated the event with parades, fireworks, and other commemorative activities. Coca-Cola used this milestone in US history to position itself as the go-to drink for all the social events that took place at the time. The company wanted to send a message that drinking Coke would "add life" to the parties, the same way a fun person becomes the life of the party.

An interesting secondary context to this slogan is another major event that happened in the same year: the right-to-die controversy prompted by Karen Ann Quinlan’s case. In 1975, 21 year-old Quinlan suffered from brain damage after consuming alcohol and Valium as part of her diet, resulting in a coma. After a year of being in vegetative state, the New Jersey Supreme Court finally granted the parents' wish to remove her ventilator. Miraculously, without the medical aid, she continued to breathe on her own and live for 9 more years before her passing in 1985. This secondary context further explains the smart choice of the word 'add' in the slogan. It was as though Coca-Cola was suggesting that even when life is hard or all is lost, Coca-Cola can add (new) life to yours.

Business Context

No	Release Year	Slogan	Contextual point of reference	Contextual Meaning
1	1927	Pure as Sunlight	Coca-Cola conducted 22 scientific tests for soda purity	Proof of product purity
2	1949	Along the Highway to Anywhere	The US has an integrated highway network known as US Routes, with Route 66 being one of the most popular during the post-war period	The red Coca-Cola vending machines / coolers were prevalent in the highways. The slogan was written on a sign board that resembled the shape of an interstate highway sign.
3	1986	Red, White & You (for Coca-Cola classic)	Coca-Cola Classic dominated the market	A smart wordplay of ‘red, white, and blue’ which are the colours of the US flag. Red and white are the colours of Coca-Cola Classic, and blue is Pepsi’s colour. Coca-Cola replaced Blue with You, which represents their consumers but still rhymes with Blue.

The first slogan is “Pure as Sunlight”. This slogan focused on proving the product's purity and safety to its consumers. The business context behind this slogan can provide a deeper understanding of what Coca-Cola wanted to convey through this slogan. During this time, Coca-Cola conducted 22 scientific tests to make sure that every bottle fulfilled the standards of quality and cleanliness. Therefore, to highlight the purity and safety of its products, Coca-Cola used the word “Sunlight”, which refers to something natural and universally trusted. This word helped Coca-Cola reassure its consumers that the products were natural and safe for consumption. Moreover, in the poster, Coca-Cola stated that not only the ingredients were natural and safe, but the manufacturing process was also strictly monitored to ensure safety. This slogan positioned Coca-Cola as a trustworthy and health-conscious company.

The second slogan is “Along the Highway to Anywhere”. At first, the slogan might sound like the company wanted to promote their drink's availability. However, it was more than just a piece of information. After World War II, the United States conducted a rapid expansion of the highway system, including the famous Route 66. As a result, the culture of traveling and mobility began to grow. Coca-Cola responded to this shift in mobility by making their product accessible on the highways. Coca-Cola creatively provided vending machines, coolers, and advertisements shaped like the interstate signs along the highways. This slogan helped Coca-Cola position itself as an important part of everyday travel and a refreshing companion on the road, especially on the highways. Furthermore, this slogan showed that Coca-Cola wanted to be known as a product that remained accessible to people, wherever they were heading. This slogan also made for a great metaphor that suggested Coca-Cola would “be there with you every step of the way”.

The third slogan is “Red, White & You”. The literal meaning does not do much to help us understand the said layers. To begin, it was a smart wordplay of “red, white, and blue” which are the colours of the US flag. This slogan tapped into deep-seated American patriotic imagery by echoing the colors of the U.S. flag. Furthermore, by replacing “blue” with “you”, Coca-Cola also appealed to the emotions of the American people and created a sense of unity and nationalism. Secondly, the removal of the word “blue” was also a dig at Pepsi - their main competitor - which had blue as their brand identity. This was further projected in the poster for the ads, as seen in Figure 5. Coca-Cola intentionally put a red car in front of a blue background to assert its dominance over its rival. Furthermore, they made their model wear a blue denim shirt while drinking Coke. This advertisement was a multi-faceted attack at Pepsi.

Economic Context

No	Release Year	Slogan	Contextual point of reference	Contextual Meaning
1	1949	Along the Highway to Anywhere	The Post-War Recession (1948-1949)	The slogan advocated for an economic recovery that would see the country prosper once again

The first slogan is “Along the Highway to Anywhere”. Coca-Cola introduced this slogan during the post-war recession in the United States. At first, this slogan might seem like an encouragement to travel and explore the country. However, the economic context suggested that this slogan conveyed a more meaningful message. During this time, the United States experienced a post-war recession, and consequently, an economic crisis. The US then began to

invest in the infrastructure and expand its highway system, offering hopes of freedom, mobility, and economic growth. Consequently, Coca-Cola positioned itself as a reliable companion for the commuters. Whether they were returning home or figuratively driving towards a better future, Coca-Cola promised to always be by their side, highlighting its role as more than just a beverage, but also a symbol of optimism, ensuring Americans that their country would prosper once again. By doing this, Coca-Cola offered a sense of normalcy during a hard time.

Political Context

No	Release Year	Slogan	Contextual point of reference	Contextual Meaning
1	1986	Red, White & You (for Coca-Cola classic)	The second term of President Ronald Reagan, who was a Republican	The word “Red” is associated with the Republican party. The removal of the word “Blue”, which is associated with the Democrat party, carried implicit political overtones.

The first slogan is “Red, White & You”. The 1986 slogan was influenced by both business and political contexts. Since the presidential election in 2000, red has come to symbolize the Republican Party, and blue the Democratic Party, a visual shorthand reinforced by national media outlets (Kaplan, 2004). At the time of the slogan release, the country was in the second term of President Ronald Reagan, a Republican, whose presidency shaped much of the political discourse and policy direction during the 1980s. As such, America’s political condition in 1986 was marked by conservative dominance, Cold War tensions, and increasing partisanship. The decision to emphasize “red” in the slogan, without the balancing presence of “blue,” could be interpreted as subtly aligning the brand with Republican symbolism, especially during politically charged times. Although Coca-Cola’s intent might have been to evoke patriotism rather than partisanship, the politicization of color could also be interpreted as carrying implicit political overtones that asserted the dominance of one party over the other.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that while the literal meanings of Coca-Cola’s slogans often appear direct and straightforward, their contextual meanings are strongly connected to the historical events that happened at the time. Four categories of context were used in this study, namely socio-cultural, business, political, and economic contexts.

To answer the first research question, and as a basis to analyze the second research question, the writers employed literal meaning analysis by means of dictionary-based denotative meaning based on the key words of the slogans. For example, “Pure as Sunlight”, literally means that something is as pure and natural as the sunlight. This interpretation was based on the two key words which were “Pure”, meaning unmixed and uncontaminated, and “Sunlight” which means natural light from the sun. However, the literal meanings of some slogans, such as “Red, White, & You” failed to convey a clear, unambiguous message. For this reason, the study employed Contextualism to see if the inclusion of context would provide a more comprehensive understanding.

This assumption was proven true in the contextual meaning analysis as the addition of context was able to give a clearer picture. For example, “The Great National Temperance

Beverage” was closely linked to the Temperance Movement that was popular with Americans. Coca-Cola jumped on the bandwagon by positioning itself as an excellent alternative to alcoholic beverages.

The main takeaway of this research is that it is essential to consider context in textual analysis, particularly in business settings. This is because companies need to stay relevant and up-to-date in their attempt to maintain customer loyalty or reach out to new customers. Without understanding the contexts of a slogan, our interpretation of the brand's message is likely to be incomplete. This study helps the audience understand the more comprehensive meaning of the Coca-Cola slogans. In their website, Coca-Cola does not give explicit context information for each slogan which means most of the general public will perceive the slogans in their literal meanings. Therefore, by conducting a research on the contexts behind the slogans, the writers were able to provide a more comprehensive outlook into the slogans.

REFERENCES

- Abdi, S., & Irandoust, A. (2013). The importance of advertising slogans and their proper designing in brand equity. *International Journal of Organizational Leadership*, 2(2), 62–69. <https://doi.org/10.33844/ijol.2013.60321>
- Greenblatt, S. (1982). *The power of forms in the English renaissance*. Pilgrim Books (OK).
- History of Coca-Cola Advertising Slogans*. (2024, July 3). <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/about-us/history/history-of-coca-cola-advertising-slogans>
- Kaplan, R. L. (2004). *Politics and the American press: The rise of objectivity, 1865-1920*. Cambridge University Press.
- Leech, G. N. (1974). *Semantics: The Study of Meaning*. Penguin Books
- Leech, G. N. (1981). *Semantics: The Study of Meaning* (2nd ed.). Penguin Books.
- Levinson, S. C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Merriam-Webster: America's most trusted dictionary*. (n.d.). Merriam-Webster. Retrieved May 15, 2025, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com>
- Pratiwi, D. R., Indrayani, L. M., & Soemantri, Y. S. (2020). The analysis of denotative and connotative meaning in Ariana Grande's song lyrics: A semantic study. *ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 3(2), 231–235. <https://doi.org/10.34050/els-jish.v3i2.9994>
- Recanati, F. (2003). Literalism and contextualism: Some varieties. In *Contextualism in Philosophy*. Oxford University Press Oxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199267408.003.0007>
- Recanati, F. (2012). Contextualism. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Pragmatics* (pp. 135–149). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139022453.008>
- Rodrigues, A. P., Tristao, J. A. M., Laruccia, M. M., & Junior, J. P. (2018). Brand innovation and sign mobility of slogans : An analysis of coke slogans. *International Journal of Advances in Management and Economics*, 2(6).