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VALENCY OF VERBS IN SENTENTIAL ADVERTISING SLOGANS*Peter Bojo*, Daniel Lančarič**Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia***Corresponding author***Received:** 12.06.2024 **Reviewed:** 23.06.2024 and 24.06.2024**Similarity Index:** 2%**Bibliographic description:** Bojo, P. & Lančarič, D. (2024). Valency of verbs in sentential advertising slogans. In *Lege artis. Language yesterday, today, tomorrow*. Trnava: University of SS Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, IX (1), p. 20-34. ISSN 2453-8035 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34135/lartis.24.9.1.02>**Abstract:** This article outlines structural patterns of advertising slogans. The earlier-introduced fundamentals are briefly presented, and the new principles, the slogan's length and its imperative content serving as a powerful directive tool are investigated. We verify the assumption that, due to the minimum effort in the cognitive processing of slogans, a great deal of slogan writing will be governed by monovalent and divalent imperative structures, whereas the more complex structures (trivalent and quadrivalent ones) will be of niche occurrence.**Keywords:** slogan, verb valency, valency structure, principle of least effort, cognitive processing.**1. Introduction**

Catchy slogans are a key element of advertising. Alongside other memory aids, slogans remain a pinnacle in the advertising industry. Forbes (1989) conducted a poll and found that 4 out of 5 magazine ads use slogans to promote a product or a brand (Vanden Bergh & Li 2012: 41). Rein (1982) describes an advertising slogan as a "*unique phrase identified with a company or brand*." He argues that a slogan serves as a concise representation of the core message of an advertising campaign and must capture attention, be memorable, and remain brief (ibid., 54).

Slogans are traditionally distinguished from taglines, which serve the purpose of verbalising the whole company. On the contrary, slogans are memorable phrases designed specifically for individual campaigns. They belong to the shortest forms of advertising text. In general, slogans are created to



provoke recipients' attention, evoke their curiosity and deliver communicatively powerful messages (Stashko et al. 2022: 79). In general, slogans are created to provoke recipients' attention, to evoke their curiosity, and to deliver communicatively powerful messages. Much slogan writing is not fully organized, though slogans do share a number of linguistic features that enable the transfer of the desired message to the target audience successfully. Slogan writing is exposed to delayed feedback on the receiver's part, which makes the linguistic tools even more necessary because, once the slogan is released, there is either no space or very little space for immediate engagement. This article focuses on the length of slogans viewed through their valency patterns. Simple as it seems, the length, accompanied by the imperative content, is observed as a tool for boosting their visibility and facilitating their cognitive processing.

2. Review of literature

The present research into the linguistic features of slogan writing, particularly their length and communicative message, is dominated by three principles. 1. **The psychological approach to cognitive processing and recollection of slogans**, which views the length, imperative content, and other linguistic features of slogans as directly impacting their further mental processing and successful recollection; 2. Zipf's **psycho-biological principle of least effort**, which impacts the length of slogans and is rooted in the inborn human capacity to put in the least effort in order to obtain the greatest possible benefit; 3. **Slogan's length observed through verb valency patterns**. To examine the slogan's length, a theory of verb valency is used as a measuring tool, allowing for a deeper analysis of the capacity of verbal elements to combine with a different number and different types of arguments.

2.1 *The psychological approach to cognitive processing and recollection of slogans*

Deriving from the original meaning of the word *slogan* introduced in an online etymology dictionary, the "battle cry", first documented in 1704, the word acquired the new meaning of "distinctive word or phrase" used by a political or other group (Online etymology dictionary, s.a.). Since then, slogans have been used as an important component of advertising, currently being understood as unforgettable words or phrases that are frequently used to express an idea or purpose (Somayeh & Abdollah 2013: 62).

Slogans are not the only mnemonic and thought-provoking tool. In fact, Leech (1972) distinguishes slogans from companies' logos, claiming that the former are easy for people to recite and remember. In addition to this, Somayeh and Abdollah (2013) state that slogans supplement or extend what is limited in the logo or in the company name, since both the logo and the company name can only carry

a certain amount of information, and the slogan is that extra space for delivering more and impacting the purchaser's behaviour. The success of slogans and the intensity of purchase is greatly influenced by the cognitive processing of slogans.

Cognitive processing as such does not have exact universal rules which, if followed, would make slogans more impactful. Sometimes, slogan perception and its processing may be influenced by markers which are unforeseeable. Vance and Virtue (2011) suggest that any cognition in slogan writing is governed by implicit and explicit processing. The implicit processing (which, in the authors' words, is often underestimated) involves attributes such as brand recognition, in which the speaker's awareness of and predilection for the brand increases the purchase power even without the recipient being directly exposed to the slogan. On the other hand, the explicit processing considers the outer, regular, tools which facilitate the slogan's cognitive processing and memorization. The explicit markers include linguistic means such as phonological patterns, puns, and other structural and semantic devices.

The European Union Intellectual Property Office presents an initial set of criteria for successful slogan writing: 1. a slogan has a number of meanings; 2. a slogan constitutes a play on words; 3. a slogan introduces elements of conceptual intrigue or surprise; 4. a slogan has some particular originality and resonance; it triggers cognitive processes and / or requires interpretative efforts; 5. A slogan has unusual syntactic structures and stylistic devices such as alliterations, metaphors, and rhymes (anonymous 2021:4-5). All of these are linguistically driven attributes.

Based on the psychological perspective, some slogans are perceived and cognitively processed easier than others. Extensive research has been conducted on the possible factors which make slogans more memorable. Reis admits that what really matters in terms of memorization is the ability to deliver the emotional message and the TOMA (top-of-the-mind awareness) (Reis 2010 in Scro 2017: 2).

Another attribute, examined in relation to slogan perception and recollection, is the length. Hodges et al. (2023) conducted a thorough survey into consumers' behaviour and cognitive processing of slogans, based on the presence of linguistic and psychological attributes. One of the attributes Hodges et al. analysed was the impact of shorter versus longer advertising slogans on consumers. They posed a question of whether companies should create slogans with fewer or more words, assuming that shorter slogans are more favourable (the favourability is marked in their research as "attitude") because committing to memory longer slogans may be cognitively challenging. The conclusion they drew confirmed their earlier assumption that "*the linguistic properties which make slogans easier to*

process tend to increase slogan attitudes but decrease slogan memory" (Hodges et al. 2023: 6-14). In other words, a contradiction may arise between the cognitive processing and memorization of slogans. Slogans with fewer words are easier to process; however, they are harder to remember. According to Egesi in Three effective types of taglines for businesses, slogan processing may equally be facilitated by their imperative content which demands the buyer to take an action (Egesi, *s.a.*). The research by Hodges et al. (2023) will serve as the theoretical background for our research. We are elaborating on the "attitude" aspect and the initial predilection for slogans, examining their length and imperative content as a tool for their easier cognitive processing.

2.2 Psycho-biological principle of least effort

The preference for shorter slogans can be viewed through the psycho-biological principle of least effort by Zipf (1965) and the valency theory by Tesnière (1988). Zipf (1965) established fundamental aspects of human communication on the psycho-biological principle of least effort, i.e. the inborn capacity of individuals to communicate maximum content with minimum physical and cognitive effort. This principle is applicable at the level of an individual as well as the whole society and is universally utilizable in any aspect of human life (Kul 2007: 20; Zhu 2018: 2). The principle was later applied to language economy, understood as permanent tension between satisfying communicators' communicative needs and attempting to minimise cognitive and articulative effort (cf. Martinet 1969), elaborated by many other authors in various areas of linguistics (e.g., Banyár 2021; Borys 2018; Hroteková 2021; Lančarič 2008; 2016; 2023; Lančarič & Bojo 2020; Lančarič & Pavlík 2016; Lančarič et al. 2022; Maierová 2015; 2021; etc.).

2.3 Slogan's length observed through verb valency patterns

The third principle developed in this paper is verb valency. We owe the term *valency* to chemistry, where it refers to the ability of elements to take a certain number of atoms of other elements. The same analogy is now applied to language, where the verb as a central element of a clause structure is able to combine with a different number of arguments. Valency theory has its roots in the contributions of Tesnière, a French structuralist whose dependency grammar theory incorporates the concept of valency (cf. Tesnière 1988).

Preliminary notes need to be made on the distinction between the semantic valency and the syntactic valency. Whereas, in the semantic perception, valency is the capacity of a verb to take semantic arguments, the syntactic observations determine valency of the verb as the overall capacity of a verb to combine with a number of the overt morpho-syntactically coded arguments it takes (Fernández 2008: 235). Syntactic valency is then understood as the ability of a verb to take logical arguments

(Jensen 2013: 1). Valency, or argument structure, introduces the obligatory participants into a situation which requires syntactic expression (Kleparska & Trojnar 2019: 7). The arguments may be referred to as complements or actants (cf. Tesnière 1988). Sometimes, semantic and syntactic valency coincide. For example, in "*Peter saw him*", both complements, "*Peter*" and "*him*", are arguments. However, in the sentence "*They divorced last year*", "*they*" is one complement of "*divorce*" but expressing two arguments. Some elements, such as adjuncts or optional complements, are not obligatory because their presence in a sentence does not rely on the predicator. In the traditional sense, such elements therefore may lie outside the scope of valency.

Jensen (2013) distinguishes four valency classes of verbs:

- a) **monovalent structures**, which are supplied with intransitive verbs and take only one argument, the subject of the sentence; such verbs may include: *die*, *walk*, *run* (in its core meaning), etc;
- b) **divalent structures**, in which the verb is able to take two arguments in order for the event to be realizable; this category may include verbs such as *build*, *kiss*, *like*, or *love*; divalent structures take the subject, like monovalent ones, and the object;
- c) **trivalent structures**, which include the verb taking three arguments, most often the subject, the indirect object, and the direct object; the objectival relations may be expressed by a specific range of prepositions (Hudcovičová 2021);
- d) **avalent structures**, which are introduced by a dummy subject ("it" or "there"); even though the subject is present, it is used without a particular semantic function just to fill the space in the matrix.

In addition to the standard classification, the perspective of some authors is more unconventional. For example, Fotima (2022) acknowledges that certain English verbs may be tritransitive in the actual context, i.e. they take four arguments including the subject and are marked as **quadrivalent**. For example, in *I paid him five euros for the book*, the verb *pay* is linked with the subject *I* and three more arguments, namely *him*, *euros*, and *book*. Liu and Du (2019: 656) refer to this valency type as tetravalent, providing the example *We bought many apples from an old man with 2 dollars*. However, the authors exclude this type from their analysis due to its low frequency of use (ibid., 658).

Consequently, the components of a sentence can be broadly divided into three groups, based on their relationship to the verb: obligatory complements, optional complements, and adjuncts.

A problem may arise when defining optional complements and adverbials. With regard to object omission, Perini (2015: 17) takes the schematicity of verbs as a crucial feature, stating that verbs which allow more schemas will allow more variability of omission (Perini 2015:17). This approach may be particularly useful with verbs which take more transitivity patterns. For example, in the sentence "*John reads*", the verb "*reads*" displays the ability to take another argument, the direct object, e.g., "*John reads a book*" (SVOd). However, the presence of the direct object is purely context-based and the verb functions equally well in the SV structure "*John reads*". Functional and structural aspects of the subject and object in the English sentence are elaborated in detail by Repka and Kotlebová (2023). Kleparska and Trojnar (2019) speculate about the presence of arguments in which a verb obligatorily requires to complete its meaning. In their words, the argument structure also modifies the interpretation of verb meaning. Kleparska and Trojnar (ibid.) further distinguish between the obligatory arguments and the adjuncts, which are optional and do not necessarily complete the lexical meaning of the verb, even though they may modify it. Broadly speaking, the argument structure may consist of the obligatory arguments and the optional ones.

Čech et al. (2010) approached verb valency from a different perspective and introduced the concept of **full valency**, the valency which, instead of picturing possible structures, focuses on creating models for empirically observable sentences. Contrary to the traditional view, full valency does not distinguish arguments from adjuncts and considers all the arguments present in the observed language material (Čech et al. 2010: 293-295), "because they are direct dependents of the verb" (ibid., 294).

The concept of full valency will be used as a selection criterion in the current research. Even though a more detailed description of the topic could be provided regarding the presence and absence of the arguments, the full-valency approach and all-argument involvement appear to be sufficient for the current research design.

3. Corpus and methodology

For the present research design, the method of random sampling is used, and the corpus of slogans is collected from various professional and popular websites on the subject of advertising slogans and their popularity. There are no pre-set extraction criteria, which secures authenticity and reliability. In total, 200 sentential slogans were compiled. Only simple clause structures were chosen. Furthermore, slogans with phrasal, non-sentential structures were disregarded. For example, Asprey's "*For the art*

of giving" has a phrasal character with no verb present. Analogously, BMW's slogan "*The ultimate driving machine*" is a complex noun phrase in which valency patterns are impossible to justify.

The slogan authenticity was crosschecked on the internet, and each slogan was paired with the company which published it, as follows (see Table 1):

Table 1. Corpus sample. Source: own processing

Company	Slogan	Category
Adidas	<i>Impossible is nothing</i>	2
American Express	<i>Don't live life without it.</i>	2
Calgon	<i>Washing machines live longer with Calgon</i>	3
McDonald's	<i>I'm lovin' it.</i>	2
Chanel	<i>Share the fantasy.</i>	1
Huawei	<i>Dreams inspire creativity.</i>	2
Chupa Chups	<i>Smoke chupa chups.</i>	1
UPS	<i>Life has its Ups and downs.</i>	2
Verizon	<i>Can you hear me now?</i>	3
Boost	<i>Boost is the secret of our (my) energy</i>	2
Airwaves	<i>Breathe free.</i>	1
Burger King	<i>Have it your way.</i>	2
Capital one	<i>What's in your wallet?</i>	2
Old Spice	<i>Make a smellmitment.</i>	1
Cinnamon Toast Crunch	<i>Crave those crazy squares.</i>	1
Coca Cola	<i>It's the real thing!</i>	2
BVD underwear's	<i>Next to myself, I like BVD best.</i>	4
Capital one	<i>What's in your wallet?</i>	2
Chupa Chups	<i>Sucking does not kill.</i>	1
Diesel	<i>Be stupid.</i>	1
Electrolux	<i>Nothing sucks like Electrolux.</i>	2
Pentland – Speedo	<i>Make waves.</i>	1
John Deere	<i>Nothing runs like a Deere</i>	2
Coca Cola	<i>Taste the feeling.</i>	1
Allstate	<i>You're in good hands.</i>	2
Feelmax – Toe Socks	<i>Love your feet.</i>	1
Skittles	<i>Taste the rainbow.</i>	1
Levi Strauss & Co.	<i>Our models can beat up their models.</i>	2
Lipton	<i>Lipton tea can do that.</i>	2
Pedigree	<i>Feed the dog.</i>	1
Heineken	<i>Open your world.</i>	1
Pizza Hut	<i>Make it great.</i>	2
United Airlines	<i>Fly the friendly skies.</i>	1
Tchibo	<i>Fly the best.</i>	1
Perry Ellis International – Jantzen	<i>Keep our beaches beautiful.</i>	2

Legend: 1 = monovalent, 2 = divalent, 3 = trivalent, 4 = quadrivalent

The research uses a two-staged mixed methodology approach (Dorney 2007: 35-38) with a textual analysis of the slogans and their testing for the presence of valency structures and their types at the first stage, followed by a quantitative evaluation and identification of the prevalent types at the next stage.

3.1 Research categories and preliminary comments

The research part of the paper will rely on the valency principles as presented by Čech et al. (2010); Fernández (2008); Jensen (2001); and Kleparska & Trojnar (2019). The following structures can be observed:

Monovalent structures, i.e. the structures which allow one argument, e.g., Burger King's "*You rule*" (see Fig. 1).

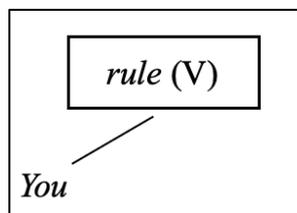


Figure 1. Monovalent structure. Source: own processing

Divalent structures, i.e. the structures which allow two arguments, e.g., American Express's "*Don't live life without it*" (see Fig. 2).

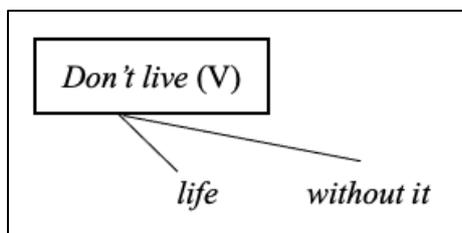


Figure 2. Divalent structure. Source: own processing

Trivalent structures, i.e. the structures which allow three arguments, e.g., Calgon's "*Washing machines live longer with Calgon*" (see Fig. 3).

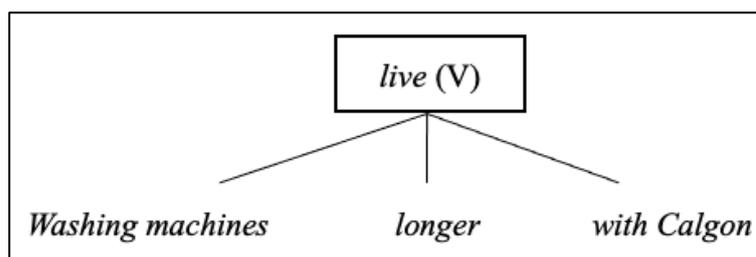


Figure 3. Trivalent structure. Source: own processing

Quadrivalent structures, i.e. the structures which allow four arguments, e.g., BVD underwear's "Next to myself, I like BVD best" (see Fig. 4).

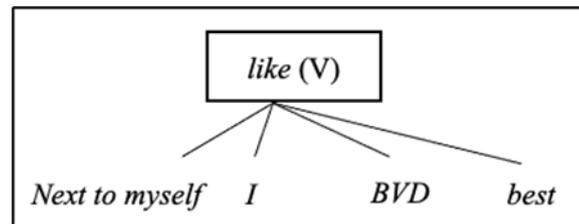


Figure 4. Quadrivalent structure. Source: own processing

Avalent structures, i.e. the structures with a dummy subject ("it" or "there"), e.g. FedEx's "When there is no tomorrow" (see Fig. 5).

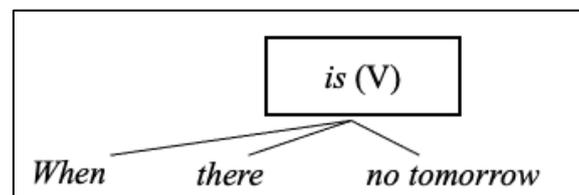


Figure 5. Avalent structure. Source: own processing

Avalent structure treatment: in the current research design, the avalent structures will be placed in the respective category according to the number of arguments, irrespective of the dummy subject structure. Such placement will secure a more precise classification based strictly on the number of arguments and will pose a better test tool for argument-based brevity and language economy identification. For example, in the FedEx slogan "When there is no tomorrow.", the dummy subject structure will have three arguments, i.e. "when", "there", and "no tomorrow". Even though the "there" solely fulfils the role of the grammatical subject, the structure will be considered trivalent purely based on the number of elements.

Imperative structure treatment: considering the approach by Čech et al. (2010), only those arguments are reviewed which are physically present. Thus, the imperative structures with subject ellipsis like C&A's (...) *Feel good fashion* will be treated as monovalent since, in the given context, the verb "feel" takes only one argument, the direct object "fashion". Accordingly, other subject ellipses, such as Canon's "See what we mean", will be treated as monovalent structures with only one argument, e.g. the direct object "what we mean" present. The divalent imperative structures will involve those clauses with an imperative content which take two arguments, e.g. Burger King's "Have it your way", similar to the divalent non-imperatives such as Allstate's "You're in good hands".

DMHQ-modelled noun phrase treatment: some slogans contain a complex noun phrase with a determiner, a modifier, a head, and a qualifier, or alternatively at least with some of these NPh components present. These phrases contain a verb in their qualifier parts. For example, the slogan "*The man your man could smell like*" by Old Spice is viewed as a complex NPh with *The* (D) *man* (H) *your man could smell like* (Q). The qualifying meaning is delivered by a defining relative clause which directly relates to the head. Much like in Tic Tac's slogan "*Refreshment to be shared*", the "*Refreshment to be shared*" is considered a complex noun phrase with a verbal element present only in its qualifier part. Slogans that feature phrasal structures or contain complex noun phrases with a clause will be excluded from our research.

Complex adverbial treatment: in an analogy with the previous category, the category of complex adverbials will be treated as one element, e.g. in the slogan "*We exist to inspire the world to play*" by Electronic Arts, the non-finite clause "*to inspire the world to play*" performs as a complex adverbial with two verbal elements present inside. It directly impacts the verb "*exist*" which takes two arguments, namely the subject pronoun "*we*" and the complex adverbial "*to inspire the world to play*".

3.2 Hypothesis

We assume that, due to the feasibility of cognitive processing on the recipient side and the overall spatial and linguistic economising on the creator's side, slogan writing will be dominated by monovalent and divalent imperative structures. Monovalent and divalent imperative structures will prevail over the divalent non-imperatives and multivalent structures (trivalent and quadrivalent ones).

4. Results and conclusion

One of the functions of advertising slogans is to directly appeal to the potential consumer. Consequently, we analyzed the valency patterns of slogans, noting that they typically take an imperative form. The results of this analysis are presented in this section, where generalizations are also drawn.

The counts of categories of monovalent and divalent imperative structures, on the one hand, and a joint category of divalent non-imperatives and multivalent structures, on the other, are presented below (see Table 2):

Table 2. Category count. Source: own processing

Types of valency structures	Count
Monovalent and divalent imperative structures	107
Divalent non-imperatives and multivalent structures	93

The goodness of fit is used to test the statistical significance of the difference between the values with the following results:

The Chi ² value is 0.98. The *p*-value is .3222. The result is *not significant* at $p < .05$.

Slogan writing is a specific type of advertising language. Together with a logo and a company name, slogans are an inevitable tool to enhance purchase power. Due to the greatest possible impact on consumers, slogan writing is governed by a number of linguistic features. This article aimed to investigate the length of slogans and their imperative content. Our priority was to establish potential conceptual brevity as a relevant linguistic characteristic reflecting the level of cognitive engagement. The length was investigated through the concept of full verb valency which, unlike regular valency patterns, disregards potential sentential patterns traditionally accepted in grammar theory and focuses on the sentence "in real time" (the authentic sentence as it is presented). The article is built on the principle that shorter slogans with a persuasive imperative message are preferred because they facilitate cognitive processing. The second principle sits in the natural psycho-biological principle of least effort, stating that shorter headlines will be preferred because humans naturally tend to invest minimum effort, but they still wish to maximise the benefit.

As introduced in Table 2, out of the total number of 200 slogans, 107 slogans were determined as monovalent and divalent imperatives based on the pre-set criteria, followed by the second joint category of the divalent non-imperatives and multivalent (the divalent, trivalent and quadrivalent structures. The category of multivalent structures is represented by 93 cases. The counts for the investigated categories respectively show that the monovalent and divalent imperative slogans are abundant in slogan writing and may potentially reflect on the linguistic and cognitive economising tendencies. Yet, the difference between the counts did not prove to be statistically significant at $p < .05$. Due to the low level of significance, the alternative hypothesis is not accepted.

We may draw a general conclusion that, in slogan writing, there are strong tendencies to produce short persuasive imperative structures. Their valency representation is approximately identical with that of the potentially longer, non-imperative slogans. The generalisations may be made that the modern slogan writing intentionally utilizes various linguistic tools to attract the audience, and largely attempt for shorter imperative sentences with persuasive power in order to facilitate further cognitive processing. However, the statistically minor difference between the categories' counts reflects the fact that the length of slogans and the complexity of sentence structures in terms of verbs and the number

of arguments do not play a significant role. The choice of structures in slogan writing largely remains intuitive.

List of abbreviations

D – Determiner

H – Head

NPh – Noun phrase

Q – Qualifier

SV – Subject-verb structure

SVOd – Subject-verb-object direct structure

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Corpus: slogans

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