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## **The name of the game:**

Rhyme and alliteration in multi-word expressions

### **Abstract**

While the Saussurean notion of the arbitrary sign has been a constant in linguistic theorizing, the past few decades have seen a substantial increase in linguistic research that downplays arbitrariness and highlights motivation as an organizing principle in language. Form does carry meaning for language users, and speakers in everyday acts of communication routinely show an interest in and enthusiasm for linguistic form. The paper outlines the extent and role that form-to-form motivational processes, in particular rhyme and alliteration, play in English multi-word expressions such as binomials, idioms, proverbs and slogans, and suggests that such devices serve a variety of purposes: reinforcing the meaning by virtue of repetition, enhancing the acceptability of novel constructions and creating an impression of enhanced truthfulness. At the same time, using alliteration and rhyme in multi-word units is simply enjoyable – the roots of which go all the way back to oral culture.

*Keywords:* phonological motivation, rhyme, alliteration, English, multi-word unit, idiom, binomials, proverbs

### **1 Introduction**

We are very much attuned to phonological similarity between words, and this attraction starts with our own name. We typically like our name – so much so in fact that if we come across somebody else whose name has a similar or fully overlapping first or last name as us, we spend more time on the conscious processing of information that is related to this person's name and perceive this person in a more favourable light (this effect has also been evidenced with places and objects; Jones et al. 2004). In fact, name similarity, in the form of alliteration, might have serious implications for the major life decisions that we make concerning who we marry and where we live. Studies indicate that people are disproportionately likely to choose a spouse whose first or last names resembles their own (Jones et al. 2004). Pelham et al. (2002) have demonstrated that women with the same first name as a US state inhabited that state in disproportionately high numbers – thus, there are significantly more Virginias in Virginia, Georgias in Georgia and Louises in Louisiana (similar effect has been demonstrated for the male names Philip in Philadelphia, George in Georgia and Louis in Louisiana). Further, alliteration also makes us gravitate toward professions that start with the same initial letter as our first name. For example, there are nearly twice as many dentists working in the US with the first name Dennis as opposed to Jerry or Walter, even though Jerry, Dennis and Walter are ranked as the 39<sup>th</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup> and 41<sup>st</sup> most common male names in the country, respectively (and thus an even distribution of these names could have been expected within the profession).

Social psychology research attributes the name similarity effect to “implicit egotism” (Pelham et al. 2002); in other words, the positive and automatic associations that we have about ourselves is extended to “almost anything” (ibid., p. 470) that is connected with us. From a linguistic viewpoint, however, the name similarity effect points to our (often unconscious) fascination for how words sound. Over a century ago, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1915/1959) established the doctrine of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, meaning that the relationship between a signifier (i.e., the form – the sound shape of a word) and the signified (i.e., the meaning or concept that the word refers to) is mostly arbitrary; there is nothing about the sequence [tri:] that would allow a non-English speaker to figure out the concept that it denotes (“a perennial plant having a self-supporting woody main stem or *trunk* ... growing to a considerable height and size”). While the Saussurean notion of the arbitrary sign has been a constant in linguistic theorizing, the past few decades have seen a substantial increase in linguistic research that downplays arbitrariness and highlights motivation as an organizing principle in language. Form does carry meaning for language users, and speakers in everyday acts of communication routinely show an interest in and enthusiasm for word play and humour (Andor 1980; 2002; 2014) and linguistic form (Hall 2001: 72).

Not only are we interested in what words sound like, their phonological make-up can also influence language use. It is this influence that is referred to as *phonological motivation* in the present paper, despite the difficulty that the definition of *motivation* implies. Within linguistics, the term has been applied in a variety of ways to various levels of linguistic analysis, and linguists have assumed its meaning to be somehow self-evident (Radden & Panther 2004: 2). Even *phonological motivation* is not a particularly novel term in linguistics, although it has been used with a slightly different meaning – in phonology, for instance, it is used to describe the assimilation of sounds (e.g., Lass 1984). As a starting point, we can, however, consider the Saussurean interpretation of *motivation*, according to which it refers to a non-arbitrary relationship between form and meaning. Thus, phonological motivation is understood as the phonological conditions that lead to a non-arbitrary relationship between a) form and meaning; and b) form and form (for an elaboration and full discussion, see Benczes 2019, forthcoming).

The aim of this paper is to focus on the latter of these motivational processes, i.e., the influence of the phonological shape of one word over another. In particular, the paper will examine the role of alliteration and rhyme in binomials (*spic and span*), similes (*snug as a bug in a rug*), proverbs (*Haste makes waste*) and slogans and promotional messages. By exploring the motivating role of alliteration and rhyme in the creation of multi-word units, the paper will also consider the effect of form on content (the message itself).

The structure of the paper is the following: Section 2 discusses phonological motivation in binomials, while Section 3 focuses on idioms and proverbs. Section 4 examines the role of rhyme and alliteration in slogans and promotional messages. The last, fifth section sums up the main findings of the paper.

## 2 Binomials

There are countless phrases in English in which a pair of words, typically belonging to the same word class and on the same level of syntactic and semantic hierarchy, is linked by a conjunction (typically *and*), as in the following headline from the American news channel

CNN: “Northeast hit by *cold and snow*”.<sup>1</sup> As Malkiel (1959) points out, there is nothing fixed about the sequence of the elements in *cold and snow*; it is possible in English to invert it as *snow and cold* (which is indeed supported by a quick Google search for “snow and cold” – both sequences resulted in approximately the same number of hits).<sup>2</sup> However, there are plenty of similar phrases in which the sequence of the components is fixed – i.e., there is no opportunity for speakers to decide the order of the components: *rock and roll*, *more and less*, *sick and tired*, *short and sweet*, *odds and ends*, *pros and cons* can only appear in this particular order; *\*roll and rock*, *\*less and more*, *\*tired and sick*, *\*sweet and short*, *\*ends and odds*, and *\*cons and pros* would sound very odd, even ungrammatical to the ear. Such phrases have usually been referred to as “fixed”, “frozen” or “irreversible” binomials, and over the decades there have been a number of forays in the linguistic literature into what forces might possibly motivate the order of the components within the expressions (see, for example, Allan 1987; Malkiel 1959; Gustafsson 1975; Mollin 2014).

Possible factors include semantic ones that are based on iconicity – these binomials reflect the order of the events, as in *crash and burn*, *kiss and tell* or *don't drink and drive*.<sup>3</sup> Further suggestions have been commonness, where the more “common” concept comes first (as in *salt and pepper*) and frequency. It has been statistically proven that more frequent words are more likely to precede less frequent ones, as in *cut and thrust* (Fenk-Ozclon 1989). This can aid processing times: by placing the more frequent word first and the less frequent word second, it is possible to retrieve the meaning from memory faster (Benor & Levy 2006). Markedness is also a factor in the ordering of binomials: concepts which are unmarked in our conceptualization tend to come first (and conversely, marked concepts appear only as the second component). Boers and Lindstromberg (2008) list some of these markedness constraints – but also note that each and every one of these constraints have exceptions. Here is the list of constraints (with examples that support and defy them):

- Concrete is less marked than abstract, as in *body and soul* – but what about *move heaven and earth*?
- Right is less marked than left (as the majority of people are right-handed) – but what about *left, right and centre*?
- What is up in the immediate field of vision is perceived more easily than what is down, as in *search high and low* – but what about *root and branch* and *through hell and high water*?
- Powerful is less marked than powerless, as in *cat and mouse* – but what about *a cock and bull story* or *a dog and pony show*?

Semantics is only one side to the story, and it is quite evident from the above exceptions that reliance on purely semantic considerations is not enough. Further aspects, especially phonological ones, need to be considered. Alliteration is a very common feature of binomials – so much so in fact that more than a quarter of English binomials repeat the initial consonants of their constituents (Boers & Lindstromberg 2008), as exemplified by the following: *black and blue*, *bread and butter*, *done and dusted*, *pots and pans*, *rags to riches*, *safe and sound*, *spic and span*, etc. Alliteration plays a number of roles in these expressions: on the one hand, it eases memorability (and thus increases the entrenchment potential of the

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <http://www.cnn.com>; accessed 11 July 2016.

<sup>2</sup> In numbers: *cold and snow* resulted in 429,000 hits, while *snow and cold* resulted in 424,000 hits (accessed 26 September 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, however, there is no sequentiality of events in *Don't text and drive* – the phrase has been coined on the analogy of *Don't drink and drive*, even though in the case of the former the events are simultaneous.

binomial; see the following section on idioms for an elaboration). On the other hand, alliterating binomials are enjoyable to produce, and the “fun factor” should by no means be disregarded as a significant contributor in language production (Gries 2011).

Yet alliteration is but one aspect of phonological motivation. In their sample of binomial expressions, Benor and Levy (2006) have found evidence for metrical factors that can affect the choice of word order in binomials, including a preference for placing the shortest word first and avoiding main stress on the final syllable of the binomial. Such factors usually conglomerate, as in *down and dirty* or *pins and needles*. Boers and Lindstromberg (2008) found proof in their data for a word pattern that prefers content words beginning with [d] and [t] to be in the position following the conjunction – as in *home and dry*, *kiss and tell*, *rough and tumble*, *hammer and tongs*, *give and take*, *raining cats and dogs*. In Boers and Lindstromberg’s reasoning, this preference is attributed to the ease of articulating the [t] or [d] after *and*, since the tongue is already in an alveolar position. The authors also checked the strength of this motivating factor against the binomials listed in the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* as well, where it featured in 23% of the examples. Such findings indicate a relatively strong reliance on phonological properties in the make-up of binomials.

### 3 Idioms and proverbs

Binomials are but the tip of the iceberg when it comes to phonological motivation in multi-word units. Both alliteration and rhyme are very common in English similes, which are typically idiomatic (i.e., the meaning of the whole is not deducible from the sum of the components and some sort of figurativity is at play). Boers and Lindstromberg (2008) collected all the similes (i.e., “A is B”, as in *cool as a cucumber*) from the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* and found that nearly 42% of the similes showed alliteration and/or rhyme. According to Boers and Lindstromberg, semantics plays a very minor part in the selection of the lexical elements in similes; the main and overriding factor is phonological motivation:

concern with semantics often seems to play only a very minor role in the lexical selection for these similes. If it were not for the alliteration or rhyme, the word in the B-slot could quite easily be substituted by another without jeopardizing the “logic” – if any – of the actual simile. Examples are brown as a berry, cool as a cucumber, done like a dinner, drunk as a skunk, pleased as punch, right as rain, fit as a fiddle, and snug as a bug in a rug (Lindstromberg & Boers 2008: 335).

Which of these features, however, plays a more important role in multi-word expressions? It seems that alliteration and rhyme have a slightly varied distribution: the former is common among *both* idioms and proverbs, while the latter is more typical of proverbs. Williams (2011) surveyed the most common idioms and proverbs currently used in Europe, and according to her findings, only one of the idioms in the English database, *to be in seventh heaven*, rhymed, as compared to proverbs, where rhyme was a regular feature. Further poetic features among idioms included assonance, but even this feature was relatively low in number as compared to alliteration (which Williams estimated to be around 13%). Williams (2011: 41) comes to the conclusion that “[a]lliteration is therefore the most consistent stylistic feature of these idioms, although it is much less common here than in riddles and tongue-twisters”.

Thus, when it comes to alliteration, everyday speech is ripe with such sequences. Alliteration is so common in the title of works of fiction – such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* (Jane Austen), *The Great Gatsby* (F. Scott Fitzgerald), *Of Mice and Men*

(John Steinbeck), *Rabbit, Run* (John Updike) or *The Pickwick Papers* (Charles Dickens) to name but a few – that there are even web-based quizzes to test our knowledge on them.<sup>4</sup> Alliteration is also extremely common both in television series and movie titles – consider, for instance, *Gossip Girl*, *Dirty Dancing*, *Batman Begins*, *Donnie Darko*, *Freaky Friday*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Karate Kid* and *Sex and the City* (to name but a very few), as well as metaphorical newspaper headlines (Kövecses 2015: 67). It is thus by no means surprising that a vast number of phrases in English – both idiomatic and non-figurative – are influenced by phonological criteria (Boers & Lindstromberg 2008). 15% of English idioms have alliterating initial sounds (such as *burn bridges*), and if non-initial alliteration is also included (as in *off the cuff*) then this figure rises to 20%. Interestingly, the percentage of catchy sound patterns further increases among the most frequently used idioms of English. As Boers and Lindstromberg (2008) report, 23% of these is based upon some form of phonological motivation – e.g., *time will tell*, *it takes two to tango*, *a dime a dozen*, *add insult to injury*, *at the drop of a hat* or *to beat around the bush*. This feature is not exclusive to English, however – there are relatively high percentages of alliterating and rhyming idioms in Dutch, French and Spanish as well. Similarly, and with regard to Hungarian, Benczes (2014) estimated the percentage of alliterating and/or rhyming idiomatic expressions to be around 10%, but also noted that phonological motivation was especially rampant in the most frequently used items. Nevertheless, Boers and Lindstromberg (2008) note that English seems to be influenced the most by alliteration (to a greater degree) and rhyme (to a lesser degree) in phrases, which they account to three factors: 1) stress in English typically falls on the first syllable of words, which is more likely to induce the alliteration of initial sounds; 2) as it has minimal inflection, words tend to be relatively short, and thus there is a lesser distance between same consonant onsets among words; 3) it has fixed word order, implying that phonologically attractive phrases will “hang together no matter what” (p. 334), with a greater possibility of entrenchment.

The significance of phonological motivation becomes especially evident when frequent collocations are considered, such as verb–noun collocations (*run a risk*, *commit a crime*, *find your feet*, *mind your manners*, *reap a reward*, etc.); adjective–noun collocations (*common cause*, *crash course*, *heavy heart*, *serious setback*, *sweet sixteen*, *warm welcome*, etc.); and fixed phrases not typically mentioned in idiom dictionaries (*life-long learning*, *publish or perish*, *last but not least*, *friend or foe*, *from dawn till dusk*, *in the thick of things*, etc.). Further, if the collocates of synonymous verbs is examined, then a similar trend can be observed (Boers & Lindstromberg 2008). For instance, the *Oxford Collocation Dictionary* lists *seek* as the preferred verb with the alliterating *sanctuary*, *settlement*, *solace*, *solitude*, *solution* and *support* – while *look for* is offered as an alternative for only one of these, *solution*.

What is the function of alliteration in such idiomatic sequences, however, and why is it preferred over other types of phonological motivation (such as rhyme)? Speculations with regard to the first question involve memorability yet again – as Gries (2011) elaborates, when people create an expression such as *bite the bullet*, it is “fun to produce and easy to memorize” (p. 504) due to the alliteration effect. Thus, it is more available to go into wider use and become entrenched in a linguistic community. As for the second question – why alliteration is so prevalent in idiomatic expressions, as compared to rhyme for instance –

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<sup>4</sup> See for example the following quiz at [http://www.sporcle.com/games/ButterMittens/alliterative\\_books](http://www.sporcle.com/games/ButterMittens/alliterative_books) (accessed 06 July 2016).

Gries (2011) suggests that the answer most probably lies in the general tendency of English to attach more significance to word-initial phonological similarity (as compared to word-final similarity), as it is also evidenced in the larger proportion of word-initial sound-symbolic segments as opposed to word-final sound symbolic segments.

Yet alliteration in idioms is only one side of the coin; it is also commonly found in proverbs (short sayings that express some commonplace truth, e.g., *All that glitters is not gold*). In fact, it is more than twice as prevalent as alliteration in idioms (Williams 2011). Why is this the case? Two main reasons can be cited here: first, proverbs are typically longer than idioms (i.e., they contain more words), and thus there is more opportunity for alliteration to occur. Second, the similarity of the sounds within the proverb has a “tongue-twister effect” (ibid., p. 42), which requires the speaker to be careful in the pronunciation of these proverbs. This, however, “adds variety to the normal rhythm of speech and thus helps to engage users and listeners” (ibid.), possibly attracting attention and emphasizing the message by the focus on the form (and manner of pronunciation) of the message.

As emphasized above, proverbs also regularly feature rhyme; this particular characteristic has attracted considerable academic attention.<sup>5</sup> Consider the following English proverbs, all of which exhibit rhyme (examples are from McGlone & Tofighbakhsh 2000):

An apple a day keeps the doctor away.  
 Birds of a feather flock together.  
 Haste makes waste.  
 What sobriety conceals, alcohol reveals.  
 Caution and measure will bring your treasure.  
 Woes unite foes.  
 Life is mostly strife.

Why does rhyme appear as a regular feature in English proverbs? One possibility is ease of remembrance. As Sackett (1964) elaborates, the role of poetic devices in folklore (including proverbs) is to reinforce the meaning by virtue of the repetition. Rhyme enhances durability: many of the rhyming proverbs in the earliest English collection (John Heywood’s *Proverbes*), published in 1546, are still alive today, as part of the oral tradition (ibid.). According to psycholinguistic results, however, rhyme has a further role to play: it can increase the fluency with which words that form a particular statement are identified and understood (Meyer et al. 1975). If people do base their evaluation of a statement’s accuracy partly on how fluently a statement can be processed (see, e.g., Begg et al. 1992), then it can be reasoned that rhyme attributes to a proverb “a perceived truth advantage” (McGlone & Tofighbakhsh 2000) over a semantically equivalent, but non-rhyming variant.

Does the power of rhyme as an indicator of accuracy – or even truth – stop with proverbs? Probably not. McGlone and Tofighbakhsh (2000) cite the O.J. Simpson case, in which the defence attorney, Johnnie Cochrane, said the following famous line as an appeal to the jurors: “If the gloves don’t fit, you must acquit!” In McGlone and Tofighbakhsh’s view, “[r]hyme increased the likelihood that jurors would rehearse, remember, and thus apply Cochran’s directive” (p. 427), and O.J. Simpson was finally acquitted. While it is impossible to tell to what degree did the rhyming plea contribute to the eventual outcome of the trial (after all, there were plenty of other pieces of evidence to consider), it is interesting to reflect on “how

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<sup>5</sup> See Andor (2010) for the other side of the story – i.e., a frame-semantic analysis of proverbs.

persuasive the jury might have found this proposition had Cochran proclaimed, ‘If the gloves don’t fit, you must find him not guilty!’” (ibid.).

The use of rhyme as a rhetorical feature is not unambiguous, however – some studies point to its adverse effect on ease of processing (Giora et al. 2004; Jakesch et al. 2013). According to the cognitive handicap hypothesis (Menninghaus et al. 2015: 49), poetic and rhetorical language requires a greater cognitive effort when it comes to comprehension; thereby exerting a negative effect on the processing of such language. This view is in accordance with lay beliefs concerning the fluency of poetic language: poems (which usually feature the most poetic devices) are considered to have lower levels of fluency when compared to novels and short stories (Galak & Nelson 2011).

Nevertheless, the cognitive fluency hypothesis of aesthetic processing (Reber et al. 2004) assumes that poetic and rhetorical language is judged as pleasant and enjoyable in so far as it has a positive effect on ease of processing. Thus, it seems that the same linguistic stimulus – such as rhyme – can both improve and reduce processing ease, but on different dimensions of language processing. This possibility was investigated by Menninghaus et al. (2015), who measured the degree of ease of comprehension, succinctness, beauty and persuasive potential of thirty German proverbs that were manipulated along the features of *brevitas* (succinctness), rhyme and meter. According to their results, the co-occurrence of all three features resulted in higher aesthetic judgments and also enhanced the overall persuasive potential of the proverb: “the joint employment of *brevitas*, meter, and rhyme translates into higher odds of a sentence being chosen for the purpose of persuasion” (p. 55). However, at the same time, proverbs that contained all three poetic features received lower ratings on the semantic comprehension scale. Thus, “[e]ase of semantic comprehension ratings were lower rather than higher for the sentence versions that were highest in aesthetic evaluation” (p. 56, emphasis as in original). This seeming contradiction can be explained by the positive effect that a cognitively more demanding text might have on the reader, by making the reader more engaged in the text and achieving a “more profound semantic understanding”.

#### 4 Slogans and promotional messages

Any proper investigation into the effect of alliteration and rhyme in slogans and promotional messages needs to start with the power that we sometimes ascribe words to – purely on account of what they sound. In medieval times, it was believed that a rabid dog or a person bitten by one could be cured by writing the following the charm on a piece of a food and then feeding it to the sick: *quare uare brare arabus arabris albus abbris rew few* (Stollznow 2014: 8). The “magic” resided in two features of the charm: the meaningless words and internal repetition (Blake 2010: 146). In fact, many of the charms and magical spells that were used in medieval times relied on mixing together classical languages (typically Latin) with nonsense words, to achieve an “exotic” effect: *rex pax nax* was a toothache cure used in the tenth century, *max max pax pater noster* was chanted to stop bleeding, and *arex artifax filia* was believed to remedy insomnia (Stollznow 2014: 9). To what degree, however, can the words of magic be regarded as “nonsense”? In Dickson’s (1994) view, the language of magic breaks down the duality of the Saussurean sign, “by foregrounding the physical density of its Signifier” (p. 161), and by doing so, it “subvert[s] the normative production of meaning” (ibid.). Meaning is thus created “outside” of the linguistic sign.

Slogans are remnants of our fascination with the language of magic. Meaning resides in both the signified and the signifier; the phonological motivation inherent in the latter carries with it the possibility that once uttered, the slogan will help change (or at least affect) reality somehow. While not all slogans rely on the use of alliteration or rhyme, many of them do, with the obvious purpose of getting the message across as effectively as possible (Fuertes-Olivera et al. 2001). In 1981 the Australian Cancer Council launched a nation-wide health campaign against skin cancer that featured a cheery seagull dressed in shorts, a T-shirt and a hat, singing the following catchy tune:<sup>6</sup>

Slip, Slop, Slap!  
 It sounds like a breeze when you say it like that:  
 Slip, Slop, Slap!  
 In the sun we always say:  
 Slip, Slop, Slap!  
 Slip on a shirt, slop on sunscreen and slap on a hat!  
 Slip, Slop, Slap!  
 You can stop skin cancer – say:  
 Slip, Slop, Slap!

“Slip, slop, slap” is thus an abbreviated form of the recommendation to “Slip on a T-shirt, slop on sunscreen, and slap on a hat”. Since its first appearance in 1981, “Slip, slop, slap” has become the core message of the Australian Cancer Council, and it has been used ever since in public service announcements.<sup>7</sup> According to the Council, over the past two decades the slogan – via its memorability – has contributed significantly to changing Australians’ sun protection attitudes and thus decreasing the danger of skin cancer.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that alliteration and other forms of word play in slogans can in fact result in easier recall has been demonstrated by Reece et al. (1994), who analyzed the influence of alliteration, rhyme, pun, repetition, etc. in 186 slogans that they extracted from television and magazine commercials. What they found was that the most successful slogans – in other words, those that were recalled the fastest and by the most people – were based on a number of “linguistic devices”, in particular alliteration (e.g., “Say Seagrams and be sure”) or repetition (e.g., “Close to Boston. Close to perfect”). The brand that was identified by the most participants used rhyme. Interestingly, the results showed no statistically significant effect on brand identification for either the advertising budget or the number of years that the slogan was in use; the latter – as the authors pointed out – was inconsistent with earlier reports that demonstrated an evident influence of repetition on brand memory. Reece et al. reason that even if there is not enough money for a proper advertising campaign (where memorability is based on frequent appearance), a well-chosen slogan that is based on alliteration or rhyme can in fact supply plenty of repetitions (and thus enhance memorability) by virtue of being interesting to the audience.

Besides enhancing memorability, alliteration has a substantial influence on our evaluation of advertised deals in promotions as well – and accordingly on what we eventually buy. In a series of experiments (Davis et al. 2016), participants were asked to evaluate pairs of promo-

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<sup>6</sup> Source: <http://www.sunsmart.com.au/> (accessed 20 September 2016).

<sup>7</sup> In the past years, the slogan has been complemented with two further recommendations: *seek* (“Seek shade”) and *slide* (“Slide on sunglasses”).

<sup>8</sup> Source: <http://www.sunsmart.com.au/> (accessed 20 September 2016).



tional messages for a product that consisted of three elements: quantity, brand/product and price. The promotional messages were manipulated so that one of them exhibited full alliteration (such as “2 Tacos \$2.15”), while the other was only partially alliterative (e.g., “2 Tacos \$1.85”). Participants were given either one of the other and had to indicate their intention to buy the particular product. What Davis et al. found was that participants were more likely to buy a product with the fully alliterative promotional message even if it was *more expensive* than its partially alliterative alternative. This finding is significant from the perspective of pricing promotions, as businesses assume that the best way to attract consumers is to lower prices, which, however, leads to income and profit losses. Yet by simply changing the message of the promotion to an alliterating one, the message can “improve deal perceptions and affect choice” (p. 10), even if the prices in an alliterating message are higher than in a competitor’s price.

How can, however, alliteration have such an effect on a seemingly rational choice such as evaluating a deal? Davis et al. (2016) reason that when we read the promotional message, we are in effect subvocalizing it (as if we were “speaking” it in the mind). This activates the word sounds, which increases the accessibility of other words with a similar sound. All this amounts to a faster and more efficient processing of the message, reflected in faster judgments. Davies et al. argue that “[t]his fast and efficient processing may result in more positive evaluations of message content” (p. 3).

Similar results emerged in a series of experiments by Filkuková and Klempe (2013), who examined the effect of rhyme on the perceived fluency of advertisements. The authors created nine pairs of advertising slogans for a variety of (not widely known or used) products; each pair of slogans had a rhyming and a non-rhyming version. Participants were presented with either one of the alternatives and were asked to rate the slogan on the basis of its likeability, suitability, originality, memorability, trustworthiness and persuasiveness. Perhaps not that surprisingly, there was a statistically significant difference between the rhyming and non-rhyming alternatives in nearly every one of the aspects under scrutiny: rhyming messages were rated as more likeable, suitable and original than their non-rhyming counterpart. They were also perceived as easier to memorize and as more trustworthy and persuasive than the non-rhyming alternative. The only aspect where no particular difference emerged in the ratings was the willingness to try the product. Interestingly, the rhymes that were evaluated as the most likeable by one experimental group were those that were considered as the most persuasive by another group. Nevertheless, as Filkuková and Klempe point out, this persuasive effect might also be related to the fact that rhymes are not employed by the advertising industry on a large scale, and thus, the appreciation of the rhyme at the end of an advertising slogan is similar to experiencing an unexpected ending in a funny joke.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper has examined the role of phonological motivation within multi-word units, from binomials through idioms to proverbs and slogans. Form-to-form motivational processes, especially in the form of alliteration and rhyme, are a common feature in these expressions. Accordingly, more than a quarter of English binomials repeat the initial consonant of their constituents, and many more indicate a preference for conforming to metrical factors, such as placing the shortest word first and avoiding main stress on the final syllable of the binomial. Alliteration is also prevalent among idioms, amounting to approximately 20% among

English-language examples, and is also a routine feature in proverbs and catchy slogans. Besides alliteration, rhyme is also a recurring characteristic in multi-word expressions, and is especially prevalent in proverbs.

Yet why is alliteration and rhyme such a permanent feature of figurative expressions, proverbs and slogans? It seems that phonological motivation serves a variety of purposes. Both alliteration and rhyme are mnemonic devices; they are able to reinforce the meaning by virtue of repetition. Alliteration enhances the acceptability of a novel construction (by virtue of its similarity to already existing ones; at the same time rhyme ensures how lasting a proverb might be, which might be related to the fact that rhyme also enhances fluency and it can create an impression of enhanced truthfulness (as opposed to non-rhyming proverbs). This persuasive feature of rhyme has also been exploited by O. J. Simpson's attorney, Johnnie Cochran, in his famous line to the prosecution, "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit".

At the same time, using alliteration and rhyme in multi-word units is simply enjoyable, which should not be underemphasized. The roots of this preoccupation (or even fascination) with sounds in fixed and multi-word expressions most probably go all the way back to oral culture, where "all expression and all thought is to a degree formulaic" (Ong 1982/2002: 35). Thus, fixed, formulaic expressions are what constitute thought itself. As Ong elaborates, the use of non-formulaic language would not have been effective in oral cultures, as it would not have been easily recoverable. "Heavy patterning and communal fixed formulas in oral cultures ... determine the kind of thinking that can be done, the way experience is intellectually organized. In an oral culture, experience is intellectualized mnemonically" (ibid.). Although we have moved onto a print culture, the effect of alliteration and rhyme on our decisions and preferences still prevails in seemingly mundane phenomena, such as how similar our name sounds to somebody else's – potentially influencing who we might marry and spend the rest of our life with.

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