Katarzyna Skrzypczak
Uniwersytet Warmińsko-Mazurski w Olsztynie
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5059-8405
e-mail: katarzyna.skrzypczak@uwm.edu.pl

Self help books and their titles – a lexical and syntactical analysis

Poradniki i ich tytuły – analiza leksykalna i syntaktyczna

Abstrakt

W artykule przedstawiono wyniki analizy tytułów anglojęzycznych poradników z kategorii *self help* jako istotnych elementów popkultury. Skupiono się na roli tytułu zarówno jako czynniku kluczowym dla decyzji konsumenckiej, jak i nośniku myśli kulturowej czy elementu kultury. Dokonano podziału poszczególnych tytułów poradników m.in. ze względu na ich długość, cechy strukturalne i semantyczne. Warstwę leksykalną omówiono ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem elementów wyróżniających się na tle badanego materiału. Analizę syntaktyczną przeprowadzono w celu zidentyfikowania struktur występujących najczęściej, tak by odpowiedzieć na pytanie, czy istnieje reguła tytułowania książki z gatunku poradnika, która decydowałaby o sukcesie sprzedażowym. Poruszono także problem odniesień intertekstualnych oraz zabiegów retorycznych, które uatrakcyjniają tytuły i pełnią funkcje reklamowe. Dyskurs ten rozpiętością obejmuje kilka gałęzi nauki, w tym psychologię oraz socjologię.

Słowa kluczowe: analiza dyskursu, analiza językowa, analiza tytułu, *self help*, poradnictwo

Abstract

The article presents results of an analysis of titles of English self-help books as an important phenomenon of pop culture. The focus was placed on the role of the title both as a key factor for the consumer decision-making process and as a carrier of cultural thought or an element of culture. Individual titles of self-help publications were divided according to, among others, their length, structural and semantic features. The lexical layer was discussed with particular emphasis on the elements that stand out from the selected research material. A syntactic analysis was undertaken in order to identify the most common structures to determine whether there is a rule for titling self-help books that would ensure their commercial success. The article also mentions the problem of intertextual references and rhetorical procedures that make titles more attractive and perform advertising functions. The subject under scrutiny spans several branches of science, including psychology and sociology.

Key words: discourse analysis, linguistic analysis, titles analysis, self-help genre

1. Introduction

The self improvement industry has been thriving continuously expanding its reach and book sales for over the last 50 years. This phenomenon has become a prosperous industry and has attracted a multi-million-strong worldwide following readers, viewers and listeners. At the beginning of the 21st century the USA alone called it a 2.48-billion dollar yearly industry. The estimation included various kinds of self-improvement websites, webinars, public speeches, seminars or lectures, infomercials, motivational speakers, personal coaching, audiobooks and self help books. According to the NPD group, a global information company, the self help sector has sold over 18.6 million units. Moreover, the number of titles with unique international standard book numbers (ISBNs) nearly tripled from 2013 to 2019 (Internet 1). The popularity of the phenomenon is closely connected with the modern American quest and craving for personal happiness, which can be achieved especially through the process of self-discovery and self-improvement. Self help books offer advice for lifestyle modification and behavioral change, additionally, making explicit promises of positive change if only their readers follow the authors' instructions or suggestions.

Steven Starker, a media sociology professor at Oregon Health Sciences University, looked for the reason why readers kept reaching for self help books and why the readership continued to grow. He mentions the following four pragmatic factors that can possibly explain the success of self help books: "cost, accessibility, privacy and excitement" (Starker 1989: 23). Certainly, a purchase of a self help book is much cheaper than a professional consultation with a psychologist. Furthermore, they are widely available and may be read at any time of day or night. Additionally, thanks to the Internet, obtaining one does not even require leaving home. The aforementioned aspect of privacy seems to play an important role as well – the form of a written solution or a suggestion for a reader allows one to work on their problems with no need of exposing oneself to anyone else. As for the excitement, they may give the reader the joy of revealing a new reality to them or offer an opportunity to feel like a part of a group.

Since the turn of the century there has been a significant interest in genre-based analyses studying different types of texts. Self help books as a genre have been investigated by Butler-Bowdon (2003), McGee (2005) Harrington (2008) and Effing (2009, 2011), Vanderkam (2012) to name just a few. Research on the psychological or sociological perspective seemed to appear particularly interesting: Wilson and Cash (2000) presented the readership and the profile of a self help reader, Bergsma (2008) focused on the

effects of reading self help books, Schueller and Parks (2014) investigated the strategies of positive psychology applied in the books, McLean[1] (2013, 2014, 2019), whilst Kapell and McLean (2015) have focused on gender differences and learning through self help books as well as the influence on readers' well-being.

2. Title

Titles – whether of a painting, a musical piece, a song or a book – occupy an important role in the perception of that to which they refer. They are the first rhetorical device used either implicitly or explicitly to hold the attention of a potential reader. A number of factors impact on the final decision whether to purchase a particular book or not, among which there may be language or/and non-language resources. These can include the author's name and any relevant titles, the book title, subtitle, back cover with carefully written blurb and conscientiously selected endorsements which are based on a meticulous choice of the right words. Hence, a book as a product is a result of a set of choices made by numerous experts whose job is to make it as attractive as possible. The research by Leitão, Amaro, Henriques, Fonseca (2018) investigated the factors that decide on a book purchase and presented the title as the most valued feature in the decision making process.

Titles as one of the most obvious determinants of how successful a text may be, have deserved attention from a number of scholars in various fields. They cover the titles of artwork (Levinson 1985), title translation of films and TV series in different countries (Nord 1994, 1995; Viezzi 2011; Maiorino 2008; Naruszewicz-Duchlińska 2016) as well as the language of research article titles in numerous fields of science (Busch-Lauer 2000; Haggan 2004; Moattarian, Alibabaee 2015). There is still a lack of detailed analysis of syntactic structures and their rhetorical functions in self help titles, thus the present article attempts to fill this gap.

At present, various websites offer advice on how to write a successful self help book or what a title of a successful self help book should include. A quick google search of 'How to write a self help book' resulted in 963 000 000 entries which would suggest that anybody can become an expert

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[1] McLean was the principal investigator in the Self-Help Literature Research Project run by the University of Calgary in Canada (Internet 2), which showed that over half of self help book readers claimed to reach for them due to certain transition in their lives – be it a new job, financial struggle or problems in relationships.

as a writer and advisor at the same time. What is more, it is sometimes a self help author themselves who encourages their readers to try their hand at writing self help, eg. Bryan Westra with *How to write a self help book* (2016) or Rebecca Richmond and Claire Pickering with *How to write a self help book fast* (2016). Many of them point out the primary importance of titling, emphasizing that it needs to be short, catchy, controversial, unique or similar to a title that already exists and, interestingly, its message should be reinforced with a subtitle which sheds a light on what the book is about.

Undoubtedly, titles of self help display persuasiveness which is expressed through a certain choice of syntactic structures and lexical items. The research questions addressed in this study were as follows: 1. Do structural constructions of titles create distinctive features of the genre? 2. What syntactic structures are used in the most popular books of the genre and what is a dominant one? 3. How common are subtitles in the genre? 4. What are observable lexical phenomena? 5. How long is an average title? 6. What are characteristic lexical features of self help titles? 7. What persuasive techniques are concealed in titles?

Therefore, studying the use of different syntactic patterns and lexical elements and their rhetorical functions in titles would appear to be of a great significance.

3. Titles analysis – procedure

A preliminary analysis was made to derive some quantitative information regarding titles. The figures obtained are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic statistics

No of titles	No of words	Title length (words/title)
100	768	7.7

What is understood under the notion of a word in a title is token i.e. a set of letters with a space before or after them or a punctuation mark, be it a full stop, question mark, exclamation mark, hyphen, comma, colon, semicolon, brackets. The 'and' sign (&) as a meaningful symbol was also treated as a word. Due to the fact that in titles all first words and principal words are capitalized, whereas for non-principal words such as prepositions, articles or conjunctions lower case is used, capitalization was not taken into account. Numbers, numerals, contractions and compound hyphenated words were interpreted as one word.

The shorter a title, the easier it may seem to be remembered or understood and the better it looks on the cover; and vice versa, the longer it is, the more specific, although simultaneously, more complex and inaccessible.

The result of a token frequency analysis showed that a title is on average 7.7-words long. The two shortest titles consisted of one word, *Tribes* by Seth Godin (2014), *Rework* by Jason Fried (2010), the longest was a 19-word one: *Skinny Bitch: A No-Nonsense, Tough-Love Guide for Savvy Girls Who Want to Stop Eating Crap and Start Looking Fabulous!* by Kim Barnouin (2005).

As Table 2 indicates, the most frequent titles comprise 4 words and then 5, 7 or 9 words. However, the results do not exhibit any particular pattern of preferred length, for instance 6-word titles were observed only in 3 cases. Similarly, very long titles, such as those of 17 or even 19 words were also observed in only 3 per cent of all titles. Although this might suggest that authors do not consider the exact number of words as a determinant of a successful title, 78 per cent of the titles were 10 words or less.

Table 2. Number of words in the titles of a hundred of the most popular self help books

Number of words	Frequency
1	2
2	6
3	5
4	17
5	10
6	3
7	10
8	6
9	10
10	9
11	5
12	6
13	3
14	3
15	2
16	0
17	3
18	0
19	1

The use of personal pronouns in titles seems to play an important role in addressing the reader. In the research material personal pronouns were used to bring the reader explicitly into the discourse. The second person pronoun *you* (used 10 times in all the titles) and possessive adjective *your* (used 15 times in the titles) were introduced in order to recognize and mark the reader's presence and, additionally, address the reader directly: *Your Money or Your Life: Transforming Your Relationship with Money and Achieving Financial Independence* by Joe Dominguez (Tab. 3). It is worth noting that no other pronoun got as much frequency. In the researched material, no explicit address to the second person plural was observed, thus it confirms that this way authors might want to invite their readers to a private, face to face conversation which could be a substitute for psychological therapy. There were 3 uses of *I*, where authors either made an attempt to shorten the distance between themselves and the reader, for instance, treating them like equally important partners in a conversation, for instance: *I'm OK – You're OK* by Thomas Harris, or *I Will Teach You To Be Rich* by Ramit Sethi.

Table 3. The use of personal pronouns in the titles of a hundred of the most popular self help books

Subject pronoun	Frequency	Possessive adjective	Frequency	Object pronoun	Frequency
I	4	My	1	Me	0
You	7	Your	15	You	3
He/she/it	0/0/0	His/her/its	0/0/0	Him/her/it	0/0/1
We	0	Our	1	Us	0
They	1	Their	1	Them	1

Another compelling observable element of self help book titles are numbers (in digits) and numerals (in words) (Tab. 4). Their primary function is to indicate the number of most important elements or matters discussed, often simultaneously revealing the structure of a book. Most importantly, they organize and forecast the contents of a book as well as make a book's title easy to remember. The number may demonstrate symbolic meaning or emphasize the simplicity of a matter.

Table 4. Frequency of digits and numbers

Digits	Frequency	Numbers	Frequency
2	1	Zero	2
4	1	One	2
5	1	Four	1
7	2	Five	1
10	1	Ten	2

In the researched material, the numbers did not exceed ten, for example, *The **7** Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey, *More than Enough: The **Ten** Keys to Changing Your Financial Destiny* by Dave Ramsey or ***Ten** Stupid Things Women Do to Mess Up Their Lives* by Dr. Laura Schlessinger. The title *The 10 Commandments of Money: Survive and Thrive in the New Economy* by Liz Pulliam Weston shows a clear reference to the Decalogue, a set of religious principles given by God himself – here used to signify the importance of the book. Timothy Ferriss and his *The 4-Hour Workweek: Escape 9-5, Live Anywhere, and Join the New Rich* is one of those titles which have achieved such great commercial success that other books by Ferris were based on the pattern of the original book, eg. *The 4-Hour Body*, *The 4-Hour Chef*. This practice is fairly widespread among the authors of the genre and can also be observed in the example of Stephen R. Covey, who soon after his above-mentioned blockbuster wrote another one: *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families* and then *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*, not to mention the fact that his son continued the title pattern and wrote a number of books, eg. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective TEENS*, *The 7 Habits of Happy Kids*, etc. One of the titles including a number refers to a version of a computer program or application, which is usually marked with subsequent numbers often with a zero after a decimal point (1.0, 2.0, etc). This suggests that the book is on a new version of emotional intelligence, adjusted to the 21st century, eg. *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* by Travis Bradberry. The research did not expose any very frequent uses of a particular number.

The titles in the set were subject to classification with regard to their syntactic structure into nine different pattern groups. Slightly more than half (52%) consisted of two main parts: a title and a subtitle, rarely separated with 'and', and much more often (45%) with a colon. A subtitle is supposed to play either an explanatory role, it is to narrow the title down to inform the reader on a more specific issue, or it constitutes an alternative to the main title. Subtitles of self help books display a definitely explanatory function. Each of the titles and subtitles analyzed was assigned to a particular syntactical category according to their grammatical structure. While all the titles analyzed begin with a capital letter (some are entirely capitalized), none of them finishes with a full stop. A vast majority of the titles (98%) are declarative statements, with only one interrogative and one exclamation 21 per cent of the titles begin with 'How to'. Not only does the question word 'How' appear, but there are also several cases of 'Why' and one of 'Who', however, they do not appear in question form.

As one of the research purposes was to find the most common title model, the analysis was aimed at discovering typical patterns of use, and at assessing the frequency of which a particular pattern is repeated. The most widespread terms used in title structure analyses include Single Unit Title versus Multiple/Compound Unit Title or 1-Unit versus 2-Unit Titles (*see* Afful 2017; Moattarian & Alibabaee 2015). In the current study, two terms are used: Single Unit Title and Compound Unit Title. For instance, a Single Unit Title is presented in only one section containing either one (a comma) or no punctuation mark; a Compound Unit Title is presented in two sections, separated with either a dash or a colon. Two examples of each type of title are provided below in order to illustrate the title styles observed in the material:

1. *Broker Executive* (Single Unit Title),
2. *Ten Stupid Things Women Do to Mess Up Their Lives* (Single Unit Title),
3. *Rethinking Money: How New Currencies Turn Scarcity into Prosperity* (Compound Unit Title),
4. *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty: How to Cope – Using the Skills of Systematic Assertive Therapy* (Compound Unit Title).

The results show that more than half (55%) of the titles are Single Unit Titles, which suggests that there is no clear evidence that providing a subtitle guarantees a success of a title.

Apart from the style of the titles, the syntactical structure of a title was taken into account while creating the categories below. The categories were formed according to grammatical features of the elements of the titles. The results are presented in Table 5. All the categories are exclusive.

Table 5. Title patterns in a hundred most popular self help books

Category	Pattern frequency	Group pattern freqency
1	2	3
N (1)	3	11
N (NP) × 3	2	
N: CL	1	
N and HOW TO	2	
N: NP.	3	
NP	22	51
NP: NP	19	
NP: HOW TO	6	
NP: WHY	1	
NP: VP	3	

cont. Table 5

1	2	3
V imp	3	3
Adv P	1	1
Adj P	1	3
Adj: NP	2	
HOW TO	10	21
HOW TO … AND	6	
HOW TO: NP	4	
HOW TO CL	1	
CL	1	7
CL, CL	2	
Cl: HOW TO	3	
CL: NP	1	
Prep P	2	2
Question	1	1

Abbreviations: Adj – adjective, Adj P – adjectival phrase, Cl – clause, N – noun, NP – nominal phrase, Prep P – prepositional phrase, V imp – imperative verb

The three most often encountered patterns in self help are presented below:
1. **Nominal Phrase (22%)**, eg. *Broker Executive* by Val Vogel, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* by Travis Bradberry,
2. **Nominal Phrase: Nominal Phrase (19%)**, eg. *Spousonomics: Using Economics to Master Love, Marriage, and Dirty Dishes* by Paula Szuchman,
3. **How to (16%)**, eg. *How to Be Alone* by Jonathan Franzen, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie.

While looking for a synonym for the genre of self help, a phrase of *how to literature* appears, which might suggest that this could be most frequent title pattern. However, the analysis showed that nominal phrases are dominant. Titles beginning with 'how to' do not constitute the most common title pattern, however, taking into account subtitles in each of the present categories, this question word appears in 32 per cent of all books titles. The dominance of nominal constructions has been observed in the studies of research articles titles (Busch-Lauer 2000; Haggan 2004; Soler 2007; Wang & Bai 2007). These researchers claimed that the reason behind a marked preponderance of nominal structures over other structures was the need to concisely name complex issues and processes. Yakhontova found that nominative constructions make titles more informative, explanatory and emotional than any other structure (Yakhontova 2002: 21).

Other patterns used in self help book titles consist of:
1. **Nominal Phrase: How to (6)**, eg. *Rethinking Money: How New Currencies Turn Scarcity into Prosperity* by Bernard Lietaer,
2. **How to: Nominal Phrase (4)**, eg. *How to Be a Domestic Goddess: Baking and the Art of Comfort Cooking* by Nigella Lawson,
3. **Verbal Phrase (imperative) (3)**, eg. *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert, *Rework* by Jason Fried, *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill,
4. **Adjectival Phrase (3)**, eg. *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap… And Others Don't* by Jim Collins.

The last group of patterns appears to be used marginally:
1. **Clause (1)**, eg. *I Will Teach You To Be Rich* by Ramit Sethi,
2. **Clause, Clause (2)** *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* by John Gray,
3. **Question (1)**, eg. *Who moved my cheese?* by Spencer Johnson,
4. **Noun: Clause (1)**, eg. *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* by Steven D. Levitt.

Another purpose of the analysis was to search for rhetoric techniques writers apply. The right choice of the right words – the words which will evoke certain feelings or cause some controversy (seductive and incongruous function) may have an impact on how successful a book is. The first example is a lexical blend that appeared in the title *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* by Steven D. Levitt. The peculiarity lies in the blend word formed out of two lexical items: *freak* and *economics*, which gives rise to a new meaning. A similar example can be found in the title *Spousonomics: Using Economics to Master Love, Marriage, and Dirty Dishes* by Paula Szuchman with a blend word of *spouse* and *economics*. Another compelling lexical element of the analyzed titles were swear words. They were observed in the four following titles: *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a **F*ck*** by Mark Manson, *They **F***** You Up: How To Survive Family Life* by Oliver James, *Skinny **Bitch**: A No-Nonsense, Tough-Love Guide for Savvy Girls Who Want to Stop Eating **Crap** and Start Looking Fabulous!* by Rory Freedman, *You Are a **Badass**: How to Stop Doubting Your Greatness and Start Living an Awesome Life* by Jen Sincero. Even though some of the unprintable words were censored with an asterisk, their form and meaning seem to be clear to all adult recipients.

Some persuasiveness in the titles can be observed in the presence of a rule of three. It was observed in 9 cases, both in titles and subtitles, and played different grammatical roles, eg. imperative forms of a verb in *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elisabeth Gilbert, an object in *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* by Jon

Kabat-Zinn or a subject in *Autobiography, Poor Richard, and Later Writings* by Benjamin Franklin.

The researched material revealed some titles whose uniqueness is based on the former contextual knowledge of the already existing titles. This enables the reader to encode the message included in the witty-sounding allusion to the well-known titles of bestsellers, such as *How to Lose Friends and Alienate People* by Toby Young, or *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* by Lenny Bruce. In this case, it seems obvious that the reader deliberately chose the book in order to acquire the knowledge of how to end a relationship or get isolated from other people. Such book titles can evoke certain associations and can be remembered more easily. Similarly, some of the books with witty titles beginning with *How to*, eg. *How to Be a Hermit, or a Bachelor Keeps House* and *How to Become Extinct* by Will Cuppy, *How to Become Ridiculously Well-read in One Evening: A Collection of Literary Encapsulations* by E.O. Parrott, *How to Eat Fried Worms* by Thomas Rockwell.

4. Conclusions

Self help books are unquestionably a significant element of pop culture. A title plays an important role and may be one of the most important factors in the decision making process of choosing the book. Therefore, as a cultural and linguistic phenomenon, it constitutes a valuable source of information which is subject to numerous analyses. The present analysis has answered the research questions and enabled us to confirm the stated hypotheses. The most common syntactic structure among the subject material was a nominal phrase, however it is not a distinctive feature unique to the self help genre. The structure of an interrogative 'How to' appeared to be third in frequency although the whole genre is at times referred to as *how to literature*. There is no regularity in whether a successful title should have a subtitle of not – both groups were nearly equally perceived. In the lexical analysis the average length of a title was established as 7.7 words. Among lexical phenomena, the presence of numerals and swear words was observed. The former organize the contents of the book or emphasize the simplicity of a few steps that need to be taken in order to make a certain change, the latter are supposed to establish a friendly informal rapport with a reader and earned special attention. Persuasive techniques are embedded in lexical and syntactical phrases such as addressative forms (addressing a reader directly with the use of pronouns either subject, possessive or object ones – mostly these of the second person singular) or neologisms – lexical blends. However, an attempt

to convince a reader to reach for the book is made through references to other blockbusters' titles. The study was based on the corpus analysis of a hundred of the most successful self help books according to www.bookgenres.com. It uses a quantitative and qualitative analysis which enables us to observe the rate of occurrence of particular issues in the study. The results confirmed the presupposed hypotheses. The titles have a semantic and communicative function and thanks to the popularity of the genre, the books have become a part of a contemporary pop cultural phenomenon. The research suggests a need for a further examination within a larger scope of the genre. Future research should pay closer attention to the functions themselves and the subjects of the books should also be taken into account.

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