

What is in a title? by Durk Meijer, August 2018

A title is one form of a reference point. All of us use reference points to help us orient ourselves. A reference point can make us interested in something and as such is also used for advertising. Most of the time a title is therefore an introduction. It can introduce an event, a movie, a web-site, a book, a chapter, an article, or of course a person. When used for introducing a person, it should be giving enough information to help us properly relate to that person. Used in other ways, it should not say too much, otherwise we may actually lose interest in knowing more. This article will only address the use of titles other than for people.

Since we as people are culturally diverse, more than likely a title in one culture will not work in another culture. Likewise, just because languages are different, it can be that a title that works in one language, may communicate something totally different in another language. So, it is very unlikely that the appeal of a title will ever be universal. If we just literally translate a title, we most likely will miss-communicate or even confuse our audience.

Once I saw an action movie about two crazy airplane pilots. At the time, the movie made quite an impression on me and I still remember the title. In Dutch it was called 'Vier vuisten de lucht in', which translates in English to 'Four fists up in the sky'. Recently I found some advertising posters on the internet with the title of the movie in Dutch. Other posters showed the original Italian name 'Più forte, ragazzi!', which means 'Stronger, guys!' In English the title was changed to 'All the way boys', while the Germans changed it to 'Zwei Himmelhunde auf dem Weg zur Hölle', meaning literally 'Two heavenly dogs on the way to hell'. The French decided that they needed their own title too and called it 'Maintenant, on l'appelle Plata', which literally means 'Now it is called Plata' (Plata was one of the two pilots in the movie). The title in Persian translates to 'All roads here lead to children', which focused on a sub-theme of the movie.

So, were all these different titles good titles? I only can speak for my native language, Dutch, which focuses in on two guys being pilots and they end up in numerous fights, even with each other... so that the title draws interest to the fighting of the pilots by calling it 'Four fists up in the sky.' But we as individuals with each our own background could have given this movie a completely different title.

This web-site uses many titles and in my effort to communicate with a diverse global audience, I am sure that the titles I use are not always most effective or clear. My aim is not to miscommunicate, yet I may never know if I do, without being able to interact with

every individual in the audience. I will use the choices I made from my personal worldview perspective as examples with the aim to communicate the principles I am addressing. If you use these materials, I encourage you to use your own examples in your local cultural context.

- If a title only serves to share information as a reference point, then it can be short and addressing the issue directly. On this website I did use such titles for some of the articles, by simply naming them 'Orality – a description', 'About worldview', or 'Exploring oral Scripture translation'. On this web-site there is also a tab with the title 'Answers to your questions', stating clearly that the kind of articles there will be answering questions that people have asked me.
- If a title serves to make people curious about something, creative expressions could be used. These expressions should be integrated in the message, so that it makes sense and so that it even can make it easier for people to engage with the communication. The name or title of this web-site is 'Engaging with the Eternal', which I chose with the aim to help people in ministry worldwide to help others engage with God. One of the articles is called 'Why I love panoramas and tapestries'. In that article I use these two things as illustrations in context of what I am teaching. Under the resources tab there is a story titled 'The Giant Mango Tree', with the aim to create a picture of that setting in the mind of the listener. That setting is interwoven in the story and as such is an important point of reference.
- If a title serves to give answer to a question, the title itself could be the question. One example on this site is 'Teach basic doctrine?' We can also make the question into a statement, especially if it is linked together with something else that helps us to know that we are addressing questions. Under the tab with the title 'Answers to your questions' I have titles like 'Avoiding to drift into error' and 'The best plan for me'.

In a world that is filled with creative titles, it is good to consider some principles that will help in choosing titles that are helpful versus those that may hinder. Even though most cultures use some form of titles as a reference point, it is not universal. So, when we work cross culturally we need to consider first of all carefully when and how to use titles.

The following is a short list of common issues to consider when using titles:

1. A title also can serve as a tagline or slogan and as such needs to have appeal for the intended audience. Coca-Cola, for example used many slogans that were sometimes used as titles, but also could stand on their own. Some of the English were 'Coke adds life' and 'Coke is it!'. The slogan used in 2016 was 'Taste the

feeling'. Sometimes they are used with short songs. Those songs then serve as a reference point, just like a title.

2. A title can be catchy, so people will remember it easily. Often they are in those situations designed to serve as slogans or taglines. The Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants used the phrase 'It's finger lickin' good!' for many years and many people in the USA know exactly what you are talking about when one uses that phrase as a title.
3. A title needs to tell something about the story or product. Both samples of Coca-Cola and Kentucky Fried Chicken do so.
4. A title can be a single word, a short phrase or even a complete sentence. All the samples given to this point are short phrases. Quite a lot of movies have single word titles, which sometimes are a name, like 'Titanic', which is about a famous ship with the name Titanic. The story about God creating everything in the Bible can for example have the simple title 'Creation'. Unless a complete sentence flows easily and naturally in spoken language, it may be hard to remember. If it is not important for our audience to remember the title and yet it is important to use a complete sentence in order to communicate enough information, at that point a complete sentence is worth considering. The following title is from a book where the author must have thought it important to use a long sentence with a lot of information; 'Man's Rise to Civilization as Shown by the Indians of North America from Primeval Times to the Coming of the Industrial State'. The longest one on this website is 'Best practices and key principles relating to storying and story telling'.
5. A title can be functional by asking a question or using a provocative statement to draw interest. A provocative statement could be 'My words or God's Word'. Sometimes the question could also be provocative, like with the following title 'How about the Great Commission?'
6. A title should not tell a key clue or teaching of the story. An example is 'The murder mystery where the thief killed the old man' or 'Cleanliness is the best principle to stay healthy'.
7. A title can easily influence what people learn from a story, so a title should not bias people to a specific interpretation of a story. The story in the bible from Daniel chapter 6 is a good example, which many people call 'Daniel and the lions' den'. Even though this is an event that happens in the story, if the focus is on that event, the overall teaching of the story is easily lost. The title 'King Darius and the living God' helps to focus better on the real teaching in that story.

There surely are other issues to consider, but the best way to confirm if a title works is to test it in the community and one creative way to find ideas for a title, is to ask people, but only after they have engaged with the message.