

Economical Writing (or, “Think Hemingway”)

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on an argument proposed by Salant (1969), who complained that on many occasions he found the writing of his colleagues “nearly incomprehensible,” and made suggestions to improve economists’ writing skills. Among other things, he argued that a “simple way of avoiding clumsiness is to prefer the short word to the long one and to avoid the unfamiliar word if a familiar one can be found that is equally correct, specific, and concrete” (p. 556). We call this “the Salant hypothesis,” and use standard statistical techniques to test this hypothesis by comparing the average length of words used by Nobel laureates in their banquet speeches. We find that Literature laureates tend to use shorter words than laureates in other disciplines, and the difference is statistically significant. These results support Salant’s idea that words should be used efficiently. This includes using short words instead of longer ones whenever possible. In short, good writing is also “economical writing.”

Key words: word length, economical writing, Salant hypothesis, ANOVA

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1. Introduction.

The motivation for this paper is an argument proposed by Walter Salant in a paper entitled “Writing and Reading in Economics” (Salant 1969).¹ Salant voiced many criticisms of the economics profession in this paper, but his chief complaint was that on many occasions he found the writing of his colleagues “nearly incomprehensible.” Too often, he said, it is difficult to understand the main message that an economist is trying to communicate: “Crimes of violence are committed daily against the English language and the helpless reader is often frustrated in his efforts to understand the message” (p. 545).

Salant also gave some advice to improve economists’ writing. Good writing, he argued, starts with good logic and a prior outline of what one wants to say:

If your thoughts do not proceed in a logical sequence, no elegance or grace of language will make your writing clear I think it should be taken for granted that before one begins to write, he should have in mind—and most of us need to have on paper—an outline of what he is going to say If, while writing, the author becomes aware that he has deviated much from his outline, he should make an outline of what he actually has written and see if it, although different, is equally logical (pp. 546–47).

Salant also stressed that using a word that does not fit exactly the meaning of the thoughts or concepts one wants to express is a “misallocation of scarce verbal resources” (p. 547). Economists, he argued, often ignore subtle but important distinctions among words, and as a consequence the message is confusing.² He also criticized what he calls “elephantine language,” i.e., economists’ excessive use of nouns to modify nouns:

I have been reading manuscripts that assaulted the reader with three, four, and even five nouns placed consecutively. All but the last were intended as adjectives or parts of an adjectival phrase. For example, in one manuscript, I found within a few pages of each other all the following: “high risk flood plain lands,” which presumably means plain lands in which the risk of floods is high; “aircraft speed class sequencing,” which uses three nouns to modify a word that might be a noun if it existed but does not really exist; and then, to top it off, “terminal traffic control program category,” which contains five consecutive nouns. I leave it to you to figure out which of these words modifies which (p. 549).

In castigating economists for their bad writing, Salant did not neglect to mention the excessive use of mathematics, noting that “very often the mathematics is not really being used; all that is being used is mathematical notation. In other cases the mathematics is being used, but there is the question of whether its use is justified. Both abuses raise serious problems of communication” (p. 553). Salant argued that mathematical formulas should be used sparingly, and only when they

¹Walter S. Salant (1911-1999) was an American economist who held important positions in government agencies such as the Treasury Department and the Council of Economic Advisors and later joined the Brookings Institution, where he stayed as a senior fellow until his retirement in 1976. He served on the Board of Editors of the *American Economic Review* from 1956 to 1958.

²For instance, he claimed that economists usually confuse “expect” with “anticipate.” To anticipate something, he says, is not merely to expect it but to do something as a consequence of the expectation (p. 548).

convey a message that cannot be said in words, or when doing so would require a very large amount of words and sentences:

Casting a statement in mathematical terms is justified if the verbal statement of the equation or the inequality would be more complicated or as unfamiliar to the reader as the mathematical statement. In that case, nothing is lost by using mathematical notation and something may be gained Of course there are times when mathematical operations really have to be used to reach a conclusion But it is certainly a good rule for all publications that are not intended only for a professional audience to say in words both the conclusions and whatever can be said about the reasoning, and to confine the mathematics to an appendix. This principle can be followed without much strain. The author who follows it will still have the opportunity, if he wants it, to tell the mathematical reader how he reached his conclusions, and he will gain a wider audience Apparently words can express not only propositions of economic theory that are derived mathematically but, according to the late Stefan Valavanis, those of econometrics, too. In the Preface of his textbook *Econometrics* [Valavanis 1959] he expresses this opinion in one sentence: "If anything in Econometrics (or in any other field) makes sense one ought to be able to put it into words." Copies of this statement suitable for framing should be made freely available to all members of our profession (pp. 554-56).

Note that Salant wrote this in 1969. One can only wonder what he would have thought about the typical economics journal article four decades later!

2. Grace and Force in Writing (the Salant hypothesis).

In the final section of his paper, Salant argued that economic writing, like all writing, should have grace and force. We should pay attention, for instance, to how the words sound to make the reading of the manuscript more enjoyable:

At a conference in Bellagio, someone asked Fritz Machlup why he had used one word in a draft rather than another, longer one that the questioner thought more appropriate. Machlup said, "Because it is more euphonious." On asked if he really paid much attention to that criterion when he wrote, he said, "Absolutely. I ask myself, 'Does it sing?'" (p. 556).

One of Salant's final ideas on this subject is the one that we are mainly concerned with in this paper: "*Another simple way of avoiding clumsiness is to prefer the short word to the long one and to avoid the unfamiliar word if a familiar one can be found that is equally correct, specific, and concrete*" (p. 556, italics added). Salant took the prose of Ernest Hemingway as a model of good writing:

That the length of words affects the cleanness and force of writing is not news. The powerful effect of short words hits one most forcibly in Ernest Hemingway's prose. His sentences strike like bullets. All are clear-cut and forceful. It is remarkable how many are built entirely of words of one syllable. Indeed, I found nearly a whole page of his writing that contained hardly a word of more than one syllable (p. 557).

Salant then compared a sample of Hemingway's prose with selections of writing drawn from

three major economists (including “two of the better writers among economists”):

To get a reasonable sample of each man’s writing I have counted the words used in a few paragraphs of each manuscript or published book, one or two from portions that do not deal with technical matters, and one or two from portions that do. I do not claim that the sample was chosen scientifically. The results, for whatever they are worth, are summarized in Table 1 (p. 557).

| TABLE 1. HEMINGWAY VS. THE ECONOMISTS (from Salant, 1969, p. 557). | | | | | |
|--|----------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| WRITER | PERCENTAGE OF WORDS HAVING | | | | NUMBER OF SYLLABLES PER 100 WORDS |
| | One Syllable | One or Two Syllables | Three Syllables | Four or more Syllables | |
| Economist No. 1 | 57 | 76 | 18 | 6 | 175 |
| Economist No. 2 | 52 | 81 | 14 | 5 | 173 |
| Economist No. 3 | 64 | 81 | 13 | 6 | 163 |
| Ernest Hemingway* | 83 | 96 | 4 | 0 | 122 |

*From *A Moveable Feast* (Hemingway, 1964).

Salant noted that “... it is striking that the Hemingway samples have only 122 syllables per 100 words and that only 4 per cent of his words contain three or more syllables” (p. 557), adding that

... [i]f we all aspired to be Hemingways, we should have to work at least as hard on our writing as he did. In *A Moveable Feast* Hemingway said it sometimes took him *a whole morning to write a paragraph*. When you read that book you will see why. Although it would be a poor use of resources for economists to spend that much time in polishing, it is obvious that many of us should spend a good deal more time in revising our drafts than we do now. *None of us has a right, even at the stage of drafting, to impose on others writing that does not meet the requirement of clarity*. He who does so not only irritates the colleagues who must read what he writes, and wastes their time, but also forgoes the larger audience that might otherwise read what he has to say. *He thereby forgoes the influence his work might have* (p. 557, italics added).

3. Testing the Salant Hypothesis.

In this paper we take this finding seriously, and explore the hypothesis that using short words is a characteristic of good English writing. To do so, we compare the Nobel Prize banquet speeches delivered by Literature laureates with those of laureates in other fields (including Economics).³ Banquet speeches give us a standard that, we would expect, is less influenced by technical jargon.⁴ Here, the writers of these speeches were all placed in the same basic context and were

³The Nobel “banquet speeches” are not to be confused with the “Nobel lecture” given by each laureate. In years when several laureates share one of the prizes, each laureate gives a Nobel lecture, but usually only one of them is invited to give the banquet speech.

⁴Most scientific writing (including economics) will *per force* rely on technical terms and expressions that are, characteristically, based on long words. Salant recognized this point in his

addressing the same audience.

The texts for the banquet speeches were obtained from the Nobel Foundation website (<http://www.nobelprize.org/>). In our analysis, in addition to using *syllables per word* to measure word length, we also used *characters per word*. One would expect a positive correlation between these two measures, but the correspondence is not perfect, especially in English, where one can easily provide many examples of one-syllable words that are actually longer, letter-wise, than many two-syllable words. (In languages such as Spanish, on the other hand, where spelling is essentially phonetic, the correspondence between these two measures would be much closer.) Although they are not exact equivalents, both concepts—characters/word and syllables/word—seem like valid approaches to the more general notion of “word length,” and thus we feel that an exploration based on characters/word is interesting in its own right, and not just as a complement to Salant’s original syllables-based analysis. To measure the average number of syllables and characters per word, we selected the speech texts from the Nobel website, and then we used the “Syllable Counter & Word Count” software available at <http://www.wordcalc.com/>.

| TABLE 2. NOBEL LAUREATES, 1954 – BANQUET SPEECHES. | | | |
|--|------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| | Words | Syllables/ word | Characters/ word |
| Physics (Born) | 597 | 1.40 | 4.65 |
| Chemistry (Pauling) | 374 | 1.33 | 4.37 |
| Medicine (Weller) | 226 | 1.66 | 5.35 |
| Peace (van Heuven Goedhart, UNHCR) | 764 | 1.36 | 4.50 |
| Literature (Hemingway) | 334 | 1.28 | 4.22 |

| TABLE 3. NOBEL LAUREATES IN LITERATURE, 1952-1957 – BANQUET SPEECHES. | | | |
|---|------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| | Words | Syllables/ word | Characters/ word |
| Mauriac (1952) | 1770 | 1.34 | 4.49 |
| Churchill (1953) | 513 | 1.39 | 4.66 |
| Hemingway (1954) | 334 | 1.28 | 4.22 |
| Laxness (1955) | 930 | 1.29 | 4.34 |
| Camus (1957) | 1668 | 1.32 | 4.38 |

Note: In 1956 Juan Ramón Jiménez could not attend the ceremony. He sent a brief thank you note. It should also be noted that three of the five speeches reported in this table are translations (Mauriac, Laxness and Camus).

The first thing we wanted to investigate was whether Salant was right in choosing Hemingway as a paragon of good writing (or at least as a model short word user). Table 2 compares Hemingway’s Nobel banquet speech with the speeches by the other laureates for 1954. Hemingway’s average word length was 1.28 syllables/word and 4.22 characters/word, lower than for any of the other laureates, and in both cases about 11 % below the averages for the four non-Literature laureates (1.438 syllables/word and 4.718 characters/word, respectively). Note, in passing, the huge difference between Hemingway’s averages and the averages for the Medicine laureate: almost 0.4 additional syllables, and 1.1 additional characters, *per word*!

paper (p. 557).

This comparison is perhaps unfair to the non-Literature laureates, who are not, after all, professional writers. In Table 3 we compare Hemingway with the Literature laureates for two years before, and two years after 1954. The averages for all five laureates were 1.324 syllables/word and 4.418 characters/word, so Hemingway's word length was about 3.3 % below average in terms of syllables/word, and about 4.5 % below average in terms of characters/word. Salant's choice of Hemingway as a model seems to have been well-founded.

The next step in our analysis is to see how economists and natural scientists compare with professional writers in this regard. Table 4 shows summary statistics for the average word lengths in the banquet speeches of Nobel laureates for five categories from 1969 to 2011.⁵ The sample period starts in 1969 because that was the first year in which the Economics prize was awarded. The Peace prize was omitted from the analysis because after 1992 the laureates for that category no longer gave banquet speeches (or at least these were no longer published on the Nobel website). To ensure comparability, only banquet speeches in English were included in the analysis.⁶

| TABLE 4. NOBEL PRIZE BANQUET SPEECHES, 1969-2011 (summary statistics). | | | | | | |
|--|--------------|-------|---------|-------|-------|------------------|
| (a) Syllables per word | | | | | | |
| | LIT | ECON | PHYSICS | CHEM | MED | COMBINED NON-LIT |
| Mean | 1.344 | 1.456 | 1.440 | 1.470 | 1.472 | 1.459 |
| Median | 1.35 | 1.46 | 1.44 | 1.47 | 1.47 | 1.46 |
| Std. Dev. | 0.103 | 0.106 | 0.104 | 0.085 | 0.088 | 0.096 |
| (b) Characters per word | | | | | | |
| | LIT | ECON | PHYSICS | CHEM | MED | COMBINED NON-LIT |
| Mean | 4.470 | 4.737 | 4.754 | 4.845 | 4.816 | 4.788 |
| Median | 4.49 | 4.75 | 4.77 | 4.80 | 4.82 | 4.785 |
| Std. Dev. | 0.254 | 0.297 | 0.288 | 0.248 | 0.250 | 0.273 |
| Observations | 27 | 42 | 45 | 42 | 47 | 176 |

Note that the lowest average word lengths are for the Literature prize. In terms of syllables/word the Literature laureates' word lengths were, on average, almost 8 % shorter than the average for all non-Literature laureates, and about 6.6 % shorter in terms of characters/word. It is also interesting to note that 50 % of the Literature laureates had average word lengths of less than 4.5 characters/word, whereas the median word length for the non-Literature laureates was 4.785 characters/word. (Only about 16 % of the non-Literature laureates had average word lengths

⁵The full dataset is available upon request to the corresponding author (andresmg@ufm.edu).

⁶The difference in sample size for each group is due to several factors. In some years there were no observations for some prize categories, either because the laureate did not attend the award ceremony, or because the banquet speech was not in English, or simply because the laureate did not give a banquet speech. On the other hand, in some years there were two banquet speeches in the same category, and in one year (1982) there were *three* banquet speeches for the Medicine award. After 1986, the protocol for the award ceremony seems to reflect the rule that when an award is shared by two or three laureates, only one of them is chosen to deliver the banquet speech for that prize category.

below 4.5 characters/word.)⁷

These differences are statistically significant. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests for both syllables/word and characters/word reject the hypothesis of equal means (Table 5), which implies that at least one of the groups is significantly different from the others.⁸ On the other hand, ANOVA tests for only the non-Literature prizes (Table 6) do not reject the hypothesis of equal means: average word length is essentially the same for Economics, Physics, Chemistry and Medicine laureates. Therefore, it is only the Literature laureates that can be regarded as a separate group when it comes to word length, which is consistent with the Salant hypothesis: the very best writers do indeed tend to use shorter words. Conversely, one can also state this same conclusion by saying that economists and natural scientists tend to use longer words, on average, even when writing in a non-technical vein and for a general audience.⁹

4. Conclusion.

Salant (1969) argued that the use of short words is a characteristic of good writing. We found support for this hypothesis by comparing the banquet speeches of Nobel laureates.

To be sure, word length is only one dimension of what makes for “good writing.” But it seems to be a necessary dimension. Words should be used efficiently, and this includes using short words rather than longer ones whenever possible. “Economical” writing does indeed seem to be an important aspect of good writing style.¹⁰

We leave for debate the different implications of our paper.

⁷The average word length for the 2780 words in this paper (excluding tables and references) is 4.79 characters/word, which at first glance seems pretty good, although it is largely due to our extensive quotations from Salant (1969). Excluding the Salant quotations, our average word length is actually 4.90 characters/word. Salant himself, on the other hand, does quite well: for the 944 words we quoted from him in this paper, the average word length is a rather impressive 4.59 characters/word.

⁸The “analysis of variance” (ANOVA) is a statistical technique, based on the so-called *F* distribution, for testing whether or not the means of three or more groups are all equal, and thus is a generalization of the well known *t*-test for two-sample comparisons. In a typical application of ANOVA, a very low “p-value” implies rejection of the null hypothesis that all of the samples are simply random drawings from the same underlying population.

⁹The average word length (in syllables/word) for the Economics laureates in Table 4 is considerably lower than the values reported by Salant for his three unnamed economists in Table 1 (1.75, 1.73 and 1.63 syllables/word, respectively). Bear in mind, however, that Salant’s word samples were drawn from books and articles by economists writing in a professional capacity, so we would expect longer words, on average, due to a greater preponderance of technical terms. In a study comparing word samples drawn from 15 major economics textbooks (Gallagher and Thompson 1981) the average word lengths ranged from 1.558 to 1.826 syllables/word, with an overall average of 1.677, so it would appear that Salant’s “unscientific” sample was actually quite representative of professional writing in economics.

¹⁰We have borrowed the expression “economical writing” from McCloskey (2000), though we use it here in a somewhat narrower sense than she does.

| Table 5. ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE (all groups). | | | | |
|---|--------------------|-------------------|---------|-----------------------------|
| (a) Syllables per word | | | | |
| <i>F</i> | Degrees of freedom | 5% critical value | p-value | |
| 9.031 | 4, 198 | 2.417 | 0.0000 | Null hypothesis is rejected |
| (a) Characters per word | | | | |
| <i>F</i> | Degrees of freedom | 5% critical value | p-value | |
| 9.304 | 4, 198 | 2.417 | 0.0000 | Null hypothesis is rejected |

| Table 6. ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE (Non-Literature prizes). | | | | |
|--|--------------------|-------------------|---------|---------------------------------|
| (a) Syllables per word | | | | |
| <i>F</i> | Degrees of freedom | 5% critical value | p-value | |
| 1.086 | 3, 172 | 2.657 | 0.3564 | Null hypothesis is not rejected |
| (a) Characters per word | | | | |
| <i>F</i> | Degrees of freedom | 5% critical value | p-value | |
| 1.508 | 3, 172 | 2.657 | 0.2143 | Null hypothesis is not rejected |

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