LONDON — Slogan is an ancient Gaelic word. It means, or at least it meant, battle cry.

When medieval Scotsmen were charging their enemies in remote and warlike glens, they would shout the name of their clan or their chieftain again and again and again. “Campbell! Campbell! Campbell!” or “McDonald! McDonald! McDonald!”

These days, in the battles of global corporations, there’s slightly less killing, and certainly fewer kilts. But otherwise it’s pretty much the same clamoring to be heard above the competitive fray.

Imagine an army of Apple employees, brandishing iPhone 6s and bellowing “Bigger than bigger!” as they storm a counterattacking legion of Samsung smartphone reps wielding Galaxy S5s and urging one another onward with “The next big thing is here!”

A slogan, a good one at least, is at the heart of a company. It doesn’t just face outward to the consumer, but inward to the employees. One sentence becomes the company identity, the corporate motto and the battle cry. So it had better be a cracking good sentence.

And many are. In fact you can often use the techniques of classical rhetoric to slice them apart and explain exactly how and why they work. Sometimes, they can be pretty simple.

You don’t need to be Cicero, for instance, to see the common thread running through “Intel Inside,” United Airlines’ “Fly the friendly skies” or the nut purveyor Planters’s “Famously Fresh.”

All three phrases rely on alliteration, which can be especially effective when,
like those last two, they repeat an F sound. They are slogans that Shakespeare might have penned.

Think I’m getting carried away? Consider “Full fathom five thy father lies.” There’s no real content there. All Shakespeare is saying is “Your father’s body is 9.144 meters under water.” But putting it that way wouldn’t have made it one of the most enduring lines in English literature.

Shakespeare knew what any good slogan writer knew: Alliteration works. And if you sat him down to write a slogan, or to name a product or a company, that’s probably where he would start. Coca-Cola, Kit Kat, Paypal: the alliterative allure is alive.

The Bard would also have heartily endorsed the international ad slogan that Reebok rolled out nearly a decade ago: “I am what I am.” It is, after all, almost exactly the same as “To be or not to be.”

That’s a trick called diacope, a verbal sandwich of two words or phrases with something else tucked in the middle. And it’s almost guaranteed to give you a memorable line — whether you’re saying “Bond, James Bond” or “Be all you can be,” or “Home, sweet home,” or “Bigger than bigger.”

Even a line like “I am what I am” — which let’s be frank, doesn’t actually mean that much — can enter the public consciousness because of its shape. Shakespeare knew that. If he were around to write a slogan for Walmart, he might come up with something along the lines of the very one the company used for years: “Always low prices. Always.”

Diacope is just one of the figures of rhetoric — little tricks that don’t change the meaning of a sentence, but make it more memorable. The ancient Greeks and the Romans loved identifying and collecting these patterns. They didn’t invent them exactly, they simply observed that some lines are memorable, others are not, and that the memorable lines tend to follow certain formulas.

In Shakespeare’s day rhetoric was still part of the standard school curriculum, so when he used diacope, he knew he was using diacope. These days we tend to thrash about until we get there by accident.

For a figure called chiasmus, a perfect example is “I am stuck on Band-Aids ‘cause Band-Aid’s stuck on me.” If you put it next to J.F.K.’s inaugural speech,
you’ll see exactly what I mean. “Mankind must put an end to war, or war will put an end to mankind.” “We must never negotiate out of fear, but we must never fear to negotiate.” “Ask not what your country can do for you... .” You get the picture.

But when I contacted Mike Becker, the man who actually came up with the Band-Aid phrase in the mid-1970s, he told me that he’d never thought of the J.F.K. parallels. “It just had a kind of magic to it,” he told me. And he denied ever having heard of chiasmus.

Instead, like a true adman, Becker was concentrating on the unique selling point: that Band-Aids stuck better than their competitors. So he wanted to get the word in twice with the different senses of “stuck on” meaning both “in love with” and “glued to.”

Once you work out the pattern, you can see that the pattern works. But unlike Mr. Becker, Shakespeare would have known that the pattern was called chiasmus, because he would have had it firmly beaten into him at school.

These days, slogans and corporate mottos tend to evolve through a form of natural selection. If one slogan isn’t memorable, it’s replaced with another and another and another until something comes along that hits the rhetorical sweet spot.

“Byte into an Apple” isn’t the best pun ever, which might be one reason Apple Computer in the late 1970s wasn’t a household name. “Think different,” which the company used more recently, worked — and it worked for a very precise reason.

The other day I told a friend I was writing an article on corporate slogans. He immediately told me that the one he hated, absolutely hated, was “Think different” because it should be “think differently.”

He’s right, grammatically. But the fact that he’s nursing a grudge over an ad slogan Apple hasn’t run for a dozen years proves just how memorable it was.

Same for a long-popular British slogan, “Beanz Meanz Heinz,” which grammar would have insisted on as “Beanz Mean Heinz.”

For that matter “Got milk?” is substandard speech. So is Subway’s “Eat fresh.” Probably the most memorable ad in Britain in the last few years uses the one-word tagline “Simples” — uttered by an anthroporphic Russian meerkat on behalf of an insurance website, comparethemarket.com.
It’s a trick called enallage: a slight deliberate grammatical mistake that makes a sentence stand out.

“We was robbed.” “Mistah Kurtz — he dead.” “Thunderbirds are go.” All of these stick in our minds because they’re just wrong — wrong enough to be right.

T.S. Eliot’s “Let us go then, you and I” is perhaps his best line. Why? Maybe because it’s wrong. It should be “Let us go then, you and me.” Thank the Muses, he didn’t have a literal-minded proof reader.

Isn’t it beautiful how these ancient figures of rhetoric still do their work, if now only to give euphony to the corporate canon?

Shakespeare’s tricolon — the rule of three that gave him “Friends, Romans, countrymen” and that inspired the French revolution’s “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité” — lives on in eBay’s “Buy it. Sell it. Love it.” and in Fisher Price’s “Play. Laugh. Grow.”

Shakespeare also had paradoxes, like “Heavy lightness! Serious vanity!” We have HSBC’s “The world’s local bank” and “If you want to capture someone’s attention, whisper.” Rhetoric survives.

But rhetoric doesn’t explain absolutely everything. There’s no classical explanation for the long success of Nike’s “Just do it” and no figure of rhetoric to account for the wondrously smug understatement of British Airways’ “The world’s favourite airline.”

Sometimes the rhetorical explanation system simply breaks down.

Or maybe it just goes back to the other great, old rule of advertising:

It’s not what you say, it’s how many times you say it.

It’s not what you say, it’s how many times you say it.

It’s not what you say, it’s . . .

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