

Advertising books: a linguistic analysis of blurbs

M^a Lluïsa Gea Valor

Universitat Jaume I (Castelló)

gea@ang.uji.es

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present a preliminary approach to the study of blurbs, brief texts traditionally displayed on bookcovers, and nowadays also on the Internet, which provide information about a book to potential readers. This study focuses on four of the most widely-known publishing and bookselling companies in the English-speaking world: Penguin, Ballantine, Routledge, and Barnes & Noble, and analyses more than 60 blurbs displayed on their web sites. The study indicates that blurbs may constitute a genre characterised by a definite communicative purpose and by the use of specific linguistic and discourse conventions. Blurbs perform an informative function based on the description of the contents of a book. But this function is secondary to their persuasive purpose, characteristic of advertising discourse, because blurbs recommend the book by means of review extracts from various sources in an attempt to persuade the prospective reader to buy the "product." In order to achieve their communicative purpose, blurbs make use of a wide range of linguistic and discourse conventions typical of advertising discourse: complimenting, elliptical syntactic patterns, the imperative, the address form "you," and what I have called "curiosity arousers," usually in the form of rhetorical questions and excerpts from the book.

Key words: genre analysis, advertising discourse, communicative function, persuasion, manipulation

Resumen

La publicidad de libros: un análisis lingüístico de los "blurbs"

El objetivo de este artículo es llevar a cabo un estudio preliminar de los "blurbs," breves textos que ofrecen información al lector sobre un libro y que pueden encontrarse tanto en la propia portada como en Internet. Para ello se ha analizado un corpus de más de 60 "blurbs" localizados en los sitios web de cuatro de las más conocidas editoriales dentro del mercado en lengua inglesa: Penguin, Ballantine, Routledge y Barnes & Noble. Este estudio parece indicar que los "blurbs" constituyen un género caracterizado por un propósito comunicativo específico y por el uso de una serie de convenciones tanto lingüísticas como discursivas. Los "blurbs" realizan una función informativa basada en la descripción del

contenido del libro, pero dicha función es secundaria a su propósito persuasivo, típico del discurso publicitario y promocional, con el cual se observan muchos rasgos en común. Para cumplir dicha función comunicativa, los "blurbs" emplean diversos elementos lingüísticos y convenciones discursivas, tales como la alabanza, la elipsis, el imperativo, el pronombre "you" para dirigirse al lector, y lo que he denominado "estimulantes de la curiosidad," que incluyen tanto preguntas retóricas como extractos del libro.

Palabras clave: análisis del género, discurso publicitario, propósito comunicativo, persuasión, manipulación

1. Introduction

It is a well-known fact that publishing companies spend much money, time and energy in designing their book covers to attract potential customers. Indeed, every time we buy or intend to buy a book, the first thing we look at is its front cover. However, if we wish to know more about the book we are about to buy or read, we usually look at the information on its back cover.

This information can also be found on the web sites that most publishing houses design in order to reach a wider public via the net. We should not forget that we live in a technologically advanced society where one of the most powerful and widespread tools of communication is undoubtedly the Internet. And like so many other companies all over the world, publishing firms make use of this effective tool to advertise and sell their product, in this case books. Whether information about a book appears on its covers or on a web page, these short descriptive texts are generally known as blurbs.

If we look up the term "blurb" in the dictionary, we find the following definition: "publisher's short description of the contents of a book, usually printed on the jacket or cover" (*OALD*, 1990). However, it is my contention that blurbs not only describe the contents of a book, but also evaluate and recommend the book by means of extracts from reviews in well-known newspapers, journals and magazines which praise the qualities of the book and the author. Therefore, blurbs seem to function as factual marketing strategies aimed at getting the potential customer to buy and read the book.

The purpose of this paper is to present a preliminary approach to the study of blurbs in an attempt to demonstrate that, although blurbs cannot be considered representative instances of advertising discourse, they do share the same communicative purpose –to persuade the potential customer– and they also present many linguistic features typical of such discourse.

2. The discourse of advertising and the blurb

Although familiar to all book browsers and readers, blurbs have surprisingly attracted little attention in linguistic research. One of the few relevant studies taking blurbs into consideration is that by Bhatia (1997), whose objective is to explore the way generic conventions are manipulated and mixed for promotional purposes in academic introductions. Bhatia focuses on the three main realisations of this introductory genre, namely introduction, preface and foreword, and states that “genres traditionally considered non-promotional in intent, including book introductions, are becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish from publishers’ blurbs” (Bhatia, 1997: 190). Here Bhatia indirectly points at the promotional nature of blurbs, although his analysis focuses on the mixing of private intentions with conventional communicative purposes in academic introductions. In contrast, this paper attempts to explore the persuasive function of blurbs beyond the constraints of the academic domain and consequently their connection with advertising discourse.

Advertising is omnipresent in our everyday life. Such is its power that a great many studies have tried to unveil the mechanisms of advertising: the linguistic dimension of the message, the use of image and sound, the processes of coding and decoding, the interaction between message and audience, etc. Lately, with the advent of the new information and communication technologies, a new dimension has come into play: Internet advertising, also known as “netvertising” (Fortanet et al., 1999).

Fairclough (1994: 198) defines the discourse of advertising as basically strategic, because it is “oriented to instrumental goals, to getting results.” This expected pragmatic response has also been underscored by Moriyón Mojica (1994), who speaks of four main communicative stages in any advertisement: capture the receiver’s attention, engage his/her interest, generate desire, and obtain the act, which is the ultimate purpose of advertising. Goddard (1998: 101) introduces a very interesting element which she considers central to advertising discourse: “the factor of conscious intention behind the text, with the aim of benefiting the originator materially or through some other less tangible gain, such as enhancement of status or image.”

The discourse of advertising is characterised by two main communicative elements: information and persuasion. Although it might seem at first sight that both functions are

necessary for an advertisement to be effective, most of the studies in the area have shown that persuasion is the ultimate purpose of advertising, and that the informative function is thus secondary to the persuasive one. As Harris and Seldon (1962: 74, quoted by Vestergaard & Schröder, 1985: 5) claim: “advertising [is] frankly and legitimately persuasive, but [...] it persuade[s] by being informative.” In the same line, del Saz (2000) states that advertising discourse adopts an informative aspect to camouflage a purely persuasive intention. Díez Arroyo (1998: 58) also insists on the persuasive function of advertising:

Así pues, no negamos que la publicidad informe, instruya y entretenga. Esos constituyen fines parciales que, como decíamos antes, explicitan ciertas estrategias de acercamiento al emisor. Son, pues, funciones subsidiarias al servicio de un objetivo principal que le es inherente: influir en la conducta del público en beneficio, en último término, de los propietarios de la marca anunciada.

A slightly different perspective is offered by Cook (2001: 10), who claims that the persuasive function is not sufficient to characterise advertising: “even if the majority of ads have the function of persuading their addressees to buy, this is not their only function. They may also amuse, inform, misinform, worry or warn.” However, the essence of his stance does not contradict the previous views. Another objective of Cook’s work is to define advertisements as a genre by analysing their main features or components. He concludes that, despite their complex nature and the difficulty of establishing clear boundaries between genres, advertisements “have the typical instability of a relatively new genre” (Cook, 2001: 221).

Cook categorises advertisements according to various criteria: by medium (newspapers, magazines, hoardings, radio, television, Internet); by product or service (luxuries versus household necessities, product ads versus non-product ads); by technique (the “hard-sell” advertisement, which makes a direct appeal to the prospective buyer, and the “soft-sell” ad, which works through indirectness and implication); and finally, by consumer, which advertisers regard as the most important factor for an advertisement to be successful.

Vestergaard and Schröder (1985) classify advertisements into two broad types: commercial and non-commercial. Commercial advertising includes three sub-types: prestige, industrial, and finally consumer advertising, which is by far the most widespread and pervasive in our society, because it involves the promotion of goods and/or services

to potential buyers. Furthermore, there are two types of needs that the consumption of goods satisfies: material needs (food, drink, clothing) and social needs (membership, recognition, friendship, love). For a prospective customer to buy commodities, these must be of “use value” to him/her. In order to claim any social use value for a product, the advertiser is “bound to leave the area of factual information and enter the area of persuasion” (Vestergaard & Schröder, 1985: 9), where the original use value of a product is disregarded, and emphasis is placed on the achievement of social aims.

Considering all this, if we were to categorise books as a product, the most reasonable option would be to classify them as a luxury rather than satisfying a material need. Undoubtedly, the use value for the potential buyer is an emotional or intellectual one, and this value is highlighted in the blurb, especially in review extracts. Moreover, in order to convince the prospective reader of the “beneficial” effects of a given book, publishing houses usually resort to the opinions given by literary critics in renowned newspapers and magazines as authoritative and objective voices that evaluate and recommend the book. In this sense, blurbs can be said to straddle the book review and the advertisement, but it is my contention that the persuasive nature of blurbs outweighs their surface appearance as book reviews. Therefore, this paper studies blurbs as book advertisements and argues that they are primarily persuasive, despite possible connections with other genres.

3. The study: methodology and corpus

In the last decade, traditional methods of advertising books, especially catalogues, have been gradually complemented by a new advertising medium: the Internet. There is no doubt that publishers and booksellers have found in the World Wide Web one of the most effective media to advertise and sell their books. This new advertising channel offers many advantages, such as universal reach (at least in the western world), interactivity, non-linearity, bidirectional or two-way communication, and obviously the opportunity for the customer to order and buy online.

This paper explores four of the best-known publishing and bookselling houses in today’s English-speaking market: Penguin (<http://www.penguin.co.uk>), Ballantine (<http://www.randomhouse.com>), Routledge (<http://www.routledge.com>), and Barnes & Noble (<http://www.bn.com>), and analyses the online blurbs of more than 60 books published between September 2002 and June 2003.

All the firms in this study offer a section on their web sites where newly-published books are advertised: “New Releases” in Penguin, “New Books” in Ballantine and Barnes & Noble, and “Current Featured Titles” in Routledge. All of them give similar “technical” information about their books (price, format, category or genre, number of pages, ISBN, and date of publication, together with a picture of the front cover), but there are certain differences worth noting:

1. Penguin’s online section “New Releases” features all its recently published books, and is divided into several subsections according to genre: biography, crime and thriller, fiction, history, politics and society, science, etc. Under each genre, a new page opens displaying all new releases by means of a picture of the book cover, the price, a critical extract, and two internal links: one to the blurb itself and another one to the author. The blurb includes description of the book’s contents, and usually one or more review extracts. Readers are offered the possibility to write and send their own reviews, which may appear online through the link “Customer’s Reviews.”
2. Ballantine devotes the section “New Books” to all its new releases. Unlike Penguin, this firm does not categorise books according to genre, but simply provides the title of the book, the name of the author and technical information (price, format, etc.). In the pages that display the blurb, the description of the book’s contents is followed by the critical extract(s) and the author’s biography. It is interesting to note that review excerpts in Ballantine are very frequently written in bold or in capital letters, in order to attract more effectively the potential reader’s attention. This is a recursive feature in all the blurbs analysed, which clearly resembles the style of headlines and slogans.
3. Routledge presents its new books under the label “Current Featured Titles.” After clicking on each title, a new page opens displaying a picture of the book cover, information about the ISBN and the price, and finally the blurb. The blurb usually includes one or more review extracts (usually written in bold as well, as in Ballantine), description of the contents of the book, and a brief paragraph with information about the author. There is an internal link, called “Buy this book online,” which leads to the section “Details” offering more specific information about the book in question.

This section includes in some cases more review extracts, an extension of the ones displayed on the previous web page, a list of the contents, usually the title of each chapter, and a more complete author's biography.

4. Finally, Barnes & Noble devotes the section "New Releases" to all its new books. Unlike Penguin, the books are not classified by genre, but both firms coincide in offering internal links to both the book and the author. The section "About the Book" displays several subsections: "From The Publisher" or "From Our Editors" usually offers a description of the book's contents, and also some evaluation and recommendation; "From The Critics" is a collection of shortened critical reviews from sources of excellent reputation such as *Kirkus Reviews*, *The New Yorker*, *Publisher's Weekly*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Library Journal*, etc.; and finally "Customer Reviews" invites readers to send their reviews online and rank the book by stars, from one to five, like in Penguin. Therefore, a "multivocal" effect is clearly sensed, because the prospective reader is offered various perspectives on the book, ranging from professional ones (the publisher and the critics) to non-expert ones (customers).

As can be observed, all four publishing and bookselling firms advertise their books online by means of blurbs, which usually provide a description of the book's contents, recommend the book to the audience, and offer information about the author. These "communicative steps" are organised into a certain rhetorical structure. Thus, the first stage in the study was devoted to exploring the rhetorical structure of blurbs from a genre-analysis perspective (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993) in order to determine their global communicative purpose. Next, the analysis focused on the most salient linguistic and discursive features of these texts, with a twofold objective: on the one hand, to unveil the relation between form and function, that is, between the form of linguistic resources and the functional aspects they textualise in discourse; and, on the other hand, to explore whether the blurb is connected with advertising discourse.

4. Results

According to Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993), the defining factor of genre is the communicative purpose it fulfils. Communicative purpose, a key element in genre theory, is reflected in the rhetorical structure or organisation of the genre. Moreover,

the use of conventional linguistic features is also a relevant element in order to achieve the communicative goal of genres.

In the case of blurbs, both requirements are accomplished. On the one hand, the main communicative purpose of blurbs is to persuade potential readers to buy the book by providing both information and positive evaluation. This purpose is reflected in the rhetorical organisation of the blurb. On the other hand, a wide range of conventional strategies are employed in order to fulfil that communicative purpose. Therefore, blurbs may be considered as a genre, characterised by its own communicative purpose, rhetorical organisation and linguistic conventions.

Generic structure

The rhetorical structure of blurbs consists of three main moves, each one performing a specific function:

- Move 1. Description
- Move 2. Evaluation
- Move 3. About the author

Move 1. Description: This is the only obligatory move in the blurb, since only a non-significant number of the blurbs analysed do not include it. Description usually means a summary of the book's contents, which may refer either to the plot or to the line of argument according to the literary genre in question; that is, if the book involves a story (fiction, crime, thriller), the plot and the characters are usually described, whereas if the book deals with science, history or politics, the argumentative line is offered.

Although description of the book is the main purpose of this move, some evaluation is also carried out, as can be seen in the underlined phrases below:

“Published for the first time more than fifty years after the war, *First Light* is Geoffrey Wellum’s gripping memoir of his experiences as a fighter pilot” (*First Light*, by Geoffrey Wellum. Penguin).

“When *The Philosopher’s Dog* was published in Australia late last year, it was greeted with rapturous acclaim. A work of amazing clarity, yet tempered with a profound

humanity, it will stand as a landmark of its time. We are truly honoured to be publishing Raimond Gaita's latest work" –Publishers' Note (*The Philosopher's Dog*, by Raimond Gaita. Routledge).

"Jonathan Kellerman is a master at creating psychologically nuanced novels of suspense—an author whose name is synonymous with unrelenting action, intriguing plot twists, and penetrating insight into the criminal mind. Now, he ventures into bold, new territory with his biggest and best novel yet" (*A Cold Heart*, by Jonathan Kellerman. Barnes & Noble).

Move 2. Evaluation by means of review excerpts: Together with description, blurbs usually include extracts from longer reviews published in newspapers and magazines, often specialised ones, within a section devoted to Arts and Entertainment, or more specifically, Books: "New Releases." In this case, the original publication source is stated, i.e. *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Sunday Telegraph*, etc., but the name of the critic may not be. Other reviews are written by independent writers, that is, with no affiliation to any journal or periodical, in which case their name and professional background are generally stated. Examples:

"A masterwork. I doubt that I have read a book as moving in at least a decade" –Fergal Keane, Independent (*The Story of Lucy Gault*, by William Trevor. Penguin).

"... one of the key sources for British politics" –Charles Reiss, The Evening Standard (*The Almanac of British Politics*, by Robert Waller and Byron Criddle. Routledge).

"... sets the historical record straight ... pitch-perfect prose ... hands-down the best biography of JFK ... a truly remarkable achievement" –Douglas Brinkley, author of *The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter's Journey Beyond the White House* and Director of the Eisenhower Centre for American Studies at the University of New Orleans (*An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963*, by Robert Dallek. Barnes & Noble).

In other cases the publishing firm provides its own evaluation of the book without resorting to any external source:

"Nuala O'Faolain's personal story of middle age is intelligent, thoughtful, hilarious and most of all, full of surprises" (*Almost There*, by Nuala O'Faolain. Penguin).

Surprisingly, there are a few review extracts which simply describe what the book is about, and render little or no evaluation:

“Tells the history of the way we look at the world and why” –The Daily Mail (*Seeing Double*, by J. Richard Block. Routledge).

“The debate over whether it is ethical to send children to private schools has been re-ignited by a controversial new book by an Oxford academic” –The Oxford Times (*How Not to be a Hypocrite: School Choice for the Morally Perplexed Parent*, by Adam Swift. Routledge).

The purpose of these review extracts is to evaluate and recommend the book by praising its qualities and the qualities of its author. Therefore, evaluative language is abundant and recurrent. Moreover, these excerpts tend to be short and visually attractive –often written in capital letters, in bold or both, as in Ballantine and Routledge– in order to catch the potential reader’s attention, and in this respect they function as “attention-seeking devices” (Goddard, 1998: 9).

This move, which clearly produces the most striking effect on readers, can be considered the headline or the slogan for the book, which is the most important part in an advertisement. According to Díez Arroyo (1998), the main purpose of slogans, which are brief and concise formulae, is to capture the consumer’s attention and arouse his/her interest in the product. In Fairclough’s (1994: 205) words: “it is the syntax of concise, no-nonsense, to-the-point efficiency.” Once readers have been attracted to the book, they may click either on the title or on the author’s name to obtain further information.

Critical excerpts usually appear before the description move (move 1), as is the case in Penguin and Routledge. Sometimes they are combined and interwoven with move 1, giving rise to a cyclical structure where a critical excerpt is followed by a descriptive paragraph, which is followed in turn by more review extracts, as is often the case in Ballantine. In Barnes & Noble, however, critical reviews are usually offered after the description move, within the section “From The Critics.”

Finally, Penguin and Barnes & Noble offer their readers an interesting option as far as evaluating the book is concerned: the possibility to write and send their own reviews (usually comments, reactions, impressions) through the link “Review this book” and “Write your own online review” respectively, which are displayed online under the link “Customer’s

Reviews.” The main purpose of this is to offer the potential reader the opinions and rankings of other readers, which seems to confer more objectivity to the appraisal.

Move 3. About the author: Description and evaluation are generally complemented by a section on the author’s life. In this move, the author’s professional background is offered, which usually includes previous publications, awards won, current interests, and occasionally place of residence and family details. Examples:

“Sylvia Boorstein is a cofounding teacher at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre and a senior teacher at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. She has a Ph.D. in psychology and teaches and lectures widely. She is the author of *It’s Easier Than You Think; Don’t Just Do Something, Sit There;* and *That’s Funny You Don’t Look Buddhist*. She and her husband, Seymour, live in Sonoma County, California” (*Pay Attention, for Goodness’ Sake. The Buddhist Path of Kindness*, by Sylvia Boorstein. Ballantine).

“Robert Dallek is one of the most highly regarded historians in America, and the author of six books, including the acclaimed two-volume of Lyndon Johnson, *Lone Star Rising* and *Flawed Giant*. His *Franklin D Roosevelt* and *American Foreign Policy* won the 1980 Bancroft Prize and was nominated for an American Book Award, and *American Style of Foreign Policy* was a 1983 New York Times Notable Book of the Year” (*An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963*, by Robert Dallek. Barnes & Noble).

Information about the author is given either through an internal link (Penguin, Routledge, and Barnes & Noble) or immediately after the description of contents (Ballantine, and occasionally Routledge and Barnes & Noble, in the section “About the Author” or “Author Biography”). In some cases, after clicking on the author’s name, instead of the author’s biography more titles by the same author may appear, which link in turn to other blurbs giving information and recommending these books. This is characteristic of online or electronic texts, with links leading the reader to other web pages and new links, in a way that has been compared to “a set of Russian dolls” (Goddard, 1998: 92).

All in all, describing the book’s contents (move 1) and the author’s biography (move 3) can be considered as obligatory moves, while extracts from the critics’ reviews (move 2) should be regarded as optional, since surprisingly not all the blurbs analysed include them.

As for the communicative function of these moves, move 1 and move 3 mainly perform an informative function, because both provide information –about the

book's contents and about the author, respectively. Move 2, on the other hand, performs an affective function, because it aims to convince the potential buyer of the qualities and beneficial effects of the book. In blurbs, therefore, the informative function intertwines with, and is secondary to the persuasive function, which is their principal purpose. Taking all this into account, blurbs fulfil one of the key prerequisites for a textual type to be considered as a genre: a communicative purpose.

Linguistic and discourse conventions

In order to perform their persuasive function, blurbs make use of a wide range of strategies which are basically meant to attract the potential reader's attention, and to get the customer to buy the book by emphasising and praising its qualities:

Complimenting: Intensifying adverbs, positive evaluative adjectives and superlative constructions are abundantly used to praise the book and the author, especially in the move offering critics' reviews.

Complimenting the book: In this case, praise usually appeals to the emotions by underlining the effects of the book on the reader, that is, what he/she will feel when reading the book in question:

"A really great, hilarious, rollicking, fantastic read" –Newsnight Review (*Stupid White Men*, by Michael Moore. Penguin).

"A beautiful, funny, wise book, full of understanding, gentle direction, brilliance, and heart" (*Pay Attention, for Goodness' Sake. The Buddhist Path of Kindness*, by Sylvia Boorstein. Ballantine).

"WITTY, ENERGETIC ... It's deeply satisfying to read a work of fiction so informed about its subject and so alive to every nuance and detail. Smiley's final chapters have a wonderful restorative quality" (*Horse Heaven*, by Jane Smiley. Ballantine).

"refreshing ... essential ... sharp ... revealing ... discerning ... indispensable ... witty ... informative ... insightful ..." (*The Almanac of British Politics*, by Robert Waller and Byron Criddle. Routledge).

Furthermore, the superlative is a feature abundantly employed in blurbs when complimenting:

“This is not only the best book so far written on the six-day war, it is likely to remain the best” –The Washington Post Book World (*Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, by Michael B. Oren. Ballantine).

“The most honest, observant and timely book written this year about the American generation now approaching thirty” –New York Newsday (*Fitting Ends*, by Dan Chaon. Ballantine).

There are excerpts which simply underline the awards won by the book as a guarantee of its quality:

“Winner of the 2002 Whitbread Book of the Year Award” (*Samuel Pepys. The Unequalled Self*, by Claire Tomalin. Penguin).

“Nominated as one of the top 21 titles in the BBC Big Read” (*The Catcher in the Rye*, by J.D. Salinger. Penguin).

“Chosen by the Los Angeles Times as One of the Best Books of the Year” (*Horse Heaven*, by Jane Smiley. Ballantine).

Complimenting the author: In this case, praise tends to highlight the author’s writing qualities and style, as in these examples:

“Uproarious and touching! Gervase Phinn writes with enormous warmth and wit” –Daily Mail (*Head over Heels in the Dales*, by G. Phinn. Penguin).

“Sean McConville graphically recounts both sides of this story—and does so with an even-handedness and objectivity that must command the respect of all his readers, whatever side of the Irish sea they may be on” –Dr. Garret Fitzgerald, the Guardian (*Irish Political Prisoners 1848-1922: Theatre of War*, by Seán McConville. Routledge).

“Ridpath has that read-on factor that sets best-sellers apart” –Guardian (*Fatal Error*, by M. Ridpath. Penguin).

This last example takes us to another typical feature of praise for the author, which consists of underlining the writer's reputation or success as a guarantee for the book. This is very often conveyed by means of the superlative and similar superlative constructions:

"From the No. 1 International Bestselling author of *Stupid White Men ...*" (*Dude, Where's My Country*, by Michael Moore. Penguin).

"From the author of the controversial bestseller *Fast Food Nation*" (*Reefer Madness*, by Eric Schlosser. Penguin).

"#1 national bestseller. A New York times notable book" (*Horse Heaven*, by Jane Smiley. Ballantine).

"Brave, learned, sassy, wildly funny, Terry Castle [is] not only our best Female Literary Critic and One Wise Babe. She's the most expressive, most enlightening literary critic at large today" –Susan Sontag (*Boss Ladies Watch Out! Essays on Women, Sex and Writing*, by Terry Castle. Routledge).

On the other hand, the force of the superlative may be toned down by means of the modal adverb "probably" or the construction "one of+superlative," as shown in the examples below. According to Díez Arroyo (1998: 248), this method is very frequently used by advertisers in order to convey modesty and gain believability from the audience:

"Probably the most important novelist of the past two decades" –Guardian (*Pattern Recognition*, by William Gibson. Penguin).

"Proof, once more, that Townsend is one of the funniest writers around" –The Times (*The Public Confessions of a Middle-Aged Woman Aged 55 3/4*, by Sue Townsend. Penguin).

"Robert Dallek is one of the most highly regarded historians in America" (*An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963*, by Robert Dallek. Barnes & Noble).

Complimenting both the book and the author: In some cases, the review extract praises both the book and the author in the same statement:

“A novel of passion in every sense ... [She does] it all with aplomb, with a demon narrative intelligence” –The Boston Sunday Globe (*Horse Heaven*, by Jane Smiley. Ballantine).

“This is a terrific book, which will add to Kathleen Wilson’s reputation as a talented historian of nation and empire in the eighteenth century. It is well written, rich in historical imagination and innovative thinking” –Catherine Hall, University College London (*The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century*, by Kathleen Wilson. Routledge).

“The tension is incredible and the mystery intriguing ... French [is] immensely talented at writing horrifying, suspenseful thrillers” (*Land of the Living*, by Nicci French. Barnes & Noble).

Ellipsis: Blurbs, especially in move 2, generally make use of elliptical syntactic patterns, especially minor sentences (sentences with no verb), in order to impact the reader and attract his/her attention. Thus, ellipsis brings blurbs closer to advertising slogans and headlines, which tend to be as simple and direct as possible to catch the reader’s eye.

Another purpose of ellipsis is to imitate real speech and to establish proximity with the audience. As pointed out by Goddard (1998: 107), speakers who know each other well “don’t need to be all that explicit about their meanings, because they know the other person will fill in the gaps as a result of shared knowledge and shared history.”

Similarly, Carter et al. (1997: 211) state that ellipsis can be used deliberately “to create an illusion of closeness [...]. The reader is forced to adopt the same position towards the writer that a speaker would adopt to a close friend in a conversation.” So ellipsis functions as “a binding factor because ties between writer and reader are strengthened through the work that the reader has to do to fill the gaps.” This is especially so in advertising, where the effectiveness of the message is based on the decoding by the receiver. In blurbs, ellipsis is pervasive, as the following examples show:

“A triumph” –Ali Smith (*An Evening of Long Goodbyes*, by Paul Murray. Penguin).

“A huge hit” –Guardian (*Artemis Fowl: The Eternity Code*, by Eoin Colfer. Penguin).

“One of Britain’s most prolific writers and a giant among historians” (*The Diaries of A. L. Rowse*, by A. L. Rowse. Penguin).

“... poignant and illuminating ...” –Roger Scruton, Sunday Telegraph (*The Philosopher’s Dog*, by Raimond Gaita. Routledge).

“Genuine chills and page-turning suspense” –Entertainment Weekly (*Land of the Living*, by Nicci French. Barnes & Noble).

In addition, omitting the subject (“the book,” “the story,” “the author”) is also a characteristic elliptical pattern of blurbs, as in these examples, which remind us of spoken language:

“Inspiring ... Offers a real sense of what it’s like to be at the beginning of Something Big” (*Synx*, by Steven H. Strogatz. Penguin).

“Extraordinary depth and resonance. Will rank among the finest of Second World War memoirs” –Independent (*First Light*, by G. Wellum. Penguin).

“... sets the historical record straight ... pitch-perfect prose ... hands-down the best biography of JFK ... a truly remarkable achievement” –Douglas Brinkley (*An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963*, by Robert Dallek. Barnes & Noble).

“An edge-of-your-seat psychological thriller ... keeps the reader on a white-knuckled, hair-raising thrill ride until the last page” (*Land of the Living*, by Nicci French. Barnes & Noble).

Imperative: Another characteristic feature of blurbs is the imperative, which is pervasive in advertising discourse. As Fairclough (1994) observes, the imperative and the address form you, which is dealt with below, evidence a personalised relationship between producer and consumer, in which the audience members are individually addressed.

By means of the imperative, the persuasive function of the blurb becomes clear since it is used to address the potential buyer directly. In this case, the imperative form has to be understood as an invitation or recommendation, not as a command or an imposition (del Saz, 2000), as in the following examples:

“Steel yourself for a gripping tale of obsession, madness and fear” –Sunday Mirror (*Land of the Living*, by Nicci French. Penguin).

“Enter the world of Susan Lilian Townsend –sun-worshippers, work-shy writers, garden centre lovers and those in search of a good time are all welcome ...” (*The Public Confessions of a Middle-Aged Woman Aged 55 3/4*, by Sue Townsend. Penguin).

“Quirky, intelligent and at times, downright maddening ... Persist with it” –Irish Examiner (*The Philosopher’s Dog*, by Raimond Gaita. Routledge).

As del Saz suggests, a way of mitigating the original illocutionary force of the imperative is the use of politeness strategies, such as giving reasons before or after the imperative form, as in the next examples, where we are invited to read the book because of the author’s writing qualities:

“Ali Smith has got style, ideas and punch. Read her” (*The Whole Story and Other Stories*, by Ali Smith. Penguin).

“If everyone who wants to be a writer would read this book there would be many more good writers, many more happy writers, and editors would be so overwhelmed by sweetness they would accept many more good books. So what are you waiting for? Read it” –Ursula K. Le Guin (*Making a Literary Life*, by Carolyn See. Ballantine).

Another use of the imperative is to make the recommendation of the book more personal, and the appeal to the reader even more direct and one-to-one, as in the following examples, especially the second one, which illustrates what may be considered an aggressively overt advertising style:

“This time, it’s a small town in the mid-Atlantic states with a savings-and-loan in 1982, and you want to be there. Trust me on this” –Donald E. Westlake (*Good Faith*, by Jane Smiley. Barnes & Noble).

“However, it’s not all bad news if you’re caught in the dilemma. Read and find out why!” (*How Not to be a Hypocrite: School Choice for the Morally Perplexed Parent*, by Adam Swift. Routledge).

Address form “you”: This textual feature is closely related to the previous one, the imperative. Blurbs often employ the typical advertising address form “you” (Goddard, 1998) with the purpose of involving the prospective reader and getting his/her interest in the story, as in the following examples:

“Gripping, harrowing. A true triumph over tragedy. You may start Kevin Lewis’s book in tears, but you finish it exultant” –Mail on Sunday (*The Kid*, by Kevin Lewis. Penguin).

“The book that will get you marching mad” (*Globalization and Its Discontents*, by Joseph Stiglitz. Penguin).

“One of those stories that will have you muttering ‘Just one more chapter’ at two in the morning” –Washington Post (*The Tutor*, by Peter Abrahams. Penguin).

“You are on the verge of entering the wise, provoking, benevolent, hilarious, and addictive world of Douglas Adams” –Stephen Fry, author of *The Liar* and *Making History: A Novel* (*The Salmon of Doubt*, by Douglas Adams. Ballantine).

“It’s huge, fascinating, funny and rude. You can dip into it and it would keep you howling with laughter for months” –Daily Mail (*A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, by Eric Partridge. Routledge).

“If you’re in the mood for mind games, *Shutter Island* is an engrossing read” –Sam Allis, *The Boston Globe* (*Shutter Island*, by Dennis Lehane. Barnes & Noble).

“If your job is more stressful than it is satisfying and you fantasize about leaving it for a career you truly love, here is the book for you! (...). The choice is yours to make. (...) this extraordinary book will help you find the courage to succeed in the ways that really make a difference. It’s true: You can at last *Do What You Love for the Rest of Your Life!*” (*Do What You Love for the Rest of Your Life. A Practical Guide to Career Change and Personal Renewal*, by Bob Griffiths. Ballantine)

Another use of “you” is for generalising the reviewer’s feelings, emotions and reactions to the book:

“Richly detailed, ingeniously constructed ... you will revel in Jane Smiley’s *Horse Heaven*” –San Diego Union Tribune (*Horse Heaven*, by Jane Smiley. Ballantine)

“Carolyn See doesn’t just tell you to sharpen your pencils, she shows you how to sharpen your wits” –Rita Mae Brown (*Making a Literary Life*, by Carolyn See. Ballantine).

“It has the headlong suspense and whopper of a story you would expect in any well-made thriller” –Joseph Barbato (*Shutter Island*, by Dennis Lehane. Barnes & Noble).

Curiosity arousers: These are intended to pique the reader’s interest. To this category belong excerpts from the books, and questions concerning their contents.

Excerpts from the book are often included in the blurb, especially powerful meaningful sentences which aim to capture the reader’s attention and arouse his/her interest in the story:

“I always thought you knew what you were –now I know different. The world’s slippery. All it takes is for one thing to shift and everything can slide away. It’s like falling off the edge of the world” (*Bad Influence*, by William Sutcliffe. Penguin).

“We have no future because our present is too volatile ... We have only risk management. The spinning of the given moment’s scenarios. Pattern recognition ...” (*Pattern Recognition*, by William Gibson. Penguin).

“Kadi read with outrage the American newspaper description of her son as “an unarmed West African street vendor.” “Nothing,” she writes, “could be more distant from the truth.” Now, with great pride and searing love, Kadi Diallo finally tells the truth about herself and her son” (*My Heart Will Cross This Ocean. My Story, My Son, Amadou*, by Kadiatou Diallo and Craig Wolff. Ballantine).

““It happens that I am going through a period of great unhappiness and loss just now,” she admits” –Book Magazine (*Unless*, by Carol Shields. Barnes & Noble).

“When the first bullet hit my chest, I thought of my daughter ...” (*No Second Chance*, by Harlan Coben. Barnes & Noble).

Curiosity arousers may also appear in the form of rhetorical questions containing key elements of the plot or argument and leaving the reader on a cliff-hanger. As Brierley (1995) states, posing questions to arouse curiosity and involve the reader is a common technique in advertising. The following examples illustrate this point:

“Are the differences between the sexes really just down to our upbringing—or is there another, more fundamental explanation?” (*The Essential Difference*, by Simon Baron-Cohen. Penguin).

“How do social and economic characteristics affect political behaviour and preference? What are the local and national determinants of voting patterns? How strong are regional factors, or the personal votes of MPs and candidates? What makes each parliamentary seat tick?” (*The Almanac of British Politics*, by Robert Waller and Byron Criddle. Routledge).

“What is a woman’s price? From the bestselling author of *The Last Time They Met* comes a brilliant new novel about love, jealousy, and loss” (*All He Ever Wanted*, by Anita Shreve. Barnes & Noble).

“At 29, Julie Barenson is too young to give up on love. Four years after her husband’s tragic death, she is finally ready to risk giving her heart to someone again. But to whom? Should it be Richard Franklin, who is handsome and sophisticated and treats her like a queen, or Mike Harris, who is Julie’s best friend in the world, though not as debonair?” (*The Guardian*, by Nicholas Sparks. Barnes & Noble).

5. Manipulation in blurbs

A very interesting aspect which is distinctly present in advertising is manipulation. Feliu García (1984: 334) states that “la manipulación es el rasgo caracterizador fundamental en la publicidad actual,” and claims that the receivers of the message, their interests, the message itself and even the universe, the reality around them, are manipulated.

This complex phenomenon, with clearly negative connotations, has been studied from different perspectives: communication studies, psychology, linguistics, politics, etc. Vázquez and Aldea (1991) offer a very thorough account of the various

approaches to this phenomenon, and conclude that in general most studies define manipulation as “un desvío de la realidad de modo que los receptores consideren exclusivamente la postura que conviene al emisor” (1991: 121). Moreover, through manipulation the receiver of the message is oriented towards one choice only, with no other alternatives.

Another insightful approach is Fairclough’s (1994), who analyses the power and “hidden relations” of power in media discourse. According to this author: “producers exercise power over consumers in that they have sole producing rights and can therefore determine what is included and excluded, how events are represented, and even the subject positions of their audiences” (1994: 50).

In the case of blurbs, publishing houses seek to send only one message to the potential reader, basically that the book has many qualities and the author is a good writer. As has been seen, this positive evaluation and recommendation is supported by review extracts, which are exactly that: selected pieces of longer reviews. Therefore, these extracts have been manipulated before reaching the reader, so the potential buyer has no access to the rest of the review, which might contain negative criticism. Only one of the firms under study, Barnes & Noble, offers the original whole review. But even in this case, the firm decides which reviews to display and which not. The same applies to the so-called “Customer’s reviews,” which have also been dealt with in this paper: by including the opinions and comments of readers, publishing houses seem to gain objectivity because the promotion of their goods does not come from their own employers, but from customers. However, it is clear that even these customer’s reviews are selected and only the positive ones are displayed.

6. Concluding remarks

This preliminary study of blurbs has tried to shed some light onto a genre with which we as readers are very familiar but whose study has been somewhat neglected so far. After analysing a corpus of more than 60 blurbs, this paper seems to provide evidence that blurbs constitute a genre characterised by its own communicative purpose: to persuade the reader to buy the book by describing its contents and by praising its qualities. This communicative purpose, characteristic of advertising and promotional genres, is reflected in the rhetorical structure of the blurb, which consists of three main moves: description, evaluation and author’s biography.

Moreover, blurbs make use of a wide range of textual features and linguistic conventions, most of them typical of advertising, in order to achieve their communicative purpose.

However, further research is needed to unveil the many interesting aspects that blurbs present. In this sense, the evolution of blurbs from a diachronic perspective, the connection between blurbs and book reviews, and the status of the Internet blurb in relation with its non-digital counterpart may constitute possible lines of research for further exploration of this fascinating topic.

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M^a Lluïsa Gea Valor is a lecturer in English Language and English for Specific Purposes at Universitat Jaume I (Castelló, Spain). Her research interests lie in the field of genre analysis, especially academic and digital genres. She is the author of *A Pragmatic Approach to Politeness and Modality in the Book Review* (2000).