

Persuasion in Blurbs As An Advertising Discourse (An Extracted Research of Master Degree Letter)

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Abstract

It is a well-known fact that publishing companies spend much money, time and energy in designing their book covers to attract potential customers. As the first thing people do when they buy or intend to buy a book is looking at its front cover. However, if there is a need to know more about the book, people usually look at the information on its back cover.

This paper attempts to explore the persuasive function of blurbs beyond the constraints of the academic domain and consequently their connection with advertising discourse in two main sections: The first presents the concept of blurb and its structure while the second defines persuasion and shows the most prominent strategies used in blurbs.

Finally, this paper gives the conclusion that the blurb is a persuasive text as it aims to influence others to buy the book and therefore, blurb is a type of advertising.

الإقناع في النبذة التعريفية للكتاب كخطاب إعلاني

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المستخلص

من المعلوم أن شركات النشر تنفق الكثير من المال والوقت والطاقة في تصميم أغلفة الكتب لجذب العملاء المحتملين. ولأن أول شيء يفعله الناس عندما يقوموا بشراء أو ينووا شراء كتاب هو أن يبحثوا في الغلاف الأمامي. ومع ذلك، إذا كان هناك حاجة إلى معرفة المزيد عن الكتاب، فإن الناس عادة ينظروا في المعلومات الموجودة على الغلاف الخلفي.

تحاول هذه الورقة دراسة وظيفة الإقناع للنبذة التعريفية للكتاب والتي تتجاوز القيود في المجال الأكاديمي، ومن ثم ارتباطها مع خطاب الإعلان في جزأين رئيسيين: يعرض الأول مفهوم النبذة التعريفية للكتاب وهيكلها بينما يعرف الثاني الإقناع ويعرض أبرز الاستراتيجيات المستخدمة في النبذة التعريفية للكتاب. وأخيراً، تظهر نتائج البحث أن النبذة التعريفية للكتاب هو نص مقنع يهدف إلى التأثير على الآخرين لشراء الكتاب، ولذلك، يعتبر نوع من الإعلان.

Introduction

Blore (2000:185) portrays advertising as an attractive power, which is able to manipulate the peoples' ideas and beliefs. It is the art of arresting the human intelligence just long enough to get money from it.

Cohen (1999:5) believes that advertising is a business activity, using creative techniques to design a persuasive communications in mass media that promote ideas, goods, and services in a manner consistent with the achievement of the advertiser's objectives, the delivery of consumer satisfactions, and the development of social and economic welfare.

It is used with persuasive intent and it is designed to influence the behavior and/ or thought patterns of the audience. That is, the advertisers are striving to alter the behavior and/or levels of awareness, knowledge, and so on in a manner that would be beneficial to them (Sandage et al, 1987:6).

As the main communicative purpose of blurbs is to persuade the 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 fulfill that communicative purpose. Therefore, blurbs may be considered as a genre, characterised by its own communicative purpose, rhetorical organisation and linguistic conventions.

Section One:

1. What is a Blurb?

Wikipedia defines a blurb as a short summary or some words of praise accompanying a creative work, usually used on books without giving away any details, that is usually referring to the words on the back of the book jacket but also commonly seen on DVD and video cases. It can be any combination of quotes from the work, the author, the publisher, reviewers or fans, a summary of the plot, a biography of the author or simply claims about the importance of the work.

Blurb means "publisher's short description of the contents of a book, usually printed on the jacket or cover" (*OALD*, 1990). Blurbs cannot be considered as representative instances of advertising discourse but they do share the same communicative purpose as they function as factual marketing strategies aimed at getting the potential customer to buy and read the book. They also present many linguistic features typical of such discourse.

2. The Structure of the Blurbs:

According to Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993) as cited in Valor (2005:47), 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 organization of the blurb.

Valor (2005:47) states that 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.

1. The 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 (ibid.:48).

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:

Example (1):

"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).

2. The 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 (ibid.:49).

Example (2):

"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).

Example (3):

".... 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).

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.

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(ibid.50).

Examples(4):

"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).

Example (5):

"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) (ibid.:51).

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 the 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).

In fact, 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 at convincing 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. Considering all this, blurbs fulfill one of the key prerequisites for a textual type to be considered as a genre: a communicative purpose (ibid.).

Accordingly, and 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 emphasizing and praising its qualities.

Section Two:

1. Persuasion

Persuasion is communication beyond words that attempts to influence or alter the framework of another, sometimes leading to a change in behavior. Human communication according to Codoban (2006: 152) “means influencing other minds through language”. Influence allows people to affect others and it’s consistently part of each individual’s life. For many there is some discomfort in thinking of communication as influence, but it in fact is.

Accordingly, persuasion is the act of influencing others, who are conscious of the intent, through communication.

2. Strategies of Persuasion:

Alfano and O’Brien (2005:31) suggest some strategies of persuasion in advertising:

1. Advertisers might use **narration** to sell their product—using their ad to tell a story.
2. They might employ **comparison-contrast** to encourage the consumer to buy their product rather than their competitor’s.
3. They might rely upon **example** or **illustration** to show how their product can be used or how it can impact a person’s life.
4. They might use **cause and effect** to demonstrate the benefits of using their product.
5. They might utilize **definition** to clarify their product’s purpose or function.
6. They might create an **analogy** to help make a difficult selling point or product—like fragrance—more accessible to their audience.

7. They might structure their ad around **process** to demonstrate the way a product can be used.
8. They might focus solely on **description** to show the reader the benefit of their product.
9. They might use **classification** and **division** to help the reader conceptualize how the product fits into a larger scheme.

3. Strategies of Persuasion in Blurbs:

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. For this reason, Valor (2005:52) suggests different strategies, which are adopted in blurbs to convince the reader to buy the book:

1. 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. They may be divided into:
 - a. Complimenting the book: In this case, praise usually appeals to the emotions by underlining the effects of the book on the reader, that is,

Example (6):

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

- b. Complimenting the author: According to Díez Arroyo (1998: 248) this case shows how praise tends to highlight the author's writing qualities and style, as in this example:

Example (7):

"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).

- c. Complimenting both the book and the author: Valor (2005:54) states that in some cases, the review extract praises both the book and the author in the same statement.

Example (8):

"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).

2. 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 example shows:

Example (9):

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

3. Imperative: Another characteristic feature of blurbs is the imperative, which is pervasive in advertising discourse. As Fairclough (1994 cited in Valor 2005:56) observes, the imperative and the address form 'you', which is dealt with below, evidence a personalized 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 (ibid.), as in the following:

Example (10):

"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).

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, This textual feature is closely related to the previous one, the imperative as in the following example:

Example (11):

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

4. 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:

Example (12):

"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).

Accordingly, manipulation can simply be considered as an exercise of shrewd or devious influence especially for one's own advantage. So independent from persuasion, manipulation takes advantage of a person's emotions and feelings for the speakers own potentially malicious devices.

4. The Discourse of Advertising and the Blurb

Fairclough (1994: 198) defines the discourse of advertising as 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.

Vestergaard and Schröder (1985:9) 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 as 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. Vestergaard and Schröder (ibid.) maintain that 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, where the original use value of a product is disregarded, and emphasis is placed on the achievement of social aims.

Considering all this, if books were categorized 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.

Conclusion:

This paper provides evidence that blurbs constitute a genre characterized by its own communicative purpose that is 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.

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.

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