

The Generic Structure of Self-Help Book Blurbs

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Abstract. The present research investigates the generic (rhetorical, move) structure of blurb sections in motivational self-help books. The structure is represented by four rhetorical moves (identified on the basis of semantic and functional criteria), namely *book description*, *book promotion*, *information about the author and website/blog*. Each of these moves is realized by means of certain rhetorical steps (rhetorical strategies that realize a particular communicative intention at the level of a move) and has its own communicative goal. The goals of four moves constitute the communicative purpose of self-help blurbs, namely to persuade the potential addressee to read/buy the book. The frequency of book description (100%) and book promotion (86%) moves is noticeable. Accordingly, two distinctive features of blurbs as a paratextual element and as an individual genre are information and persuasion. Although book description is the most frequent rhetorical move in the generic structure of self-help blurbs, these texts can undoubtedly be called evaluative and persuasive ones as evaluative language is vital even to the description of the book (which is mainly the summary of the book content).

Keywords: *motivational self-help genre, blurb, generic structure, rhetorical moves, rhetorical steps.*

Introduction. At the present stage of genre studies, new speech genres, which are constantly developing [1, p. 11], attract the attention of researchers. This concerns motivational self-help genre (also called success genre, personal-success literature, inspirational books) which emerged in the USA in the 18 century (the first work is traditionally considered to be “Autobiography” by Benjamin Franklin (1790) [8, p. 145]). In its classic version, this dynamic genre is a social phenomenon of the mainstream culture and, therefore, it is designed for a mass reader. The very name “self-help, success genre” explains the context of the genre under investigation: it is represented by the manuals on achieving success which aim to teach readers to help themselves live successfully and prosperously in the rapidly changing world. Among the authors of popular self-help texts there are N. Hill, F. Bettger, R. Kiyosaki, B. Tracy, J. Clason, J. Kehoe, etc. All of them have succeeded financially and developed a formula of success, which they want to share with the potential reader.

The popularity of the motivational self-help genre demonstrates its considerable importance for the modern audience [8; 11; 21; 22; 25; 26]. However, despite many attempts to study it from the sociology [22] cultural studies [11], or history [8; 11] perspectives, the success genre was the subject of only few linguistic researches [11; 21], and therefore it requires a detailed analysis.

Research problem. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the generic structure of blurbs accompanying seven motivational self-help books by bestselling American authors.

As G. Genette indicates, a text is often accompanied by a certain number of verbal or other elements such as an author’s name, a title, or a preface which the scholar names a paratext [15]. A blurb also belongs to a paratext, and what is more, together with a title and a preface of self-help books it makes up a key “threshold that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back” [15, p. 2]. The data suggest that it is an obligatory paratextual element as its frequency reaches 100% in the analyzed books. Although blurbs are “tied” to the main text, they can be used separately, for instance, as summaries of books and or about the author sections on websites (e.g. goodreads.com, Amazon.com) or as a kind of promotion on flyers. Such paratextual elements are relatively long, have explicit semantic and formal completeness as well as a typified generic structure and linguistic conventions and

can function separately from the main text. T. Yakhontova proposes to call them microgenres within a macrogenre which incorporates them [3, p. 222]. Therefore, in this paper, blurbs are considered not only as a paratextual element, but also as an individual genre (microgenre) with its own communicative purpose, pragmatic and linguistic features.

Discussion. As defined by Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, a blurb is “a short description of a book, a new product, etc., written by the people who have produced it, that is intended to attract your attention and make you want to buy it” [24]. However, the Spanish scholar M. Gea-Valor contends the fact that blurbs only describe books. The researcher argues that recommendation and evaluation play a key role in this genre. Thus, blurbs, according to Gea-Valor, function as a marketing strategy that aims to convince potential reader/customer to read/purchase a book [13, p. 42]. In addition, a blurb was defined as “a flamboyant advertisement”, “an inspired testimonial”, and “a fulsome praise” [30] by American humorist Gelett Burgess who coined the term in 1907.

The rhetorical organization of blurbs for various genres has been intensively studied in recent years. Thus, a detailed analysis of blurbs accompanying fiction and academic books [7; 9; 13; 14; 16], EFL books [4], Construction Engineering and Architecture textbooks [24], and online bestselling fiction books [23] has been performed. Despite the immense popularity of self-help books, surprisingly no attention has been paid to their blurbs leaving this area of research unexplored to date.

Based on the adoption of Swales’ approach [28], hard cover self-help blurbs were examined to reveal move-step sequences. Such a procedure “allows tracing the conventional organization of the content influenced by the communicative purpose of the genre” [3, p. 129]. Therefore, moves are considered as cognitive structures which serve particular communicative intentions and are subordinate to the general communicative purpose of the genre [6, c. 30-31]. T. Yakhontova claims that these moves are actually segments of a text which perform specific communicative functions and calls them functional and semantic textual blocks [3, p. 170].

Most researchers agree that persuasive nature of blurbs outweighs their surface informative nature [13, p. 45], and positive evaluation is a core of the genre [9; 16; 23] which makes it close to advertising discourse. Moreover, the

common communicative purpose, namely to convince a potential reader/customer to read/purchase the book, makes blurbs use a wide range of language and discourse conventions typical of advertising discourse.

In the present study, a model by H. Önder has been adopted. In the light of her findings, H. Önder suggests that book blurbs have a six-move schematic structure: complementing the author, book description, justifying a book by establishing a niche, book promotion, author's background and author's website/blog. After a precise analysis of seven hard cover self-help blurbs we found out there is no such a move, as justifying a book by establishing a niche. The step *claiming the uniqueness of the book* in prefaces to self-help books (see [2]) seems to explain the absence of that move in blurbs for motivational self-help genre. Furthermore, short excerpts from reviews written by renowned authors fully compensate for this absence. In addition, such functional and semantic textual blocks as complementing the author and author's background seem to employ the same content, so it would be advisable to combine them.

Results. Genre analysis of self-help blurbs revealed a four-move schematic structure: *book description, book promotion, information about the author and website/blog.* Each of these moves is realized by means of certain rhetorical steps (rhetorical strategies that realize a particular communicative intention at the level of a move) and has its own communicative goal. The goals of four moves constitute the communicative purpose of self-help blurbs, namely to persuade the potential addressee to read/buy the book. The frequency of moves and steps in blurbs accompanying motivational self-help books is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Moves and steps in blurbs for self-help books

Moves	Steps	Frequency
Move 1 Book description		7/7 (100%)
	1. Outlining the theme of the book/ genre identification.	7/7 (100%)
	2. Claiming positive results.	4/7 (57%)
	3. Quotations from the book.	1/7 (14%)
Move 2 Book promotion		6/7 (86%)
	1. Complimenting the book.	6/7 (86%)
	2. Excerpts from reviews.	5/7 (71%)
Move 3 Information about the author		4/7 (57%)
	1. Complimenting the author.	3/7 (43%)
	2. Stating some biographical facts.	3/7 (43%)
Move 4 Website/blog		4/7 (57%)
	1. Website/blog	3/7 (43%)
	2. Mailing address	1/7 (14%)

As can be seen from Table 1, the most frequent element of the self-help blurbs' generic structure is **book description**. This rhetorical move is actually a summary of the book's content. Since we deal with non-fiction texts, the summary refers to the line of the argument. It usually outlines the theme of the book or the genre which the book refers to, for example:

The step-by-step blueprint for success and achievement presented in these pages includes proven principles drawn from psychology, religion, philosophy, business, econom-

ics, politics, history, and metaphysics [29];

THINK AND GROW RICH IS ONE OF THE GREAT SELF-HELP BOOKS OF ALL TIME [17];

Countless readers have been helped by the famous "Babylonian parables", hailed as the greatest of all inspirational works on the subject of thrift, financial planning, and personal wealth. [10].

As demonstrated by the first example, the theme of the book is clearly outlined – *success and achievement*; as shown by the second example, the book belongs to the motivational self-help genre (*self-help books*). The third example outlines both the theme of the book (*thrift, financial planning, and personal wealth*) and the genre (*inspirational works*).

Blurbers (authors of blurbs) mainly use phrases such as *"the author gives/shows/demonstrates, the book reveals/offers"* to describe the book's content:

In MONEY, SUCCESS & YOU, best-selling author John Kehoe shows that there are powerful reasons to harness our destiny. The book reveals how to gain financial prosperity by learning to shift your focus to catch sight of what's really valuable in this information wilderness [19];

Acclaimed as a modern-day classic, this celebrated bestseller offers an understanding of – and a solution to – your personal financial problems that will guide you through a lifetime [10].

The rhetorical strategy *claiming positive results* is implemented in two ways: as promises about positive changes in the reader's life and as positive consequences in the life of others. Future Simple tense (*will + verb*) and modal verb *can* serve as grammatical devices of expressing promises about positive change while the Present Perfect tense is used to express positive consequences which took place in the life of others. The examples are the following:

These ideas are combined in a fast-moving, informative series of steps that will lead you to greater success than you ever imagined possible – they can raise your self-esteem, improve personal performance, and give you complete control over every aspect of your personal and professional life [29];

Many of the more than one million graduates of the seminar program upon which this book is based have dramatically increased their income and improved their lives in every respect [29];

Countless readers have been helped by the famous "Babylonian parable" ... [10].

Book description can also be realized via quotations from the book, that is, the reproduction of the sentences from the book. Since only two examples of this step were found, it is considered to be occasional rather than typical:

"The main reason people struggle financially is because they have spent years in school but learnt nothing about money. The result is that people learn to work for money ... but never learn to have money work for them"

Robert Kiyosaki.

Author of *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* [20]

Move 2 **book promotion** is represented by two steps in the generic structure of self-help blurbs – *complementing the book* and *excerpts from reviews*. Positive evaluative words (mainly adjectives), syntactic constructions such as *"one of the", "of all time"* as well as words *"bestseller", "bestselling", "# 1"* are abundant in praising the book. The following examples illustrate this point:

THINK AND GROW RICH IS ONE OF THE GREAT SELF-HELP BOOKS OF ALL TIME [21];

THE # 1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER [20];

In language as simple as they found in the Bible, these fascinating and informative stories set you on a sure path to prosperity and its accompanying joys. Acclaimed as a modern-day classic, this celebrated bestseller offers an understanding of – and a solution to – your personal financial problems that will guide you through a lifetime [10].

In the third example, reference to the style of the book (*simple language*) is employed to evaluate the book positively. It is worth highlighting that some blurbs include embedded moves, that is two or more moves are embedded in the same sentence. The third example clearly illustrates this point: the second sentence comprises **book description** and **book promotion**.

Excerpts from reviews published in newspapers or magazines are also plentiful in blurbs when promoting the book. In this case, only the source is mentioned without the reviewer's name, for example, *Los Angeles Times*, *Sunday Dominion Times*, *USA Today*, *Honolulu Magazine* etc.:

“Rich Dad Poor Dad is a starting point for anyone looking to gain control of their financial future”

USA Today [20];

*“There is genius, power and magic within us
- John Kehoe explains how to awaken it”.*

Sunday Dominion Times [19];

“Gives practical techniques everyone can use”

Montreal Gazette [19].

Publishers believe reviews written by celebrities or renowned authors in the field of personal achievement to be a successful PR-technique and often employ them. If the author of the review is well-known, only his/her name is indicated. If he/she is known only in a particular community, his/her occupation and/or affiliation are indicated:

“The most helpful and inspiring book on salesmanship that I have ever read” – Dale Carnegie [5];

“Rich Dad Poor Dad is not about getting rich quickly. It is about taking responsibility for your financial affairs and improving wealth by mastering money. Read it if you want to awaken your financial genius”

Dr. Ed Koken

Lecturer on Finance,

RMIT University, Melbourne [20].

As can be seen from the examples, these excerpts are short and eye-catching, and are often printed in a different font and color, thus aiming to draw readers' attention. Concerning these excerpts, one detail is worth highlighting: the purpose of them is not only to provide the positive evaluation of the book (rarely of the author), but also to recommend to read/buy this book. The marker of this recommendation is an imperative with the verb “*read*” where the blurb directly targets the addressee. Moreover, the pronoun “*you*” is used to explicitly target the potential reader. The following example illustrates this point:

If you want all insider wisdom on how to personally get and STAY rich, read this book! [20];

Thus, the main purpose of Move 2 is to evaluate the book (always positively) and recommend the reader to read it. This move, in Gea-Valor's words, “produces the most striking effect on the reader and can be considered the slogan of the book” [13, p.50]. As is known, a slogan is a brief and concise formula in advertisements which serves to at-

tract consumers' attention and arouse their interest in the product. Therefore, a sentence *THE SUCCESS SECRETS OF THE ANCIENTS – AN ASSURED ROAD TO HAPPINESS AND PROSPERITY* [13] can be definitely considered an advertising slogan, or, as N. Fairclough puts it, “the syntax of concise, to-the-point efficiency” [12, p. 205] in the **book promotion**.

Move 3 – **information about the author** – is realized by one or two rhetorical steps, namely *complementing the author* and *stating some biographical facts*. It performs both promotional and informative communicative functions. The information on the author's current interests, work experience, previous publications, awards, participation in radio or TV programs as well as some family details and place/year of the author's birth/death are offered in this Move. The marker of the positive evaluation of the author is the phrase “*the author of ... bestseller*”. The examples are as follows:

For over a decade, John Kehoe has travelled the world teaching people the principles of success and happiness. A dynamic lecturer and author of the bestseller Mind Power, he is admired and respected by all those who have benefited by his teachings.

A self-made millionaire, entrepreneur, philanthropist and social activist, he has been the subject of numerous radio, TV and newspaper interviews. [19]

Frank Bettger was the author of the famed best seller How I Multiplied My Income and Happiness in Selling. He died in 1981 [5].

The final Move in the generic structure of self-help blurbs is **Website/blog**. This move directs the reader to online sources for further information about the author or the book (only one blurb in the corpus contained three mailing addresses):

Visit our Web site at www.twbookmark.com [20]

Register online at www.simonsays.com for more information on this and other great books. [29]

Conclusions. The present research has focused on generic structure of hard cover self-help book blurbs. The findings indicate that this structure is represented by four Moves: *book description*, *book promotion*, *information about the author* and *website/blog*. Each of these moves is realized by means of certain rhetorical steps (rhetorical strategies that realize a particular communicative intention at the level of a move) and has its own communicative goal. The goals of four moves constitute the communicative purpose of self-help blurbs, namely to persuade the potential addressee to read/buy a book. The frequency of book description (100%) and book promotion (86%) moves is noticeable. Accordingly, two distinctive features of self-help blurbs as a paratextual element and as an individual genre are information and persuasion. Although book description is the most frequent rhetorical move in the generic structure of self-help blurbs, these texts can undoubtedly be called evaluative and persuasive ones as evaluative language is vital even to the description of the book which is mainly the summary of the book content.

Blurbers carefully select the vocabulary and grammatical structures to achieve the communicative purpose of the genre. With this in mind, further research is needed to analyze promotional elements employed to express positive evaluation in self-help book blurbs.

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Смысловая организация промоционной аннотации мотивационного жанра «искусство успеха»

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Аннотация. В статье анализируется смысловая организация промоционной аннотации мотивационного жанра «искусство успеха». Особенности этой структуры представлены в виде четырех функционально-семантических блоков – *общая характеристика книги, эксплицитное рекламирование книги, сведения об авторе и вебсайт/блог*. Каждый из этих функционально-семантических блоков реализуется определенными риторическими стратегиями и имеет свое коммуникативное назначение, а их суммарное количество составляет коммуникативную цель промоционной аннотации. – убедить потенциального адресата прочитать/ купить книгу. Заметной частотностью отличаются *общая характеристика книги (100%)* и *эксплицитное рекламирование книги (86%)*. В соответствии с этим, двумя ключевыми параметрами, характеризующими промоционную аннотацию как паратекстовый элемент и как отдельный жанр, являются информация и убеждение. Хотя общая характеристика книги является наиболее частотным коммуникативным блоком в смысловой организации промоционных аннотаций, их можно назвать оценочно-персуазивными текстами, поскольку даже в описании содержания книги заметна ярко выраженная оценка.

Ключевые слова: *мотивационный жанр «искусство успеха», промоционная аннотация, смысловая организация жанра, функционально-семантический блок, риторическая стратегия.*