

# REVIEW OF NON-LINGUISTIC RESEARCH STUDIES ON BOOK BLURBS

Shahla Qasim<sup>1</sup> and Aleem Shakir<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Applied Linguistics, GC University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

<sup>2</sup>Department of Applied Linguistics, GC University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: [shahlaqasim1@hotmail.com](mailto:shahlaqasim1@hotmail.com)

**ABSTRACT:** *Book blurbs have occupied a conspicuous place in the fields of book writing and book marketing. Their existence has become essential for the promotion of book industry. The multifaceted nature of blurb domain has not only attracted the attention of a considerable majority of linguists but also involved a number of individuals from non-linguistic field to talk over the blurb text from various angles. The paper reviews multiple perspectives of non-linguistic research on book blurbs, which not only highlight the indispensable role of book blurbs in setting new buying trends but also overviews serious allegations charged against the highly elaborated and inflated phraseology used in writing blurbs. It is finally concluded that despite multiple negative voices raised against blurbs, it is an acknowledged phenomenon that blurbs are a source of encouragement, inspiration and promotion in this rapidly expanding book industry and they do influence the choice of the customers.*

**Keywords:** Book blurbs, Non-linguistic, Researchers, Review, Promotion.

## INTRODUCTION

Blurb constitutes a short collection of information about the content and quality of book along with its author, from a known, reliable and prestigious source. Glatzer (2011) remarked that as employers, before offering job to the candidate require references confirming the expertise and trustworthiness of candidate for a particular job. The same service is supplied by book endorsements, they assure readers that someone is vouching for the quality of the book, even if only in the form of a snappy one line on its cover [1]. The paper presents the exploration of book blurbs from non-linguistic point of view by the researchers who are mostly literary critics, authors and blubbers at the same time. A few writers have seen the content and function of blurbs through a positive lens highlighting its significance for authors, blubbers and publishers [2,3,4,5]. Several others have underscored some of the ethical concerns and marketing issues related with book blurbs [6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11]. A few noteworthy studies tried to explore that how far customer's choice of books is influenced by book blurbs or what role is played by book blurbs in setting buying trends of common public [12, 13, 14].

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data comprised different research studies and articles published in important newspapers and journals. The data was accessed through internet source. Selected articles presented a critical evaluation of the content of book blurbs from non-linguistic point of view. Initially, more than one hundred articles were collected through online source. After a careful screening, a sample of 25 articles was selected for review, later to be divided into four groups, i.e., diachronic study of book blurbs, studies related with positive features of book blurbs, studies related with negative issues of book blurbs and studies related with influence of book blurbs.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The studies were classified under four headings, depending upon the subject matter and focus of attention i.e. diachronic study of book blurbs, studies related with positive features of book blurbs, studies related with negative issues of book blurbs and studies related with influence of book blurbs.

## Diachronic Study of Book Blurbs

A revealing account of the evolutionary progression of book blurb was presented by a comparatively recent writer, Levinovitz (2012) [11]. He traced out the origin of blurb in 1906, coined by Gelett Burgess (1866-1951), but simultaneously claimed the existence of book blurbs in the panels of literary history long before the term 'blurb' was introduced. Levinovitz (2012) turned the pages of ancient Roman history, when newspapers, periodicals and professional book reviews were nonexistent and book sellers used pillars, nearest to their shops or open book displays, to advertise the new books and titles [11]. Roman author Martial (between 38 and 41 AD – between 102 and 104 AD), the inventor of 'Epigram' (published between AD 86 and 103), wrote himself the introductory stuff as 'prefatory puff' in the beginning of his collection.

"I trust that, in this little book of mine, I have observed such self-control, that whosoever forms a fair judgment from his mind can make no complaint of them."

The self-written remarks were exceptional because they not only presented the book and author in praising terms but also reposed confidence on the fair judgment quality of readers. After fourteen hundred years passed, by 1516, the humanists came up with the idea of getting acclamatory remarks printed on book by some person other than author and publisher. Thomas More (1478-1535) wrote Utopia (published in 1516) and requested his friend Erasmus (1466-1536) to get his book ornamented with the commendatory remarks of the highly intellectual and literary figures of that time. Erasmus himself adorned the book with his laudatory remarks Up to 1600s, all writers and intellectuals continued writing appreciating notes to applaud authors and their books. Ben Johnson's (1572-1637) glowing tribute to Shakespeare's First Folio (published in 1623):

Shine forth, thou star of poets, and with rage  
Or influence, chide or cheer the dropping stage  
Which, since thy flight from hence, hath mourned like night  
And despairs day, but for thy volume's light  
In 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of periodicals, the publishers and authors jumped at the opportunity to adapt this new form of publicity to serve the purpose of promoting their books. Samuel Richardson's Pamela (1741) is a good example of exceptional use of prefatory puff. Two reviews were included in the beginning. These reviews were first published as 'pre-

publication praise' in the weekly Miscellany. Richardson wrote an extravagant self-praise note which was also included in the book. The whole ludicrous practice annoyed Henry Fielding (1707) so much that he wrote a satirical response "Pamela", which was prefaced by a fake ridiculous letter from the editor to 'himself', a laudatory letter from Mr. Puff with an exasperated coda: "Note, Reader, several other commendatory letters and copies of verses will be prepared against the next edition". Henry Fielding (1707) used different satirical devices to make people conscious about this unhealthy practice of self-praise and cronyism, or the "meaninglessness of blurbs" as phrased by Levinovitz (2012) [11]. Blurbs were considered meaningless because they had nothing to do with content and quality of books. They were written for the sake of publicity and promotion of books, authors and publishers even in those days when marketing was not developed enough and resources were limited.

Another literary giant who updated the format and content of blurb was Walt Whitman (1819-1892). After receiving a letter of admiration from Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Whitman got the selected portion printed in gilt letters on the outer cover of book.' And it was the very first example of blurb on the outside of a book:

I Greet You at the Beginning of a Great Career

R. W Emerson

Emerson's letter in entirety and many other laudatory reviews were printed at the end of book.

It was not only the beginning of a great career for Whitman but also a great beginning for the newly emerged blurb genre on the outer cover of book. After Whitman's innovations to modernize blurbs, further improvements continued to be introduced by writers and publishers depending upon the changing times and needs of the stakeholders. Blurbs cannot be discarded on the grounds of being unauthentic and unreliable. Their significance for writers, publishers and readers is a fact which received due acknowledgement from a couple of studies detailed in next part.

#### **Studies Related with Positive Features of Blurbs**

An overwhelming number of studies discussed book blurbs from an optimistic and constructive outlook, underscoring the productive impact produced by blurbs. Trachtenberg (2003) emphasized the inevitability of book blurbs for writers and publishers [3]. He quoted various examples to prove that blurbs written by the top-selling writers kept the maiden books from fading into oblivion. Significance of top-writers' blurbs for hoisting new voices is an established phenomena. The new writers remain in a dire need of blurbs penned down by eminent authors to get immediate acknowledgement and to be noticed in reading circle. There is a rising trend in known authors that most of them decline to write blurbs for new writers on account of their busy schedules and because they are so overwhelmed by the onslaught of unsolicited manuscripts that they never get time to go through them, so they simply refuse. It becomes very difficult for the new writers to secure a promising career and to overcome the imminent hazard of obscurity in case the eminent authors do not blurb them at all. If a famous celebrity shows up in the blurb list, it is a good indication that the book will grab the

attention of media and may reach the sight and hearing of people who are interested in buying books. A good blurb can invariably change the fortune of a book from marketing point of view. Therefore blurb writing is a serious activity, it should not be taken as a wastage of time. Rather it should be taken as a tremendous honor, as is suggested by Almond (2003) [4]. It means that people believe and trust the words of blurb writers and that their names help sell books.

Blurbs are indispensable for the subsistence of publishing industry which already is undergoing a state of fierce competition with television, movies, internet and other innumerable attention grabbing communicative and entertainment devices. In some cases, blurbers wrote blurbs for the cause of promoting publishing companies and writers. Jacobs (2012) (known as king of blurbs) referred to blurb as a thrilling business and reason for writing so many blurbs was to save publishing companies from falling into loss. Other reasons, he enumerated, were liking of book in entirety or just preface and to satisfy his ego that he enjoyed getting praise for his praise [15]. Sanburn (2012) stated that for a few writers the motivation for writing blurb was absolutely genuine. They wrote blurbs not only to help talented young writers get noticed by potential readers but also to benefit book sellers and industry as a whole [12].

The significance of blurbs as a source of encouragement and inspiration for the writers is well expressed by the insightful experience of Scott (2012) who stated that how a glowing recommendation by an eminent author changed her life and she vowed to utilize her maximum potential to take a place among the best writers of her generation [5]. This is another constructive aspect of blurbs that they prove to be immensely helpful in keeping writers' morale high and making them feeling proud of their achievements.

#### **Studies Related with Negative Issues of Blurbs**

Book blurbs are pithy little sentences that grace the back and sometime the front of book [2]. The content, format, and language of book blurbs have always been a center of critical attention of literary scholars and historians. The art and ethics of blurb are other arguable issues which remained the point of controversy over the years. Book blurb, according to Jackson (2000) 'is a minor literary form, every bit as exacting and disciplined as the cinquain, villanelle or a Petrarchan sonnet' [17]. Blurbs may be paratextual in nature [18], but requires an equal amount of seriousness and devotion, demanded for writing a manuscript. As Filer (2014) demonstrated that writing blurb needs a lot of thinking and contemplation [10]. It's no simple task to distil a whole reading experience into a couple of lines. But now it has been turned into a 'form of boosterism that has by some accounts spiraled out of control in a publishing market suffering from over-capacity' [19].

The reliability and originality of blurbs is suspected because the reasons underlying blurbs are found extra literary, either personal relationships or benefiting the publishing business [9]. In a number of cases, the books do not deserve that much inflated tributes of excessive praise and admiration as claimed by the description given in blurbs. Similar concern is echoed by Jackson (2003) that unnecessary and unwarranted

praise should be avoided in blurbs [17]. He advocated the 'elegant symmetry of treble adjectives as number 3 represents infinity in every culture. Filer (2014) remarks sarcastically about the purposeless use of superlatives (such as the most astounding, incredible, breathtaking) to accentuate the impact of adjectives [10]. So if the motive of writing blurb does not commensurate with the content and quality of book it appears to advocate, its functional utility and integrity may be called to question.

The hyperbolic excesses of blurbs are ridiculed by Dyrek (2003) with remarks that the enticing book blurbs may be baffling for those potential readers who are in search of a book worth reading [20]. Readers are suspected of the credibility of blurb description, find themselves in a fix at the time of selecting book for reading or buying purpose. The hyperbolic extravangza of blurbology do invite mockery and degrade the status of this genre to a level where it becomes a target of derision and scorn [9]. The blurbs have been referred to as 'today's most imaginative text' by Blades (1987) who sarcastically remarks that fiction writing does not appear in books but on book jackets [21]. The testimonials and endorsements displayed there come from author's friends and fellow writers in the form of highly elaborated words which sound unnatural and artificial in their impact. Similar views are shared by Warner (2012) who stated that blurbs sometime display overblown praise, which compares the book in hand to an enduring classic [2]. All this smacks nothing but dishonesty and fallaciousness. A literary critic, Levinovitz (2012) quoted George Orwell (1936), who referred to blurbs as 'disgusting tripe' and cited an exasperating example of 'hyperbolic ecstasy' from Sunday Times, 'If you can read this book and not shriek with delight, your soul is dead' [11]. Levinovitz (2012) suggested that blurbing should be banned and some fair system of grading the book should be established to help the hapless readers in selecting among thousands of great masterpieces [11].

This sorrowful situation leaves several questions to be answered. The most significant one is that what ulterior motives lie behind this practice of puffery which has stigmatized the whole blurb spectrum. Why do established authors and eminent cultural figures use excessively elaborated and exaggerated phrases in their bylined endorsements? Different literary and media people have presented different perspectives in this regard. Almond (2003) commented on the situation that the entire blurb milieu is nepotistic and queasily promotional [4]. Blurbs are one of the essential marketing tools which are dependable and through them publishers can draw attention to a particular book. Therefore they go to every length to allure the fascination of readers without realizing that they are throwing their credibility at stake. All this led Horowitz (2014) to state categorically that blurbs are now written just for promotion sake and 'authors promoting authors on book jackets is so wide spread now that few books appear without them' [22]. So cover blurbs have become advertisements, 'no space for balanced, nuanced positivity' [10].

Another aspect of blurbs, severely criticized by literary scholars, is concerned with 'serial blubbers'. Serial blubbers

is a term used for those writers who pen down endorsements frequently and recurrently to extend undue favors to books and authors. Truitt (2001) used disparaging remarks to curb the reckless practice of 'serial blubbers' who squander the words of praise in 'wanton blurbing' without realizing the fact that the more quotes they hand out, the more their blurbs will be ignored by the readers [6]. Foggo (2004) looked at the issue from a different angle and pointed out how readers were misled by the authors' irresponsible attitude [7]. They inscribe laudatory remarks without reading. A few authors followed "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" policy [7]. It refers to those authors who write highly inflated blurbs for each other's books without having any concern about the quality or contents. This practice of 'reciprocal blurbing' was entertainingly disclosed in 'Spy magazine' column under the heading 'Logrolling in our time' during late 1980's and early 1990's. It investigated and displayed the authors promotional blurbs to benefit each other tracking 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' [19].

FailKoff (2004) argued that the 'war of reviewers' has renewed the old practice of 'logrolling'. The friends and family members of writer send anonymous reviews to boost sales. The genuine merit of book remains unexplored [8]. FailKoff (2004) found fault with unsolicited reviews by non-professionals and suggested a legitimate way for editors to request the concerned reviewers who are unbiased and on whose expertise and judgment, they repose confidence [8].

Commenting upon the negative inclination of blurbers, Paglia (1996) called for the utter denouncement of this, "corrupt practice of advance blurbs plagued with shameless cronyism and grotesque hyperbole" [23]. She raised voice against two discrepancies with respect to blurb writing. First, the blatant practice of authors to benefit each other overtly by exchanging highly inflated endorsements whether deserved or not. Genuine quality and merit of book are entirely neglected. This sort of unjustified praise is tantamount to falseness and dishonesty. Second, blurbs, most of the time display the exaggerated overstatements which sound improper and do not commensurate with the solemnity of this genre. Paglia (1996) asked for a complete rejection of blurbs which were written for no literary motives but to support the fellow authors, editors and publishers [23]. Horowitz (2014) suggested that excerpts from book reviews are rather permissible because they are open to interpretation [22].

Anyhow when seen at this incongruous problem with an objective look, no empirical study comes fore to attest these subjective perceptions of different voices. Cronin and La Barre (2005) conducted a research study to investigate the matter of authorship of blurbs, specifically taking into account the issues of 'reciprocal blurbing' and 'serial authors'. The findings surprisingly confuted the major allegations charged against blurbs. The assumptions of "back scratching" and "serial blubbers" at work were invalidated and reduced to hypothetical perceptions [19]. Cronin and La Barre (2005) analyzed 1850 blurbs of 450 books published in two disciplines, business and history. Results revealed that business books employed greater use of blurbs as compared to history books. Few books were found with 20 or more than

30 blurbs which indicated an excessive trend of marketing. Average number of blurbs per book was found to be 5. In history books, 52% of all blurbs were written from blubbers in the media world with academics 32%. In business, the pervasive blurring group was found to be industry (49%), media (29%) and academia (14 %). In history, blubbers generally came from media background because common people tend to develop ties of familiarity with them. Business books were mostly blurbed by industry people because they had an advanced level of understanding of business affairs and their recommendations would get instant recognition in readers. Three examples of "back scratching" were found in analysis but no coteries of back-scratching blubbers were identified [19].

Anyhow, just on the basis of this research study (inadequate data, blurbs drawn from only two subject areas), no generalized conclusions may be approached regarding underlying linkages of serial and reciprocal blurbs. More studies with a much larger data to be attested systematically are required to validate the authenticity of log-rolling phenomena in current literary scenario.

#### **Studies Related with Influence of Blurbs**

An important question which is addressed by few studies is related with the efficacy of blurbs that do they really influence the readers' selection of books and how far blurbs are helpful in boosting sale. As a matter of fact, no empirical research is published so far to explore the relationship between blurbs and a consumer's inclination to purchase. A few survey studies have been conducted to explore the buying trends and behaviors of people. Details are given in following paragraphs.

A study of more than 9,000 Avid readers by Verso Advertising Book Buying Behavior, was conducted in 2010. According to this study people were prompted to buy books because they were influenced by certain factors, i.e. author representation (52%), personal recommendation (49%), price (45 %), book reviews (37 %), cover /blurbs (22%), Advertising (including online, 14 %). The top factors which exerted the maximum impact upon the prospective buyers were found to be 'author representation' and 'personal recommendation'. Blurbs' influence remained 22% on prospective buyers.

Verso's (2012) study included 2,200 Avid readers in late 2011. The ratio for 'Author representation' and book blurbs were not included. Probably because the actual heading on this specific section was, 'Principal ways of learning about new titles' or 'Discoverability'. Rest of the factors and the percentage of their impact is as follows. Personal recommendation (49.2%), book staff recommendation (38.8%), advertising (24%), search engine (21.6%), book reviews (18.9%), online algorithm (16.0%), library visit (15.5%), blogs (12.1%), social network (11.8%). Results indicated that the most important source of discovering about new titles remained personal recommendation. Book blurbs have no role to play here because the survey confined to studying only discoverability of new book titles.

'Nielson Books and Consumers' conducted a book and consumer survey and presented results in Nielson Report,

2014. The report stated, " Factors affecting overall purchase were interest in series, pricing and reading an extract or looking inside before buying. As for authors themselves, likeability of the authors (get well written blurbs, folks!) and pricing were the important factors for both online and in print". Along with other notable factors, well written blurbs increase popularity of authors and affect buying trends.

Penguin's report about 'book buying trends' collected insights into the responses of 87 people, ages ranging from sixteen to eighty. It was a kind of survey study and questions were asked about the buying attitudes of people. The most important question inquired which things determine whether or not a reader will buy a book. Responses entailed the following factors:

Book cover (15 %), Reviews (20%), Endorsements (4%) Author credentials (12%), Lay out (3%), length (4%), size (3%), Price (18%), content/topic (19%).

So the most influential top two factors that sway a reader to purchasing a book are reviews (20%) and content (19%). Results reveal that reviews are potentially significant to persuade the buyers. While interesting content and title of book will also impact the buying decision of readers. This question and responses it brings forth are highly beneficial for the writers and publishers. They can adapt their promotional strategies according to the reaction of the people. Although blurbs do not appear distinctively in the factor list of this survey but 'Author credentials' and 'endorsements' are the characteristic features of blurbs.

Another unscientific survey regarding the impact of blurb to set buying trends was conducted by Morris (2012) in New York Times. He investigated if blurbs help sell goods (books) effectively. He put this question before well-known figures like Mariunne Schaefer (documentary film maker) and Sara Nelson (an extensive reader and writer of books). They replied affirmatively that blurbs from distinguished personalities intrigued them and they were convinced to buy books. They further added that people do get influenced by blurbs, that's why writers and publishers keep pursuing blurbs intensively. Colum Mc Cann (Winner of national book award, 2009) remarked that blurbs were a necessity for authors and publishers because they were designed specifically for placing the books on shelves of book shop. He admitted that blurbs for his own book 'Get the great world spin' were very important "to its initial book shop push. They helped the book succeed".

A systematic study with respect to the efficacy of blurbs, was conducted by Anderson (2012) [13]. He analyzed web ads, back cover blurbs and book introduction of monolingual dictionaries to see whether these three sources of information give clear, unmistakable and easily understandable information about the user group or whether they convey information about the lexicographic functions covered by dictionary. Sample constituted 4 monolingual English phrasal verb dictionaries and 5 monolingual English specialized dictionaries (all published by Oxford University Press). Analysis was based on functional theory of lexicography. Sentences containing clear or unclear information were extracted and percentage of their occurrences recorded.

Findings revealed that total proportion of clear statements remained in Blurbs (58%), Introduction/Preface (50%), Web ads (56.8%) and the total number of unclear statements in Blurbs (41.2%), Introduction/Preface (50%) and web ads (43.2%). As far as the comparison of two types of dictionaries in terms of the distribution of clear and unclear statement was concerned, the specialized dictionaries were found to be vague in their statements about dictionary functions. The study suggested more efficient use of blurbs, web ads and introduction to convey accurate information to the users to buy the most appropriate books [13].

### CONCLUSION

A detailed review of non-linguistic research studies regarding book blurbs vindicated the essentially productive and constructive role played by them in accelerating the popularity and sales rate of books, they speak of. It is also concluded that blurbs invariably serve the purpose of securing the reputation and credibility of books, authors and publishing houses. As argued by Masum and Zhang (2004), that survival of institutions and organizations depend upon the sound reputation and credibility, they bear among the society [25]. Reputation cannot be formed in isolation. Inundated broadcasting and ubiquitous advertising play a crucial role in forming reputation of people and institutions. Publishing companies, in an attempt of securing a sound and established reputation system, exhort favors and recommendations of literary titans and eminent celebrities for their published and to be published stuff in the form of endorsements and blurbs. This practice, most of the time is suspected and the credibility of blurbs and endorsements is called to question. Bowes (2012) exclaims that blurbs are hated the most, but they are needed the most. Blurbs are an integral part of the package, a necessary evil [26].

Blurbs have been a highly commercialized and institutionalized phenomena. Their credibility and sincerity is recurrently under threat due to some ulterior factors (a few discussed in foregoing paragraphs) but even then they cannot be altogether discarded. Their significance in boosting the book and author and their inevitability for the survival of publishing industry cannot be neglected. The comments of Almond (2003) truly depict the situation that blurbs are essentially a forum to champion literature and as such deserve some thing kinder than scorn[4].

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