From Narratives to Intensification and Hyperbole: Promotional Uses of Book Blurbs

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1. Evaluative language and promotion in book blurbs

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate evaluation in book blurbs.[2] Back-cover blurbs of bestsellers by well-known writers and fictional debuts are mainly evaluative-persuasive texts. They summarize the main features of the book and provide a mostly subjective evaluation of the book using a restricted set of lexical, pragmatic and textual devices. As such they serve both an informative and a promotional function or, in terms of Kotler and Armstrong's (1993) model of marketing strategies, they position and market the book.

Description and evaluation are found to be used in various combinations in promotional genres like book blurbs (Bhatia, 2004: 60), and are shown to be a feature of academic blurbs (Gesuato, 2004). However, this doesn't seem to be true of book blurbs taken from lazy reads, in which positioning the product and informing customers about its quality is almost exclusively done by means of optional narratives and obligatory evaluations, most often in the form of quotations from book reviews, and subjective descriptions (if present at all) are functional to evaluate the book and promote it.

In the light of this, I shall therefore concentrate on the lexical and discourse-pragmatic features of evaluative language in book blurbs using a corpus of around 200 book blurbs of lazy reads (BB corpus). As illustrated in Section 1 via a comparison of the generic structure of book-blurbs and book reviews of fiction (BR corpus: around 160 reviews, all taken from *The Economist*, years 2004-2006), back-cover blurbs from lazy reads only seem to share the Identification and Endorsement moves, with quality attributing sentences representing the basic text idiom (term from Werlich, 1976/1983). After touching upon the relationship between evaluation/comment, characterization, description and subjective narratives in Section 2, I shall turn to the lexical and pragmatic features of evaluative language in Section 3. The focus will be on type of evaluation and on the extent to which lexical resources construct positive affect (*I loved it*), appreciation (*engaging*) and/or judgment (*truthful*) (Martin and White, 2005) in book blurbs. Graduation of engagement and attitude will be investigated within the framework of speech act theory and speech act modification (Searle and Vandervecken, 1985; Merlini Barbaresi, 1997; Sbisà, 2001). Second, using the WordSmith Tools suite of software (Scott, 1999) I shall generate a keyword list for the book blurb corpus and then focus on the collocational profile of *funny*, the most key content word in the corpus. The purpose of this part of the analysis is therefore twofold: first, to identify diverse lexico-grammatical patterns which can be

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[2] Following Thompson and Hunston (2000: 5), by evaluation we mean "the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about." Unless otherwise stated, evaluation is used as a cover term for evaluation for good/bad, certainty, surprise and importance.

used to express intensification and hyperbole; and, second, to illustrate how novelty and creativity of the lexical device and degree of intensification also help foreground relevant information, appeal to the reader and focus on the relevant assets of different types of read.

2. Generic structure of book reviews and book blurbs

Alongside promotional letters, advertisements, and job application forms, book blurbs belong to the genre colony of promotional genres (Bhatia, 2004). They have also been grouped together with arts reviews, food reviews, academic book reviews, technical reviews, newspaper editorials and written adverts (Radighieri, 2006). This justifies complementing and adapting previous work on the rhetorical structure of book blurbs with works on the rhetorical structure of genres belonging to the same colony[3] in order to isolate moves and steps (cf. Swales 1990) in book blurbs and book reviews.

Table 1, *Rhetorical moves in book reviews*, summarises moves and steps in book reviews and provides the relevant examples. The star key (*) signals optional moves and steps, while single underlining indicates evaluative passages in the examples.

Obligatory sections comprise Move 1, *Identification*, which positions the book on the market by means of creating the need for a desirable object, Move 3, *Highlighting parts of the book*, used to position and appraise the book, the main emphasis being on its content and qualities, and, third, Move 5, *Evaluating the book*, which includes both idiosyncratic evaluations and comments on style in the form of praise and criticism.

Table 1: Rhetorical moves in book reviews

1. Identification		
i. Issue #		(1a) Economist, 00130613, 9/30/2006, Vol. 380, Issue 8497 (BRF10)
ii. Title of review	a. *Providing general evaluation*	(1bi) Insipid and Overcooked (BRF5)
	b. *Defining general topic*	(1bii) Worked to death in Denmark. (BRF10)
iii. Domain		(1ci) Employment (BRF10)
*Subdomain		(1cii) Relations (BRF10)
iv. Section		(1di) Books and arts (BRF10)
*Subsection		(1dii) New fiction (BRF10)
*Evaluation		(1diii) Claire Messud's new novel will make her name. (BRF16)
v. Title of book		(1e) The Exception (BRF10)
vi. Author / translator		(1f) By Christian Jungersen. Translated by Anna Paterson. To be published in America by Nan A. Talese in July 2007 (BRF10)
vii. Publisher /Book series / Pages / Price		(1g) Weidenfeld and Nicolson; 487 pages; £12.99.
2. *Introducing the book		
i. *Providing initial evaluation of the book		(2ai) ROBERT HARRIS'S latest is an effortlessly slick and enjoyable book, … (BRF15)

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[3] Specifically, reference was made to: Kathpalia (1997) and Gesuato (2005), on book blurbs; Motta-Roth (1998), Stotesbury (2002), Salager-Meyer and Alacaraz Ariza (2004), Römer (2005), Suárez-Tejerina (2005), on academic book reviews; Diani (2004), on book review articles; Bhatia (2004: 65), on written adverts; Radighieri (2006), on arts reviews.

Table 1: Rhetorical moves in book reviews

(2aii) After more than a decade messing about writing some fine essays and autobiography mixed in with poor fiction and some questionable history, Martin Amis has suddenly--and unexpectedly, even to his publishers--turned in a work of real worth, a novel that not so much makes the spine tingle as the heart race at its passion and richness. (BRF7)

(2aiii) Le Monde likens him to Tolstoy. But is his book any good? (BRF4)

*ii. * Identifying literary (sub-)genre(s)*

(2b)…, part historical drama, part political thriller and part blueprint for a buddy movie. (BRF15)

3. Summarizing / highlighting parts of the book

i. Summarizing/highlighting content of the book (conveying the content of the book and announcing what it is about)

(3a) It tells the story of republican Rome's cleverest statesman, Cicero, as remembered by his secretary of 36 years, Tiro […]. Tiro's account begins when he and Cicero are still in their 20s. The two men travel to Rhodes so that Cicero, then a struggling lawyer, can improve his public-speaking skills. They visit a boot camp for would-be orators run by an old Greek called Molon. First Molon bulks up Cicero's scrawny body with eggs, anchovies and exercise. Then he puts muscles on his vocal cords by forcing him to declaim speeches over the roar of the ocean.

Cicero returns to Rome a lean, mean speechifying machine. The rest of the book charts his progress from senator to consul. […]"Imperium" ends on a high note, with Cicero's triumph over his aristocratic enemies. But Mr Harris hints at chaos to come, both for Cicero and for Rome.

*iv. *Introducing characters*

(3bi) Mr Littell's anti-hero shows signs of deep disturbance: an incestuous relationship with his sister, sado-masochistic homosexuality and a violent matricide form only a small part of a traumatic life. (BRF4)

(3bii) … he met Nazira: "robust in baggy jacket and trousers. A wool hat was pulled close over her wind-flayed cheeks, and her hair sprouted in two black side-tufts bound with blue ribbons." (BRF100)

3. *Author's track record (* Mentioning awards / listings / achievements*)

(4) Jonathan Littell's new novel, "Les Bienveillantes", has been the sensation of the rentrée littéraire, the French fiction season. Set for an initial print run of 12,000, it had sold nearly 200,000 copies by the end of September. A month later, the Académie Française awarded the book its grand prize for fiction, […] (BRF4)

4. Evaluating the book

i. Praising the book or
*Highlighting style and

(5a) Mr Arditti has written sensitively about many weighty issues--betrayal, fanaticism, faith--in his previous books. Once again he treats his subjects with empathy, neither trivialising their horror nor glamorising their plight for fictional benefit. (BRF8)

Idiosyncratic evaluation

(5b) In the week that a divided jury awarded the 2006 prize to Kiran Desai's "The Inheritance of Loss", what is astonishing is that Mr Amis's publishers did not even submit his book for consideration. (BRF7)

ii. Criticising the book
* Highlighting style and

(5c) So it is a puzzle that he could render such a compelling life story in a manner so dull. But then the finest ingredients can turn to overcooked mush in the hands of a cackhanded chef. (BRF5)

Idiosyncratic evaluation

(5d) But sometimes there is no clever way to say it: "Thirteen Moons" is awful. (BRF5)

5. *Picture

*i. * Photo*   *PHOTO (COLOR or black and white)*

*ii. *Caption*   (6) PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Teacher's pet (BRF19)

Let us now turn to the generic structure of book blurbs as exemplified in Table 2. The following conventions are used: the star key (*) precedes optional moves and

steps, single underlining signals evaluation in the text and small caps is used to label subfunctions in the *Endorsement* section (Move 4).

Four moves can be isolated:
- Move 1, *Identification*, an obligatory move which positions the book on the market;
- Move 2, *Establishing credentials*, is optional. Awards, listings and achievements are mentioned and/or reference is made to the author's biography (most often from the inside flap);
- Move 3, *Highlighting parts of the book*, is also optional. Six sub-functions can be distinguished: highlighting (as against summarizing) part of the book; introducing peculiar features of main character(s) which may attract the reader to buy the book; appraising the book; highlighting style; establishing credentials; targeting the market;
- All book blurbs share Move 4, *Appraising the book: quotations/endorsements*. It is a classic instance of genre embedding, in which the writer fully and explicitly endorses the positive opinions of satisfied reviewers as to targeted market, style, content, and/or idiosyncratic evaluation.

Table 2: Rhetorical moves in book blurbs

1. Identification	
i. Title of book	(7a) House of Sand and Fog. A novel. (BB211)
ii. Author	(7b) Andre Dubus III (BB211)
iv. Publisher / Publisher logo / Book series / Price / ISBN /barcode	(7c) Vintage | Trade Paperback | $14.95| 978-0-375-72734-4 (0-375-72734-5) (BB211)

2. *Establishing credentials (author's track record)

i. * Mentioning awards / listings / achievements
   (8ai) Now a *major* motion picture from Universal Pictures <u>starring</u> Renée Zellweger, Hugh Grant … (BB15)
   (8aii) National bestseller (BB207)
   (8aiii) Pulitzer Prize Winner (BB207)
   (8aiv) National Book Critic's Circle Award Finalist (BB207)

ii. *Author's biography (most often from the inside flap)
   (8b) Cormac McCarthy is the author of nine novels, among other literary works. His many honors include the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. (BB212)

3. *Highlighting parts of the book

i. *Introducing / highlighting content of the book and/or
   (8a) […], when the NSA's invincible code-breaking machine encounters a mysterious code it cannot break, the agency calls its head cryptographer, Susan Fletcher, a <u>brilliant and beautiful</u> mathematician. What she uncovers sends shock waves through the corridors of power. The NSA is being held hostage...not by guns or bombs, but by a code so ingeniously complex that if released it would cripple US intelligence.
   Caught in an accelerating tempest of secrecy and lies, Susan Fletcher battles to save the agency she believes in. Betrayed on all sides, she finds herself fighting not only for her country but for her life, and, in the end, for the life of the man she loves. […] (BB201)

ii. *Introducing characters
   (8bi) Will is thirty-six but <u>acts like a teenager</u>. Marcus <u>is a bit strange</u>: he listens to Mozart, looks after his mum and he's never owned a pair of trainers. (BB43)
   (8bii) Born in sweaty, fetid eighteenth-century Paris, Grenouille is distinctive <u>even</u> in infancy. He has "the finest nose in Paris and no personal odour." (BB85)
   (8biii) […] its head cryptographer, Susan Fletcher, a <u>brilliant and beautiful</u> mathematician. (BB201)

iii. *Appraising the book

Table 2: Rhetorical moves in book blurbs

> (8c) … White Teeth is a <u>funny, generous, big-hearted novel, adored</u> by critics and readers alike. (BB39)

***iv.** *Highlighting style**

> (8d) Dan Brown <u>set his razor-sharp research and storytelling skills</u> to work on the most powerful intelligence organization on earth, … (BB201)

***v.** *Establishing credentials**

> (8ei) Before the <u>phenomenal</u> runaway bestseller The Da Vinci Code, … (BB201)
>
> (8eii) <u>One of the most talked about</u> fictional debuts of recent years, … (BB39)

***vi.** *Targeting the market**

> (8f) … <u>adored</u> by critics and readers alike. (BB39)

4. Appraising the book: quotations (endorsement of reviewers' positive opinions)

***i.** *Highlighting style and/or**

***ii.** *Targeting the market and/or**

***iii.** *Introducing contents and/or**

***iv.** * Idiosyncratic evaluation*

> iii., iv.: (9a) "<u>A spanking 7-0 away win of a football book</u> [INTRODUCING CONTENTS, IDIOSYNCRATIC EVALUATION] ... <u>inventive, honest, funny, heroic, charming</u> . [IDIOSYNCRATIC EVALUATION]" Jim White, *Independent* (BB45)
>
> i., ii., iii., iv.: (9b) "Whether you are interested in football or not [TARGETING THE MARKET], this is <u>tears-running-down-your-face funny, read-bits-out-loud-to-complete-strangers funny</u>, [IDIOSYNCRATIC EVALUATION] <u>but also highly perceptive and honest</u> [IDIOSYNCRATIC EVALUATION] about Hornby's obsession and the state of the game [INTRODUCING CONTENTS]. Fever Pitch is <u>not only</u> the <u>best</u> football book <u>ever</u> written [HIGHLIGHTING STYLE], <u>it's the</u> <u>funniest book of the year</u> [IDIOSYNCRATIC EVALUATION]." Nicholas Lezard, *GQ* (BB45)
>
> i., iii.: (9c) "Fever Pitch is a <u>sophisticated</u> study of [HIGHLIGHTING STYLE] obsession, families, masculinity, class, identity, growing up, loyalty, depression and joy [INTRODUCING CONTENTS]. <u>He should write for England</u> [HIGHLIGHTING STYLE]." Brendan O'Keefe, *Observer* (BB45)

2. Text types in book blurbs

A comparison of the generic structure of book reviews and book blurbs seems to suggest that exclusively positive evaluation (as carried out via endorsements) is a defining property of book blurbs and a function of their marketing and promotional purposes. The promotional function of book blurbs shapes and constrains choices of content and style in the genre. Their main purpose is not to inform the prospective reader but to catch his/her attention and keep his/her interest alive in order to promote the book from the shelves and make it attractive to buy. As a result, book blurbs present selected positive features of the book in highly positive terms.

Werlich (1976/1983) distinguishes five abstract text types,[4] which can be realized by different genres (*text forms* and *text form variants* in his terms): description, narration, exposition, instruction, and argumentation. This section concentrates on the speech act of evaluating as a distinctive feature of *comments*, or subjective argumentations. The main emphasis will be on the way in which narration, description, characterization and evaluation variously combine within the genre under investigation.

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[4] Also called *generic values* (Bhatia, 2004) or *modes of discourse* (Smith, 2005).

2.1 Evaluation and narration in book blurbs

The examples in Table 2 were chosen to bring out the role of evaluation (single underlining) in book blurbs. However, they suggest that positioning the product and informing customers about its qualities can be done also using narratives, which (Werlich 1976/1983) focus on persons, objects and relations in time. They are found in optional subsections within Move 3, *Highlighting the book*. One such example is (8a), repeated here for the sake of clarity:

> (8a) […], when the NSA's invincible code-breaking machine encounters a mysterious code it cannot break, the agency calls its head cryptographer, Susan Fletcher, a brilliant and beautiful mathematician. What she uncovers sends shock waves through the corridors of power. The NSA is being held hostage...not by guns or bombs, but by a code so ingeniously complex that if released it would cripple US intelligence.
> Caught in an accelerating tempest of secrecy and lies, Susan Fletcher battles to save the agency she believes in. Betrayed on all sides, she finds herself fighting not only for her country but for her life, and, in the end, for the life of the man she loves […]. (BB201)

Since narratives present highlights of the book in order to introduce attractive content, inform prospective readers about the desirability and qualities of the book and arouse their curiosity, in terms of Kotler and Armstrong's (1993) model of marketing strategies they can be seen as positioning the book while introducing a promotion variable.[5]

2.2 Evaluation, characterization and description in book blurbs

Description is the text type related to the cognitive process of perception in space (Werlich, 1976/1983), it particularizes over and identifies objects, people and relations in space (Smith, 2005). Whereas objective descriptions are absent from book blurbs, subjective descriptions are highly infrequent and typically merge into evaluation or characterization within subjective argumentations or narratives. Specifically, description and characterization may serve various functions, as illustrated in examples (10ai) to (10cii):

a. *Setting the scene*

> (10ai) *Lying deep* in the *remote woods* of New Hampshire, the *crumbling gothic façade* of Bishop's Hill Academy hides dark secrets. (BB181)
> (10aii) Earth – a *garbage-ridden eco-disaster – is over-populated and disease-ridden.* (BB182)

Example (10ai) clearly sets the scene for future events. The passage is, in part, descriptive (italics): the figurative meaning of *dark* in *dark secrets* (end-focus position) spreads over the sentence leading to an exponential increase in subjectivity and inviting a figurative, evaluative reading for the preceding words, which would or could be interpreted literally in other contexts (respectively, *lying [...] in the remote woods*, and *crumbling gothic*, which point to wickedness, death and destruction, all meanings which are repeated and reinforced by *dark* (OED: DARK: 'characterized by turpitude, […] absence of moral or spiritual light, evil, wicked').

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[5] For a detailed classification of moves in academic back-cover blurbs within the framework of Kotler and Armstrong's (1993) model of the marketing management process, see Gesuato (2004).

(10aii) is a slightly different example, an environment description, or, better still, a characterization in which no reference is made to objects and relations in space and the reviewer depicts an apocalyptic scenario via accumulation of negative evaluatives which belong to the same semantic field (*garbage-ridden, eco-disaster, disease-ridden*) which may take on an exclusively classificatory meaning in other contexts, especially when used in isolation.[6]

b. *Introducing main character(s)*, as in (10b):

> (10b) But in the world of wizards, *small, skinny* Harry is *famous* as a survivor of the wizard who tried to kill him. He is left only with a *lightning-bolt scar on his forehead*, <u>curiously</u> *refined* <u>sensibilities</u>, and a <u>host of</u> *mysterious powers* to remind him that he's *quite, <u>yes, altogether</u> different from his aunt, uncle, and <u>spoiled, pig-like</u> cousin Dudley.*

where characterization (italics) merges into evaluation (single underlining) via antonyms (*survivor/kill; small, skinny/pig-like; curiously refined sensibilities/spoiled*) and the selection of evaluative lexis which reinforces or expresses subjective point of view (*quite, yes, altogether*; *spoiled, pig-like*).

c. *Introducing main character(s) and setting the scene; introducing main character(s) and setting events in motion*

> (10ci) Born in <u>*sweaty, fetid eighteenth-century Paris*</u>, Grenouille is *distinctive <u>even</u>* in infancy. He has "*the finest nose in Paris and no personal odour.*" (BB85)
> (10cii) His wife Stella - <u>*beautiful, isolated*</u> - befriends a patient, Edgar Stark, and the affair between them develops into an *obsessive, destructive* love [...] (BB181)

In (10ci) the striking contrast at the heart of the novel (*sweaty*, *fetid Paris/finest nose; finest nose/no personal odour*) is reinforced both via accumulation of negative endpoints typically associated with unpleasant sensations (*sweaty, fetid*) and the presence of contextual antonyms within and across sentences for the purposes of characterization. By contrast, in (10cii) characterizing Stella is only functional to presenting highlights of the book via a primarily narrative text type. The negative crescendo from isolation through friendship to *obsessive, destructive love* is clearly meant to inform the prospective reader about the contents of the book while awakening his/her curiosity.

3. Evaluation in book blurbs

The discussion so far suggests that appraising the book via quotations is a distinctive feature of book blurbs. Characterization tends to replace subjective descriptions and merge into evaluation. Alongside the very few narratives, descriptions are always optional and functional to commenting on the book and, hence, marketing it. As illustrated in Table 3, the lexical resources used chiefly express evaluation for good and bad (Thomson and Hunston, 2000). Within White and Martin's (2005) Appraisal Framework, they construct *appreciation* and, secondly, *judgement* (White and Martin,

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[6] See Tucker (in press) for extensive discussion of *describing*, *characterizing* and *evaluating* as features combining in various ways to realize the macro-speech-act of *commenting* on works of visual arts.

2005).[7] It should be stressed, however, that most adjectives take a high position along the positive side of the related underlying imaginary scale: alongside gradable lexical items like *good* or *funny* (Cruse, 1986: *implicit comparatives*), *implicit superlatives* (Cruse, 1986) abound (e.g. *extraordinary, fantastic,* or *wonderful*). Implicit superlatives graduate attitude and engagement. They indicate an extreme point along the imaginary open scale that they project on. As such, they are vehicles for semantic and pragmatic intensification (cf. 3.1 below).

Table 3: *Appraisal in book blurbs* (White and Martin 2005)

ATTITUDE:

a.	*AFFECT*	happiness:	*joyfully*
		inclination:	/
		satisfaction:	*amused*
		security:	/
		inclination:	/
b.	*APPRECIATION*	reaction:	*funny, brilliant, rollicking, witty, a pleasure charming, gripping, a page-turner with a beating heart, seductively, moving, profound, touching extraordinary, fantastic, good, great, superb, wonderful beautiful, sexy*
		composition:	*sophisticated, Bellovian rhetoric, well written, worthy of a Jewish American Balzac*
		valuation	/
c.	*JUDGMENT*	social esteem:	*heroic*
		capacity:	*perceptive*
		tenacity:	*powerful, heroic*
		social sanction:	*honest, true, truthful, wise*
		propriety:	/

Corpus analysis performed using the WordSmith Tools suite of software (Scott, 1999) gives support to and clearly furthers the investigation. As shown in Table 4, based on a comparison of the wordlists generated from book blurbs and book reviews, evaluative language is key in book blurbs (e.g. positive evaluatives like *funny*, implicit superlatives typically constructing appreciation like *brilliant, powerful, best, superb, extraordinary, terrifying*, highly grammaticalized intensifiers like *very* and *much*, and modifications for manner like *beautifully*).

Table 4: *Keywords [bb.kws[keyness]]*

N	WORD	FREQ.	BB.LST %	FREQ.	BRF.LST %	KEYNESS	P
2	FUNNY	103	0,15	13	0,02	79,9	0
7	BRILLIANT	64	0,09	7	53	0	

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[7] Within White and Martin's (2005) Appraisal Framework, *appraisal* is one of the discourse resources construing interpersonal meaning. *Attitude*, one of its subdomains, is further subdivided into: (a) *affect*, which is concerned with resources for construing emotional reactions; (b) *appreciation*, as manifested by resources which construe the value of things; (c) *judgement*, which deals with resources for assessing behaviour in relation to norms.

Table 4: *Keywords [bb.kws[keyness]]*

11 EXCITING	42	0,06	3		40,5	0
18 POWERFUL	62	0,09	13	0,02	35	0
19 BEST	130	0,18	52	0,07	34,9	0
24 SUPERB	36	0,05	3		33,1	0
25 MOST	193	0,27	97	0,14	32,9	0
27 EXTRAORDINARY	37	0,05	4		30,8	0
28 TERRIFYING	22	0,03	0		30,6	0
33 BEAUTIFULLY	45	0,06	8	0,01	28,7	0
34 MAGNIFICENT	25	0,04	1		27,7	0
36 WONDERFUL	28	0,04	2		27	0
38 VERY	84	0,12	31	0,04	25,6	0
44 GRIPPING	37	0,05	6		25	0,000001
45 HIGHLY	34	0,05	5		24,3	0,000001
50 MUCH	35	0,05	91	0,13	25,6	0

Keywords are pointers to something else, in this case to the role played by semantic and pragmatic intensification in the promotional genre of book blurbs. This means that the final steps of the study consist precisely in a brief overview of the literature on the semantics and pragmatics of intensification (Section 3.1) and, second, in a qualitative analysis of recurrent lexical and textual devices used to express intensification (Section 3.2). For reasons of space the analysis is restricted to *funny*, the most frequent keyword in book blurbs.

3.1 Intensification

Speakers/writers take a stance towards the value positions presented in the text and with respect to the putative addressees. As White and Martin (2005) put it, *graduation* includes the lexical and grammatical language resources which "graduate the force of the utterance or the focus of the categorization in which semantic values are identified." (Martin and White, 2005: 94). Such resources, Martin and White's (2005) argument goes on, "negotiate relationships of alignment/disalignment [i.e. agreement and disagreement] vis-à-vis the various value positions referenced by the text and hence vis-à-vis the socially-constituted communities of shared attitude and beliefs associated with those positions." (Martin and White, 2005: 95)

Graduation is not only a feature of all attitudinal meanings, whereby greater or lesser degrees of positivity or negativity can be construed, but also a property of *engagement*, defined as "the degree of the speaker/writer's intensity, or the degree of their investment in the utterance" (Martin and White, 2005: 136).

In this section I shall address graduation of attitude and engagement within the framework of speech act theory, hence, in terms of different degrees of intensification. Specifically, the emphasis will be on speech act modification (cf. Searle and Vandervecken, 1985; Merlini Barbaresi, 1997; Sbisà 2001) as brought about by intensifiers. As Labov (1984: 43–44) puts it, intensifiers are just one out of several markers of (pragmatic) intensity, or "the emotional expression of social orientation toward the linguistic content of a proposition: the commitment of the self to the proposition". They will be used to exemplify the semantics and pragmatics of intensification in view of the central role they play in book blurbs and, second, of the

various ways in which they can contribute to speech act modification depending on their lexico-semantic features.

3.1.1 Intensifiers: semantics

Intensifiers (Cacchiani, 2005) express the semantic role of degree. Specifically, upgrading intensifiers scale upwards a quality already present in the predicate (i.e. head) modified. They can be divided into *absolutives/completives* (e.g. *absolutely great*), intensifiers of the *extremely high degree* (e.g. *extremely high*) and intensifiers of the *high degree* (e.g. *very*).

Depending on underlying pattern of intensification and extent of grammaticalization (Cacchiani 2005), intensifiers also differ as to type and degree of expressivity and speaker's involvement and commitment. Three categories can be distinguished:

a. Still subjective (i.e. personal) but *relatively more rational evaluations* (*very, highly, easily*);
b. *Undistinguished emotions*:
    i.   *high-degree* intensifiers like *so (much)* or *really*;
    ii. *completives* like *absolutely* and *totally*;
    iii. intensifiers of the *completive and extremely high degree* like *focus markers* (*just, simply*), *taboo intensifiers* (*bloody*), *telic intensifiers* (*unbelievably*);
c. *Specific emotions*, as expressed via *non-telic polyfunctional intensifiers* like *amazingly*, which expresses idiosyncratic evaluations, and *semantic-feature-copying* intensifiers like *bitterly* (as in *bitterly disappointed*) and *desperately* (as in *desperately want*).

3.1.2 Intensifiers: pragmatics

In Bühler's (1934) terms, intensifiers are *expressive* vehicles of intensification in the sense that they are indexical of the speaker. The lexico-semantic features of intensifiers determine type and degree of expressivity conveyed and, as a result, ability to contribute speech act modification. If intensifiers convey expressivity to different extents, by implication this is tantamount to reinforcing inner and mental states, the degree of strength associated with the sincerity conditions of the speech act, and the speaker/writer's epistemic commitment, which eventually turns out to modulate the resulting speech act.

We can distinguish between *reinforcement*, where it is not a matter of face-work (11a), *mitigation*, whereby the resulting speech act is less risky for the speaker (11b), and *aggravation* (Merlini Barbaresi, 1997), whereby the resulting speech act is more risky for the speaker (11c):

(11a) Scholarship is an *entirely different* matter. Some schools … (BNC, KE6)[8]
(11b) You're all *bloody marvellous*, you are. (BNC, J1G)
(11c) You're stupid, you are *bloody stupid*! (BNC, KR0) (from Cacchiani, 2005)

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[8] All three examples are taken from the British National Corpus (BNC) so as to obviate to the lack of examples for aggravation and mitigation resulting from their promotional use of book blurbs.

3.2 Case study: *funny*

This section concentrates on the collocational profile of *funny* in order to isolate a set of lexical and textual devices used in book blurbs to obtain semantic and pragmatic intensification:

1. *Repetition*, clearly biased towards spoken language, e.g.:

(12ai) A *funny, funny* book. (BB78)

2. *Accumulation*, whereby intensification is mostly achieved by referring to different dimensions and sub-dimensions, for instance bringing together words like *funny* and *wise*, which tend to exclude each other, to the effect of marketing the book as a number-one read in all respects:

(12aii) *Funny, wise and true.* (BB45)

3. *Predicate-intensifier collocations*:
   i. more grammaticalized and less expressive, less involved intensifiers, e.g. *extremely funny*;
   ii. less grammaticalized 'evaluative' intensifiers used in spoken discourse, e.g. *gloriously funny* (BB66), in which *semantic-feature-copying* intensification (Lorenz 2002, Cacchiani 2005) intensification is achieved though reinforcement and repetition (OED, GLORIOUSLY, 5a […] intensely delightful; now often with jocular hyperbole). Another example is *screamingly funny,* (BB66), where *phonestemic intensification* (Cacchiani 2005) is at play: *screamingly*, (OED: SCREAMING, c: *slang*. First-rate, splendid). *Screamingly* indicates a somewhat undifferentiated intense emotion, with connotations of surprise and excitement (Cacchiani, 2003: 233) and is used to the effect of awakening interest and curiosity in the prospective reader, which is well in line with the promotional and marketing function of book blurbs;
   iii clever, memorable nonce formations, e.g. *read-bits-out-loud-to-complete-strangers funny* (BB66), which is created by analogy with the highly colloquial *LOL, laugh-out-loud* by turning a resultative construction into a compound. Purposeful exaggeration (McCarthy and Carter 2003: *hyperbole*) is at play in this clever compound which strikes the reader as a new formation, takes some extra time to process and eventually turns into a memorable word.

4. *Combination of 1, 2, 3*:
   By and of themselves, accumulations and, to a larger extent, repetitions and predicate-intensifier collocations are not felt to be strong enough. Accordingly, various *combinations* of the three are the rule, and the expression of manner combines with the expression of degree in order to inform about the book and promote it:

   (12bi) *Hilariously funny, miraculously observed, endlessly touching.* (BB66)
   (12bii) *Extremely funny ... witty and fresh with authenticity.* (BB39)
   (12biii) This is *tears-running-down-your-face funny*, *read-bits-out-loud-to-complete-strangers funny, but also highly perceptive and honest.* (BB45)

   (12bi) clearly illustrates the case of intensification as achieved via asyndetic accumulation of words construing different attitudinal dimensions and modified for

manner or degree. By contrast, (12bii) is an instance of a climax construction in which *witty* repeats part of the meaning of *funny* while also lexicalising manner (OED: WITTY, 7: 'capable of saying brilliant and sparking things, esp. in an amusing way; smartly jocose and facetious') and the figurative reading of *fresh with authenticity* repeats part of the meaning of *witty* (OED: FRESH (of water), 7: 'refreshing, invigorating with authenticity'; 10: 'brisk, full of vigour') while introducing the judgement dimension. Finally, in (12biii) repetition of the same head and selection of the same type of intensifying compound clearly realize a creative hyperbole within the domain of appreciation in order to achieve strong pragmatic intensification. Hyperbolic appreciation combines via coordination with the expression of different dimensions of judgement. This enables the writer to carry out a comprehensive evaluation of the book along all the relevant dimensions

Example (12biii) also illustrates another point. In Cacchiani (2005) I suggested that the ability of certain intensifiers to modify intensifiers in collocations extending to the left (e.g. *just absolutely ridiculous*) reflects type and extent of expressivity and involvement of the intensifier. The other way round, not all heads combine with the same intensifiers: in line with Hunston and Sinclair's (2000) *Local Grammar of Evaluation*, according to which words that share a grammatical pattern also share meanings, adjectives which construct appreciation (*funny*) and adjectives constructing judgement differ in their ability to combine with different types of intensifiers. In particular, unlike *funny*, adjectives constructing judgement can be modified by highly grammaticalized intensifiers but are never hyperbolic (*highly perceptive and honest*).

5. Non-conventionalised *figurative language*, chiefly metaphorical expressions which replace the literal equivalent for the purposes of intensification:

(12c) *A page-turner with a beating heart.* (BB211)

6. *Combinations of textual devices, lexico-grammatical patterns (collocations) and metaphorical expressions* abound:

(12di) *A funny, funny book. WISE CHILDREN is even better than NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS. It deserves all the bouquets, diamonds and stage-door Johnnies it can get.* (BB
(9a) *A spanking 7-0 away win of a football book...inventive, honest, funny, heroic, charming.* (BB45)

In (12di) reduplication (*funny, funny*) works together with comparative reference to previous achievements (*even better than NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS*) and a creative metaphor depicting the book as a *prima donna*, which deserves all the bouquets and young men a great actress can get. Likewise, in (9a) *a spanking 7-0 away win of a football book* could be substituted for "exceptionally good […] with implications of showiness and smartness" (OED: SPANKING). However, the metaphorical expression *a spanking 7-0 away win of a football book*, represents a more creative and effective way not only to foreground the desirability of the book in terms of its originality, but also to inform the potential reader about its content while making it attractive and desirable. Quality attributing sentences with ellipsis of given information ("[*X + is/are*] + *evaluative adjective*") also help foreground relevant information in the interest of informativity and effectiveness (cf. De Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981).

4. Conclusions

I hope to have at least demonstrated that book blurbs position the product and inform potential readers about the content and quality of the book. They promote and market the book from the shelves and are therefore intended to make it attractive to buy. This is the rationale behind the generic structure of book blurbs, the text-types selected, and the constraints on style and content.

Specifically, back-cover blurbs from fictional texts only seem to share the *Identification* and the *Endorsement* moves, with quality-attributing sentences representing the basic text idiom. Related to this, narratives are optional and descriptions (if present at all) merge into characterizations and evaluations, whereby the writer takes an explicit, voluntary stance with respect to the book. Most importantly, characterizations of people and settings via contextual antonyms seem to be a defining property of book blurbs (cf. *sweaty, fetid; finest nose, no personal odour*).

Lexical resources chiefly construct attitudinal evaluation in terms of appreciation and, second, judgement. The type of evaluation expressed is clearly constrained by genre. This means that book blurbs as a promotional genre are a rich source of intensifying devices: novelty and creativity of the lexical device and degree of semantic intensification help appeal to the reader and foreground the relevant assets of different types of read. Hyperbole is therefore a function of the promotional use of book blurbs, which, however, seems to be restricted to words constructing 'value'. Implicit superlatives (e.g. *wonderful*), repetitions (e.g. *funny, funny*), and predicate-intensifier collocations in which the intensifier conveys different degrees of intensification and different types and degrees of expressivity (e.g. *screamingly funny; read-out-loud-to-complete-strangers funny*) are most often felt to be too weak and, therefore, they tend to combine together and also with other devices, for instance metaphorical expressions, in order to creatively express strong intensification.

Next to graduation, however, accumulation of words which are not usually found together also plays a crucial role in making the book attractive to buy by enabling the writer to qualify the book as a first-rate choice with respect to all the relevant dimensions along which it is possible to create the need for a desirable read (e.g. *funny, wise and true*).

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