

Dynamic Properties of Blurbs to Works of Fiction in English^{*}

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Abstract. This article is devoted to dynamic transformational processes within contemporary English mini-texts (small-format texts). The paper reflects the findings of research that encompasses 500 advertising blurbs to works of fiction. Transformational dynamics is disclosed in terms of linguosynergetics based on a dynamic and systemic representation of evolutionary developments in blurb discourse. In particular, the conventional invariant discourse features are considered; non-systemic stochastic elements are revealed in such texts; and the ability of blurb discourse to generate meaning that exceeds the sum total of the meaning of the text units, i.e. functional synergism, is under analysis. The authors argue that fluctuations are observed on the lexical, structural and contextual levels of text organization. The analysis of the data obtained leads to the conclusion that the system features of book blurbs are currently undergoing a transformation of their pragmasemantic parameters, which are moving towards those of purely advertising discourse. Today's trend towards the reduction of the volume of verbal communication shows that the prospect for further investigation of mini-texts (including book blurb discourse) lies in the elaboration of the pragmasemantic synergism concept, with the feature of this discourse being of special significance to texts aimed at conveying the maximum possible information in as few words as possible.

Keywords: small-format text, linguosynergetics, advertising abstract, system features, transformation dynamics, fluctuations, communicative attractor

In the era of globalization and widespread digitalization, the information field of modern society is overloaded with a huge amount of constantly changing data. Information makes its way to recipients through a variety of technically advanced auditory and visual channels in a continuous stream. However, the perceptual capabilities of the human body are not limitless; there is a certain point at which there is an information overload, and it becomes extremely difficult to perceive and process it.

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This gives rise to the urgent need to organize the flow of information and choose effective (including linguistic) means to ensure the necessary balance between the physical length of a given piece of information and its semantic richness. This circumstance inevitably entails the need to optimize the verbal space, and this has led to a significant shift in traditional communicative practices towards a reduction in the length of texts while retaining as much of the content as possible (Malinowska, 2017). This trend is most clearly manifested in the ubiquity of small or small-format texts, which include all kinds of chats, blogs, tweets, text messages, Instagram posts, social media messages, etc.

Along with the emergence of new, ontologically small-format genres, changes have taken place within traditional formats. The processes of reorganizing familiar formats are inevitably accompanied by a “blurring” of their classical system properties and the development of a set of new language tools that can perform pragmatic tasks in a changing communicative reality.

In this respect, it would make perfect sense to study these small-format texts. On the one hand, they demonstrate all the signs of textuality and are full-fledged, complete, coherent and situationally determined communicative fragments (Vedeneva, 2018). On the other hand, the sheer number of small-format texts makes it possible to trace the mechanisms of the interaction of elements at all levels of the text structure as precisely as possible, and ultimately to identify dynamic processes that ensure the integrity and stability of the pragmasemantic text system in a changing communicative environment.

Research subject and approach

This paper aims to examine and describe the system properties of modern English small-format texts from the point of view of the dynamics and transformation of the formal and meaningful parameters of how a text is put together. We will be analysing blurbs to works of fiction that appeared in the online catalogues of leading international publishers between 2018 and 2020. The total sample size was approximately 500 texts with lengths ranging from 500 to 1500 characters.

A blurb is defined as “a brief description of a printed work (or unpublished document) in terms of its content, design, direction, origin, etc. The purpose of the blurb is to inform readers about the existence of a work of a certain content and nature” (Tumina, 2005: 936).

Our choice of subject matter was informed by the fact that, on the one hand, blurbs are secondary texts that exist thanks to the original source text and which mirror it in terms of their semantic structure (Kushnina, 2020). On the other hand, in compressing the meaning of the original and moving to another genre category – namely, the category of advertising texts – these secondary texts undergo significant systemic transformations at all levels of text organization. In addition, the need to adapt the traditional blurb to new extralinguistic conditions, such as functioning in a new semiotic

environment (the internet instead of a traditional paper catalogue or book cover), as well as the widespread decline in the popularity of written fiction and the change in the cognitive attitudes of the modern generation of potential customers of book products (digital natives, Generation Z) (Konkova, 2017; Trubnikova, 2018; Buckingham, 2013; Micheli, 2015), lead to a large-scale shift in the system of established discursive markers in the texts of book blurbs.

In our opinion, the methodology prescribed by functional linguosynergetics provides an effective tool for analysing and describing systemic multi-level changes in the structure of a text. The main theoretical provisions of this approach were developed in the works of T.I. Dombrovan, A.A. Kharkovskaya, D.S. Khramchenko, N.V. Mamonova, G.G. Moskalchuk, N.S. Olizko, V.A. Pishchalnikova, E.V. Ponomarenko, A.V. Radyuk, and others (Mamonova, 2016; Moskalchuk, 1998; Ponomarenko, 2013, 2018; Khar'kovskaia, 2009; Khramchenko, 2015, 2018, 2019; Dombrovan, 2016; Olizko, 2020).

In functional linguosynergetics, discourse is interpreted as an open, non-linear, nonequilibrium system that constantly interacts with the external environment (the consciousness of the communicants and the communicative situation) on the way to a functional attractor – that is, to the realization of a communicative goal. In the process of discourse deployment, chaotic fluctuations arise in the system under the influence of the changing external environment (the reactions of the interlocutor, the inclusion of new arguments, classifications, objections, etc.) that are elements (speech units) or processes (a combination of semantic components) that do not correspond to the initial conditions of the semantic system of discourse (Ponomarenko, 2013). On the one hand, these fluctuations play a disorganizing role in relation to the initial tendencies of the system. On the other hand, they are a catalyst that mobilizes the system's self-regulatory (pragma-semantic) properties. The coordinated and coherent behaviour of discourse in response to chaos causes the system to be restructured and reorganized – new semantic components enter it from the external environment, helping to keep the trajectory of the discourse moving towards a specific communicative goal. Ultimately, the system moves to a new state of pragma-semantic orderliness.

The most important synergistic property of discourse is its functional nonlinearity – the ability of speech units to combine in such a way that the formula “two plus two equals five” works. That is, the general pragma-semantic space of discourse is formed not as a simple sum of values of text units, but as new meanings that are greater than their constituent elements (Ponomarenko, 2013; Khramchenko, 2018; Malakhova, 2017, and others). This aspect of speech was noted by Lev Shcherba (a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences) and other classics of linguistics, even though synergetics had not yet been developed at the time.

A consideration of small-format blurbs from these perspectives allows us to identify patterns of behaviour in complex discursive systems of this type and determine the dynamics of their semantic self-organization. Synergetics is characterized as a dynamic-systemic area of scientific research, as it studies the interaction between

the stable, systemic properties of an object in combination with its mobile, dynamic properties.

Results and discussion

Within the framework of the linguosynergetic concept, the analysis of the dynamic properties of a discursive system should begin with its equilibrium state (its initial or typical state), because the dynamics of the functioning of discourse are revealed as the movement of its semantic system against the background of invariant manifestations of the organization of a text.

Thus, the invariant model of blurbs can be represented as follows:

- 1) The title of the book being advertised (true in 100% of the cases we looked at).
- 2) The surname of the author of the book.
- 3) The main body of the text, normally two to three paragraphs, constructed according to the classical principle of the “inverted pyramid,” where the so-called lead introduces general information about the setting, characters and key conflict in the book, followed by additional information about the plot. The style used here is typically bookish and includes elements of evaluation.
- 4) Quotations. These are taken from emotionally rich, positive reviews of the book taken from reputable publications or well-known literary or cultural figures, etc.
- 5) Information about the author (with a photograph). This section includes information about the author’s past work, describes the milestones in his or her creative path, lists any literary awards they may have won, and provides key biographical information that is essential for understanding the author’s creative origins and the content of the book being advertised.
- 6) Illustrations (a photograph of the book’s cover).
- 7) Practical information – the release date of the book, how much it costs, publisher details, etc. (Cherkunova, 2019).

These structural blocks are arranged in a strict sequence (with the exception of illustrations, which is non-linear in relation to the text and does not have a fixed position), which reflects the relative importance of each of the elements in terms of their logical introduction to the reader and the progressive movement of the entire system towards a communicative attractor – the recommendation that the consumer purchases a particular book.

As our analysis of the empirical material showed, these system features were typical for the blurbs we looked at. However, non-systemic properties can be found at all levels of organization of the text of blurbs. For example, a number of texts (approximately 15%) demonstrate structural fluctuations that typically appear in close proximity to an additional structural element, namely, slogans:

Sophisticated and hilarious must-read (Legend Press, 2019: 7).

Blogging brides. Clean eating. Dirty tricks (Legend Press, 2019: 27).

Shifting patterns of fate and the universality of souls (Legend Press, 2018: 20).

Slogans are an alien, chaotic element of the pragma-semantic system of the text of literary blurbs. They are traditionally used in advertising in order to create an emotional response in potential customers (Korableva, 2019; 4). In the corpus of blurbs we studied, slogans actually duplicate the function of the quotations section. However, the use of slogans destroys the illusion, created by the history of blurbs, that the person writing it is giving an honest summary of the work based on detailed information about the plot of the book and its author(s), with the opinions of experts included in the form of quotations.

Additionally, the first paragraph of many of the blurbs (the lead) also takes on the function of a slogan: it is highlighted in a different font and lacks any kind of factual information about the content of the book; instead, it contains a subjective, evaluative judgement of the work. For example:

A brilliant example of black modernism and one of the earliest queer fictions in African American writing (Penguin Press, 2020: 49).

Another chaotic property of blurbs at the level of structure is the disruption of the traditional sequence of structural blocks through the placement of quotations in prominent positions within the text, namely, at the beginning. The semantic load of this element is also strengthened by means of font variation, where the quotation is highlighted in a much larger font relative to the main text of the blurb. The ration looks something like this:

“A page-turning, jaw-dropping thriller of action and surprise. A riveting debut.”

An LA screenwriter is killed shortly after completing his latest script, Fall OUT – a thriller destined to be a blockbuster but written with a secret double purpose... (Urbane Publications, 2020: 12).

The main text of the blurb, containing information about the plot of the work, is so small that the reader is subconsciously drawn to the quotations only and does not bother with the main part of the blurb. We can thus say that there is a tendency to shift the pragmatic focus of the blurb from the actual content of the book to an evaluation of it through the manipulation of the sequence in which the traditional structural elements of the blurb are presented.

Something that was not particularly characteristic of the blurbs we examined was the presence of structural elements containing the subheadings “Key Selling Points” and “Target Market” (only 8% of the blurbs contained such a section). In this case, the overt use of marketing terminology is a deviation from the conventional norms of building the internal space of blurbs. At the same time, it should be noted that the scope of “selling points” of a book is rather diverse. As a rule, they duplicate the information in the text of the blurb and vary wildly, from noting the literary awards the author has either won or been nominated for (*Author shortlisted for Amazon Rising Star Award*) to mentioning the commercial success of the book (*Strong commercial female*

fiction), pointing out its relevance to the current sociocultural situation (*Highly topical novel, inspired by the rise of racism and nationalism*), describing the genre and target audience of the book (*Intelligent thriller for fans of scandi and tartan noir*), lauding the interesting plot (*... a dark and original novel about search for meaning and identity*) and even complimenting the book's beautiful cover (*Unique and modern cover design perfect for gifts and collections*).

In addition to these atypical elements in the structure of blurbs, non-systemic characteristics are also evident at the level of semantic content of these small-format texts. Specifically, in the invariant model, the obligatory section of the blurb entitled "About the Author," mostly describes, as we have already noted, the landmark events in the writer's literary biography, with some references to his or her personal life. The following is typical of the biography section of blurbs:

Daisy Johnson was born in 1990. Her debut short-story collection, *Fen*, was published in 2016. In 2018 she became the youngest author ever to be shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize with her debut novel *Everything Under*. She is the winner of the Harper's Bazaar Short Story Prize, the A.M. Heath Prize and the Edge Hill Short Story Prize. She currently lives in Oxford by the river (Vintage, 2020: 18).

In other words, a worthy fiction writer is seen as someone who has progressed along the path of developing their creative potential, earning their place in the profession, and who has cemented their place therein by receiving a number of literary awards. However, our analysis of the empirical material revealed that 12% of the blurbs do not emphasize the relevant aspects of the author's creative biography in the "About the Author" section as much as they focus on their direct personal experience in a wide variety of social and professional fields (*a lawyer experienced in child protection, criminal law and refugee law; the book is inspired by her childhood growing up in a sweet shop in Torquay; she is a librarian at University of Brighton; Stephen now works as a teacher at Nottingham, having also lived and worked in Lithuania and Mallorca; Dan Mooney is a writer, air traffic controller and amateur filmmaker*). References to aspects of the author's everyday life, such as where they live (*Originally from Manchester, she lives in Sydney, Australia; Marcus Low is a Cape Town based writer*), their marital status (*Maria lives with her husband and two children*), what pets they own (*She lives with her dog, Bollo; ...lives in Mid Devon with ... too many cats*), their hobbies (*When she is not writing, she is reading; Holly hosts a parenting podcast; Jea has played saxophone in "Hoodwink", an all-female indie rock-band, and travelled extensively*), etc., have become increasingly common. For example:

Mark has worked extensively in the justice system, before deciding to write. Originally from Italy, Mark grew up in a rural Australian town. Now he lives in Melbourne and his second novel The Rip is out in 2020 (Legend Press, 2019: 5).

We can thus conclude that there is a tendency in the texts of blurbs to deregulate discourse at the level of the reader's expectations by reducing the distance between the author and the reader. The author is presented first and foremost as an ordinary person who writes about their personal experiences, describing events that they lived through

themselves. Personal qualities and firsthand experience are valued over professional merits and the recognition of the professional community.

This observation is also consistent with the emerging tendency to quote not only the opinions of writers (for example, *Daniel Lewis, international bestselling author* (Urbane Publications, 2020: 12)) or industry-specific publications (*Observer, Fiction to Watch Out For in 2020* (Vintage, 2020: 18)), but also people who are not professionally associated with literature (for example, *The Reverend Jonathan Aitken, Prison Chaplain* (Urbane Publications, 2020: 14); Annie West, award-winning illustrator (Legend Press, 2018: 22)).

Finally, it should also be noted that blurbs represent an extremely interesting case of the functional synergy of discourse – the non-linearity of the pragma-semantic space ($2+2=5$) mentioned above. Exploiting this function of speech, blurb writers compose texts with a high density of semantic components, which both cumulatively create the desired impression on the reader and mutually reinforce each other's pragmatic potential when concentrating text units of a common semantic field. For example:

MARK GRENSIDE began his working career at Lloyds of London, specializing in Kidnap, Ransom and Extortion Insurance. At 25 it was time for a career change and he started his media career working for Jim Henson and The MuppetsTM. He went on to create and produce a number of television series and mini-series. At the same time he started a music management company launching a million seller artist Neneh Cherry. He is a co-founder of seed to shelf CBD producer Dragonfly Bioscience and a founder in two separate digital companies. He lives with his wife, a pug and a French Bulldog in Malta (Urbane Publications, 2020: 12).

Obviously, the functional attractor to which all the trajectories of the semantic development of discourse are directed in the above passage is the representation of the author as a successful, experienced, versatile individual who has something to share with the reader. This impression is created through the interaction of such devices as:

- reeling off the areas in which the author has experience, thus demonstrating the breadth of his professional interests (insurance, media career, television [mini-] series, music management, digital companies);
- referencing notable and popular projects (Lloyds of London, The Muppets, Dragonfly Bioscience);
- noting the author's successes in these projects (launching a million seller artist, seed to shelf CBD producer);
- mentioning where he currently lives, thus giving the author an air of intrigue (Malta is considered one of the most picturesque and historically and culturally significant places in Europe).

The combination of all these semantic components not only communicates a set of information, but undoubtedly forms an image of an attractive and active person in the mid of the reader, someone who is culturally savvy and has a flair for business. Hence the conclusion (not openly expressed, but certainly suggested) that his book is worth

reading and may offer something to people of all ages working in different professions and with different interests.

Conclusion

Our analysis of the functional properties of small-format texts in the form of blurbs for works of English fiction showed that both systemic and non-systemic elements are present at all levels of the structural and functional organization of blurbs. On the one hand, non-systemic components cause chaotic fluctuations and lead to a certain deregulation of the semantic space of discourse – subverting the reader's expectations, which in turn causes a surge in reader interest and propels the evolution of the discursive space towards the optimal attractor. On the other hand, the totality of the fluctuations we identified, in particular the systemic introduction of interdiscursive elements at the lexical, structural and content levels of blurbs, allows us to conclude that the pragma-semantic plane of this discursive system is moving towards advertising discourse. More specifically, the introduction of slogans and slogan-like elements into the structure of the text; the shift of semantic focus from information blocks to emotive blocks (including as a result of structural rearrangements in combination with the use of paragraphemics); the inclusion of advertising terminology; the saturation of personal opinion with axiological, rather than professional, meanings; and fluctuations in functional data and style – all this points to the fact that the conventional system properties of blurbs are being restructured, and the conceptual scheme for the effective development of the semantic space of this type of discourse is undergoing a transformation.

Another essential property of the blurb is pragma-semantic synergism, in which the general semantic space of discourse is not reduced to the mechanical addition of the meanings of text units, but rather generates meanings that are greater than the sum of individual meanings. This property of discourse is especially significant for all small-format texts, where it is necessary to incorporate a considerable amount of content in as compact a space as possible. This is a vast subject worthy of further research.

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Conflicts of interest.

The authors declare the absence of any conflicts of interest.

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