

SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS OF BLURBS IN ANDREY KURKOV'S *DIARY OF AN INVASION*

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Summary

This study investigates the semantic and pragmatic functions of blurbs on book covers of Andrey Kurkov's *Diary of an Invasion* (2023), with a specific focus on their role as a key element of communication between the Ukrainian author, a publisher, English-language potential readers and a core text. The research, based on Gérard Genette's theory, examines the interplay between semantic content and pragmatic functions of such paratexts as blurbs, exploring how they voice author's message, shape the reader's attitude to the narrative and contribute to the understanding of the core text. Through the discourse analysis of the selected blurbs, this research interprets the shifts in meanings of lexical units taking into account political and cultural context in Ukraine after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In addition, the paper presents a classification of communicative tactics that are used within the core communicative strategy of building trust to the core text among English-speaking readers, jointly expressed by the author and publisher. The emphasis is made on the persuasive power of blurbs, which often blend informational, evaluative, and emotive elements to attract potential readers. The study concludes by underscoring the importance of blurbs as a form of culturally embedded paratext, capable of conveying authentic and culturally-marked texts in a cross-cultural context.

Key words: paratextuality, communicative tactics, book cover, literary marketing, culturally embedded paratext.

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1. Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine made Ukrainians instantly unite to offer military resistance to the aggressor and protect their country. The plan to occupy Ukraine in three days failed because of the coordinated actions of the military and civilians. Apart from the military bravery of Ukrainians, the Russo-Ukrainian war has also become a remarkable example of cultural resistance.

In February 2022, many people in Ukraine experienced the loss of their cultural, linguistic, and professional identities, but in exchange, it seemed as if everyone made an unwavering commitment to Ukraine, forming a united community rooted in a shared Ukrainian identity. Confronted with existential threats, Ukrainians sought to understand themselves and their homeland on a deeper level. As Andrey Kurkov wrote in the preface to *Diary of an Invasion*, "...Russia's attempt to destroy Ukraine as an independent state – have contributed to the strengthening of

Ukrainian national identity” (Kurkov, 2023, p. 15). Meanwhile, beyond Ukraine’s borders, the world discovered a resilient nation that sparkled global interest. The interest grew as millions of Ukrainians were forced to flee abroad. People all over the world wanted to know more about the nation they found out about from the breaking news. The interest lied in humanitarian areas mainly, such as history, culture, and literature.

Responding to the upsurge in the interest in Ukrainian literature worldwide after Russia’s full-scale invasion, publishing houses started promoting Ukrainian literary works. As Blake Morrison put it in his review on Kurkov’s *Diary on an Invasion*, “[w]ar and books are incompatible” (Blake, 2022). Growing interest created the situation that requires complex understanding of mediation between a Ukrainian author, a publisher, and an English-language audience. In order to examine the role of a book cover in conveying the messages in diverse multicultural environment, it is worth referring to one of the modern theories, which seems quite efficient when rethinking the role of the so-called textual periphery or paratexts.

Book cover is a heterogeneous text which consists of verbal and visual elements, which this paper, after Genette, calls paratexts or paratextual elements. The book covers of Kurkov’s *Diary of an Invasion* contain a variety of paratexts that provide substantial data for analyzing them as structural elements (Kovalchuk, 2024) and from semantic and pragmatic perspectives. As textual periphery surrounds and contextualizes the core text and mediates the relations between text, author, publisher and reader (Kovalchuk, 2024), it is essential to study how the communication is conducted between them, what messages are conveyed on the book cover, what semantic shifts can be traced in the use of vocabulary and what pragmatic impact the book covers have on the readership.

This article aims to study the semantics of blurbs as one of the verbal paratexts on a book cover of Kurkov’s *Diary of an Invasion* and interpret the shifts in meanings of lexical units taking into account political and cultural context in Ukraine after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In addition, the paper presents a classification of communicative strategies used in the blurbs on book covers of the second editions (2023), which convey a unified message about the core text, jointly expressed by the author and publisher, to English-speaking readers. This, together with the description of how explicit and implicit author’s position and the publisher’s promoting strategy shape the understanding of the core text, add novelty to the research.

The present paper operates with the term “paratext”, coined by Gerard Genette in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982). The scholar stressed the importance of paratexts to the text as, in his opinion, the function of paratexts was not only “...to present it [the text], in the usual sense of this verb, but also in its strongest meaning: to make it present, to assure its presence in the world, its “reception” and its consumption, in the form, nowadays at least, of a book” (Genette, 1997, p. 1). This emphasizes the importance of paratexts as a mediator between the text and the reader. As Genette puts it, paratext is “...what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers, and more generally, to the public” (Genette, 1997, p. 1). What seems especially valuable for the present research is Genette’s contention that there is “a fringe”, which is “always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition, but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and of a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception of the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies) (Genette, 1997, p. 2). The pragmatic value of paratexts seem essential in mediating the relationship between the world of narration, the world of a publishing house and the world of readership. As Richard Macksey puts it, paratexts function as “a

threshold” or “the literary and printerly conventions that mediate between the world of publishing and the world of the text” (Macksey, 1997), which controls one’s whole reading of the text.

2. Paratextuality of Blurbs

After Genette and Macksey, Jonathan Gray also stressed the ability of paratexts not only improve the reception of the work, but also predetermine the reader’s understanding of the text codes. He wrote that “...Hollywood and its marketers often mobilize paratexts to proffer “proper interpretations,” some preceding the show’s arrival in the public sphere, thereby setting up pre-decodings, and some working in medias res to subtly inflect the public understanding of an ongoing and open text” (Gray, 2010, p. 81). In other words, paratextual elements connect the author’s text with its published version, contextualize the core text, mediate it to a potential reader and provide information that affects the public reception and reader’s perception of the work. It is obvious that they serve as mediators between the author, the text, the publisher and readers, conditioning trajectories of criss-cross interactions between them all.

Genette identified various paratexts on the cover considering their location, such as the front cover (cover 1), the back cover (cover 4), the inside front and back covers (covers 2, 3). Blurbs are mainly placed on the back cover and “sometimes these even appear on cover 1” (Genette, 1997, p. 25) which means that the typical place for blurbs used to be on the back cover whereas their placement on the front seemed to be quite unusual of the books published in the 20th century. Genette defines a blurb as “[p]ress quotations or other laudatory comments about earlier works by the same author or, indeed, about this work itself...” or “...more literally, promotional statement” (Genette, 1997, p. 25). Though the layout of paratexts is undoubtedly important, we assume that blurbs play an essential role in communicating the book origin, the main message of the core text and publisher’s intent to shape the context that fosters a favourable perception of the core text in multicultural environment. Thus, we focus on analyzing the set of lexical and pragmatic devices that serve both an informative and a promotional function, i.e. elucidate the core text, convey the author’s and publisher’s messages and shape the English-language reader’s perception of the Ukrainian author’s text paying particular attention to what they may suggest or explicitly tell the potential reader about the text, and how they establish the proximity between reader, text and writer.

Blurbs were described in numerous works within applied linguistics. Researchers focused on describing the functional-semantic structure and genre-based promotional strategies of blurbs for fiction (Bhatia, 2004) and non-fiction (Gesuato, 2004). S. Kathpalia compared cross-cultural differences between blurbs on book covers created by international and Singaporean publishers outlined sociocultural factors and stressed their importance in blurbs (Kathpalia, 1997). Semantics and pragmatics of evaluative language in book blurbs was studied in works by (Römer, 2005; Cacchiani, 2007; Suárez-Tejerina, 2005), whereas semantic and lexical peculiarities of blurbs for Ukrainian books were described by (Poltavets, 2015; Sokol, 2011).

Undoubtedly, research on semantics of blurbs can contribute to a better understanding of how the meaning of a core text is actualized in a cross-cultural context as “...semantics must account for how the meanings of smaller parts are combined to form the meanings of larger wholes” (MIT, 1999, p. 739). We assume that blurbs as smaller linguistic units help potential readers interpret the whole core text. Stalnaker noted that speech context has features “...which help determine which proposition is expressed by a given sentence” (Stalnaker, 1972, p. 383). So, it is essential to consider the linguistic and cultural contexts of a literary work, and an utterance situation in which the participants have various propositions, beliefs and intentions.

The interaction between the context of utterance and the interpretation of its elements requires pragmatic analysis of the meaning.

3. Semantics of blurbs of the *Diary of an Invasion* cover

There are two blurbs on the front cover of *Diary of Invasion* written by journalists from *The New York Times* and *The Times*. On the back cover a reader can find two more blurbs written by Giles Harvey from *The Daily Mail* and Helen Davies from *The Daily Express*. These written statements of approval and support for a book lend credibility to a book.

The blurb “*Ukraine’s greatest novelist is fighting for his country*” conveys the message that the author has a significant literary status in Ukraine (*Ukraine’s greatest novelist*), and actively defends his country emphasizing a sense of duty and patriotism (*fighting for his country*).

The blurb “*Immediate and important...this is an insider’s account of how an ordinary life became extraordinary*” stresses that the book was an instant response to the event that changed the life of the country dramatically (*immediate, important*). The collocation “*an insider’s account*” implies that the narrative comes from a person with direct first-hand knowledge of the events described, adding authenticity to the literary work. A statement “*ordinary life became extraordinary*” suggests a transformation from a usual everyday routine to an unusual practice, implying dramatic negative changes in the ordinary people’s lives. A contextual meaning of the lexeme “*ordinary*” shifts towards “normal, familiar, regular” acquiring a positive connotation whereas the meaning of the lexeme “*extraordinary*” turns to “odd, strange, and unexpected” acquiring a negative connotation. The meaning of “*ordinary*” resilience and notable achievements.

Another blurb “By the author of *Death and the Penguin* and *Grey Bees*” can be found at the bottom of the front cover. The phrase “*By the author of*” explicitly identifies the writer of the book, Andrey Kurkov, and implicitly suggests that Kurkov is an author of well-known novels (*Death and the Penguin* and *Grey Bees*) with remarkable literary reputation.

Gerard Genette calls the back cover a “strategically important spot” (Genette, 1997, p.25). Although, it can be left blank as “an external sign of nobility” especially for poetry series, as Genette puts it, publishers of fiction and non-fiction often use this space to establish a connection with potential readers and provide additional reasons to read the book. The back cover of the 2023 edition of Kurkov’s *Diary of an Invasion* places two blurbs, a description blurb for the novel, an author’s blurb accompanied by photo of the author. Verbal paratexts occupy two thirds of the back cover space but the photo of the author is, undoubtedly, a central and essential element of a layout.

The first paratext that potential readers see on the top of the back cover is a blurb written by Dominic Lawson from *The Daily Mail*. The blurb says “*No-one with the slightest interest in this war, or the nation which is being waged, should fail to read Andrey Kurkov*”. The literal meaning of this blurb implies that anyone who is even minimally interested in the ongoing war in Ukraine or the country itself should read works by Kurkov. The use of the pronoun “*no-one*” refers to any potential reader, whereas “*Andrey Kurkov*” used as a metonymy refers to works written by the author, so the blurb recommends a wider range of works to a broader audience. The expressions “*this war*” and “*the nation which is being waged*” focus on the main subjects that would prompt someone to read Kurkov’s book.

Another blurb, written by Matt Nixon from the *Daily Express*, describes the work as “*Uplifting and utterly defiant*”. The adjective “*uplifting*” suggests that the book has a positive, inspirational impact, while “*utterly defiant*” implies a strong, rebellious spirit.

The biggest blurb is a message from the publisher which describes the core text and introduces the author: *“As Russian forces build up beyond Ukraine’s borders and the prospect of war becomes reality, Andrey Kurkov chronicles the shocking impact of Russia’s invasion. Part political and historical commentary, part personal journal, Kurkov explores the fraught interrelation of Russian and Ukrainian history, the complicated coexistence of their languages, and in describing how a peaceful society defies occupation, he builds an image of a culture which is unique and democratic, liberal and diverse, one that will “resist to the end”.*

Employing his satirical flair to paint a defiant portrait of his compatriots, Kurkov portrays a people united against erasure. For despite the networks of community work for the common good being stretched to breaking point, and the embittering reticence of some European nations to make good on their promises of aid and armaments, hope endures: children are born deep under besieged cities and farmers go on working fields made lethal by unexploded shells.

Kurkov tells his own story alongside those of other displaced Ukrainians and the communities which have gone to extraordinary lengths to care for them. Showing an irrepressible spirit, they “wait for the moment when it will be safe to return,” he writes, “just as I am waiting” (Kurkov, 2023).

Andrey Kurkov’s chronicle of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a blend of political, historical, and personal commentaries. The narration moves from a broad historical and geopolitical focus to individual human experiences, creating a layered structure. The semantic and thematic analysis of this blurb allows us to outline several key themes:

1. Impact of Invasion: Lexemes and collocations like *shocking impact*, *fraught*, *defies occupation*, *erasure*, *stretched to breaking point*, *unexploded shells lethal* and *displaced* carry strong emotive and negative evaluative connotations, suggesting the severe consequences of the invasion.

2. Resistance and Defiance: The phrases *“resist to the end”*, *“defiant portrait”* implies defiance and resilience of Ukrainians in the face of aggression.

3. Ukrainian Identity: Descriptions like *“a culture which is unique and democratic, liberal and diverse”*, *Ukraine’s borders*, *Ukrainian history*, *complicated coexistence of their languages* emphasize the distinct and admirable qualities of Ukrainian society, complex shared past and cultural overlap with the aggressor state.

4. Hope: Expressions like *“networks of community work,”* *“hope endures,”* and *“irrepressible spirit”* convey the enduring solidarity and optimism among Ukrainians.

5. Kurkov’s Narrative: The mention of *“Kurkov tells his own story alongside those of other displaced Ukrainians”* points to a deeply personal and collective narrative of displacement and resilience. *“Satirical flair”* suggests that Kurkov employs irony or dark humor to discuss serious issues, implying a distinctive literary style. The final phrase *“just as I am waiting”* establishes authorial presence, making Kurkov’s personal experience central to the book’s narrative.

Semantically, the blurb constructs a narrative of war, resistance, and survival through strong emotive language and carefully structured contrasts between personal and collective narratives.

4. Pragmatics of the blurbs of the *Diary of an Invasion* cover

When readers enter a bookstore, they usually appear in a situation when they have limited time to assess a book and a wide range of books to choose from. There is a variety of verbal and non-verbal devices and communicative strategies that publishers employ to attract potential

reader's attention. When a potential reader takes a book from the shelf, blurbs on a book cover help potential readers decide if the story is suitable for them and if they can trust the information provided in the book. Moreover, blurbs can significantly enlarge the book's audience as readers who trust the person or a source endorsing the book trust that the author is credible. We presume that blurbs are the paratextual elements whose communicative function is to convince a potential reader that the author and his text are trustworthy and worth attention. In other words, blurbs serve as a linguistic device in the communicative strategy of building trust between all participants of communicative situation such as the author, the text, the reader and the publisher. Their arguments are different but they complement each other within the core strategy. Each argument is considered to be a communicative tactic.

Kurkov's *Diary of an Invasion* is aimed at English-speaking international audience who are unfamiliar with the intricacies of Ukrainian-Russian relations and require contextualization of the Russo-Ukrainian war. As the blurb mentions the coexistence of Russian and Ukrainian, it suggests that a target audience might be interested in with an interest in current affairs, history, international relations language policy, cultural identity, and post-Soviet transformations.

As a result of pragmatic analysis of the implied meanings that are used in blurbs to reach the communicative intention, it is possible to single out several communicative tactics (hereafter, CT) within the strategy of building trust:

1. CT "Appeal to Authority". The mention of the well-known newspapers *the New York Times*, *the Times*, *the Daily Mail*, *the Daily Express* and journalists' personal names implies that a trusted source endorses the book. Moreover, blurbs mention the author and describe him as "*Ukraine's greatest novelist*," and an "*insider*". This establishes credibility, implying that the author's insights and perspectives are valuable and trustworthy.

2. CT "Appeal to Emotions". The blurbs use emotive vocabulary (*uplifting*, *utterly*, *interest*, *immediate*, *important*, *ordinary*, *extraordinary*) to create a positive and intriguing image of the book. The adjective "*uplifting*" and "*utterly defiant*" have positive connotations, making the book appealing to a broad audience. The adjectives "*immediate*" and "*important*" suggest that the content of the book is both timely and significant. The transformation of "ordinary life" into "extraordinary" denotes a development and, considering the context, implies political and cultural resilience and notable achievements in Ukraine.

3. CT "Appeal to Values". The description of Ukraine as "*unique and democratic, liberal, and diverse*", *a peaceful society* suggests a contrast with authoritarianism of the aggressor. Moreover, this description aligns with the values of western society and stresses European course of actions in Ukraine.

4. CT "Appeal to National Pride". Numerous uses of the lexemes "*Ukraine*", "*Ukrainian*", "*fighting for his country*", "*Ukrainian history*", "*a culture which is unique*", "*resist to the end*", *compatriots* "*defies occupation*" and "*defiant portrait*" highlight the author's Ukrainian identity and the role of Ukrainians in defending their country. It emphasizes a strong connection between the author and the nation, and reinforces the idea of cultural and national solidarity. The mention of fighting for the country evokes emotions of bravery, resilience, and patriotism, aiming to elicit admiration and support from readers.

5. CT "Appeal to Authenticity". The phrases "*insider's account*" and "*tells his own story*" emphasize the authenticity and personal nature of the narrative, suggesting that readers will gain unique insights into Ukrainian identity and experiences.

6. CT "Appeal to Cultural Relevance". The emphasis on the immediacy and importance of the account suggests that the book provides critical insights into contemporary Ukrainian experiences making it relevant to current events and cultural understanding.

7. CT “Appeal to Solidarity”. Blurbs implicitly call for solidarity and support for Ukraine when one of them mentions the “*embittering reticence of some European nations to make good on their promises of aid and armaments,*” thus advocating for more substantial international support.

All the above-mentioned communicative tactics complement each other within the strategy of building trust to the text among potential readers and jointly serve several pragmatic functions such as informative, persuasive and expressive. Blurbs inform the reader about the origin of the book, the content of Kurkov’s work, historical context, and the impact of the invasion. They evoke interest in the narrative and persuade readers to choose Kurkov’s book through language that elicits sympathy and admiration for Ukrainians. The blurbs set powerful emotional tone as they stress the gravity of the situation in Ukraine and the emotional resilience of its people. What is more, they voice the values that resonate with European readership.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the semantics and pragmatics of the blurbs on the book cover of *Diary of an Invasion* by Andrey Kurkov reveals a few distinctive features of paratextual elements that contribute to promoting a Ukrainian literary work in Western literary market. The placement of the blurbs follows a conventional pattern typical of 21st-century fiction as they are found on both the front and back covers.

The blurbs outline the dual nature of Kurkov’s core text that blends personal and collective narratives on certain topics. The main semantic themes include the impact of Russian invasion of Ukraine, cultural and military resilience of Ukrainians, Ukrainian identity, and hope. The lexeme that constitute these themes carry strong emotive and evaluative connotations, and show contextual shifts in their evaluation. The blurbs reflect Kurkov’s narrative style, characterized by first-person narration, which places his personal experience at the core of the book’s narrative. Kurkov employs irony or dark humor to discuss serious issues, implying a distinctive literary style.

The blurbs serve multiple pragmatic functions such as informative, persuasive, emotive that contribute to the reader’s initial interaction with the text. The communicative function of these paratextual elements is to convince a potential reader that the author and his text are trustworthy and worth attention. So, the core communicative strategy of these verbal paratexts is to build trust between all participants of communicative situation such as the author, the text, the reader and the publisher. Different blurbs employ different communicative tactics that collectively aim at achieving the communicative intention of the core communicative strategy. The following communicative tactics were singled out within the communicative strategy of building trust to Kurkov’s *Diary of an Invasion*: Appeal to Authority, Appeal to Emotions, Appeal to Values, Appeal to National Pride, Appeal to Authenticity, Appeal to Cultural Relevance, Appeal to Solidarity. The blurbs play a crucial role in emphasizing reliability and the significance of the content and establishing a framework of trust and credibility to the author and the core text.

Overall, semantics and pragmatics of the paratexts collectively enhance the book’s appeal, authenticity, and trustworthiness, ensuring an initial engagement for the reader.

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