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A linguistic analysis of the official tourism websites of the seventeen Spanish Autonomous Communities

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to research the linguistic strategies used in the official tourism websites of the seventeen Spanish Autonomous Communities for destination management, marketing and branding. The seventeen webpages have been assessed through the analysis of persuasive linguistic techniques and thematic lingo. Based on content and discourse analysis, a specialised synchronic corpus of texts in Spanish and their parallel texts in English was created, and a census reached. Interactional metadiscoursal markers uncovered rhetorical and persuasive means of promotion and communication, while specificities of the tourism discourse were broached through terminology. Moreover, transcreation is considered an indispensable linguistic tool for the internationalisation of the destinations. The abundance of interpersonal metadiscursive markers and thematic lexicon in the corpus led to the assumption that the target tourism discourse is used as a means of informing but primarily persuading the tourist, thus, conceptualising language as catalyst to tourism promotion.

1. Introduction

1.1. Rationale

1.1.1. Research context

Nowadays, the majority of tourists plan and organise their trip online through various corporate, destination, metasearch and social media websites for booking flights and other types of transportation (bus, train, ferryboat), accommodation, tours and transfers, and cruises, to obtain information about the tourist resources and attractions of the destination, visa regulations, user opinion, etc (Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015). According to Fernández-Cavia and Castro (2015) almost 50% of European tourists considered websites as ‘the most important source of information when making a decision about travel plans’. Within the online tourism ecosystem, official tourism destination websites (usually belonging to and maintained by the respective destination management organisation) play an important role not only in providing (potential) tourists with information about the destination (e.g. resources and attractions, accessibility, accommodation, activities, history, traditions, culture, legal issues, etc), but also in creating and projecting positive destination image, and attracting tourists to the destination. As Fernández-Cavia and Castro (2015, p. 168) put it, destination websites are ‘complex communication tools, which impact on several levels – from destination management to destination promotion and commercialisation.’

Research on tourism destination websites has been quite extensive and much of it has concentrated on the quality of the website (Law, Qi, & Buhalis, 2010). The following parameters have been studied in prior research: commercialisation, brand image, discourse analysis, mobile communications, social web, interactivity, web architecture, positioning, usability and accessibility, homepage, languages, and quality and quantity of content (Fernández-Cavia, Vinyals-Mirabent, & López-Pérez, 2013). An official website of a destination must not only be well designed and easy to navigate but also provide relevant information, tailored to the needs of the users who are considered as potential future visitors, with the aim of effectively transmitting the values that differentiate a particular destination brand from another (Fernández-Cavia et al., 2013). To facilitate their marketing function, destination websites are translated in the languages of the main tourist segments visiting the destination.

An ancient proverb states that a picture is worth a thousand words. Undeniably, it can be argued that the photographic image of a destination on the destination website first catches the eyes of potential tourists and remains in their memory. In other words, as Lopes (2011) correctly notes, the picture has always been a critical factor for the choice of a tourist destination. Nevertheless, in accordance with Crystal (2002), language is the heart of the internet because words determine, limit and widen our vision of the world. Therefore it can be stated that apart from the main visual photographic image, text plays a major role in the development and promotion of a brand. Language – being

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dynamic – has been studied for centuries. Studies on tourism language are relatively recent. Pickett (1989), cited in Suau Jiménez (2006), states that the tourism discourse has been considered as part of the business language in general, nevertheless, characterised by being part of a specific context and composed by its own communicative functions and terminology. More and more researchers (see, for example, Calvi, 2010b; Swales, 1990; Varó, 2006), remark that the tourism discourse is part of the so-called 'specialised languages'. Hence, it has its own linguistic identity (Suau Jiménez, 2006) and semantic fields (accommodation, food and beverage, culture, art, travel, destination, landscape, etc). Therefore, it can be argued that tourism lingo has particular characteristics (Francesconi, 2011) worth researching and studying. While it is evident that many academics have researched tourism discourse for a long time (Antelmi, Held & Santulli, 2009; Calvi & Mapelli, 2011; Calvi, 2000, 2005; Dann, 2001, etc), only a portion of recent papers have discussed the online tourism discourse of websites (Bonomi, 2011; Calvi, 2010b; Jaworska, 2017; Mariottini, 2011; Mattiello, 2012; Suau Jiménez, 2011, etc), mainly focusing on studying the broad sense of genre along with the user experience.

It is widely agreed that online language (as part of the online genres) is different to the language of traditional genres (radio, press or television, for instance) (Alonso Ruiz, 2006). Edo Marzá (2012) draws the attention to the fact that webpages that promote tourist destinations are saturated with adjectives with the purpose of persuading and captivating the potential tourist, hence, using subjectivity. On the other hand, the objectivity of a website is presented through informative data, for instance, price, availability, directions, reception hours, etc.

This paper addresses the linguistic features used in tourism discourse, the specific terminology and the socio-cultural component of language content and its cross-cultural transcreation. The principal subject of the research is the persuasive linguistic strategies used in tourism promotion by official tourism destination websites and, more specifically, the destination websites of the 17 autonomous communities in Spain.

1.1.2. Geographic scope of the research

Spain – as the most popular tourism destination in the European Union (Eurostat, 2017) and ranking third worldwide (UNWTO, 2016) – can be considered to have a relevant, effective and successful tourism promotion strategy. It is not only the country as a whole that is being branded as a tourism destination but rather the autonomous communities themselves are promoted as individual units, competing with each other to attract more tourists (Alonso, 2007), leading to the creation of diverse strategies to promote their tourism products and services. An autonomous community (AC) is a geographically defined, political and administrative independent entity, which, in terms of tourism, has its own destination management organisation (DMO), whose functions are performed by each individual regional government (Spanish Constitution, 2005), with autonomy to take decisions and create strategies. In turn, it is part of a greater and collective national DMO in the hands of the Secretariat of State of Tourism of the Spanish Ministry of Tourism (Minetad, 2017), with competences over tourism (one of the most developed economic sectors in Spain, representing around 11% of GDP (Garcia, 2016)) such as actions involving the development, coordination and execution of tourism strategies, cooperating with national and international, and public and private institutions with the aim of promoting tourism activity (BOE, 2017). For the object of this study, it is helpful to distribute the AC in coastal communities (Andalucia, Asturias, Islas Baleares, Islas Canarias, Cantabria, Comunidad Valenciana, Galicia, Murcia and País Vasco) and inland communities (Aragón, Castilla La Mancha, Castilla y León, Extremadura, Madrid, Navarra and La Rioja), respectively (Table 1). According to the data of the Spanish Statistical Institute, Andalucía, Baleares, Canarias, Cataluña, Comunidad Valenciana and Madrid are the most successful ACs in regard to tourism statistics (INE, 2017a). Therefore, it is clear that littoral regions have an advantage over inland autonomies.

Nevertheless, the total of 17 autonomous communities in Spain (specially the inland ones) feel the need to innovate and create offers in order to have an advantage over the conventional tourism destinations (such as the coastal regions) in order to fight the traditional 'sun and beach' tourism by exploring new alternative ways of tourism activities (Alonso, 2007). This aspiration towards innovation and diversification of tourism offer makes the autonomous communities an element worth investigating.

The usefulness of the research lies on its capability to analyse and investigate the tourism conception of a given country from two levels: as a single unit on the one hand, and as a system of smaller components on the other, which are part of a larger whole, however, with their own specific characteristics.

1.2. Research aim and objectives

The principal aim of this paper is to disclose and analyse the linguistic strategies and features used by official tourism websites for the promotion and branding of each of the seventeen autonomous communities of Spain. The research attempts to investigate tourism discourse taking into consideration cross-linguistic and cross-cultural factors. The specific research objectives are:

- To analyse whether the aforementioned tourism websites are –apart from informative– persuasive, and if it be so, to investigate the means of persuasion made use of.
- To uncover similarities and differences between Spanish (target native language – L1: intended for domestic tourists) and English (parallel translated language – L2: a head language used to internationalize each website for foreign tourists) versions of the websites.
- To provide a clarification whether official tourism websites in Spain present common patterns regarding specific tourism terminology.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. The next section provides a focused review of the literature on tourism communication, cross-cultural marketing and transcreation. Section 3 presents the methodology. Results are analysed and discussed in Section 4, while Section 5 elaborates the paper's contribution, tourism policy implications, limitations and future research directions, and then concludes the paper.

2. Literature review

2.1. Tourism communication

People communicate with one another consciously (Duncan, 2017). The process of communication can be understood as the combination of the following elements: participants, the time-space setting, the channel, the intended goal, the interpretation of the message and the textual and discursive genres (Mariottini, 2011). It is affected by factors such as context, history, culture, society, and so on. And when it comes to people from different nations and cultures, intercultural communication helps eliminate barriers (Neuliep, 2017). In many studies about communication, the concept implies a 'relation'. For instance, Paoli Bolio (1983) defines the term as the act of communication among two or more individuals, sharing a meaning in common. Similarly, Romero (1979) explains it as the creation, expression and transmission of a 'message' from a single source towards various receivers using one mean of communication. And globalisation and the development of technology serve as decentralisation of the dissemination of information 'across local, regional, national, and international borders', allowing people all around the world to share and communicate information (Neuliep, 2017, p. 4). In tourism terms, it is this mobility that Germann Molz (2012) calls 'travel connections', making a reference not

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