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The persuasive discourse function in the language of tourism

A corpus-driven lexico-grammatical analysis of travel articles

Abstract

As part of the ever increasing research on the special language and discourse of tourism, this study inquires into how the persuasive discourse function, an effective communicative means of attracting potential customers, occurs in the texts of a small-scale tourism corpus. The study focuses on the investigation of lexical and grammatical choices in the travel articles of a self-compiled corpus, to examine in what ways the selection and recurrence of certain lexical and syntactic patterns manifest and demonstrate the persuasive promotional function of this special discourse. Following a brief account of the theoretical framework, the paper presents the results of a corpus-driven analysis of the use of keywords, attributive clusters, intensifiers, and ego-targeting person pronouns, as markers of persuasion in the articles related to city tours. The results suggest that further corpus-based research is needed on the lexical and syntactic patterns of tourism genres and registers to reveal the peculiar discursive features of tourism texts.
Keywords: tourism discourse, persuasive function, self-compiled corpus

1   Introduction

Tourism, one of the fastest growing industries worldwide (Scowsill 2017: 3) has become a global social phenomenon that has an impact on economy, nations, and geographical areas. Due to the rapid economic growth of the tourism sector, the increasing number of tourists and overseas holidays, tourism as a multidiscipline including promotional marketing and its special language, has become the focus of numerous studies. The promotion of tourism products brought forth the specific tourism discourse, in which the language is used as a medium to persuade and attract more and more visitors. Promotional media, especially advertising and journalism, apply multimodal visual and communicative strategies to inform and influence the target audience in decision-making; besides creating an appealing imagery of destinations and services with visual aids, the creative and persuasive use of language increases their attractiveness.

Persuasion is an essential element of tourism discourse as it may enhance the truth value of the information on destinations and services, and, additionally, it induces a 'worth-visiting' image in prospective tourists. So far, studies on the persuasive function of tourism discourse have been conducted concerning only promotional media such as tourism advertisements, brochures, and web-pages (Hassan et al. 2008; Ling, p, 2008; Luo & Huang 2015; Mocini 2005; Sona 2015; Sparks et al. 2013). However, several aspects of this special discourse

remain unexplored, especially in terms of the persuasive style of travel articles and the application of persuasive discursive techniques including linguistic devices, particularly metaphors and similes, as a means of promotion in travel journalism.

Corpus-driven research on the language and discourse of tourism is based mainly on self-compiled corpora, as large-scale tourism corpora are publicly not available. This empirical study intends to add some specific details to the line of corpus-based research on the persuasive discourse function of tourism language from a different perspective, investigating in what ways persuasiveness is reflected in the choices of lexical and syntactic structures in the specific register of travel articles.

2   Language of tourism as a special discourse

Since promotional media with the creative, descriptive, and persuasive use of tourism language evokes the imagery and fascination of travel to affect potential clients' decisions on holiday-making, this special language reflects the commercial, marketing aspect of the genre. The language of tourism depicts the tourist destinations and services in persuasive, encouraging and alluring manner, and makes them visual with dynamic images and vivid colours (Francesconi 2014). Hence, the texts of brochures, travel articles, and advertisements are crammed with descriptive and evaluative adjectives, superlatives and intensifiers to influence and even manipulate the attitude and behaviour of prospective tourists.

Tourism genres make great use of comparisons, metaphors and similes, keywords and keying, languaging, that is, impressive use of foreign words, and omission (Dann 1996: 37-39). Comparisons with familiar places and experiences make the tourists more acquainted with novelty, the use of keywords aims to boost the imagination of tourists, and real or invented foreign words induce the feeling of inferiority in the tourists who depend on the guiding of the message (Nigro 2006: 188). However, the language of tourism is not a well-established linguistic domain as it is a combination of different disciplines and technical fields such arts, history, geography, transportation or marketing (Calvi 2005: 43 quoted in Nigro 2006: 188-189).

Discourse, a term that applies to both written and spoken language, according to Stubbs's (1983: 1) widely known definition is the language 'above the sentence or above the clause'. Opposed to this view, Sharma (2010) regards discourse as any series of speech events or any combination of sentences both above and below the sentence level, wherein successive sentences, phrases, or utterances hang together. The specific tourism discourse is explained by Gotti (2003: 24) as "the specialist use of the language in contexts which are typical of a specialized community stretching across the academic, the professional, and the occupational areas of knowledge and practice". The promotional and marketing aspects of tourism are reflected in Dann's (1996: 2) interpretation of this special discourse; "tourism … has a discourse of its own. …the language of tourism attempts to persuade, lure, woo and seduce millions of human beings and, in doing so, convert them from potential into actual clients". In the discourse of tourism language use is part of a social discursive practice, beyond the literal meaning tourists infer and grasp the intended convincing and influential meaning as well.

The special discourse of tourism has been investigated from different perspectives of applied linguistics including sociolinguistic, linguistic, cultural, pragmatic, discourse, semantic, and corpus-based aspects (Alcantar 2007, 2010; Capelli 2006; Castello 2002, 2013; Francesconi 2012, 2014; Gandin 2014; Gotti 2006, 2011; Jaworsky & Thurlow 2010;

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Jaworsky et al. 2014; Lam 2004; Maci 2012; Tognini-Bonelli & Manca 2002). Castello (2002) and Lam (2004) are considered the initiators of corpus-based tourism text analyses; since the compilation of their large-scale corpora and milestone studies remarkable undertakings have been carried out in corpus-driven tourism language research (Chujo et al. 2006; Kang 2011; Nigro 2006). Gotti (2006) emphasized the importance of pragmatic communicative function in determining a tourism text's genre, whereas Gandin (2014) examined whether loan words and expressions can be considered pragmatic markers of social attitude in this special discourse. Francesconi (2014) searched for the means of integrating applied linguistics with multimodal discourse analysis, shifting the textual approach of tourism discourse to semiotic perspective.

Investigations of the lexical and discourse features of tourism language have been increasingly in the focus of studies in the past two decades (Dann 1996; Gotti 2006; Lam 2004; Maci 2010, 2012; Nigro 2006). Dann (1996) worked on the identification of different registers in tourism language corresponding to different specific sub-fields that are characterised by peculiar features and lexis *e.g.* religious or congress tourism. Grounded on Dann's (1996) work Luo and Huang (2015), as well as Nigro (2006) carried out research on the special terminology and discourse of guidebooks, whereas Rosypalova (2012) conducted a corpus-based analysis on the written and spoken discourse of tour guides.

3   The communicative and persuasive functions in tourism discourse

In Nigro's view (2006: 189) the language of tourism fulfils three communicative functions; *vocative* (promotional), *expressive* and *referential*. The main *vocative function* of promotional materials such as brochures, leaflets, and advertisements is to attract the attention of potential customers, whereas travelogues and tourism journals have a predominant *expressive function* as they focus on individual tourists' accounts of travel experiences. The *descriptive referential function* is predominant in guidebooks or descriptive panels of museums that present tourist attractions with technical terms and provide objective information. However, as Nigro (2006: 189) points out, there is no clear-cut distinction of linguistic functions in tourism texts as they generally appear simultaneously.

Persuasiveness is a crucial element of the vocative and expressive communicative functions in promotional materials and travel journalism, as the alluring, personalised, and detailed descriptions of the destinations make the information credible for potential clients. Besides attracting the hope-for tourists' attention, the application of persuasive discourse techniques helps them to refine their image towards the destination by highlighting its specialities, introducing favourable details, and offering incentives (Luo & Huang 2015: 8). An important and unique persuasive device of tourism discourse is tautology (Dann 1996: 66), that is, tourists take the content of tourism texts for granted, and, information that sounds plausible has a positive impact on consumers' beliefs and decisions.

Tautology is a controversial issue in travel journalism. Opposed to the most important textual feature of journalism, wherein the content counts as true, travel articles are inherently biased and may contain fictional elements as well that calls for further evidence to support the pausibility of the information. In addition, travel journalism is increasingly conducted online by travel journalists and freelancers who are not experts in the field, which definitely has a negative impact on the content of the articles (Hanus & Fürsich: 7-8). To compensate for

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these deficiencies in the credibility and trustworthiness of the content, the use of persuasive discursive devices is central in travel journalism.

The study investigates different means and techniques of persuasion in travel articles; it explores in what ways keywords and lexico-grammatical patterns such as attributive clusters, intensifiers, adverbials and person pronouns occur as persuasive devices to increase plausibility and trustworthiness in the specific register of travel journalism.

4   Research questions

Adopting Halliday's (1991: 32) integrating approach of lexico-grammar that argues that lexis and grammar are interdependent and form a continuity of the same linguistic phenomenon in naturally occurring texts or discourse, the research focused on the following questions:

1. What lexico-grammatical persuasive discursive tools can be detected in a corpus comprising a scant amount of running words?
2. In what ways is the persuasive discourse function of tourism texts manifested in the lexical choices of the articles?
3. In what ways do grammatical choices enhance persuasiveness in tourism texts?

As lexico-grammatical patterns can be regarded as fundamental units in text analysis, and lexicogrammar perceived as system of choices in the creation of meaning that corresponds to a specific register or discourse function, the exploration and identification of the persuasive discourse function in certain syntactic structures seemed to be the most intricate and perplexing. Since word selection in tourism texts highly depends on the communicative goal that they intend to achieve, the lexical analysis of the texts cannot be separated from syntactic patterns that help convey the intention to persuade, beyond the literal meaning. As the lexico-grammatical choices hinge on and intertwine with the intended communicative goals, the lexical and grammatical aspects cannot be examined separately, however, the analysis is organised and moves along the continuum of lexis, syntax, and discourse.

5   Corpus compilation and data analysis

Following Dann's (1996) concept that different registers of tourism language are representative of different domains in the tourism industry, I compiled a corpus of travel articles comprising 30,846 running words on the topic of 'city tours'. The articles and relevant parts of articles were selected from a free website that has altered its content, *Articlecity*, http://www.articlecity.com/search.shtml. The texts had to be cleaned from the disturbing 'noise', I removed the unwanted advertisements and contact details. The corpus, dubbed '*City tours*', is available online at http://bit.ly/GH6VnA.

Data processing was administered with Anthony's versatile freeware, *AntConc3.2.4.w*, and Cobb's *Compleat Lexical Tutor* (CLT). First, I generated frequency and keyword lists, then investigated the occurrence of attributes including superlative forms with a wildcard (*). I also looked at frequent attribute-noun clusters including adjectival sequences and comparisons, applying mainly the *Concordance* and *Clusters* functions, and relying on mutual information (MI) scores. Afterwards, I examined the persuasive role of intensifiers and the epistemic adverbial 'certainly', as the adverbial hints at the stance of travel journalists who intend to convince the readers to accept their statements as credible. The next step was the

investigation of the ego-targeting use of first person pronouns 'I' and 'we', since their keyness and frequency are significant markers of persuasive self-focused language use. Finally, I looked into the occurrence of the personal pronoun 'you' that addresses would-be travellers as unique and extraordinary, functioning as an implied persuasive device.

6 Results and discussion

6.1 Frequency

The lexis of the articles demonstrates a distinctive feature of tourism discourse, the most frequent words and keywords tend to have positive connotation; they convey the implicit message to the readers that they would spend memorable days at the destination, abounding in thrilling experiences. Frequently occurring words evoking positive associations are effective means of persuasion as they boost the imagination of tourists, meeting their expectations and desire to escape from everyday life by creating the image of a pleasant experience. The most frequent common nouns, adjectives, and main verbs can be seen in *Table 1*.

Rank	Common noun	FQ	Adjective	FQ	Main verb	FQ
1	city/cities	469	beautiful	74	offer/s	84
2	tour/s	467	great	56	see	83
3	world	87	new	46	visit	81
4	history	70	popular	45	enjoy	60
5	place	68	famous	42	like	54
6	travel	66	old	32	said	51
7	day	58	wonderful	30	get	50
8	attraction/s	57	historic	31	take	46
9	time	52	unique	26	explore	41
10	people	46	top	28	make	36

Table 1. Frequency (FQ) lists of common nouns, adjectives and main verbs

Besides the thought-provoking nouns, positive meaning can be associated to all the adjectives, in addition, *unique* and *top* refer to the exceptional and superb qualities of tourist attractions. The most frequent verb, *offer*, is a hidden reference to influence tourists to take part in sightseeing tours, and other frequent verbs like *see*, *visit, enjoy* and *explore* also encourage them not to miss this pleasurable and attractive experience.

6.2 Keywords and keying

Keywords are "indicators of texts or domain specific terms" (Bowker & Pearson 2002: 149), and, with their repetitiveness and salience, they are effective means of drawing people's attention in tourism texts. Keyness, a quality of words or lexical chunks, is text-dependent; keyness suggests that 'the wordings are prominent in some way' in that particular text (Scott 2010: 44). The prominence and outstandingness of keywords in tourism texts lead to a general perception of the content, it may help perceive the style and create an imagery of the journey.

To generate a keyword list the CLT's keyword function was used as it determines keyness related to a larger reference corpus, the British National Corpus (BNC). As *Table 2* demonstrates the keywords are far more frequent in this small specialised corpus than in a large-scale reference corpus.

Key nouns (Corpus vs BNC)		Key adjectives (Corpus vs BNC)		Key main verbs (Corpus vs BNC)	
sightseeing	970.00	panoramic	291.00	explore	110.50
tourism	776.00	trendy	162.00	attract	75.33
tours	637.00	breathtaking	151.00	unveil	65.00
options	421.00	culinary	129.00	aquaints	65.00
website	291.00	cosy	129.00	said	65.00
locals	259.00	frugal	129.00	opined	65.00
travel	259.00	bustling	129.00	teaches	65.00
artwork	226.00	cobbled	97.00	knew	65.00
attractions	204.89	cheapest	97.00	dedicate	65.00
basilica	194.00	affordable	97.00	boasts	64.50

Table 2: Frequency of nouns, adjectives and full verbs related to the BNC

The high recurrence of *website* indicates that city tours are promoted mainly via direct internet marketing, and with adjectives like *frugal*, *cheap* and *affordable* tourists are encouraged to buy them.

(1) *Madrid City Tours is an <u>online travel website</u> featuring Madrid excursions, including trips and tours, along with information on hotels and accommodations.*
(2) *If you visit Moscow choose us for Kremlin tour, we provide the best service for an <u>affordable price.</u>*

Although the frequency of adjectives is considerably higher than that of main verbs, which is another characteristic feature of tourism texts**,** the use of seemingly rare verbs in general English like *unveil*, a*cquaint*, *dedicate* or *boast* make the city tours more attractive, inspiring participation in sightseeing.

(3) *The French capital <u>boasts </u>the most famous and expensive hotels on the planet.*

(4) *View this cosmopolitan city from the comfort of an air-conditioned bus while a professional tour guide <u>acquaints</u> you with its most popular and historic sites.*

6. 3 Attributes as means of persuasion

6.3.1   Descriptive and evaluative adjectives

Since all the adjectives in the frequency list (Table 2) have positive connotation, the descriptive adjectives like *panoramic*, *breath-taking* and *bustling* help create a captivating and vivid imagery of cities, while *culinary*, *cosy*, or *cobbled*, evoke longing and nostalgic feelings of the atmosphere of old city centres.

(5) *You will discover a <u>fascinating </u>city with Arab origins, <u>spectacular</u> architecture, <u>bustling</u> modern parts, and <u>great</u> nightlife.*

(6) *Your guide can take you through the <u>charming cobbled</u> streets around San Jacinto Plaza to browse its <u>thriving</u> art market.*

As seen in the extracts, descriptive and evaluative adjectives trigger positive and lively images of the destinations and experiences in the minds of the prospective visitors. Cook (1994:11) argues that readers use schemata in discourse processing, that is, mental representations of typical instances and situations, in order to 'predict and make sense of the particular instance which the discourse describes'. The extensive use of descriptive and evaluative adjectives, especially superlatives, communicates a truly engaging image of the venues, enhancing their extraordinariness, and increasing the temptation to visit them. The descriptive and evaluative attributes in the following examples convey the message that the attractions are must-see and the experiences are not-to-be-missed.

(7) *The <u>diverse architectural</u> styles and <u>lavish</u> landscaping provide a <u>truly breath-taking</u> sight.*

(8) *We take you on an <u>unforgettable bilingual narrated</u> sightseeing cruise to the <u>scenic</u> bay.*

(9) *A <u>bonafide culinary destination</u> with sophisticated restaurant option for every taste, the city's every gourmand's heaven.*

In the last extract the professional client-oriented attitude, the indulging culinary experience, and the impeccable service are strengthened with an implicitly convincing attribute, *bonafide*.

6.3.2   Intensifying adjectives

Some of the intensifying adjectives of the articles have a general heightening effect on the nouns that they pre-modify like *true* (9), *great* (56) or *real* (6), and some of them function as amplifiers denoting a high degree as they are inherently superlative, such as *perfect* (24), *unique* (26), or *superb* (10). *Table 3* shows the most frequent intensifying adjectives.

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Rank	Intensifying adjective	Frequency
1	great	56
2	unique	26
3	perfect	24
4	superb	10
5	true	9
6	real	6
7	absolute	2
		Total: 133

Table 3: Frequency of intensifying adjectives

The most frequent intensifying attribute, *great*, accentuates the excellence of venues, culinary experiences, and facilities, while the second most favoured adjective, *unique* refers to locations, cultures and attractions. Additional frequently used adjectives such as *perfect* that occurs mainly as an attribute of tours and destinations, and *superb* that emphasises the fineness of cuisines and vistas, foreshadow the extraordinariness of the travel experience.

6.3.3 Sequences of adjectives

In strings of adjectives the multiplicity of attributes reinforces the positive impression of the described tourism product, however, the use of threadbare words make these descriptions sound like clichés. As compensation, the use of some buzzwords in the sequences makes the attractions more appealing.

(10) *Just <u>wonderful… really beautiful, peaceful and cultural</u> city.*

(11) *Mexico City is really <u>amazing, diverse, beautiful, mind-blowing and thought-provoking</u>.*

As the latter excerpt demonstrates, exaggeration is accepted when these sequences help visualise the attraction and arouse the desire to take part in a once-in-a-life-time experience.

6.3.4   Superlatives

Whereas deficiency is concealed in tourism texts, 'salience', a concept introduced by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996: 183), helps to highlight the positive aspects of a tourism product, this way increase the degree of persuasion. Besides the high recurrence of keywords with positive connotation, salience is best achieved with the use of superlative attributes, as these forms express the highest value of the described entities distinguishing it from others, and emphasising their uniqueness.

Examining the occurrence of superlative forms, the total number of superlatives found with wildcard is *187*; the '*the most **' form is the most frequent with *88* instances, the irregular '*the best*' has *55* occurrences, and there are *44* '*the *est*' forms. The superlative adjectives reflect the alluring and superb nature of tourism language; they give additional emphasis to the uniqueness of the described destinations or services.

6.4   Comparisons

Comparison as a persuasive communicative technique is employed in tourism language either to emphasize the excellence of the destination or service related to others, or to highlight their exceptional qualities in order to diminish the effects of strangeness in tourists. Similes and metaphors, as the most effective devices for comparison, depict the tourism product with exaggeration, and, in doing so they change people's attitudes. As illustrated in the following examples, similes help tourists become familiar with the destinations as they are likened to something well-known and pleasant.

(12) *This place has a warm and intimate atmosphere like something out of the Arabian Nights.*

(13) *Adorned with huge skyscrapers and pristine beaches, Dubai attracts tourism like honey a group of bumblebees.*

'Magic' is a key metaphor of tourism, implying that a touristic experience is too mystical to be real or true; however, it sparks the imagination of tourists and arouses the desire to visit that 'dreamland'.

(14) *Come and explore some of the most magnificent piazzas, ancient buildings, impressive fountains and incredible views that unveil the magic and the splendour of the eternal city!*

(15) *It's like living in dreamland! The interior is out of this world beautiful and so are the outdoors with all the trees and gardens! Magical!*

Besides creating an emotional link to the addressed tourist, a metaphor with an exclamation mark elicits an immediate urge not to miss these enchanting sceneries.

6.5   Intensifiers

Intensifiers, as emphatic devices strengthen the meaning of the words that they modify, as well as give them an additional emotional context that enhances their attractiveness. The most frequent intensifier in the articles is *very* with 40 cluster types that highlight the advantages of city breaks and city tours. Further frequent intensifiers are *really* with seven occurrences, and *quite* with six instances.

6.6   Epistemic adverbial 'certainly'

The use of the epistemic adverbial 'certainly' indicates that a statement is accepted as valid and evident. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996:160) accentuated that 'the truth value or credibility of linguistically realized statements about the world' is an important aspect of the representation of reality. The adverbial 'certainly' expresses different meanings and fulfils different discourse functions in tourism texts, yet it is generally used to emphasize that something is true without doubt, or it is extremely likely to happen. Three main persuasive functions of 'certainly' could be identified in travel articles; expression of opinion, attitude, and emotion.

- Expression of opinion

(16) *It is probably the most important building in Barcelona and certainly the most visited.*

- Expression of attitude

(17) *The metropolis <u>can never be disappointing</u> as <u>all those taking flights to Rio de Janeiro can certainly expect a lot to explore,</u> be it the frolicking carnivals, the beautiful landscape or the beach culture.*

- Expression of emotions

(18) *London is <u>certainly one of the most charming cities that one can visit during their most valuable vacation.</u>*

The discourse functions of 'certainly' illustrated in the examples help to testify that the information is fact-based and these venues are worth visiting.

6.7 Person pronouns

6.7.1 First person pronouns

The accounts of tours and journeys as personal experiences give the impression of authenticity as the use of the personal pronouns 'I' and 'we' increases their truthfulness. In Jorgensen's (2004: 73) view the subjective representation of a destination is likely to result in increased number of visitors.

(20) *<u>I spent about 4 hours</u> inside this wonderful museum, <u>amazed by the works of art</u> and antiquities.*

(21) *<u>I recommend it to everyone</u> who wants to relax, eat delicious foods and visit a classical city with unique monuments.*

(22) *<u>We enjoyed almost everything</u>. The scenery was amazing and the guides were professional.*

Comparing the keyness of subject pronouns, pronoun 'I' is ranked ninth in the keyword list preceeded only by third person 'it', and followed by pronoun 'we' that stands in rank ten based on its keyness. The high recurrence of first person pronouns, the subjective reinforcement of the travelogues and descriptions enhances the validity of the content.

6.7.2 Pronouns 'you' and 'we'

The discourse strategy of ego-targeting is often applied in tourism texts to persuade tourists by emphasizing their uniqueness (Nigro, 2006: 188). Addressing them with '*you*' and distancing '*us*' from others will give them the feeling that they are special and unique as the focus of attention is directed towards them.

(23) *Truly speaking, Taj Mahal is amazingly beautiful and <u>once you see</u> this marvellous monument also referred to as the epitome of love, <u>you are sure to get spell bound</u>.*

(24) *As <u>we have always shared a very trusted rapport</u> with our tour providers, <u>we have managed to offer</u> some of the best deals on hotels that can be booked via this new feature and help the travellers with finding convenient and comfortable accommodation.*

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In the above listed instances personal accounts, recommendations, and the strategy of ego-targeting are applied as persuading promotional marketing tools, to amplify the reliability and trustworthiness of the information.

7   Conclusion

This corpus-based analysis of the application of persuasive discursive techniques in travel articles shed light on some specific features of tourism discourse, and presented some ways how lexico-grammatical choices as inherent persuasive devices affect customers' perception and attitude. Style, lexis, syntactic structures, and persuasive discourse techniques such as self-presentation of travel experiences, or individualisation with ego-targeting were detected as powerful means of persuasion. These discursive devices trigger attractive imageries in prospective tourists' minds and urge them to experience the excitement that they foreshadow. Lexical choices, such as the use of keywords and keying, loads of attributes, comparisons, and metaphors, tend to exaggerate in order to increase their persuasive power, and highlight the positive aspects of touristic experiences. The use of certain syntactic patterns in the descriptions of tourism products, such as the abundant usage of attribute-noun phrases or intensifying adverbial-adjectival clusters, despite the exaggerated and hyperbolic images, conveys the message that the vivid depictions are authentic representations of reality.

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