Travelling in space: Spatial representation in English and Italian guidebooks

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The language of tourism as a type of specialized discourse displaying different levels of specialization associated with different types of texts that address a more or less specialized audience has been the subject of several recent studies (Gotti 2006, Cappelli 2006, Nigro 2006, Francesconi 2007). In such accounts, guidebooks are considered to be one of the most representative written genres pertaining to tourism discourse (Dann 1996), and have recently received much attention for the privileged vantage point that they provide for the observation of the dynamics of cross-cultural representation (Fodde and Denti 2005, Vestito 2005, among others).

In this paper I discuss the possibility to consider the language of tourist guidebooks as a type of specialized discourse – a complex dynamic system emerging from the pressures of linguistic and contextual factors – and I focus on the “leading function” of this genre (Margarito 2000, Cappelli 2006), i.e. on the way in which guidebooks, through language, help construct the tourist’s gaze (Urry 2002) by guiding the tourist glances (Urry 2001) both at the pre- and on-trip stage of the tourist experience. I analyze and compare the way in which descriptions of places and of the collocation of objects in space are carried out through verbs of motion and state in English guidebooks and in their Italian translations.

My analysis has a twofold aim. Firstly, it shows how verbs used to describe space and spatial relations in guidebooks, despite being taken from ordinary everyday language, act as specialized lexical items in that they fulfill the “leading function” in a specialized way. They are carefully selected in order to guide and shape the tourist gaze while “firing imagination” (Dann 1996, Cappelli 2006). I show how motion verbs lexicalize fictive motion most of the time, in an attempt to reproduce in an (experientially) iconic way the path that the eyes of the tourist-child (Dann 1996) are supposed to follow. Secondly, the study of a parallel corpus of English and Italian guidebooks shows how the two systems differ in some significant respects in the way in which descriptions of places and of the location of objects are lexicalized. In this sense, this paper unveils interesting aspects of the cross-linguistic mapping between the space-related concepts and the lexical items used to encode them (Bertuccelli Papi and Lenci 2007) that can make for a useful resource for translators who wish to attain a truly diagrammatic translation (Merlini Barbaresi 1996), respectful of the features of the type of specialized discourse found in guidebooks.


Francesconi, S. (2007), English for Tourism Promotion. Italy in British Tourism Texts, Milano: Hoepli


