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“A PERFECT TUSCAN EXPERIENCE”: DESTINATION IMAGE AND CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS IN POSITIVE TRAVEL REVIEWS IN ENGLISH AND ITALIAN

Abstract

L'articolo discute somiglianze e differenze che emergono dall'analisi lessicale e collocazionale di un piccolo corpus comparabile di recensioni positive pubblicate da viaggiatori di madrelingua inglese e italiana su TripAdvisor, ad oggi il maggiore sito di viaggi fondato su contenuti generati dagli utenti. L'analisi delle recensioni di hotel situati in Toscana mostra come anche questa tipologia testuale di recente sviluppo contribuisca alla natura essenzialmente tautologica del discorso turistico, rafforzando l'immagine stereotipica della destinazione in modo non dissimile da ciò che avviene nel testo promozionale per il turismo propriamente detto attraverso il ricorso a temi e strategie retoriche tipiche.

Introduction

The role of tourists' cultural expectations is widely acknowledged in tourism studies. Linguistic research on stereotypes in tourism discourse has traditionally focused on genres with a more or less overt promotional intent, such as advertisements, brochures, websites and guidebooks (Cappelli 2006, 2008a, 2012, forthcoming; Castello 2002; Fodde, Van Den Abeele 2012; Fodde, Denti 2005; Francesconi 2007; Mattiello 2012; Nigro 2006; Vestito 2005). The latter are certainly iconic of the famous statement by adman Jerry Goodies included in an article published in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* 30 years ago: “Adver-

tising doesn't always mirror how people are acting, but how they're dreaming... In a sense, what we're doing is wrapping up your emotions and selling them back to you" (Nelson 1983).

Dann (1996:65-67) highlights the tautological nature of tourism discourse and of its circularity. On the one hand, destinations are presented as everybody imagines them, and, on the other, tourists demand to see things as they dream of them, and to photograph the same images they see on brochures and ads. Photos become "mere verifications of the tourist's image-filled mind" (Dann 1996:66) and narrations reproduce the discourse of brochures, guidebooks and ads, not only in their contents, but also in their ideology and style (Thurot, Thurot 1983). Advertisers and marketing strategists have known this for a long time, and have used tourists' feedback to produce more advertising material. Some scholars have pointed out that promotional genres¹ can be "essentially fraudulent in their tautological messages of guaranteeing that what is advertised is what will be seen and experienced" (Buck 1977:206).

It is probably because of the increasing awareness of this fact among consumers as well that online user-generated content has been growing in popularity over the past few years to an extent that it is now considered the most influential factor in the way in which consumers' travel decisions are made (Tancer 2008; Zehrer, Crofts, Magnini 2011). Travel reviews in particular have been found to be especially decisive in travel planning, as indicated by the recently published TripBarometer by TripAdvisor Global Report² (2013), with an average of 69% of global travellers relying on them alone in order to choose accommodation. This figure reaches 76% in the USA and in the UK and 87% in Italy. Overall, 93% of the participants in the survey said that other people's evaluations on travel review websites influenced their travel plans (p.6) and 41% of them reported they actively contributed online evaluations of their travel experience in the form of an accommodation review (51%), a website review or a blog or forum post (p.7).

¹ Buck (1977) focuses on brochures in particular, but the observations can be extended to all promotional tourism materials.

² TripBarometer by TripAdvisor (2013) is at present "the world's largest accommodation and traveller online survey" commissioned by TripAdvisor and carried out by the agency StrategyOne on a sample of 35,042 participants (both travellers and businesses) from 26 different countries. Data were collected in December 2012 and January 2013. Results were published in March 2013 and are publicly available online (<http://www.tripadvisortripbarometer.com/>).

Besides being of great interest to the tourist industry, these data provide interesting stimuli for linguistic research as well, as they portray the rapid growth in popularity and availability of post-trip genres of tourism discourse (Dann 1996; Cappelli 2006) such as reviews and trip reports. Texts which can be described as eWOM or electronic word-of-mouth (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, Gremler 2004), or rather, “word-of-mouse” as they are commonly referred to, are rapidly becoming the most prolific genre in tourism discourse, with presumably interesting consequences for the discursive domain at large.

Since Dann’s (1996:2) pivotal observation that “tourism is grounded in discourse”, there has been a growing interest in the crucial role of language in the field. Interestingly, long before reviews became so popular, he also observed that “[...] tourists often can and do feed back into this discourse. [...] They build up their own systems of expectation, and, when these do not mesh with the promises held out by the language of tourism, one will clearly discern the voice of complaint. On the other hand, when tourists are satisfied with their experiences, they contribute to the language of tourism by becoming promoters themselves” (1996:3).

Travel reviews have certainly become the main locus for the expression of the tourist’s voice and, in this sense, they represent the most remarkable exception as regards “the lack of sender identification” listed by Dann (1996:62) among the divergent properties unique to the language of tourism discourse. In the case of reviews, trip reports, blog entries, and forums, the reader is very much aware of the real or “online” identity of the writer (Sen, Lerman 2007; Vermeulen, Seeger 2009; Vásquez forthcoming a), who acts as a living testimonial to the quality of the accommodation or lack thereof, the truthfulness of the advertisement, etc. (Cappelli 2006).

The spread of these more “subjective”, peer-oriented genres, along with the success of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare, Pinterest, and Instagram to mention but a few, seem to be slowly changing the way in which more or less traditional genres such as guidebooks, brochures and official websites address their readers, by pushing them towards a progressive democratization of content creation as well as towards a decrease in the lack of sender identification. “Companion sites” for guidebooks as well as blogs on traditionally informative websites where identifiable users or authoritative writers can contribute original content are now quite common: a sign of the remarkable influence exerted by the growing popularity of user-generated content, which is giving a whole new meaning to the concept of online

reputation and personal branding. Miguéns, Baggio, and Costa (2008:27) describe this trend as a shift “from a business-to-consumer marketing to a peer-to-peer model for the sharing of information” which is pressing suppliers and buyers to “value more and more the opinions, reviews and referrals of fellow travelers. These information agents (Travel 2.0 users) represent a more reliable and trustworthy source than the suppliers themselves”.

In spite of recent interest in travel reviews (Fina 2011; Vásquez 2011, 2012, forthcoming a), the striking paucity of systematic linguistic studies of this post-trip genre through which tourists become active users (and creators) of tourism discourse demands a thorough investigation of its features. This article investigates a small corpus of positive accommodation reviews written by English and Italian travellers in their own native language and posted online on TripAdvisor³, presently the largest travel website populated with user-generated content. First, the results of a lexical and collocational analysis of the reviews are presented and trends and preferences in the way in which speakers of the two languages report on their experience are identified. Hypotheses are made as to the possible connections between linguistic and cultural aspects which may be responsible for some of the differences observed in the genre across the two languages. Finally, the data are discussed with respect to the problem of the tautological nature of tourism discourse, and more specifically of whether the imagery presented or evoked in accommodation reviews mirrors – and therefore contributes to – the rhetoric of canonical tourism promotion or whether, on the contrary, it provides a more independent and faithful portrayal of the tourist experience.

1. *Previous linguistic research on travel reviews*

Research on the language of tourism has mainly focused on the rhetorical or linguistic features of advertising and of other more or less overtly promotional genres such as brochures, destination or accommodation websites and guidebooks, or on the way in which cross-cultural differences are represented in these or other “pre-trip” materials (Cappelli 2006, 2008a, 2012, forthcoming; Castello 2002; Fodde, Van Den Abeele 2012; Fodde, Denti 2005; Francesconi 2007; Mattiello 2012;

³ The article reports on the first results of a larger research project focusing on post-trip tourist texts, more specifically positive and negative accommodation reviews, trip reports and forum posts.

