

li201

Linguistic Insights  
Studies in Language and Communication

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# The Perception of Nature in Travel Promotion Texts

A Corpus-based  
Discourse Analysis

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background to and purpose of the study

This study reflects on the relationship between three areas of research, the natural environment, tourism and discourse, and how this relationship is affected by and affects society as a whole.

During recent years consumers have become increasingly aware of the need to protect the environment. In fact, after the 1980s, the threat of climate change and the depletion of resources began to appear more frequently in media coverage, leading to a rise in environmental consciousness (Harré, Brockmeier and Mühlhäusler, 1999; Holden, 2008). By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the furore surrounding these issues had grown to such an extent that it has led the tourism industry to respond to them (Holden, 2008) through the implementation of ecotourism. As a consequence, the tourism industry is now taking advantage of the concept of nature travel, exploiting the term linguistically in its advertisements.

Indeed, tourist choices are increasingly influenced by sustainability considerations. There is empirical evidence that international tourists are interested in the social, cultural and environmental issues relevant to the destinations they visit and specifically seek for places that can provide them with the opportunity to experience nature in its most *natural* state (Stamou and Paraskevopoulos, 2006; Pollock, 2007), a place where they can renew themselves observing and learning about nature. This has led to the “growing specialist market impulse for ‘getting back to nature’” (Davidson, 2005: 30), shaping the perceptions regarding all those forms of tourism involved with nature, such as sustainable tourism, ecotourism or nature tourism, turning them into “a sponsored, commercialized cultural product” (Ryan, Hughes and Chirgwin, 1999: 150).

In line with this remark, I argue that social and economic actors, i.e., advertisers and tourism entrepreneurs, are *exploiting* the idea of nature by constructing it according to contemporary ideology and culture. The way places are discursively built as tourism destinations and their effect on the shaping of tourists' expectations and experiences has been extensively examined (Urry, 1990; Dann, 1996; Stamou and Paraskevopoulos, 2006). Moreover, there is a large number of studies on the effect of the environmentalist movement on advertising (Howlett and Raglon, 1992; Banerjee, Gulas and Iyer, 1995; Hansen, 2002), and more specifically on the advertising of tourist destinations (Mühlhäusler and Peace, 2001; Peace, 2001; Stamou and Paraskevopoulos, 2006; Stamou, Lefkaditou, Schizas and Stamou, 2009).

Considering these studies in an attempt to combine their main argumentations, the present work revolves around two main areas of interest: linguistic and cultural. From a linguistic point of view, my interest concerns those lexical items which are used to describe the natural world and contribute to the construction of nature within travel promotion texts. For this reason the study adopts a corpus-based approach to identify any meaningful patterns that may be revealed through the analysis of frequency lists, collocates and concordance lines.

From the cultural and social point of view, my aim is to investigate how the surrounding context affects the use of language, providing a different understanding and interpretation of constructions of discourse, in this case of nature. Drawing on discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Stubbs, 1996; Koteyko, 2006), this study aims at linking the above-mentioned perspective to a more accurate study of the role of language in the construction of nature in travel promotion texts. Discourse analysis involves investigating texts (i.e., instances of language in use) in order to understand how they create and reproduce social meanings which in turn shape people's knowledge of the world. In particular, language itself is considered a form of social practice and texts are never discussed in isolation, but rather located within a wider, critical analysis of the surrounding (Stubbs, 1996; Wodak and Meyer, 2009). Thus, the idea of nature is analyzed along the lines of ideology and culture.

## 1.2 Reasons for choosing the tourism sector

Looking at the aforementioned mechanisms and drawing on a more personal interest, I have decided to focus the investigation on the concepts of ecotourism as a form of responsible and sustainable tourism. Specifically, the interest stems from several discussions and debates on the definition of ecotourism and eco-friendly destinations that took place in class with students majoring in Tourism<sup>1</sup>.

When asked to define the topic, the students provided the following definition: ‘Ecotourism is responsible travel to *natural* areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people’. Moreover, they underlined the fact that there are certain ecotourism principles that need to be followed: minimizing impact; raising environmental and cultural awareness and respect; providing positive experiences for both visitors and hosts; providing financial benefits for both conservation and local people; raising sensitivity to host countries’ political, environmental and social climate.

Although the definition provided is valid with well defined principles, there is an aspect on which students fail to respond: how can a tourist (who is not an expert in this field of research) understand whether the destination chosen is truly eco-friendly? Is it a matter of trusting the travel agent? Or do tourists have to be informed on specific guidelines? I argue that tourism, like all other economic sectors, is exploiting the idea of nature and related words, such as green or eco-friendly, with the sole purpose of promoting or selling their product/destination, a tendency that is due to the increasing general interest and concern for the environment. After all, we are assailed by the idea of global warming, its effects on our lives and countries, and the necessity to return to a more natural lifestyle. These are concepts that are cleverly used by businesses to appear more attractive to the growing audience of conscientious travellers.

In light of this, I investigated the discourse used in travel advertising with the aim of understanding whether all the social and economic actors

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1 The students were 1<sup>st</sup> year students enrolled in the second level degree course in Tourism at the University of Calabria (Italy).

involved – that is, advertisers, travel agencies, local communities – are promoting authentic sustainable destinations or if they are simply following the trend of the cultural and social stances regarding the natural environment.

Tourism is a global industry which involves psychological, social and cultural dimensions. In fact, tourism representations are related to a wider context of social and political processes (Urry, 1990; Dann, 1996; Ryan *et al.*, 1999; Jaworski and Pritchard, 2005).

In order to analyze the discourse of tourism, and more specifically the discourse of tourism advertising, it is necessary to investigate the link between language, text and social relations (Fairclough, 1995; Stubbs, 1996), looking into the context of production and reception: who produced it, why, who is responding to it, what social and cultural factors may influence these texts.

Travel promotion texts in specialized magazines will be the tools for the investigation since, first of all, they contain all the elements that are typical of advertisements, such as persuasive and descriptive language, eye-catching layout and colorful attractive pictures. Moreover, these texts are addressed to travel professionals as well as to potential tourists, with the intent to attract them.

### 1.3 Research focus and outline of context

The overall purpose of the study is to reveal the meaning and function of nature as it is represented in a corpus of travel promotion texts, by investigating which linguistic devices are used by the producers of the texts to present natural destinations. In particular, the study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How are the words *nature* and *natural* linguistically defined and constructed?
2. What functions does nature serve?
3. To what extent are these travel promotion texts following the guidelines on sustainable tourism in protected areas provided by the World Tourism Organization?