

BOOK REVIEW



INTO THE WILD? EXPLORING THE DISCOURSE ABOUT NATURAL ENVIRONMENT IN TOURISM TEXTS

Ida Ruffolo. THE PERCEPTION OF NATURE IN TRAVEL PROMOTION TEXTS. A CORPUS-BASED DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (2015), Bern etc: Peter Lang. Series: Linguistic Insights. 148 pp., ISBN 978-3-0343-1521-0 pb.

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This book is a revised version of the author's PhD dissertation submitted in 2011. Its central topic is situated at the intersection of three areas of research: discourse analysis as a broad methodological framework, and natural environment discourse and tourism discourse as two thematic domains of interest. As the author argues, there are indeed very few studies that focus on this specific intersection. In a broad sense, the aim of the book is to contribute "to a more accurate study of the role of language in the construction of nature in travel promotion texts" (p. 2). As such, it departs from the premise that concepts such as *nature* are social and discursive constructions that are affected by ideology, culture and other, for example promotional, interests. The broad research aim is translated into three more specific research questions, which also provide the structure of the book:

1. *How are the words nature and natural linguistically defined and constructed?*
2. *What functions does nature serve [in the promotional texts]?*
3. *To what extent are [...] travel promotion texts following the guidelines on sustainable tourism in protected areas provided by the World Tourism Organization?* (p. 4)

The first part of the book (Chapters 2 and 3, pp. 7-48) provides the theoretical and methodological framework for the empirical analysis. The author gives an insightful overview of the existing bibliography on environmental and tourism discourse, and, particularly, of the studies situated at the intersection of both domains. The main outcome of the theoretical and bibliographic introduction are three coding grids, one for each of the above mentioned research questions. The coding grid for the first research question, about the linguistic and social construction of nature, draws upon Thelander (2002) and Hansen (2002), and consists of four categories: 'artificial nature', 'tamed nature', 'untamed nature' and 'accessible wild nature', which can roughly be situated on a cline ranging from artificial and intervened by human action to authentic and pristine nature. The taxonomy for the functions of nature (second research question) is based on the work of Hansen and Machin (2008) and distinguishes, in turn, four categories, which are further subdivided: 'states of mental and physical well-being' (subdivided into 'spiritual' and 'nurturing' functions), 'desire for knowledge and progress' (subdivided into 'cultural', 'global economy', 'local economy', 'promotional' and 'educational' functions), 'social goals' (with 'preservative' and 'recreational' functions) and 'aesthetic' functions (p. 42). For the third research question, the taxonomy is based on a handbook with specific guidelines for planning and managing sustainable tourism projects, and consists of three main categories: 'enhancing economic opportunity', 'protecting natural and cultural heritage', and 'enhancing the quality of life'.

In the second part of the book (Chapter 4, pp. 49-106), the three research questions are operationalized by applying the coding grids to a corpus of selected excerpts in order to evaluate the frequency of the different categories within each coding grid. Although the author does not define it in these terms, the overall methodology can best be described as content analysis or perhaps interpretive discourse analysis.

The empirical data for the study is a 300,000 words corpus compiled by the author, consisting of articles from two specialized travel magazines, *Travel Weekly* and *Travel Agent*. The texts are not analyzed entirely, but excerpts are selected through a specific search query, consisting of the keywords *nature* and *natural* in combination with their most frequent lexical collocates, which are defined as lexical items that occur more frequently than expected in a three-word context at the left or at the right of the keywords (for example, *reserve*, *lovers* or *bird* in the case of *nature*, or *beauty*, *attractions* or *springs* in the case of *natural*). The discourse analysis consists then in evaluating to which category of the coding grid the example belongs (for example, 'artificial nature', 'tamed nature', etc.): for doing this, the author does not only look into the concordance lines but also into the "surrounding co-text" (p. 37). It remains, however, unclear how the extension of the possibly relevant co-text was delimited: the examples that are quoted range from one sentence to several paragraphs.

The corpus analysis addresses the three research questions separately, and, as was already said, is primarily designed to measure the frequency of the different coding values within the corpus of selected excerpts. The author discusses these

frequencies and a fair amount of examples to illustrate the ‘categories’ and ‘functions’ of *nature*, or the occurrence of sustainable tourism-related features. The corpus analysis reveals, for example, (a) that ‘accessible wild nature’ is the most frequent linguistic and social construction of *nature*; (b) that the ‘recreational’, ‘preservative’ and ‘promotional’ functions are the most frequent functions of *nature*; and (c) that ‘enhancing economic opportunity’ and ‘protecting natural and cultural heritage’ are the most frequent topics regarding sustainable tourism. The quantitative data are integrated in an interpretive and predominantly qualitative approach to the data, in which the examples of the different values are discussed and related to insights from previous research.

In the conclusions (Chapter 5, pp. 107-113), the author emphasizes that there is indeed “evidence to the hypothesis that the perception of nature is socially and culturally constructed” (p. 109). In particular, it is possible to observe a greening process in travel promotion texts, which means, for example, that the usage of the concept *nature* may be deceptive, and that the promotional material conveys the idea of nature-based tourism in order to target environmentally-conscious consumers (pp. 107-8). The most salient image of nature in the promotional texts is that of ‘wild accessible nature’, which allows to promote the nature destinations as “authentic and accessible places” (p. 108). According to the author, this “reflects the perspectives, beliefs and expectations of the contemporary social world, which claims to be interested in the preservation of the natural environment while enjoying nature and the activities that it may offer” (p. 108). As for the functions of nature, the results are more ambiguous. At first sight, natural destinations are mainly described as recreational sites, and travel promotional texts “emphasize the economic aspect of ecotourism rather than the environmentalist aspect” (p. 110), although the author emphasizes that also the latter dimension is instantiated in the corpus. Overall, the corpus results for the second and third research question appear to “illustrate the possible reconciliation between the environmental-conservation and economic-development perspective” (p. 111).

This study addresses a current and topical issue, especially from the perspective of tourism discourse, and the research is situated in a relevant and informative conceptual framework (although, unfortunately, no references after 2010 are included). The analysis makes use of original and new empirical data, and the conclusions seem intuitively plausible and in line with previous research. The author also addresses explicitly some limitations of the study, such as the inherently subjective nature of the codification or the decision to work with textual data only. In my view, however, there remain a number of questions which the author or future readers of the book could intend to further explore in future research. Hereby follow two comments.

A first question concerns the exact role of the ‘collocates’. Although this is an important notion in the theoretical section, its exact status remains rather unclear in the empirical section and the conclusions. A few times, the author attributes semantic or pragmatic values to specific collocates (for example, “collocates such as *attractions*,

wonders, environment and resources are presumably used to allure those tourists who are ‘interested in the environment for its own value rather than how it can be used’ [p. 53]), but these statements are not explicitly supported by quantitative data. Moreover, although one of the implicit conclusions seems to be that there is no correlation between the collocates and the ‘linguistic/social constructions’ or ‘functions’ of nature, which is a challenging claim for corpus-based discourse analysis, the conceptual implications of this lack of correlations are not explicitly or systematically discussed. A second question concerns the exact definition of the text type that has been studied. Although in the methodological section, the author correctly claims that the articles address tourism professionals and/or tourists (p. 28), the discussion of the examples focuses almost invariably on the promotional function towards potential *tourists*. Yet, the media that are chosen clearly define themselves as B2B media (for example, *Travel Weekly* describes itself as “the most successful B2B news resource”), and in many examples, it is clear that the intended audience consists of tourism professionals, rather than tourists (for example, in “Showing us new attractions such as El Cajas National Park means we can extend length of stay by selling more add-ons.”, p. 95). In particular, this raises the conceptual question to what extent B2B and B2C communication possibly differ from each other in relation to the constructions and functions of the natural destinations that they promote, and which influence this might have in the empirical findings of the study.

Although I believe that the author could have pushed her analysis further by applying more corpus-driven research methods and by addressing for example the above mentioned conceptual questions, this study certainly will help the reader become more aware of the way in which nature is discursively and socially constructed in travel promotion texts.

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