Chapter 2

Sustainability in Mountain Tourism: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Web Sites in the German Language

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability is a fundamental concept of Alpine tourism in countries like Germany and Austria, which have signed the Alpine Convention, a treaty between Alpine countries and the EU. The following paper presents the main results of a multimodal discourse analysis conducted on selected online presentations of eco-friendly hotels in Austria and in Germany. The selection of this textual genre is due primarily to the fact that online presentations are a sort of gateway to introduce the reader into the world of tourism—a world that, at the pre-trip stage, is only virtual, becoming real in the ongoing-trip stage. Hotel presentations try to convince readers to go beyond the pre-trip stage and to choose the accommodation structure for the holiday. Austrian and German presentations use common verbal strategies, but they differ in the relationship between visual and verbal components.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability, i.e. the maintenance of good environmental, social and economic practices on a long-term basis (Portney, 2015), concerns various aspects of tourism, such as mobility, accommodation and hospitality. UNESCO defines “sustainable tourism” as “tourism that respects both local people and the traveller, cultural heritage and the environment” (UNESCO, n.d.). It should consider the high level of satisfaction of tourists as main goal, while offering them a meaningful experience and “raising their awareness about sustainability issues” (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005, pp. 11-12). The concept of sustainable tourism is indeed directly connected to the process and actions undertaken to obtain tourism practices, which could be classified as sustainable, and to the results of these processes and action. Specifically, the

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focus is on the “sustainable tourism development”. According to the World Tourism Organization (UN-WTO), “sustainable tourism development”—based on the idea of sustainable development—“requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building.” (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005, pp. 11-12).

Among types of tourism, mountain tourism is an interesting field of analysis, in that it is strictly bound to sustainable habits and practices. The following paper concentrates on Alpine tourism, in particular tourism of German-speaking countries. The Alps offer biodiversity capital, and water and wood reserves, and attract 120 million visitors every year, while 14 million people live there permanently (Alpine Convention, n.d.).

This chapter proposes a linguistic analysis of selected web presentations by eco-hotels located in the Austrian and German Alps. It aims to examine textual, linguistic and discursive characteristics represented in promotional tourism texts produced for a precise stage in the tourism experience, i.e., before travelling. The focus is on the promotional domain of tourism, because advertising intents pervade the tourism field and have a strong social impact (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2010). Promotional tourism texts are present in everyday life, “while reading the newspaper (printed or digital), while driving to work and looking at posters and billboard, while checking our inbox with email from tour operators or travel booking engines” (Francesconi, 2014, p. 4). In particular, the following chapter considers web presentations of eco-hotels as sign systems—i.e., as markers of the tourist place (Culler, 1989, p. 159), which represent and make sense of a world where sustainability is a priority interest of many organizations, including hotels.

**BACKGROUND**

The Alpine Convention, an international treaty among the eight Alpine countries (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Slovenia, and Switzerland) and the EU, highlights the importance of sustainability. “From the point of view of tourism, the Alps, by blending tourism and nature, represent the best source of inspiration for the development of sustainable tourism development taking nature protection into account” (Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention, 2013, p. 41). Alpine tourism is a significant consumer of natural resources such as water—hotel guests use a third more water on a daily basis on average than the local population (Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention, 2013, p. 61). Other considerable aims beyond the reduction of water use include the reduction of waste, greenhouse gases, and energy consumption.

The topic of sustainable tourism in mountain areas is relevant from an economic and social perspective, as many recent academic publications on the subject demonstrate (see Koulov & Zhelezov, 2016; Pechnaler, Keller, Pichler, & Weiermair, 2016; Richins & Hull, 2016). The topic is also relevant if considered from a metalingual perspective. It is additionally innovative both referring to the analysed language, German, and to the linguistic material under investigation. Tourism is based on communication and on language, so it is remarkable that linguistic studies have not yet devoted their attention to communication practices in the area of sustainable mountain tourism. Considering works about tourism web communication, research concentrates on certain languages such as English and Spanish, from an intralingual perspective (see Pierini, 2009; Hallett & Kaplan-Weinger, 2010; Mapelli, 2013; Francesconi, 2014), or an interlingual perspective (Jaworska, 2013; Manca, 2013; D’Egidio, 2014; Cenni & Goethals, 2016), while neglecting others such as German. Nevertheless, some studies about the German language
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