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'Stunning views' vs. 'pleasant surroundings' – what values do the British and Slovak tourist texts promote?

Abstract

Being a prominent slot for evaluative adjectives, premodifying structures offer a good opportunity for tracing implicit cultural values. Moreover, they reveal what aspects and qualities of the head nouns are selected and thus foregrounded and prioritized, while the selection of the nouns itself renders interesting comparative data in terms of semantic fields. The objective of the paper is to analyse a body of English and Slovak tourist information texts from the perspective of the implicit cultural values. The data consist of small-scale accommodation offers (mostly cottages) in the mountainous regions of the Lake District and Northern Slovakia of approximately 5000 words each. These are analyzed in the framework of critical stylistics, while grounded in the notion of genre. The results reveal a bias in the British culture towards more consumer-oriented values and anthropocentrism as manifested in the linguistic structures present in the texts, while the Slovak texts show more balance between the persuasive and informative functions, and weaker inclination towards anthropocentric values.

Key words: genre of tourist texts, evaluative adjectives, critical stylistics, comparative analysis, value-based bias

1. Introduction

Tourist texts promoting recreational facilities are an instance of persuasive discourse appealing to desire. Being embedded in a fixed socio-cultural context, they are informative about the values cherished by the particular linguo-geographical community, as evaluative aspects become explicit in the language forms applied. Similar framing of such texts in the British and Slovak cultures thus offers fertile soil for a comparison examining value biases. The enterprise is further facilitated by the fact that both languages employ comparable linguistic structures that predominantly host evaluative aspects, i.e. those of premodifiers in a noun phrase (NP).

The aim of the present study is to compare premodification patterns in the corpora of British and Slovak tourist texts, both from the frequency and lexico-semantic point of view. This should not only shed light on the character of the genre in question, i.e. how different cultures organize a particular social practice in linguistic terms, but also initiate a comparison of specific values that are professed in the respective socio-cultural contexts. In terms of methodology, the research is data-driven rather than theory-driven, and falls under the framework of critical stylistics as spelled out by Jeffries (2010).

2. Theoretical premises

The guiding theoretical assumption informing the subsequent analysis of the selected data is the formative influence of the genre. As a relatively stable social practice, it is predominantly defined by its communicative purpose(s) and a highly structured and conventionalized character. Swales (1990, p. 46) considers the shift of the main focus from form to purpose as a prevention against oversimplification:

Stressing the primacy of purpose may require the analyst to undertake a fair amount of independent and open-minded investigation, thus offering a protection against a facile classification based on stylistic features and inherited beliefs.

He sees genre as comprising

a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre (1990, p. 58).

In this sense, genre differs from register with its field, mode and tenor variables. While register is set to explain the fact that we use language differently in different situations, genre tends to be associated with the larger socio-cultural context:

Register defines a probabilistic relationship between context and language [...] in addition to register variation, texts exhibit generic variation. This type of variation is determined by the purpose the text is achieving in the culture (Taboada, 2004, p. 18).

Leckie-Tarry associated the term 'register' with Bakhtin's (2007, p. 62) primary or simple genres, while his secondary genres are associated with the term 'genre' (cf. Leckie-Tarry, 1995). Although there are theoretical accounts that lump the notions of register and genre together (cf. Eggins and Martin, 1997), we will subscribe to the 'separationist' theoretical assumption that genre, as a layer above register (cf. Martin, 1997, p. 6), is more suitable for a socially-oriented analysis (cf. Taboada, 2004, p. 19). In this connection, Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) claim that it

needs to be understood in a more abstract way than in SFL as the ordering and regulative facet of discourse, and not simply used for the stages of structuring of relatively permanent types of discourse (1999, p. 145).

For Bhatia, the turn from register analysis to genre analysis is a turn from surface-level linguistic description to language description as explanation, or ‘from pure surface description to a thicker description of various texts and genres’ (Bhatia, 1993, p. 11). Following Swales, he claims that since genre is primarily characterized by the communicative purpose(s) that it is intended to fulfil, ‘any major change in the communicative purpose(s) is likely to give us a different genre’ (1993, p. 13).

Bhatia stresses the psychological factors, or the cognitive structuring, which he claims are underplayed by Swales, as their negligence undermines ‘the importance of tactical aspects of genre construction, which play a significant role in the concept of genre as a dynamic social process, as against a static one.’ (1993, p. 16) This means that the multiple linguistic resources that are at the writer’s disposal actually have to be used in conformity with ‘certain standard practices within the boundaries of a particular genre.’ (Bhatia, 1993, p. 14)

Following that argumentation, if a cross-cultural linguistic comparison is to shed light on possible value biases, it should be based on the equivalence of the communicative event where the communicative purpose determines the relationship between the participants in the dialogue. Given that the communicative purpose of a particular genre is closely connected to a typical cognitive structuring, a cross-cultural comparison should first highlight the genre formative structures and use these as a springboard for comparison. In that way, one should get a fairly objective insight into the intrinsic values professed by particular cultural communities.

To compare a set of texts promoting recreational facilities in Britain and Slovakia in relation to the values accentuated, the methodological starting point is to identify a shared communicative purpose. Concerning promotional texts, Torresi (2010) claims that the overall purpose is to attract, persuade, motivate and influence the potential customers. While the informative aspect of such texts cannot be ignored, it is the persuasive function that largely contributes to making the object desirable to the recipient, and would also be more instructive in terms of cultural values.

According to Fairclough (2003, p. 172), the cognitive structuring of desirability/undesirability assumes the form of ‘evaluative statements’. These are ‘in the most obvious cases realized as relational processes [...] the evaluative element is in the attribute, which may be an adjective or a noun phrase’. However, ‘evaluations are often embedded within phrases [...] rather than made as statements. We can say that ‘this awful book’ presupposes the evaluative statement ‘this book is awful’ (Fairclough, 2003, pp. 172-173).

Arguably, the former structure could be classed as a more sophisticated, or concealed persuasive means, as it is less open to questioning by the recipient. Compare:

1. This book is *awful*.
2. This *awful* book is lying on my table.

The very fact that the proposition is embedded in a noun phrase makes it more implicit and thus harder to doubt. Alongside nominalised verbs, the cognitive structuring of noun phrases is highlighted by Jeffries (2014, p. 413) as a relevant target for checking ideological/value-based biases:

[...] more interesting, usually, is the way in which noun phrases are put together and what is included within them. Thus the adjectives preceding the head nouns might be evaluative ... although the recipient is not really in a position to question the applicability of this evaluation, embedded as it is in the noun phrase [...].

Although evaluation is not restricted to adjectives, they are, with their semantic role of 'attributes', its most prototypical carriers, e.g. *good/bad* for moral evaluation, *beautiful/ugly* for aesthetic evaluation or *pleasant/disgusting* for affective evaluation. While these are evaluative already as stand-alone units, there is a great array of adjectives that highlight an objective quality of an object, such as its material (*wooden*), size (*mid-size*), age (*historical*), and can assume evaluative character when used in context. Interestingly, the generic constraints of persuasive discourse tend to charge them with (mostly) positive value, as the very selection of the properties that get foregrounded in this way would be driven by the communicative purpose. They are thus relevant from an evaluative point of view.

It is assumed that a close look into the premodifying structures of the noun phrases in cross-cultural linguistic data framed by an equivalent communicative purpose can feed into a value-based comparison of the respective linguo-geographical communities. While the results of such a small-scale research focused on a particular text type are far from conclusive, they can be a relevant contribution to a more extensive research carried out in the framework of critical stylistics (cf. Jeffries, 2010).

3. Data and methodology

The research data consist of two corpora of short blurbs promoting small-scale recreational facilities (mostly cottages) in the mountainous parts of Slovakia and the Lake District in Britain. They include 30 and 27 items respectively, while containing a similar

number of words (5160 and 5130 respectively). The texts were selected by applying a location/type of facility filter on websites dedicated to pooling offers of recreational accommodation (www.tripadvisor.co.uk and www.ubytujsa.sk). While there is a high degree of similarity in how the websites organize the information, it is assumed that they both serve similar ends. All the data were collected in the year 2015.

An extraction of NPs containing premodification has generated a list of premodifiers mostly realized by adjectives (alternatively, in English, nouns functioning as adjectives), the head nouns and their collocations. Determiners with purely grammatical function were not counted in either language. Fixed expressions bordering on compounds such as *dining room* in English or *mikrovlnná rúra* [microwave] in Slovak were considered to function as the head of the noun phrase.

For the purposes of the study, the main factor to be considered is frequency and manifestation of the particular linguistic forms, which are compared across two languages. The analysis thus includes both quantitative and qualitative research methods (cf. Jeffries and McIntyre, 2010, p. 11), which are seen as complementary. Although it is well noted that there are other avenues worth exploring, such as where the analysis would stem from semantic factors and/or include other languages, these can hardly be accommodated within the scope of the present undertaking.

4. Analysis and discussion

4.1 The genres of tourist texts in English and Slovak

The offer of cottage rentals in mountainous regions in Britain and Slovakia as displayed on the Internet is, on the surface, organized in a similar fashion, perhaps due to globalization and a universal character of the world wide web. Applying preference filters, a result list of suitable properties is returned where each item is supplied with a picture and a short blurb. The target of 5000 words has accommodated 27 texts in English and 30 in Slovak, which means they are of comparable length.

In terms of premodification patterns, both corpora display a frequency of premodifiers, especially adjectives, which would be considered marked in respect of the general frequency in the national linguistic corpora. The following table shows the proportion of head nouns

enriched by premodifiers, as well as the number of premodifiers, to the total number of words in each corpus.

Table 1: The proportion of NPs with left branching and premodifiers in the English and Slovak corpora

	English	%	Slovak	%
Number of premodified NP heads	545	10.6%	445	8.6%
NP head types	262	n/a	229	n/a
Number of premodifiers	667	13.5%	518	10.0%
Premodifier types	366	n/a	230	n/a
Total number of words	5130	100%	5160	100%

The results show that the proportion of both left-branching NPs and that of premodifier in relation to the total number of words is greater in the English corpus by approximately 20% and 30% respectively. The difference in the NP head variability between the two languages is insignificant. This is indicated by the variability ratio counted as number of types divided by the number of tokens, where absolute variability, i.e. no repetition of lexical units would be 100%. The variability thus counted amounts to 48% in English and 51% in Slovak, which is within only a 3% deviation. This is in stark contrast to the lexical variability of premodifiers, which is 55% in English and 44% in Slovak. The number is even more disproportionate if absolute figures are considered, with 366 types in English as opposed to just 230 types in Slovak in the corpora of the same size. All of these data indicate more developed and richer left-branching patterns in the English texts, both from the point of view of number and variability.

As has been noted, the syntactic structure of premodification is one of the most important carriers of evaluation. This can be realized either directly by evaluative adjectives (e.g. *stunning*) or indirectly by the selection of a descriptive property of an object, whereby an attribute of a category is accentuated, such as in *local pub*. The very selection of an attribute to be made explicit is motivated by the vehicle of the genre. Following is a table that shows the distribution of evaluative elements contained in premodifiers.

Table 2: Distribution of evaluative elements in premodifying structures

	English	%	Slovak	%
Evaluative premodifiers	159	3.1%	94	1.8%
Descriptive premodifiers including evaluative function	360	7.0%	266	5.2%
Other	174	3.4%	158	3.1%
Units marked by evaluation	519	10.1%	360	7.0%
Total number of words	5130	100%	5160	100%

The results show that the English corpus displays a greater tendency towards lexicalization of evaluative aspects in premodifying structures, with the difference reaching an almost 50% increase in the proportion of evaluative units in comparison with the Slovak analogue. Interestingly, the volume of this ‘extra layer’ of evaluative vocabulary totalling 3.1 percentage points approximately matches the difference in the general number of premodifiers between the two corpora, which is 3.5 percentage points (see Table 1.). This means that the greater development of premodifying structures in the English corpus is largely driven by a stronger motivation for positive evaluation, i.e. a stronger ‘pull’ of the persuasive function in the genre of tourist texts. This points to a significant difference related to how the genre is contextualized within the two cultures. The balance between persuasive and informative function, with the English corpus gravitating more strongly to the former, might be revealing of the cultural values professed in Britain and Slovakia. The differences in the way the genre is realized in the two cultures would underline a more commercial orientation of the former.

4.2 How are the evaluations tied to cultural values?

Even though the objects promoted in the two corpora share the basic properties including their setting and function, a comparison of the qualities, both subjective and objective, highlighted by the adjectives in the position of premodifiers, shows significant

differences. The following table is a list of the ten most frequently used adjectives ordered by frequency.

Table 3: The most frequent adjectives in the two corpora

English	Number of tokens	Slovak	Number of tokens
<i>Local</i>	18	<i>nov-</i> [new]	12
<i>Stunning</i>	13	<i>samostatn-</i> [separate]	11
<i>Private</i>	12	<i>pln-</i> [full]	10
<i>Beautiful</i>	11	<i>horsk-</i> [mountain(ous)]	9
<i>Full</i>	11	<i>kompletn-</i> [complete]	9
<i>Small</i>	8	<i>prijemn-</i> [pleasant]	9
<i>Perfect</i>	8	<i>velk-</i> [big]	9
<i>Excellent</i>	8	<i>krasn-</i> [beautiful]	8
<i>Easy</i>	8	<i>nádhern-</i> [splendid]	8
<i>Spacious</i>	7	<i>zimn-</i> [winter]	7
<i>Large</i>	7		

The most frequently selected candidates mirror the more general results which have shown a stronger tendency to subjective evaluation in the English corpus. The English adjectives *stunning*, *beautiful*, *perfect*, *excellent* both outnumber and feature higher on the frequency list than their Slovak counterparts *prijemný* [pleasant], *krásny* [beautiful], and *nádherný* [splendid]. In connection with evaluative statements, Fairclough (2003, p. 172-173) is discerning about the scale of intensity, pointing out that evaluations ‘cluster in semantic sets which range from low to high intensity’. While it is difficult to make such a scale the object of quantifying statistics, it can still be noted that the English most frequent evaluative lexemes would rank higher than their Slovak counterparts, with *stunning*, *perfect* and *excellent* occupying the high extreme matched only by *nádherný*, whose frequency is still much lower than that of *stunning*.

In order to be able to compare the socially embedded values, we need to look into what the quality of ‘emotionally/aesthetically pleasing’ expressed by the adjectives is attributed to, i.e. what head nouns they tend to premodify. To make the comparison viable,

only the first two English lexemes will be considered as the counterparts of the three Slovak ones listed in the table, as their total number of occurrences is 24 and 25 in the English and Slovak corpus respectively. The results of this investigation are presented in the following table.

Table 4: Headnouns with premodifiers *stunning*, *beautiful*, *príjemn-*, *krásn-* and *nádhern-* and their frequency

STUNNING BEAUTIFUL	No. of tokens	PRÍJEMN- KRÁSN- NÁDHERN-	No. of tokens
<i>views</i>	11	<i>prostredie</i> [setting /surroundings]	8
<i>Countryside</i>	3	<i>výhľady</i> [views]	4
<i>Walks</i>	2	<i>scenéria</i> [scenery]	3
<i>Feature</i>	1	<i>(po)sedenie</i> [(outside) seating to spend time in the company of others]	3
<i>Waswater</i>	1	<i>príroda</i> [countryside/nature]	2
<i>Property</i>	1	<i>ubytovanie</i> [accommodation]	2
<i>Promenade</i>	1	<i>osvieženie</i> [refreshment]	1
<i>Parts</i>	1	<i>lokalita</i> [location]	1
<i>Gardens</i>	1	<i>pohoria</i> [mountains]	1
<i>Area</i>	1		
<i>Beaches</i>	1		

As seen from the frequency list, the salient objects endowed with emotive evaluation are *views* and *prostredie* [surroundings/setting], in English and Slovak respectively. These could be viewed as semantic competitors, as the concepts are accommodated by both corpora. While the English unit *views* has a close Slovak counterpart in *výhľady*, with both lexemes used with approximately the same reference in the genre in question, the concept referred to by the Slovak *prostredie* does not have such a close semantic match, and its nearest equivalent in the English corpus would be realized by *setting*. Compare:

...providing superb relaxing accommodation in a picturesque and exclusive setting.

...chata sa nachádza v krásnom horskom prostredí obce Zázrivá.

[...the cottage is situated in the beautiful mountain 'setting' of the village Zázrivá]

The high prominence of the most likely candidate for positive evaluation in the respective corpora is significant and revealing of the professed cultural values. This is also supported by their rate of occurrence in the position of premodified headnouns in the whole corpora as manifested in the following table.

Table 5: The most frequent headnouns in the two corpora

English	No. of tokens	Slovak	No. of tokens
<i>walk</i>	28 ⁹	<i>prostredie</i> [setting/surroundings]	16
<i>view</i>	24	<i>príroda</i> [countryside/nature]	13
<i>area</i>	10	<i>chata</i> [cottage]	12
<i>cottage</i>	9	<i>časť</i> [area/part]	12
<i>bedroom</i>	8	<i>kuchyňa</i> [kitchen]	11
<i>kitchen</i>	8	<i>izba</i> [(bed)room]	9

Interestingly, while the positions 3. – 6. on the list are occupied by a selection of lexemes with very similar reference, which centres on the promoted object and its parts, the top two are indicative of a cultural bias. In the Slovak corpus, neither of the top English lexemes feature prominently, with only 4 instances of *views* equivalents and no direct equivalent of *walks*.¹⁰ Vice versa, the English corpus contains only 2 instances of *setting* and 5 occurrences of *countryside*.

In comparison with Slovak, the English prominent lexemes are marked by countability, reification and anthropocentrism, which all make them a better fit for commodification in a consumer-oriented culture. They also reflect the conceptualization of the reader as an active rather than a passive participant. This is in stark contrast to the role of

⁹ In 10 instances, the reference of *walk* is that of distance, such as in *a 5 minute walk from*. This, however, still leaves 18 tokens combined with evaluation such as in *scenic walk* or *amazing walks*. The lexeme *walk* would then feature second after *view* on the list.

¹⁰ There are 5 lexical units with significant semantic overlap rendered by *túra* and *turistika* [hiking]. Interestingly, these are outnumbered by as many as 7 instances of *(po)sedenie* conflating the concepts of seating and spending time in a company of other people, for which *party* would be a culturally adapted equivalent. There is no 'sitting-based' concept lexicalized in the British corpus.

prostredie and *príroda* in the Slovak corpus. Being uncountable and enviro-centric, they necessarily provide for a different, less consumer-oriented, as well as more 'passive' conceptualization of the visitor. A complementary study of syntactic participant roles could provide more evidence on what is now a lexically based indicator.

5. Conclusion

As genres can be viewed as a linguistic organization of particular fields of human activity and are largely defined by the purpose(s), they are apt to offer a framework for a cross-cultural comparison aiming at uncovering value biases. For the present analysis, the genre of tourist promotional texts has been selected, with the text specimen consisting of small-scale mountain resort accommodation offers, as displayed on dedicated websites. Two comparative corpora have been compiled in English and Slovak totalling over 5000 words each. These were compared from the point of view of evaluative adjectives as contained in the premodifying structures, as they are considered to be a key stylistic marker in promotional texts, and, by their appeal to desire, closely tied to professed cultural values. The data-driven analysis was conducted both from a quantitative and a qualitative perspective.

The results show stark differences between the way in which the genre is realized in the two cultures. In the British culture, this sphere of human activity as regulated by linguistic exchange is more biased towards consumer orientation, which is manifested in stronger accentuation of the persuasive function in the genre with greater proportion of positive evaluation both in the premodifying structures and in the whole corpus. Moreover, the frequency of the choice of headnouns attributed such positive evaluation (*view*, *walk*) indicates more anthropocentric value inclinations in comparison with the Slovak corpus.

The Slovak analogue, on the other hand, shows more balance between the persuasive and informative function, which makes it comparably less promotional. The choice of the most likely candidates for positive evaluation (*prostredie*, *príroda*) seems to point to a less anthropocentric character in comparison with the British data. This could be further verified by looking into the participant roles that the most valued entities occupy in the syntactic structure.

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