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The Functions of Language in Shaping Tourism Information

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ABSTRACT

Providing tourists with sufficient information is one of the most crucial tasks to tourism operators. One way of achieving the goal is by means of language. This paper thus aims to discuss the functions of language in shaping various types of information to cater tourists' diverse needs. In this study, a survey and interview were conducted to gauge the types of information which tourists perceive important and, in addition, text analysis was carried out on tourism brochures, websites and tourist information boards to grasp the functions of language in realising such messages. A total of 155 questionnaires with Cronbach's alpha of 0.876 was used for the data analysis and the findings show that the most important information needed is on security and safety followed by attractive and appealing destinations, available facilities and public transportation. In addition, the important information on tourism commodities that tourists need is about Malaysian people in general which includes cultures and history. Similarly, the findings of text analysis highlight that the language use in tourism promotional materials is geared towards foregrounding those types of information. However, not all types of information needed by tourists are given equal attention.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics, tourism discourse, culture, tourist expectations, tourist needs

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the important economic sectors and a fast growing industry that brings in huge revenues to a country (Hassan, *et al.*, 2008; Aitchison, 2001). Tourism is defined as activities that involve long or short journeys and temporary stays of the trip by which the aim is for the leisure and recreational purposes (Dredge and Jenkins, 2007; Urry, 2001). Realising its significant potential for the economic development, the Malaysian Tourism Board (MTB) is given the responsibility to promote Malaysia with the aim of attracting and increasing the number of tourists visiting the country.

Like any other promotional materials, tourism promotion can either be in a printed or an electronic form. One of the main functions of tourism promotional tools is to portray one's country by means of self-presentation or distancing 'Us' from 'Others' using tourism language styles and lexis (Hassan *et al.* 2008). Given that tourists nowadays are not only expecting information on tourism

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activities per se, tourism promotional materials should therefore look into providing tourists with a variety of information as a way of satisfying the tourists' expectations.

One way of delivering information to tourists is by means of language. This is to say that language plays a very significant role in disseminating the intended message to tourists and without which will result in miscommunication between the tourism operators and tourists. In consequent, there is a need to study how language is used to shape the information as desired by tourists and thus this paper aims to discuss the functions of language in shaping tourism information.

2.0 TOURISM PROMOTIONAL DISCOURSE

Promotion is a crucial element in marketing and its main function is to enable customers to learn about the available products and services (Thackeray *et al.*, 2007). Besides, promotion is used to persuade target customers to purchase products, by which the aim is to influence the customers' behaviour, attitudes and perceptions towards the products. Hence, it is important that the message sent by means of promotional tools must be tailored to the mental framework of consumers (Harper, 2003). Having said that one of the tourism promotion functions is to portray the beautifulness and uniqueness of a tourist destination (Aitchison, 2001; Endesor, 2001). In so doing, the language used should be able to construct and define the tourist experience and destination image to ensure that the place can be touristic (MacChannel, 1976).

Unlike before, of which tourism attractions were concentrated on spectacular tourism destinations for example, resorts and theme parks, but now tourism attractions have evolved and tourists now are searching for new experiences. Tourists nowadays aim to experience the culture of the region they are visiting of which tourism causes genuine, meaningful interactions between cultures (Rojek and Urry, 1997). In other words, tourists can easily identify and encounter the culture and tradition of local people through images of tourism. In addition, the tradition can be sustained by means of tourism industry when one's identity and culture have become the objects of tourism (Palmer, 1999).

A study on Fijian Tourism discourse, for instance, reveals the strategy adopted by Fiji Tourism promoters in marketing Fiji as the destination for experiencing 'genuine friendliness of indigenous Fijians as the native' (White, 2007). The primitiveness and genuine friendliness therefore form the unique cultural features or the strength of Fijian of which 'the primitiveness within which authenticity becomes the principal commodity' (Mowforth, 2003). Following this, Hassan *et al.* (2008) conducted a study on the discourse of tourism brochures and found that there are various Malaysian tourism commodities highlighted in the brochures. The commodities include exciting tourist destinations, natural wonders, shopping paradise, eating places, exciting choices of entertainment and lastly a fascinating diversity of cultures. In addition, tourism brochures are preferably used as tourism promotional tools, by which the main aim is to portray self-presentation and distant 'Us' from 'Others' through the use of language styles and carefully selected words (Hassan *et al.*, 2008). Tourism brochures are thus a discourse, by which language, besides other modes, plays a crucial role in persuading the potential tourists to be actual tourists (Jaworski and Pritchard, 2005).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The current study uses a quantitative method. Totally 200 international students (49 Undergraduate and 151 postgraduate) participated in this study. The international students are enrolled at a Malaysian Higher Learning Institution. In all, 148 were male (71.5%) and 57 were female (28.5%).These students were from different countries (7.55% from Bangladesh, 1.5% from Indonesia, 25 % from Iran , 16% from Nigeria, 11.5% from Pakistan, 7% from Yemen, 3.5% from Sudan, 8.5% from Iraq, 5.5% from Libya, 5% from India. They also identified a variety of different languages as their native languages (Arabic, Balochi, Bengali, Fulain, Hausa, Hindi, Urdu, Indonesian, Mandarin, Panjabi, Pashto, Persian, Sudanese, Tamil and Yoryba). Their average length of stay in the campus was 2 to 3 years (66%). These students were from different faculties within the university. The questionnaires were distributed to those who agreed to participate in the study and returned immediately after they finished completing the questionnaire. Simple random sampling was used to collect data from different respondents. This study used the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) (Searle &Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). The SCAS is an elastic tool that can be easily adapted according to the features of the dwelling sample frame and has regularly demonstrated reliable and valid (Searle & Ward, 1990; C. Ward & Kennedy, 1993, 1999). Moreover, this scale has been used in Malaysia by few researchers to investigate different aspects related to social adjustments of international students" (Awang-Rozaimie *et al*., 2013; Ina Suryani *et al*., 2012; Mohd, 2010; Yusoff, 2011a). Thus expanding upon these studies, the researcher wants to look into the present situation of sociocultural adaptation in UTM.

   Further, demographic information was asked which included gender, nationality, academic status, region of origin, English speaking level, total time spent in Malaysian university. Questionnaire consisted of 21 items from the study of Simic-Yamashita and Tanaka (2010) with an addition of 4 questions added by the researcher relevant to the current context of the study. Therefore, the total numbers of items were 25. As the researcher modified the questionnaire, so a pilot study was done before the main data collection. The following data analyses are the results of that pilot data. For the current study, quantitative method was used to analyse the data. The instruments used to collect the data are questionnaires. Data was analyzed using the SPSS 18.0.

3.1 Instruments and Analysis

In this study, a survey was conducted to gauge the types of information which tourists perceive important and, in addition, textual analysis was carried out on tourism brochures, websites and tourist information boards to determine the functions of language in instantiating such information. A total of 164 questionnaires were distributed to local and foreign tourists at different tourism destinations, but only 155 questionnaires were valid for the analysis with Cronbach's alpha of 0.876 (see Table 1)

Table 1 Setting Word's margins

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.876	.865	12

Tourists were given a list of types of information for them to tick which they think important for them to know before travelling to a foreign country. The list given includes, but is not limited to, types of information on appealing tourists attractions, tourist information locations, safety and security, public transportation, Malaysian culture and history, restaurants and entertainment. The options are given in a five-point Likert scale format, starting from very not important to very important.

Textual analysis, in addition, was done using a Systemic Functional Linguistics theoretical framework. Systemic Functional Linguistics (hereafter SFL) is a functional theory introduced by Halliday (1985), in which language is interpreted as one of social semiotic resources for meaning making. Social semiotics is about how we use semiotic resources, for instance, language, to deliver and construe the shared meanings (Hodge and Kress, 1988). As mentioned earlier, the data for this study were tourism promotional materials, for example, tourism brochures, tourism guides and Malaysian official websites, by Malaysian Tourism Board (MTB).

This study thus investigated the meaning of the texts using transitivity analysis. According to Halliday (1985), an English clause is a combination of different functional components which are referred to as metafunctions. The three metafunctions are ideational, interpersonal and textual. Since this study used transitivity analysis therefore the discussion is limited to the ideational metafunction, that is, a semiotic resource for construing our experience of the world in terms of objects, events and relations between them.

Following Halliday (1985), the transitivity analysis carried out aimed to examine the representation of participants in portraying tourism information. In so doing, the verbal texts found in the tourism promotional materials were firstly ranked into clauses and followed by the identification of process types and participants. The prominent process types in English texts are material, relational and mental. Participants of the clause were then categorised based on the types of process, for example, participants for a material process are actor, goal and beneficiary. The function of language in shaping the tourism information could be construed from the identification of process types and participants.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the survey conducted show that there are five types of information perceived important by tourists. The most important information needed by tourists is on safety and security

with the mean of 4.51 followed by attractive and appealing attractions (4.45), facilities (4.42), public transportation (4.37) and tourist information centre (4.30). The Likert scales used are from very not important (1) to very important (5). This means the five types of information which have the mean of over than 4.3 are in the range of important to very important. Table 2 illustrates the findings of the survey done on the important information perceived by tourists.

Table 2 Important types of information needed by tourists

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Safety and security	4.51	.758	155
Attractive and appealing attractions	4.45	.583	155
Facilities (e.g., restaurants, hotels)	4.42	.788	155
Public transportation	4.37	.839	155
Tourist information centre	4.30	.825	155

It was found that the safety and security information is provided at certain tourist locations, of which the safety of visitors is the top priority. For instance, at the Penang Hill funicular train station when the safety of the passengers is very crucial, the notice on safety measures is then displayed and made readable to everyone (see Figure 1).
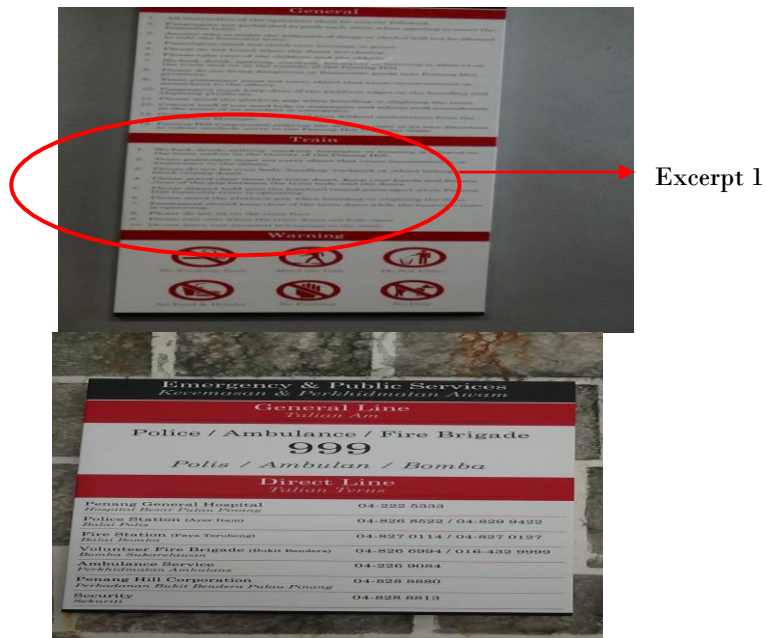

Figure 1 Notice on safety measures at the Penang Hill funicular train station

The text taken from the notice shown in Figure 1 clearly contains lexicogrammatical items which connote safety measures (see Excerpt 1). The prominent process type found is material that is the 'process of doing' (Halliday, 1985), for example, stand clear, keep clear, hold onto, mind and exit. It is

clear that the material process type is used to signify the function of language in shaping the information on security and safety by foregrounding the rules or actions which the passengers have to adhere to for their own safety.

Excerpt 1.

Please **stand clear** from the train doors.
Keep your hands and fingers **clear** of the gap between the train body and the doors.
Please always **hold onto** the handrail (stand passenger) while Penang Hill funicular train is operating.
Please **mind** the platform gap when boarding or alighting the train.
Passengers **should keep clear** of the train doors while the funicular train is operating.
Please **exit only** when the train doors are fully open.

As mentioned earlier, Malaysia is known for her diverse tourist attractions across the country and a variety tourism commodities to cater for different tourists' needs. Having said that, the Malaysian tourism commodities comprise of various types of exciting tourist destinations, natural wonders, shopping paradise, eating places, exciting choices of entertainment and lastly a fascinating diversity of cultures (Hassan *et al*., 2008). Most importantly, culture (see Table 3) is one of the promising commodities in tourism industry since current tourists expect to experience the culture of the visited region in which tourism provides genuine, meaningful interactions between cultures and, furthermore, tourists are pleasantly moved by different cultures (Rojek and Urry, 1997; Wen and Chia, 2013).

Table 3 Information on tourism commodities expected by tourists

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Malaysian culture	4.38	.750	155
Malaysian people in general	4.35	.761	155
Malaysian history	4.33	.774	155
Eating places	4.29	.837	155
Entertainment	4.23	.804	155

The information on cultures can be divided into five categories, for instance, people, festivals, traditional lifestyles, traditional music and traditional games (Hassan, 2014). The diversity of Malaysian cultures, which is the result of multi-ethnic groups in Malaysia, has turned to be an invaluable tourism commodity to the Tourism Malaysia and the cultural diversity is portrayed largely by means of emphasising the variety of ethnic groups, cultures and religions (Salim *et al*., 2014; Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2004). It was found that the language used in tourism brochures is to signify the unity among Malaysian ethnic groups and to depict how they retain the harmonious relationship through the understanding of each other cultures, language, religious faiths and traditions (Nadzri and Hassan, 2013).

Most interestingly, the information on Malaysian people is depicted through the representations of traditional lifestyles, by which the primitiveness and genuine friendliness of Malaysians are

intentionally portrayed to highlight the unique cultural features. The aim is to allure tourists who really fancy otherness (White, 2007). Figure 2, for example, illustrates the element that realises the message of traditional lifestyles of which the text is used to foreground the lifestyle of the locals that tourists are expected to experience.

Figure 2 The representations of traditional lifestyles

The image in Figure 2 portrays a tourist in a Malay traditional dress and she is cooking a traditional dish with the help of local women. The text on the left highlights the state's vast wilderness and natural attractions that make a homestay experience lively and adventurous. The transitivity analysis thus shows that the function of the language is therefore to instantiate the experience of the untouched natural beauty of the state, since Pahang is known for its reserved forest, that awaits the tourists by means of carefully selected participants..

In conjunction to that, Malaysian history is also a major attraction in the tourism industry. Figure 3 shows the tourist information board located at the Makam Mahsuri (Mahsuri Tomb) which tells the history of Mahsuri. Mahsuri is a legend of Pulau Langkawi (Langkawi Island).

Figure 3 The tourist information board at the Mahsuri Mausoleum that tells the history of Mahsuri.

Excerpt 2 is the text about the history of Mahsuri taken from the tourist information board. The transitivity analysis was conducted to examine the foregrounded participants, with which the aims

include to determine the prominent message of the text. The participants are highlighted in bold in Excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2

Mahsuri binti Pandak Maya is **the native** of Langkawi. **The daughter of Pandak Maya and Mak Andam, she** was born in the 18th century AD in Ulu Melaka Village, Langkawi.
Mahsuri married **a local young warrior, Wan Derus**, a younger brother of the Sultan of Langkawi's representative, Datuk Pekerma Jaya and Wan Mahora.
While **her husband** was away fighting **a war**, **Mahsuri** was said to be staying with her parents. It was during that period, **Deramang**, **a travelling poet** made **a stopover** in Langkawi and with the blessing of Mahsuri's parents, **Deramang** stayed at her house to teach poetry and singing.
Deramang's outstanding talent in poetry reading made **Mahsuri a famous hostess** resulting in her sister-in-law, Wan Mahora, wife of the Island's high ranking officer jealous. **The birth of Mahsuri's son, Wan Hakim** caused **her** to face more slanders especially when **Wan Mahora** accused **Mahsuri** of adultery with Deramang. Due to the accusation, **Mahsuri and Deramang** were sentenced to death by **Dato Pekermajaya who** believed in the allegations made by his wife. Upon her death, **Mahsuri** cursed **the land of Langkawi** would never have **peace** for seven generations to come**.** Since that moment, **Langkawi** was **never peaceful** causing some to believe that there were more buffaloes than human in Langkawi then.

From the participants identified, it can be construed that there are six important characters in the story. The characters are Mahsuri, Wan Derus who is Mahsuri's husband, Deramang, Wan Mahora who is Mahsuri's sister in law, Mahsuri's son Wan Hakim. Mahsuri's brother in law Dato Pekermajaya. The analysis also shows how the language is used to unfold the story, that is, it starts off with introducing Mahsuri in brief and informing when she was born. The story then moves on into informing her marriage to Wan Derus and elaborating who Wan Derus was. During her husband absence, Mahsuri met with Deramang, a talented traveller and since then she became very popular. This resulted in Mahora's jealousy and lead to an accusation. The language is profoundly used to portray the injustice faced by Mahsuri, who was killed without any further investigations. Hence, this suggests that carefully selected participants help readers to construe the significant characters and events in the message and the flow of the story.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Language is an important tool used as a means of disseminating information to tourists. In other words, language is a communication means between the tourism providers and tourists. This paper thus discusses the functions of language in shaping various types of information to cater diverse needs of tourists.

From the survey conducted, it was found that there are five types of information perceived important by tourists. The top most important information is on safety and security followed by attractive and appealing attractions, facilities, public transportation and tourist information centre.

The findings of this study show that the message of tourism information is shaped by lexicogrammatical items to connote safety measures, places of interest and facilities. In addition the process types used in the text also play an important role to signify the message, for example, the use of material process type is to foreground what tourists can do as a way of experiencing new cultures. The selection of participants, on the other hand, shapes the message in terms of what are being highlighted and to maintain the coherency of the message. However, information on public transport is found lacking, which tourists find very dissatisfying. It is thus recommended that Malaysian tourism operators should look into this matter seriously and upgrade the country's transportation system to ease tourist mobility.

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