SEMIOTICS, IDENTITY, IDEOLOGY AND TOURISM DESTINATION MARKETING

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ABSTRACT
In this paper we wish to problematize tourism site/tourist interaction using ideas drawn from Peircean semiotics on the one hand and recent thinking on the ties between aesthetics and ideology on other. Linking these ideas leads to the conclusion that for any one tourist site, more information must be provided the more distant the ideology of the tourist is from that of the host country. Thus, one would expect that descriptions of a tourism site directed at the foreign tourist should be longer and provide more background that that provided the domestic tourist who, presumably, is already an interpellated subject of the host society. Analysis of tourism materials collected in Denmark show that descriptions provided to non-Danes are the same length or shorter than descriptions provided to Danes and that, in descriptions of equal length, considerable slippage occurs.

Keywords: semiotics, identity, ideology, content analysis, Denmark.

INTRODUCTION
In this paper we wish to problematize tourism site/tourist interaction using ideas drawn from Peircean semiotics (Metro-Roland, 2009) on the one hand and recent thinking on the ties between aesthetics and ideology (Eagleton, 1991; Žižek, 1989) on other. In addition to providing new theoretical insights for tourism combining these bodies of theory yields considerations for destination marketing, particularly in regards to provision of information at the tourism site. In what follows we, first, present an argument about how tourists cognize tourism sites. We then explicitly consider the case of difference in the making of meaning between domestic and foreign tourists at tourism sites in terms of Eagleton’s (1991) notion of sensus communis and MacCannell’s (1976) notion of truth marking. We then illustrate our points using materials collected at Danish tourism sites before closing with some concluding observations.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
When touring, we are confronted on all sides by images and objects. Semiotics, or sign theory, is one way to explain the means by which we make sense of the world around us. While much of the semiotic theory that is employed today is based in the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1959), we use the semiotics of the American Charles Peirce here (Metro-Roland, 2009). Rather than use a bifurcated sign as did Saussure, Peirce (1998) suggested a
tripartite sign comprised of object, representamen and interpretant. This is useful, firstly, because Peirce engages the actual object, while Saussure limits interpretation to only an image (signifier) and a concept (signified). Secondly, according to Peirce, any particular object is cognized through its image (the representamen), which is then interpreted (the interpretant). Interpretation draws heavily upon what Peirce refers to as collateral observation, the accumulated knowledge that we have built up over time. Collateral observation in this Peircean scheme is an individual’s cache of tacit and codified knowledge. Yet it is also partly held in common, particularly as it is used to inform collective identities. However, identity itself has many layers and is a function of both individual agency and societal structure (see Althusser, 1971; Giddens, 1984; Žižek, 1989).

In everyday life, much of semiosis is reflexive, thus we rarely need to stop and think about the ways in which to interpret the signs that we encounter with the greatest frequency (Knudsen & Rickly-Boyd, 2011). It is only when we bump up against something which does not seem to fit, as we frequently do when touring, that we must undertake a more conscious interpretive course. A subtlety of Peirce’s idea of interpretation is its dynamism – after an initial interpretation is made, it is then progressively refined. Such a first attempt at interpretation typically leads to an utterance or an action, which in turn solicits a confirmation or rebuttal. This is the process of “truth marking” (MacCannell, 1976) which allows us to add to our accumulated knowledge of the world, and therefore why so many of us describe tourism as “educational”. However, the concept of sensus communis offers another way to think about this by allowing a more direct examination of the underlying processes of utterance and “truth marking”. Whereas utterance or action are a result of an individual’s collateral observation, “truth marking”, as confirmation or rebuttal, has its origin in the collateral knowledge of someone else, perhaps another tourist, a guide, a local, or a tourist text of some sort. Therefore, while the utterance or action takes the form of a subjective judgment, the “truth marking” rejoinder is intersubjective and, as such, relies on a sensus communis, a shared experience or meaning (Sharpe, 2005). Thus, one reason why most moments of semiosis in everyday life are reflexive is that interpretation is often in accord with sensus communis. Put another way, the subjective judgment is in agreement with intersubjective judgment so that we experience what might be termed a subjective universal. Because the mechanisms ensuring this agreement are many and we are, within the ideological framework of our society, fashioned to concur as citizen/subjects of that society, there are a large number of things that have more or less agreed upon meanings (Althusser, 1971; Žižek, 1989; Eagleton, 1991).

This same process is at work when touring, but the result can be remarkably different. When abroad, for example, one’s subjective judgment typically fails to accord with the sensus communis of the locale one is touring, as one’s ideological underpinnings do not serve as well outside of one’s home country. Because the fashioning of agreement that would occur in the tourist’s home country is absent, replaced by the ideological framework of the host country, “truth marking” takes the place of sensus communis. This lapse from sensus communis to truth marking has important implications for destination marketing and tourist practices.

Thus, we argue that the mechanisms of identity, interpellation, sensus communis, and truth marking are key factors in differentiating tourists. However, this same logic also leads to the conclusion that for any one tourist site, more information must be provided the more distant the ideology of the tourist is from that of the host country. Thus, ceteris paribus, descriptions of a tourism site directed at the foreign tourist should be longer and provide more background that
that provided the domestic tourist who, presumably, is already an interpellated subject of the host society. The obvious question is as to whether or not this is the case in practice.

METHODOLOGY

In order to begin to examine this question, we undertook a simple content analysis of 25 multilingual tourism documents from various tourism sites in Denmark. These documents included text in Danish, English and German. The analysis involved two steps. First, the column-inch length of the Danish-language version of the document was recorded, then the length of text provided in English and then the length of text provided in German. Next the original Danish and German texts were translated into English using Google Translate®. Finally, the translated Danish and German versions and original English texts were examined semiotically to ascertain what qualitative differences existed between texts.

RESULTS

Of the 25 documents analyzed, 20 provided approximately equal length of information in the three languages, while five provided less information in English and German than in Danish. Of those providing less information in English and German than Danish, an average of 49.4 column inches was provided in Danish, 9.6 column inches in English and 6.3 column inches in German. In short, compression was severe. By way of example, the Danish (Jenseni, n.d.):

A large and grand city plan took form under Frederik V and architect Nicoli Eigtved. St. Anne’s plaza, Bredgade, Amaliegade and Frederiksgade was expanded to the current appearance from where they had previously met open fields and an elegant quarter emerged: Frederiksstadt with Amalienborg, four rococo palaces, originally occupied by four nobles families Moltke, Brockdorff, Levetau and Lovenskold, who was unable to finish his mansion and sold it to the Countess Schack, hence its name of Schackenborg. But only after the Christianborg fire of 1794 was Amalienborg the royal residence.

becomes:

[King Frederik V] put the Danish architect Nicoli Eigtved in charge of the planning of the Frederikstown, a grand and fashionable quarter where a great number of imposing mansions were to be built, including what later became the royal residence: Amalienborg.

This shortening effectively omits much of the geographical context for this new city quarter as well as the historical context for both the building of this section of the city of Copenhagen and for Amalienborg becoming the royal residence. We would argue that this is a crucial lapse in that much about Frederiksstadt cannot be adequately cognized by tourists not already familiar with its story and given the shorter description above. The shorter description, for example, is inadequate to explain the uniform window and cornice heights of this quarter of the city, why there are four Amalienborg palaces and not one single large palace as is the case with royal residences elsewhere or why and when the royal family came to occupy this set of buildings.

While documents with shortened descriptions of tourism sites contained significant omissions, translations of documents with approximately equal length of description in Danish, English and German often omitted cultural detail as well. For example, the Danish “On weekends the tour ends with coffee and the delightful Princess Marie layer cake in the private (ground floor) rooms” is translated as “Café in the private rooms during the weekend” in English and “In the private rooms is the Weekend Café” in German (Nordfyns Kommune, 2008). Edited out in this passage is the reference to that particular Danish institution layer cake, a cake
constructed of successive layers of white cake and whipped cream topped with strawberries and Danish flags and the explicit reference to coffee. Edited in, by either design or simple slippage of language is the word café which, to most Americans, is much more inclusive than simply cake and coffee. In the German version of the text, we are told that the café has the particular name “The Weekend Café.” One only need be reminded that at TGIFridays® it is Friday everyday of the week to appreciate how drastically the meaning of the Danish text differs from the German text. We suggest, in line with our conceptual framework, that perhaps the more useful approach would be to have the English and German versions read “On weekends the tour ends with coffee and Denmark’s favorite layer cake in the private (ground floor) rooms,” while in Danish “On weekends the tour ends with layer cake and coffee in the private rooms” is likely sufficient, as most Danes are familiar with the nationally consistent “layer cake”.

Amongst texts of approximately equal length, one final slippage can be noted and that is one that has its basis in the simple clash of previous or collateral experience regardless of language used. Consider, for example, the sentence “In the northern part of the municipality, you could visit the Tarup-Davinde gravel pit, where you can enjoy a delightful landscape with fishing lakes, long barrows, stone exhibition and much, much more” (Midtfyens Kommune, 2008). Here, there is no difference in the translation across the three languages. However, there exist considerable differences in the perceived aesthetic value of gravel pits across the experiences of Danish, American and German tourists. In particular, while a Dane might feel comfortable with the linkage of “gravel pit” and “delightful landscape,” it is unlikely that an American would make a similar connection. It is this last type of disconnect between text and experience that is the most difficult to overcome since the misperception has its basis not in the tourism site or in the textual information about the tourism site, but in the differing collateral knowledge carried to the tourism site by the tourist. The only solution to this it seems is the careful elision of troublesome words and phrases from the tourism site literature, so that the previous description becomes, in the English translation: “In the northern part of the municipality, you could visit the Tarup-Davinde quarry, where you can enjoy a delightful landscape with fishing lakes, long barrows, stone exhibition and much, much more.”

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have connected Peircean semiotics, identity, ideology and tourism in an effort to problematize tourism site/experience interaction. In so doing we have focused on the importance of collateral observation in tourism site interpretation and the necessity of sensus communis in creating the successful tourism experience. We have illustrated our central points using content and semiotic analysis of tourism literature collected at tourism sites in Denmark. Our analysis identifies three areas of concern which might be categorized as slashing, slippage and misperception. The first, which occurred in a small minority of the texts analyzed, involved the severe reduction of content in translation. The second we use to describe language shift in translation so that messages become other than they were intended. The last is the most difficult to avoid and arises simply due to the differing interpretations of the same word in different societal contexts.

While this discussion has been highly theoretical, important conclusions can be drawn with respect to the marketing of destinations. First, domestic tourists and foreign tourists understand tourism sites with reference to substantially different caches of collateral observation in part because each is interpellated as citizen/subjects into their society. Second, because domestic tourists and foreign tourists rely on differing caches of collateral observation, they must
be marketed to in different ways and provided different bodies of knowledge at tourism sites (Pritchard & Morgan, 2001). We recognize that these two conclusions are already widely known and practiced but our analysis provides additional theoretical justification for both of these advertising practices. Third, our conceptual framework indicates that foreign tourists need more information about the site than domestic tourists since they are often unaware of its context. Our content analysis indicates that this is not being carried out in practice, thus testing of this concept by destination marketing boards may be worthwhile.

REFERENCES


