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## Translating the Style of Tourism Promotional Discourse: A Cross Cultural Journey into Stylescapes

Mohamed Zain Sulaiman<sup>1</sup>

*Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria 3800, Australia*

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### Abstract

Different societies behave and view the world differently due to different cultural values. These cultural values shape people's needs, motives, expectations and preferences. Based on these cultural values, themes are carefully selected and exploited by promoters in tourist promotional texts (TPTs) in order to persuade people to travel and become tourists. However, it seems that it is not only the themes that matter, but also the way they are communicated in TPTs. Different cultures have different ways of communicating, which in turn affects the stylistic features of TPTs. These stylistic differences pose a key challenge for translators of TPTs, whose role is to produce an effective translation in the target language and culture in order to persuade potential tourists in that language and culture. This paper analyses the style of an existing published translation of a tourism promotional website and discusses the cultural challenges involved. The discussion is supported by findings derived from focus groups and parallel text analyses.

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*Keywords:* Translation; functional approach; culture; tourism promotion; stylistic features.

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### 1. Introduction

Translated tourism promotional texts (TPTs) have frequently been the subject of criticism, and the fact that they are not given the professional attention now taken for granted in the production of their original has been acknowledged within the field of Translation Studies (Hickey 2004: 77; D. Kelly 1998: 33-36; Pierini 2007: 90; Pinazo 2007: 320; Snell-Hornby 1999: 95; Sumberg 2004: 329-50). Sumberg suggests that the poor standard of translated TPTs is attributable to the translation approach adopted (2004, p. 343). She claims that the adoption of a linguistic, rather than a functional approach, suggests that translators are unwilling or unable to leave the 'safe haven of a *straight translation*' (1997, p. 175). This view is supported by Hickey, who claims that the problem lies in the fact that translators aim at 'semantic equivalence' instead of 'perlocutionary equivalence' (2001, p. 220; 2004, p. 77). Put differently, translators tend to focus on the micro (linguistic) level of the language of tourism

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\* Corresponding author. *E-mail address:* [mznsulaiman@yahoo.com](mailto:mznsulaiman@yahoo.com)

promotion leaving the macro (cultural) level largely ignored. This is despite the fact that the creation of TPTs involves a dual-level process, in which the macro-level is the determining factor which shapes and guides the construction of the micro-level. The importance of this macro-level of the language of tourism promotion has been rightly acknowledged by Dann who stresses that in order to be able to convince potential tourists to become actual tourists, their needs and motivations - which are deeply rooted in culture - must be addressed:

[T]he language of tourism attempts to persuade, lure, woo and seduce millions of human beings, and in so doing, convert them from potential into actual clients. By addressing them in terms of their culturally predicated needs and motivations it hopes to push them out of the armchair and onto the plane – to turn them into tourists (Dann, 1996, p. 2).

The above statement implies that in order to achieve the communicative purpose and overall intended function of TPTs - that is, rousing the burning desire in the reader's mind to travel to a tourist destination - the cultural values that shape people's needs, motives, expectations and preferences must be dealt with adequately. These cultural values determine the most appropriate themes to be used in TPTs to persuade people to travel and become tourists. Nevertheless, the cultural differences that exist between different cultures do not only result in different themes being used to persuade different cultures, but also in different ways of communicating these themes. To put it another way, different languages and cultures have different stylistic conventions with regard to the writing of TPTs. The implications of differing TPT conventions across languages and cultures on the translation of TPTs are discussed by Kelly (1998), Snell-Hornby (1999), Sumberg (2004), Hatim (2004a), Mason (2004), Adab and Valdes (2004), Kalėdaitė and Achramėjūtė (2006), Pinazo (2007), Pierini (2007) and Jiangbo and Ying (2010). Their works show that adherence to the conventions of TPTs in the target language is crucial for successful message reception. They agree that the translator should be guided by, among other things, the stylistic conventions of TPTs in the target language and that these should prevail in the translation, 'as their application constitutes a greater guarantee for the communication process' (Kelly, 1998, p. 37).

While some translation scholars have commented on some stylistic differences between TPTs written in different languages (Kelly, 1998, p. 36), a more in-depth research study which links these differences to cultural values is lacking. This article seeks to bridge this gap by exploring the stylistic differences that exist between English TPTs and Malay TPTs by relating them to cultural values such as individualism vs. collectivism; high power distance vs. low power distance; high context communication vs. low context communication; and literacy vs. orality.

## 2. Methodology

For the purpose of this paper, I will analyse the textual stylistic features of Tourism Australia's consumer website ([www.australia.com](http://www.australia.com)) in English as the source text (ST). The analysis of the ST will examine the style in which tourism promotion is communicated to the ST audience, that is, Anglophone readers<sup>2</sup> and link the stylistic features identified to the cultural characteristics of the audience. This is followed by an analysis of the Malay version (the target text) of Tourism Australia's consumer website ([www.australia.com/my](http://www.australia.com/my)). The analysis of the target text (TT) will examine the way the stylistic features are translated and whether the approach adopted is effective. The effectiveness of the stylistic features of the TT in creating an appealing image for potential Malay tourists was tested on five focus groups each comprising 7 to 8 native Malay speakers. The focus groups were shown a number of representative samples taken from the Malay version of the website. The responses of the focus groups were examined so as to deduce the effects of the stylistic features on them. The causes of such

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term 'Anglophone readers' to refer to English speaking audiences from Anglophone countries, i.e. countries in which the dominant culture is the Anglo culture: Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and United States.

effects were then examined and linked to the cultural traits of the Malay society. The ST and TT analyses are followed by a parallel text (PT) analysis. By parallel text, I mean relevant, authentic, non-translated TPTs in Malay. By analyzing the textual practices of the PTs and comparing them with the ST and TT, the differences that exist in how tourism promotion is communicated to the ST audience and how it is communicated to a Malay audience will be determined. The extra-textual, cultural knowledge derived from the analyses will be useful for the formulation of effective translation strategies.

### 3. Source text analysis

The communication style of the ST reflects a combination of stylistic levels ranging from general to specific. The general level represents the characteristics of generic English communication style, while the specific level represents the characteristic of English advertising and tourism communication style. The stylistic features of both levels are culturally motivated. These features are exploited to carry out specific culturally-related functions. The most distinctive feature of the ST at the general level of English communication is directness and explicitness. This feature is strongly motivated by the main trait of the Anglophone culture: that is, individualism (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010, pp. 95-97). Individualistic cultures have such unique aspects of communication as having a low-context communication style (Reisinger & Turner, 1997, p. 142). In a low context culture, most of the information is made explicit. Consequently, low context communication cultures are characterized by explicit and direct verbal expression. The most prominent stylistic features of the ST at the specific level of English tourism promotional discourse is orality. The orality of the ST is reflected in the systematic use of a dialogic oral style. This style has several functions, the most important of which are: 'linguistic markedness' (Hatim, 2004b, p. 230) and 'ego-targeting' (Dann, 1996, p. 185).

'Linguistic markedness' is the use of linguistic expressions and forms that are less 'normal' than a comparable expression potentially available in a comparable context (Hatim, 2004b, p. 230). The purpose of this function is to make the text stand out and attract attention. The 'non-ordinariness' of the dialogic oral style of the ST lies in the fact that modern English is highly literate and attaches a high value to literate communication. Modern English demonstrates 'literate' linguistic behavior as the influence of oral tradition on English writing ceased to be dominant. Hence, the use of orality in the written composition of a highly literate language and culture somehow makes the use itself stand out and attracts attention. Orality used in a deliberate and conscious manner by producers of promotional and advertising texts in highly literate societies such as Anglophone societies is what Ong (1991, p. 136) terms 'secondary orality'. Cook, in analyzing the discourse of advertising states:

So strangely, the computer reintroduces behaviour reminiscent of an oral culture [...] Advertising is very much a child of this secondary orality. Even when printed it affects the style of personal spoken communication. (Cook, 2001, p. 19)

While the linguistic markedness of secondary orality aims at making the text stand out, the ego-targeting function aims at making the reader stand out.<sup>3</sup> The dialogic oral nature of the ST is highly marked by the deployment of certain devices of linguistic expressions, particularly the imperative voice, interpersonal reference and informal tone. In this paper I will restrict the discussion to the imperative voice strategy. Through imperative verbs, the author explicitly and directly urges the reader to join and experience the destination. As a result, the reader is 'pulled' into the scene. The textual description unfolds as if the reader was travelling through it. The imperative mood, which is widely used in the ST, indicates 'a pretended already existing relationship of

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<sup>3</sup> Ego-targeting is a technique in advertising used to address the reader directly, as it is believed that if a potential consumer recognises that he or she is being addressed by an advertisement, he or she feels singled out from the crowd, thus making him or her feel special, or at least privileged

friendship or of familiarity’ between the author and the readership (Francesconi, 2007, p. 109). The verbal function here ‘is less an order than an invitation, which lacks the sense of compulsion’ (Francesconi, 2007, p. 109). In addition to its dialogic function, the imperative voice is also deployed for another function which is of no less importance: that is, to evoke a sense of action and adventure. The imperative also lends the discourse a confidential, direct and explicit tone consistent with the individualistic and low-context characteristics of Anglophone societies.

#### 4. Target text analysis

The textual analysis of the TT shows that the literal approach is generally the approach adopted in the translation of Tourism Australia’s promotional website from English (ST) into Malay (TT). This approach is by and large maintained even at the stylistic level. All the focus groups were unanimous in perceiving the representative samples of the TT negatively. The TT samples were criticized as being ‘unattractive’, ‘unappealing’, ‘dull’, ‘awkward’, ‘inappropriate’, ‘too direct’, ‘too aggressive’, ‘too pushy’, ‘too strict’, ‘too adventurous’, ‘do not give options’ and ‘difficult to understand’. More alarmingly, they were also described as ‘impolite’, ‘unfriendly’, ‘unwelcoming’, and even ‘rude’. These responses indicate that the very basic principle of advertising, that is the AIDA principle (attract Attention, maintain Interest, increase Desire, get Action), has somehow collapsed in the process of translation. The result is a TT which is void of the intended function and purpose (to persuade readers to become tourists). Upon probing the focus groups and subsequent analysis, it emerges that the negative reaction of the focus groups were the result of a stylistic feature of the TT which was duplicated from the ST: the imperative voice which is nonetheless, one of the main features of secondary orality used in English advertising discourse. Example 1 demonstrates how the imperative mood inherent in the dialogic dimension of the ST is brought over to the TT unchanged.

##### Example 1

| Source Text (ST)   | Target Text (TT)  |
|--|---|
| Hit Australia’s highest ski fields or hike to the top of Mount Kosciuszko [...] Immerse yourself in Aboriginal history [...] Drive the Great Alpine Road past historic villages [...] Or go cycling, caving, rafting, kayaking, four wheel driving and horse riding. | Kunjungi lapangan ski tertinggi di Australia atau kembara berjalan kaki ke puncak Gunung Kosciuszko [...] Hayati sejarah Orang Asli [...] Lewati perkampungan bersejarah [...] apabila anda memandu di atas Great Alpine Road. Atau tunggang basikal, teroka gua, berakit, berkayak, naiki kenderaan pacuan empat roda dan menunggang kuda. |

The ‘awkwardness’ and ‘inappropriateness’ of the imperative voice in the TT is due to the different framework of orality within which Malay language operates: ‘residual orality’ (Ong, 1991, p. 41). Residual orality refers to a communicative condition in which certain traits of orality continue to linger long after a culture and its language have shed full-fledged orality and replaced it by an elegant written medium. In this regard, written Malay composition continues to demonstrate features of ‘orate’ (as opposed to ‘literate’) linguistic behavior. Therefore, whereas the use of orality (secondary orality) in the ST is a deliberate move to break away from the norm (linguistic markedness) to create certain effects on the reader (ego-targeting), the Malay use of orality, is not a deliberate move to break away from the norm, as it is the norm (residual orality). The main feature of the oral style in the Malay communication is: (a) the appropriate use of language and tone of voice of the speaker (Sullivan, 2009, p. 361), and (b) storytelling. Since the Malay culture is a high context culture, the appropriate use of language in everyday affairs is a matter of great priority.

Unlike in low context cultures such as the Anglophone culture where more emphasis is given to the content of communication rather than to the way the message is conveyed, in the Malay culture great attention is paid to the way the message is delivered. People are required to follow ‘etiquette of language use’ and ‘conventions of Malay politeness’. One of the rules of language use for effective interaction is to use the ‘respectful style’. To communicate respectfully in Malay is to ‘avoid ‘tones’ and rapid speech that characterize ordinary conversation’ (Teo, 2001, p. 372). An effective persuasive language in Malay requires the use of a deliberate subdued tone of

voice with utterances which are soft, slow and restrained in nature. The use of imperatives in the TT defies this important rule. The written imperatives, according to the focus groups, resemble a spoken command uttered in a high-pitched tone of voice. Moreover, the use of a series of imperative verbs consecutively in the TT is perceived by the focus groups as rapid speech. In their own words, the participants of the focus groups said that it sounded like ‘Do this! Do that! See this! Go there! Swim here! Eat that!’ In other words, the impoliteness of the ‘high pitch command’ is made worse by what appears to Malay readers as a ‘list of commands’ uttered rapidly. This is in contrast to Anglophone readers who are likely to perceive the consecutive use of imperatives in the ST as signifying action, enthusiasm and dynamism.

The inappropriateness, impoliteness and subsequently the unappealing effect of the imperative voice can be explained in terms of power relations: that is, the cultural dimension of ‘power distance’. While the use of imperative voice in English advertising discourse creates an allusion of an already existing relationship of friendship or of familiarity between the author and the readership, its use in the Malay TT tends to evoke the notion of a command given by a higher authority. In this sense, the imperative voice is considered inappropriate and impolite. This is because Malays belong to a very high power distance culture and are used to hierarchical social structures. Hence, for Malay readers, the imperative voice implies the demonstration of power and control. In the context of host-tourist relationship in a tourism setting, Malay tourists are likely to view themselves as more powerful than their service providers, compared to Anglophone cultures where such contrasts may not exist or may be less extreme.

The sense of command evoked by the imperative voice also brings to the Malay mind a sense of inflexibility, hence the description ‘too aggressive’, ‘too pushy’, and ‘too strict’. Inflexibility contradicts the expectation of any tourists including Malay tourists who expect to have the option to do what they feel like doing on their vacation. In fact, inflexibility is the antithesis of tourism which carries with it notions of freedom, liberty and escape from the restrictions and inflexibility of daily life. And for the middle-class Malay tourist, tourism also means an escape from the orders and instructions of their superiors which they have to cope with daily at work. I am not implying here that the imperatives used in the TTs will be perceived by Malay tourists as instructions without option (any Malay tourist would know that they are not compelled to follow the instructions). What I am trying to highlight is that such imperatives tend to give rise to culturally motivated negative feelings and internalized mental pictures, hence stripping the TT off its intended persuasive function.

The inappropriateness of the TT is further aggravated by the degree of its directness and explicitness. The focus groups’ description of the TT as being ‘too direct’ indicates that an important rule in the Malay style of communication, that is, indirectness and implicitness, was not observed. This Malay style of communication is the total opposite of the English style of communication. While the Anglophone culture appreciates the directness and explicitness reflected in the imperative voice of the ST, the Malay culture does not. Directness in Malay discourse is correlated with impoliteness, uncouthness, arrogance and boastfulness. Such a preference for indirectness stems from the fact that the Malay culture is a high-context culture which favors implicit and indirect verbal expression. In Malay, the persuasion function is best delivered indirectly and implicitly using what is termed as ‘bahasa berlapis’ (layered language), and using the imperative voice as the main strategy is definitely not a viable option.

The second important feature of orality in the Malay style of communication is storytelling. The influence of the ‘storytelling/word-of-mouth style’ in Malay communication has much to do with the fact that the Malays are a group of people which has a very strong tradition of oral literature in which storytelling is a key feature. A general comment by the focus groups with regard to the TT style is that the sentences in the body of the copy are not cohesive, detached from one another, and do not show continuity, all of which contradict the general

characteristics of a storytelling style. The lack of storytelling features in the TT is indeed one of the reasons behind the ‘unattractive’ and ‘unappealing’ effects of the TT.

## 5. Parallel text analysis

The analysis of parallel texts (PT) revealed that their stylistic features differ significantly from those of Tourism Australia’s promotional website in English (ST) and its Malay translation (TT). Unlike the style of the ST which evokes action, dynamism and enthusiasm, the style of the PTs creates an ambiance of tranquility and relaxation. The style is softer, slower, calmer, more relaxed and with a subdued tone. The key contributing factor to this stylistic effect lies in the way the imperative voice is used. Firstly, the imperative voice is not used as the main strategy and is used to a much lesser degree compared to the ST. Secondly, when the imperative voice is used, it seems that the PTs distinguish between two groups of imperative verbs: (a) imperative verbs which name specific physical actions and/or imply energy consumption (e.g., swim, dive, climb, jump, fly), and (b) imperative verbs which do not name specific physical actions but rather general actions (e.g., visit), and/or do not imply energy consumption. Verbs that denote mental and emotional actions (e.g., experience, discover, enjoy, explore, relax, escape) are good examples of the latter category. The former group of imperative verbs is hardly used in the PTs. The majority of the imperative verbs used are those which belong to the second group. However, these verbs are carefully selected to function as keywords. Only positive verbs are used, which fire the imagination of the reader and emphasize the positive values of the destination, such as the verbs *nikmati* (enjoy), and *terokai* (explore) in one of Tourism Malaysia’s latest print advertisements.

### Example 2

Dunia penuh kerianan menanti anda

Dari utara ke selatan dan timur ke barat, Malaysia hanya menawarkan percutian yang terbaik!

Malaysia bertuah kerana dianugerahi kepelbagaian warisan budaya dan tarikan yang unik serta menarik. Nikmati aneka sajian yang lazat, terokai keajaiban alam semula jadi serta hirup udara segar di destinasi peranginan tanah tinggi. Setiap percutian menjanjikan kenangan indah yang tidak dapat dilupakan. (Tourism Malaysia, 2011)

[A world full of fun awaits you

From north to south, and east to west, Malaysia only offers the best holidays! Malaysia is fortunate to be blessed by a variety of cultural heritage and uniquely beautiful attractions. Enjoy a wide range of delicious food, explore the wonders of nature and breathe fresh air on the highlands. Each vacation promises beautiful unforgettable memories.]

This finding is consistent with the negative reaction shown by the focus groups towards the TTs in which the imperative voice was used excessively as a key stylistic feature, with many of its verbs denoting specific physical actions. While the reason for which this type of imperatives is disliked by the Malay reader has been discussed earlier, the exception of non-physical action imperatives can be explained from a number of perspectives. Firstly, rather than denoting a command to perform a physical action, this second group of verbs function as keyword verbs with ‘magical effects’. These verbs act as ‘verbal charms’ which create a spell effect on the reader. In the example above, the promotion is carried out in what could be described as an incantatory manner. The imperative voice which appears all of a sudden amid a narrative background becomes a sort of ‘spell’ (Cappelli, 2006, pp. 62-63; Dann, 1996, p. 55). Secondly, Malay tourists perceive the first group of imperative verbs as physically demanding and energy consuming and this contradicts their concept of vacation. Thirdly, the first group of imperative verbs denote particular physical actions to be performed by the addressee, while the second group of verbs (particularly mental and emotion verbs) are general in nature and does not denote any specific way in which the destination is to be experienced (the tourist can enjoy and explore the destination the way he wants). This explains the focus groups’ description of the TTs as ‘strict’ and ‘does not give options’. Furthermore, since they belong to a high context culture, Malays do not appreciate highly detailed ‘instructions’.

One of the strategies used by Malay PTs to avoid using imperative verbs denoting specific physical actions is the use of a non-physical imperative verb followed by the physical action verb in a non-imperative form:

### Example 3

Bangun pagi di ladang rekreasi pertanian dan **rasai** pengalaman **menaiki** kuda, memerah susu lembu dan pengalaman unik kehidupan di ladang. (Taiwan Visitors Association, 2011, emphasis mine)

Instead of saying ‘tunggangi kuda’ (ride a horse) the PT uses an imperative verb which denote mental action, that is, ‘rasai’ (feel) followed later by the verb ‘menaiki’ (ride) in its non-imperative form.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that the presence of the imperative voice in the PTs is far less evident than in the ST marks a major difference in terms of directness and explicitness. In the PTs, the reader is persuaded in a more indirect and implicit manner. Indirect and implicit persuasion is executed primarily by emphasizing the destination rather than the reader. In Example 2 we can see how the destination is emphasized both by objectifying it (Malaysia is fortunate to be blessed by a variety of cultural heritage and uniquely beautiful attractions), and by subjectifying it: the destination ‘awaits you’, it ‘offers the best holidays’, and it ‘promises beautiful unforgettable memories.

The PTs analyzed also showed that in emphasizing the destination tourists at the destination in general and not the reader in particular, are also emphasized by means of third person referencing. Third person referencing (e.g., ‘pelancong’: tourists, ‘pengunjung’: visitor) is used instead of or in combination with second person referencing (anda: you), and/or imperative verbs in PTs to reduce directness and explicitness and increase indirectness and implicitness as and when necessary. Moreover, suggested tourist activities, commonly referred to as ‘things to do’ in TPTs, are not conveyed through a series of direct imperatives. Instead, modal verbs are employed to formulate mitigated imperative structures and address the Malay reader in a less aggressive and less direct style. The most popular modal verbs are ‘boleh’ (can, may). The indirect style used is correlated to Malay politeness. Apart from politeness, the use of these modal verbs also indicates flexibility, that is, the reader can choose from a range of options. In addition to the above strategies, the Malay particle ‘lah’ is a key strategy which focuses on softening the tone of an imperative. The particle ‘lah’, which is unique to the Malay language, offers an explanation of the speaker’s motive and illocutionary purpose. In our case, it explains why an imperative is used so as to correct, or at least, to pre-empt, a misapprehension or misunderstanding of some kind (Goddard, 1994, p. 154).

## 6. Conclusion

From the above discussion it is evident that translating TPTs or any promotional materials for that matter, with the ‘right’ persuasion style is crucial for the success of the promotion. Creating the appropriate style is one of the final courses of translational action on the part of the translator that will determine the smooth flow of the persuasive discourse. Ensuring that the content of the TT is meticulously adapted to the requirements, preferences and expectations of the target culture alone without adopting a culturally appropriate style, is not sufficient for the success of the TT. The style of the TT is instrumental in producing a perspective or point of view for the reader (readership positioning), thus weaving him or her into the flow of communication. In English tourism promotional discourse, the direct imperative style of persuasion draws the reader into the discourse. The textual description unfolds as if the reader is travelling through it not only as a spectator but more importantly as an active ‘actor’ and a dynamic ‘performer’. On the other hand, in Malay tourism promotional discourse a direct imperative style would repel the reader. Instead, an indirect word-of-mouth style of persuasion is employed to give the reader a privileged view of the destination. The reader is unconsciously ‘sewn’ into the narrative structure, mainly as a privileged spectator and a ‘passive actor’. However, I am not suggesting that in translating TPTs into Malay, the translator should stick to a strict regime which consists only of particular stylistic devices such as indirect forms of expression. What matters is not the function of individual linguistic devices and features but rather the overall stylistic effect produced by the combination of these devices and features. Hence, besides

<sup>4</sup> Although the verb ‘menaiki’ is acceptable, a more idiomatic option would be ‘menunggang’ (ride).

using indirect forms of expressions, for example, it is still possible to use a direct form of expression every now and then to create a particular stylistic effect while maintaining an overall sense of indirectness. This can be achieved so long that the directness-indirectness ratio is oriented towards indirectness. Similarly, suitable imperative verbs, even those which denote specific physical actions may also be used sparingly yet creatively against a backdrop of an opposing feature such as objective exposition, so as to create particular stylistic effects in Malay tourism promotional discourse. This could be implemented so long that the overall style and ‘feel’ is one that resembles word-of-mouth storytelling and not a set of strict instructions.

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