Travelogues in time and space:
a diachronic and intercultural genre study

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Abstract

On the basis of a recently compiled corpus of travel literature from the 16th to the 21st century, this paper investigates both synchronic and diachronic variation. The synchronic investigation uses a subcorpus of texts from the 21st century, which shows fascinating language choices reflecting shared values and attitudes among travellers as an intercultural group, negotiating facets of their identity as independent and adventurous people. The study will show how a local evaluative schema of use develops for words which were found to be key words in a statistical sense in the subcorpus. The second case study looks at the pragmatic extension of the prepositional phrase ‘in the middle of’ in the diachronic development of the language of travel writing covered in the corpus, in a span of 600 years. Some implications of working with such a multifaceted corpus for researchers and students of linguistics, literary studies and cultural studies are discussed. Potential applications to language learning and teaching are briefly covered, suggesting that/showing how a quantitative and qualitative approach to authentic data in computer-readable format can help language learners to cope with the phraseological nature of language.

1. The Corpus – data and potential routes of exploitation

The corpus I use for the following analyses contains travel literature from the 16th to the 21st century. It comprises about half a million words per century, as evenly distributed across the centuries as possible. The corpus will be further extended in order to fill existing gaps. The subcorpus of the 21st century consists of texts which are all published on the internet, on a well-structured and well-edited website, rather than in interactive weblogs, which are mostly of a highly colloquial style.

The travel corpus offers broad analytical and interpretative potential. At the macro-level, it is a repository of cultural knowledge and stories about intercultural encounters. The corpus can tell us about the role of travel in societies through the centuries; what it has meant for people to travel and to hear about travels. It provides us with information about the people who were able to travel and about their status in society, in political as well as economic respects. Naturally, the regions travelled to as well as the means of travelling have changed...
in significant ways throughout time. These factors have of course also influenced the kind of contact that developed between the traveller and local people.

At the micro-level, the corpus enables researchers to carry out diachronic and synchronic studies of the language of travel writing. We can aim at a broader description of the genre, investigate diachronic changes in style and content, and, more concretely, trace developments on the level of lexis, phraseology and structure. Two case studies will illustrate some of these possible approaches.

2. Theory and Methods

The methodological and theoretical approach underlying the present analyses starts from the assumption that we are interested in how language creates meaning. This needs to be investigated not in abstract terms of 'language', but in more concrete terms of 'actual language use', because this is the observable aspect of language. The regular and frequent way of representing something shapes our understanding and our way of dealing with it. This mildly constructivist concept of utterances in relation to social agency assumes that habitual forms of language use construe topics. The argumentative framework here goes back to Foucault's concept of discourse formations (e.g. 1980) and work by the language philosopher Searle (e.g. 1995), who proposes a major role for language in creating social and institutional facts. (For a more comprehensive discussion of the relationship between linguistic evidence and socio-cultural conceptualization see Gerbig 2003. Implications of work in this field for linguistic theory are discussed by Stubbs 2007).

Take as an example the alleged destruction of the ozone layer. We cannot perceive the ozone layer – or its absence – with our senses. We are presented with data which are interpreted for us by scientists. The 'raw' data would not help us much. Whatever we know about the ozone layer, we know from discourse. Whether countries reduce their CFC emissions or not is regulated discursively. Those arguments which are more powerful create realities. Such realities, by implication, are construed and therefore fragile.

'Representation' is a concept that helps us link people's experience and cognition to linguistic encoding. Representations construe versions of the world (Hall 1997), they construe views on how a culture, or in the present context, a sub-culture, 'functions'. Although this might be a contested view of culture, it can be revealing to investigate pervasive discourse that shapes – and is shaped by – the ordinary way a sub-culture and its individual participants function. With respect to travelling, a rather abstract, though linguistically transmitted, 'way of life' or category of experience is visible. It involves, for example, backpacks, buses, uncomfortable sleep, but also an experience of belonging to a group of independent, adventurous and outgoing people. Travellers semiotically not only create a system of rules and rituals that other travellers take as a starting point for their own behaviour, but they also create expectations about, and in a way even give rise to, those institutions which cater for travellers.