

Positive reviews on TripAdvisor: a cross-linguistic study of contemporary digital tourism discourse

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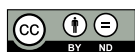
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Abstract

The emergence of the Web 2.0 profoundly changed the tourist experience and its modes of interaction and communication. Among the most pervasive forms of contemporary tourism discourse we find online reviews posted on social media platforms as TripAdvisor. Previous research on online travel reviews focused almost exclusively on negative reviews and mostly considered monolingual English dataset. In the present study we will explore positive reviews and we will add a cross-linguistic analysis comparing reviews written in English, Italian and Dutch.

In this contribution, we first explore the move structure of reviews, and then delve into their different linguistic realizations, paying particular attention to potential cross-linguistic similarities and divergences.

Our results show that positive reviews are generally formed by four main moves: positive and negative evaluations, offering extra/background information and future-oriented recommendations. These moves represent stable and recurrent features in reviews written in all three languages under examination. Further, also the topics of the reviews display a cross-linguistic tendency towards similarity, with the preferred topics being the accommodation, its services and the staff.

The findings also highlight some divergences among the three language groups, especially not on *what* is said but on *how* it is said. For instance, in reviews written in Italian we found expressions of thankfulness and congratulations to the staff, while these are practically absent in the other languages. Moreover, we observed that Italian reviewers tend to realize positive evaluations in a more intensified way (e.g. through the use of superlative lexical expressions) while these strategies are used far less frequently in British and Dutch reviews.

With this study we seek to contribute to research in the field of (digital) tourism discourse providing one of the first discourse-oriented analyses on reviews of positive polarity. Moreover, performing a comparative analysis, we aim at gaining a deeper insight on the issue of multilingualism within (online) tourism communication.

Keywords: TripAdvisor; digital tourism discourse; user-generated content; online hotel reviews; cross-linguistic analysis; evaluative discourse.

1. Introduction

The emergence of the Web 2.0 profoundly changed the tourism industry, affecting not only all tourism-related businesses, but also the tourist experience and, with it, its modes of interaction and communication (Sotiriadis, 2017). Indeed, from a socioeconomic perspective, the impact of social media platforms as TripAdvisor is undeniable, and becomes tangible if we think, for instance, of its power to determine the popularity of specific destinations and accommodations.

From a communicative point of view, platforms as TripAdvisor embody a new channel of interaction (Öz, 2015) and gave rise to new discourse genres, such as online travel reviews and related business responses. TripAdvisor provides a forum where tourists can share their knowledge and experiences with the rest of the travelling community (Minazzi, 2015). At the same time, these opinions and evaluations do not only serve to connect with and give advice to fellow travelers, but may start a potential interaction with tourism providers, for whom this new type of communication constitutes valuable feedback on their business performance (Leung et al., 2013).

In this study, we will focus on a specific form of contemporary tourism discourse, namely positive hotel reviews posted by tourists on TripAdvisor. In the last decade, online hotel reviews have attracted the attention of numerous scholars working both in the hospitality/marketing and discourse/linguistic fields. Research on negative reviews greatly outnumbers that on positive ones (Khoo-Lattimore and Ekiz, 2014; Feng and Ren, 2019), which might be connected to the fact that negative reviews carry a high damaging potential to the image and reputation of hotels (Papathanassis and Knolle, 2011). However, it has been attested that on tourism review platforms, the great majority of contributions display positive polarity (Bridges and Vásquez, 2016; Melián-González et al., 2013; San-Martín Gutiérrez et al., 2018), and that these positive reviews also play an influential role in tourists' future bookings (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013) or help hotels with improving their organization and customer care (Khoo-Lattimore and Ekiz, 2014). Yet, in spite of their business relevance, positive reviews are still greatly understudied. The present study seeks to bridge this gap in research and contribute to the study of new computer-mediated communication (CMC) practices, focusing on the linguistic behavior displayed in reviews of positive polarity. We will adopt a genre analytic approach (Swales, 1981), investigating which communicative moves are commonly used by reviewers to structure their positive reviews (section 3 and 4). Additionally, a comparative perspective will be implemented, examining reviews written in different languages. Concretely, we will offer an in-depth examination of a corpus of 300 positive hotel reviews, concentrating on potential similarities and differences in the move patterns and linguistic realizations detected in reviews written in three languages: English, Dutch and Italian. Importantly, we believe that a cross-linguistic standpoint is particularly relevant in the context of digital tourism discourse, since it better mirrors the actual reality of tourism communication online which is overwhelm-

ingly multilingual (Cenni and Goethals, 2017; Hale, 2016). Moreover, this addresses the widespread demand in both the fields of tourism and linguistic studies to consider a multiplicity of languages, and not focus solely on English data (Feng and Ren, 2019; Mariani et al., 2019).

2. TripAdvisor and multilingualism

TripAdvisor was founded in early 2000 (Lee et al., 2011) and represents one of the first platforms to embrace the potential of user-generated content (Vásquez, 2014a). At present, TripAdvisor hosts more than 850 million reviews and claims around 460 million monthly visitors (TripAdvisor, 2020), which makes it the currently most popular travel platform. As is well known, on the platform tourists can express opinions and recommendations on hotels, destinations and services (Minazzi, 2015), voicing their disappointment or satisfaction concerning their travel experience, and peer travelers can rely on this information during their trip-planning activities (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013).

Undeniably, online travel reviews have become a global phenomenon, with users from all over the world (Amaral et al., 2014), and multilingualism has turned into a defining feature of most social media platforms (Hale and Eleta, 2017), including TripAdvisor. Supporting user-generated content in various languages yields more participation on the platform, and, of course, higher potential profits (Desjardins, 2017).

By currently supporting content generated in 28 languages, multilingualism is thus recognized as a vital factor in keeping TripAdvisor updated, reachable and successful. In order to deal with the challenge of managing the multilingual communication flows, TripAdvisor applies two different strategies. On the one hand, language is one of the key filters for viewing and ordering the reviews: users can set a language preference, and thus view first the reviews written in that language (reviews in other languages get demoted). This strategy seems to encourage interactions between users sharing the same linguistic background (Cenni and Goethals, 2017; Hale, 2016). On the other hand, TripAdvisor incorporated machine translation (Google), allowing users to consult reviews written in other languages, and facilitating a more global approach to the interaction patterns between platform users (Cenni, 2019).

This instance of dual language policy, and the remarkable multilingual participation on the TripAdvisor platform highlight how the issues of multilingualism, tourism discourse and 2.0 communication are deeply intertwined. Therefore, we believe that analyzing multilingual travel reviews is of great relevance in order to get a deeper understanding of the contemporary (digital) tourism discourse landscape, especially since previous literature mostly focused on monolingual (English) data (Vásquez, 2014a; Cenni and Goethals, 2020). Further, our comparative analysis will shed some light on the actual linguistic similarities and differences between travel reviews written in different languages, indicating whether reviewers writing in different languages tend to share the same communicative habits and strategies or not.

3. Online reviews: an expanding genre in digital tourism discourse

Typically, in the pre-digital world, reviews were written by experts in the field and were considered a professional genre (Taboada, 2011). Yet, in the last decade, an online version of this genre started to emerge, adapted to fit the technological affordances (Herring, 2013; Virtanen, 2010), and allowing for users writing themselves reviews on all kind of goods. In general, these online reviews were produced for an audience of peers, with the intention of providing information, help and advice to fellow consumers (Vásquez, 2014a), representing a typical form of a “one-to-many” communication (Calvi, 2010). In particular, writers of online consumer reviews have been defined as a specific kind of ‘prosumers’ (Toffler, 1980; Vásquez, 2014a) being at the same time consumers and producers of online content, sharing their opinions and evaluations mainly for altruistic reasons (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). Users are inclined to be readers of reviews before starting to contribute themselves, and more users read rather than write reviews (Virtanen, 2017).

At present, online platforms hosting user-generated reviews have multiplied (e.g. Yelp, Netflix, The Fork, Amazon, etc.), and every kind of product or experience can potentially be reviewed. This stimulated several researchers to start investigating this pervasive online genre. Discourse analysts focused on the genre, pragmatic and linguistic characteristics of online reviews concerning a variety of topics, as, for instance, movies (De Jong and Bergers, 2013; Taboada, 2011), Amazon-sold products (Feng and Ren, 2019; Ren, 2018), books (Virtanen, 2017) and restaurants (Vásquez and Chick, 2015). In her book on consumer reviews, Vásquez (2014a) provides a comparative analysis of the different types of prosumer discourse on several review platforms (e.g. Netflix, Epicurious, Yelp). Of course, reviews are ubiquitous in the tourism environment.

As mentioned before, most of research focusing on online travel reviews focused on the study of negative polarity reviews. Vásquez was the first scholar who systematically studied negative hotel reviews, investigating complaint strategies and reviews’ textual structure (2011), their narrative features (2012) and the discursive resources adopted by reviewers (2014b, 2015). Other studies examined travel reviews focusing on their engagement strategies (Tian, 2013), their vocabulary (Fina, 2011) and their communicative functions (Hernández Toribio and Mariottini, 2016). In the last years, hotel responses to negative tourists reviews have started to receive increasing attention in literature (Cenni and Goethals, 2020; De Ascaniis et al., 2015; Napolitano, 2018; Zhang and Vásquez, 2014). In these latter studies, special attention is devoted to the genre characteristics of hotel responses and to the communicative strategies employed by tourist providers to repair their relationship with the guests and restore their public/online image.

So far, positive reviews have been rarely at the center of investigations on their own, and are usually included in studies as a basis for comparison. For instance, De Ascaniis and Gretzel

(2013) investigated TripAdvisor reviews' titles, with the aim of examining the communicative functions they accomplish with respect to the review text. In particular, the authors analyze the role titles play in shaping readers' first impression of a certain hotel/destination/attraction. Their findings point out that the prevailing communicative function of travel review titles is to anticipate the travel advice given in the review. They also concluded that reviews' titles in some cases even provided a stronger indication of the reviewer's opinion than the ratings. In particular, most titles, and especially positive ones, highlighted a distinctive topic aspect and were characterized by rich and evocative lexical choices. These lexical choices and specific vocabulary are at the core of the work of Cappelli (2013). Cappelli observed that the vocabulary used in a corpus of positive accommodation reviews reproduces the "linguistic euphoria", which is typical for promotional tourism language (Cappelli 2013: 80). Cappelli highlighted how travelers' vocabulary choices further spread the stereotypical destination image that can also be found in movies, novels, postcard or tourist websites and guides.

Finally, Khoo-Lattimore and Ekiz (2014) performed a content analysis of the most recurrent themes mentioned in positive reviews concerning hotels located in Malaysia. Their results indicated that 'rooms', 'staff' and 'food' were the most frequent themes. In particular, tourists often commented upon the view of the room and the friendliness of the staff members. This study, coming from the hospitality field, did not focus on the language used in the reviews, but on the themes mentioned: its main scope was to underline how positive reviews are advantageous to hoteliers in predicting accurate and specific points for maintaining excellence in guest satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth on platform such as TripAdvisor.

Yet, although some specific lexical and thematic aspects of positive reviews have been studied, we still lack a more systematic genre and move analysis (Swales, 1981), as has been the dominant research tradition for negative reviews (see above). Within this tradition, texts are subdivided into functional units, or moves, which are characterized by a distinctive communicative goal (Biber et al., 2007; Upton and Cohen, 2009). The main concept is that texts belonging to the same genre usually exhibit analogous move patterns (Bhatia, 2004). This will indeed be the main focus of the analysis that follows.

In sum, we seek to explore genre and discourse features of positive hotel reviews and we will address the following research questions:

- 1) What are the genre characteristics of positive hotel reviews? Which communicative moves make up this specific genre? And what are their frequencies?
- 2) To what extent do the moves frequencies point to cross-linguistic uniformities or divergences?
- 3) What are the linguistic realizations adopted in the most recurrent moves? Are there different preferences in the linguistic/pragmatic strategies adopted in the three languages under examination?

4. Methodology

4.1. Data

Our multilingual corpus is composed by 100 reviews written in English, 100 in Italian and 100 in Dutch, which were downloaded from the TripAdvisor platform. The reviews concern hotels located in London, Rome and Amsterdam respectively. We restricted our selection to reviews showing a clear positive polarity with ratings 4 ('very good') or 5 ('excellent') bullets out of 5. The selected reviews were all in their original language and no translations were included.

4.2. Data analysis and coding method

The data was coded in three rounds of manual coding, using the program NVivo12.

First, reviews were coded subdividing the texts in sequential functional units or 'moves' (section 4.3). This procedure is in line with the method applied by numerous scholars working on online reviews and responses (i.a. Feng and Ren, 2019; Taboada, 2011; Vásquez, 2011; Zhang and Vásquez, 2014).

Secondly, we concentrated on the core move characterizing this genre: evaluation. As we know from previous work on negative reviews (Cenni and Goethals, 2017; Vásquez, 2011; Ren, 2019), even when reviews display a clear and pronounced negative polarity, they frequently contain also some positive evaluative remarks. Consequently, it is likely that some negative comments will also be detected in our dataset formed by positive reviews. Therefore, we tested whether the co-presence of evaluations of opposite polarity also characterizes positive reviews (see section 5.1 and 5.2), and we added an extra level of codification focusing on the intensification and mitigation of the evaluative statements of both polarities (sections 4.4).

Finally, in the third phase, we performed a qualitative analysis of all remaining non-evaluative moves. We took a closer look at the examples contained in the opening and closing moves, looking in more detail at the linguistic and discursive strategies adopted by reviewers, examining, for instance, how tourists build their credibility as review writers or how potential face-work strategies are adopted to enhance the relation with the interlocutors.

4.3. Moves in positive reviews

Building on the coding grids that we elaborated in our previous work on negative hotel reviews (Cenni and Goethals, 2017), we identify six 'macro' moves as the main components of positive reviews (Table 1). The evaluative statements and future-oriented recommendations have been further divided in subcategories.

In opening position it is possible to find the move 'offer extra/background information'. This category comprises instances in which the reviewer shares with the reader different kinds of

background information concerning the stay at the hotel (e.g. when the sojourn took place, with whom, for how long).

The main body is constituted by positive evaluations of different characteristics of the hotel. In this central part of the reviews it is also possible to identify evaluations with negative polarity.

The ‘evaluative statements’ moves have been further subdivided based on the aspect of the hotel they focused on, namely: accommodation (e.g. comments on the rooms and their furniture), services (e.g. comments on cleanliness, breakfast, bar, room service), interaction with the staff, price, location and a general evaluation (containing all instances referring to the whole stay experience).

In closing position we find ‘future-oriented recommendations’, in which reviewers express their intention to return to the hotel in the future or recommend the hotel to fellow tourists. At the end of positive reviews, it is also possible to detect two additional moves which were not attested in studies on negative reviews, namely ‘thanking’ and ‘paying compliments’, in which reviewers express gratitude for the pleasant stay and pay direct compliments to the hotel or its staff.

TABLE 1

Structure and move taxonomy of positive hotel reviews

MOVES	
Beginning	<p>Extra background information <i>We stayed just for one night to see the local sights.</i></p>
Middle	<p>Accommodation <i>P: Beautiful decor and lovely garden</i> <i>N: Room was not very modern</i></p>
	<p>Services <i>P: The room was clean and breakfast plentiful</i> <i>N: Breakfast is a bit limited, could do with more variety.</i></p>
	<p>Interaction with staff <i>P: Staff are warm and friendly.</i> <i>N: Staff could be a bit more enthusiastic</i></p>
	<p>Location <i>P: Amazing location!</i> <i>N: The hotel is faraway the historical centre</i></p>
	<p>General <i>P: I had a really pleasant time in the hotel</i> <i>N: Overall it was not a very nice experience</i></p>
	<p>Price <i>P: Great value for money</i> <i>N: For the price of bed and breakfast I expected much more</i></p>
Positive evaluations	
Negative evaluations	

	Future-oriented recommendations	Recommendations to other tourists <i>I would recommend it to anyone</i>
		Self-oriented intentions <i>We would happily stay there again.</i>
Closing	Thanking the hotel <i>Thank you so much again</i>	
	Paying compliments to the hotel/staff <i>I have to CONGRATULATE the Management for employing great individuals that have made the difference.</i>	

4.4. Coding hedging strategies in positive and negative evaluations

In the second phase of coding, we focused on the evaluative statements contained in the reviews.

Evaluative comments have been coded for the presence of intensification and mitigation strategies (Martin and White, 2005). Elaborating on the observations of intensifying/mitigating phenomena identified in previous works on negative reviews (Cenni and Goethals, 2017; Ren, 2018, 2019), in Table 2 we offer an overview of the most frequent intensification/mitigation strategies detected in our corpus. Positive and negative evaluations that did not contain any of these hedging strategies have been considered unmarked (Table 2). By coding these hedging strategies, we aim to deepen and refine the description of potential divergent or similar trends in the linguistic realizations of evaluations in the three languages under examination.

TABLE 2

Positive and negative evaluations: intensifying, mitigating and neutral strategies

	POSITIVE EVALUATIONS	NEGATIVE EVALUATIONS
UNMARKED	<i>Rooms are simple, clean and quiet</i>	<i>The hotel was expensive</i>
INTENSIFYING STRATEGIES		
Expressive punctuation/ orthography	<i>Perfect balance of location versus price!!</i>	<i>Constant problems with room cards!</i>
High degree adverbs	<i>We really enjoyed our stay</i>	<i>Rooms are very small</i>
Superlative lexical expressions	<i>Excellent service</i>	<i>It was like a dark dungeon</i>
Additional positive descriptions	<i>He couldn't do enough for us / Se lo provi non puoi più farne a meno [if you try it you can't live without it]</i>	/

MITIGATING STRATEGIES

Mitigating adjectives, adverbs, expressions	<i>Kamers zijn groot genoeg</i> [Rooms are big enough]	<i>The lobby looks a little tired/ The room was a bit small</i>
Mentioning isolated circumstances	/	<i>The only downside is the breakfast/ The only downfall was the lack of space in the bedroom</i>
Underlining a personal point of view	/	<i>Noisy but we didn't mind</i>

5. Results

In this section, we will first compare the overall frequency of the moves in the three languages in order to find out whether there are systematic differences or similarities in the composition of positive hotel reviews (5.1). Then, we will offer a more detailed analysis of each move. In particular, we will look at the proportions of hedging phenomena in the evaluative comments (5.2) and present a qualitative discussion of examples the non-evaluative moves contained in positive reviews (5.3-5).

5.1. Move distribution in positive hotel reviews

Table 3 presents the move distribution analysis in the three languages under examination: on the left, the frequencies of the main moves and their subcategories are shown, and on the right, we report which language pairs show statistically significant differences (using chi-square tests, and setting the critical *p value* at the 0.05 level of confidence).

As could be expected, positive evaluations immediately stand out as the most frequent move included in positive reviews, occurring in almost the totality of the reviews and in all the three languages under examination.

Looking at the topics of these positive evaluations, we note that, even though there are some fluctuations in the actual frequencies cross-linguistically, the six themes can be defined as stable and recurrent topics. In general terms, the topics' frequency patterns show similarities across the three languages, as significant differences have been detected in only 4 out of 18 possible cases. We observe that comments concerning the accommodation, services, and the interaction with the staff are the matters mentioned most frequently, while general and price-related comments are incorporated less often. Despite this general and relatively uniform trend, it is interesting to notice that 'interaction with staff' represents the most discussed topic within Italian-written reviews (N94), displaying a significant divergence when compared to both English- and Dutch-written reviews (EN N73; NL N60). Indeed, in these two latter groups the topic showing the highest frequency is 'accommodation'. Remarkably, this

TABLE 3

Move distribution and statistical significant differences comparing English, Italian and Dutch positive hotel responses

MOVES IN POSITIVE REVIEWS ¹	#REVIEWS (/100)			STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES			
	ENGLISH	ITALIAN	DUTCH	EN-IT	EN-NL	NL-IT	
Extra information/ Background information	73	55	59	X	X	-	
Positive evaluations²	99	97	97	-	-	-	
TOPICS POSITIVE	Accommodation	85	76	74	-	-	-
	Services	78	84	72	-	-	X
	Interaction with staff	73	94	60	X	-	X
	Location	71	60	55	-	X	-
	General	41	42	35	-	-	-
	Price	25	30	27	-	-	-
Negative evaluations	41	11	49	X	-	X	
TOPICS NEGATIVE	Accommodation	28	10	34	X	-	X
	Services	16	1	13	X	-	X
	Interaction with staff	0	0	5	-	-	-
	Location	2	0	3	-	-	-
	General	0	0	2	-	-	-
	Price	4	0	2	-	-	-
Future-oriented recommendations	46	47	37	-	-	-	
Recomm. to other tourists	12	22	22	-	-	-	
<i>Self-oriented intention</i>	39	32	21	-	X	-	
Thanking the hotel/staff	7	16	4	X	-	X	
Paying compliments to the hotel/staff	1	18	2	X	-	X	

1 The total frequencies (N) refer to the number of reviews in which a certain category is used at least once.

2 It is possible that more than one type of evaluation might be coded per review. For this reason, adding up the frequencies of the six main evaluation's topics may result in a higher number than the total number of reviews per language in which at least one evaluative instance has been detected.

inclination among Italian review writers to refer more frequently to the interaction with the staff echoes similar results emerged in a previous examination of negative reviews (Cenni and Goethals, 2017; Cenni et al., 2020).

Even if the evaluative comments' polarity is predominantly positive, in the dataset we also found evaluations with negative polarity. Notably, while positive comments are analogously pervasive in the three languages, negative comments included in these texts are not similarly distributed. Indeed, the statistical analysis reveals a significant divergence concerning the inclusion of negative evaluations, with English and Dutch subsets including negative comments in almost half of their positive reviews (N41/100; N49/100, respectively), and a considerably lower frequency in Italian (N8/100).

Beyond the core move of expressing evaluations, two additional moves appear to be adopted regularly in shaping positive reviews. In opening position, tourists tend to offer extra (background) information regarding their trips: this move is found in more than half of the reviews in all three languages, and appears to be preferred in reviews written in English (EN N73; IT N55; NL N59). Future-oriented recommendations characterize the reviews' closings in almost half of the reviews, displaying similar frequencies cross-linguistically (EN N46; IT N47; NL N37).

Finally, a striking result is represented by the adoption of two specific moves by Italian reviewers, namely 'thanking' and 'paying compliments' to the hotel/staff. Even if their frequencies are not particularly high (N16; N18), they are adopted significantly more often in Italian when compared to the other two subsets in which these moves are almost absent (Thanking EN N4; NL N1; Compliments EN N1; NL N2).

These findings suggest that the interpersonal dimension is more relevant in Italian reviews both as object of the evaluations and in the interactive dimension of the review: Italian reviewers refer more often to interaction with the staff as topic of positive evaluations, and, at the same time, they also clearly try to create a connection with the addressee, through means of strong interactional moves as thanking and paying compliments to the interlocutors.

5.2. Positive and negative evaluative comments

Given the relevance of evaluative comments within this genre, we investigated how they are linguistically realized, in particular looking at hedging strategies. In this paragraph, we will analyze to what degree reviews written in different languages intensify or mitigate their positive and negative evaluations following the coding scheme presented in methodology section 4.4.

The first observation is that positive and negative evaluations differ considerably in their hedging patterns. In the negative evaluations, we note that all three languages (and especial-

TABLE 4

Mitigated, unmarked and intensified evaluative statements: frequencies and statistically significant differences

POSITIVE EVALUATIONS	#OCCURRENCES (%)			STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES		
	ENGLISH	ITALIAN	DUTCH	EN-IT	EN-NL	NL-IT
Mitigated	2 (1%)	3 (1%)	4 (1%)	-	-	-
Unmarked	232 (61%)	106 (27%)	205 (58%)	X	-	X
Reinforced	144 (38%)	282 (72%)	144 (41%)	X	-	X
NEGATIVE EVALUATIONS						
Mitigated	29 (59%)	9 (82%)	41 (68%)	-	-	-
Unmarked	12 (24%)	1 (9%)	13 (22%)	-	-	-
Reinforced	8 (16%)	1 (9%)	6 (10%)	-	-	-

ly Italian) display a significant preference for mitigated negative evaluations as in (1), which is understandable since we are examining reviews of overall positive polarity.

(1) My only niggle would be that it was just a little bit too warm for me.

Looking at positive evaluations, we notice that they are almost never mitigated, in the three languages, but, when considering unmarked and intensified realizations, significant cross-linguistic differences emerge. More specifically, it stands out how reviews written in Italian show a tendency to realize positive evaluations in an intensified manner as in (2), emphasizing the illocutionary force of the utterance, whereas English and Dutch reviews display a clearer preference for unmarked realizations (3)³.

(2) L'accoglienza era a dir poco perfetta, gentilissimo tutto lo staff!!! [The welcome was perfect to say the least, the whole staff was very kind!!!]

(3) Kamers zijn netjes en de badkamer was recent vernieuwd. [Rooms are tidy and the bathroom were recently renovated]

3 Among the most recurrent strategies used to intensify positive evaluations we detected superlative lexical expressions (as *fantastic*, *perfect*, *the best*) and adverbial high-degree markers (as *very*, *really*, etc.). Interestingly, relevant divergences have been detected among the three languages not only in the degree positive evaluations are intensified or not, but also in the preferred strategies to realize this intensification. Indeed, superlative lexical expressions represent the most recurrent intensifying strategy within Italian positive evaluations, adopted in 57% of the intensified instances (vs. EN 31%; NL 28%), while English and Dutch positive evaluations are mostly intensified through adverbial high-degree markers (EN 56%, NL 53% vs. IT 28%).

This strengthened positivity in Italian reviews is further corroborated by the tendency that could be seen in Table 3, namely the very infrequent inclusion of negative evaluative comments in the Italian subset (IT N8/100), whereas negative evaluations are juxtaposed to positive ones in almost half of the reviews in the other two languages (EN N41/100; NL N49/100). Both these trends clearly suggest that when Italian reviewers write a positive review they show less reservations and produce full-fledged and enthusiastic positive evaluations. Remarkably, when we consider reviews (with the same ratings) written in English and Dutch, their expression of positivity is realized differently, generally performed in a more understated and unmarked manner, including also critical remarks (negative evaluations) in their texts, thus giving an overall effect of a more neutral review.

These observations are in line with previous research on negative reviews and hotel/business responses, which also pointed out that Italian texts show a more involved, passionate and personal style than texts written in English or Dutch (Cenni and Goethals, 2020; Incelli, 2013; Napolitano, 2018).

5.3. Extra/background information

The category ‘extra/background information’ represents a rather stable non-evaluative move, which was found in more than half of the reviews in the three languages under investigation and reaching even a proportion of 3 out of 4 reviews within the English-written subset (see Table 3).

In our corpus, the ‘extra/background information’ move is always placed at the beginning of the texts. It typically functions as an orienting unit, introducing the reader to the rest of the text (Vásquez, 2012, 2014b). In almost the totality of the cases, instances included in this move offer some extra contextual information concerning the reviewer’s stay. Among the most recurrent shared information we find, for example, the period of year in which the tourist stayed at the reviewed hotel, how long they stayed, whom they traveled with, whether they were travelling for work or leisure and also why they had chosen this specific hotel.

As observed in previous works on negative travel reviews (Cenni and Goethals, 2017; Vásquez, 2014b), in some cases, reviewers share specific information to boost their credibility as review authors, suggesting they are expert travelers, for example by highlighting that they know very well the city they are visiting as in (4), or that they frequently travel for work (5).

(4) Veniamo frequentemente a Roma e quindi la conosciamo molto bene. [We often come to Rome and therefore we know it very well]

(5) I’ve stayed in numerous London hotels for work.

Within this move, reviewers also profile themselves as ‘returning customers’. We found this kind of statements in all three languages (6-8).

(6) Third time at this hotel.

(7) Sono stato ospite diverse volte negli ultimi anni. [I have been a guest several times in the last years]

(8) We komen al 5 jaar in hetzelfde hotel. [We have been coming to the same hotel for 5 years]

The production of such instances is probably related to the fact that positive reviews are usually written by satisfied customers, and reviewers might take pride of their good choices, by pointing out they have been to this ‘highly rated’ hotel before/multiple times. Also this type of instances may enhance the credibility of the reviewers and contributes to the reviewer identity creation as ‘expert traveler’, choosing and travelling only to excellent accommodations.

5.4. Future-oriented recommendations

The category ‘future-oriented recommendations’ shows a similar frequency pattern in the three groups, being present in 37-47% of the reviews, typically appearing at the end of the positive reviews.

In our dataset we observed that future-oriented recommendations are mostly realized through self-oriented intentions (as “I will come back”; 21-39%), while advice to other tourists are less common (as “I highly recommend this hotel”; 12-22%)⁴. Possibly, this is related to the fact that the positive review as a whole already represents a sort of recommendation for peer travelers and thus it is felt as less needed to include an explicit endorsement in the text.

Taking a closer look at the positive self-oriented intentions, we notice that they are realized with varying degrees of epistemic certainty. The first adopted linguistic strategy is to render the intention to return to the hotel as a possibility, adopting the conditional mood (9-10):

(9) Se dovessi tornare a Roma tornerei qui. [If I were to go back to Rome I would go back here]

(10) Overall I would stay again

The second strategy is to express the intention of returning to the hotel conveying more certainty, almost resembling a promise, mostly through the use of the indicative mood and often accompanied by exclamation points (11-13):

4 Perhaps it is interesting to note that in negative hotel reviews future-oriented recommendations are considerably more recurrent than in positive ones (66% versus 37-47%) (Cenni and Goethals, 2017). Moreover, within negative reviews, around 65% of the future-oriented recommendations were directed to other tourists (that took the form of a ‘warning’ as “avoid this hotel at all costs!!!”), while in positive reviews we notice an inclination to include more often self-oriented intentions (62% of the total future-oriented instances).

(11) I will stay here regularly in the future!

(12) Wij komen terug! [We will come back!]

(13) Tornerò presto! [I'll be back soon]

Finally, we also found a specific adverb used cross-linguistically to reinforce the emphasis of these self-oriented intentions, namely: 'definitely/sicuramente/zeker', which has been found in N54 out of N92 total future-oriented instances, embodying the preferred reinforcing adverb adopted within the move 'future-oriented recommendations', and almost creating a fixed formula to close positive reviews (14-16).

(14) Will definitely return.

(15) Ci tornerò sicuramente!!!! [I will definitely return!!!!]

(16) We komen zeker nog een keer terug. [We are definitely coming back again]

5.5. Thanking and complimenting the hotel

Thanking the hotel/staff after a pleasant stay could be considered as a common politeness routine in face-to-face guest-staff interactions, for instance during the check-out moment. Yet, it appears as a less obvious move in this digital form of consumer-to-business communication, displaying a low frequency of N27/300 throughout the whole corpus.

Only the Italian group shows a relative inclination to overtly express gratefulness, actually thanking the hotel for the pleasant stay, showing interest in maintaining, and possibly enhancing, the relation with their interlocutors. In particular, not only we observe a significant difference in frequencies (IT N16, vs. EN N7, NL N4), but we also note a difference in the linguistic realizations of the thanking move.

The few instances produced in Dutch and English are highly formulaic, as (17-18):

(17) Thank you for an enjoyable stay!

(18) Bedankt voor alles! [Thank you for everything!]

On the contrary, thanking instances in Italian are more detailed, thanking the staff as a whole (N5/16) as in (19) or even thanking directly staff members mentioning their first name (N9/16) as in (20-21).

(19) Infine, un ringraziamento a tutto lo staff [Finally, thanks to the whole staff]

(20) Gaetano, Vanessa, Andrea, grazie! [Gaetano, Vanessa, Andrea, thank you!]

(21) Un grazie enorme a Maurizio! [A huge thanks to Maurizio!]

In the case of the ‘paying compliments’ move, the cross-linguistic differences in terms of frequency appear even more clearly. As a matter of fact, in our corpus, we found a compliment in about 1/5 of Italian positive reviews (N18/100), while they are practically lacking in the other two languages (EN N1/100; NL N2/100).

The direct compliments paid by Italian reviewers to the staff are usually quite general in nature, as in (22-23), although, in some cases, they go a step further and even juxtapose encouraging comments to the staff, as in (24-25), promoting a more informal tone and suggesting a kind of guest-staff familiarity.

(22) Complimenti davvero! [Sincere congratulations!]

(23) Complimenti a tutto lo staff. [Congratulations to the whole staff]

(24) Bravi! Continuate così! [Well done! Keep it up!]

(25) Restate così, siete unici. [Do not change, you are unique]

Although they do not display very high frequencies, we believe that thanking and compliment moves point towards different discursive habits between Italian reviewers, on the one hand, and British and Dutch ones, on the other. These moves suggest a higher awareness of Italian reviewers concerning the ‘double audience’ of their texts: they do not write only thinking of fellow travelers but also open a direct communication with the staff of the accommodation that they review. Italian reviewers are the only ones within our dataset to systematically address both audiences, promoting a sense of closeness between the interlocutors. Second, these moves adopted by Italian reviewers may function as politeness strategies, in particular to boost the face of the hotel and its staff, since appraisals are conveyed in a clear and overt manner. Again, the use of such strategies suggests that special attention is devoted to the interactional aspect of the communication. Finally, the act of including explicit thanking and complimenting moves, in some cases even mentioning the first names of staff members (N9/100), also contributes to a more personal writing tone. In sum, all these elements corroborate the presence of a more involved and personalized communicative style in Italian-written positive reviews, in which reviewers pay also more attention to the face sensitivities of the interlocutors.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The main objective of this study was to explore the genre and linguistic characteristics of positive hotel reviews posted on TripAdvisor. While there is a growing body of research on negative reviews (and their relative hotels responses), we provided one of the first accounts focusing on positive hotel reviews. Furthermore, we added a cross-linguistic perspective to the analysis, discussing convergent and divergent discourse patterns in English, Dutch and Italian.

With respect to the move analysis, we identified six main moves characterizing the structure of positive reviews, namely ‘positive’ and ‘negative evaluations’, ‘extra background information’, ‘future-oriented recommendations’, ‘thanking’ and ‘paying compliments’. Additionally, the analysis of the evaluation revealed the presence of recurrent topics, in particular ‘accommodation’, ‘services’ and ‘interaction with the staff’. In general terms, the results highlighted that the identified moves and topics represent typical features of positive reviews and reviewers usually drew from these elements to compose their positive reviews.

Yet, taking a closer look at the cross-linguistic findings we also observed specific divergences. More specifically, Italian-written reviews displayed some different discursive behavior when compared to the other two languages. Concretely, Italian reviews activated more clearly the interpersonal dimension of the communication, and, in line with this observation, they also appeared inclined to use a more involved and emphatic communicative style. These communicative preferences are realized through several linguistic strategies. First of all, it emerged that ‘interacting with the staff’ is the most recurrent theme within Italian positive evaluations, while it occupies only the third place in English- and Dutch-written reviews. Furthermore, Italian reviewers show a tendency to add extra moves at the end of their reviews, as ‘thanking’ and ‘paying compliments’ to the hotel’s staff, which are almost absent in the other two languages. The fact that Italian reviewers use these moves reveals in our opinion a special awareness concerning the dual audience of reviews, addressing not only fellow tourists but also the hotel’s staff.

The personal and strongly involved writing style among Italian reviewers also emerged when examining the realization of evaluative statements. Indeed, the great majority of positive evaluations comprised in Italian reviews were intensified and were rarely juxtaposed to any type of negative or critical comments, producing, as a result, a highly enthusiastic review. This is in contrast with the communicative style adopted in reviews written in English and Dutch, which displayed mostly unmarked evaluative statements and often included critical remarks in their texts, creating an overall effect of a more impersonal and neutral review. Indeed, Dutch and British users seem to focus less on the interactional aspect of the communication: they do not address the hotel’s staff directly, they do not devote specific attention to the face sensitivities of their interlocutors and clearly tend towards a more detached and professional type of interaction.

These divergent cross-linguistic tendencies appear to be in line with previous studies, suggesting different communicative norms and habits when performing positive evaluations and compliments in different languages (e.g. Sifianou and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2017). Furthermore, the intensified and involved style in Italian-written reviews corroborates similar outcomes of recent works on negative reviews and online responses (Cenni and Goethals, 2020; Napolitano, 2018).

In conclusion, the present study contributes to scholarship on contemporary tourism discourse in various ways. It extends the study of genre and linguistic characteristics to a pervasive form of digital touristic text: positive hotel reviews (San-Martín Gutiérrez et al., 2018), and our findings also provide a deeper understanding of multilingualism in the context of on-line tourism discourse. Indeed, to the best of our knowledge, this work represents one of the first studies analyzing positive hotel reviews from a cross-linguistic perspective. Our analysis brought to light different communicative behaviors between tourists with different linguistic backgrounds. This result might have not only theoretical but also practical repercussions. In particular, it may be of interest to service providers, who could, for instance, take into account the different communicative preferences when writing responses to guests' reviews in order to maintain high level of satisfaction. Potentially, a greater awareness and attention to the different guests' communicative styles should be useful also in the 'offline' version of a service encounter, for instance in order to conduct professional, efficient and appreciated face-to-face interactions with guests coming from different linguistic backgrounds. Finally, positive reviews embody a rich source of information for hotels, by mapping out the aspects of the stay that guests valued the most and pointing out to service providers which elements the hotel should maintain to keep its level of excellence and which aspects might still need some improvement (Khoo-Lattimore and Ekiz, 2014).

Elaborating on these findings, future research on positive travel reviews could be expanded in various directions. For instance, the exploration of communicative traits of positive reviews should be extended to a higher number of languages. Moreover, future studies could test how these customers' evaluations might affect readers' purchase behavior (e.g. willingness to book the accommodation) (Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012). Finally, further attention could be paid to positive reviews posted on different tourism platforms, for instance performing a comparison of positive reviews on TripAdvisor vs. Booking. All these types of research will contribute to further advancements in the field of contemporary tourism discourse and will help us gain a deeper understanding on which factors (e.g. linguistic and cultural background, different platform configurations) induce the same discursive evaluative habits or not.

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