

Nature or civilization – a comparative study of premodifying attributes in English and Slovak tourist texts

Danica Maleková

Katedra anglického jazyka a literatúry, Filozofická fakulta,
Katolícka univerzita v Ružomberku, Slovensko

Abstract: The aim of the paper is a cross-cultural comparison of the most dominant premodifiers with partly evaluative function in English and Slovak tourist texts with a view to compare the two linguo-cultural communities in terms of values. The study is based on two corpora of texts promoting small-scale accommodation in the mountainous regions in Britain and Slovakia, counting 10 000 words each. The findings reveal significant differences in terms of emphasis the two cultures place on the category of ‘nature’ in comparison with that of ‘civilization’.

Keywords: cross-cultural comparison, evaluative adjectives, semantic categories, cultural values.

1 Introduction

The main function of the language of tourism is to inform and to persuade. While it accommodates numerous subgenres, ranging from brochures and guidebooks to the more dialogic text types such as telephone, letter, internet feedback sites or online guidebook forms (cf. Dann, 2012, p. 64), one of the most pertinent generic traits is that of evaluation, which is, to a greater or lesser degree present in all of them. Typically, and most directly, the carriers of evaluation are adjectives, or, more generally attributes realized by adjectives or noun phrases (cf. Fairclough, 2003, p. 172). A comparative insight into the values professed by cultural communities can thus be gained by focusing on the premodifiers employed in the tourist language by studying comparative data sets. The following research aims to investigate the relative stress that is placed on what can be called natural sights such as mountains, woods or lakes versus those created by man or otherwise socially constructed, which could generally be subsumed under the semantic category of ‘place’/‘nation’ descriptors – e.g. *English, Lake District, slovenský* or *liptovský*. It is assumed that the comparison can bring out culture specific features that constitute the respective collective mentality of the English and Slovak cultural communities, and thus enhance understanding of the particular tendencies determining collective values. In practical terms,

the findings can feed into translation theory regarding tourist texts, as these represent a significant market, especially with English as the target language.

2 Data and methodology

The research stems from a more extensive study of evaluative adjectives in tourist texts (Maleková, 2017), adopting the methodology applied therein – i.e. the premises of critical discourse analysis especially as accommodated by Jeffries' critical stylistics (2010, 2014) as well as those of cognitive linguistics (Langacker, 1999; Talmy, 2000). The selection of data was based on the genre theory that conceives of genre as a relatively stable social practice largely defined by its communicative purpose(s) and a highly structured and conventionalized character (cf. Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993), which became the criteria observed when building the corpora to be studied, and which, in turn, serve as a guarantee of compatibility of the linguistic material.

The research data used in the present study comprise of two corpora of short texts promoting small-scale accommodation offers (mostly cottages) in the areas of the Lake District and the Scottish Highlands in Great Britain and the mountainous parts of northern Slovakia. They contain an equivalent number of words (10000), resulting in 53 blurbs in the English material and 72 items in the Slovak one. The texts were selected by applying a location/type of facility filter on websites dedicated to pooling offers of recreational accommodation (www.tripadvisor.co.uk and www.ubytujsa.sk). All the data were collected in the year 2015.

Both sets of texts share the same communicative purpose of facilitating information on the offer of local, mostly cottage-based recreational facilities in a mountainous setting provided by individual property owners, and they appear in the context of websites emulating the same aim – to collate dispersed individual offers, bring them 'under one roof', which largely concerns the way they are presented, to secure a 'competitive edge', or relative influence, in the segment of the market. The British Trip Advisor is one of the largest and most influential sites dealing in the business of tourism (cf. Dann, 2012, p. 60), while its Slovak counterpart ubytujsa.sk, though the leading one in the region of Slovakia, obviously cannot compete with Trip Advisor neither in terms of influence, nor in terms of size and diversity of content. The websites, however, share essentially the same structural patterns. It could be reasonably admitted that the Slovak marketers model themselves on the largely anglophone 'best practices' in line with the ethos that technology is free of cultural borders. While such asymmetry on the production – reception scale of structural generic elements should not be ignored, the critical stylistic analysis can profit from the uniform streamlining of the web-user behaviour in the sense of compatibility of the textual corpora (cf. Maleková, 2017, pp. 19–30).

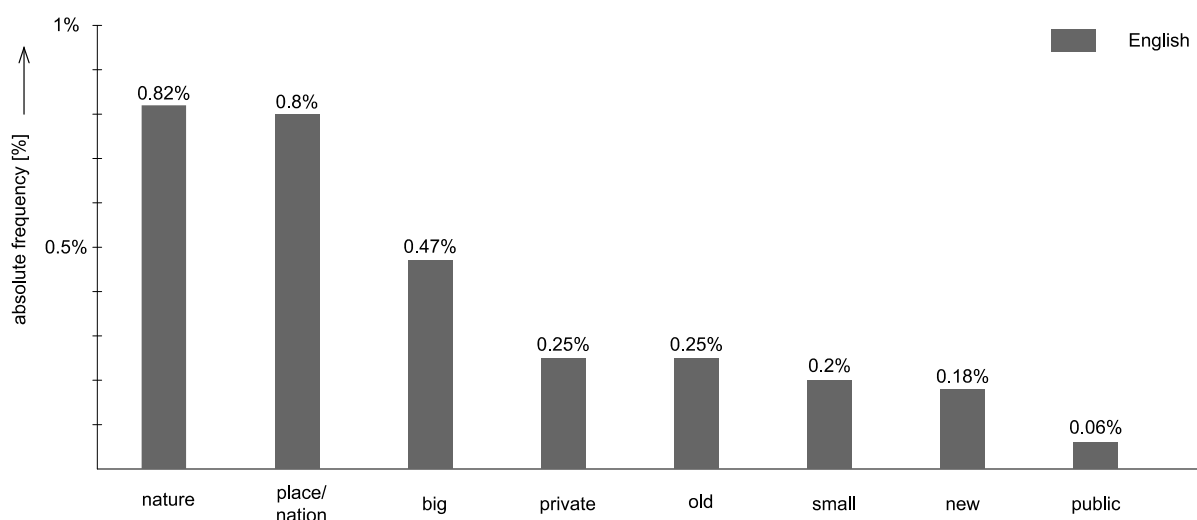
The semantic categories of 'nature', 'place' and 'nation' when manifesting in the surface structure of the language as premodifiers in a noun phrase, are not, strictly speaking, car-

riers of direct evaluation, such as *beautiful*, *great*, *prijemný* or *tichý*. However, in the context of a promotional genre to which tourist texts belong, the objective quality they assign to the concept at hand might partly serve evaluative function – compare:

v krásnom pokojnom horskom prostredí
 ‘in beautiful peaceful **mountainous** surroundings’

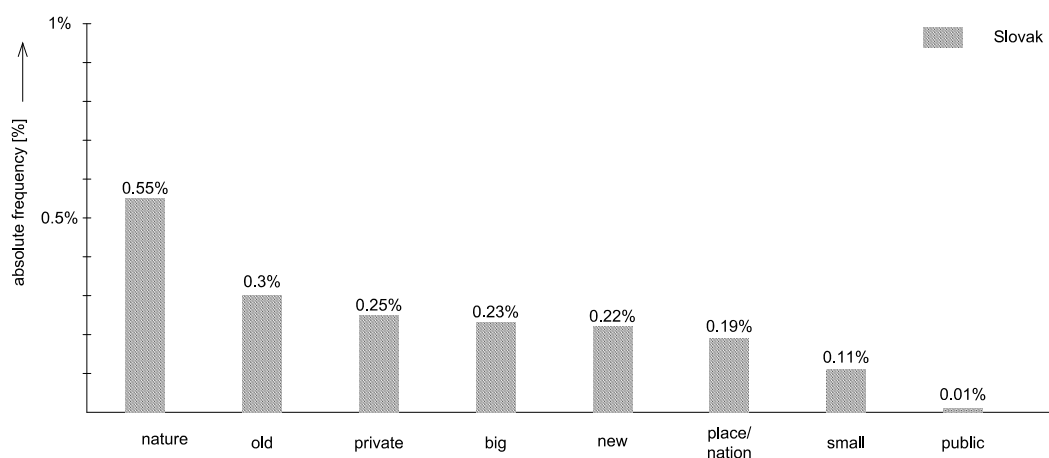
where the third adjective, similarly to the preceding ones, is clearly tinged by positive evaluation.

In the English corpus, the tokens related to the semantic categories of ‘nature’ and ‘place’/‘nation’ are the most frequent ones among attributes with partly evaluative function, as shown in graph 1 below.



Graph 1: Absolute distribution of the most prominent semantic categories of attributive adjectives with partly evaluative function in the English corpus.

While in the Slovak corpus the ‘nature’ category is equally prominent in terms of frequency of the respective tokens, the semantic category of ‘place’/‘nation’ plays a relatively less important role, as can be seen in the following graph 2 below.



Graph 2: Absolute distribution of the most prominent semantic categories of attributive adjectives with partly evaluative function in the Slovak corpus.

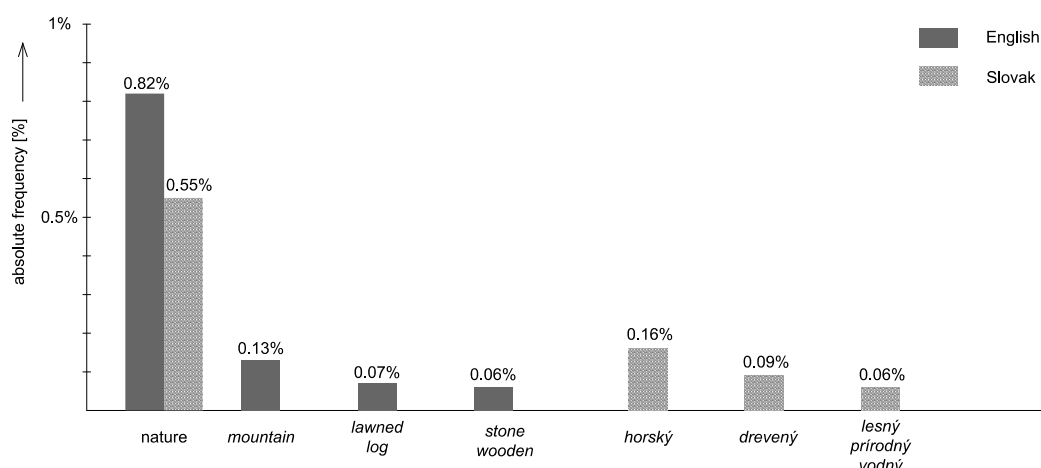
Although account needs to be taken of the fact that, generally, in English tourist texts premodifiers are more abundant (cf. Maleková, 2016), the difference in the relative balance between the investigated categories is marked. While the ratio in the English corpus is approximately 1:1, in its Slovak counterpart it is almost 3:1 in favour of the ‘nature’ descriptors. The following account should provide a deeper look into the phenomenon at hand, as well as try to account for some of the related causes and implications.

3 Mapping the semantic fields of ‘nature’ and ‘place’/‘nation’ attributes

One of the most important themes (second only to the description of the facility itself) invariably employed by the blurbs advertising accommodation consists in references to the surrounding area. As the actual setting in both corpora is mountainous countryside, it is to be expected that the semantic category of ‘nature’ will play a significant role. Another predominant way to refer to the surrounding area is by proper names or derivatives thereof, here subsumed under the category ‘place’/‘nation’. The following subsections will make a cross-linguistic comparison of the respective semantic categories.

3.1 Lexemes with ‘nature’ reference

As has been shown above, attributes with ‘nature’ reference are dominant in both corpora, which mirrors the fact that nature, or, more specifically, mountains, are the main attractor in the holiday destinations selected for analysis. The ensuing graph 3 shows the frequency of lexical units featured as premodifiers in the two corpora, together with their most typical representatives (types realized by the greatest number of tokens).



Graph 3: Absolute frequency of ‘nature’ descriptors in English and Slovak with their most typical representatives.

Translated into actual numbers, in English this amounts to 84 tokens, which are accommodated by 30 types. The respective lexical variability is thus 35.7% – this means that the lexical stock realizing the category is fairly varied, with little repetition. This is also manifest in the proportionate representation of the most common type, *mountain*, featuring

in approximately 16% of all the 'nature' attributes. It is followed by the lexemes *lawned*, *log*, *stone*, and *wooden*, whose proportion is also relatively small (roughly 7%).

The situation in Slovak is different, with the total of 56 tokens realized by 13 types, which amounts to the lexical variability of 23.2%. Compared to English, the vocabulary range is much smaller (with as much as 50% difference), resulting in a greater level of repetition. This can already be seen from the strong position of the lexical unit *horský* ('mountainous') within the category, as it occurs in almost 30% of the given 'nature' references. Therefore, while the top position of the mountain reference in both corpora is predictable in the given context, there is still a stark difference between the relative emphasis it gains in the two cultural settings.

Interestingly, the other most frequent types are also partly equivalent in the two languages, in particular *wooden* and *drevený* ('wooden') both refer to 'natural' material. While their absolute frequency is quite similar, the relative importance of *drevený* within the category is twice as great as its English counterpart (16% versus 7% respectively). In case of the unit *log*, whose reference is similar to *wooden*, the situation is more complicated as its use is specific to the analytical structure of English where premodification by nouns, often maintaining reference to substance rather than quality is common. In Slovak, similar conceptualizations need to be handled by postmodification or a derivative in the grammar structure, compare:

*log burner/stove ... pec na drevo *drevená pec*

*log hut/cabin ... drevenica*¹ (the meaning of *drevený dom*, normally rendered as *drevodom*, is different)

log fire ... ohnisko (does not make the sememe 'log' explicit, employing a different semantic perspective)

The significance of the structural aspect will be handled in more detail in the following section.

In terms of semantic fields accommodated by the category of 'nature', the two most salient ones are associated to 'mountain'/'woods' (e.g. *mountain*, *wooden*, *oak*, *horský* ('mountainous'), *lesný* ('wood')) and 'water' (*lake*, *sea*, *bay*, *vodný* ('water'), *rybársky* ('fishing')). The two corpora, however, differ in the relative value they assign to each. Concerning 'mountain'/'woods', the number of tokens in Slovak reaches 66%, while in English, the proportion of the respective wordstock is only 36%, which is only slightly more than a half. The situation is reversed when 'water' category is considered, with English displaying water related lexical units in 30% of the cases, compared to just 13% in Slovak. This might be explained by the type of relief inhabited by the two cultural communities, and the Slovaks taking pride in their mountains.

Regarding the remaining lexical representatives of the 'nature' category, the most significant difference consists in the level of generality, with English tending towards the more

¹ There are as many as 77 instances of the lexeme *drevenica/čka* ('log house/(diminutive)') in the Slovak corpus, making it the second most frequent reference to 'accommodation facility' (cf. Maleková, 2017, p. 100).

specific (*bird, horse, pony, brown trout, hay*) and Slovak resorting to generalising via quite frequent use of the word *prírodný* ('natural'). This can also be observed within 'mountain'/'woods' category, where English mentions specific trees such as *oak* or *pine*, while Slovak invariably sticks to the more general expressions of *horský* ('mountainous') and *lesný* ('wood').

3.2 Lexemes with 'space'/'nation' reference

Alongside references to the surrounding area highlighting the 'nature' aspect, adjectival descriptors denoting the name of the tourist destination or its indigenous inhabitants stand out as another salient theme, especially in the English corpus where they are on a par with the 'nature' related tokens in terms of frequency (see graph 1 above). In Slovak, on the other hand, they are less prominent, amounting to approximately one third of the frequency of the 'nature' lexemes (graph 2 above).

In fact, the findings are in line with those of a large-scale computer assisted research into the language of tourist brochures carried out by Capelli (2008), where a list of the 50 most frequent lexical words is generated from texts originally written in English and a similar one drawn from texts translated from Italian – both advertising the region of Tuscany. Interestingly, the original English texts feature more 'nation'/'place' adjectives than their translated counterparts, the former listing the items *tuscan, Sienese, Italian* and *senese* (occupying the positions 6, 10, 15 and 50 respectively), while the latter include only 3 such items (*Sieneze, Tuscan, senesi*). Moreover, the first two positions on the original English list are filled by the nouns *Siena* and *Tuscany*, which can also function as adjectives, and it can be reasonably assumed that they frequently do so. The computer-generated data, however, do not indicate the actual distribution of the respective syntactic positions. The cross-cultural comparison of English with both Slovak and Italian thus reveals a distinct inclination of English to emphasize the names of nations and places, i.e. mark the civilization aspect more strongly than the other two languages.

The types most frequently used with reference to the given category in the English data are *Britain's, Scottish, England's, English* realized by 12 tokens and *Highland/highland, Lake District's/lake district, Lakeland/lakeland* with 21 tokens altogether. In the Slovak corpus, the lexical units concerned are *slovenský* ('Slovak') realized by 4 tokens, and *lip-tovský, oravský, podtatranský, tatranský, kysucký, horehronský* with 11 tokens. Contrary to English, Slovak does not have the systematic structural option to place the names of small towns and villages as a premodifier, which is a common strategy in English (*Keswick cottages, Kilchoan hillside, Loch Eil cottage*), as an adjectival derivative is required. Such derivatives are normally available for larger towns and many villages, however, there are many smaller or less well-known places with no established adjectival forms, especially if the name is a combination of two or more lexical items. This indicates that the structural make-up of English is an important factor in this type of promotional texts, potentially also emphasizing the evaluative aspect of such units, inasmuch as *Loch Eil cottage* carries more intrinsic evaluation than *cottage in Loch Eil* (see Jeffries, 2014, p. 413).

The presence of 'other nation' descriptors in the English data (*Finnish, French, Scandinavian style*) is another distinctive characteristic. These have no match in the Slovak data, which could suggest more openness on the part of the British culture towards 'the foreign'.

4 Conclusion

The comparison of tourist texts from the point of view of adjectives and nouns in the position of premodifiers with partly evaluative function referring to 'nature' and 'place'/'nation' has revealed significant differences between the way in which communication is handled by the British and Slovak cultural communities. While both categories are highly relevant in the context of the given genre, as they describe the promoted destination, their prioritization is not equivalent cross-culturally.

In the English corpus, both semantic categories of 'nature' and 'place'/'nation' are dominant in comparison with other descriptors with partly evaluative function (see graph 1). The Slovak data, on the other hand, highlight the category of 'nature', whose relative prominence in the set of categories compared is outstanding, while the role of 'place'/'nation' descriptors is not particularly strong (see graph 2). The results thus show that the civilization aspect is more emphasized on the British part. The findings are in line with a large quantitative research (Capelli, 2008) comparing English and Italian tourist texts, which reveal a similar difference in tendencies between English and Italian.

On a more detailed note, the English texts feature greater lexical variability, as well as stronger tendency toward specificity. Another difference lies in stronger focus on the 'mountain'/'woods' semantic category in Slovak, while 'water' related lexemes are more emphasized in English. While this might be partly due to the differences in geography, it may also indicate a different degree of importance assigned to the natural elements in the respective cultures. Last but not least, English seems to be more open to promote 'the foreign', as shown by the presence of 'other nation' descriptors in the English data.

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Contact

Danica Maleková, PhD.

Department of English Language and Literature,
Faculty of Arts, Catholic University in Ružomberok
Hrabovská cesta 1, Ružomberok
danica.malekova@ku.sk