

# Metaphor in Tourism Discourse: Imagined Worlds in English Tourist Texts on the Web

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Instead [...] of construing the utterance  
so that it makes sense in the world, we  
construe the world so as to make sense  
of the utterance.

(Levin 1993: 121)

## *Abstract*

Tourism discourse is a type of specialised discourse (Cappelli 2006; Gotti 2006) typically characterised by stylistic choices and linguistic strategies of persuasion. In English promotional tourist websites suasion is specially achieved through metaphoric language use.

This study investigates tourism metaphors within the framework of relevance-oriented lexical pragmatics (Wilson and Carston 2007, 2008; Sperber and Wilson 2008; Carston forthcoming). The primary aims of the study are to show that: a) metaphor is a subvariety of lexical broadening, and often combines with hyperbole to produce suasive effects; b) in tourist texts, metaphor interpretation does not always involve the construction of *ad hoc* concepts such as 'paradise', based on information made accessible by the encyclopaedic entry of the encoded concept; c) metaphors may be interpreted literally, and metarepresented to activate a mental image that evokes an imagined world (Davidson 1984; Levin 1993; Camp 2006).

## **1. Introduction**

The language of tourism has been recently defined and investigated as a type of specialised discourse (Cappelli 2006; Gotti 2006), and, within tourism discourse, particular attention has been devoted to the genre of tourist guides, not only for their cross-linguistic-cultural representations (Fodde and Denti 2005; Vestito 2005; Cappelli 2009),

but also for their strategies of persuasion (Francesconi 2007, 2008; Manca 2008).

This study explores metaphors in English tourist texts on the web. Promotional tourist websites belong to the argumentative (and partly descriptive and narrative) text type. Normally, they describe the scenery of a location, give various types of detailed information, but the language they use indicates that a suasive function is intended to be prominent. Suasion is specially obtained through metaphoric language use.

Here are some examples of language use which would be generally agreed to be metaphorical<sup>1</sup>:

(1) Laguna Beach Resort is an ideal getaway for any type of vacation. A small gem in the garland of pearls on the Indian Ocean that is the Maldives is truly a piece of paradise.

(*My Maldives Travel Guide*, <http://www.mymaldives.com/>)

(2) A small jewel between the Rialto Bridge and St Mark's, the hotel boasts its main entrance directly on the Grand Canal with its own private pier, a real rarity in Venice.

(*Arounder*, <http://www.arounder.com/>)

(3) This sacred island is an ecological and cultural treasure that should not be missed if you are looking for adventure and amazing views of Taha'a, Huahine, and Bora Bora.

(*Fly Tabiti.com*, <http://www.flytahiti.com/>)

(4) Cannizaro House is more than just a hotel, to us she has a personality – a sexy, aristocratic and sophisticated beauty, glamorous and alluring but never aloof.

(*Cannizaro House*, <http://www.cannizarohouse.com/>)

(5) An invitation to the authentic taste of Sicily. Capture the heart and soul of the island in an exciting dining experience of seasonal variations, hints of tradition and unforgettable flavours.

(*Global Hotel Alliance*, <http://www.imex-frankfurt.com/>)

(6) Tourism is at its start, and Milos will surely steal your heart while making a restful vacation.

(*Katerina Travel*, <http://katerinatravel.com.cy/>)

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<sup>1</sup> For the examples I have drawn from various tourist guides and brochures on the web.

(7) While civilizations, countries, emperors and people have been changing and the time has been going by with the speed that we can not catch up, the 1001 Cistern has been watching around with a smile for more than 1600 years as it had predicted these changes. [...] all Istanbul City legends get tangled in this place, at the very heart of Sultanahmet. 1001 Cistern opens its doors to the visitors as a place that lives every day differently and serves varied alternatives since we purpose the 1001 Cistern to hold a distinctive place in Istanbul's cultural and artifice life that you would be able to experience all the history entirely.  
(1001 Direk Sarnici, <http://www.imex-frankfurt.com/>)

According to classical rhetoric and most later theories, including the Gricean approach (Grice 1975, 1989), metaphors are departures from a norm of literalness. On the other hand, cognitive linguists such as Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Lakoff and Turner (1989), Fauconnier and Turner (2002) see metaphor as constitutive of human thought, and hence pervasive in language. Lastly, relevance theorists (Sperber and Wilson 1995; Carston 2002; Wilson and Sperber 2002) describe it as emerging in the process of verbal communication. In particular, Sperber and Wilson (2008: 84) view metaphors as “a range of cases at one end of a continuum that includes literal, loose, and hyperbolic interpretations”.

In this study, I will examine metaphors within the framework of relevance-oriented lexical pragmatics. Current applications of Relevance Theory to metaphor are in Wilson and Carston (2007, 2008), Sperber and Wilson (2008), Carston (forthcoming). The aim of this study is to explain: a) how tourists recognise and interpret promoters' metaphorical word meanings, and b) how words used metaphorically are metarepresented to describe imagined worlds.

In particular, the study intends to show that:

- a) Metaphor is a radical case of a loose use of language. It does not overlap with hyperbole, although they both involve a semantic process of broadening, and, especially in tourist texts, they may combine to produce suasive effects, as in hyperbolic metaphors.
- b) In tourism discourse, the meaning of metaphor may be constructed as an *ad hoc* concept which contributes to the proposition explicitly communicated (Fodor 1998; Sperber and Wilson 1998),
- c) alternatively, metaphor may be interpreted literally, and activate a mental image that evokes an imaginary/illusory world in the tourist's mind (Davidson 1984; Levin 1993; Camp 2006).

The evocative imagistic element of metaphors seems to play a dominant role in tourism discourse, and have an even more central value in the extended metaphors of (7). In line with Carston (forthcoming), I will claim that the understanding of metaphors such as (1)-(7) above involves both a propositional component and an imagistic component, although one or the other component may prevail from case to case. For instance, (1)-(3) are spontaneous, conventional metaphors, primarily focused on propositional content, whereas the metaphors in (4)-(7) are carefully crafted, expressive of a feeling or sensation, and highly imagistic. As we will see, they involve a specific case of metaphor (i.e. personification), where non-human entities are personified and assume the characteristics of or act like human beings. Hence, they have highly suasive power upon tourists exploring the web in search of an ideal holiday destination.

## 2. Existing pragmatic accounts of metaphor

The main existing theoretical approaches to metaphor differ on several key points. First, they differ on whether or not they consider metaphor as a distinct pragmatic category, i.e. as a natural kind. Philosophers of language such as Grice (1975, 1989) seem to have envisaged distinct treatments for metaphor and other pragmatic phenomena. Relevance theorists such as Sperber and Wilson (1995), Carston (2002), Wilson and Sperber (2002), by contrast, defend a unitary approach; they consider metaphor as part of a *continuum* that includes literal utterances, approximations and hyperboles (cf. Ruiz de Mendoza and Santibáñez 2003; this point will be expanded in § 3).

A second difference among existing accounts is in their view of how metaphor affects the truth-conditional content of utterances, or, in Grice's terms, what is said. According to the Gricean view, the speaker in metaphor 'makes as if to say' something, which is merely a vehicle for conveying his implicit meaning or implicatures. According to the alternative relevance-theoretic view, metaphor is both part of what is explicitly communicated and a vehicle for implicatures. Thus, in (1), for instance, the metaphor *the Maldives is truly a piece of paradise* affects both its truth-conditional content and the implicatures that the Maldives is an uncontaminated place, immersed in nature, where waters are limpid, pure, etc.

Existing accounts of metaphor also differ in how far they consider metaphorical interpretation an inferential process. Many treatments of metaphor within the cognitive linguistics framework (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Turner 1989; Fauconnier and Turner 2002; Ruiz de Mendoza and Pérez 2003) are non-inferential associative approaches, in which *a piece of paradise* in (1), for instance, would be seen as activating, rather than implying, associative features such as uncontaminated, immersed in nature, with limpid waters, etc., which are shared by both source and target conceptual domains. By contrast, Relevance Theory proposes a fully inferential approach, where expectations of relevance play a crucial role. In particular, the more relevant the utterance, the more likely the addressee will understand it successfully. Accordingly, the interpretation of *the Maldives is truly a piece of paradise* in (1) would combine the premise that (1) is a sentence with a certain decoded meaning with further contextual premises (e.g. the promoter is trying to advertise a tourist place for a vacation), to derive the conclusion that the promoter means that the Maldives is an uncontaminated place, immersed in nature, with limpid waters, etc.

A fourth difference among existing accounts concerns the way they understand metaphors. According to Carston (forthcoming: 3), there are two different routes to the understanding of metaphors, the “proposition theory” and the “image theory”. On the one hand, the Grice and Sperber-Wilson accounts share the view that the proposition literally expressed is merely a vehicle by means of which the implicated meaning is recovered. On the other hand, Davidson (1984: 245) claims that “metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more”. The position of Carston (forthcoming) is somehow in-between, since in her view:

full understanding of any metaphor involves both a propositional/conceptual component and an imagistic component, though the relative weight and strength of each of these varies greatly from case to case. (p. 4)

In particular, the propositional component seems to dominate in conventional metaphors, whereas the imagistic component prevails in creative metaphors, as in Carl Sandburg’s lines *The fog comes / on little cat feet*, evoking the idea that the fog comes silently, smoothly

and stealthily. As Sperber and Wilson (2008: 103) claim, poetic metaphors are likely to achieve optimal relevance “through a wide array of weak implicatures: that is, through poetic effects”.

My aim in this paper is to show that the analysis of metaphor in tourist texts is in accordance both with the unitary literal-loose-metaphorical approach to lexical pragmatics proposed within Relevance Theory and with its fully inferential account of metaphor interpretation. Specifically, I will show that: a) metaphor is, like hyperbole, a subvariety of lexical broadening, and b) lexical broadening is guided by expectations of relevance which may help us understand how metaphor typically works.

Lastly, the analysis of metaphor in tourism discourse will reveal itself to be in accordance with Carston’s (forthcoming: 15) claim that “metaphor is a unified phenomenon” characterised by both propositional and imagistic components, in that metaphor processing not only involves on-line *ad hoc* concept construction, but also the metarepresentation of literal meaning to describe an imaginary world. I will try to demonstrate that the interpretation of creative metaphors in poetry may also apply to metaphors in tourist texts, where the imagistic component is used to depict a place, an atmosphere, a mood, and to achieve overall suasive effects.

### 3. Metaphor as a subvariety of lexical broadening

Lexical broadening is the process whereby a word is used to apply to objects, events or actions that strictly speaking fall outside its linguistically-specified denotation. As we will see in the next section (§ 4), broadening is triggered by the search for relevance, and involves the construction of *ad hoc* concepts – or *ad hoc* categories à la Barsalou (1983) – based on information made accessible by the encyclopaedic entry of the encoded concept.

Radical versions of the unified approach to lexical pragmatics such as the one proposed in Relevance Theory (see Carston 2002; Wilson and Sperber 2002; Wilson and Carston 2007) treat approximation, category extension, hyperbole and metaphor as subvarieties of broadening which differ essentially in the degree to which the linguistically-specified denotation is expanded. Consider, for instance, the following excerpt:

(8) Holidays in Tuscany are a real adventure!  
 (*Direct Tuscany*, <http://www.directtuscany.com/>)

Here the word *adventure* may be understood either literally, as an activity that is perceived to involve risk, danger, jeopardy, and probably harm, or as an approximation, so that the speaker/writer would be interpreted as claiming that holidays in Tuscany are close to a dangerous, hazardous experience.

But, within the fully unified account of Relevance Theory, the interpretation of the word *adventure* may also be seen as involving a further degree of broadening. For instance, a promoter might write (8) hyperbolically, intending to convey that holidays in Tuscany involve activities that are not properly risky or unsafe for one's life, but simply unexpected, unforeseen, etc.

Lastly, the unified approach also puts forward that the interpretation of *adventure* may involve a greater departure from the encoded meaning, as in metaphor. A metaphorical use of *adventure* would involve a still more radical variety of broadening than hyperbole (i.e. not a gradual difference, but a shift to another conceptual domain), conveying that Tuscan holidays are exciting, thrilling, stimulating, that they entail surprisingly new experiences, etc. This latter interpretation is confirmed by the hedge *real*, which emphasises and thus serves as a pointer to the figurative nature of the *adventure*<sup>2</sup>. In (8), holidays are not, of course, *a real adventure*, but, like a typical adventure, they involve risk and excitement at the same time.

In support of the unified view, tourist texts on the web show not only that metaphor falls at the end of the literal-loose-hyperbole *continuum*, but also that there is often no clear-cut distinction between it and, for instance, hyperbole, or category extension (see Sperber and Wilson 2008: 94).

First of all, there seems to be a continuum of cases between hyperbole and metaphor. In general, metaphor involves a qualitative difference between the concept encoded and the concept contextually constructed, as in (1) (*the Maldives is truly a piece of paradise*), while hyperbole involves a quantitative difference, as in (9) below:

<sup>2</sup> See *truly* in (1) for the same function.

(9) Rome [...] has just about the richest, fullest history of any town on earth [...]

(*Italy Heaven*, <http://www.italyheaven.co.uk/>)

However, the quantitative/qualitative difference is not always so straightforward. For instance, (10) below involves both a quantitative and qualitative difference:

(10) The Maldives is often called 'the last paradise on earth' [...]

(*Traveling Fiesta Vacation Guide*, <http://travelingfiesta.com/>)

*The last paradise on earth* implies that no other place *on earth* qualifies as a *paradise*, which is a hyperbolic statement. Moreover, since there is no actual *paradise* in the strict sense of the term (i.e. the Biblical place where there is no death or corruption and where beauty is supernatural), this is a metaphorical statement as well. Therefore, we could consider the metaphor in (10) as a case of hyperbolic metaphor.

Besides hyperbolic metaphors, in tourism discourse there is also a continuum between metaphor and category extension. Category extension generally involves the projection of defining properties of the encoded concept onto a broader category, as in (11):

(11) Its [Shibam's] impressive tower-like structures rise out of the cliff and have given the city the nickname of 'The Manhattan of the desert'.

(*Tripwolf Worldwide Travel Guide*, <http://www.tripwolf.com/>)

where *Manhattan* is used as a common noun to indicate a category of cities characterised by tall skyscrapers. On the other hand, the type of broadening involved in metaphor may be based on peripheral properties, as in (12):

(12) But in fact Milan has a lot to offer the visitor. The city is vibrant and has many sights of interest [...]

(*Italy Heaven*, <http://www.italyheaven.co.uk/>)

Indeed, being vibrant is not a defining property of cities.

However, some metaphors are borderline with respect to category extension. For instance, personifications, where some typically human action is extended to an inanimate entity, as in (13):



(13) [...] Corsica is one of the most beautiful places in the world, and seduces every visitor.

(*Direct Tuscany*, <http://www.directtuscany.com/>)

or where an inanimate entity acquires the properties of an animate one, as in (14):

(14) Tahiti is the most famous island in the South Seas – Queen of the Pacific.

(*Fly Tahiti.com*, <http://www.flytahiti.com/>)

Hence, against the Gricean account, it seems confirmed that “there is no mechanism specific to metaphor” (Sperber and Wilson 2008: 84), in that metaphors are, like hyperboles and category extensions, analysable as subvarieties of lexical broadening.

#### 4. Metaphor interpretation and expectations of relevance

Relevance Theory treats lexical broadening as guided by expectations of relevance. The central claim of the relevance-based account of pragmatic processing is that the addressee uses the following comprehension heuristic to derive the speaker/writer’s meaning:

Follow a path of least effort in constructing an interpretation of the utterance [or sentence] [...];

Stop when your expectation of relevance is satisfied (or abandoned).  
(Wilson and Carston 2007: 245)

Accordingly, at each point in the on-line processing of an utterance or sentence, the addressee tentatively chooses the most accessible interpretation, and reconsiders his choice only if it seems unlikely to lead to an overall interpretation that satisfies his expectation of relevance.

Consider, for instance, the following extract, focusing on the metaphoric use of the word *pearl*:

(15) Viareggio, elegant, chic and nicknamed the ‘Pearl of the Tyrrhenian Sea’ is one of the loveliest, most picturesque seaside resorts in Tuscany.

(*Viareggio Versilia Congressi*, <http://www.imex-frankfurt.com/>)

(15) contains the concept ‘pearl’, which activates a range of distinctive and logical properties (e.g. a pearl is a hard smooth round iridescent

object, of white or bluish grey colour), and a variety of encyclopaedic properties, some of which are: precious and noble things, used to make expensive jewels, particularly appreciated by elegant people (esp. women), given as presents, etc.

In the discourse context of (15), where a tourist is expecting a description of Viareggio as an ideal vacation site, characteristic properties having to do with roundness or white colour are likely to be undervalued. By contrast, encyclopaedic properties having to do with preciousness, nobility and elegance are likely to be activated to construct an interpretation of the metaphor *Pearl of the Tyrrhenian Sea*. Indeed, they receive additional activation from other items in the context, such as the adjectives *elegant*, *chic*, *loveliest*, *most picturesque*, confirming that this is the correct path to follow.

Of course, Viareggio is not a hard smooth round object, and therefore not a 'pearl', as the literal interpretation would suggest. However, by broadening the denotation of 'pearl' to include places which share with pearls some of their encyclopaedic properties, the tourist can interpret the metaphor in (15) and implicate that Viareggio is elegant, noble, gleaming, etc. At this point, having found an interpretation which satisfies his expectations of relevance and, therefore, having constructed an *ad hoc* concept, the tourist should stop.

In short, broadening is a process of mutual lexical adjustment in which tentative hypotheses about contextual assumptions, explicatures<sup>3</sup> and contextual implications are modified so as to yield an overall interpretation which satisfies the addressee's expectations of relevance.

However, metaphoric interpretation is not always as straightforward as in (15). Consider again example (1), where the Maldives is seen as a *garland of pearls on the Indian Ocean*<sup>4</sup>. This metaphor exploits at least two conceptual dimensions that combine with each other: a) a shared topological structure between the shape of the Maldives islands – as seen from above – and the shape of a

<sup>3</sup> Within Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995), explicatures, such as *She's ready [for the party]*, *The student was late [for his Mathematics class]*, require a straightforward form of inferential activity which is different from implicature.

<sup>4</sup> The use of the word *garland* is rather anomalous as a collocation with *pearls*, but interesting in that garlands are typical ornaments on many Indian Ocean islands.

string of pearls, and b) a physical resemblance between the islands as seen from a distance and a string of pearls, which enhances not only attributes such as colour and brightness, but also the positive reaction that such attributes generally produce on the amazed observer. Hence, the denotation of ‘garland of pearls’ is broadened to include the Indian Ocean islands, sharing with a string of pearls such characteristics as shape, brightness, colour, etc., as well as the capacity to provoke a positive effect on the observer/tourist. Such combined metaphoric structure provides the layout for further conceptual enrichment (*A small gem in the garland*).

### 5. Literal meaning and imagined worlds

As we have seen in the previous section, metaphor processing generally involves on-line *ad hoc* concept constructions. Conventional metaphors such as *X is a paradise* or *X is a pearl* cost “relatively little processing effort” and yield “relatively limited and predictable effects” (Wilson and Carston 2007: 235). They are easily accessible to tourists, in that they are “interpreted along fairly well-established lines” (Wilson and Carston 2007: 235). As we have seen in (1)-(3) above, vacation sites are often associated with gems, pearls, jewels, general treasures, or with a paradise in order to accentuate their beauty, value, preciousness and so on (Francesconi 2008).

Still other metaphors, by contrast, are particularly poetic, as those found in (16):

(16) Mauritius will enchant you, will uplift your soul, making you feel that you belong to the chosen few. Every visitor enjoys personal attention. Every encounter is an opportunity to discover a friendly face. Behind each smile lies the promise of a unique holiday. The contrast of a multitude of colours and tastes, the island, set in its turquoise sea, is an oasis of peace and tranquillity. Mauritius, a melting pot where past and present are smoothly blended together, offers an essential beauty that will compel to return to its shores time and time again. May your stay with us remain engraved in your memory forever.

(*Discover Mauritius*, <http://www.mauritius.net/>)

After the introduction of the topic, Mauritius, nearly every sentence is built on a metaphor (with interrelated hyperboles and metonymies). Thus, rather than activating a process of metaphorical adjustment

of concepts, forming *ad hoc* concept after *ad hoc* concept ('will-enchanted-you', 'will-uplift-your-soul', 'chosen-few', 'behind-each-smile-lies-the-promise', 'oasis', 'melting-pot', 'past-and-present-blended-together', 'stay-engraved-in-your-memory'), linguistically encoded concepts are activated, and literal interpretations preferred over the metaphorical ones.

Literal meaning in (16) does not linger in the background until the metaphorical meaning is formed, but is used to depict an imaginary scene of Mauritius uplifting the tourist's soul, or being an oasis, a melting pot where past and present merge.

Thus, metaphors in (16) do not depend on strong implicatures, except perhaps for the conventional metaphor of the 'oasis', which is a common cliché. The interpretation resulting from processing the literal scenario will depend on weak implicatures, which may vary from reader to reader. For instance, some of the concepts involved (e.g. 'soul', 'the chosen few', 'peace') might have religious implications for some readers, but have simply to do with positive feelings for others.

In (16) the imagistic component appears to prevail over the propositional one, and it seems quite appropriate to talk of poetic effects. The tourist will adopt a different mode of metaphor processing than the basic one: rather than starting a process of rapid *ad hoc* concept formation, he will maintain the literal meaning of metaphorically used language, metarepresent it and then subject it to slower interpretative inferences. In other words, rather than adjusting word meaning so as to capture the thought, he will make the thought or conception of the world (albeit temporarily) correspond to the literal language (Levin 1993; Camp 2006; Carston forthcoming). The result will be a surreal imaginary world, a fertile spot in the desert, a sort of mirage the tourist will be persuaded to choose as his holiday destination.

This literal interpretation of metaphor supports Davidson's (1984: 246) assertion that "a metaphor doesn't say anything beyond its literal meaning". At least, it is appropriate in the case of the imagistic metaphors in (16), or of the extended metaphors in (7) above.

Thus, in many tourist texts, "much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character" (Davidson 1984: 263), in that metaphors are used to provoke us, to cause certain responses or

reactions in us, including the evocation of mental images of distant, unknown or illusory worlds.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper has proposed an application of Relevance Theory to the analysis of metaphor in tourism discourse. The study of excerpts taken from tourist texts on the web has confirmed that metaphor is a radical case of a loose use of language. Like hyperbole, it is a subvariety of lexical broadening, but, unlike it, metaphor primarily involves a qualitative difference between the concept encoded and the concept contextually constructed. However, the combination of metaphor with hyperbole also involves a quantitative difference, which plays a relevant role in the suasive effect the overall hyperbolic metaphor produces.

This study has also shown that, in understanding metaphor, broadening is triggered by the search for relevance, according to which, in metaphor processing, the tourist follows the path of least effort. Yet metaphor interpretation does not always involve the construction of *ad hoc* concepts such as ‘paradise’, ‘pearl’, or ‘adventure’, based on information made accessible by the encyclopaedic entry of the encoded concept. Metaphors may be interpreted literally, too, and metarepresented so as to activate a mental image that evokes an imagined world.

These two distinct processing routes for metaphors – namely, *ad hoc* concept construction and metarepresentation – do not imply that there are two different kinds of metaphors. As Carston (forthcoming: 15) specifies, “metaphor is a unified phenomenon” because all instances of metaphors share a common nature, although their propositional or imagistic components play different roles on different occasions. That is, sometimes the explicitly communicated propositional content prevails while imagery is just an incidental effect, at other times the propositional content is implicated, while the literal meaning and the imagery it evokes play a dominant role.

Metaphors in tourism discourse are either conventional or poetic, depending on the audience they are expected to attract. Some touristic metaphors are meant to catch the attention of the common traveller, looking for relaxation and peace, or for activity

and entertainment. Other metaphors are instead more selective of a refined traveller, one with sophisticated tastes and in search of mystery, secrecy and dream, one who might accept an intriguing invitation such as:

(17) The encounter of a lifetime is waiting for you here.  
(*Tokyo Meeting Planner's Guide*, <http://www.imex-frankfurt.com/>)

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