Thainess realisation in selected travel websites

Woralan Kongpolphrom

Language Institute, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok 10330, Thailand

Abstract

The study aims to look into how Thainess or Thai national identity can be realised through selected travel websites in tourism context. Based on the framework of Wodak et al. (2009) the means and forms of realisation, the findings revealed that Thainess could be realised through personal, spatial and temporal references. Recommendations for further studies and teaching implications are also provided.

1. Introduction

In the globalised era, with the development and ease of transportation it is common for people to travel to different countries. As a result, tourism has become a main source of revenue for several countries. There are many reasons for travelling. It is inevitable to say that people travel because they want to explore authenticity, cultural difference and uniqueness. Thus, destination countries are attempting to present their national identity as one of their unique and distinguishing selling points.

Thailand has also been one of the attractive tourist destinations in Asia Pacific region employing its national identity, Thainess, to attract tourists besides its natural landscape. Thailand was ranked in the top 10 destination countries in the world destination [1]. Tourism generates approximately 12% of Thailand and there were 35.28 million tourists visited the country and it is expected to rise to 37.55 million in 2018 [2].

With the attempt to boost the number of tourists to Thailand, the new theme 'The Seven Amazing Wonders of Thailand' was launched in 2010. Thainess was included in this theme but it was not clearly defined in this tourism context.

Thainess itself is enigmatic. There is no concrete definition of it. To understand the root of Thainess, the definition of culture should be revisited.

According to the Culture Act B.E. 2553 [3], culture refers to way of life, thoughts, beliefs, norms, customs, traditions, rites, wisdoms whose communities and society have created, accumulated, transferred, learnt, adapted, and changed for both mental and physical prosperity in peaceful and sustainable manners.

In Thai context, Prince Narathip Praphanphong [4] defines culture as the development of knowledge in terms of arts and sciences, literature, religion including traditions, and etiquettes. He further explains culture as a social heritage which is both tangible and intangible. The intangible ones include poems, arts and traditions. Consequently, culture is one significant factor in construing the way people in a nation behave. Phraya Anuman Rajdhon [5] signifies culture as what human changes, adapts or creates for the growth of shared ways of living. It can be transferred and imitated from the ancestors. It can also be inherited and turned into traditions in different forms which are attitudes, opinions, behaviors, and actions.

It can be seen that the above definitions of culture share some similarities. It is believed that culture is created in a shared community or society and can be altered. Culture is also tangible and intangible and passed on from generation to generation into customs and traditions. Therefore, there is a connection between culture and Thainess since Thainess belongs to Thai national identity and has been transferred from the past until present.

There have been some studies of Thainess but they are in the political sphere such as the development of concepts of Thainess reviewed by Renard [6], Sattayanurak's study [7] pointed out the origin of Thainess has been from the centralised political structure and became the 'the ideology that maintained the centralised political regime and hierarchical social status.' Thainess is also used for the purpose of nation building and underlying administrative purpose [8].

However, it may not be enough to rely on one source to indicate what national identity is. Having drawn the conclusion based on the definition of national identity in tourism literature, normally the national identity in tourism discourse is composed of cultural heritage [9, 10], heritage sites [11], myths [12] and food [13].

Travel Websites

Travel websites are sources used in promoting

tourism information Thainess is also represented via this channel. These websites are the sources to provide information and to sell the country to prospective tourists and they are exposed to tourists seeking for destination information. Websites are considered an effective channel to promote tourist destination since it is easy for potential tourists to access and to seek information without leaving home and there is a huge amount of information gathered via the network [14]. Websites can also be a good marketing tool for business establishment such as travel agencies or tour operators. This is because the websites fit in the communication structure of many-to-many people. People who receive information from the Internet can interact with the websites by booking online, expressing their opinions, giving feedback, providing contents or even setting up their own community via websites [15]. Therefore, websites seem to be a good source for both from business and consumer's perspective. In addition, tourists' anticipation is formed by tourist brochures, travel guides and websites before the arrival at the destination. In addition, there are plethora of studies of websites showing the trend and significant role of websites in tourism [16]. In this research context, websites chosen for the data collection and analysis process were all in English. Two simple reasons are English is a lingua franca and the status of lingua franca makes these travel websites to be understood among most audience.

The study of websites and information sources in tourism discourse is plenty. Some studies are concerned with the analysis of information sources and actual tourist selection [17 - 19]. Some examined the images of the brochures [20, 21]. However, it is not adequate to only investigate images of the tourist brochures since images alone cannot convey the whole messages. Regarding the study of websites, the study of official tourism websites of several countries was conducted [14]. Even though they examined the websites in a very thorough analysis, they focused on the official tourism, not the ones from private sectors that come under the same theme. Therefore, the study of travel websites is worth investigating. However, it is restricted to the websites under the similar theme, namely, the represent-tation of national identity.

2. Research Objective

With tourism and the revenue thereof playing an ever increasing role in Thailand and Thainess a magnet to draw tourists, the research aims to identify how Thainess -- Thai national identity-- can be realised in selected travel websites through the use of linguistic resources. The research question for this research is how can Thainess be realised through the use of linguistic resources.

3. Conceptualisation

The theoretical framework applied to examine the construction of Thainess in travel websites was the linguistic realisation from Wodak *et al.*'s [22] framework in the discursive construction of national identity. This framework was a part of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) aiming at unpacking on the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are performed, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context [23]. It also focuses on analyzing ideologies constructed by discourse, public discourse and media, in particular. This framework is related to the discursive construction of national identity in the Austrian context, it provides the closest foundation of analysis of national identity representation to this research as the aim is to find the national identity in the media in a public domain – websites but in a tourism context.

In this study of the discursive construction of national identity, the linguistic construction plays an explicit role in creating the contents and the representation. Then, lexical units and syntactic devices are the prime focus of the means and forms of realisation framework. These lexical units and syntactic devices include the ones aiming to create unification, unity, sameness, difference, uniqueness, origin, continuality, gradual or abrupt change, autonomy, and heteronomy by observing the linguistic resources, particularly lexical items.

As a result, the main features of lexical units and syntactic devices, according to [22] the framework, are classified below.

1. Personal reference: anthroponymic generic terms, personal pronouns, quantifiers;
2. Spatial reference: toponyms/geonyms, adverbs of place, spatial reference through persons, by means of prepositional phrase such as '*with us*', '*with them*';
3. Temporal reference: temporal prepositions, adverbs of time, temporal conjunctions, temporal references by means of nouns, semi-prefixes with temporal meanings.

The above framework has been used mostly within the construction of national identity in historical and political viewpoints and found that besides linguistic resources used in the media ideological concepts have somehow been uncovered in the studies. One study in the context of tourism using this CDA framework is the study of Narrative of the Nation: Baltic Tourism Website in the Post-Soviet Context [14]. The study shows that websites allow the nations to present their identity and call for prospective tourists to visit their countries through linguistic and visual texts.

4. Methodology

This research employed a written text analysis by exploring the selected websites of package tours offering travels and trips in Thailand.

Written text analysis based on the framework mentioned above about national identity in the perspective of means and forms of realisation is justified as an appropriate methodology because it helps reveal the lexical and syntactic forms delivered to the audience, in this case, the travel websites with the representation of Thainess in tourism context. As aforementioned, the ways in analysing the discursive construction of national identity could be conducted through the three angles, namely, content, strategies and means and forms of realisation, respectively. The last one was selected as it fits to identify how Thainess – Thai national identity -- can be realised by the use of linguistic resources.

Prior to the analysis of the travel websites, websites consisting of Thainess in their content were selected with the following criteria. To justify the websites suitable for the study, the Internet search engine, was used for finding the tourist information websites with Thainess. The keyword 'Thainess' + 'tour package'/ package tour' was used to find relevant websites for the analysis. The selection process was conducted by looking at the travel websites existing on the first search without advertisement label as an evidence that the selected websites were the most frequently visited. In addition, only websites from travel agencies providing package tours were selected, not those from experienced travellers. With the aim for qualitative nature, the selected websites were then limited to 3 websites. The websites were selected in a one-month period in June 2018. The websites which were selected were www.middleway travel.com, www.orientalescape.com and www.elixirtrips .com and the websites contained 53 tour packages for the analysis. The micro level of analysis was based the investigation of lexical units with Gee's [26] situated meanings at sentential level.

5. Findings and Discussion

The results revealed that, according to the means and forms of realisations through lexical and syntactic devices of Wodak *et al.* [22], Thainess could be realised through the perspectives of personal, spatial and temporal references.

Personal Reference

Personal reference could be seen through the use of anthroponymic generic terms which are Thailand and Thai, and the pronoun 'we' and 'us' to represent 'we' and 'us' for Thais. The pronouns 'we' and 'us' were used to indicate inclusive we and created the solidarity of the Thais. This is also the way to distinguish the Thais from others. One of the obvious examples is the phrase '*we* offer the best in us by Thai greeting…' Regarding

another anthroponic generic term in the analysed text, Chakri dynasty – the anthroponym- was also mentioned to give a reference to the history of Thailand. Quantifiers were also employed to point out some of the activities in Thailand trip as a minimal part of a greater thing. The example is 'Pattaya is a must if Thailand's in your bucket list.' and the phrase 'one of the' shows the outstanding character of the tour sites.

Spatial Reference

As for spatial reference, names of places were given. These names referred to different tour sites. The tour sites included markets, temples, rivers and beaches. Furthermore, some prepositional phrases such as 'in us' was employed with further modifying phrase. With the same example of personal reference, '*we* offer the best in us by Thai greeting..., the prepositional phrase 'in us' is described with 'by Thai greeting…'. Moreover, the geonymic terms were also used to indicate regional tour sites and specific places such as northern Thailand, southern Thailand and names of provinces and towns: Bangkok, Pattaya, Chiang Mai, Ayutthaya and so forth. The spatial reference in terms of place names also showed one recurring pattern: Place name + be + complement. It is a simple structural pattern; yet commonly used through the entire three websites to give an emphasis of a place and a call for attention.

The analysis of spatial reference also indicated that modifiers – adjectives – were used to describe positivity of the attributes of the places. The examples were 'distinguished temples', 'most modern works of Thai religious architecture', 'beautiful Buddha image', 'the world famous floating market', etc. Not only were modifiers used for the positivity of the attributes, the modifiers indicating the uniqueness or constructing the authenticity of the country were also employed in the texts. These adjectives are 'local', 'unique', 'traditional', and 'exotic'.

Temporal References

Temporal reference was used in many places. Some of them were 'present', 'dating back to...', 'timeless', 'endless', 'ancient', and 'over (number) years'. The lexical units in the analysed texts also showed that the temporal reference was used to provide a temporal realization for both past and present.

From the analysis, it is possible that the three references can appear in the same phrasal or sentential level to tie the meaning together, particularly spatial and temporal references. This means that the spatial reference can function as a place or tour site to visit with the description of the temporal reference, which gives further explanation of the space.

In addition to the three perspectives of references, the findings showed that in these tour packages these three tour operators offered, there were some similarities

among the tour sites. From the three selected websites, the places can be divided into four categories: temples, heritage sites, markets, and natural destinations. The results showed that all packages related to Thailand were related to those four. The differences were in the specific temples, heritage sites or markets but all of them were included in the itinerary of the tour packages. The temples, heritage sites and markets can fit the definition of culture. The temples showed the significance of Buddhism – the main religion practised by approximately 95 percent of the Thai. This should demonstrate that religious beliefs play a crucial part in representing the Thai national identity. Heritage sites in the tour packages offered included those in UNESCO's World Heritage list such as Ayutthaya and Sukhothai. Also, markets were mentioned through the analysis of the three websites. The most frequently mentioned market was Floating Market. Other markets such as flower market and night markets at different areas or provinces were also indicated in the tour packages. As a result, markets seem to be places that represent Thainess. As for Floating Market, it showed the uniqueness of Thais in trading in the past while the present markets such as Chatuchak, fresh markets and night markets demonstrate the Thai ways of life. The last category of the tour site mentioned before is the natural destinations. Natural destinations should be clarified as the places with attractive natural landscape. It can be seen that the main emphasis of the tour packages available in these three websites were beach destinations. Even though, based on the definition of culture identified earlier, the beach destinations may not fit this definition, the beach can also be used to represent Thailand as a country with many beautiful beaches attracting tourists.

Another element which was brought to attention from the analysis of the three selected websites was Thai cuisine. Thai cuisine was included in the tour packages offered from these three websites. These ranged from 'cultural breakfast', 'Welcome Khantoke Dinner, which is the traditional northern Thai (Lanna) form of dining.', 'delicious Thai cuisine', and 'incredible food'.

Also, it can be seen that some phrases were utilised to provide the distinguishing characters to Thailand and its tour sites. The examples of these phrases are 'Venice of the East' which is the name given to Bangkok based on its historical and traditional way of commuting and 'River of the Kings', which refers to Chao Phraya River. From this point, it can be related to another element presented in the text which is the narration of the national history. All the three websites presented the information regarding the national history of Thailand in different extent.

As the approach lies in the realm of CDA, the results also revealed ideological concepts regarding the construction of Thainess in some ways. It can be seen that the elements represented in the websites as Thai culture were commodified as tourism products. Simply put, Thainess was discursively constructed and turned into products for sell. Two obvious examples were, first, the floating market which is no longer the way of trading nowadays, and second, 'Khantoke Dinner' was also put on display rather an authentic way of life of the current Thai society. Thainess in these websites was controlled and portrayed as authentic and idealised through the use of media from the use of positive modifiers to describe attributes. This is similar to the Ardorno's [27] 'Culture Industry' where mass-produced art was used to influence what its subjects think, do or desire in order to keep them within their system. This is how media has a control over the receivers of the texts. In addition, the way Thainess was presented with the repetitive use of the word 'Thai' and 'Thainess' in these websites demonstrated that there is another level of power relation. Thainess was employed for the national identity construction in accordance with the promotion of national authority of tourism. Therefore, the power relation still existed in the form of discursive construction through text production.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, it can be concluded that from the analysis, the selected travel websites demonstrated that the personal, spatial, and temporal references regarding the national identity were used throughout the three websites with the use of different lexical and syntactic features. With the combination of these three, the national identity or Thainess was revealed. The analysis of Thainess through these selected websites indicates tourist attractions showing Thai heritage, beliefs, ways of life and history along with the use of modifiers to manifest the uniqueness, authenticity and positive attributes. In terms of Critical Theory, Thainess was commodified as selling points in tourism industry where consumerism plays a vital role for generating national income. Culture through the discursive construction may not be presented for its authenticity but for commercial purpose through the use of media for a 'hegemonic' way of seeing culture. Also, the power relation is still exercised from the authority – the government agency – to the subordinate – the private tourism sector.

The recommendations of this research can be two-fold. Firstly, the main pedagogical implication is in the realm of ESP, that is, grammar structure should be included in English for Tourism, for example, pronoun reference, the structure of introducing place names, modifiers to describe positive attributes, and lexical items and phrases indicating time in past and present. Secondly, the recommendation for future research is to include more websites which may reveal the national identity of countries to examine the role of tourism and culture industry in those countries.

References

[1] UNWTO. **UNWTO 2014 Tourism Highlights.** Available from https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284416226 [Accessed 25th June 2018].

[2] Franco, A. **English Proficiency in Thailand – Still a Way to Go**, Bangkok Post. Available from https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1500050/english-proficiency-in-thailand-still-a-ways-to-go [Accessed 8th July 2018].

[3] **Culture ACT.** Thailand. [cite 25 June 2018]. Available from https://www.mculture.go.th/mculture_th60/download/article/article_20160108150445.pdf

[4] Uttamung, S. **'Language and Culture', T310 31: Thai Language for Communication Development.** Chulalongkorn University. Unpublished; 2015.

[5] Anuman Rajdhon, Phraya. **The Cultures of Thailand. Bangkok**. Silpakorn; 1989.

[6] Renard RD. Creating the Other Requires Defining Thainess against Which the Other Can Exist. **Japanese Journal of Southeast Asian Studies,** 2006;**44**(3), pp.295-320.

[7] Sattayanurak S. **The Construction of Main-stream Thought on "Thainess" and the "Truth" Constructed by "Thainess"**. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. Chiang Mai University. [cite 25 July 2018] Available from http://www.fringer.org/wpcontent/writings /thainesseng. pdf.

[8] Premsrirat S. **Redefining "Thainess": Em-bracing Diversity, Preserving Unity.** In Contemporary Sociocultural and Political Perspectives in Thailand. Springer, Dordrecht; 2014.

[9] Xie PF. The Bamboo-Beating Dance in Hainan, China: Authenticity and Commodification. **Journal of Sustainable Tourism.** 2003;**11**(1):5-16.

[10] Naidu M. Indigenous cultural bodies in tourism: An analysis of local 'audience'perception of global tourist consumers. **Journal of Social Sciences,** 2011;**26**(1): 29-39.

[11] Palmer C. An Ethnography of Englishness: experiencing identity through tourism. **Annals of Tourism Research,** 2005;**32**(1):7-27.

[12] Light D. (2007). Dracula Tourism in Romania Cultural Identity and the State. **Annals of Tourism Research,** 2007;**34**(3): 46-765.

[13] Hashimoto A, Telfer D. Selling Canadian Culinary Tourism: Branding the Global and Regional Product. **Tourism Geographies**, 2006;**8**(1): 31-55.

[14] Hallet RW, Kaplan-Weinger J. **Official Tourism Websites: A Discourse Analysis Perspectives.** Bristol: Channel View Publications; 2010.

[15] Schmid S, Cantallops AS, Pizzutti SC. The characteristics of hotel websites and their implications for website effectiveness. **International Journal of Hospitality Management,** 2008;**24**(7):504-516.

[16] Pritchard A. Morgan M. **Representation of "Ethnographic Knowledge": Early Comic Postcards of Wales.** In Jaworski A, Pritchard A. (Eds.). Discourse, Communication and Tourism. Clevedon: Channel View Publications; 2005

[17] Mathieson A, Wall G. **Tourism: Economic, Physical and Social Impact.** London: Longman; 1982.

[18] Schmoll G. Tourism Promotion. London: Tourism International Press. Ateljevic I, Doorne, S. (2002). Representing New Zealand – Tourism Imagery and Ideology. **Annals of Tourism**. 1997; **29**(3):648-667.

[19] Umm S, Crompton J. Attitudes Determinants in Tourism Destination Choice. **Annals of Tourism Research.** 1990;**17**:432-448.

[20] Shellhorn M. Perkins H. The Stuff of which Dreams are Made: Representations of the South Sea in German-language Tourist Brochures. **Current Issues in Tourism**. 2004;**7**(2): 95-133.

[21] Molina A, Esteban A. (2006). Tourism Brochures: Usefulness and Image. **Annals of Tourism Research.** 2006;**33**(4):1036 – 1056.

[22] Wodak R. Cillia R, Reisigl M, Liebhart K. **The Discursive Construction of National Identity.** 2nd Ed. (trans. A. Hirsch & R. Mitten). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; 2009.

[23] Phakdeephasook S. Discourse of Femininity in Advertisements in Thai Health and Beauty Magazines. Manusya: **Journal of Humanities.** 2009;**12**(2):63-89.

[24] Sahin S. **The Discursive Construction of National Identity by the Newspaper in North Cyprus**. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. University of Westminster; 2003.

[25] Carvalho A. Burgess J. Cultural circuits of climate change in UK broadsheet newspapers, 1985–2003. **Risk Analysis: An International Journal,** 2005; **25**(6): 1457-1469.

[26] Gee JP. **An Introduction in Discourse Analysis**. Abingdon: Routledge; 2005.

[27] Adorno TW, Bernstein JM. **The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture**. London: Routledge; 2001.