A metaphor analysis research agenda for tourism studies

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RESEARCH NOTE

Title:

A metaphor analysis research agenda for tourism studies

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Title:

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Highlights

- Proposes a research agenda on metaphor analysis for tourism research
- Situates metaphor analysis within the linguistic turn in social sciences
- Identifies that tourism metaphors always have a selling function
- Metaphors used to sell tourism development to communities have yet to be examined
- Shows how the metaphors of 'heart' and 'pillar' are used by tourism policy makers

Introduction

A metaphor until a century ago was simply a figure of speech. With the development of discourse analysis however, metaphors have come to represent much more. Metaphors, it has been shown are not just tangential to people's argument. On the contrary, metaphors in many instances represent a way of looking, seeing, understanding and indeed reorganising the world. In the most basic sense a metaphor is a kind of 'standing-in-for' relationship where one concept is used to represent another as in describing an island destination as 'a piece of paradise'. Metaphors are pervasive in everyday language and therefore play an important role in our cognition. Human thought processes – i.e. our conceptual system – are considered to be metaphorically structured (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Thus we simultaneously shape our reality when we choose the metaphors 'we live by' either consciously or unconsciously. Following the linguistic turn in the social sciences, language and metaphor analyses are gaining prominence in political science, sociology and policy studies leaving its traditional foothold in linguistics and the humanities (Carver and Pikalo, 2008; Cameron and Maslen, 2010). In this research note I propose that perhaps now is the time for a concerted effort in establishing a research agenda on the use of metaphors in tourism research in more substantive ways than is currently being done.

Within tourism studies the linguistic turn has witnessed a number of studies focusing on language (Cohen and Cooper, 1986; Dann, 1996, 2000; Belhassen and Caton, 2009) but less attention has been given to metaphors. In a rapidly changing social world metaphors offer new ways of understanding ongoing transformations when existing vocabularies are inadequate. There are number of traditional metaphors associated with tourism and the tourist – 'tropical heaven', 'tourism as a sacred journey' and 'tourist as a child'. It is therefore surprising that a metaphor analysis research agenda has failed to materialise within tourism studies. What might account for this is that although every research involves the use of concepts, some research are explicit about it while others make implicit use of concepts (Xin et al., 2013). A look at the tourism literature shows that many writers have touched on different aspects of metaphor use in tourism and leisure studies, events management and in hospitality (Urry 2002; Morgan and Pritchard, 2005; Larson, 2009; Laing and Crouch, 2009; Urry and Larsen,2011; Elliot et al., 2013). There are however remarkable differences in how each research explicitly or implicitly makes use of metaphor analysis to build up theory and offer explanations. Much of these existing research tend to take touristic metaphors as a given without adequate analysis of the genesis and conditioning of these metaphors.

Current writings on metaphors within tourism studies tend to focus on the epistemological uses of metaphors and are less reflective on the ontological creative function that metaphors possess. For instance the principal underlining metaphors of 'push and pull', 'host and guest' and 'backstage and frontstage' are no longer given due consideration in recent research on tourist motivations and the tourist encounter. There is no attempt at deconstructing these metaphors in order to show whether they are still useful or have been usurped by more contemporary metaphors. Contemporary analyses are consequently limited to interpreting metaphors in a literal sense or by showing their relevance in different

contexts. The reasons for this are varied but can be traced to what McKercher and Prideaux (2014:25) identifies as some of the academic myths of tourism. They highlight how as tourism research has become derivative new researchers are failing to read outside the field of study but instead rely on summarising 'sound bites' of original materials cited elsewhere. This means "only a kernel of truth remains from the original studies that may have informed the research".

There are considerable prospects for the use of metaphor analysis in tourism research both as an object of study and as a tool of analysis. A research agenda on metaphors is a call for going back to the roots of concepts in order to understand the context within which a given metaphor came about and to assess its usefulness in light of contemporary social changes. Tourists for example are variously labelled as 'pilgrims', 'travellers' and 'vagabonds'. The key question is: do these labels reflect the diversity of contemporary tourists? If not, do we need to come up with new metaphors and to deconstruct old ones? In the introduction to *The Tourist as a Metaphor of the Social World* – Dann (2002) offers a reflective ontological and epistemological account of the nature of metaphors, the ways they operate and how metaphors relate to a changing social world and in particular to tourism. In particular, Dann offers a historical overview of how metaphors or perhaps simile have been a basis for tourism theory development – albeit in a mostly implicit manner. This implicit use of metaphor analysis need to be transcended in order to establish a research agenda that explicitly engages with metaphor analysis in ways that contribute new insights to our understanding of tourism as a socio-economic, cultural and political phenomenon.

In developing a research agenda on metaphors the focus needs to be on the ontologically creative functions of metaphors. The interpretation and analysis of metaphors in tourism must focus on how they create meaning and a basis for action. This means that researchers need to be explicit about the metaphors they develop and construct to explain tourism phenomenon. Importantly, there is a need to deconstruct touristic metaphors since it is in deconstructing conventional metaphors that hidden meanings and ideological positions can be made explicit and examined. As Chaney (2002:194) puts it "metaphors are essential because they say concisely what can otherwise only be put elaborately and with difficulty, if at all". A critical approach to metaphors needs to acknowledge the Janus-faced nature of metaphors' potential to illuminate as well as obscure meanings simultaneously. In terms of area of application, the political dimensions of tourism appear a promising place to start.

In my ongoing research on tourism governance and planning in Ghana two key metaphors keep being repeated by policymakers who see 'tourism as a pillar for socio-economic development' and the Central Region as 'the heartbeat of tourism in Ghana' (Adu-Ampong, 2015, 2014). Deconstructing these metaphors beyond their literal meaning provides a new lens (metaphor intended) with which to understand how governments 'sell tourism development' to communities. The use of the metaphors of "pillar" and "heartbeat" in particular portrays tourism development as necessity. Without the "heartbeat" and "pillar" of tourism there are is no real alternative to keep the economic body of the region alive and supported. Tourism metaphors more often than not are a sales pitch and they tend to take off through repeated use by authority figures and other stakeholders. The main contribution

of this research note is therefore to show that their use to sell tourism development to communities rather than sell tourism to tourists has yet to be examined. Metaphors used in advertisement and in tourism development policy and planning need to be deconstructed in how they are targeted at tourists but importantly, how they are pitched to communities.

In a rapidly changing world that shapes the perception of tourists and tourism, a research agenda on metaphors is both timely and important in providing new insights. Metaphors "are among our principal vehicles for understanding. And they play a central role in the construction of social and political reality" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980:159). The more society changes, the more novel metaphors are required to enhance our understanding of the changing nature of tourism and tourists. It is therefore important for tourism studies to move beyond the current implicit engagement with metaphors to an explicit focus on the ontologically creative functions of metaphors. Given that as a social science journal "*Annals* sees the development of theory and concepts as central to its mission" (Xiao and Smith, 2006:498) it is perhaps time for *Annals* to take the lead towards a research agenda on metaphors.

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