Discourse, Communication and the Enterprise

Discourse, Communication and the Enterprise:

Where Business Meets Discourse

Edited by

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THE CONSTRUCTION OF A COUNTRY'S IMAGE FOR THE EXPO 2015 EVENT: THE CASE OF ENGLISH AND GERMAN WEBSITES

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1. Introduction

The event "Expo Milano 2015 is a non-commercial Universal Exposition […]; an exhibition but also a process, one of active participation among a large number of players around the theme of Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life. It is sustainable, technological, thematic and focused on its visitors" (Expo Milan 2015 website). It took place in Milan (Italy) from May to October 2015 and attracted more than 140 world countries (as well as international organizations, corporations and NGOs), each of which had a dedicated pavilion. The aim was to promote national food culture as well as the countries' actions in terms of global, sustainable nutrition. Each country presented its participation through links available on the main Expo website, in which they presented their pavilions, their Expo-related activities and commitment to the main theme.

The present study will focus on English-speaking and German-speaking countries that presented themselves as particularly active in the promotion of their policies; indeed, they put great emphasis on their commitment to social responsibility deriving from a sustainable food production, global nutrition and national food culture. The aim of the work is to explore the ways in which these countries constructed their image, "selling" themselves and their ideas in order to attract investments from stakeholders, visitors to the pavilion and tourists to their home country. Thus, the visual and the verbal features in the websites of the German and the English-speaking countries will be analysed to identify preferences and

patterns that these two groups of countries used to construct a specific image for Expo 2015.

2. Research rationale and methodology

A number of marketing studies, especially in the decades 1960s-1990s, have investigated the concept of country image behind the consumers' attitude towards the products of specific countries (see, e.g. Han 1989, and Martin and Eroglu 1993). Country image is defined as "the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country" (Martin and Eroglu 1993: 193). This definition has been applied to study the extent to which a product's country of origin can influence the consumers' evaluation that is generated by the "structural relationships: country image → beliefs → brand attitude" (Han 1989: 223). More recent literature reinforces this interpretation, emphasising the fact that the notion of a country image is a construct that summarises the cultural attributes associated with a particular nation and use them to create a stereotypical idea. Then, this is employed for marketing purposes as a brand that represents the whole nation (cf. O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy 2000). In this context, the nation is considered as a commercial product and the related marketing strategies vary according to the consumers' expectations which are based on their "beliefs and claims about the brand" (*ibid.*: 57). So, if the image of a country carries specific attributes, the items it produces will be marketed and advertised on the basis of these connotations (e.g. "Swiss chocolates, French perfume, Italian sports cars and Japanese electronics", *ibid.*: 56). The consumers' perceptions and expectations "also affect perceived risk and value as well as likelihood of purchase" (Roth and Diamantopoulos 2008: 726). For instance, the increasingly popular brand image of 'Made in Italy' does not only refer to products made in Italy but also encompasses the idea of products made with a combination of innovative, highly specialized equipment and traditional methodologies, respecting the peculiarities of the territories in which the product is developed (cf. Giumelli 2016). Thus, consumers buying products with a "Made in Italy" label expect to purchase high-quality, genuine and conscious items; the label itself will have a marketing advantage over similar products made in another country.

These marketing strategies are adapted to the construction of a country image, or nation brand, to promote it as a tourist destination or to attract stakeholders in important global events such as the Expo exhibitions. These can be seen as "an international stage on which countries present themselves, participate in discussions, and compete at the same time. It is

here that they demonstrate, in a creative and universal manner, their economic and cultural transformations, directions for development, plans and ambitions" (Expo Poland 2017 website). For this reason, the construction of a country's "favourable international image" (Chen 2012) for this kind of major events is important not only to attract prospective visitors with specific expectations but also to attract investors for the projects presented during the Expo.

In light of this, the present study conducts a qualitative analysis of the visual and verbal strategies that were used by the German- and English-speaking countries for the Expo 2015 event. In particular, it will look at the elements that these countries use to construct their image and to "sell" their initiatives to stakeholders as well as to create specific expectations in the prospective visitors to both the Expo pavilions and to the country itself. Each one of the websites investigated is used by the countries to present their participation in Expo 2015, the structure and location of the pavilion, the country's individual development of the main theme (including socially-conscious and environmentally-sustainable initiatives already organised at home) as well as their programme of events, exhibitions and artistic/cultural performances of national artists.

The visual analysis will examine the graphic features of the websites, i.e. how the pages are constructed, the message transmitted by the combination of colours, the use of multimodal and multimedia elements and all possible features that were employed to represent the countries' image and how they developed the main Expo theme. The verbal analysis will use the computer program for language analysis *WordSmith Tools 6.0* (Scott 2012) to generate a wordlist of the most frequent content words, and of recurrent clusters in the websites, with the aim of understanding how verbal language, together with the visual component, is used to construct the countries' images.

3. Visual Analysis: German-Speaking Countries

The visual analysis of the websites of the three German-speaking countries present at Expo Milan 2015 reveals that they tend to present themselves as "environmentally sustainable" nations with particular attention to the nation's and citizens' responsibility in achieving the goals set by international policies.

3.1 Germany

Germany seems to provide the most "intellectual" experience with particular attention given to its environmental commitment. The main theme of the pavilion itself, "Field of ideas", helps construct the image of Germany as an innovative and enthusiastic country, which is also described in terms of desire for novelty. The website promotes innovative projects as well as political, economic and research initiatives but also the citizens' involvement in its projects. In fact, the activities in the pavilion encourage visitors to collaborate with the German initiatives, which include a conscious and more efficient usage of natural resources as well as the development of innovative ideas for an "urban farm". The visitor's attention is caught thanks to an engaging and interactive website: navigation can be done through Prezi-like paths (Figure 21.1) that guide the visitor through a virtual tour of the pavilion, structured as an exhibition (*Die Ausstellung*).

Figure 21.1 Homepage of the German website

One of the leading themes of the website is also the "be active" motto, which is used as encouragement to make innovative ideas public and visible. The website offers again a dynamic navigation experience in its use of images, interviews with people, famous and ordinary, a focus on interaction through social media, as well as helpful information such as in the section "grow your own herbs from cuttings".

The cultural program is the section of the website that fully commits to its theme: the representation of the various aspects of Germany's cultural landscape goes from the presentation of young new talents to a selection of the most important achievements by German citizens in various cultural fields, such as literature, and the visual and performing arts. In addition,

the website constructs the country's image as a travel destination particularly committed to global sustainability. The visitor is given a concise overview of each Federal State with information on their territories, cultural and historical heritage and traditions (arts and crafts as also eno-gastronomic traditions).

3.2 Austria

The aim of the Austrian website is to reinforce the country's worldwide reputation of an attractive and beneficial place worth visiting. It promotes itself as a "green nation" that has achieved this status with the elimination of air and water pollution, by stopping deforestation and preserving its eco-system. The forest is the leading theme of both the pavilion and the website. The senses of the visitors are stimulated through background music with the sounds of nature while they undertake a journey of discovery "immersed in the green" (see Figure 21.2).

Figure 21.2 Homepage of Austria's website

Moreover, the website provides information on the Austrian landscapes and climate; they are used as key elements to increase awareness on the use of sustainable resources. Despite the presence of the YouTube video of a virtual tour through the pavilion, no other graphic elements develop the theme, present only in the homepage with the video itself and the title of the website. The general impression is that, unlike the German website, the Austrian one gives more emphasis to the specific events organised during the Expo rather than to the construction of the image of a country committed to global sustainability.

3.3 Switzerland

Switzerland's participation to Expo 2015 is promoted through the image of a socially responsible, morally correct country that gives priority to global challenges by proposing solutions such as the development of responsible consumption, healthy nutrition and fair trade around the world. These ideas are creatively represented through the image of the four Towers (*Türme*) of Coffee, Apple, Water and Salt, respectively (see Figure 21.3).
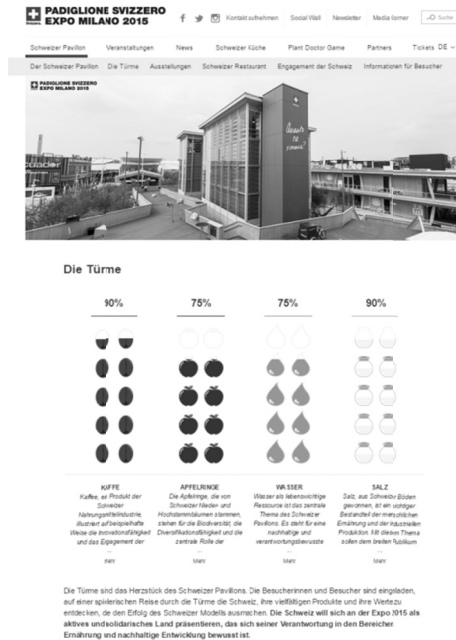
Figure 21.3 The 'Towers' on the Swiss website

The innovation, in this case, lies in the possibility for the visitors to the Swiss pavilion to actively participate in controlling the consumption of the products stored in the towers during the six months of the Expo 2015. Visitors, then, could take as much of these products as they wanted, either to be consumed on the premises or to be taken away, but once finished, the products would not be resupplied. The modular structure of the pavilion allowed the ground to slump when products were taken out, while in the website the graphic equivalents of the Towers were updated with the level of available products left at that moment, showing the visitors their own

individual impact on global food consumption. The idea was to stimulate a reflection on the global availability of food and on sustainable development along the food supply chain. It also invited everyone to act responsibly and to consume resources intelligently, leaving enough products for other people who had yet to visit the pavilion.

However, except for the idea of the four Towers, the website is quite static: its only interactive section is a "social wall" and the links to social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. The theme of the Towers appeared in two other sections, which however were not given enough prominence in the website, being left in one of the last pages to visit: they are the app "Sharing Food", to learn how to avoid wasting food, and the "Plant Doctor Game", a video game showing how modern technology can be used to improve the lives of smallholder farmers.

4. Visual Analysis: English-Speaking Countries

The visual analysis of the English-speaking countries' websites shows three different strategies in the construction of each country's image both for the Expo event and for their individual commitment to the theme of the exhibition.

4.1 The UK

The navigation experience of the website presenting the British pavilion is organised as a guided walking tour of an orchard. The idea of the "British orchard" is further developed with a section that displays the colours and flowers in the UK according to the season (Figure 21.4).

Figure 21.4 Pollen and Plants on the British website

The accompanying texts describe to the public essential concepts about British wildlife before pollution, deforestation and climate change cancel it forever. This reflects the UK's strategy in constructing its image for the Expo 2015 event: a country that preserves, but also shares with the rest of the world, the natural beauties of its rich eco-system. Another leading theme of the British pavilion is the role that bees play in the preservation of biodiversity. Bees and the "footprints" they leave as they cross the page are also used as indicators for the same pages, making the visual experience of the website even more attractive. The navigation of the website is accompanied by a "soundtrack" of bees buzzing, birds singing and pastoral music that create a relaxing sensory environment for the virtual visit to the UK's pavilion.

4.2 Ireland

Ireland's Expo website focuses on the role that countries in the North Atlantic area play in preserving wildlife and natural resources; it is, indeed, the least "Expo-centred" of the websites analysed in this study. Compared to the British website, the Irish one is quite factual and far less creative, more focused on the general commitment to the sustainability theme than on the events or activities organised for the Expo (Figure 21.5). In addition, the sections contain a general description and presentation of their contents with a minimal usage of multimedia elements limited to a link to a video on the homepage and to the background pictures of each page. The image of Ireland emerging from the visual analysis of its Expo website is that of a country full of wildlife that commits itself with rigour and professionalism to the preservation of the environment and its resources.
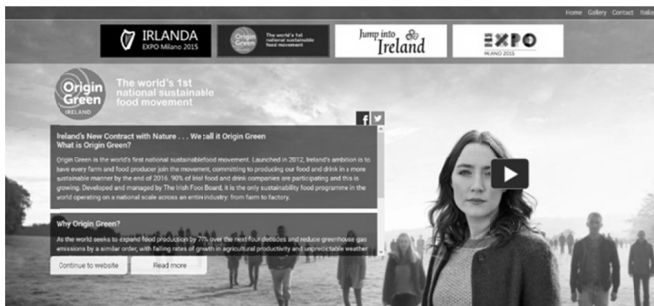
Figure 21.5 Homepage of the Irish website

4.3 The USA

The first image of the USA's website is that of the actual pavilion, which is shown in a full screen picture on the homepage. All sections are easily accessible and immediately visible at the top of the page (Figure 21.6).
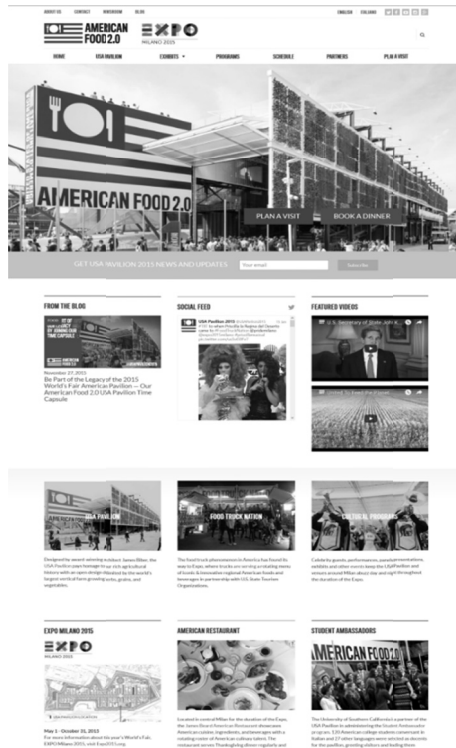
Figure 21.6 Homepage of the USA website

The exploration experience of the USA's website is linear: visitors have easy access to the several sections on the exhibits and activities organised in the pavilion. At the right-hand side of each section, there are links to social networks; the website, then, appears as more media-centred than the Irish and the British websites, also offering a newsletter subscription so the public can receive updates on events and activities. In addition, it contains more direct and evident reference to social networks with real-time feedback and discussion of the US commitment to the Expo

2015 mission and related events, constantly inviting visitors to share videos from the pavilion and interact with blog posts and social feeds.

The theme of the website is the focus on the American activities linked to the homeland: emphasis is on the role played by the great American people in producing American food. The title of the pavilion itself ("American Food 2.0") and the activities organised testify the great commitment of the US pavilion to promote and present its traditional food and food-related cultural traditions.

5. Verbal Analysis

The present section contains the verbal analysis conducted on the websites. Wordlists and clusters are examined to identify the most recurrent terms and expressions used to promote each pavilion.

5.1 German-Speaking Countries

In the German wordlist, the most recurrent terms are words that are connected with patriotism, such as *Deutschland*, the adjective *deutsche(n)*, *Landschaft* ("landscape"), *Region* and, more specifically, *Thüringer* ("Thuringian") and *Berlin*. These two German regions appear more frequently than the others probably because, during the Expo, the German Pavilion organised two weeks (in June and in August, respectively) dedicated to the Federal State of Berlin and to Thuringia with a comprehensive cultural and music program. Other recurrent words are closely linked to German food and drink, namely: the adjective *kulinarische*, *Küche* ("Food"), *Bier*, *Spezialität/en* ("Delicatessen"), *Geschmack* ("Taste"), *Fisch* and *Fleisch* ("Meat"). In this group of terms, the word *Vielfalt* ("variety") plays an important role since it is often used to express the great selection of German products and traditions. The other words in the list are related to the general Expo event and to the pavilion's theme, such as *Pavillon*, *Besucher* ("Visitors"), *Ausstellung* ("exhibition") *Partner*, *Veranstaltungen* ("events") and *Ideen* ("ideas"). Words connected to nature appear to be important in connection with the Expo topics and confirm the results of the visual analysis: the word *Natur*, in fact, is one of the most recurrent words together with *Landwirtschaft* ("agriculture") and *Wasser* ("Water"). The words *heute* ("today"), *Besucher* ("visitors") and *Menschen* ("people"), in the first ten positions in the wordlist, are connected to the leading theme of the German pavilion and its website, i.e. offering visitors innovative approaches to human nutrition, at the same time inviting them to take active action in protecting

resources more effectively and use them more intelligently. As for the clusters, Germany shows recurrent reference to the country (*in Deutschland*, *das Land*, *die Region*, *die Stadt*) with particular attention to its culinary traditions (*Geschmack*, "Taste"; *kulinarische Landschaft*, "culinary landscape"). These clusters confirm also the importance of the Expo theme as also of the leading theme of the German pavilion with particular emphasis on visitors and their actual ideas and projects.

Results from the Austrian corpus show that the top keyword is *Luft* ("Air"), which is strictly connected to the website's general theme ("Energy for Life. Breathe. Austria"); similarly, the words *Klima* ("Climate") and *Wald* ("Wood") testify Austria's great attention to its natural resources. The country itself plays an important role in the language of the website: *Austria*, in English, ranks second while the term in German ranks eighth followed by *Landes* ("country's"), *Landschaft* ("Landscape") and *Gelände* ("ground", "country"). Recurrent are also words focusing on events during the Expo, such as *Pavillon*, *Mailand* ("Milan"), *Weltausstellung* ("World exhibition") and *Ausstellung* ("exhibition"). The terms *Herausforderungen* ("challenges"), *Forschung* ("research"), *Leitthema* ("key topic") are also connected to the Expo event. Here, the verbal analysis confirms the visual one because, in both cases, the Exposition has a prominent role. Other frequently used words are "Energy", the German *Energie*, *Forschung* ("research"): they recall the emphasis given to the title of the pavilion. As for clusters, results show a focus on the main theme of the pavilion; the clusters ranking in the first three positions are, in fact, *Breathe Austria*, *der Expo* and *und Klima* ("and climate") followed by *in Mailand* (in Milan) and *Österreich Pavillon* (Austrian Pavilion).

As for the Swiss website, *Schweizer* ("Swiss") and *Schweiz* ("Switzerland") open the wordlist, confirming the spirit of patriotism and reference to the intention of constructing the image of a country with a deeply-rooted sense of responsibility and solidarity. The other words in the list are related to the general Expo event, namely: *Pavillon Besucher* ("visitors to the pavilion", *Expo*, *Ausstellung*, *Veranstaltungen*. Words linked to the specific theme of the Swiss Pavilion – *Türme*/*n* ("Tower/s"), *Ernährung* ("Feeding"), *Nahrungsmittel* ("food"), *Wasser*, *Kaffee*, *Plant* and *Salz* ("salt") – confirm the visual analysis: the promotion of Switzerland is presented through the idea of the four Towers and its resources. Other words in the list are connected to the virtual game and app "Doctor Plant", namely, they are *Doctor*, *Plant*, *Spiel* ("game"), *Spieler/Spielerinnen* ("players", "female players"). Clusters in the Swiss website largely confirm the visual analysis with the focus on the Expo

event expressed with four different clusters *schweizer Pavillon*, *die Türmen*, *der Expo* and *Plant Doctor*. In addition, clusters stress the importance of the visitors: the word *Besucher* appears in six clusters, while other clusters show recurrent reference to the country, such as in *der Schweizer*, *des Schweizer*, *die Schweiz*.

5.2 English-Speaking Countries

As regards the wordlist from the British website, the results confirm the visual analysis: attention is on the global impact of sustainable actions with "UK" in first position followed by "world", testifying the global dimension and collocation of the UK worldwide. In third position ranks "hive" which, in the website, is used both literally, referring to the importance of hives and bees for the ecosystem, and metaphorically with the UK representing the world as a hive and humanity as its bees, all essential to biodiversity. Then, we find the terms "food", "business" and "technology" which all testify the role of these three factors in the country's approach to sustainable production of food as well as the British role in innovation and technology to create sustainable business. As for the clusters, the UK's website shows reference to the country and the pavilion ("the UK, UK pavilion"), with particular emphasis on plants grown in Britain ("are grown in Britain", "feeding the planet"), probably to emphasise the "km0 policy" (another cluster) in food production, a well-established policy that is now being adopted by an increasing number of Western countries.

In the case of the Irish website too, the verbal analysis confirms the visual one because in both cases importance is given to sustainable food production and to the role of the country in this kind of commitment. As for the wordlist, the country plays a primary role with the terms "Ireland" and "Irish" followed by "food", "green" and "origin" but also by "wild, "Atlantic" and "world", all confirming the information transmitted in the visual analysis. Clusters, though recurring with a limited frequency, highlight once again the importance of the production of green food ("origin green"), especially as regards the Atlantic side of the world ("Atlantic way", "wild Atlantic", "wild Atlantic way").

Finally, the wordlist from the USA website shows "food" and "American" as its first two most frequent words. The wordlist in general confirms the approach shown in the visual analysis with terms such as "our", "we", "America" and "farm". American food is especially promoted but with no reference to sustainability and the role of the USA in the global scenario. Clusters confirm the USA-centred promotion, which

focuses more on the re-discovery of truly genuine American gastronomic traditions ("our food", "our country", "American food", "local ingredients"), evident also in the constant reference to specific projects ("blackberry farm", "vertical farm", "food truck"), to the "farm-to-table" process and to "American cuisine" (other recurrent clusters). Reference to the national culinary traditions is present in those expressions indicating the multi-ethnic composition of American society such as, for instance, the clusters "Latin America" and "Taco Bell", even though the latter is a restaurant chain. Reference to the Chinese component of American society is particularly stressed, indeed the terms "Chow Mein" and "Chop Suey" are more frequent than references to "New Orleans", "New York" or "Latin America". The message inferred from the analysis of both clusters and wordlist is that the USA firmly wants to construct the image of a country that is not the homeland of junk food and exploitation of natural resources, but it is rather a country in which local traditions produce genuine, farm-to-table food, with respect for both health and safety regulations, and American ethnic diversity.

6. Final Remarks

The investigation of how the countries examined construct their image through the Expo websites produced varied results. Both the visual and the verbal analyses revealed that the main Expo theme "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life" is developed with different effects, thus producing different country images.

As regards the German-speaking countries, Germany seems to construct the image of a destination for sustainable tourism, attracting visitors who particularly value local traditions and cultural heritage. Similarly, Austria constructs for itself the image of a country strongly connected to its cultural and eno-gastronomic traditions, mainly exploiting the image of a country in which the air is clean, and the environment is well preserved. The country image developed by Switzerland is that of a nation proud of its local traditions and history, but at the same time, it confirms the stereotypical image of a "neutral" country especially conscious of individual responsibility, sustainable policies and the equal distribution of food, locally and globally.

The English-speaking countries showed greater variation in how they decided to develop the main Expo theme. The UK's website is certainly the most creative and picturesque, constructing the image of a country-orchard that highly values the preservation of the ecosystem and its bio-diversity. Ireland, unlike its traditional image of a tourism destination

exploiting its Celtic heritage for commercial purposes, constructs a country image of rigour and builds for itself the role of being a representative of countries in the North Atlantic, committed to preserving wildlife in this area. Finally, the image that emerges from the USA website is that of a country that wants to get rid of the stereotypical attribute of a junk food producer. Instead, the USA constructs itself the image of a country proud of its most genuine, rural traditions. A country that is now committed to sustainable food production but also proud of its multi-ethnic composition, which ultimately has a positive influence on the national culinary traditions.

In conclusion, the present analysis has shown that the German-speaking countries construct their image adhering faithfully to the main Expo theme, while the group of English-speaking countries use it as a mere starting point to develop their own individual interpretation, choosing one peculiar aspect of their national identity and only subsequently adapting it to the main theme.

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