

2 Text genre “comments” on the Social Web and corpus description

2.1 Comments on online travel and hotel booking websites

Among the wide range of text types used for describing a company’s products or services, the most relevant for the tourism industry may well be the comments posted by former, current or prospective customers on the websites of travel agencies and hotel booking agencies. Unlike comments on social networking services, video-sharing platforms, or blogs, which first need to be discovered by the interested customer, comments on booking agencies such as booking.com, hrs.com, expedia.com or tripadvisor.com, are often just a mouse click away for online customers. Although it is nearly impossible to precisely assess the importance and impact customer reviews have in terms of the booking decisions of hotel guests, having easy access to independent comments on the services offered by a particular hotel is greatly appreciated by those internet users thinking about booking accommodation. The reviews hotel customers share with each other on the net may have a huge impact on booking decisions, so customer comments should be seen as an integral part of customer relationship management (also called customer care management, Ebel 2007: 161). From an economic point of view, these type of comments are, in fact, a written form of word-of-mouth communication.

The text type “comments pages of online travel and hotel booking agencies” could be succinctly described as an asynchronous CMC text type that belongs to the so-called social web, and whose main goal it is to discuss the quality of hotel accommodation and recommend or discourage booking a room in a given hotel.

Since there is no universally accepted text classification, the focus of the linguistic characterisation of this text type will be based on text patterns. As Gansel/Jürgens (2002: 53) affirm, “aufgrund der Multidimensionalität der Kategorie Text ist es praktisch nicht möglich, alle potentiellen Texte entsprechend einer einzigen verbindlichen Klassifikation einzuordnen”. Thus, at a descriptive level, this chapter will outline the main textual features which can be found in the text type we will be considering: text function, situationality, text structure, and wording patterns. At the end of the chapter, an attempt will be made to identify the possible differences in text patterns between languages.

2.1.1 Text function and text actions

When studying text functions, it should be borne in mind that a language utterance does not “fulfil only one function, to the total exclusion of others” (Brown/Yule 1983: 1). A hotel customer posting a comment is usually pursuing different aims or intentions expressed by one or more text functions, as can be clearly observed in the following example¹:

- (1) Das Hotel hat eine hervorragende Lage. In 5 Minuten ist man mitten in der Fußgängerzone. Die Mitarbeiter waren sehr freundlich und hilfsbereit. Das Frühstücksbuffet war sensationell. Die Sauberkeit der Zimmer und Bäder waren vorbildlich. Wir würden jederzeit wieder dort einchecken. Das Hotel kann man mit ruhigem Gewissen weiterempfehlen (EC D Booking: Jens, Gruppe, Alsfeld, Deutschland, 6. April 2012).

In this text, one assertion is undoubtedlyly informative (“in 5 Minuten ist man mitten in der Fußgängerzone”), while other sentences convey information and persuasion (“das Hotel hat eine hervorragende Lage”, “die Mitarbeiter waren sehr freundlich und hilfsbereit”, “das Frühstücksbuffet war sensationell”...), and the last two assertions are straightforward recommendations (“wir würden jederzeit wieder dort einchecken”, “das Hotel kann man mit ruhigem Gewissen weiterempfehlen”). Information and persuasion go hand-in-hand here, although as is usually the case in texts (Brinker 2005: 89), this comment reflects a dominant function of a persuasive-appellative nature that outweighs the informative one.

Although we have pointed out above that a text producer may have different intentions when posting a comment, intention, described by De Beaugrande as a “user-centered notion” and as one of the seven standards of textuality (De Beaugrande 1980: 21), is a “concept defined from the viewpoint of the sender” (Nord 2005: 53), and the only way we can ascertain the intentions of a commenting client is through the analysis of text functions. Customer comments posted on the comments pages of online travel and hotel booking agencies seem to have dominant appellative and informative text functions, according to the definitions of text functions provided by Brinker (1983: 139, 1985: 59). Text functions can be examined in very different ways depending on the study’s proposed aims and on the theoretical framework used by the author. If the approach is an eminently practical one aimed at describing the text structures and functions displayed in multilingual customer comments from a contrastive point of view, an in-depth analysis of the text actions present in informative and appellative settings may be useful. Text actions were initially described by Polenz (1980: 142) in the fol-

1 For practical reasons, no translation of the examples quoted from our corpora will be provided.

lowing terms: “Jeder Satzinhalt enthält mindestens eine Sprecherhandlung; es können mehrere Satzinhalte die gleiche Sprechhandlung enthalten; jede Sprechhandlung ist in eine übergeordnete Kontexthandlung eingebettet, deren oberste eine wesentliche Texthandlung ist”. Recent text-linguistic studies, such as those by Bendel (1998), Schröder (2003: 7) and Janich (2005), tend to use the term to describe the main linguistic actions underpinning text functions.

We will use the term in a somewhat (but not exactly) similar way. For us, linguistic actions denote the use of concrete language patterns pursuing certain textual intentions in a given medial context. In the German example mentioned above, the sentence “die Sauberkeit der Zimmer und Bäder waren vorbildlich” would be classified as “assessing the cleanliness”, which would in return be part of an appellative (rather than informative) text function. As can be inferred, since the context is clear and the text functions present in customer comments are usually reduced to two, no differentiation will be made between main and secondary text actions (“Texthandlungen” and “Teilhandlungen” according to Janich 2005: 122).

After a thorough analysis of both our exemplary and general corpus², the text-type “comments pages of online travel and hotel booking agencies” usually includes at least some of the following text actions underlying the appellative and informative text functions:

- Describing the room and the hotel premises (usually appellative, but in some contexts also informative)
- Assessing the cleanliness (usually appellative)
- Stating or commenting on the hotel location (usually informative, seldom appellative)
- Assessing the price/performance ratio (usually appellative, but in some contexts also informative)
- Commenting on the performance of hotel staff (usually appellative)
- Describing breakfast choices (informative and/or appellative)
- Indicating parking availability or commenting on parking-related problems (informative and/or appellative)
- Commenting on quietness and privacy (usually appellative)
- Recommending or discouraging a stay at a given hotel (usually appellative)

2 For this study, two different corpora have been built up. The “Exemplary Corpus” (or EC) will be mostly used for illustrative purposes in the description of the text genres that are being analysed. The “General Corpus” (or GC) will provide the empirical data used to draw conclusions about the communicative macrostructure and text-grammatical structures of hotel comments and reviews.

It may be posited that this text type needs to be thematically organised around one or more of the text actions illustrated above. In a contrastive study analysing text functions and text actions in comments written in different languages, special attention should be devoted to the language used for persuasive (and hence appellative) purposes, as this is precisely where the main differences may lie between languages (and cultures) on this level of analysis.

2.1.2 Situationality

Following De Beaugrande/Dressler (1981: 9), the term situationality has been used for referring to “the factors which make a text relevant to a situation of occurrence”; that is, to the communicative situation in which the text producer and reader are involved. Text linguistics used to disregard the medium and concentrate on the “distribution and meaning of medium-independent word-forms” (Esser 2009: 95). This traditional approach is obviously no longer possible in the case of transmedia text types such as websites, where text and visual (and even audiovisual) components are usually interwoven, leading to a semantic complexity (Lüger/Lenk 2008: 25) that must be considered when analysing the text and its structure. This is also true for user-generated content on the internet: most social web applications allow the user to post not only text but also upload and display images, videos, etc. As for the text type “comments pages of online travel and hotel booking agencies”, there are no common standards on the textual environment that characterizes the situationality of the textual occurrences, so the researcher is compelled to describe the specific textual settings of every comments page. Adapting the term used by De Beaugrande/Dressler to our descriptive needs, we assume that there are at least three relevant factors that need to be taken into account when rendering the situationality of this text type: the channel and communicative form, the superficial text structure, and the visual text structure. Out of these three, only the channel and communicative form may be similar across the comments pages of online travel and hotel booking agencies.

We will outline the situationality of the customer comments of three large, internationally active online travel and hotel booking agencies: Booking.com, Expedia and TripAdvisor. All three websites allow hotel customers to post their experiences during a given hotel stay on the hotel’s comments page. On one level, the hotel reviews are similar to private online texts like those posted on chats or mailing lists: they are intended only for a (relatively) small group of people interested in the hotel. On another level, however, the comments are as universally accessible as any other website: everyone can read these comments, even those people the posts were not intended for. This text type might best be

described, according to Sánchez Prieto (2011: 20, tab. 1), as a half-private communicative form. Like blogs or fora, comments are intended for a particular audience, but can be read by all internet users; some of them are typical reviews and hence isolated, while others refer to other comments, and could be seen as part of a developing conversation among commenting hotel customers.

Private texts	Emails, chats, mailing lists, newsgroups, text on social media platforms
Half-private texts	Blog posts, forum posts, customer comments
Universally accessible texts	Webs

Table 1. Online communicative forms in computer-mediated communication (Sánchez Prieto 2011: 20)

Although the communicative form and the channel are very similar for the comments posted on the web of the three travel agencies, there are at least two significant differences between TripAdvisor and the other two:

- Whereas customer comments on Booking.com and Expedia are verified, or, as Expedia puts it, “They [the commenting customers] paid and stayed. We double-checked”, anyone can review a hotel on TripAdvisor.
- On TripAdvisor, the hotel management is given the opportunity to respond to the reviews, so customer comments can turn into conversations.

The superficial text structure is somewhat different on Booking.com, Expedia and TripAdvisor. Besides the formal restrictions imposed by the different applications used on the websites (e.g. for Booking.com there is a limit on the number of characters, whereas TripAdvisor imposes a 200 character minimum for reviewers), the use of perigraphemic elements differs with regard to the font design, font size and font colour(s). Since perigraphemic characters organise the superficial text structure optically (Schütte 2004: 94), it would be worth noting the differences between the comments on the three webs:

- Booking.com uses a rather small classical web font design in dark blue against a white background (Ill. 1).
- On Expedia.com, comments are also shown in a classical web font design in dark grey against a white background, but in comparison to Booking.com there is a large heading (Ill. 2).
- On Tripadvisor.com, only the first lines of customer reviews are listed on the comments page. The whole review can be read on a separate node. The typeface is bigger and black against a white background, and there is also a blue colour heading.



Ill. 1 Typical comment on Booking.com



Ill. 2 Typical comment on Expedia



Ill. 3 Typical comment on TripAdvisor

As we may infer from the three screenshots, there are also certain differences in the visual text structure:

- The most striking one may be the possibility of uploading an avatar image on TripAdvisor. A reviewer's avatar alongside the hotel comment should help to develop mutual trust between reviewers and potential customers. From a textual point of view, it would be interesting to explore the relationship between an avatar image and the comment. Avatar images cannot be posted on Booking.com and Expedia.
- Another difference to be exploited in a linguistic analysis is the presence of flags denoting the origin of the commenting client (or their country of residence) on Booking.com. The flag displayed is usually linked to the language in which the comment has been drafted.
- A recommendation ribbon may be found on reviews featuring hotels recommended by customers on Expedia.
- A fourth visual difference between comments posted on the webs of these three big booking agencies concerns the score awarded to the hotel by clients. It appears in a blue speech bubble on Booking.com, as a large yellow figure before a bullet graph on Expedia, and as a green-coloured bullet graph made up of circles, but lacking a scoring cipher, on TripAdvisor. Additionally, TripAdvisor also provides supplementary scoring graphs for at least six service items directly connected with text actions (value, location, sleep quality, rooms, cleanliness, and service).

2.1.3 External structure

Customer comments have a certain external appearance depending on the host website of the online travel and hotel booking agency. The term “external structure” is used here according to Gaddy et al. (2001: 102), and refers primarily to “text-structure cues, such as titles and headings, [that] operate by means of structuring the text as a whole”. Thus, we understand external structure to be the constituent parts of the text type. This should not be confused with the term “text structure”, the commonly accepted denomination for the internal text structure, and described by Vater (1994: 63) and Brinker (2005: 20) as “Gefüge von Relationen, die zwischen den Sätzen bzw. den Propositionen als den unmittelbaren Strukturelementen des Textes bestehen und die den inneren Zusammenhang, die Kohärenz des Textes bewirken”.

The constituent parts of the text type “comments pages of online travel and hotel booking agencies” are the headline, the score, the main body of the comment or review, the information concerning the guest reviewer and the hotel stay, as well as the feedback request. A hotel reviewer can usually draft the headline and the main body freely, although the review applications based on social web technology do not allow customising the typography. It should be

noted that comments posted on Booking.com do not have a heading. The information about the reviewer is also given by the commenting hotel guest in a standardised way. By contrast, the information on the hotel stay is provided by the booking agency (with some exceptions on TripAdvisor). Feedback requests are automatically posted at the end of the hotel reviews by the social web application, and are therefore neither written nor influenced by the commenting guest. There follows a brief description of the constituent parts of this text type. For illustrative purposes, we will divide the three comments shown above in their original form into their constituent parts (tab. 2 to 4).

Information about reviewer/ hotel stay	Ralf Älteres Paar, Bad König, Deutschland 26. Dezember 2012
Headline	(-)
Main body	+ Die Details im Haus sind perfekt ausgewählt – alles stimmig – man fühlt sich sofort wohl. Der Blick auf die Stadt – gerade bei Nacht – genial. – Parkmöglichkeiten sind sehr gering. Booking.com hat kein Frühstück im Angebot beinhaltet bzw. ausgewiesen, obwohl das Frühstück beinhaltet war! Somit haben wir es dann leider aus Nichtkenntnis verpasst.
Score	8.8
Feedback	Fanden Sie diese Bewertung hilfreich? Ja Nein

Table 2. Parts of a comment posted on Booking.com (EC D Booking)

Information about reviewer/ hotel stay	juankirm las palmas 2 opiniones Opiniones en 2 ciudades Se alojó el Diciembre de 2006, viajó en pareja
Heading	“el peor hotel en el k he estado”
Main body	Me aloje en este hotel en diciembre de 2006, tres noches. Las dos primeras nos kdamos en una habitacion doble y la ultima en una triple. La habitacion doble era enana. El baño era tan grande como un armario y el equipamiento era viejo. La limpieza era pesima, el suelo estaba pegajoso y el “balcon” estaba cerrado con verjas y la calle era muy ruidosa. Solo desayunamos el ultimo dia y ojala no lo hubieramos hecho. el desayuno es un pan k parecia del dia anterior con mantequilla y un cafe con leche. Me gustó — absolutamente nada No me gustó — limpieza y el tamaño de la habitacion
Score	1/5
Feedback	¿Ha sido útil esta opinión? Sí ¿Algún problema con esta opinión? Pregunta a juankirm sobre Cantabrico Hotel Esta opinión es la opinión subjetiva de un miembro de TripAdvisor, no de TripAdvisor LLC.

Table 3. Parts of a comment posted on TripAdvisor (EC E TripAdvisor)

Information about reviewer/ hotel stay	für alle von Ein verifizierter Reisender Empfohlen Gesendet am 22. Februar 2013 von einem verifizierten Hotels.com Kunden
Heading	zentrumsnah und guter Anschluss Nahverkehr
Main body	Sehr guter Service beim Empfang, nett , freundlich und hilfsbereit. Lage für Stadtbesuch Heidelberg super. Sehr guter Anschluss Nahverkehr. Frühstücksangebot entspricht den Erwartungen, frisch, reichlich und ausreichend. Zimmer waren topp zum wohlfühlen. Hotel kann man stets weiterempfehlen.
Score	4
Feedback	Hilfreiche Bewertung? Danken Sie dem Bewerter 0

Table 4. Parts of a comment posted on Expedia (EC D Expedia)

Headings are titles preceding the main text body and indicate “what the central theme of the text is about” (Gunter 1987: 260). Following Kozminsky’s terminology and its reception in media studies, titles would be “advance organizers” (Kozminsky 1977: 482). Since there are hardly any studies on the headings of hotel reviews, we will make do with the research on news headlines by well-renowned text linguists such as Van Dijk, whose definition of news headlines (1985: 74) can be adapted and re-defined to fit the particularities of comment headings as follows: titles posted by commenting guests are brief sentences that summarise the gist of the hotel review in a personal, catchy style. As is the case with newspaper headlines, the drafting of comment headings appears to differ in different languages and cultures. For example, Spanish headings tend to have an eminently verbal nature, whereas German ones are often defined by their nominal form³.

The comments body of text is the main component of the hotel review. Unlike other text types or text genres, no textual formalities are expected of the comment’s author. There is no need to structure the text in a particular way, or even sequence the information, so neither a greeting nor a leave-taking expression is expected. The reader’s expectations are reduced to the positive or negative experiences the commenting guest has undergone during the hotel stay. The commenting hotel guest usually launches straight into the review. From the point of view of text linguistics, the review is a succession of text actions that

3 This assertion is based on the results of a preliminary study on online newspaper headlines and comment headings in German, Dutch and Spanish (Sánchez Prieto 2016).

can be seen as typical for this text type, and which have already been described above. The text actions do not appear to be strung together in a particular sequence, but most reviewers share some common textual assumptions about the order in which they are presented: among the first text actions the reader comes across are “stating or commenting on the hotel location” and “describing the room and the hotel premises”, whereas “recommending or discouraging a stay at a given hotel “ is usually placed at the end of the review.

The information concerning the guest reviewer and the hotel stay, as well as the feedback request, are technically speaking not part of the comment, but they help us to understand the context in which the comment is made.

2.1.4 Wording patterns of the text type

Like all text types and genres, customer comments are also defined by certain characteristic text grammar, syntactic, morphological and lexical features. These features concern the manner in which comments are linguistically composed from an internal point of view, and will be referred to here as “wording patterns”.

One of the most important wording patterns for defining a text type is text grammar. Text grammar in general and cohesion in particular are responsible for creating the “texture” of a given text (Halliday/Hasan 1976: 2). There follows an outline of how the texture of customer comments is achieved based on the first data obtained from our multilingual corpus. As defended in Sánchez Prieto (2011: 85) and other authors, such as Schnotz (1994), Von Stutterheim (1997) and Storrer (2004b: 3), we will now ignore the distinction between cohesion and coherence for practical purposes⁴. The most striking characteristic of customer comments regarding their text grammar may be the almost complete absence of cataphoric references, and the limited number of anaphoric ones. The only anaphoric references that often feature in hotel reviews are pronominal forms and some repeated lexical items (like “hotel” or “room”): sentences are linked simply through the systematic repetition of personal and possessive pronouns (usually in the first person) or certain key words, as can be seen in the three following comments (the anaphoric pronominal references are in *italics*):

- (2) Somos um casal jovem na casa dos 30, adoramos a nossa estadia! Cama de casal muito confortável... A disponibilidade dos funcionários foi ex-

4 As Rickheit/Schade (2000: 275) point out, the use of both terms is not clear enough to be applied without further problems. Among text linguists, it appears to be a “nicht unumstrittene Differenzierung” (Storrer 2004a: 16). Nevertheless, we will differentiate both terms later on in the chapter dealing with text-grammar structures.