
AI-assisted translation and the systematisation of multi-word units and realia in tourism discourse: A contrastive study of English and German

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Résumé

Specialised tourism discourse (STD) offers fertile ground for studying multi-word units (MWU), collocations, and complex noun phrases (CNP; Lombardi, 2013; Torresi, 2013), often involving realia - terms conveying culture-specific references and emotional resonance. These units are central to destination marketing, where language serves as both a tool for promoting identity and a medium of cultural mediation (Malamatidou, 2024). While extensively examined in traditional translation workflows, less is known about how AI-assisted systems handle them in STD.

This study enquires what patterns of variation emerge in AI-assisted translations of tourism discourse MWU, CNP, and realia and how effective are these tools for specialised communicative purposes?

Drawing on a corpus of Italian tourism websites promoting Brescia (<https://www.visitbrescia.it>) and their English and German versions, we compare AI- and non-AI-assisted translations of 10 representative items (*visite guidate*, *pianura bresciana*, etc.) ranging from fully (*olio EVO*) to semi-fixed (*appuntamenti imperdibili*) and freer combinations. The tools selected are ChatGPT (premium) and DeepL (free). Human translations were extracted, then AI-generated outputs produced both via zero-shot and few-shots prompting (Armamento et al., 2024).

Our analysis shows notable variation in strategies across and within languages, even when AI is used. Deficiencies include undertranslation (*DOCG*), overtranslation (*Die sanfte Landschaft der Brescianer Ebene*), referential inaccuracies (*secondary exhibitions*), and pragmatic-stylistic infelicities (*unmissable appointments*). Realia translation proved particularly problematic, with cultural mediation needed to evaluate alternatives. In this context, DeepL performed poorly.

The study proposes pedagogical recommendations: combining data-driven learning with AI-assisted tools can help learners develop critical and cultural awareness when translating MWU/CNP denoting culture specific items in STD (cfr. Snell-Hornby et al. 1997). Consistent with research on plurilingual transfer from English L2 to German L3 collocations in STD (Lombardi & Poli, forthcoming), our findings highlight the importance of supporting learners in recognising and assessing AI-generated outputs, and leveraging corpus evidence

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to refine translation choices.

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