Language, knowledge and community in museum discourse: Tate and GAM

A prominent segment of Tourism Discourse, Museum Discourse is under-researched, notably in terms of its positioning and dynamic meaning production. Museums should be critically approached as knowledge sites where, besides artifacts and artwork, verbal and visual language are on display, constructing specific socio-cultural mind-frames and construing community involvement. Documents from the Tate Gallery (London) and the Galleria d’Arte Moderna (Turin) are cross-culturally examined as ‘best practice’ case studies in the transition from ‘traditional’ and asymmetric to multimodal, symmetric triangulation of the key agents in Museum Discourse: the institution, visitors and local communities.

Within a constructivist model of knowledge, language is crucial to fostering interaction, socio-cognitive alignments and socio-economic benefits particularly for the museum’s local area. My aim in developing the two case studies is to pursue these ‘outward-bound’ discursive practices, notably the strategies displayed in the ‘participatory mission’ statement. Using a contrastive/comparative approach, I investigate two sets of texts, as well as the central element in the visual grammar of each of the two institutions, namely its logo, to identify the distinctive textual features through which both museums set an authoritative self-representation and establish rapport with their respective audiences.

My focus is on texts which activate a positive ‘brand identity’ for external addressees, promoting innovative, participatory socio-cultural mind-sets through persuasive language (e.g. evaluative lexis, personal pronouns for ego-targeting, proximal vs distal deixis) and enhancing both context-oriented and ‘customer-centred strategies. I therefore examine the textualization process, in particular the lexical and interpersonal features deployed to discursively ‘situate’ and position the two institutions in addressing their publics, within their broader cultural systems.