

CONSTRUCTING POSITIVE TRAVEL EXPERIENCE THROUGH LANGUAGE: A DISCOURSE-PRAGMATIC STUDY IN CENTRAL JAVA, INDONESIA

Budi Purnomo

Universitas Surakarta, Surakarta, Indonesia

e-mail: budipurnomo989@yahoo.co.id

Abstract

This study investigates how language is used to construct positive travel experiences in online reviews of tour services in Central Java, Indonesia. It aims to reveal the linguistic and pragmatic strategies through which international tourists express satisfaction, gratitude, and interpersonal warmth in digital communication. Drawing upon Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992) and Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), 150 English-language TripAdvisor reviews written by foreign travelers who had participated in tour programs across major destinations in Central Java were analyzed qualitatively through discourse-pragmatic interpretation. The analysis focused on evaluative expressions, politeness markers, and narrative framing that revealed the writers' affective stance. Findings show that reviewers frequently employed expressive lexical choices, intensifiers, and positive adjectives (e.g., amazing, helpful, friendly) to strengthen affective meaning. Pragmatically, tourists often used direct appreciation, collectivist expressions, and culturally sensitive compliments (e.g., thank you so much, we truly appreciate it) to establish solidarity and warmth. These linguistic strategies demonstrate how reviewers not only evaluate tour services but also enact politeness norms and rapport-building within digital discourse. The study concludes that online reviews extend traditional Indonesian values of *sopan santun* (courtesy) into digital interaction, reinforcing Central Java's image as a hospitable and culturally respectful destination in global tourism communication.

Keywords: *Discourse Analysis, Pragmatics, Digital Politeness, Tourism Communication, Central Java*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a multidimensional field in which language plays a central role in shaping travelers' perceptions, experiences, and interpersonal relationships. In the digital era, online reviews have emerged as a dominant discourse genre where tourists express their evaluations, emotions, and satisfaction with travel services. These reviews not only convey personal experiences but also influence potential travelers' decisions and construct the public image of tourism destinations. As global communication increasingly occurs through digital platforms such as TripAdvisor, the linguistic and

pragmatic features of online reviews warrant closer examination within applied linguistics.

Language use in online travel discourse reflects not only the writer's emotional stance but also the underlying cultural and interpersonal values that frame interaction. When international tourists describe their experiences in destinations such as Central Java, Indonesia, they employ linguistic strategies that reveal their perceptions of hospitality, service quality, and intercultural encounter. Positive expressions such as helpful, amazing, and friendly are more than simple adjectives; they function as linguistic

resources for constructing affective meaning and social solidarity. These expressions also serve as pragmatic acts that reinforce politeness, gratitude, and mutual respect—values deeply embedded in cross-cultural communication and intercultural rapport-building.

Moreover, the globalization of tourism has turned online discourse into a vital arena for intercultural dialogue. Tourists and hosts interact through mediated communication in which impressions are co-created through words, tone, and digital etiquette. Scholars such as Gretzel and Yoo (2008) argue that online reviews are an integral part of the “experience economy,” where storytelling and evaluation converge to shape consumer trust and destination image. Therefore, understanding the linguistic and pragmatic mechanisms that sustain positive tourist discourse is essential for both tourism linguistics and professional practice.

Previous studies have investigated digital communication in tourism from various perspectives, focusing on customer satisfaction (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015), online review discourse (Vásquez, 2014), and politeness strategies in service encounters (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2016). However, research specifically examining how international tourists linguistically construct positive experiences in reviews of Indonesian tour services remains limited. Most prior studies have emphasized negative feedback or complaint discourse, leaving the positive and interpersonal aspects underexplored. Furthermore, few have integrated discourse and pragmatics to explain how language embodies intercultural politeness and local hospitality values within Indonesian tourism communication.

To address this gap, the present study analyzes how international tourists construct positive travel experiences through language in their online reviews of tour services in Central Java, Indonesia. Specifically, it aims to: (1) identify the linguistic strategies employed in positive travel reviews; (2) examine the pragmatic and evaluative strategies that express politeness, appreciation, and interpersonal warmth; and (3) interpret the intercultural implications of these linguistic patterns. Drawing upon Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992) and Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), this research combines linguistic and pragmatic perspectives to reveal how language contributes to the positive representation of Central Java as a hospitable and culturally rich destination. Ultimately, it offers insights into intercultural politeness practices that enhance mutual understanding between service providers and global travelers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Discourse Analysis in Tourism Communication

Discourse analysis provides a framework for understanding how language operates beyond the sentence level to construct meaning, identity, and social relations. Fairclough (1992) emphasized that discourse functions as a form of social practice shaped by cultural and ideological contexts. Within tourism, discourse serves not only to describe experiences but also to persuade, promote, and build destination images (Jaworski & Pritchard, 2005). Online travel reviews, as a modern discourse genre, represent authentic reflections of tourists’ encounters that integrate narrative, evaluation, and interactional meaning (Vásquez, 2014). Through discourse, travelers co-

construct perceptions of both places and the people who represent them.

In Indonesian tourism contexts, language in online reviews embodies both personal expression and cultural interpretation. In destinations such as Central Java—renowned for its politeness and hospitality norms—positive reviews often convey satisfaction intertwined with local values such as friendliness (*ramah tamah*) and warmth toward others. Thus, the linguistic study of online travel discourse must be situated within a broader sociocultural dimension that links language use with Indonesian cultural identity and the moral ideals of local hospitality.

2.2 Pragmatics and Politeness in Customer Reviews

Pragmatics examines how meaning arises from context and social interaction. In customer discourse, politeness and gratitude expressions are essential for maintaining harmonious relations between customers and service providers. Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory explains that speakers perform face-saving acts through strategies such as positive politeness, indirectness, and appreciation. Leech (2014) extends this perspective by outlining the maxims of politeness—tact, approbation, and generosity—which frequently surface in evaluative and thankful utterances.

In online travel reviews, politeness is realized through gratitude (e.g., *thank you so much*), compliments (e.g., *the guide was very helpful*), and collective expressions (e.g., *we were very happy with the tour*). These linguistic choices function as pragmatic strategies that promote empathy and rapport across cultural boundaries. Studies by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2016) and Vásquez (2011) demonstrate that

reviewers adapt their politeness strategies to intercultural contexts, showing awareness of local courtesy norms and digital etiquette. In this sense, politeness in online reviews acts as both a linguistic and cultural bridge, shaping how hospitality is interpreted globally.

2.3 Appraisal and Evaluation in Tourism Discourse

Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory provides a systematic explanation of how language conveys attitudes, emotions, and evaluative meanings. It identifies three key domains—attitude, engagement, and graduation—that describe how speakers or writers express feelings, negotiate viewpoints, and intensify or soften meaning. In online reviews, these linguistic resources are used to assess service quality and to construct affective alignment between reviewers and readers.

Empirical studies (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015; Kim & Stepchenkova, 2017) have shown that positive evaluations in online reviews significantly influence destination image and consumer trust. However, the specific linguistic mechanisms that generate such positivity—particularly in cross-cultural settings like Indonesia—remain insufficiently explored. Integrating appraisal analysis with pragmatic interpretation offers a more comprehensive understanding of how satisfaction, solidarity, and intercultural empathy are linguistically realized.

2.4 Research Gap and Novelty

Although prior research has addressed online review discourse and politeness in global tourism, few studies have examined how international tourists construct positive experiences through language in Indonesian contexts. Most existing works emphasize negative

feedback, complaint management, or customer dissatisfaction (Vásquez, 2014; Zhang & Vásquez, 2014), leaving the linguistic realization of positivity—especially in relation to Javanese hospitality and interpersonal respect—underexplored.

This study fills that gap by integrating discourse-analytic, pragmatic, and evaluative perspectives to reveal how international tourists linguistically construct satisfaction and rapport in their reviews of Central Java tour services. The novelty lies in its dual emphasis on (1) how language reflects intercultural politeness and local hospitality values, and (2) how these linguistic features co-create the image of Indonesian warmth and service excellence. Such insights extend the theoretical scope of tourism linguistics and provide practical implications for improving cross-cultural communication in the tourism industry.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study integrates three complementary perspectives—Discourse Analysis, Politeness Theory, and the Appraisal

Framework—to provide a multidimensional interpretation of online tourist discourse.

- 1) At the discourse level, Fairclough’s (1992) notion of discourse as social practice explains how tourist narratives contribute to destination image-making and identity construction.
- 2) At the pragmatic level, Brown and Levinson’s (1987) model of politeness elucidates how reviewers linguistically manage rapport, express gratitude, and maintain social harmony.
- 3) At the evaluative level, Martin and White’s (2005) Appraisal Theory clarifies how affect, judgment, and appreciation are expressed through linguistic resources.
- 4) Together, these frameworks position online reviews as both linguistic performances and social negotiations, where expressions of satisfaction, empathy, and cultural sensitivity co-construct the representation of Indonesian hospitality within a global digital environment.

Table 2.1 Conceptual Framework of the Study

Theoretical Lens	Key Focus	Analytical Contribution to the Study
Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992)	Discourse as social practice shaping meaning and identity	Explains how online reviews construct destination images
Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987)	Face-saving and rapport-building strategies	Reveals pragmatic acts of politeness, gratitude, and solidarity
Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005)	Attitude, engagement, and graduation in evaluation	Describes how positivity and emotion are linguistically realized

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design within a discourse-pragmatic framework. The qualitative

paradigm was chosen to explore how meanings are constructed through linguistic and contextual features rather than to measure frequency or numerical patterns (Creswell, 2014). The

discourse-pragmatic approach integrates Discourse Analysis, which examines how texts construct social meaning, with Pragmatics, which explores speaker intentions, politeness strategies, and contextual interpretation (Schiffrin, 1994; Yule, 2010).

This design was particularly appropriate for investigating how international tourists linguistically construct positive travel experiences in their online reviews of tour services in Central Java. It enabled the researcher to uncover implicit interpersonal and cultural meanings embedded in naturally occurring digital communication, providing nuanced insights into the interplay between language, culture, and tourism discourse.

3.2 Data and Source of Data

The primary data of this research consisted of written online reviews posted by international tourists on the TripAdvisor website. The reviews analyzed were those written in English that expressed satisfaction, gratitude, or positive evaluations toward tour guides, itineraries, or tourism services located in Central Java, Indonesia (including Yogyakarta, Solo, and Semarang).

A total of 150 online reviews were collected between March and September 2025 using purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- 1) Written by international tourists
- 2) Describing tour experiences in Central Java
- 3) Containing evaluative and affective expressions
- 4) Publicly available with no personal or sensitive information disclosed.

The reviewers represented diverse national backgrounds—such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, and Japan—reflecting both individualistic and

collectivist orientations relevant to cross-cultural interpretation. Each review was coded using an alphanumeric system (e.g., R1–R150) to ensure anonymity and facilitate systematic analysis.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process involved three main stages:

- 1) Identification: The researcher browsed TripAdvisor using keywords such as Central Java tour service, Yogyakarta tour, and Solo private tour.
- 2) Selection: From the search results, only reviews that met the inclusion criteria were selected. Reviews containing both positive and negative elements were still included if the dominant tone was positive (i.e., more than 70% of evaluative adjectives and verbs carried positive polarity).
- 3) Documentation: Selected reviews were copied into a data corpus and formatted in Microsoft Word for annotation. Metadata such as posting date, location, and reviewer nationality (if available) were also recorded.

This procedure ensured systematic and replicable data collection consistent with ethical standards for online discourse research (Bruckman, 2002). Since the data were publicly accessible and contained no identifying personal information, formal consent was not required. Nevertheless, all materials were treated with academic discretion and respect for user anonymity.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis was carried out through several interrelated stages:

- 1) Discourse Analysis:
Identification of discourse

- structures such as thematic organization, narrative patterns, and evaluative sequences (Fairclough, 1992), focusing on how language constructs tourism experiences and social relations.
- 2) **Pragmatic Analysis:** Examination of politeness strategies and interpersonal meanings using Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory and Leech's (2014) Politeness Maxims to identify rapport-building and gratitude expressions.
 - 3) **Appraisal Analysis:** Application of Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Framework to analyze attitude, engagement, and graduation resources that reflect emotional tone and evaluative stance.
 - 4) **Annotation and Categorization:** Each lexical item conveying affect, judgment, or appreciation was annotated and coded based on its polarity (positive or neutral) and semantic function. For example:
Review excerpt: "Our guide was incredibly friendly and knowledgeable."
– friendly → Attitude: + Affect (positive emotion toward guide)
– knowledgeable → Attitude: +Judgment (positive assessment of ability)
– incredibly → Graduation: High intensity (amplifying positivity)
(R34) ATT: + Affect; + Judgment; Grad: High intensity
 - 5) **Interpretation and Thematization:** The identified linguistic and pragmatic features were categorized into broader thematic domains such as gratitude, empathy, collective identity, and recommendation.

- 6) **Verification:** Cross-review comparisons, multiple reading cycles, and peer debriefing (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) were conducted to ensure interpretative consistency and analytical rigor.

3.5 Research Validity and Reliability

Credibility and trustworthiness were ensured through triangulation, peer debriefing, and transparent documentation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation was achieved by cross-verifying results across three analytical dimensions—discourse, pragmatics, and appraisal. A detailed coding log and annotation samples were maintained for auditability.

Peer consultation with another researcher familiar with discourse-pragmatic analysis was conducted to minimize subjectivity and enhance reliability. The qualitative orientation of this study prioritizes interpretive validity, emphasizing how meanings are negotiated through culture, context, and linguistic choice, rather than statistical generalization.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and interpretation of how international tourists linguistically construct positive travel experiences in their online reviews of tour services in Central Java, Indonesia. The analysis integrates discourse and pragmatic perspectives to uncover patterns of evaluation, politeness, and interpersonal meaning that shape tourists' representations of their travel encounters. The findings are organized into three major subsections: (1) discourse strategies, (2) pragmatic strategies, and (3) intercultural and digital implications.

4.1 Discourse Strategies in Constructing Positive Experience

The analysis of 150 online reviews reveals three dominant discourse strategies employed by international tourists: (1) affective evaluation, (2) narrative personalization, and (3) collective endorsement. These strategies work together to create coherent, emotionally resonant narratives that represent Central Java as a hospitable and memorable destination.

These findings indicate that tourists' linguistic choices are systematically patterned to express emotion, authenticity, and social connectedness. Each review demonstrates how discourse operates as a form of narrative construction, transforming individual experiences into shared cultural meaning. Table 1 summarizes the discourse strategies identified in the corpus, along with their typical linguistic realizations and communicative functions.

Table 4.1 Discourse Strategies in Positive Tourist Reviews

No	Discourse Strategy	Linguistic Realizations	Communicative Function	Example Excerpt
1	Affective Evaluation	Evaluative adjectives (amazing, excellent, friendly, beautiful) and intensifiers (so, really, highly)	To express satisfaction and reinforce positive emotion	"It was an amazing experience! The guide was super friendly and helpful."
2	Narrative Personalization	First-person pronouns (I, we), storytelling, temporal sequencing	To build authenticity and emotional connection	"From the first day, our guide treated us like family."
3	Collective Endorsement	Inclusive pronouns (we, our group), recommendation formulae (highly recommend, must-try)	To strengthen social solidarity and persuade potential travelers	"We highly recommend this tour to everyone visiting Central Java."

Affective evaluation emerges as the most dominant discourse strategy, appearing in nearly all reviews. Adjectives such as amazing, unforgettable, and incredible frequently co-occur with intensifiers like so and really, producing heightened emotional tone and indexing satisfaction (Martin & White, 2005). The use of "super friendly," for example, reflects the informal yet enthusiastic register typical of user-generated online discourse, conveying personal engagement and sincerity.

Narrative personalization enhances the sense of authenticity by recounting specific personal experiences. Tourists

often narrate interactions that made their journeys meaningful—such as kindness from local guides or unexpected help from residents—thereby transforming individual experiences into relational narratives (Jaworski & Pritchard, 2005). These personal accounts contribute to a perception of Central Java as not only beautiful but also emotionally enriching.

Collective endorsement, meanwhile, strengthens credibility through communal voice. Many reviews shift from I to we, suggesting shared satisfaction and solidarity. Phrases such as "We will definitely come back" or "Everyone in our group was impressed" extend personal satisfaction into a

collective validation. This aligns with Fairclough's (2015) notion of solidarity-building discourse, where inclusivity reinforces persuasion and trustworthiness.

4.2 Pragmatic Strategies in Expressing Politeness and Solidarity

From a pragmatic perspective, three major strategies emerged: (1)

expressions of gratitude, (2) compliments and positive politeness, and (3) indirect recommendations through mitigation. These pragmatic acts illustrate how tourists' linguistic choices serve not only evaluative but also interpersonal and intercultural functions in digital contexts.

Table 4.2 Pragmatic Strategies Identified in Tourist Reviews

No	Pragmatic Strategy	Typical Linguistic Features	Pragmatic Function	Example Excerpt
1	Expressions of Gratitude	Thanking formulas (thank you so much, we are grateful, many thanks)	To acknowledge hospitality and enhance rapport	"Thank you for your hospitality and patience throughout our trip."
2	Compliments and Positive Politeness	Approving adjectives (friendly, kind, knowledgeable) and appreciation acts	To express admiration and recognize positive face	"Our driver was incredibly patient and made us feel safe."
3	Indirect Recommendations (Mitigation)	Conditional or hedged forms (you should try, it would be great if, worth visiting)	To give advice politely and avoid imposition	"You should try this tour if you love culture and history."

Expressions of gratitude appeared in 85% of the corpus, signaling not only satisfaction but also reciprocity (Leech, 2014). Frequent thanking formulas function as positive politeness markers that reduce social distance and foster interpersonal warmth.

Compliments and positive politeness are primarily directed toward people—guides, drivers, and locals—rather than infrastructure or facilities. This human-centered focus reflects empathy and relational orientation, as seen in "Our guide was so passionate about Javanese history." Such compliments go beyond professionalism, acknowledging emotional and cultural engagement.

Indirect recommendations demonstrate awareness of intercultural politeness norms. Rather than issuing direct

imperatives, reviewers prefer softened suggestions such as "It would be great for those who enjoy nature." This strategy aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework of maintaining negative face, combining persuasion with deference.

Overall, these pragmatic strategies reveal that online reviews are not merely transactional or informational texts but socially embedded acts of rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Through gratitude, compliments, and mitigated advice, reviewers construct a discursive environment of harmony and respect, reflecting both universal politeness conventions and local Indonesian values of *ramah tamah* (hospitality) and *tenggang rasa* (mutual consideration).

4.3 Intercultural and Digital Implications

Beyond their linguistic and pragmatic dimensions, the findings hold significant implications for intercultural communication and digital discourse studies. Tourists' frequent use of gratitude, inclusive pronouns, and mitigated recommendations reflects relational sensitivity that resonates with Javanese cultural principles of *tata krama* (proper manners) and *unggah-ungguh* (social respect).

Interestingly, many reviewers appear to accommodate local politeness norms unconsciously. Their linguistic patterns show convergence with host cultural expectations—a phenomenon Blitvich (2010) describes as intercultural accommodation. This alignment suggests that positive digital discourse can act as a bridge between global travelers and local value systems.

From a digital perspective, these patterns are shaped by the affordances of the TripAdvisor platform. Features such as the 5-star rating system, “helpful” button, and owner-reply options encourage users to engage in affective and persuasive communication. As Zappavigna (2012) observes, such affordances create “emotional architectures” that facilitate expressions of appreciation and empathy online. Consequently, online reviews function not only as consumer feedback but also as performances of intercultural politeness.

Practically, the findings carry relevance for tourism education and marketing. Training programs for local tour guides and service providers can incorporate pragmatic awareness modules to improve responsiveness to tourists' linguistic expectations. Similarly, tourism promotion strategies can leverage authentic positive discourse

from user reviews to strengthen global narratives of Indonesian hospitality.

Overall, the interplay between discourse strategies, pragmatic acts, and digital mediation demonstrates that online reviews operate as both communicative and cultural practices. Through emotionally charged and polite language, international tourists participate in the social construction of hospitality, empathy, and cultural identity within virtual spaces of tourism interaction.

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated how international tourists construct positive travel experiences through language in their online reviews of tour services in Central Java, Indonesia. Using a discourse-pragmatic approach, the analysis revealed that tourists employ specific linguistic and pragmatic strategies to express satisfaction, appreciation, and interpersonal connection within digital tourism discourse.

At the discourse level, three dominant strategies were identified: affective evaluation, narrative personalization, and collective endorsement. These strategies illustrate how evaluative adjectives, storytelling, and communal voice work together to portray Central Java as a hospitable and memorable destination. Meanwhile, at the pragmatic level, tourists consistently used expressions of gratitude, compliments and positive politeness, and indirect recommendations through mitigation. These acts not only convey positive evaluation but also reflect intercultural sensitivity and relational harmony between travelers and local hosts.

Overall, online travel reviews function as more than descriptive narratives—they are interpersonal

performances that shape destination image and foster cross-cultural understanding. Through linguistic choices, international tourists participate in a process of rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) that aligns global communication norms with local values of *ramah tamah* (hospitality), *toleransi* (respect), and *sopan santun* (politeness). In the digital environment, such expressions of empathy and appreciation demonstrate how local values of respectful interaction find new forms through the affordances of online platforms such as TripAdvisor.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to discourse-pragmatic scholarship by situating online tourist reviews at the intersection of evaluation, politeness, and intercultural discourse. It underscores how digital texts can reveal broader socio-cultural processes of empathy, solidarity, and appreciation in global tourism communication.

Practically, the findings provide useful insights for tourism practitioners, educators, and marketers. Training for tour guides and front-line staff should include pragmatic and intercultural awareness, enabling them to recognize and respond to the linguistic expectations of international visitors. Tourism boards and marketing professionals can also draw on authentic positive language from online reviews to promote destination narratives that emphasize friendliness, care, and cultural warmth.

This study has several limitations, as it focused solely on English-language reviews collected from a single platform—TripAdvisor—within a limited time frame (March–September 2025). Consequently, the results may not capture linguistic variations across platforms, languages, or seasons.

Future research may expand this scope by conducting comparative analyses of reviews from other Indonesian destinations or exploring cross-platform data (e.g., Google Reviews, Booking.com, or Instagram comments). Incorporating multimodal analysis, examining both visual and textual elements, would also enhance understanding of how language, imagery, and emotion jointly construct positive travel experiences in digital tourism discourse.

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