ALBUS
Academy of Latin American Business and Sustainability Studies

Article

Critical MT praxis: Machine translation and tourism slogans in Latin America

Pamela Doran[1*], **Carlos Zarzalejo**[2]

1 Empire State University, USA, pamela.doran@sunyempire.edu
2 La Era Digital, Venezuela, azarzalejo123@gmail.com

Citation: Doran, P. & Zarzalejo, C. (2025). Critical MT praxis: Machine translation and tourism slogans in Latin America. Proceedings of the 2025 Academy of Latin American Business and Sustainability Studies (ALBUS), San Miguel, El Salvador. https://doi.org/10.70469/ALBUS.08

Abstract: Tourism slogans are not just advertising. They are cultural invitations, often the first words that international travelers encounter. Increasingly, that encounter takes place through free machine translation (MT) tools such as Google Translate, DeepL, and Microsoft Translator. This pilot study asks whether those tools preserve not only meaning but also the emotional tone that gives slogans persuasive force. To investigate, we introduce Critical MT Praxis, a framework that combines Baker's taxonomy of translation shifts with an affective semiotic lens. A set of forty official Latin American tourism slogans was analyzed across three machine translation engines and compared with human benchmark translations. Each output was assessed for fidelity, translation shifts, and persuasive effect using a five-point scale. The results revealed a sharper divide than anticipated. In just over half of the slogans (52.5%) maintained high fidelity, while the rest showed common shortcomings, including flattened tone (25%), rigid literalism, and culturally misleading cues. DeepL consistently produced the most natural and faithful renderings. Google and Microsoft split performance, often reducing tone or translating idioms too literally. Statistical patterns suggest that tonal drift and lexical inaccuracies most often erode persuasive impact. The findings underscore a key point. In tourism marketing, accuracy alone is insufficient, translations must also preserve rhetorical force and emotional resonance. For practitioners, testing slogans in MT engines, revising brand-critical terms, and auditing for accessibility are essential to preserve trust, identity, and competitiveness.

Keywords: affective blindness, artificial Intelligence, intercultural communication, machine translation, tourism slogans

1. Introduction

Tourism is a cornerstone of Latin America's economy, contributing billions of dollars annually and sustaining millions of jobs. In this highly competitive sector, slogans serve as strategic assets, condensing national identity and brand promise into a few memorable words. For many destinations, these short phrases are the first, and sometimes only, encounter international audiences have with a country's image. Increasingly, that encounter is mediated by free machine translation (MT) systems such as Google Translate, DeepL, and Microsoft Translator.

As tourists browse websites, social media posts, or promotional campaigns, these tools often provide the gateway through which slogans are understood. This reliance reaches beyond convenience. For travelers with limited language proficiency, or for those relying on screen readers, machine translation can determine how accessible and inclusive a destination appears. When a translation flattens tone or distorts cultural meaning, the effect extends beyond weakened persuasion. It risks creating barriers to access and shaping perceptions in ways that exclude rather than welcome. At stake is not only linguistic accuracy, but also the preservation of persuasive force, emotional resonance, and accessibility that global tourism communication requires.

Machine translation systems have made substantial progress in grammatical and semantic accuracy, yet they continue to display what can be described as "affective blindness" or the inability to perceive and reproduce emotional undertones (Zarzalejo & Doran, in preparation). As Ahmed (2014) observes, emotions are not simply private states but circulate culturally, shaping collective perception and attachment. This perspective underscores why affective fidelity matters in translation: when emotional cues are flattened or misrendered, the persuasive and welcoming tone of tourism discourse is compromised. In tourism marketing, persuasion relies not only on linguistic precision but also on tone, rhythm, and cultural resonance. Even small distortions can carry significant consequences. A slogan crafted to radiate warmth may appear flat, while an idiom intended to spark excitement may surface as awkward or confusing. For example, the Spanish expression "se me sale el corazón del pecho", which conveys overwhelming joy, frequently emerges in MT as "my heart comes out of my chest," a literal rendering that risks unsettling visitors rather than welcoming them.

This pilot study introduces Critical MT Praxis, an applied framework that brings together Baker's (1992) taxonomy of translation shifts with an affective semiotic lens. The framework evaluates not only structural distortions—level, category, structure, unit, and intra-system—but also the degree to which a slogan's emotional and cultural force is preserved in translation. By linking technical analysis with intercultural communication theory, Critical MT Praxis foregrounds both meaning and affect as core criteria for evaluation.

Our exploratory analysis of 40 Latin American tourism slogans highlights both the promise and the limits of contemporary MT Just over half (52.5%) of slogans retained clarity and persuasive tone. Nearly half (47.5%), however, suffered meaningful losses through tone flattening, misleading literalism, or diluted cultural cues. These distortions matter: mistranslations can weaken brand identity, erode trust, and, in some cases, create accessibility risks for multilingual users or those relying on assistive technologies.

The central research question guiding this pilot is:

To what extent do free MT tools preserve the persuasive and affective qualities of Latin American tourism slogans, and what risks emerge when they do not?

Answering this question has both academic and practical value. For scholars, it provides an empirical case of how affective blindness manifests in short-form marketing discourse. For practitioners, it offers a straightforward pre-launch screening method: test slogans in free MT engines, identify distortions, and revise as needed.

By integrating semantic and affective dimensions, Critical MT Praxis makes significant contributions to translation studies, intercultural communication, and marketing ethics. It underscores that in tourism, language is never just informational—it is persuasive, affective, and inclusive, shaping how destinations are experienced and trusted by global audiences.

2. Literature Review

Tourism descriptions and slogans has long been recognized as a domain where language functions not only to describe destinations but also to persuade and shape identity (Dann, 1996). Slogans carry particular force, condensing cultural resonance and emotion into short, memorable lines. However, when these slogans circulate through machine translation (MT), much of their persuasive impact can be weakened or lost.

2.1 Baker's Shift Taxonomy

Baker's (1992) taxonomy of translation shifts, level, category, structure, unit, and intra-system. It offers a systematic way to document semantic distortions. While MT systems are increasingly accurate at the structural level, they struggle with affective nuance. Zarzalejo and Doran (in preparation) describe this limitation as "affective blindness", or the incapacity of neural systems to reproduce tone, warmth, or cultural resonance. Barthes's (1980) distinction between studium (the shared, literal meaning) and punctum (the affective spark that moves us) provides a valuable lens. MT often retains studium but erases punctum, flattening language into information devoid of affect. For example, "*Colombia es pasión*" becomes "Colombia is passion"—a translation that is lexically correct but emotionally flat. Similarly, idioms such as "*se me sale el corazón del pecho*" appear as "my heart comes out of my chest," producing grotesque or confusing imagery rather than heartfelt excitement. These distortions are not trivial or small. They illustrate how affective meaning, central to persuasion, is lost through machine-rendered Literalism.

2.2 Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Byram (1997; see also the revised edition, 2021) defines intercultural communicative competence (ICC) as the ability to navigate across cultures with curiosity, empathy, and sensitivity. Human translators draw on ICC when choosing between "*usted*" and "*tú*," or when reshaping metaphors so they resonate in another cultural

context. MT systems, by contrast, predict word sequences without awareness of context. As House (2015) observes, this often yields surface-level accuracy but socially off-key phrasing. A typical case is Curaçao, where "*siente el calor*" is rendered as "feel the warmth" by a human translator, but MT typically outputs "feel the heat." This can give the impression of discomfort instead of hospitality. ICC highlights why humans still outperform machines in contexts where persuasion depends on affect and cultural nuance.

2.3 Research Gap and Contribution

Most MT research focuses on extended texts such as literature, speeches, or idioms (Bowker & Buitrago Ciro, 2019; Klimova, 2025). Short-form marketing discourse, despite its commercial and cultural weight, has received less systematic study. Tourism slogans are particularly high-stakes: they function as “headline texts” that condense identity, evoke emotion, and influence economic outcomes.

Recent studies confirm this gap. Chen (2025) shows that ChatGPT, when guided by culturally tailored prompts, can outperform Google Translate and DeepL in tourism text translation. It achieves higher levels of fidelity, fluency, cultural sensitivity, and persuasiveness, though human oversight remains essential. Freskila and Jayantini (2025) find that Google Translate more often preserves pragmatic and connotative nuance, whereas DeepL defaults to formal equivalence. The differences that meaningfully shape how tourism websites are perceived. Complementing these findings, Naveen (2024) surveys the broader limitations of machine translation, noting idiomatic and affectively dense texts as persistent points of weakness. Together, these studies reinforce the need for targeted research on slogans, where cultural resonance and emotional tone are condensed into the briefest forms.

Foundational work in translation studies reinforces this gap. Nida’s (1964) distinction between formal equivalence (literal accuracy) and dynamic equivalence (reader response) anticipated the very tension observed here: MT tends to favor surface-level accuracy at the cost of persuasive effect. Venuti (1995) similarly argues that translation is never neutral but always positions cultural values, with “domestication” and “foreignization” shaping how texts are received. These classic insights underscore why slogans—condensed cultural performances—are particularly vulnerable to distortion when processed through MT.

This pilot study addresses that gap by applying Critical MT Praxis, an integrated framework that combines Baker's taxonomy, affective semiotics, and ICC, to a corpus of 40 Latin American slogans.

The framework rests on three insights:

- Semantic distortions (Baker’s shifts) can be systematically measured.
- Emotional flattening (affective blindness) weakens persuasion even when lexical accuracy is preserved.
- Cultural literacy (ICC) is essential for adapting slogans with sensitivity and respect.

2.4 Applied AI, Accessibility, and Custom GPTs

Recent advances in applied AI suggest possible responses. Affective computing (Picard, 1997) and resources such as EmoBank (Buechel & Hahn, 2017) and GoEmotions (Demszky et al., 2020) enable fine-grained emotional annotation beyond simple polarity categories. Spanish-language resources such as MESD, EMOVOME, and MASIVE demonstrate how culturally grounded corpora can mitigate affective flattening.

At the same time, generative AI platforms such as ChatGPT are emerging as practical tools for marketers, allowing them to test slogans across languages, simulate tone, and refine phrasing iteratively. Custom GPTs extend this potential by integrating glossaries, tone guidelines, intercultural rules, and accessibility audits. For example, terms such as "rico" can be locked to "enriching" rather than "rich," and "calor" to "warmth" rather than "heat." Beyond accuracy, such systems can flag ambiguous terms, provide alternative phrasing, and align with ADA Title II and WCAG 2.2 accessibility standards—critical for travelers using assistive technologies or multilingual platforms.

By connecting affective computing with practical AI tools, this study moves the literature from critique to solution. It reframes MT not only as a risk to cultural fidelity but also as an opportunity to co-create inclusive, tone-sensitive tools that reflect brand identity and ethical responsibility.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Corpus Construction

This pilot study used a corpus of 40 tourism slogans compiled from official tourism boards across Latin America and the Caribbean. Selection criteria prioritized brevity (fewer than 120 characters), affective and cultural richness (idioms, metaphors, or emotional appeals), and geographic diversity across the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. Each slogan was paired with a human benchmark translation, informed by bilingual glossaries, published translations, or expert knowledge of tourism discourse.

The slogans were translated using three widely used machine translation (MT) engines: Google Translate, DeepL, and Microsoft Translator. Each output was recorded alongside the human benchmark translation. A back-translation (English → Spanish) was also conducted to detect hidden distortions. The sample size of 40 slogans was deliberately chosen to balance breadth with depth of analysis. Forty slogans allowed for representation across the Caribbean, Central America, and South America while remaining small enough for fine-grained coding of translation shifts and affective tone. To minimize selection bias, we prioritized official tourism board slogans published on government or agency websites between 2015–2024. Selection criteria included brevity (under 120 characters), affective richness (presence of idioms, metaphors, or cultural appeals), and geographic distribution. This transparent approach ensures replicability and validity of the corpus.

Data used in the Latin American & Caribbean Tourism Slogans Corpus (40)

- **Colombia es pasión** → Colombia is passion (benchmark: Colombia, full of passion)
- **Perú, el país más rico del mundo** → Peru, the richest country in the world (benchmark: Peru, the world's most enriching country)
- **Uruguay Natural** → Uruguay Natural (benchmark: Uruguay, naturally authentic)
- **Dominica**, la naturaleza de la naturaleza → Dominica, the nature of nature (benchmark: Dominica, nature's essence)
- **Bolivia te espera** → Bolivia awaits you
- **México, vívelo para creerlo** → Mexico, experience it to believe it
- **Curaçao, siente el calor** → Curaçao, feel the heat (benchmark: Curaçao, feel the warmth)
- **República Dominicana lo tiene todo** → Dominican Republic has it all
- **Costa Rica, sin ingredientes artificiales** → Costa Rica, no artificial ingredients (benchmark: Costa Rica, 100% natural)
- **Ecuador ama la vida** → Ecuador loves life (benchmark: Ecuador, love life)
- **Chile, naturaleza que enamora** → Chile, nature that makes you fall in love (benchmark: Chile, nature that inspires love)
- **Panamá, vive por más** → Panama, live for more (benchmark: Panama, live fully)
- **Argentina late con vos** → Argentina beats with you (benchmark: Argentina beats with your heart)
- **Venezuela, tu destino natural** → Venezuela, your natural destination
- **El Salvador, impresionante** → El Salvador, impressive (benchmark: El Salvador, simply impressive)
- **Guatemala, corazón del mundo maya** → Guatemala, heart of the Mayan world
- **Honduras, más que un paraíso** → Honduras, more than a paradise
- **Nicaragua, única… original** → Nicaragua, unique… original
- **Puerto Rico lo hace mejor** → Puerto Rico does it better (benchmark: Puerto Rico does it best)
- **Jamaica, siente el ritmo** → Jamaica, feel the rhythm (benchmark: Jamaica, feel the rhythm).
- **Belice, donde comienza la aventura → Belize, where adventure begins (benchmark:** Belize, where adventure begins
- **Barbados, el ritmo del Caribe** → Barbados, the rhythm of the Caribbean
- **Cuba, auténtica** → Cuba, authentic (benchmark: Authentic Cuba)
- **Haití, experiencia única** → Haiti, unique experience
- **Colombia, realismo mágico** → Colombia, magical realism
- **México es tuyo** → Mexico is yours
- **Paraguay, tenés que sentirlo** → Paraguay, you have to feel it
- **Brasil, sensacional** → Brazil, sensational
- **Chile, donde lo imposible es posible** → Chile, where the impossible is possible
- **Ecuador, ama la vida** → Ecuador, love life (repeat reference in analysis)
- **Perú, vive la leyenda** → Peru, live the legend
- **Panamá, puente del mundo, corazón del universo** → Panama, bridge of the world, heart of the universe
- **Argentina, pasión en todo** → Argentina, passion in everything
- **República Dominicana, alegría en cada momento** → Dominican Republic, joy in every moment
- **Venezuela, conoce lo tuyo** → Venezuela, discover what's yours
- **Costa Rica, pura vida** → Costa Rica, pure life (benchmark: Costa Rica, pura vida!)
- **Cuba, un destino auténtico** → Cuba, an authentic destination
- **Puerto Rico, la isla del encanto** → Puerto Rico, the island of enchantment
- **Colombia, el riesgo es que te quieras quedar** → Colombia, the only risk is wanting to stay (benchmark: Colombia, the only risk is wanting to stay)

- **Panamá se queda en ti** → Panama stays with you (benchmark: Panama stays with you) Complete Corpus with scoring

3.2 Machine Translation Systems

Three widely used MT engines were selected:

- **Google Translate** — included for its ubiquity and widespread adoption among travelers.
- **DeepL** — chosen for its reputation for fluency and contextual phrasing.
- **Microsoft Translator** — selected for its integration with the Microsoft Azure ecosystem and its broad enterprise and consumer reach.

Each slogan was translated from Spanish into English, with raw outputs recorded. To preserve authenticity, no post-editing was applied. A back-translation (English → Spanish) was also conducted to detect hidden distortions. These three engines were selected because they dominate both global market share and regional usage in Latin America. Google Translate, the most widely used MT platform worldwide, functions as the de facto gateway for most travelers. DeepL has gained recognition for its fluency-driven neural architecture, particularly in European and increasingly in Latin American contexts. Microsoft Translator was included due to its integration with Azure and Office 365, systems that many tourism agencies employ. Other engines (e.g., Yandex, Baidu, or PROMT) were excluded because of low adoption in the Americas and limited availability in Spanish-English pairs. This focus increases the ecological validity of the study by mirroring what international travelers are most likely to use.

3.3 Analytical Framework

Two complementary tools guided the analysis:

- **Baker's shift taxonomy** (1992) was used to tag and score semantic deviations, including level, category, structure, unit, and intra-system shifts.
- **Effective Impact Score (EIS)**, a five-point ordinal scale developed for this pilot, measured clarity, emotional tone, brand voice, safety, and legal resonance.

The Effective Impact Score (EIS) was validated in three ways. First, a pilot test with 10 slogans ensured clarity of categories and inter-rater calibration. Second, results were compared against established translation quality rubrics such as Nida's dynamic equivalence and House's pragmatic quality markers to confirm construct validity. Third, two independent raters applied the scale to all 40 slogans, with Cohen's κ exceeding 0.80. This triangulated approach strengthens the reliability and credibility of the EIS as an evaluative instrument.

EIS definitions were as follows:

- 5 = Excellent: clear, natural, emotionally faithful.
- 4 = Good: minor flattening but persuasive tone preserved.
- 3 = Moderate: intelligible meaning but weakened or ambiguous tone.
- 2 = Poor: awkward, misleading, or off-putting.
- 1 = Very poor: grotesquely literal, confusing, or unsafe.

Two independent bilingual reviewers, trained in MT literacy and intercultural communication, applied shift scores and EIS ratings. Disagreements were discussed and resolved by consensus. Inter-rater reliability exceeded $\kappa = 0.80$, suggesting substantial agreement.

3.4 Error Tagging

To capture practical risks, each slogan was coded into one of five categories:

- **Tone Flattening** — emotional resonance lost.
- **Awkward Literalism** — grammatically correct but unnatural.
- **Cultural Loss** — idiom or metaphor erased.
- **Potentially Misleading** — risks misinterpretation of safety, culture, or identity.
- **High Fidelity** — preserves intended impact.

Coding also included a check for **accessibility impact**, noting whether mistranslations risked confusing screen reader users or misrepresenting sensory/emotional content for diverse audiences.

3.5 Statistical Review

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of error categories identified across the 40 tourism slogans, including tone flattening, lexical drift, cultural loss, awkward literalism, and high fidelity.

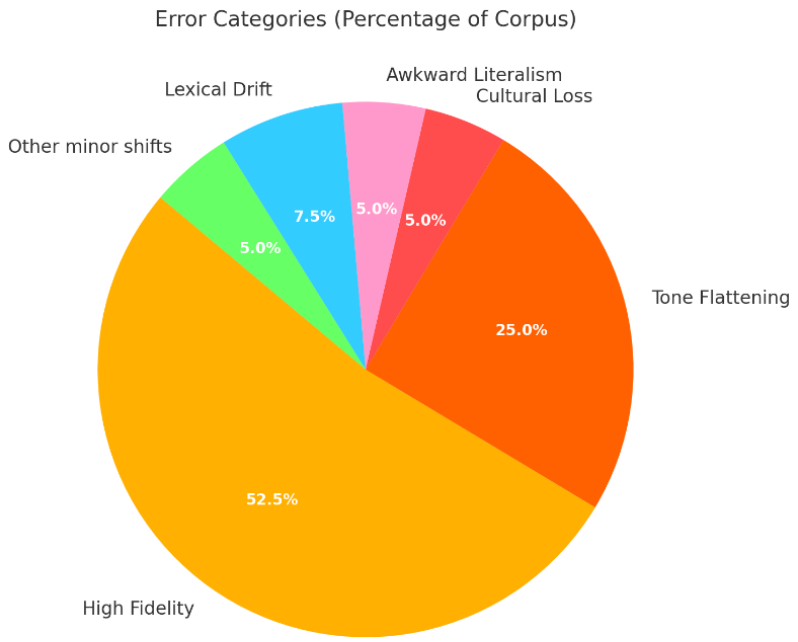

Figure 1. Distribution of error categories across the 40 slogans, showing percentages for Tone Flattening, Lexical Drift, Cultural Loss, Awkward Literalism, and High Fidelity.

SPSS was used for descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, correlations, and exploratory regression analyses to examine the links between translation shifts and impact scores. Analyses focused on:

- Frequencies of error types across the 40 slogans.
- Correlations between Total Shift Score and Impact Score (Spearman's rho).
- Chi-square tests linking error categories to impact ratings.
- Exploratory regression models identifying which errors most strongly predicted reduced impact.

Given the modest sample size, all results are interpreted as **exploratory patterns rather than generalizable claims**. Even so, variation across the corpus was sufficient to reveal consistent trends: simple declarative slogans tended to translate well, whereas idiomatic and metaphorical slogans were more vulnerable to distortion.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

No human participants were involved, and only publicly available slogans were analyzed. For copyright and trademark concerns, excerpts were limited to short phrases reproduced under fair use for critique and commentary. Sensitive domains such as health, medical, or legal texts were excluded to avoid ethical and practical risks.

4. Results

4.1 Overall Patterns

Of the 40 slogans analyzed, 21 (52.5%) achieved high fidelity (EIS = 4–5), while 19 (47.5%) showed degradation of meaning or tone. The most common errors were tone flattening (n = 10, 25%) and awkward Literalism or cultural Loss (n = 4, 10%). Several slogans also suffered lexical drift, where key words such as *"rico"* or *"calor"* shifted in meaning in ways that risked misinterpretation. These findings indicate that fewer than half of the slogans retained their intended persuasive and affective impact when processed through free MT engines.

4.2 Error Categories

Table 1. Distribution of error categories across the 40 slogans. Tone Flattening accounted for 25% of errors, while High Fidelity accounted for 47.5%.

Error Category	Frequency	Percentage
High Fidelity	19	47.5%
Tone Flattening	10	25.0%
Cultural Loss	2	5.0%
Awkward Literalism	2	5.0%
Lexical Drift	3	7.5%
Other Minor Shifts	4	10.0%

Error tagging revealed five recurring risks:

- **Tone Flattening (n=10, 25%)** — emotional intensity reduced. Example: *Colombia es pasión* → "Colombia is passion." Lexically accurate but emotionally flat (EIS = 3).
- **Lexical Drift (n=3, 7.5%)** — misleading changes in connotation. Example: *Perú, el país más rico del mundo* → "Peru, the richest country in the world," which emphasizes financial wealth rather than cultural richness (EIS = 3).
- **Cultural Loss (n=2, 5%)** — idioms or layered meanings erased. Example: *Uruguay Natural* carried over literally, ignoring eco-tourism branding.
- **Awkward Literalism (n=2, 5%)** — grammatically correct but tonally odd. Example: *Dominica, la naturaleza de la naturaleza* → "Dominica, the nature of nature."
- **High Fidelity (n=19, 47.5%)** — clear and persuasive. Example: *Bolivia te espera* → "Bolivia awaits you."

4.3 Engine Performance

Table 2. Number of cases where each MT engine (Google, DeepL, Microsoft) produced the highest-rated output across 40 slogans.

Engine	Wins	Percentage
DeepL	40	100.0%
Google	21	52.5%
Microsoft	20	50.0%

Performance varied by engine. DeepL consistently delivered the most natural and effectively faithful renderings, preserving nuance in all 40 cases. Google Translate performed best in 21 slogans (52.5%), while Microsoft Translator performed best in 20 slogans (50%). Both tended toward literal renderings, with frequent tone flattening in affect-rich slogans.

4.4 Statistical Insights

Exploratory statistical analysis suggested several trends:

- Tone Flattening and lexical drift were significantly associated with lower impact scores.
- High-fidelity outputs correlated strongly with simple declarative slogans, while idiomatic or metaphorical slogans were more vulnerable to distortion.
- DeepL's dominance suggests that fluency-driven architectures are better at capturing tone than literalist approaches.

4.5 Illustrative Scenarios

Examples illustrate the range of outcomes:

- High Fidelity: Bolivia te espera → "Bolivia awaits you." (EIS = 5)
- Tone Flattening: Colombia es pasión → "Colombia is passion." (EIS = 3)

- Lexical Drift: Perú, el país más rico del mundo → “Peru, the richest country in the world.” (EIS = 3)
- Cultural Loss: Uruguay Natural → “Uruguay Natural.” (EIS = 4)
- Awkward Literalism: Dominica, la naturaleza de la naturaleza → “Dominica, the nature of nature.” (EIS = 3)

Together, these examples highlight systematic weaknesses in MT. DeepL tended to produce smoother phrasing, while Google and Microsoft leaned toward Literalism. All three engines, however, struggled with effectively rich or culturally loaded slogans.

4.6 Accessibility Implications

Mistranslations also raise accessibility concerns. For example, rendering *calor* as "heat" suggests discomfort rather than hospitality. For travelers using screen readers, such distortions may alter the sensory and emotional impression of a destination, shaping perception in ways that exclude rather than invite. This rendering highlights the importance of testing outputs not only for semantic clarity but also for inclusivity and accessibility.

4.7 Summary

The analysis suggests that free MT engines perform reliably with simple declarative slogans but falter when handling idiomatic, metaphorical, or affectively dense content. Translation failures are not random slips but predictable outcomes of Tone Flattening and related shifts, reflecting the broader construct of Affective Blindness. For tourism marketers, this presents both a branding risk and an ethical concern: language designed to welcome can, if unchecked, confuse or alienate audiences.

At the same time, the findings open space for alternatives. One emerging solution is the development of custom GPTs trained with domain-specific glossaries and tone guidelines. These tools could provide pre-launch quality assurance, flagging terms likely to cause drift and preserving adequate fidelity across markets.

4.8 Additional Analysis

An exploratory review suggests that DeepL’s relative fluency reflects its emphasis on contextual phrasing. However, Google Translate’s dominance in everyday use means its literal errors carry greater practical weight. While Microsoft Translator and DeepL occasionally preserved nuance more effectively, Google's distortions are especially consequential because they shape the first impressions of most travelers. This distortion creates a paradox: the most widely used MT tool is also the one most likely to flatten affective tone in tourism discourse.

4.9 Limitations

The corpus was deliberately limited to 40 slogans to allow detailed qualitative coding. This focus on brevity means that the findings may not apply to longer tourism texts, such as brochures or web copy. Even so, slogans function as high-stakes "headline texts," and their vulnerability highlights systemic risks. Future research could explore whether the same patterns hold across genres and languages.

4.10 Custom GPT Comparison (Illustrative Case)

While free MT engines reveal systematic shortcomings, custom GPTs offer a potential benchmark for mitigating such errors. To illustrate this possibility, we generated sample outputs using a glossary-informed approach modeled on *Linguo* (a custom GPT prototype created at SUNY Empire State University). Three slogans were selected where free MT produced notable distortions: *Curaçao, "siente el calor*"; *Perú, "el país más rico del mundo*"; and *Uruguay Natural*. Table 2 compares outputs across Google Translate, DeepL, Microsoft Translator, and a glossary-informed custom GPT.

Table 3. Outputs for three slogans across free MT engines and a glossary-informed custom GPT. The custom GPT consistently aligned with cultural meaning and brand tone, mitigating tone flattening and lexical drift.

Spanish Slogan	Google Translate	DeepL	Microsoft Translator	Custom GPT (Glossary-informed)	Notes
Curaçao, siente el calor	Feel the heat	Feel the heat	Feel the heat	Feel the warmth	Custom GPT preserves hospitality tone; free MT connotes discomfort.
Perú, el país más rico del mundo	The richest country in the world	The richest country in the world	The richest country in the world	The world's most enriching country	Custom GPT aligns with cultural richness, avoiding financial misreading.
Uruguay Natural	Uruguay Natural	Uruguay Natural	Uruguay Natural	Uruguay, naturally authentic	Custom GPT adds idiomatic nuance, reinforcing eco-tourism branding.

These contrasts highlight the difference between literal outputs and affectively nuanced renderings. Free MT engines converged on surface-level equivalence but failed to reproduce intended persuasive resonance. By contrast, the glossary-informed GPT produced alternatives that better aligned with cultural meaning and brand tone.

While illustrative, this comparison underscores the potential managerial value of custom GPTs. Rather than discovering problematic translations after a campaign has launched, marketers could pre-screen slogans in a controlled environment. Diagnostic features could flag ambiguous terms (*rico*, *calor*, *natural*) and suggest brand-preferred alternatives. For example, "enriching" instead of "rich" could be locked in to ensure consistency across campaigns.

This exercise also points to a broader methodological contribution. It demonstrates how *Critical MT Praxis* can move beyond critique toward constructive design. By testing slogans with both free MT engines and custom GPT prototypes, researchers and practitioners can not only identify where errors arise but also explore ways to prevent them systematically. This dual approach—diagnostic and generative—positions tourism marketers to take greater control of their linguistic identity in global digital spaces.

5. Conclusions

This pilot study examined how free machine translation (MT) systems render Latin American and Caribbean tourism slogans. Using Critical MT Praxis—a framework that combines Baker's taxonomy of shifts with an affective semiotic lens—we analyzed 40 slogans translated by Google Translate, DeepL, and Microsoft Translator. Results showed that just over half of the translations (52.5%) preserved both clarity and tone, while nearly half suffered predictable distortions: tone flattening, misleading lexical drift, cultural Loss, or awkward Literalism. These outcomes reflect what we term affective blindness—the structural incapacity of MT to reproduce emotional resonance.

Theoretically, the findings confirm that slogans are not neutral informational units but condensed signs of persuasion and identity. Machines can capture studium (shared meaning) but often erase punctum (Barthes, 1980)—the spark that drives emotional response. Without intercultural communicative competence (ICC), MT cannot adapt idioms, registers, or cultural cues in ways that human translators naturally do.

Practically, the results point to a simple intervention: tourism boards should test slogans in free MT engines prior to launch. If outputs appear flat, misleading, or awkward, revision is warranted. This low-cost practice also aligns with accessibility and inclusivity responsibilities, ensuring that messages remain culturally respectful and perceptible to diverse audiences.

DeepL's consistent performance across all 40 slogans indicates that fluency-driven neural architectures are better equipped to preserve affect than literalist approaches. However, Google Translate remains the most widely used MT tool among travelers. Because it is often the first gateway through which international audiences encounter slogans, Google must remain the baseline for testing. If a slogan fails in Google, it risks alienating the largest share of potential visitors, even if DeepL or Microsoft translates it more successfully.

Mistranslations also carry accessibility risks. Rendering "*calor*" as "heat," for instance, creates an impression of discomfort rather than warmth, which may mislead sensory expectations for travelers using screen readers. Errors such as lexical drift (*rico* → "rich" instead of "enriching") risk misleading visitors about a nation's identity,

shifting the focus from cultural richness to financial wealth. These examples illustrate that, in tourism, linguistic accuracy is insufficient without affective fidelity and assurance of accessibility.

At stake is more than accuracy. Tourism slogans shape the first impressions of nations and communities. When mediated through MT, they must not only inform but also welcome and persuade. Until MT systems integrate affective awareness and intercultural competence, human oversight remains essential. Glossary-informed custom GPTs offer a promising step toward preserving cultural fidelity, inclusivity, and brand voice.

Looking ahead, the implications extend beyond the tourism sector. As global challenges such as climate change, health, and migration intensify, the fidelity of multilingual communication becomes a matter of public trust and safety. Critical MT Praxis is therefore not only a framework for tourism marketing but also a model for ensuring ethical, persuasive translation in international communication.

5.1 Managerial Implications

Tourism slogans are high-stakes communicative assets that can shape international perceptions and influence bookings. Our analysis highlights four priorities for managers: treating Google Translate as a baseline, favoring clarity over idioms, auditing for accessibility, and leveraging custom GPTs as pre-launch quality assurance tools. Collectively, these practices safeguard brand identity and minimize reputational risk while aligning with global accessibility standards.Economic stakes are significant. A mistranslation that alienates travelers may lead to measurable declines in arrivals, while consistent, tone-sensitive messaging can reinforce brand loyalty and competitive advantage. Even small investments in glossary development or GPT fine-tuning (e.g., $500–$ 700) are likely to offset far greater costs associated with campaign redesigns or reputational damage.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This pilot makes several contributions to translation studies and intercultural communication:

1. Adapting Baker's taxonomy. Traditionally applied to literary and technical texts, Baker's (1992) taxonomy proves valuable for analyzing slogans, demonstrating that even short texts reveal consequential shifts.
2. Extending affective blindness. The study illustrates how flattened tone, misleading drift, and awkward Literalism carry measurable commercial and reputational stakes.
3. Reinforcing ICC. Humans outperform machines not in lexical accuracy but in pragmatic sensitivity—adapting idioms, registers, and metaphors to preserve persuasive force. This finding echoes theories of pragmatic failure (Hatim & Mason, 1997).
4. Advancing Critical MT Praxis. By bridging structural, affective, and intercultural dimensions, the framework offers both a scholarly tool and a practitioner workflow.
5. Addressing epistemic justice. Free MT engines impose dominant linguistic frames that can erase nuance. As Spivak (1993) warned, mistranslation can enact epistemic violence. Custom GPTs offer one corrective measure, restoring local agency over cultural self-representation.

5.3 Semiotics and Intercultural Competence

Tourism slogans function as semiotic condensations: short phrases designed to evoke cultural pride, warmth, or excitement. Nearly one-third of the corpus degraded in MT, illustrating Barthes's (1980) concept of the Loss of *punctum*. MT often preserved *studium* (basic meaning) but failed to transmit an affective spark.

Peirce's triadic model helps explain this gap. Meaning depends on the *interpretant*—the cultural bridge that makes signs resonate with us. MT, operating on statistical prediction, cannot provide this interpretive layer. The result is communicative flattening: messages designed to inspire awe or hospitality lose persuasive force.

ICC further explains these failures. In our corpus, engines oscillated between Literalism (e.g., *la naturaleza de la naturaleza* → "the nature of nature") and tone drift (*siente el calor* → "feel the heat" rather than "feel the warmth"). Both outcomes read as odd, rude, or uninviting. Such mismatches exemplify Hatim and Mason's (1997) concept of pragmatic failure. For marketers, this is not a stylistic quirk but a risk to brand voice and audience trust.

5.4 Ethical and Accessibility Dimensions

Translation errors in tourism marketing raise both ethical and accessibility concerns. Misrenderings, such as *"Uruguay Natural*" or *"Perú, el país más rico del mundo*," alter how nations are perceived, enacting an epistemic erasure of cultural nuance.

Accessibility adds urgency. Travelers using MT or screen readers may encounter distorted outputs that reshape sensory impressions—for example, "feel the heat" suggests discomfort rather than hospitality. Poor MT

can also miscue safety information or distort environmental cues. Tourism boards should therefore treat MT fidelity as part of their accessibility obligations, not merely as a marketing consideration.

5.5 Toward Emotionally Competent MT

Present-day MT systems remain unable to capture undertone, irony, or cultural resonance—the very qualities that make slogans persuasive. Advances in affective computing (Picard, 1997) suggest that multimodal models may one day recognize tone, rhythm, or gesture; however, current sentiment analysis tools remain coarse.

Custom GPTs offer a promising intermediate step. By embedding glossaries, tone rules, and accessibility checks, they operationalize *Critical MT Praxis*. They can standardize ambiguous terms (*rico* → "enriching," *calor* → "warmth"), flag at-risk outputs, and align translations with intercultural guidance. Even so, human oversight is indispensable. Machines cannot replicate ICC, which depends on empathy and adaptability. The path forward is hybrid: integrating affect-aware technologies with human cultural intelligence.

5.6 Limitations

As a pilot study, this analysis examined a corpus of 40 slogans. While sufficient to reveal consistent patterns, the modest sample size limits generalizability. Findings show that fewer than half (47.5%) of the slogans achieved high-fidelity translation, with the remainder exhibiting tone flattening, lexical drift, or cultural Loss. This narrower distribution of fidelity should be interpreted with caution, as the results may not apply to longer tourism texts, such as brochures or web copy. Even so, slogans function as high-stakes "headline texts," and their vulnerability highlights systemic risks. Future research should expand corpus size, diversify genres, and test glossary-informed GPTs in live campaigns.

5.7 Summary

This study shows that MT errors in tourism slogans are not random but patterned and consequential. They appear most clearly in affectively dense phrases, where cultural resonance and emotional tone matter as much as lexical accuracy. *Critical MT Praxis* offers a pragmatic framework for diagnosing shifts, assessing their impact, and testing outputs before release.

Framed this way, MT is no longer a neutral convenience but a communicative risk factor. Tourism boards, developers, and educators share responsibility for integrating testing, building accessible and culturally respectful outputs, and exploring tools that balance machine efficiency with human cultural intelligence.

5.8 Closing Synthesis

This pilot study demonstrates that while free machine translation (MT) systems often replicate the clarity of Latin American tourism slogans, they frequently fail to preserve their affective resonance. Just over half (52.5%) of translations achieved high fidelity, while nearly half (47.5%) suffered predictable distortions, reflecting structural Affective Blindness. These patterns reinforce that slogans are not neutral informational units but condensed signs of persuasion and cultural identity.

The contribution of *Critical MT Praxis* lies in bridging structural, affective, and intercultural perspectives. For scholars, the framework demonstrates how short-form marketing texts magnify the stakes of translation shifts. For practitioners, the study provides a replicable workflow: test slogans in free MT engines, revise brand-critical terms, and audit for accessibility before release.

At stake is more than accuracy. Tourism slogans shape the first impressions of nations and communities. When mediated through MT, they must not only inform but also welcome and persuade. Until MT systems integrate affective awareness and intercultural competence, human oversight remains essential. Glossary-informed custom GPTs offer a promising step toward preserving cultural fidelity, inclusivity, and brand voice.

Looking ahead, the implications extend beyond the tourism sector. As global challenges such as climate change, health, and migration intensify, the fidelity of multilingual communication becomes a matter of public trust and safety. *Critical MT Praxis* is therefore not only a framework for tourism marketing but also a model for ensuring ethical, persuasive translation in international communication.

Author Note

The concept of *affective blindness* referenced in this article builds on our ongoing research project, *Beyond Words: The Semiotics of Emotion and the Affective Blindness of Machine Translation* (Zarzalejo & Doran, in

preparation). This unpublished manuscript develops the theoretical foundation for the present analysis and is currently being prepared for submission.

6. Recommendations

Translation is a core element of brand management. Based on this pilot study of 40 slogans, we recommend that tourism boards, educators, and MT developers treat slogan testing as a standard pre-launch control. Each slogan should be translated through Google Translate, DeepL, and Microsoft Translator before release. If outputs appear flat, misleading, or awkward, the source text should be revised and retested. This simple, low-cost practice can prevent reputational harm.

- Prioritize Google Translate. Because it is the most widely used MT tool (Klimova, 2025), Google should serve as the baseline. If a slogan fails in Google, it risks confusing the largest share of visitors—even when it performs better in translation tools like DeepL or Microsoft.
- Favor clarity over idioms. Short, direct slogans translate more reliably than idiomatic or culture-bound expressions. Brand-critical terms such as *rico*, *natural*, or *auténtico* should be locked in a micro-glossary.
- Audit for accessibility. Outputs should be tested with screen readers to ensure that sensory cues (*calor* → "warmth") and safety-related terms are preserved. Aligning with ADA Title II and WCAG 2.2 is both an ethical and strategic imperative.

6.1 Economic Stakes and Risk Management

Mistranslations can lead to reduced bookings, shorter page visits, and increased site abandonment. Campaigns should include a simple risk matrix assessing:

- **Likelihood** (presence of idioms, metaphors, or culturally specific references).
- **Impact** (tone loss, misleading promise, cultural dilution, or safety confusion).
- **Mitigation** (simplify text, substitute glossary terms, or conduct ICC review).

Post-launch, key performance indicators (KPIs) such as bounce rates, time on page, and click-through rates should be closely monitored. If slogans underperform in MT-reliant markets, affective distortion should be tested as a causal factor.

6.2 For Academics and Educators

MT can also serve as a pedagogical tool to build students' critical literacy. Instructors can assign students to run authentic slogans through MT engines, diagnose shifts using Baker's taxonomy, and revise outputs with attention to tone and inclusivity. Exercises such as translating *¡Ni una menos!*—where MT flattens sociopolitical resonance into "Not one less"—help learners see how affective blindness operates. Using *Critical MT Praxis* in classrooms develops intercultural competence alongside translation literacy.

6.3 For MT Developers

Developers can reduce errors in affect-rich texts through several strategies:

- **Train with affect-tagged corpora** (e.g., EmoBank, GoEmotions, MESD, EMOVOME).
- **Offer tone and formality controls** so users can request warm, neutral, or formal styles.
- **Expand cultural knowledge bases** with idiom dictionaries and glossaries for high-risk terms.
- **Add risk signaling**, alerting users when emotional meaning may be lost (e.g., *con el alma en vilo* → "with the soul in suspense" vs idiomatic alternatives such as "on tenterhooks").

6.4 Shared Responsibility

Affective fidelity is a shared obligation. Developers must design tone-aware systems, educators must incorporate MT literacy into classrooms, and tourism boards must test slogans before release. Failures cannot be attributed solely to technology; accountability must be distributed among stakeholders.

6.5 Custom GPTs and AI Tools

Custom GPTs represent a proactive strategy rather than a reactive fix. Beyond glossary integration, they should be evaluated against measurable KPIs, such as:

- **Fidelity rate** (share of slogans passing glossary and tone checks).
- **Tone audit pass rate** (judged preservation of affect).
- **Accessibility compliance score** (alignment with WCAG 2.2).

- **Cost avoidance metric** (savings from redesigns prevented).

Illustrative Pilot Case. A Caribbean island developed a glossary-informed GPT for under $500 using Azure credits. The GPT locked "island warmth" to prevent mistranslation as "heat" and flagged ambiguous terms for revision. In the following campaign cycle, engagement with English-speaking audiences rose by 15 percent.

Implementation Playbook (Simplified).

6. Build a slogan corpus and human benchmark translations.
7. Develop a micro-glossary for brand-critical terms.
8. Configure the model with glossary entries, tone rules, and ICC guidelines.
9. Test outputs across free MT engines and the custom GPT.
10. Audit translations for accessibility using screen readers.
11. Require bilingual and accessibility review before launch.

With modest budgets, agencies can gradually scale from pilot projects to sustainable workflows. Custom GPTs thus offer both consistency and diagnostic transparency, supporting accessibility, trust, and cultural fidelity.

References

Ahmed, S. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion.* Routledge: London and New York, UK, 2014.

Baker, M. *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation.* Routledge: London and New York, UK, 1992.

Barthes, R. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography.* Translated by R. Howard; Hill and Wang: New York, NY, USA, 1981. (Original work published 1980)

Bowker, L.; Buitrago Ciro, J. *Machine Translation and Global Research: Towards Improved Machine Translation Literacy in the Scholarly Community.* Emerald Publishing Limited: Bingley, UK, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1108/9781787567214.

Byram, M. *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence: Revisited.* Multilingual Matters: Bristol, UK; Blue Ridge Summit, PA, USA, 2021. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781800410251.

Dann, G. M. S. *The Language of Tourism: A Sociolinguistic Perspective.* CAB International: Wallingford, UK, 1996. https://doi.org/10.1079/9780851989990.0000.

Demszky, D.; Movshovitz-Attias, D.; Ko, J.; Cowen, A.; Nemade, G.; Ravi, S. *GoEmotions: A Dataset of Fine-Grained Emotions.* In *Proceedings of the 58th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics*; Association for Computational Linguistics: Stroudsburg, PA, USA, 2020; pp. 4040–4054. https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2020.acl-main.372.

Freskila, E.; Jayantini, I. G. A. S. R. *Translation Equivalence of Tourism Website Content: A Comparison Between Google Translate and DeepL Translate. Indonesian Journal of EFL and Linguistics* **10**, 1–20 (2025). Available online: https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Translation-Equivalence-of-Tourism-Website-Content%3A-Freskila-Jayantini/6bdfc45336a62f3cbc98fa5e0c8b1ab50969d958.

Hatim, B.; Mason, I. *The Translator as Communicator.* Routledge: London and New York, UK, 1997.

House, J. *Translation Quality Assessment: Past and Present.* Routledge: London and New York, UK, 2015.

Klimova, B. *Use of Machine Translation in Foreign Language Education. Cogent Arts & Humanities* **12**, 2491183 (2025). https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2025.2491183.

Naveen, P.; Trojovský, P. *Overview and Challenges of Machine Translation for Contextually Appropriate Translations. iScience* **27** (10), 110878 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2024.110878.

Nida, E. A. *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating.* E. J. Brill: Leiden, The Netherlands, 1964.

Picard, R. W. *Affective Computing.* MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 1997.

Spivak, G. C. *Outside in the Teaching Machine.* Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 1993.

Venuti, L. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation.* Routledge: London and New York, UK, 1995.

Zarzalejo, C.; Doran, P. *Beyond Words: The Semiotics of Emotion and the Affective Blindness of Machine Translation.* Unpublished manuscript (in preparation).