

# Communicating culture through hotel names: The case of the Maramureş region in Romania

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**Abstract:** The hospitality industry has seen a revigorating boost following COVID-19. As people start to embark on new travelling experiences, hotel owners have to keep the pace and enhance their hotel branding strategies in order to attract as many guests as possible. One such strategy is finding a compelling hotel name, which ideally should tell about the hotel's history and its link to the local culture, to entice the customers to sojourn there. This study has explored the way in which hotel owners in Maramureş, a very touristic and traditional region in Romania, have decided to insert the local culture and values into the names of the establishments they manage. Based on an analysis performed on 502 types of accommodation in the County of Maramureş (hotels, pensions, motels, hostels), the findings show that there is indeed a great tendency of transposing the local culture into hotel names linguistically, in the form of anthroponyms, toponyms, specific cultural elements related to the Maramureş countryside life as well as semantic word associations suggesting culture. This study brings novelty in this scarce field of research and suggests that the liaison between hotel names and local culture could be a helpful way of promoting not only the hotels, but also the whole region of Maramureş, being useful for the hotel owners and local and national decision-makers alike.

**Keywords:** hotel name, culture, Maramureş, anthroponym, toponym, marketing strategy

## Introduction

The speeding process of globalisation has impacted the hospitality industry deeply, making it more competitive and inovative (Sufi 2008, 51) as well as one of the fastest growing industries in the world in the aftermath of COVID-19 (Market Data Forecast 2023).

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Therefore, on such a competing market, hotel owners have to strive to accommodate their customers' needs and desires, which tend to shy away from standardisation nowadays and prefer the local flavour of the individual hotels (ETHospitalityWorld.com 2023). That is why, chain hotels (e.g. *Golden Tulip*) have acknowledged the role of local culture as an important part of the hotel brand promotion through slogans such as “International standards, local flavours” (Munsters & de Klumbis 2006, 37).

This rise of “localism” in hospitality (Minett 2017) can prove not only as an important means of attracting new customers, but also of promoting local culture. One way in which local culture could be reflected is through hotel names, which must stay in people's minds as something unique (Booking.com for Partners 2019), using a background story or history to tap on people's emotions (Cvent Blog 2023).

Thus, this paper aims at analysing the linguistic and cultural elements found in hotel names in a very touristic region of Romania, i.e. Maramureș. More precisely, the paper seeks:

1. To analyse the linguistic manner in which the local cultural element is reflected in the local hotel names;
2. To analyse the hotel names in the Maramureș region from a structural and a grammatical point of view;
3. To see whether there is a tendency towards a certain foreignisation of the hotel names in the area; and
4. To observe the occurrence of the cultural element, expressed through linguistic means, in hotel names, as a marketing strategy.

## **Literature review**

### **Culture and hotels**

The literature on hotel naming is relatively scarce. Research mainly focuses on the relationship between culture and hotels. The fact that national culture has a positive effect on the organisational/corporate culture, having the potential to create better hotel service quality and improve the employees' performance, has been stressed by many researchers (Nazarian et al. 2017; Cerović & Tomašević 2006; Mwaura et al. 1998).

As for the national culture and its impact on hotel customers, studies have shown that, indeed, cultural differences do influence the way in which customers perceive their experiences in the hotels (Zhang et al. 2015). For example, national culture is analysed through

Hofstede's dimensions in customer reviews on hotels in Paris, concluding that national culture is important in shaping customers' perception of the hotel post-stay (Zhang et al. 2020). Another study (Hsieh & Tsai 2009) based on a questionnaire applied to Taiwanese and American hotel guests in Taiwan also highlights the fact that cultural differences as regards the hotel service quality are deemed important by the respondents and should be taken into consideration by hotel managers for marketing purposes and for improving the overall service quality provided by their facilities.

Hotel branding, encompassing factors such as brand name, physical features, personality, identity, a special service, etc., is another area where national culture can play an important role. As Kapferer points out (2008, 184), a brand is synonymous with culture, being a means of communicating the values expressed by that specific culture. Through interviews with hotel managers in Malaysia and using Hofstede's national culture dimensions, Sumaco et al.'s study (2014) shows the importance of creating a framework of cultural hotel branding based on national culture values. Other studies also posit the fact that culture has an important effect on hotel brand personality and performance (Unurlu & Uca 2017; Ghafourian Shagerdi & Shirvani Moghaddam 2021) and show the importance of this type of research for hotel managers who want to strengthen the hotel brand and offer the best customer experience.

### **Culture, linguistics, and hotel names**

As already known, the brand name is an important part of the brand image, giving the brand more power and distinguishing it from the rest by encompassing different associations of symbols and meanings (Kohli & LaBahn 1997). In this respect, hotel names can be seen as brand names and can be a powerful tool in promoting the hotel image (Plenković et al. 2010), being an influential factor in the customers' choice of a hotel or even of a whole touristic region.

The hotel name is the very first thing that reveals the hotel's characteristics to the customers, acting "as an advert in itself" (Booking.Com for Partners 2019). Nevertheless, few studies have investigated the linguistic characteristics and the way in which culture is reflected in hotel names.

The idea that the foreignisation of the hotel names is related to the geographical location of the hotel, namely its distance to the western border in the case of Russia, is advanced by Kormazina et al. (2022).

They discuss the cultural and linguistic characteristics of hotel names in four cities of Russia, coming to the conclusion that the foreignisation of their names (English, French, Italian) accounts for 25% of the total of the names and tends to diminish while moving away from the western border and inside the country.

A more linguistic approach to hotel naming can be found in a study on hotel names in Malang City, Indonesia (Purnantoa & Ardhanb 2020). The study shows a reiteration of the intertwined social patterns in the community into the hotel names, e.g. cultural symbols of all the ethnicities involved (Javanese, Balinese, Indonesian, European, Muslim). Other studies have analysed the linguistic and cultural elements in the hotel names on Norfolk Island (Nash 2016), in Saudi Arabia (Al-Jarf 2021), in Bulgaria (Ivanov et al. 2022), or in Tanzania (Rieger 2013), and have also emphasised the role of hotel naming as a marketing strategy in Singapore (Lim & Cacciafoco 2022).

### **Culture and hotel naming in Romania**

In Romania, to the best of our knowledge, the topic of hotel naming has not been studied from a linguistic and cultural point of view extensively. There is only one study analysing the Transylvanian hotel names from an ethnical, national and international perspective (Bugheșiu 2013).

Romania, being a collectivistic country and having a long-term orientation score of 52 as per Hofstede's index scale (Hofstede Insights n.d.), is more prone to maintaining its traditions while at the same time looking forward to the future. A look at the oldest hotels in Romania (Bucur 2019) shows this tendency of preserving traditions, e.g. *Grand Hotel Traian* in Iași, *Împăratul Romanilor* in Sibiu (historically linking back to the times when Dacia was conquered by the Romans by using the anthroponym Traian and its descriptor – “Roman Emperor”), *Hotel Transilvania* in Cluj or *Hotel Caraiman* in Sinaia (referring to toponyms).

The name of a hotel can take you back in time due to the culture ingrained in it. This is the case of the name of another old hotel, formerly known as *Hotel Hungaria* (1887), in Alba-Iulia. Its name suggests a moment in history when today's Transylvania was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After 1918, when Romania emerged as a state, it was renamed as *Hotel Dacia* (again making us reminisce about our Daco-Roman origins) and later as *Hotel Apulum* (the original Latin name of the city of Alba-Iulia). Unfortunately, the hotel was

demolished during communist times and a block of flats was built on its premises. Still, it is another example of the history and culture intertwined with linguistic elements (Fostul Hotel Hungaria 2023).

This paper aims at adding up to the scarce research carried out on the topic of hotel naming and on the issue of finding how local culture is imprinted into it in a very touristic and culture-preserving region of Romania.

## **Methodology**

### **The Maramureş region**

Maramureş is a region in northern Romania and western Ukraine; for the purposes of this research, only Maramureş County in Romania will be addressed in this paper (see Annex 1). It is a mountainous region of scenic beauty, well-known for its well-preserved traditions and cultural values.

Maramureş is considered as a “cultural brand name” (Ştef 2008) in itself, encompassing ethnographic elements (traditional art and architecture), folklore (traditions, mythology, clothing), historical sites, all of these mingled with modern art.

From a touristic point of view, Maramureş offers tourists a chance to catch a glimpse at one of the few pristine and traditional lifestyles on the continent, where people still wear popular costumes everyday and where old manual jobs, such as embroidering, are still in use today.

### **Data analysis**

21,120 types of accommodation in the whole country were taken from the Romanian Ministry of Economics, Entrepreneurship and Tourism website (Ministerul Economiei, Antreprenoriatului și Turismului 2023). Only the hotels, pensions, cabins, motels and hostels were selected, after having eliminated the rental apartments, rental houses, campings, barges, etc. Therefore, 502 types of accommodation were found for the Maramureş County. Of these, 38 (7.5%) are hotels, while the rest (92%) is covered by pensions, cabins or hostels, which emphasises again the rural and traditional atmosphere of the place. Still, the word “hotel” will be used generically for all the types of accommodation.

A qualitative and a quantitative analysis were performed. For the quantitative analysis, the data were analysed using MAXQDA 2022 software for data analysis. The following section presents the linguistic

analysis of the hotel names in Maramureș both qualitatively and quantitatively, followed by a linguistic analysis based on the cultural element imprinted in the name.

## **Results and discussion**

### **Linguistic structure of the hotel names in Maramureș**

From a linguistic and structural point of view, the hotel names are made up of one, two, three or four words, the one- and two-word names being the mostly used (35.39% and 39.50%) (see Annex 2).

The grammatical structure is presented as follows:

- Two-word compound names:
  - Noun + noun: *Țara Codrului* [Forest Country]
  - Noun + adjective: *Casa Băimăreană* [deriving from Baia-Mare]
  - Preposition + common noun: *La Bunici* [At the grandparents' (house)]
  - Numeral + noun: *Două Veverițe* [Two Squirrels]
- Three-word compound names:
  - Noun + preposition + noun: *Popasul din Vale* [Rest area in the Valley]
  - Noun + article + proper noun: *Hanul lui Nuțu* [Nuțu's Inn]
- Four-word compound names:
  - Preposition + (proper) noun + preposition + noun: *La Vasile la cazan* [At Vasile's Vat]

It should be noted that the two-word and the three-word compounds are the most suggestive ones as they are better descriptors of the name and of what it suggests. They either make a clear reference to a certain place (*Popasul din Cornești*, *Căsuțele din Moisei*), a certain description of the surroundings (*Plai cu peri* [Land of Pears], *Valea cu salcâmi* [Acacia Valley], a certain person (*Hanul lui Cobală* [Cobală's Inn]) or they suggest the place they are referring to metaphorically by using visual and olfactory images (*Colț de rai* [Corner of Heaven], *Iz de Maramureș* [Flavour of Maramureș]).

### **Local and global culture in the hotel names in Maramureș**

Being such a highly sought-after touristic area for its natural wonders and cultural traditions, it is to be expected that they are reflected in the way hotel owners name their properties. As such, the local culture

transpires into the hotel names and enchantes the customers. This is realised linguistically through anthroponyms, toponyms, flora and fauna that are specific to Maramureş, cultural elements related to the Maramureş countryside life, as well as other keywords and word associations suggesting culture.

- *Anthroponyms*

Since anthroponyms (proper names) are linked to cultural and social contexts (Agyekum 2006: 208), many one-word properties are named after the owner mainly by using their first name. It is interesting to note that they are usually female names, probably showing that women are the ones taking care of the business. According to the word frequency analysis (see Annex 3), the names that are mostly used are *Maria* (1.94%) – with its variants, *Mărioara* and *Măriuca* -, *Ana* (0.61%), *Ioana* (0.61%) and *Mara* (0.49%), being saint namesakes and very employed in the rural areas.

Diminutives of such first names are also found, e.g. *Ancuța*, *Anuța* (diminutives of *Ana*) or *Alinuța* (diminutive of *Alina*). According to Felecan (2007), such diminutives are common in the Maramureş rural areas as they express higher affectivity towards the newborns. Interestingly enough, Hungarian first names are also found, probably due to the long cohabitation with the ethnic Hungarian minority in the region, e.g. *Erika*, *Lenke*, *Rozy*, *Eniko*. First names of foreign origin, which are more modern and not specific to the local culture, can also be encountered, such as *Denisa*, *Alexis*, *Sofia*, *Sandra*, making us believe that the owner probably represents a younger demographic. This is also depicted graphically in the generated word cloud (see Annex 3).

The owner's surname or first name is also present in the two-word compounds, where it is associated with different types of accommodation, such as *Casa* [House] (7.89%), *Popasul* [Rest place] (1.11%), *Hanul* [Inn] (0.55%), or *Pensiunea* [Pension] (0.42%): *Casa Poienar*, *Casa Iulia*, *Hanul Teilor*, *Pensiunea Ana*. *Casa* is also the most frequently used component in the hotel names, counting 57 occurrences in all the hotel names, suggesting again the homey atmosphere found in this region instead of the one in the standardised hotel chains.

4.78% of the pensions are named in a very scholastic manner by using the surname and first name (e.g. *Manța Marie*, *Petreuş Irina*) (used in Romanian schools during Communist times) or with the first name and surname (e.g. *Ioana Laviță*) (based on the English model).

This might be due to the pride of the locals as they associate the property with their own names or since they are well-known in the community (Mihali 2011, 556).

- *Toponyms*

Being a mountainous region, it is only natural that toponyms (names of places) related to geographical features represent an important part of people's lives and, therefore, are found in the hotel names (15%):

- Local mountains: *Pietrosu, Gutâi, Țibleș*
- Local rivers: *Iza*
- Other: *Măgura* [Hill], *Poiana/Poienița* [Clearing] (*Poiana Brazilor*), *Vaduri* (plural) [Shallows], *Salina* [Salt mine], *Codru* [Wood] (*Țara Codrului*), *Vale* [Valley] (*Valea muntelui, Valea brânzei*), *Plai* [Land] (*Plaiul Moroșenilor*)

There are some exceptions when the hotel names also take more general names of mountains, e.g. *Carpați* [The Carpathians], or of rivers not found in the region, e.g. *Cerna* (a mountain river), still denoting the idea of a mountainous region.

Some take the name of villages: *Firiza, Mara*, or even the name of the whole county and region: *Maramureș*, and even *Maramu*, the shortened name of Maramureș, in the local dialect. There are also adjectives derived from place names, such as *Casa Băimăreană* (from Baia-Mare), *Casa Maramureșeană* (from Maramureș), *Perla Sigheteană* (from Sighetu Marmăției – a town), *Riviera Someșeană* (from Someș – a river).

- *Flora and fauna as cultural symbols*

Besides being used as symbols for restaurants, political parties or different brands (Schirpke et al., 2018), plants and animals are also seen as cultural symbols inserted into hotel names. Names of plants and animals are considered as the cultural identity of the Maramureș region and are also used with the purpose of touristic boost.

2.19% of the hotel names are named after local animals:

- Forest animals: *Căprioara* [Deer], *Cerbul* [Stag], *Lupul* [Wolf] (*Vadul Lupilor*), *Veverița* [Squirrel] (*Două veverițe*), *Șoim* [Falcon] (*Piatra Șoimului*)
- Water animals: *Vidra* [Otter], *Lostrîța* (type of mountain fish)

As for the flora, there are a lot of flowers that are specific to the region and are imprinted in the hotel names, such as *Gențiana* [Goldenseal], *Laleaua pestriță* [Fritillary] (found in the neighbouring county of Suceava), or *Floare-de-colț* [Edelweiss]. As regards the



trees, the most important one is undoubtedly *Brad* [Fir], with its plural form *Brazi* [Firs], the diminutive *Brăduț* and the collective noun *Brădet* [Fir tree forest], *Pini* [Pines] (*Trei pini*), *Tei* [Linden] (*Hanul Teilor*), and also *Salcâmi* [Acacia] (*Valea cu salcâmi*).

- *Specific cultural elements related to the Maramureș countryside life*

Some of these hotel names include different jobs related to this region, e.g. *Hangița* [Innkeeper], *Olar* [Potter] (*Casa Olarului*) [Potter's House], *Vânător* [Hunter] (*Conacul vânătorului*) [Hunter's Manor]. Others make reference to the lifestyle and to different objects or places related to that, e.g. *Cetera* [Bell Harp – regional string instrument] (*Vasilică ceterașul*) [Vasilică, the Bell Harper], *Stâna* [Sheep farm], *Păstrăvăria* [Trout farm] (*Păstrăvăria Alex*), *Moara* [Mill] (*Moara veche*) [Old Mill].

A very strong cultural element is represented by the local people that are known in the community by their location, which is the concrete manner in which the countryside people locate people, e.g. *La Vasile la Cazan* [At Vasile's Vat], *La Ancuța în Șușani* [At Ancuța's in Șușani], *La Lenuța lângă Biserică* [At Lenuța's next to the church], *Sub Cetate la Matei* [At Matei's under the citadel], *După Apă la Răzvan* [At Răzvan's well], *În Deal la Ancuța* [At Ancuța's on the hill], *La Moară la Niculai* [At Niculai's mill].

*Other keywords and word associations suggesting culture*

Some hotels are named so as to suggest the local way of life, such as traditions, tranquility or joy, which is the reason why people would choose Maramureș as a holiday spot.

- Traditions: *Tradiții* [Traditions], *Casa tradițiilor* [House of Traditions], *Maramureșul străvechi* [Immemorial Maramureș], *Casa Bunicii* [Grandma's House], *Dacii liberi* [Free Dacians], *Plai străbun* [Age-old Land]
- Tranquility and wellness: *Oaza* [Oasis], *Liniștea codrului* [Silence of the Forest], *Siesta*, *Armonia* [Harmony]
- Joy: *Veselia* [Joy], *Soare-n Maramureș* [Sunny Maramureș]

While the above-mentioned names are very concrete, other names are meant to depict a more metaphorical picture of the region by using visual, chromatic or olfactory images.

- Visual images: *Colț de rai* [Corner of Heaven], *Cununa văilor* [Wreath of the Valleys]
- Chromatic images: *Paradisul verde* [Green Paradise]
- Olfactory images: *Iz de Maramureș* [Flavour of Maramureș]

- *Global culture found in local hotel names*

Only 2.3% of all the accommodation in Maramureș bear a foreign name, stressing once again the powerful local culture that seems to be preserved at all costs. The foreign names are mainly English, e.g. *Green Garden, Black Mountain, Maramures Landscape*, aiming to express the beauty of the landscape.

## **Conclusion**

Even though for Shakespeare's Juliet a name was just a mere convention ("What's in a name?"), personal and brand names bear a lot of symbolism, making the person or the place they designate stand out and linking it to culture, history, or personal identity. In the case of chain hotels, for example, a certain name equals different things for travellers, i.e. quality, cleanliness, business features, comfort, etc.

This study has focused on local hotels in the region of Maramureș, Romania, a very traditional and pristine region, packed with tourists every year, seeking to observe how the local cultural element transgresses into hotel names. In this respect, the analysis has noticed a strong tendency of hotel owners to preserve the region's cultural heritage by making use of anthroponyms, toponyms and other cultural associations in their hotel names.

Culture has been seen to influence the way service providers market their hotels (Koc & Ayyildiz 2021). This study is also useful as it provides a view on how local hotel owners choose to use local cultural elements in hotel names to depict real and metaphorical pictures in customers' minds as regards their touristic experience in Maramureș and, thus, by extension, to market the whole region.

Hopefully, this analysis will show the hospitality industry that keeping alive the cultural element is a good way in order to prevent a "McDonaldisation" of the global hotel industry" (Munsters & de Klumbis 2006, 31) and to attract more guests to the properties. At the same time, these findings can help local decision-makers in promoting the whole Maramureș region as it clearly shows the way local people think and feel and their connection to the cultural values of the region.

Even though this research is confined only to one specific county, such studies are important as they show the interconnectedness between language and culture, providing useful insights into hotel naming as an important part of hotel branding. Also, in the future, comparative analyses could be carried out between different touristic regions in Romania in order to see whether the same hotel naming

style is maintained by other regions as well. Cross-cultural research between Romania and different other cultures can also be undertaken in order to emphasise the similarities or differences in hotel naming as far as culture is concerned.

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## ANNEX 1

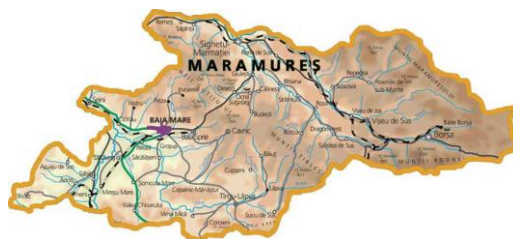


Figure 1. Maramureș County  
(Direcția pentru Agricultură Județeană Maramureș /  
Maramureș County Directorate for Agriculture, n.d.)

## ANNEX 2

One word	Two-word compounds	Three-word compounds	Four-word compounds
35.39%	39.50%	15.08%	9.63%

Table 1. Percentages of words based on their linguistic structure

ANNEX 3

Word	Word length	Frequency ▼	%	Rank	Documents	Documents %
casa	4	57	7.89	1	1	100.00
maria	5	14	1.94	2	1	100.00
maramureș	9	9	1.25	3	1	100.00
poiana	6	8	1.11	4	1	100.00
popasul	7	8	1.11	4	1	100.00
ana	3	5	0.69	6	1	100.00
ancuța	6	5	0.69	6	1	100.00
deal	4	5	0.69	6	1	100.00
ioana	5	5	0.69	6	1	100.00
matei	5	5	0.69	6	1	100.00
rustic	6	5	0.69	6	1	100.00
teodora	7	5	0.69	6	1	100.00
valea	5	5	0.69	6	1	100.00
alex	4	4	0.55	14	1	100.00
floare	6	4	0.55	14	1	100.00
hanul	5	4	0.55	14	1	100.00
ileana	6	4	0.55	14	1	100.00
iza	3	4	0.55	14	1	100.00
magnolia	8	4	0.55	14	1	100.00
mara	4	4	0.55	14	1	100.00
resort	6	4	0.55	14	1	100.00
cetate	6	3	0.42	22	1	100.00
denisa	6	3	0.42	22	1	100.00
florilor	8	3	0.42	22	1	100.00
iurca	5	3	0.42	22	1	100.00
maramureșului	13	3	0.42	22	1	100.00
montana	7	3	0.42	22	1	100.00
obreja	6	3	0.42	22	1	100.00
pensiunea	9	3	0.42	22	1	100.00

Table 2. Word frequency analysis



Figure 2. Word cloud of the word frequency