People between the ages of 15 and 25 represent 20% of the tourists in the world and, within this percentage, students represent an important part (Xu et al. 2009, Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe, 2008). Although the study of tourism and education as related experiences has received little attention, Urry and Larsen (2011) recognise their increasing interconnection. International universities compete today to recruit mobility students and, in this context, institutions may adopt practices typical of enterprises to present itself as an attractive destination, emphasizing its leisure and cultural offer, but also placing less emphasis on the use of local languages as languages of instruction (Kwong, 2000). In the discourse of tourism, local languages are frequently commodified to construct the authenticity of a destination and become ‘metonyms of place’ (Urry, 2007) but are never presented as a potential ‘problem’ for the visitor (Thurlow and Jaworsky, 2010).

This paper explores the impact of the discourse of tourism on the self-representation strategies that a university in Catalonia adopts towards international students and the extent to which these strategies connect with the stance of international students towards their study-abroad experience. The data were ethnographically collected during the academic year 2010-2011 and are analysed following the notion of ‘stance’ (Du Bois, 2007; Jaffe, 2009) to explore how the university and international students project their perspectives on Catalan.

The results show that the commodification of Catalan is not only a strategy to increase the value of the university and recruit students but also represents a way of projecting the Catalan national identity in a post-national era (Pujolar, 2007; Heller, 2003, 2008, 2010). This is perceived unambiguously by students, who, similarly to tourists, expect the university to limit the use of Catalan to specific ritualised events and adopt Spanish in interactions with them.

Keywords: tourism discourse, Catalan, study abroad.