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# Introduction to “Tourism Discourse in the 21st Century: Challenges and New Directions”

## 1. The evolving language of 21st century tourism

**T**ourism discourse, when aimed at prospective travelers and visitors, has the ultimate purpose of convincing its audience to purchase a service—in this case a travel experience, which it does through the skillful use of rhetorical strategies that present destinations in effective, captivating ways. The quick growth of the travel sector and of mass tourism in recent times has given the industry “a prominent position in international business markets” (Maci 2020, ix), creating multidisciplinary interest in the many facets of the world of tourism and its evolution in the era of globalization, information technology, and, not least, in the current era of the Covid-19 pandemic. Tourists and prospective travelers today are “experienced, educated, destination-oriented, independent, and more ecologically-aware” (Maci 2020, ix), and professionals in this field need to address this change in their customers, adapting their promotional strategies and their products and services to attract their target audience.

This special section deals with the multiple aspects of tourism discourse in the contemporary era and has the aim of showcasing how the past few decades have changed the linguistic relationship between tourism professionals, tourists and prospective tourists, as well as ways in which these changes are informing how the language of tourism is taught to prospective industry workers. Five main aspects of tourism discourse are addressed from a linguistic perspective: the diversification of the tourist market, with the proliferation of sub-types of tourism (e.g. heritage tourism, accessible tourism, ecotourism); the role of English as a *Lingua Franca* in tourism interactions; user-generated-content (UGC), whereby tourists themselves become producers of texts for prospective travelers; the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on the hospitality industry and how language use has changed to promote leisure traveling after travel restrictions were lifted; and the teaching of English for Tourism (EfT).

In addition to new iterations of tourism discourse, the 21st century has also provided us with access to new, increasingly sophisticated tools, such as text mining and corpus analysis software, that can be used by linguists as alternatives to and in combination with other

approaches and methodologies (e.g. discourse analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, ethnography, content analysis, as will be seen in this volume) to gain additional insights into the texts they are investigating. The support of information technologies not only allows researchers to gather data and explore emerging sub-genres of tourism discourse from both a purely linguistic and a multimodal perspective, but can also contribute to providing new insights into more traditional texts.

### ***1.1 Diversification of the market***

With increasing global competition and the entrance into the tourist market of new popular destinations in developing countries, it is paramount for the industry to innovate and diversify in order to remain attractive to travelers (Weidenfeld 2018). Niche and tailor-made services and products have therefore appeared on the market, working in synergy with other sectors and to enhance destination attractiveness and boost the local and national economy.

The same destination is therefore promoted differently to different markets and customers and language strategies need to be tailored to the expectations of the specific segment of audience which is being targeted.

One example of a growing market is that of ecotourism, which started in the 1980s and is currently developing: not only are tourists increasingly environmentally-aware, but the industry itself, in fact, depends on the sustainable exploitation of its natural assets (Weidenfeld 2018). Ecotourism therefore aims to “protect not just recreation opportunities or the scenery, but also to meet more contemporary priorities of protecting biodiversity and maintaining ecosystem integrity” (Stronza, Hunt and Fitzgerald 2019, 230). There are other sub-types of tourism that have encountered the interest of tourists, such as dark tourism, defined as “the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites” (Foley and Lennon, 1996, 198), and film-induced tourism, that is, “tourist visits to a destination or attraction as a result of the destination’s being featured on television, video, or the cinema screen” (Hudson and Ritchie 2006, 387).

Tourism services nowadays also aim at being increasingly inclusive, working to be more accessible to “people in poverty, people with disabilities, young families with children, senior citizens” (Weidenfeld 2018) so that they may enjoy leisure activities without obstacles or hindrances (Darcy and Dickson 2009). This is the topic of Stefania Gandin’s paper, which focuses on those linguistic strategies increasingly used by accessible tourism providers during the pandemic with the aim of guaranteeing both safety and social inclusion for travellers with disabilities. Marina Bondi and Annalisa Sezzi on the other hand focus on cultural and religious

tourism in Britain and Italy. “Heritage travelers are seekers of the authentic and unique and are, not surprisingly, frequent visitors to cultural attractions” (Reaves 2020, 442), of which they learn the stories and histories. The authors focus on specific websites dedicated to churches and cathedrals, analysing data collected from July to September 2020, when, as a result of the lockdown, virtual travel was often the only means of access to such sites. They investigate ways in which definition and denomination in both English and Italian are adopted for the dissemination of the heritage of sacred places.

### ***1.2 English as a Lingua Franca in tourism interactions***

English being the *de facto* language of global communication, it is often used as the working language for interactions between tourists and hospitality providers (e.g. tour guides, airport, hotel and restaurant staff) that do not share any other common language. In such encounters, strict adherence to native-speaker norms may be relinquished, as the ultimate goal of the interaction is to ensure comprehension for all involved parties. English is therefore adapted, rather than just adopted (Seidlhofer 2011, 66), with form following function (Cogo 2008). The intercultural nature of such encounters that are ultimately business interactions indeed entails the use of accommodation strategies, whereby meaning is negotiated by drawing on the participants’ strategic competence (Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2011) and multilingual repertoires (Franceschi 2017). Ida Parise, in her discussion of Tourism English as a domain of ELF, sets out to investigate sociocultural, discursive and sociolinguistics factors by means of an ethnographic study of twenty-seven industry stakeholders in Italy. She explores interviewee awareness of intercultural accommodation and attitudes towards multilingual resources. One of her main aims is to provide linguistic data from the emic perspective of employees within the Italian tourist industry in order to foster and support the development of effective multicultural use of ELF by means of reciprocal support and understanding through accommodation.

### ***1.3 The tourist as a content producer***

Easier and more widespread access to the Internet can be said to have transformed the discourses of the tourism industry and the way in which relationships have traditionally been created and maintained with its customers. In addition to conventional institutional and commercial material, social media and user-generated content (UGC) have enabled tourists to take an active role in producing tourism-related material with the potential to influence consumer behavior from destination choice to travel planning. This may be done in various

ways, such as contributing to the shaping of destination image through electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWoM) (e.g. Pan et al.2007; Wenger 2008). Such content comprises a variety of texts that are present in a wide range of digital environments: reviews, social media posts, blogs and video blogs are all popular user-generated texts that exist alongside and compete with professionally-produced commercial content. Texts written by tourists themselves are considered more genuine and therefore more reliable than commercial ones (D'Egidio 2014, 147), and for this reason they have drawn academic interest from multiple disciplines, including linguistics as well as destination marketing. In Valeria Franceschi's paper the focus is the tourist gaze on China and how this emerges from UGC in travel blogs and travel guides developed by non-professional internet users. A mixed approach was adopted to study a corpus of such blogs and guides, focusing initially on the analysis of keywords and collocational profiles. A content analysis of concordance samples was also conducted in order to provide insight into the ways in which visitors gaze upon major Chinese destinations.

#### ***1.4. Promoting travel during the Covid-19 pandemic***

The past two years have especially impacted the hospitality industry as a whole due to the sudden onset of the Covid-19 pandemic that has rapidly swept across the entire world. International and intranational movement restrictions have taken a massive toll on the field. Tourist mobility ground to a halt just as many holidays (i.e. Chinese New Year, Easter, spring break in the northern hemisphere, etc.) would in other circumstances have provided the opportunity for many people to travel around the world. According to Fernandes (2020), the global travel industry reduced its activities by more than 90%, with negative consequences spilling over to other businesses that rely on tourism. International tourist arrivals worldwide started declining from late February 2020 (-14%) and plummeted in March (-65%), April (-97%) and May (-95%),<sup>1</sup> putting tourism jobs at risk. As lockdown measures and travel restrictions are lifted, sometimes temporarily according to the continuously evolving situation, leisure activities and travel have been allowed to resume in "compliance to government guidelines" (Kim and Liu 2022). It should however be noted that international tourist arrivals for both 2020 and 2021 remained overall within a -76% to -86% range compared to 2019, with arrivals growing from July 2021 onwards.<sup>2</sup> Risk perception and tolerance have prompted professionals in the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unwto.org/international-tourism-and-covid-19>. All websites last visited 14/12/2021.

<sup>2</sup> July 2021 -67%, August 2021 -63%, September 2021 -63%.  
<https://www.unwto.org/international-tourism-and-covid-19>.

hospitality industry and related businesses to change their strategies to attract customers and promote safety and compliance to guidelines and norms, as “health concerns are likely to linger in the minds of many and result in continued reluctance to travel” (Shin et al. 2020). The bulk of the papers in this special section deals with the language strategies used by travel and tourism service providers to promote destinations and hospitality structures, to ensure customer safety and compliance with norms and regulations, and to provide tourists with all the necessary information so that they themselves may maintain responsible behaviour and preserve public health. Four articles deal with this aspect of promotion during the Covid-19 pandemic. Daniela Cesiri focuses on the promotion of the Veneto region by means of institutional tourism communication during this period. She compares the results of a previous study of seven tourism board websites in the Veneto region, which provide information in both English and Italian, and focuses on the changes in communicative strategies that have emerged as a result of the pandemic. Using a discourse analysis approach to the analysis, she focuses on the ways in which the territory is presented to visitors together with the information provided with reference to the pandemic itself and health regulations designed to prevent contagion. The second article related to promotion is by Ida Ruffolo and Jean Marguerite Jimenez and, who focus on the promotion of hotels in this new era, exploring reviews of UK hotels and the challenges facing them. A corpus was created to study hotel website content and the specific language used to promote stays during the pandemic. The aim of the study is to ascertain how far hoteliers are reorganizing stays to meet new requirements as a result of the pandemic; this is done by means of a mixed methods analysis of the linguistic devices present on luxury hotel websites in Central England.

The following two articles investigate air travel discourse in different contexts (airlines and airports) and with different approaches.

Laura Tommaso focuses on airline digital discourse in the post-peak pandemic period. She adopts a discourse analysis approach to the study of the online language used by airlines to neutralize potential distrust and highlight, on the other hand, airline achievement and commitment. The aim behind this study is to contribute to the existing body of research on the topic of trust in corporate discourse.

Erik Castello also deals with air travel discourse, focusing, however, on the use of modality in international airport website discourse. He investigates four varieties: British, American, central European and Italian, exploring the sections of such websites that provide specific information on Covid-19 related issues and procedures. His findings highlight differences between the varieties as to the frequency and use of core modals, semi-modals, and some suasive

verbs and their nominalizations which were identified by means of the analysis of keywords. He aims to provide insights into the use of such language which could inform the writing of such content in the future.

### ***1.5 The teaching of English for tourism (EfT)***

The teaching of English for Tourism (EfT) is considered to be a sub-category of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) field. This is a fairly recent theoretical and methodological area, which has seen particularly rapid growth since the end of the Second World War (Starfield 2013). The name of the field embodies its approach insofar as it focuses on the development of linguistic competence with reference to the purpose and context in which English is to be used rather than the study of the language from a general viewpoint. Although the specific fields that are most commonly associated with ESP are related to major arenas such as business or academia, English for Tourism (EfT), which refers rather to the teaching of the specific language of tourism to professionals in the field, could, in fact, be said to be one of the “oldest and largest branches of ESP” (Ennis and Mikel Petrie 2020, 2). Swales (1984, 9) underlines the fact that interest in learning English for the purpose of tourism has existed for as long as people have been travelling and recalls Peter Strevens’ observation that “specialized phrase books for foreign tourists have been in existence for 400 years” (Strevens 1977). EfT, in fact, for the latter half of the 20th century and the beginning of this one, has been a flourishing business, with considerable investment in courses and coursebooks to go along with it. Many of the teaching materials that have been developed for global markets aim to meet the practical needs of tourism professionals, ranging from those working in direct contact with travellers in hotels, restaurants or airports, to name just a few, to those involved in tourism management. Mainstream EfT generally adopts a multistrand curriculum approach to the teaching of the language accompanied by a specific topic-based approach to various areas of tourism itself (Harding 1998; Jacob and Strutt 1997). Other materials, on the other hand, are often developed at local levels or by individual practitioners to meet specific needs (Sari 2016; Angeletti Meirano and Perez 1987). Unlike English of Tourism (EoT), which refers to the language used in the tourism field and its study, EfT is lacking in academic research, and can be considered to be a neglected area. When such research is carried out, it tends to be conducted informally at local level when developing courses, and, as a result, its findings are rarely shared with the academic community. For this reason, Michael Ennis’s paper fills a gap in this field. The author replicates an earlier exploratory study that he had carried out on the nature of EfT, which consisted of a mixed methods literature review of available academic studies and teaching materials. This study

applied the same approach to an expanded corpus and is of particular interest in that the results reveal recent shifts in international and national discourses.

## 2. Conclusion

Despite, or perhaps even because of, the particular situation that the tourism industry is currently facing as a result of the pandemic, the studies in this issue highlight in different ways the various rhetorical strategies being adopted in the tourism industry. To return to our point of departure these strategies present destinations in effective, captivating ways in order to persuade travelers to visit them. Added to this, in times of Covid-19 the onus is also on the industry to convince its customers that they will be safe and that measures are being taken to protect their health. The papers in this issue provide a snapshot of the current situation from the point of view of Tourism discourse, ranging from the language used on websites to the practice of teaching English for Tourism. The studies of websites in this sector show that the focus of this discourse is indeed shifting to reassure tourists that even during the pandemic it is safe and desirable to travel although travel itself has changed and is changing. Airlines are doing this by means of highlighting their commitment to safety and their existing achievements. Hotels and destinations use linguistic strategies to convince travelers that health measures are in place to protect visitors and prevent contagion, and that travelers with disabilities also need to be catered for. Some tourists, in the extreme case of lockdown situations, have had recourse to digital travel when prevented from doing so physically. Websites are not the only digital content being produced in this field as UGC has become increasingly widespread in the form of travel blogs and travel guides. The English language of the tourist industry is English as a Lingua Franca, and studies of the differences among varieties or of the specific intercultural accommodation and attitudes towards multilingual resources that those involved in this discourse need to be aware of and to develop suggest the importance of mutual support and tolerance in those who wish to communicate effectively. The teaching of English for tourism is also a key factor in fostering effective communication between tourism workers and the tourists themselves. This last area would benefit from further academic research to inform the development of course materials and didactic approaches, which at present is lacking. All in all, the tourism discourse is a vibrant field which is alive and well.

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