



THE LANGUAGE OF TOURISM

A Sociolinguistic Perspective

Graham M.S. Dann



CAB INTERNATIONAL

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1

The Language of Tourism

Ladies and gentlemen, on your right you will see the exact spot where William the Conqueror first set foot in Britain.

The swaying palm trees, the golden beaches, the crystal white crests of the gently lapping waves – our island paradise can be yours.

I entered the cavernous temple – alone. All around me I could hear the scampering of tiny feet, the flap of a giant bat's wings – while outside, in the graveyard of the moonless night, a hideous beast snarled. So this was Borneo. I had arrived.

Well that picture there – that's the Eiffel Tower, see. In front's me mum, and next to her is Aunt Flo. You should've been there, though. Smashing it was. Worth every penny. I'd do it again any time.

The foregoing excerpts seem familiar enough. We have either heard or read examples such as these, respectively, on guided tours, in brochures, in the travelogues of the Sunday newspaper supplements, and in the accounts of friends returning from abroad with their snapshots and slides. In all probability we recognize these speech acts without giving them more than a couple of moments thought, since they seem to be so pervasive and commonplace, all part and parcel of the thousands of messages beamed at us on a daily basis through the mass media and replicated everywhere in conversation.

However, and on reflection, we somehow sense that these verbal descriptions, along with their glossy displays of photographs and film footage, collectively constitute a very special type of communication, one which differs from other forms of human exchange since it represents the largest industry in the world – that of tourism. We may also realize that, without this discourse

of publicity, there would be very little tourism at all. Why else in 1993 alone should Cyprus have allocated 86% of its tourism budget to promotion, Greece 85%, Turkey 76% and Canada 72%? Or, why in the same year did Spain pay out \$77,692,000 on tourism advertising, France \$69,248,000 and Australia \$64,254,000 (Paci, 1994)? But apart from the sheer volume of these vast financial outlays, aside from the question of whether all this money was well spent, surely a more fundamental issue relates to the object of this expense – something we instinctively recognize without necessarily knowing what to call it – that elusive something which we can now designate ‘the language of tourism’.

And yet, amazingly, no one has comprehensively analysed this language as a phenomenon in its own right. Certainly there have been some studies which have alluded to the linguistic features of tourism promotion, but none has so far brought them together and systematically examined tourism as a language *per se*. This book intends to remedy that deficit.

In everyday speech, we often hear references to the ‘language of dance’, the ‘language of architecture’, the ‘language of music’, and so on. We know roughly what the expressions mean – that somehow these various facets of life have ways of communicating to us. They are structured. They follow certain grammatical rules and have specialized vocabularies. They are in many senses language-like in their properties. Analogically too, these languages convey messages, they have a heuristic or semantic content, they operate through a conventional system of symbols and codes. Many also include the equivalent of dialects and registers.

In the following chapters it will be demonstrated that tourism operates along similar linguistic lines; that tourism, in the act of promotion, as well as in the accounts of its practitioners and clients, has a discourse of its own. Seen in this light, the language of tourism is thus a great deal more than a metaphor. Via static and moving pictures, written texts and audio-visual offerings, the language of tourism attempts to persuade, lure, woo and seduce millions of human beings, and, in so doing, convert them from potential into actual clients. By addressing them in terms of their own culturally predicated needs and motivations, it hopes to push them out of the armchair and on to the plane – to turn them into tourists. Later, the language of tourism gently talks to them about the possible places they can visit by introducing various pull factors or attractions of competing destinations. Thus, since much of this rhetoric is both logically and temporally prior to any travel or sightseeing, one can legitimately argue that tourism is grounded in discourse.

However, it should be noted that tourists often can and do feed back into this discourse. They have their own ways of constructing images from the information that is supplied to them by the tourism industry and other independent sources. They build up their own systems of expectation, and, when these do not mesh with the promises held out by the language of tourism, one will clearly discern the voice of complaint. On the other hand,

when tourists are satisfied with their experiences, they contribute to the language of tourism by becoming promoters themselves.

Chapter 2 will show that among tourism researchers and academics there has been a growing awareness of the sociolinguistic nature of tourism. Indeed, four major theoretical perspectives on international tourism all have sociolinguistic components sufficient to contribute crucial insights into understanding the language of tourism.

Chapter 3 continues the discussion by identifying the properties of the language of tourism. We can thus begin to appreciate the points of convergence and divergence between the language of tourism and other forms of communication in the contemporary world.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to a separate in-depth treatment of one of the major characteristics of the language of tourism – the realization that above all it is a language of social control. As a bearer of cultural messages, it contains norms and values, prescriptions and proscriptions. If tourism itself is to proceed in an orderly fashion, such order must be reflected linguistically.

Chapter 5 outlines the principal manner in which such control is exercised in a context of apparent freedom. Just as all languages have to be learned, so too does the language of tourism require a process of socialization for those committed to its charge. Its protégés are thus placed in a child-like state and shown that by becoming tourists they are in fact developing their identities. They must learn to talk, walk, and play. Above all, the tourist as child is led to understand that there are several rules and regulations which need to be internalized and followed.

Chapter 6 turns to the channels of communication employed by the language of tourism (e.g. brochures, travelogues, videos, and word-of-mouth). In particular, it demonstrates that its messages vary not only in relation to dominant sensory mode, but also according to the stage of the trip which is being experienced.

Chapter 7 throws additional light on the language of tourism by examining the techniques it employs (ranging from the verbal and visual to a combination of both), and Chapter 8 rounds off the analysis by looking at variation in topic according to a number of registers in the language of tourism. Among these various registers one encounters 'Greenspeak' – a particular subtype which refers to 'eco-tourism'. But there are others – those which focus on gastronomy and health, for example. Seen in this light, the language of tourism is like a jigsaw or kaleidoscope with many themes and colours.

What makes the language of tourism so fascinating is that, like tourism itself, it thrives on the act of discovery. Just as travel is a pre-requisite or co-requisite to exploration, so too is a sociolinguistic journey required in order to uncover and reveal the language of tourism.

2

Tourism as Language

In order to set the scene for a sociolinguistic analysis of tourism, it will first be shown that there is an emerging consensus within the academic community that tourism can be usefully considered as a language. Thereafter it will be demonstrated that four major theoretical perspectives in the treatment of international tourism all have sociolinguistic bases.

A Growing Awareness of Tourism as Language

In the words of Said (1991: 21), language is a 'highly organized and encoded system which employs many devices to express, indicate, exchange messages and information, represent and so forth'. Therefore, just as leisure becomes a code whose praxis has the value of language for a given group (Thurot, 1989: 12), so too can one legitimately refer to the 'language of tourism'¹ as a 'language of modernity'², promotion³ and consumerism.⁴ Indeed, so extensive⁵ and pervasive is the language of tourism that it merits thorough investigation by tourism researchers (Kemper, 1993: 594).

However, although language may be considered ideologically neutral,⁶ 'discourse' is value-committed. Discourse, through the processes of domination and subjectification, is said to commit violence on people and things (Hollinshead, 1993a: 527, 529; 1994a: 3–4, 10), and to impose authoritative limits on thoughts and action (Said, 1991: 3). Reflecting this notion of social constraint, several commentators⁷ can be found who refer to the 'discourse of tourism'. Above all, such discourse is not just about what is represented and communicated, it is also what is practised. Discourse reinforces 'praxis' and vice versa. It is privileged communication (Hollinshead, 1993a: 127, 129,

364, 576). For this reason there is often a confusing profusion of competing discourses in tourism (Frey, 1994).

There are also several academics who refer to the 'rhetoric of tourism'. Like discourse, rhetoric implies power of the speaker over the addressee.⁸ Where rhetoric differs, however, is in its manner of exercising such power, since above all it is 'the art of persuasive or impressive speaking or writing' (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1959: 1050), an 'ars bene dicendi' that seeks to move, instruct and entertain, which is often based on eloquence and deceit (Nöth, 1990: 338–9). Katriel (1993: 107; 1994a: 8; 1994b: 1, 3–6), more than any other observer of contemporary tourism, captures these distinguishing characteristics of rhetoric when she refers, for instance, to 'the guide's rhetorical construction of the museum story', the 'rhetorical task' and 'the rhetorical burdens carried by tour guides'. For her, the use of 'testimonial rhetoric' only serves to heighten 'the intrinsically rhetorical nature of historical representation' and 'the rhetorical shaping of museum interpretation'.

The realm of 'narrative', by contrast, has more to do with the telling of a story, the relating of an account to an audience. Thus, for example, one comes across references to 'storytelling' and narratives of tour guides (Jafari and Gardner, 1991: 26) and to 'tour guide performance as an elaboration of narrative and anecdotes' (Fine and Speer, 1985: 82). However, some commentators extend the concept of 'sender' beyond the narrow confines of guiding in order to include people, objects, and places. In this regard, Katriel (1993: 108, 110; 1994a: 10; 1994c: 3) speaks of the 'narration practices of museums' and Hollinshead (1993a: 364) refers to different types of destinations as having their own 'narrative style'. Nevertheless, and as with rhetoric and discourse, there is also an element of contestation in narrative as speakers attempt to impose their definitions on situations. Hence the many allusions to 'narrative authority', 'master narratives', and 'dominant narratives'.⁹ Katriel (1994b: 8) additionally addresses the question of 'narrative seduction', in other words the persuasive power of narrative analogous to rhetoric.

Apart from discourse, rhetoric and narrative, expressions indicative of the sociolinguistic nature of tourism, there are several other terms used by researchers which demonstrate that tourism is more and more being regarded as a language. There are associated references, for example, to word power,¹⁰ cliché,¹¹ formulae,¹² vocabularies,¹³ speech,¹⁴ talk,¹⁵ voices,¹⁶ idiom,¹⁷ semantics,¹⁸ grammar,¹⁹ and text.²⁰ Tourism is also referred to as communication,²¹ advertising,²² publicity,²³ promotion,²⁴ and even propaganda.²⁵

Additionally, there is increasing evidence of various semiotic approaches towards the analysis of tourism. Indeed, in the introduction to an issue of *Annals of Tourism Research* dedicated to 'The Semiotics of Tourism', MacCannell (1989b: 2, 5) explains that there is 'a privileged relationship between tourism and semiotics'²⁶ since both have 'implications concerning the Other in global sociocultural arrangements'. Relatedly, Kemper (1993: 594)

maintains that semiotics should be extended to include tourist encounters, whereas Chalfen (1985: 104) advocates an ethnographic-semiotic approach in order to discover the cognitive processes of tourists. Nowhere, however, is a semiotic perspective considered more appropriate than in the analysis of tourism advertising with its culture coded covert connotations,²⁷ in the study of tourism imagery,²⁸ and in the treatment of tourism communication as a discourse of myth.²⁹

Four Major Theoretical Perspectives on Tourism and Their Sociolinguistic Correlates

Four major theoretical approaches which have significantly contributed towards an understanding of contemporary tourism are those based on the perspectives of authenticity, strangerhood, play, and conflict. Their respective sociolinguistic correlates are authentication, differentiation, recreation, and appropriation. Although each theory is examined separately for its unique insights, certain shared positions lead to the combined recognition that tourism has a language of its own.

The authenticity perspective

Context and features

According to Jafari (1989), the development of theory in tourism has passed through four evolutionary stages, which he identifies as the 'platforms' of advocacy, caution, adaptancy, and knowledge.

The first of these platforms, originating in the 1960s, was dominated mainly by economists, who, for the most part, looked upon tourism solely in positive terms as a means of national and international development. Tourism could provide substantial foreign exchange earnings, generate employment, improve the infrastructure, and satisfy basic human needs such as health and education. The accent was very much on the tangible benefits which could accrue to countries, particularly those of the Third World. Little attention was paid to the accompanying economic, social and cultural costs (cf. Mathieson and Wall, 1982).

Inevitably a reaction set in, and a number of critics appeared (e.g. Mitford, 1959; Boorstin, 1964, 1987; Rivers, 1972, 1973; Turner and Ash, 1975), who pointed out that, not only did tourism have significant disadvantages which well outweighed its economic merits, but that the phenomenon of tourism itself was essentially based on escapist fantasy to which spurious attractions of the industry responded. This counter-ideological approach was the cautionary platform – the antithesis of the advocacy platform. Indeed, so diametrically opposed were these two standpoints, and so inadequate was the

dialogue between their protagonists, that only the emergence of an adaptancy position was able to represent any kind of synthesis.

This adaptancy viewpoint argued that the previous two approaches had assumed (incorrectly) that there was only one type of contemporary tourism, namely 'conventional mass tourism' (CMT), and had then proceeded either to defend or attack it. By contrast, the adaptancy proponents maintained that there was in fact an alternative to CMT (which they even termed 'alternative tourism' or AT), a type of tourism which was less environmentally disruptive than one based on sheer quantitative growth in the numbers of visitors frequenting a given area. At the same time, they claimed, AT could bring more qualitative benefits to host communities and contribute to a greater understanding between tourists and destination peoples than CMT. This stage thus witnessed the ushering in of such alternatives as 'green tourism', 'eco-tourism', 'soft tourism' and 'responsible tourism'.

Yet up to this point, notes Jafari, none of these approaches had contributed very much in terms of tourism theory. Certainly there was plenty of heated exchange, but little by way of explanation or enlightenment. Therefore the time was ripe for the appearance of a knowledge-based platform, one that attempted to fill the intellectual void from a variety of social science disciplines.

One of the earliest³⁰ theoreticians of the knowledge-based platform was Dean MacCannell, who created quite a stir with the publication of a seminal article (1973) and a book entitled *The Tourist. A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (1989a). The principal adversarial target of the California-based sociologist was another American, the critic Daniel Boorstin of the cautionary platform. Boorstin (1964(1987)) had maintained that contemporary tourism, unlike 'the lost art of travel', comprised a series of contrived experiences grounded in 'pseudo events' produced by the 'graphic revolution'. Just as the mass media constructed and preserved celebrities for popular consumption, so too did the tourism industry provide inauthentic places and attractions for a gullible public. Boorstin's tourist was thus portrayed as a superficial nitwit and cultural dope, someone who was taken in by the artificial fabrications of reality.

While concurring with Boorstin that much of present day life was inauthentic and that many individuals were deeply alienated, MacCannell disagreed that tourists were emblematic of such inauthenticity. Rather, he believed that tourists sought out authentic experiences in other times and places, and that this search for meaning was a contemporary version of the pre-modern quest for the sacred. Thus the tourist of today was to be understood as a pilgrim of the secular world paying homage to many and varied attractions which were symbolic of modernity and represented the differentiations of society. These attractions in turn ranged from the pristine and the natural to primitive customs and work displays. The tourist was fascinated with these manifestations of the real lives of others, and attempted