

Chapter 103

Tourism Promotion and Disability: Still a (Linguistic) Taboo? A Preliminary Study

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ABSTRACT

This study illustrates the preliminary results of a corpus-based analysis aimed at discovering the main linguistic features characterising the promotion of tourism for special-needs travellers. Even if accessible tourism represents an important sector in the market, not only for its social and moral importance but also for its strong economic potential, detailed research on the linguistic properties of tourism for disabled people is still rather limited and mainly tends to focus on the problems of physical access rather than considering the ways to improve its promotional strategies. Through a comparative corpus-based analysis, this paper will investigate the relevant linguistic features of a corpus of promotional materials advertising holidays and tourist services for the disabled, and relate them to the communicative strategies of two other corpora dedicated to the standard and translational language of tourism. The aim of this research is to show how mainstream tourism discourse still considers disability as a taboo topic, mostly ignoring or vaguely mentioning it in the general promotion of tourist destinations. The study will also attempt to suggest new linguistic and social attitudes aimed at stylistically improving and further including the accessible tourism sector within the overall tourism promotion.

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ACCESSIBLE TOURISM AND THE LANGUAGE OF TOURISM PROMOTION: A GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been an increasingly growing interest for the needs and requirements of disabled travellers within the tourism industry. Many tourist operators have finally started to specialise in accessible tourism services by offering package-holidays or promoting facilities and destinations tailored to suit (or at least partially accommodate) the requests of tourists with disabilities. Accessible tourism can be defined as a form of tourism that

[...] enables people with access requirements, including mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access, to function independently and with equity and dignity through the delivery of universally designed tourism products, services and environments (Darcy & Dickson, 2009: 34).

Accessible tourism entails, therefore, “the set of services and facilities capable of allowing persons with specific needs to enjoy a holiday and their leisure time with no particular barriers or problems” (Lovelock & Lovelock, 2013: 169).

The spread of accessible tourism is partially due to the development of a more inclusive ethic of tourism, following the emanation of more specific and binding regulations at national and international levels¹ aimed at ensuring that people with disabilities have an “equitable access to tourism services and products” (Lovelock & Lovelock, 2013: 169). In addition, and probably as the main leading reason, the tourism industry is finally starting to understand and exploit the commercial potential of this niche in the holiday market. Indeed, the accessible tourism sector in Europe has been estimated at approximately 27% of the global population, representing 12% of the tourism market (World Tourism Organization, 2016: 4), and the number of persons with disabilities is expected to grow due to the constantly increasing rate in population ageing, most of all in western, developed countries (Small & Darcy, 2010; Lovelock & Lovelock, 2013). Therefore, accessible tourism is a profitable market opportunity for those operators that are able and willing to organise holidays for disabled visitors, their caregivers, families and friends, considering also that “these people tend to travel more frequently during the low season, usually accompanied or in groups, make more return visits and, in some parts of the world, spend more than average on their trips” (World Tourism Organization, 2016: 4).

Despite these considerations, in many countries the promotion of tourism accessibility is not included in planned and extensive tourism policies. Indeed, long-term investments in this sector are still rare and are often mostly dissuaded by the fact that there is an almost exclusive focus on the issues of physical barriers and on the different kinds of impairments that require a segmented and complex response on behalf of the tourism industry. This kind of attitude falls under the so-called “medical approach” to disability, which focuses “on the individual and his/her impairment (functional/psychological losses)”, by considering disability the result of an individual’s fault, his/her ‘personal tragedy’ (Oliver, 1996). However, a major shift towards a “social model of disability”, in which it is the oppressive social environment and attitudes that produce disability and that hinder and prevent the individual from full participation in society (Small & Darcy, 2010), could contribute to overcoming the limited medical perception that has characterised to date even the most relevant academic literature. This could gradually unlock the potential value of the accessible tourism market through the implementation of effective and intensive promotional strategies at qualitative and quantitative level that could include also a more careful consideration of the linguistic features characterising its related advertising materials.

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