

ENGLISH FOR TOURISM: A DISCOURSE OF ITS OWN

Pilar de Juan González

Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

Abstract

Although not always considered as such, English for Tourism is in fact a type of ESP. It not only fulfils the conditions established for any ESP, but also has a common culture shared by the professionals of all the activities it covers. This common culture shapes the language, awarding it specific characteristics.

All students of Tourism should be aware of the pragmatic presuppositions shared by professionals in Tourism and, above all, they should know how to convey them through the language. The analysis of texts belonging to different sectors within Tourism proves the existence of such common presuppositions and reveals the main linguistic forms they take.

Resumen

Aunque no siempre se ha considerado así, el Inglés para el Turismo es un tipo de Inglés para Fines Específicos. De hecho, no sólo cumple todos los requisitos establecidos para cualquier IFE, sino que, además, dispone de una cultura común compartida por los profesionales de todas las actividades que éste incluye. Esta cultura moldea la lengua utilizada y le confiere unas características específicas.

Todos los estudiantes de Turismo deben conocer las presuposiciones pragmáticas compartidas por los profesionales del Turismo y, sobre todo, deben ser capaces de transmitir las por medio del lenguaje. El análisis de textos pertenecientes a sectores diversos dentro del Turismo confirma la existencia de tales presuposiciones y revela las principales formas lingüísticas que adopta.

Nowadays, tourism is one of the main industries in the world. In fact, according to the WTO, the World Tourism Organization, (WTO 2001), it is the largest and most dynamic industry in the world.

The definition of the term “tourism” however, has given rise to considerable debate. Most of the definitions that have been put forward are fairly broad in order to embrace all forms of the phenomenon. One such definition was given by the British Tourist Society in 1976: “Tourism is the temporary short-term movement of people to destinations outside the places where they normally live and work, and activities during their stay at these destinations; it includes movements for all purposes, as well as day visits or excursions” (McBurney 1996: 4). Consequently, this industry includes many different activities; 185, according to the United Nations and the WTO, ranging from checking-in at a hotel to a guided tour or to in-flight service on a plane. Such a great range of activities is frequently grouped under four sectors (Alcaraz Varó, Hughes,

Campos Pardillo, Pina y Alesón Carbonell 2000: x): travel, leisure, catering and meals service, and lodging and accommodation.

Despite the importance of the industry, there is a surprising lack of attention to the language used in Tourism. On the one hand, it is rarely mentioned in the books dedicated to English for Specific Purposes. In Hutchinson and Waters's *English for Specific Purposes* (1987) and Pauline Robinson's *ESP Today: A Practitioner's Guide* (1991), for example, it is not considered at all.

Similarly, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 5-7) mention neither English for Tourism nor any other more specific branch. Only when explaining the meaning of semi-technical vocabulary, do they mention the field of "tourism" and give examples of words they term as having high frequency.

Jordan (1997: 3-4), nevertheless, mentions "English for airline pilots" and "English for hotel staff" as examples of English for Occupational / Vocational / Professional Purposes. So, instead of a wide branch of English for Tourism, he establishes different ESP's related to Tourism.

In the recent book *El inglés profesional y académico*, Alcaraz Varó (2000) does not mention the discipline of Tourism or make any reference to the language used. He distinguishes three large branches within what he calls IPA (*Inglés Profesional y Académico* or Professional and Academic English): English for Science and Technology, English for Legal Purposes and Business English, which is, in turn, divided into Commercial English, English for Finance and English for Economics. According to his definitions of these three types, some aspects of the English used in Tourism could be included under Commercial English, but not all: "*Comprende el lenguaje de la correspondencia comercial, el del transporte y los seguros, el de la compraventa de productos, tanto en los grandes mercados de primeras materias como el marketing en los puntos de venta*" (Alcaraz Varó 2000: 73).

This lack of bibliography on the language characteristic of Tourism could be explained by the fact that although people throughout history have travelled for various reasons, tourism as we know it is quite a recent phenomenon, belonging to the second part of the 20th century. Due to the importance that this industry has in Spain today, a new three-year degree was set up in the Spanish university in 1996: Tourism Studies

(*Diplomatura en Turismo*). It is only from that date that some articles about ‘English for Tourism’ have begun to appear; most of them written by university teachers.

On the other hand, if we pay attention to the course books devoted to teaching the English language used in this industry, we will observe that the majority of the first books, published in the 70s, were narrow in scope: each book dealt with the language used in a very specific area within Tourism. However, since the end of the 80s, new books have been published with a much broader scope; they consider the language of English for Tourism as a whole.

Since the information gathered from recognised books on ESP is not clear in reference to the existence or not of English for Tourism as a type of ESP, I think that this question should be the starting point for any further research: is English for Tourism a branch within ESP? Or should we talk about different ESP’s instead of a unique branch?

First of all, we should observe that, as Huntley and de Juan (2000) have stated, English for Tourism fulfils the conditions established by different linguists for all ESP’s: It is a course devised to meet the learner’s particular needs; it is centred on the language, skills, discourse and genres appropriate to the activities of the discipline it serves; it is aimed at the successful performance of occupational roles; etc. Consequently, we could say that from this point of view it is a type of ESP, and, more specifically, a type of English for Occupational Purposes.

We have seen, however, that it has not always been considered as a unique branch, but as different types (English for receptionists, English for airline staff, English for travel agents, etc). There is no doubt that, as said before, the tourist industry covers a wide range of activities, some of them being rather different in nature. All these different activities and situations can, however, be grouped under two main blocks: those situations in which the professionals deal with other professionals, and those in which the professionals deal with the public (tourists). As De Juan and Huntley (2001: 9) have pointed out, “English for Tourism covers both communication between professionals, (for example between a travel agent and a foreign tour operator) and communication between professionals and the general public who, in the majority of cases, are tourists or business travellers”. The language used in both cases is different in the sense that the language used in the first situations is more specialised than in the

second. We will find, for example, more technical vocabulary in this first case. In the second group, however, since the communication is established with non-specialists, the language used is much more general. Dudley-Evans and St. John's continuum, which runs from General English courses through to very specific ESP courses (1998: 9) helps us locate both varieties:

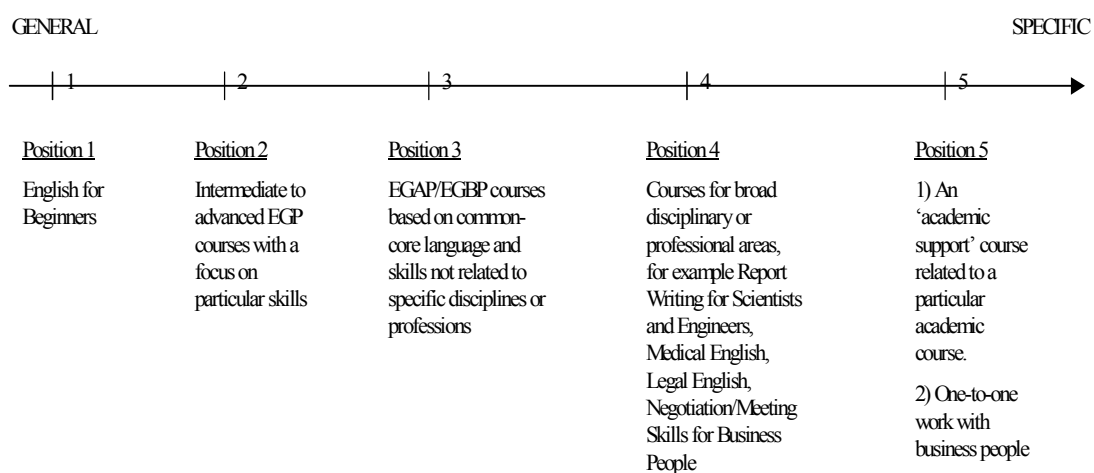


Figure 1. Continuum of ELT course types (Dudley-Evans and ST. John 1998:9)

The language used between professionals could be situated under position 4 whereas the communication established between professionals and tourists could be located under position 3.

However, the level of specialisation is not the only difference between these two varieties. The situations covered by the first variety (professional-professional) refer to business meetings, negotiations, business letters, etc, i.e., business language. All of these are situations similar to those found in any book for Business English. This is why I think that it can really be considered Business English.

The second variety, however, refers to situations completely different from the previous ones. Here we are dealing with communication between a professional and a tourist. This includes a myriad of situations –some of them quite apart- within the four sectors of the tourism industry mentioned before. Nevertheless, they have something in common: the professional establishes communication with a client and, at the same time, his main aim is to satisfy. “No matter what aspect of the industry one may work in, the final result of the effort should be a satisfied customer who remembers his trip or

his vacation with pleasure” (Hall 1976: 114). In fact, the final and prime element in the tourist industry is the tourist, and the final purpose is to achieve the client’s satisfaction with the service provided. This is why this industry is sometimes called ‘the hospitality industry’. The quality of the services provided is frequently measured by the client’s level of satisfaction. This quality depends not only on the physical elements (establishments, facilities, means of communication, weather, ...) but also on the treatment received from professionals who play a crucial role in the client’s satisfaction. This inner purpose is common to all situations, whether in a hotel or in a rent-a-car office. As Aleson Carbonell (1999: 13) has pointed out, “in Tourism customers are a priority and they should hold the empowered position. [...] the main pragmatic presupposition that should be inherent to any context in the Tourism Industry is ‘the customer is always right’. This is part of the basic knowledge professionals have to assume in the tourism context”. This presupposition is always conveyed in the language used, making it different from the language used in other contexts.

The professional training involved in each of the above areas is clearly different. Nevertheless, apart from the job-specific terminology, the English-learning needs are very similar. When it comes to using English, the communication skills that the people in all these industries require have a great deal in common – and all of them need to deal with visitors and tourists (Jones 1998: 5).

In fact, if we analyse several dialogues taken from rather different situations, the first impression we receive is a similar effort to satisfy the client’s needs by being kind and polite. This politeness becomes apparent in the language used: although the specific lexis is different, most of the linguistic forms are the same. This is why I think that we can appropriately talk of English for Tourism as a type of ESP that includes all the possible communicative situations in the tourist industry between professionals and clients. The other situations (between professionals) should be considered under Business English. A course on English for Tourism should, then, include all those situations (both from English for Tourism and Business English) that the students’ needs require, as well as enough practice in General English to make them able to answer the clients’ queries when called upon to do so.

In such a course on English for Tourism, it is of paramount importance not only to make students aware of the pragmatic presuppositions shared by professionals in Tourism, but also to teach them how to convey them through language.

In this sense, the most frequent linguistic forms are polite or distancing forms. These are structures that make statements, questions and requests seem less direct and, consequently, more polite. The main polite forms are the following (De Juan and Huntley 2001: 9-11):

- a) The use of modals, both primary and secondary. They are appropriate not only for questions and requests but also for suggestions. E.g.: ‘Would you give me your address?’ ‘You might take a taxi to the airport’.
- b) The use of the polite vocative *sir* or *madam*, or even better, the client’s own name (*Mr Smith*).
- c) The use of *yes/no* questions for requests. E.g.: ‘Can you show me your identity card?’ ‘Do you have a telephone number where I can contact you?’
- d) The use of the attitudinal past instead of the present tense. E.g.: ‘Where did you want to go today?’
- e) Progressive forms instead of simple forms. E.g.: ‘What make of car are/were you thinking of hiring?’ The future progressive is used to enquire politely about people’s plans. E.g.: ‘How long will you be staying with us?’
- f) Indirect questions. E.g.: ‘Could you tell me how you will be paying?’
- g) Polite conditionals. E.g.: ‘If you (would just) show me your passport, I’ll fill in the registration form’.
- h) Politeness markers like: *please, excuse me, thank you, sorry, pardon*.
- i) Certain expressions such as: *just, certainly* (instead of *yes*), *quite*, etc.
- j) Other linguistic devices used to achieve politeness are:
- k) The introduction of the first person to avoid direct requests or questions. E.g.: ‘I’ll need you to fill in an application form’, ‘Who may I say is calling?’
- l) Impersonal statements. E.g.: ‘This is a non-smoking flight, sir’

- m) The use of the words *for you* to emphasise a service or an action done.
E.g.: ‘I’ll have it changed for you immediately’. ‘Can I do anything else for you?’.

Depending on pragmatic factors such as the specific context and the degree of knowledge between the speakers, some forms are more appropriate than others, as not all of them convey the same degree of politeness.

The linguistic device known as ‘hedging’ is also sometimes used to express politeness. As Alcaraz Varó (2000: 173) says:

La matización es una estrategia comunicativa usada con el fin de cumplir por el uso consciente de los matizadores o hedges, una serie de objetivos entre los que merece destacarse los siguientes (Lewin 1998: 92-93): [...] e) ser cortés, por la limitación que se impone a la pretensión expuesta, o simplemente mostrando modestia profesional.

In the context of Tourism, the most frequent hedges include:

- a) Expressions such as “I wonder if you’d mind...” for requests.
- b) The use of the passive voice in order to avoid mentioning the author of the action. E.g.: ‘The door was left opened’ instead of ‘you left the door opened’.
- c) Modal verbs expressing possibility: *may, might, could, would*. E.g.: ‘You might like a whisky instead’.
- d) Probability expressions to avoid direct statements: *maybe, perhaps, probably*. E.g.: ‘Maybe you’d take that seat over there’.

In the relatively frequent situations of complaint, the client’s empowered position is clearly revealed in the use of softening techniques. Professionals adhere to expressions such as “I’m really/awfully/terribly sorry”, “I’m afraid”, “we apologise for...”. They also use other techniques such as identification with the client’s feelings: “This must be quite upsetting for you”, “I quite understand”.

The appearance of euphemisms can sometimes be explained by the same assumption. Professionals try to avoid words that could have negative connotations and produce negative feelings in the client. So, instead of *cheap* (Alcaraz Varó, Hughes,

Campos Pardillo, Pina y Alesón Carbonell 2000: XV), that could imply low quality, other expressions like *low-cost*, *reduced-price*, *cut-price*, *bargain*, etc. are used.

As regards written discourse, politeness is substituted by formality. It also takes specific forms, such as the typical set phrases used in business correspondence (“I look forward to hearing from you”, “If you need any further help or information, please do not hesitate to contact us”, “I would be grateful if you could”, etc.)

All these devices to achieve politeness are intermingled in the communication established in any tourist situation. They provide the texts with unity besides acting as a link between all of them. The language used, then, is different to the language used in other contexts. Therefore, we are talking of a type of ESP, English for Tourism, which has a discourse of its own.

Bibliography

- Alcaraz Varó, E. 2000. *El inglés profesional y académico*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.
- Alcaraz Varó, E., B. Hughes, M. A. Campos Pardillo, V. M. Pina y M^a. A. Alesón Carbonell. 2000. *Diccionario de términos de turismo y de ocio. Inglés-Español, Spanish-English*. Barcelona: Ariel.
- Aleson Carbonell, M. A. 2000. Tourism: The Problems of the Definition of a New ESP: A Study of the Didactic Implications of this Characterisation. *Actes del III Congrés Internacional sobre Llengües per a Finalitats Específiques*, Canet de Mar, 8-10 Septiembre 1999. Ed. F. Luttikhuizen. Barcelona: Publicacions de la Universitat de Barcelona. 11-15.
- De Juan González, P. y S. Huntley 2001. Distancing Forms in English for Tourism. *Tesol Newsletter*, 24: 9-11.
- Dudley-Evans, T. y M. J. St. John. 1998. *Developments in English for Specific Purposes: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, E. J. 1976. *The language of tourism in English*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Huntley, S. y P. de Juan González. 2000. English for Tourism: its position within ESP. *Actes del III Congrés Internacional sobre Llengües per a Finalitats Específiques*, Canet de Mar, 8-10 Septiembre 1999. Ed. F. Luttikhuizen. Barcelona: Publicacions de la Universitat de Barcelona. 187-190.

- Hutchinson, T. y A. Waters. 1987. *English for Specific Purposes. A learning-centred approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, L. 1998. *Welcome! English for the travel and tourism industry. Teacher's Book*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jordan, R. R. 1997. *English for Academic Purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McBurney, N. 1996. *Tourism*. Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall International.
- Robinson, P. 1991. *ESP Today: A Practitioner's Guide*. Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall International.
- WTO. 2001. *Tourism highlights 2001. World Tourism Organization*. [Documento de Internet disponible en su página web].