

# SAYING WHAT WE MEAN: COMMENTS ON THE VOCABULARY OF TOURISM

– Elery Hamilton-Smith

## Introduction

We commonly believe that professionals choose their words with care and a sense of precision. In fact, for a range of reasons, this is not the case. We fall into using words that have long been used uncritically, which are fashionable or which we even simply do not fully understand.

The continuing changes in society provide another trap. To quote Régis Debray, *'We are never completely contemporaneous with our present. History advances in disguise; it appears on stage wearing the mask of the preceding scene and we lose the meaning of the play.'*

The combination of these various factors mean that although we may think we are clear about what we think, our selection of words may convey a very different idea to our audience. This appears to be particularly troublesome in tourism and I am going to discuss a few examples.

## The Ubiquitous Guides

First of all, there has always been some ambiguity in the relationship between the travelers and those who seek to accompany them along their way. Casson (1974:105), in summarizing the experience of Herodotus during his Egyptian travels (c. 450 BC), discusses the extent to which he had problems in relying upon 'guides' and 'interpreters'. Plutarch (c. 100 AD) was probably their most articulate critic, saying, for example:

*'....The guides went through their standard speech, paying no attention whatsoever to our entreaties to cut the talk short and leave out most of the explanations....'*

*'....The guides at Argos know very well that not all the stories they tell are true, but they tell them anyway.'*

Of course, the use of the word 'guide' in these references is simply an artifact of translation. We do not know what the Egyptian or Latin words were. But it is clear that as Casson (1974) comments, *'....local guides have not improved very much in the last 2,000 years.'*

Modern English language tourism (as distinct from travel) probably had a large part of its origin in the concept of the Grand Tour, where the sons (not daughters) of aristocratic families were taken on an extended tour usually of the European continent under the leadership of a tutor, usually known as a 'bear'. The bears were expected to help their charges in learning to be an adult aristocratic male, even including the identification and recruitment of appropriate women for sexual enjoyment. (Hudson 1993). The term 'guide' gradually came into prominence with the democratization of tourism, as initiated by Thomas Cook. (Swinglehurst 1982)

One only has to look superficially at contemporary tourism literature to find a

multitude of papers dealing with ways of refining the role of 'guides' or improving their performance, but this plethora of ideas appears to have only impacted upon a relatively small number of sites. Worst of all, today's equivalents of Plutarch's guides often have the additional benefit of electronic megaphones! But once labeled as 'guides', most people continue to guide with all the skills of 2,000 years ago. My time in South-East Asia has now brought me to a realization that the problem is inherent in the word and the idea of 'guiding', not in the failure of the people themselves. In Vietnam (particularly at Ha Long Bay) and in South China (particularly at Shilin), I have experienced the finest visitor services staff of my whole life experience.

Let me start with Halong Bay. Visitors to the key sites (e.g., Hang Dau Go) all arrive in boatloads. One of the staff will walk to the landing to greet each boat but her key task is to identify the key language for the group. If it is not amongst her languages, she will find the person best equipped to talk with the group. Whoever continues with the party will give a very brief description of the site and then say:

*"Now, you can all walk off along the pathways by yourselves, taking your time to see what you want. If you have any questions, you can ask any of the staff you will see along the way. Or, if you want it, I will come with you."* If a party chooses the latter, then she will walk with them joining in general conversation with the group, but not leading them nor reciting the story of the site. Part of the charm of this site is its remarkable multi-lingualism. I once led a seminar for the visitor service staff and found the 17 who were on duty that day spoke 25 languages! Most visitors are thus welcomed with their own language or a closely related one that they largely understand.

Then in Shilin, the Yi people provide all visitor services in a very similar way. They are also multi-lingual, and having learned from radio and television, their English is of the perfect BBC style with its clarity of diction and rich vocabulary. They relate to visitors in the same way as the Vietnamese, but they have a further interesting twist in quality of service. If a clearly infirm person arrived who might trip and fall, one of the staff stayed within no more than a metre from them. On noticing this, I asked and was told that they were all given special training to catch a falling person and that they could not remember any who actually reached the ground.

But the key thing came when I asked each of the two groups, the word in their language that was used to describe their job and its most accurate translation into English. Both told me that the best translation is 'host'. This was, in fact, a very good description of their behavior. Probably, our most outstanding 'guides' would also be better described as 'hosts'.

I now believe that my South-East Asian friends have got it absolutely right. They don't need to go on endless training programs to redefine their role. They fill the role superbly without condescension or obsequiousness: I remember feeling absolutely delighted that the Yi people treated me as an equal and I saw that as a real compliment.

## Interpretation

We have also made a minor industry out of what we call interpretation, which is a long-standing extension of the basic meaning of the word. Probably, a lot of its popularity is owed to Freeman Tilden's work and, in particular, his argument that knowledge and understanding is a vital prerequisite to appreciation. There is no evidence to support this idea but one often finds appreciation as a virtually immediate emotional response to many natural phenomena. A further problem lies in the extent to which we seem to be stuck in the underlying assumptions of cognitive psychology theory and pay little or no attention to other more significant bodies of theories in, e.g., the cultural basis of perception or the whole field of man-environment relationship.

It is, after all, fundamentally important that appreciation and love of nature is a far more potent force in both visitor satisfaction and developing a sense of environment than any scientific understanding of nature.

Also there is a very basic practical problem in assuming that we must interpret what people see or experience. If 'interpretation' is to be effective, then it demands comprehension of the existing values and knowledge of the person we are addressing and that is simply impractical. The result is that visitors are either confused by too much information or totally bored by things they have heard all too often. I often feel that the 'guide' is talking down to people and this is totally offensive, simply because it fails to treat visitors with respect and dignity.

In fact, this becomes one of the implications of moving from the concept of 'guide' to 'host'. When we host people in our own home, which is the model of hosting most are familiar with, we would not subject them to an interpretive address about

the home. Similarly, my South-East Asian friends with their focus on hosting and helping people to feel absolutely welcome and at home, do not indulge in what we call interpretation. They are, in fact, very well informed about the natural and cultural history of the sites where they are working, sometimes drawing upon a thousand years or more of wisdom and experience. But they do not make that compulsory for all; although they may well draw upon it in answering a question.

## Tours – Should we offer them?

A number of writers have distinguished between travelers and tourists and noted the extent to which many people see being a traveler as much more valuable and dignified than being a tourist. One of our very excellent 'guides' in Australia always welcomes visitors saying, "Now let me be clear. I am not taking you on a tour. I am taking you on a journey of discovery. What you discover along that journey may be about nature, it may be about yourself and or other people, it may be about science or it might be about your sense of God. Whatever it is, it is for you to discover, not for me to tell you."

## Conclusion

There is really no excuse for doing (or saying) things the way we have always done or said them. In essence, I am arguing for a rethink of our basic vocabulary and for the use of words that do not lead us into trying to make them mean something different. It is quite obviously simple commonsense to select the word which will convey what we mean without ambiguity.

## REFERENCES

- Casson, Lionel, 1874. *Travel in the Ancient World*. London: Allen & Unwin.  
Debray, Régis, 1967. *Revolution in the Revolution?* Many editions.  
Hudson, Roger(Ed.), 1993. *The Grand Tour 1592-1796*. London: The Folio Society.  
Swinglehurst, Edmund, 1982. *Cook's Tours: The Story of Popular Travel*. Poole: Blandford Press.

