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The Intercultural Question and the Interpreting Professions

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Intercultural Communication in Tourism Promotion

Nikolas Komninou

Abstract

This paper deals with intercultural communication in the tourism industry, using research carried out on five small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Northern Italy. English is generally the lingua franca for interactions between international tourists and local tourist institutions, and often also the language of promotion. However, while these tourists and institutions may communicate in the same language, they often do not share the same cultural framework of reference, which can lead to miscommunication, misinterpretation and even offence. This can be a significant hindrance when promoting local and regional tourism.

The aim of this study is to examine intercultural communicative competence in the context of the tourism industry. It will also examine how negotiation can be an encounter of models, culture effects goals, attitudes, perception, personal and communicative style, and nonverbal behaviour.

1. Introduction.

In recent years, intercultural communication obstacles have created a number of challenges for tourism providers, and the struggle to deliver culturally sensitive tourist experiences has become a principle concern for them (e.g. Reisinger and Turner 2013; Leclerc and Martin 2004; Jack and Phipps 2005):

All tourism employees should be exposed to a broad multicultural training for cultural sensitivity to the international tourist's needs. Such training should include familiarization by tourism providers with the tourist's native language, the cultural aspects of the meanings of interpersonal and non-verbal communication cues

such as symbols, signs, gestures, facial expressions, and messages contained in body language. Reisinger and Tumer (1999: 146).

Moreover, subgroup interest may well override ethnic culture. Research tools were created to probe the expectations and judgements of culinary tourists. The results were then considered and compared along the frameworks of global, national, regional and subgroup influences on tourism communication.

Service quality can be defined as the difference between expected, perceived and delivered service levels. From a customer's perspective, this is the service quality they expect compared to what they actually experience. Tourist service quality expectations partly result from their own culture and past social experiences, which leads them to interpret the factors influencing tourism destination choice and experience from a distinct perspective. One important factor worthy of attention here is the cultural subgroup.

1.1 Culinary Tourism as a Cultural Subgroup with Distinct Behaviour, Verbal (and Nonverbal) Communication Patterns

Dann refers to the language of food and drink related tourism as 'Gastrolingo'. It is often used by tourism providers in their brochures, on high-quality restaurant menus and in magazines dealing partly or exclusively with food (gastrologues). It is a specific register (Dann 1996: 211) characterised by the search for the authentic, the over-use of foreign words without further explanation (particularly Italian and French expressions), the quasi-cult veneration of food with inspiring expressions or hyperbole, conservatism and a stress on the 'traditional', a pseudo sense of guilt for overindulgence, and a disregard for general health and fitness (Dann 1996).

Culinary tourism is an appealing resource for many locations, especially in Italy, with its unique set of food and wine producers. Products related to specific locations are rooted in local history and culture, which gives them a uniqueness for tourists visiting those areas, and the link between these products and a specific territory are often protected by law. Food and wine are often used as a powerful tool for regional development, and to attract tourists to lesser-known locations. The charm of culinary tourism is the authenticity of the experience and the unique link with localities. For this study, it has been considered a subculture, as

a specialist tourist activity with its own language patterns. This also depends, however, on tourists' background knowledge of the activity.

According to Paolini (2000) and Thurlow and Jaworski (2010), culinary tourists should also be considered elitist. Like other elite tourists, culinary tourists are oriented:

To some ideological reality and/or its discursive representations in order to claim exclusivity and/or superiority on the grounds of knowledge, authenticity, taste, erudition, experience, insight, access to resources, wealth, group membership or any other quality which warrants the individual to take a higher moral, aesthetic, intellectual, material, etc. ground against 'the masses' or 'the people'.(Thurlow and Jaworski 2010, 190).

Paolini (2000: 79-91) identifies two main culinary tourist types: "foodtrotter" (longer periods) and "gastronaut" (shorter periods, events). Foodtrotters spend two or more days in a specific area, taking part in a variety of local activities besides the central culinary event. The gastronaut type is more focused on the culinary event itself.

In light of the fact that both distinct behaviour (Paolini 2000) and language (Dann 1996) patterns have been identified for culinary tourists, it could also be assumed that distinct non-verbal communication patterns also exist. The identification and codification of these patterns could be useful for tourism marketers dealing with culinary tourism and regional development plans with culinary tourism elements as well as the companies working directly in this sector.

2. Research tools

According to Bhawuk and Triandis (1996: 31), the appropriate methodology for studies of intercultural communication depends on the actual problem being investigated, the knowledge available to the researchers, and the degree to which those being studied actually accept the techniques used. When beginning a study in a culturally unknown scenario, these authors recommend emic approaches such as ethnographic techniques, systematic observations, content analysis, and thorough interviews, with the aim of gaining either an in-depth or a holistic but unique understanding of the situation.

With this in mind, research tools were created to probe the expectations

and judgements of culinary tourists attending culinary tourism events, and tourism service providers organising these events. These results were then compared along the frameworks of global, national/regional/local and subgroup phenomena. Interculturalists, such as Edward T. Hall and Geert Hofstede give little consideration to narrower, more specific parameters such as regional and subgroup cultural influences, which are crucial in tourism. For example, there are major differences in human behaviour between different communities in Italy: mountain communities and coastal communities; mainlanders and islanders; boarder areas and non-boarder areas. There is also a major difference in human behaviour between child, young-adult, middle-aged and elderly tourists; as there is between ski tourists and beach tourists. Therefore, promoting and providing services for a beach holiday to families in Puglia is different to a family beach holiday in Friuli Venezia Giulia. The differences are even greater if the holiday is not a family beach holiday, but a young-adult beach holiday, and even more so if the holiday is a skiing holiday in the Veneto. Regional youth skiing holiday promotion for tourists from many different countries will have more behavioural (expectation and perception) patterns that bypass ethnic or national patterns, and converge on the patterns central to skiing. This is the same for many holiday types: clubbing, sailing, yoga, cycling, surfing, culinary-tourism, specific cultural event holidays, and so on.

These theoretical cultural systems also consist of many overlapping, interrelated and dynamic sociocultural subsystems. Thus, overall generalisations and assumptions of hierarchical or other linear relationships between these subsystems and overarching macro-cultural constructs become rather tenuous. Cultural constructs, if they are to be more than static cultural stereotypes, must be continuously updated in light of social change. Therefore, even though Hall and Hofstede, for example, have been used extensively in tourism research (Mitchell and Vassos, 1997; Steenkamp et al., 1999; Chen, 2000; Crofts & Erdmann, 2000; Litvin, Crofts, & Hefner, 2004; Litvin & Kar, 2003, Funk & Bruun 2007, Reisinger & Crofts 2009; Moura, Gnoth & Deans 2014; Yacout & Hefny 2015), these approaches fail to account for differences (and values) in tourist subgroups and individuals, and for situational factors and how they change over time.

Other communication, behavioural and intercultural communication models were therefore also considered when creating the research tools for this study. The models chosen focused more on determining the

parameters of expectation and perception creation specific to the tourist experience, including: Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Forgas, 1983; Cronen & Shuter, 1983; Brown and Levinson 1987; Salacuse 1999; Trevisani 2005; Cheng 2012; Ting-Toomey 2012.

In intercultural exchange, Ting-Toomey (2012) states that particular attention should be paid to elements such as the tone of voice, nonverbal behaviour, linguistic codes and assumptions. Effective intercultural communication means managing cultural differences in a mindful way. 'Mindfulness' refers to a full self-consciousness in the present moment, not only at a mental level, but also at a sensitive and emotional level (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). It is important to not only pay attention to cultural differences without falling into stereotypes, but also to bring multiple perspectives and creative visions to solve intercultural conflicts.

The research tools consisted of two comparable questionnaires of 25 questions. One questionnaire was for tourists and the other for service providers. In this paper the results from the tourist will be dealt with. The questions were based around: expectations and perceptions of different elements along the tourist value chain, verbal and nonverbal intercultural communication issues, self-identification with culinary subgroup culture and aspects that were specific to the events attended. The participants answered on a scale 1-5 for each question (1 = Very poor, 2 = Poor, 3 = Fair, 4 = Good, 5 = Very good). In the analysis of the results 1 and 2 were considered negative; 4 and 5 were considered positive, 3 was considered neither positive nor negative. This was done to avoid factors such as a culture's or individual's propensity to use hyperbole or understatement in expression of satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

When the questionnaires had been administered, this was followed up with semi-structured interviews, one for participating tourists and one for service providers. The semi-structured interviews gave the opportunity to probe further into the results of the written questionnaires, in the specific context in which they were conducted.

The research tools were administered to five small to medium companies working in the culinary tourism sector and 50 culinary tourists. The companies either provide culinary tourists services (restaurant, wine-bar, hotel, producer) or organised the marketing or communication of tourism or culinary tourist events. The culinary tourists were attending events organised by those companies. These events were: Ein Prosit (Malborgetto); Festa del Prosciutto (Sauris); Olio Capitale (Trieste); Prosecco Doc dinner-show (Venice), Bresaola and wine tasting

(Medesimo); Prosciutto and wine tasting event lesson (Milan).

A total of 50 tourists were interviewed. They came from eight countries: Austria (twelve participants), Croatia (ten participants), Germany (eight participants), Japan (six participants), Slovenia (six participants), Switzerland (four participants), UK (two participants) and USA (two participants). There was a 50% male, 50% female gender distribution in the sample group. All participants were over 40 years old, employed, with incomes they defined as “over their national average” and considered themselves as having an “above-the-average interest in food” and had come specifically to participate in the event. So in Paulini’s terms, they were all “gastonauts”.

If cultures could be mapped like territories, and if ‘cultural maps’ of communities were known and recognised, then research tools would have been created incorporating this delineation. Unfortunately, although it is not wrong to say that one culture is closer to another one because it has similar values, behavioural patterns, and communication orientation, this proximity or distance cannot be measured in the same way as two physical objects - and trying to measure them may well be unhelpful. The issue here centres on identity and contextualisation. Individuals identify with many culture groups simultaneously and these culture groups influence behaviour, perception and communication with differing intensities depending on what is being done and where it is being done (contextualisation). For example, an individual could identify themselves as belonging to the following culture-groups: European, British, Scottish, Glaswegian, middleclass, self-employed, urban, black, atheist, middle-aged, heterosexual, only-child, widower, childless, diabetes-sufferer, ex-rugby-player, novice-tennis player, pro-EU, pro-Scottish independence, motor-enthusiast (petrol-head), ‘gastonaut’, and so on.

Each of these culture group identities have a different impact on the individuals’ behaviour depending on the context of interaction. So being European or being a car-enthusiast (or even being British) may have little impact when participating in discussions on or voting on Scottish independence when the individual identifies with the pro-independence culture group. However, being British, Scottish and pro-independence have little impact when choosing a special-events holiday, especially if that holiday is centred around a classic car event, a racing event or car-piloting training. In these cases, identification and knowledge as a car-enthusiast would have a far greater impact on holiday choice and the framework for

reference for perception and satisfaction than many of the other culture-group belongings.

Consequently, every context stimulates the intensity of impact the relevant culture group or groups have on an individual's behaviour and perception. This contrasts with the notion that belonging to one larger or less specific culture group shapes behaviour towards and perception of a specific context. This dynamic aspect, between culture group impact on behaviour and context, renders 'cultural-mapping' unhelpful as it presupposes a static relationship and so tends to create stereotypes.

The research tools were specifically developed to identify whether belonging to a culinary tourism culture subgroup had more impact on certain aspects of the tourism culture chain than simply belonging to a national culture group, and whether there were some global tourism chain aspects that were universal to all cultures.

3. Analysis of Results

The first result presented here is created by the sum of all the results of the questionnaire referring to satisfaction and should be considered as feedback referring to overall satisfaction. There were 20 questions dealing with satisfaction focusing on: holiday advertising and aftersales services, destination information and booking systems, transport to destination (mode of transport, transport experience, service components), services experienced in the destination, reception, accommodation, appearance of people, appearance of structures and landscapes, architectural/urban organisation, animation and sports, cultural events and education, consumption of other services (e.g. shopping), billing, environment in private and public spaces (light, heat, sound), appropriateness of communication, eye-contact, touch, tone of voice, relevance of discourse, appropriateness of behaviour. The participants answered on a scale 1-5 for each question (1 = Very poor, 2 = Poor, 3 = Fair, 4 = Good, 5 = Very good). 1 and 2 were considered negative; 4 and 5 were considered positive, 3 was considered neither positive nor negative:

Overall satisfaction rating:

Japanese 90%

USA 73%

UK 67%

Austrian 51%
Croatian 43%
German 41%
Slovenian 39%
Swiss 33%

This result was compared with the items on the questionnaire that referred specifically to global, or national/regional/local or subgroup cultural values. In this way, it can be seen if there is a greater correlation between culture subgroups, global values or national/region/local.

In reference to (non-culinary) local authentic products or services such as local or regional entertainment, culture and sports, as well as the appearance of people, structures and landscapes, the tourists viewed these as culturally distant or even exotic. The tourists were more tolerant and less critical towards these experiences, with positive results of over 59% for all countries of origin. During the semi-structured interviews, it emerged that the differences of these local or national phenomena to the home situation of the tourists was often perceived as a pleasurable experience and was considered as an intrinsic part of the holiday experience. This result could well be illustrating quality judgements in relation to the tourist search for “authenticity” (Dann 1996: 211; Jack and Phipps 2013: 543; Thurlow and Jaworski 2010, 190) which is central to many holidays.

In the semi-structured interviews, the participants had much to observe but little to comment on about these factors. They made observations but were often unwilling to pass comment or opinion as to whether it was a good or bad thing. For example, when asked about the sport ‘bocce’ (a game similar to bowls) the tourists that had noticed it were able to give some description of the game, equipment and even the type of participants, but were unwilling to commit to stating if it was a good/interesting/beneficial game or not.

Other areas that fell into this category were prevailing fashion and dress-customs (the use of school uniforms for children), the organisation of the scholastic year and its influence on work and family life (with an emphasis on winter or summer holidays, half-term holidays and so on), and building design (a prevalence of certain materials, density of urbanisation, the favouring of planned apartment blocks as opposed to detached houses, shared bedrooms amongst brothers). Typical answers to

the question “Is this a good/beneficial/interesting situation” were “they must do it for some reason” or “they like it like that”, but with little or no further expansion.

This could suggest that a lack of knowledge or involvement in these issues leads to a reluctance to commit opinion. Some participants acknowledged that although they appreciated observing some of these phenomena on holiday, they would not want to reproduce them in their home environment, suggesting a temporary tolerance for that phenomena while on holiday. For items that referred to global values, such as travel experiences, ease of intermodal connectivity, punctuality of services, signposting, access to travel information and accommodation, all participants registered their least positive response. This was the aspect the tourists were most critical of. It would seem that a global travel culture exists with global values and expectations, which is shared by a large class of frequent, experienced and quality-conscious holiday-makers. Although there was consensus on punctuality, ease of intermodal connection, access to information there was a highly-varied perception regarding nonverbal and intercultural communication aspects relating to the interaction.

Disappointment was voiced by tourists regarding notions of politeness and appropriacy. Regarding travel staff and the way they dealt with travel problems, the Swiss perceived too much focus on the part of the staff with aspects that were not central to the problem; the US tourists found the degree of staff interpersonal involvement “charming” but would “not want to have it like that at home”. Perceptions of aggressiveness or indifference of personnel in transport hubs was a frequent comment. For example, in one semi-structured interview a Swiss tourist reported that when he was enquiring about a delayed train, that staff seemed uninvolved and unperturbed by the short-comings of the system they are part of. However, the same staff member was perceived as being overly involved in interpersonal aspects that were perceived by the tourist as irrelevant or inappropriate to the client-staff relationship. When the tourist ignored what he called the “inappropriate” direction of discourse, the staff member was perceived to have been angered and even becoming aggressive and unhelpful. It cannot be ascertained whether the personnel were objectively aggressive or indifferent, but the frequency of this type of comment would suggest either a cultural impact influencing communication and perception or a serious problem regarding transport personnel communication strategies.

Regarding eye contact, space and touch, the Japanese perceived that allocation of more personal space was officially assigned compared to the norm in Japan but that these larger spaces were often breached. Examples given were the frequency and duration of touch, the lack of seating allocation on public transport, space between seats for passengers and audience members and also what they saw as uncivilised attitudes to rubbish and waste disposal (which was perceived as a breach of personal space). The Japanese also perceived too much eye-contact between interlocutors, while the Croatian tourists found a lack of eye contact disturbing.

When probing about perceptions of tone of voice, Britons perceived this aspect as “musical in conversation but rude in transport service” interaction. The Austrians perceived an “inappropriateness” in the tone of voice especially when public officials were dealing with problems. The tourists’ comments on directness and indirectness of communication included:

(USA) this really depends who and where, sometimes there is a lot of chat but I cannot understand what they are saying, I think their English is OK, but where are they going, what are they getting at? I can kind of find myself confused at the end of the conversation. It can be enigmatic. Other times I have found myself truly captured and I think to myself that this is really a culture of poets and philosophers;

(Slovenian) we find the people here either do not really speak to you or with you, they often speak at you and I get the feeling they do not understand me as they do not really answer my questions, but then they also manage to do so many great things, like this event here.

When probing about access to information, comments included:

(Swiss) information is a commodity here shared in a complicated way;

(Austrian): before coming we rely on an Italian friend who helps us, she is great, after that we do not need much else but if we do, we sometimes find ourselves a bit lost. It can be similar to the street signs, not very clear but they can take you to incredible places. If you follow the wrong sign, you can find yourself nowhere;

(German) It can be difficult finding the right place to get information, but once you find it, there is a lot. Beyond the tourist things we found talking to people a great way for information but that is not very reliable.

When probing about content and organisation of communication, comments included:

(Swiss) So many eloquent words not answering my questions;

(Japanese) Italian style, very creative people;

(Slovenian) there is a big difference between what we talk about and how we talk about it, this is really one of the characteristics that makes Italians Italians. For me, it can be amusing, annoying, inspiring, confusing and just wrong. It all depends on the situation.

These global values, seem to largely follow the notions offered by Hall and Hofstede. In the semi-structured interviews the participants felt more comfortable volunteering opinion and comment. This suggests that a working knowledge leads participants to committing an opinion. Some hedging was made, such as “maybe we were unlucky...”; “it probably is not always like that..”, or “he might just have been feeling ill”. Nevertheless, more negative opinion was expressed and detailed here than in items regarding national, regional or local phenomena.

In reference to the items dealing with culinary tourism culture (satisfaction with the central event, products featured in the central event, information about products and preparation, notions of hospitality, and so on) there were high levels of critical quality judgements, although not as high as with the global values. Significantly though, with these items, the tourists volunteered the largest amount of interview feedback. It would seem that, as with the global values regarding travel and accommodation the participants felt they had the authority to comment on the organisation and quality of the culinary events with greater confidence.

The feedback was abundant, full of observation and comment, mostly positive but also some negative. These often dealt with details: colours, smells, combinations of sensory stimuli, authenticity and extent of knowledge and experience. For example, when commenting on the oil

tasting event and cooking school held within the Olio Capital, a German tourist reported that:

the oil tasting was well organised with a range of oils that demonstrated the vast differences it tastes (tropical, sweet, herbaceous and fragrant) and possible uses. The impact of soil-type, light exposure, humidity and variety on taste and extraction method was well explained. Even the choice of apples used to refresh the palate and negate the effect of the previous oil on the organoleptic senses was well researched. ... but I still sometimes like more than just dribble of oil on my fish, (they would kill me if they heard me) but that is just me.

As can be seen in this example, the culinary tourists were comfortable to volunteer their observations and opinions, highlighting satisfaction and dissatisfaction and openly commenting if dissatisfaction was due to their own personal tastes or due to structural flaws in the service provided. This could suggest that a greater knowledge or involvement in these issues leads to confidence to commit opinion.

When asked to compare global travel and accommodation value satisfaction with the subgroup culinary items, the participants all had a more positive perception of the subgroup event. It would seem that the events met their expectations: "The experience has been positive, we are satisfied and will return home feeling we have learned something new"; or was perceived as being 'tailored to our needs', as one participant commented. Moreover, the needs of participants with diverse culinary cultures was overwhelmingly satisfied by an event that was so characteristically different to their normality.

It would seem that although each service provider developed their own particular style, along with their own characteristic products, both the tourists and the service providers clearly recognised that there were universal standards to be satisfied and surpassed much like the global values. In the semi-structured interviews, it emerged that much more than only the characteristics of the products was a major factor in tourist satisfaction. For example, when asked to compare the experience of travel with that of the culinary event, the Swiss tourist said: "well it is incomparable, the personnel at this food event are informed, they are passionate about their product and company, and they care about it and us and our opinion and satisfaction..... There is a greater formality and seriousness in the exchange, this leads to a more professional exchange,

relationship, and result. There were not the irrelevant and out of place questions like at the train station. Although I did sometimes have problems with the accent here....”.

An Austrian tourist commented that:

the [culinary] event considers everything, location, environment, taste, smell, texture, presentation, sound, and is a success because of that, this the high point. The travel experience must simply be done with as little pain and as much comfort possible.

However, unlike the global values where there was consensus regarding some elements but highly differentiated opinion on nonverbal aspects that followed classic national cultural descriptions, here there was a sharp differentiation between national cultural descriptions and what constituted a satisfying element. It would seem that the tourists were expecting to embrace the culture of the experience offered and judge it from those parameters which, as ‘gastronauts’, they either knew, or were getting to know. In fact, one participant described the event he was attending as: “a medium of communicationwhere the highest levels of the culinary development of one culture are demonstrated and explained to well-informed enthusiasts from other cultures”.

In light of this, the culinary tourist experience takes on a completely different framework of reference than those pertinent for the global values and those for national/regional or local phenomena. This subgroup of culinary tourists is closely associated with local and regional phenomena, given that all the events were associated with regional specialities: wines, hams, local cuisines. However, the tourists felt they had the knowledge and authority to comment at length on the culinary events, which had essentially become their field of expertise. This meant the different nationalities produced far more homogenous results for each event even though the events were characteristically regional.

4. Conclusion

The results suggest that subgroup cultural values are one of the most important factors - together with global cultural values - influencing tourists' perception of satisfaction. This should not be underestimated in regional development programmes that include a tourism element.

Although the participants in this study gave more tolerant and positive assessments of local and regional events, they gave far more feedback and with a more informed and critical opinion on culinary events. The participants had clear opinions on standards and values in this category, whereas they had less to say on other local and regional phenomena or felt unqualified to volunteer their opinions.

The results suggest that greater knowledge of a subject or cultural subgroup leads to stronger opinions. A grounded knowledge (through training and experience) on the part of the tourist service providers of the counterpart's frameworks of reference which come into play when potentially confusing or conflictual situations occur would be of significant benefit for companies and regions trying to improve this sector. Although there was a wealth of personal knowledge and experience in the companies in the study, in general they lacked a structured knowledge of nonverbal and intercultural communication strategies. Such strategies could benefit other members of a company, other tourism service providers and, consequently, regional development.

One solution could be the creation of intercultural managers for the tourism sector who could support the companies working in a specific territory. The managers would support the tourism service providers, and would train tourist staff in intercultural communication aspects specific to their cultural subgroup. For example, in the Friuli Venezia Giulia area in Northern Italy, there would be specific training for youth beach holidays (in Lignano), family skiing holidays (in Tarvisio), culinary tourism events in small villages, (e.g. Cormons or Dolegna) and so on. In this way, managers would develop specialised subgroup knowledge of the activities linked to a specific region.

The skills needed for this role would include much of the intercultural communication theory touched on here: the effective and appropriate use of language; verbal and nonverbal behaviours to manage conflict situations (e.g. issues of appropriateness when problem-solving or negotiation); mindfulness and the ability to understand other people's cognitions, emotions and cultural, linguistic and personal communication assumptions (Ting-Toomey 2012). Further areas of research for this role would also need to include managing the interface of service encounters across the cultures connected by tourism, including: the culture of tourists' home countries, the culture of the host region, tourism and subgroup cultures and the organisational cultures of tourism companies. In this way, regions would be better equipped to meet the increasingly complex needs

and expectations of tourists and, at the same time, do justice to the potential of their destinations.

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