

# Learning the Arts of Linguistic Survival

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**TOURISM AND CULTURAL CHANGE 10**

*Series Editors: Mike Robinson and Alison Phipps*

# **Learning the Arts of Linguistic Survival Languaging, Tourism, Life**

Alison Phipps

Existir, humanamente, é *pronunciar* o mundo, é modificá-lo.  
To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it.

Paulo Freire: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

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# For Ruth

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# Introduction

'Quick' is an old English word used to refer to vibrancy and to anything characterised by the presence of life.

What happens when we ignore the 'quick', when our habitual ways of researching social, cultural and linguistic practices fail to search out the presence of life? The 'quick' of human relationship, the interstices of life, energy and freshness are repeatedly and systematically excluded from research into languages and from research into tourism. In the discourses of endangered languages, skills-shortages and language crisis we find little to suggest vibrancy. Equally in many of the dystopian accounts of tourism as a blight on the planet, or in the critical voices that consider its effects, we find little to suggest a freshness and liveliness that may come through relationship and encounter. And yet holidays – shaped into tourism, touched by languages – we know, offer refreshment, renewal and a revitalisation. Tourism has become one of the greatest repositories for our imagination of happiness.

There is much that is 'quick' when a tourist steps out of her habitual ways of speaking and viewing the world, and has a go at speaking the language of her hosts. And yet, in the literature on languages and the languages crises, we find virtually no mention at all of the wide practice of learning other languages, or of what I term the *linguaging* practices of tourists – having a go, trying to make sense and getting somewhere against all the odds. Life. Energy. Freshness. In the same way in the research into tourism we find a massive multilingual phenomenon boiled down to a few articles bemoaning the lack of language skills in its servants, and a few more critically assessing the patterns of discourse and the potential symbolic violence inherent in such representations. Modern linguists ignore tourism in their research, with one or two exceptions making forays into the study of travel writing, and tourism scholars ignore the main medium of tourism – not language, but languages.

And yet all the time there is life, energy and freshness in the 'quick' of human – tourist – relationships worked out in the learning of languages. The crisis in mainstream modern languages other than English may well be real, but in tourist language classes there is life and freshness. The problem is that such life and energy is not present in ways that are easily quantifiable.

The UK Nuffield Foundation report *A New Landscape for Languages* (Kelly & Jones, 2003) documented a significant change in when and where and who was engaged in language learning activities:

[...] there is a growing tendency for languages to be provided on the margins of the mainstream curriculum in schools, colleges and universities. Language learning may be marginal in the amount of teaching time allocated, in being timetabled outside the main teaching hours, and in being located in less well suited premises. It may be marginal in terms of accreditation arrangements and staffing provision. (Kelly & Jones, 2003: 39)

Changes in patterns of learning and languages don't just happen. They index much wider phenomena and aspects of social and cultural change. Although there may appear to be a certain logic to this particular change, as a response to the multilingual phenomenon and experiences of tourism, there are also certain paradoxes associated with this change. It is my contention that analysing what happens when people bother to invest time and energy in learning to speak a tourist language reveals much about the experience and process of both becoming and being a tourist, its material, social and linguistic dimensions. It is equally my contention that framing such research in functional terms, looking only at the efficacy of language pedagogy or of tourism and failing to analyse the social and intercultural dimensions of language and tourism experience, as it is encountered through everyday life, will not get us very far in terms of understanding the human importance of learning to engage with others, in different contexts and in different languages. Skills-based paradigms dominate the literature on tourism and on language learning, burdening the human activities of those learning with performance criteria and failing to consider the 'quick' of human relationships.

Languages are not just skills, even if they enable skilful interaction and an efficacy in human activity. To find a way of thinking that does not simply rehearse the commonplaces of language pedagogy, communicative learning and intercultural communicative competence requires a shift away from the discourses of performance and competency and skills. It also requires a different perspective to be taken, one that does not seek to write of language learning and teaching as two sides of the same coin, one that does not insist on language acquisition and focus on the measured and tested outcomes of the inputs of a curriculum and its production through assessment.

Furthermore, to examine the context of languages learned for and by tourists, rather than by school pupils or modern language students equally shifts the focus away from the dominant literature in the study of language

pedagogy, language acquisition and, more recently, of the crisis that has beset the formal teaching of languages other than English in schools and universities. Tourist language learning is precisely the activity that the majority of mainstream language teaching defines itself against. Serious language teaching is 'more than just learning to order a cup of coffee' I hear and read, repeatedly. Maybe. But to take seriously the multilingual, intercultural concentrations that accompany the world's largest industry – tourism – then learning to order a cup of coffee has to be taken more seriously than has hitherto been the case in the literature on languages.

Throughout this book I write not as a language pedagogue, but as a tourist language learner. I am not interested in the kinds of pedagogies used or the methods employed in tourist language classes, but rather in the social life and everydayness of the worlds brought into being and imagined through the activity of learning a language for tourist purposes. I am also interested in what 'tourist purposes' might actually be, when subject to more than superficial analysis. As well as demonstrating the need to 'arrive and survive', what might the learning of languages and their actual use – the *linguaging*, as I term it – tell us about wider social and cultural phenomena in an age of globalisation and of cultural change?

Consequently, in this book I am concerned with the 'quick', with the messy, complex and often contradictory work of learning to speak a language for tourist purposes. What happens when tourists learn other languages? What constitutes a curriculum shaped by the collective energy and desires of tourists learning languages? How important is the perception and the minimising of risk to tourist language learning? What effort is involved in moving from the learning environment of the classroom to the actual contexts of *linguaging* as a tourist? What is occurring through way finding, role playing, lessons in pronunciation and language games? Instead of focusing on skills and competences as detached add-on languages to be acquired through language classes that will help with the finding of hotel rooms, visiting museums and buying tickets, I take a phenomenological perspective.

I argue throughout this book that languages are fully embodied, not detached and 'acquirable', in easily measurable ways. Furthermore, when the focus of language scholars is only on the acquisition and the measurement of competences, of success spooned out according to numbers applying to mainstream courses or reasons for learning, we miss out on seeing what goes on in the 'quick' of human relatedness, through languages. There can be no speaking of a tourist language in which the person is not fully engaged. It is never just skills that are 'performed'. People speak – to and with each other. Discourses of performance and competence simply

mask and technologise the variedness and complexities of felt languages, from within the human person.

## Languages in Crisis

If undergraduate students are voting with their feet, and avoiding studying modern languages unless they happen to come from an elite background where such luxuries in accomplishment can be afforded, it is because they are forced to make their choices in the framework of utilitarian criteria that directly link decisions about education to the shape of the labour market. Languages, increasingly are being pushed out of secondary and higher education into primary education and onto the margins. Languages, as taught both to tourists and those studying for qualifications to work in the tourism industry, are sold as packaged commodities and skills sets for basic training and in the lifelong learning market (Kelly & Jones, 2003). Those studying languages in these contexts – usually on the margins of the working day, after hours or in lunch breaks, or as part of vacation courses – are of diverse ethnic and social backgrounds. This is in marked contrast to the demographics of those studying modern languages in mainstream contexts. The democratisation of travel in the west has brought about a democratisation in the learning of languages for tourist purposes, but not yet in mainstream study.

In adult and lifelong learning there is a long tradition of engaging people from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds. In many ways my own attempts to dwell alongside those learning a language and languaging as tourists simply add to the numbers of those adults wishing to do the same. Others have documented the important social contribution of popular adult education in other places and it is not my intention to write here within that particular, and honourable, tradition (Crowther *et al.*, 1999). I am far more interested in the tourist languaging phenomenon. The growth in tourist language learning and the particular and peculiar questions that tourism raises for languaging are the ones that detain me here. Why bother to put your whole body through an often humiliating and difficult, unwieldy and socially awkward learning experience where the rewards are slow and meagre at best and why do this for the sake of interactions that, if truth be told, will be fleeting and impersonal for the most part?

Over the past three years I have engaged in an empirical ethnographic study of the phenomenon of languages for tourist purposes. Certain languages pitch themselves in the languages market, outside of standard university courses and within the 'training' context of courses taught as foreign languages across the curriculum, or institutional wide language

programmes; as useful not as intellectual endeavours. I have engaged in a variety of different courses, as participant observer, beginning with a six-week course in Tourist Italian, and following this up with a year-long course in Portuguese. I continued this work through taking a language holiday that involved *in situ* language courses and home stays with families in Lisbon.

Some of those who bothered, alongside me, might be introduced as follows:

**Pat:** Retired, former nurse who loves Italy. She has been going there on coach tours with her neighbour ever since her husband died. She loves the opera too. She travels in to class by public transport from the suburbs. It is the first time she has really engaged with another language.

**Anja:** A graduate student of Spanish who loves Capoeira, Brazilian literature and art history. She is German, speaks impeccable English with a Glaswegian accent. She just loves learning languages and Portuguese attracts her because of its relationship to Spanish.

**Pascal:** A French Jesuit missionary. He has lived and worked in the French colonies of Africa for much of his ordained life. He is now of retirement age and is to be placed in Mozambique. He has been sent on holiday to Lisbon to begin learning the language and to mark the end of one phase in his life.

**Catriona:** Speaks French and German fluently. Teaches at a local university. A keen gardener as we discover through the classes. She travels a lot with her work, increasingly to Portugal, but also with connections to Brazil and Mozambique. She had a trip to Portugal last year and it got under her skin.

**Graham:** A community worker from one of the housing schemes and an ardent supporter of the local football team. He is spending his holidays at the European Cup Final in Portugal and it is football that brings him to the classes. He hasn't learned a language before.

**Regina:** A Dutch musician who loves learning about the music of other countries through their languages. She often goes on holidays that combine language and cultural activities. She has spent time in Brazil and is now in Portugal.

**Betty:** Goes to Spain and Portugal regularly on holiday. Began learning Spanish through the evening class access scheme for senior citizens. Wants to expand her repertoire.

**Rhona:** Has been to the same resort on the Algarve for the last 13 years and knows lots of people there. She goes back to the same place every year. It's beautiful. Has never learned a language before. It is a real challenge. Comes to class on the bus from one of the schemes.

**Sita:** Has just finished her first degree and is about to go travelling, starting with South America, especially Brazil, for a year. Portuguese could come in handy.

At a time when language degrees are in crisis in languages other than English, modern language professionals have spent much time and energy demonstrating that 'languages are about much more than learning to order a coffee'. This is the constant refrain. There are hierarchies that are constantly appealed to by those who teach other languages in which tourism is the lowest of the low. The last thing languages are about is ordering coffee, we are repeatedly told (Byram, 1997; Méndez García, 2005). It is easy to understand this perspective. It is clear that languages are indeed about more than ordering coffee. But it is my contention, in this book, that far from being the first aspect of language learning to be dismissed, as is so often the case, the desire and willingness to order a coffee in another language, to step outside one's habitual ways of speaking, to let go of one's normal fluency and linguistic power point to aspects of social and moral life that are of fundamental significance.

To find ways in which the experiential struggles of tourist languages and intercultural communication may be captured, described and analysed – rather than dismissed out of hand or modelled to enable ever increasing profits – we need other methodologies and frameworks.

Languages, both generally and within the context of tourism, have come to be understood as functional necessities that may solve some of the myriad problems of intercultural communication and the mastery of which will provide basic skills, increase economic profit and personal pleasure. This is the common sense position, the position that asset-strips languages of their life and of all other human relationships beyond those that guarantee value for money. This is the position that fails to notice the 'quick' of human relationships in languages and the way that languages inhabit others and offer others spaces in which to dwell and to encounter the world. If, as I contend in this book, there is more to languages than economics and the training of the labour market, then how might we find ways of uncovering alternative language economies, other ways in which human beings may exchange stories, words, encouragement, meaning and come to work through and change their own ways of being as they encounter different possibilities for language and for life?

## Languages for Tourist Purposes

This book presents the data, stories, memories and experiences that I have gathered through participant observation, mainly through reflective journal entries of my own. As a language learner myself I write deliberately from my own place of 'dwelling' – a concept to which I shall return – in the world of tourist language learning. The narrative entries – italicised to mark them out stylistically – punctuate the main line of the text and argument. Other course participants and course or holiday providers described remain anonymous composites throughout according to the now standard ethical conventions of such research. The tourist sites, however, and tourist destinations have not been anonymised. They remain publicly available and present as destinations that form part of the stock of the tourist imagination.

Throughout I attempt to reflect the relationship I evolved with language, participants, activities and the process of learning. My concentrated identity throughout the tourist language courses and holiday was always primarily that of a tourist language learner. Learning to speak another language – like the learning of other skills, as Ingold notes (Ingold, 2000) – is an absorbing activity. It is often exhausting and as a process of 'enskilment' (Ingold, 2000: 5) it involves attuning 'the whole organic being (indissolubly mind and body) situated in a richly structured environment' (Ingold, 2000: 5). This is not, following Ingold, a process of enculturation, of learning the Italian or Brazilian or Portuguese language as if this exists as an entity separately from its context, and as if it is acquirable by being observed, or through understanding symbolic systems. Far more it involves a full education of attention in which learning is constituted by doing, breathing, living, languaging – dwelling in the world and being practically engaged with it:

It involves an embodied skill, acquired through much practice. It carries forward an intention, but at the same time is continually responsive to an ever-changing situation. [...] The attentive quality of the action is equivalent to what, in relation to musical performance, I have called 'feeling': to play is to feel; to act is to attend, The agent's attention, in other words, is fully absorbed in the action. (Ingold, 2000: 414)

As such I would not wish to over play claims for aspects of this work as an ethnography of tourist language learners. Undoubtedly I owe a debt to the ethnographic method and training I have had in the past. But my field notes – the ethnographic present of a fully native tourist language learner – are actually language learning notes, vocabulary lists, phrases for booking hotel rooms or buying the right size of shoes, of knowing how to