

# “It’s nice when they speak back to you in Chinese!” Frustration, perseverance, and linguistic accommodation in language travel

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## Abstract

Linguistic accommodation is a topic as quotidian in tourism practice, as neglected in tourism literature. This research note brings some insights into the topic of linguistic accommodation in language travel. Language travellers tend to have atypical patterns of linguistic accommodation, since they struggle to accommodate linguistically to locals, instead of expecting locals to accommodate to them. The purpose of this research note is to contribute to the understanding of the frustrations in the process of linguistic accommodation among a group of language travellers. Using the lens of serious leisure, it addresses the question of what “conquering adversity” in linguistic accommodation means for these travellers. Although the struggle to accommodate may entail frustrations, it also leads to a sense of achievement. This study contributes to a better understanding of the link between linguistic accommodation, intercultural encounters, and tourism behaviour in the specific context of language travel.

**Keywords:** Language travel; linguistic accommodation; serious leisure; persistence; intercultural encounters

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## Introduction

Communication in tourism typically involves communicating in foreign languages; hence, language barriers are frequently encountered (Basala & Klenosky, 2001; Cohen & Cooper, 1986). Therefore, it is usually required from tourists and/or hosts that they adapt in order to understand one another. Linguistic accommodation refers to the "selection of one or more linguistic codes between speakers who do not have the same mother tongue" (Goethals, 2014, p. 181). Convergence refers to the process of individuals adapting their speech to their interlocutor to increase proximity (Giles, Coupland & Coupland, 1991). The desire for social approval or a high level of speech efficiency often motivates individuals to use convergence (Beebe & Giles, 1984; Giles *et al.*, 1991). Divergence refers to strategies where individuals accentuate differences to increase distance from interlocutors (Giles *et al.*, 1991). There are usually three options for linguistic accommodation: the use of the tourist's mother tongue, the use of the language of the destination, or the use of a *lingua franca* (e.g. English) (Goethals, 2014). The use of the interlocutors' mother tongue can be understood as convergence (Goethals, 2014).

Due to the high temporariness of tourism encounters, tourists are not usually expected to learn the host language. In fact, it is locals who have the greatest incentive to learn, since they have an economic interest in their visit (Cohen & Cooper, 1986). Although the degree of linguistic accommodation that is expected from different types of tourist differs, only the "exceptional original drifter and hardy traveller on untrodden paths [...] will make an effort at learning the natives' language in order to be able to communicate with them" (Cohen & Cooper, 1986, p. 549).

Not all language tourists may fit exactly this definition of the "exceptional original drifter", yet they are likely to seek to accommodate linguistically in the destination. Language tourism involves "travel abroad to improve language skills" (UNWTO & WYSE, 2016, p. 22). Language tourists can achieve that through immersion in language courses, staying with host families or by travelling independently. Despite the growing importance of non-European destinations in language tourism (e.g. Australia, Canada, the US or Mexico), most language tourists still opt for learning their target languages in European countries (IALC, 2016; Norris, 2019). The UK is the largest destination worldwide for language learning. In Malta, language tourism contributes to 6.5% of total tourism expenditure (Deloitte, 2018). As to Spain, it has had national language tourism policy since 2002 (Richards, 2008).

Language tourism shares the qualities of "serious leisure" (Kennett, 2002), whereby people can "express their abilities, fulfil their potential and identify themselves as unique human beings" (Stebbins, 1982, p. 251). Kennett (2002) analysed language tourists as cultural tourists and concluded that Stebbins's six qualities of serious leisure (perseverance; careers; personal effort; durable benefits; unique ethos; and identification) feature in the cases analysed. Although Kennett identified language tourists' need to persevere in the face of communication barriers and culture shock, the topic of perseverance in language travel still deserves further analysis. Perseverance is an attitude which drives "the effort to acquire the skills, knowledge, and experience needed to find fulfilment in a serious activity" (Stebbins, 2016, p. 3). Hence, "conquering adversity" seems to lead to positive feelings about the activity (Stebbins, 1982, p. 256).

This research note analyses the experiences of linguistic accommodation and associated frustrations of a group of language travellers through the lens of serious leisure. It addresses the question of what "conquering adversity" (Stebbins, 1982, p. 256) means for language travellers, specifically in the process of linguistic accommodation.

## Methodology

Participants were chosen on the basis of having travelled as a tourist outside their country of residence for less than a year in order to learn a language as a main or secondary motivation. The purposeful sample was made up of informants recruited on various social media, mostly in language and travel-related interest groups. Twenty-two in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out face-to-face and online. Participants' characteristics are summarized in Table 1. Further information about the participants is in the appendix.

**Table 1.** *Participants' Characteristics*

Sex	Age	Country of residence	Country of origin				
Men	7	0-18	0	Portugal	4	US	4
Women	14	19-24	5	Italy	3	Italy	3
Non-binary	1	25-30	8	UK	2	UK	2
		31-35	6	Sweden	2	Portugal	2
		36-40	1	US	2	Canada	2
		>40	2	Canada	2	Sweden	1
				Austria	1	Russia	1
				Russia	1	Bosnia	1
				China	1	Ukraine	1
				Japan	1	Egypt	1
				Egypt	1	India	1
				Dominican Republic	1	Venezuela	1
				Australia	1	Colombia	1
						Germany	1
						Australia	1

Source: developed by the author

For data interpretation, thematic analysis was carried out, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The software NVivo was used for categorizing the nodes, and for collating the nodes into themes and sub-themes. This research note mostly reports on the theme of "Language-related frustrations" and its sub-nodes. The sub-nodes of this theme are briefly summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Sub-nodes of the theme "Language-related frustrations"*

Theme	Number of references	Explanation
Lack of language skills	15	Frustrating situations related with lack of language skills, such as communication barriers or practical problems in daily lives at the destination.
Different language variants	7	Frustration with encountering a different language variant (e.g. different dialect, different accent, or different writing) than what one is accustomed to.
Use of English	9	Frustration when English is used, instead of the target language (this sub-theme only occurred for participants with a target language other than English).

Source: developed by the author

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## Results

For participants, improving their language skills was the most positive aspect of their language travels. However, their experiences of linguistic accommodation involved not only successes but also frustrations and struggles.

Even if participants had some knowledge of the local language, it does not mean that communication occurred seamlessly. Particularly those participants with only basic language skills faced several language-related obstacles in their daily lives at the destination. Some of these obstacles included taking public transportation in the wrong direction, being yelled at for not understanding front office employees at university, or inadvertently eating rabbit:

*In Dutch we say for a rabbit "konijn", and for a king we say "koning." Apparently, my friend was told it was a big sandwich, so she thought it was king-sized sandwich. She never knew the meat was rabbit, because she confused the words. [...] [the teacher said] "oh no, 'konijn' means rabbit". So, we were like oh my God, we just ate rabbit. (P4)*

Learners at more advanced levels had different obstacles, such as struggling to understand TV and to follow conversation where many native speakers were talking simultaneously.

Other participants were challenged by the variations in dialects or writing systems. In some cases, these variations were unexpected or perceived as "a shock" (P1). When P16 first had contact with Swiss German in Switzerland, she felt that it was "so different" and that she could not "understand anything anyone is saying." However, many participants were also satisfied for having learned a new variant of the same language.

Some participants had negative or ambivalent feelings towards the use of English when travelling to learn a language other than English. These participants expressed feelings of frustration when hosts switched back to English, since they interpreted this as a sign that their language level was still "not good enough":

*Even if my Vietnamese was better than their English, the attempt would be to speak in English, and I think you have to get to a certain level before the other person will drop English. (P3)*

This was regarded as an impediment to improving their language skills:

*"Oh, you're English? Here's, this, here's that" and then I was damn it, I really want to try [Swedish]. (P5)*

*I moved into an apartment with a Chinese student, and that was really good, except that her English was really good [laughs] again! We had to be very disciplined, "no! Speak Chinese!". (P3)*

Some also lamented that they relied too much on English because of the abundance of other international students in their immediate environments (e.g. language school):

*So easy to fall into the trap of hanging out with... because when you're on this program, there are a lot of people from Melbourne, where I live, well not a lot, maybe like 50, plus a lot of Americans, Germans, French. (P3)*

Stewart (2010) also noticed that nowadays it is harder for students going abroad to become fluent. A generation ago, students were more likely to stay at a homestay with non-English-speaking hosts, while today they are more likely to travel with a cohort, and travel on the weekend with English-speaking peers.

Some participants told of some of their strategies to avoid the use of English. For P14, what made a difference for him was never switching to English with his German friends: “*because if you start switching to English once you’re lost, then you’ll always speak English, so I was very reluctant with that.*” Sometimes, P17 would pretend he could not speak English, in order to force locals to interact with him in their native language. He also told how he sometimes would explain locals that he was trying to learn the language (“Usually in that case I just tell them, look, I’m trying to enjoy the language”). Preferring to interact in the host community language instead of one’s native language, even at the risk of misunderstanding, was also reported by Hall-Lew, Fairs and Lew (2015).

The following quote illustrates respondents’ paradoxical attitude to locals’ use of English:

*They would almost immediately sort of default to English, because they think that’s what I would want, and it would kind of suck because I believed I would practice my Dutch, but I also appreciated that if there were words I didn’t know, they would still be able to help me because there was that backup plan. (P5)*

Where there is a communication need that cannot be met in the local language it may be a relief that locals use English. In such situations, locals’ inability to speak English may lead to feelings of distress:

*They were yelling at me in Chinese [laughs] and I was just like “I have never learnt Chinese before!” but you know people kept talking to me in Chinese [...] that was probably the hardest because I was like “what am I doing? I’ll never understand anything, it’s too hard, no one speaks English, no one is nice, they all yell at me.” (P3)*

It is noteworthy how several respondents described a sense of achievement, particularly when locals dropped English. When P3 was asked about the most positive aspect of her trip to Taiwan, she answered:

*I think it’s what I’ve said before, when you have someone speak back to you in the language that you’re learning. [...] because you know that they speak some level of English [...] but it’s nice when they speak back to you in Chinese [laughs] [...] And I think that when that happens, it’s a real sense of achievement as a language learner, because it’s “ahhh they think my language is good enough not to speak English”. (P3)*

In general, participants regarded their language-related frustrations more as challenges that they successfully overcame, rather than as negative aspects. After crying in the first days for not understanding her host family, P11 reports how one of the children of her host family was surprised about her quick improvement:

*[She] was camping and, in the middle of the week, we called her and everyone talked to her, and I also talked to her and I spoke to her in Italian and then [...] she was like “V. speaks Italian?! I didn’t know that! I thought she could only speak English!” Because I learned so so fast.*

## Conclusion

For most participants, language travel implied language-related frustrations. Participants desired to converge with locals in language use, but their attempts to converge often failed. Firstly, because participants' language skills were in some cases still lacking, which led to communication barriers or misunderstandings. Secondly, the use of local language variants distinct from the ones that they had learnt posed additional challenges, at least until they adapted. Finally, some participants described their frustrations with locals switching to English, possibly as a response to participants' convergence attempts being perceived as inaccurate by native speakers. According to Beebe and Giles (1984), people tend to converge to where they believe their partners to be linguistically.

However, when those frustrations were overcome through persistence, participants garnered a sense of achievement, fulfilment, and self-esteem. As in Stebbins (1982), "conquering adversity" generated positive feelings among participants. Hence, improved language abilities were the most rewarding aspect of language travel for the majority of participants. Therefore, this research note highlights the importance of perseverance in attaining fulfilment in language travel. It provides a modest contribution to support the importance of perseverance in the serious leisure framework, thus countering criticisms to this concept (Lamont, Kennelly & Moyle, 2015). It also highlights the role of motivation in overcoming communication challenges in the context of international tourism. Due to sample size, findings cannot be generalised.

## Appendix 1

	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Country of residence</b>
P1	Female	26	Ukraine	Italy
P2	Male	19	UK	UK
P3	Female	38	Australia	Australia
P4	Female	24	India	Dominican Republic
P5	Non-binary	26	UK	UK
P6	Female	34	Sweden	Sweden
P7	Male	25	Canada	Canada
P8	Female	25	US	China
P9	Female	28	US	US
P10	Female	34	Italy	Italy
P11	Female	19	Venezuela	Portugal
P12	Male	33	Bosnia-Herzegovina	Sweden
P13	Female	21	Egypt	Egypt
P14	Male	20	Colombia	Austria
P15	Female	29	Italy	Italy
P16	Female	46	Germany/ US	US
P17	Male	62	US	Japan
P18	Female	33	Portugal	Portugal
P19	Male	28	Portugal	Portugal
P20	Female	33	Italy	Portugal
P21	Female	29	Russia	Russia
P22	Male	31	Canada	Canada

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