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Tourism Management

On linguistic relativity and pro-environmental attitudes in tourism

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Explores if language contributes to pro-environmental attitudes of tourists.
- Compares pro-environmental attitudes of Korean and Mandarin speakers.
- Significant differences in pro-environmental attitudes are recorded.
- Linguistic relativity may shape pro-environmental attitudes of tourists.

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ABSTRACT

Language is a key cultural and cognitive attribute which can shape the way people think and behave. Research in economics has tested the influence of language on human consumption and found that languages that explicitly mark future events, i.e. so-called future-time-reference or strong FTR languages, may engage their speakers in less future-oriented attitudes and actions. This phenomenon is known as linguistic relativity. By applying its principles to tourism, this study investigated the impact of language on pro-environmental attitudes of tourists. Comparative analysis of Korean (strong FTR language) and Mandarin (weak FTR language) speaking tourists revealed substantial differences in attitudes. Although tourists possessed good knowledge on the environmental impacts of tourism, this knowledge did not translate into high pro-environmental attitudes for Korean speakers while it did for Mandarin. This suggests that language can shape the attitudes of tourists towards environmental impacts. Implications for management, policy-making and future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Tourism generates a wide array of environmental impacts whose urgent mitigation is necessary (Mowforth & Munt, 2016). A substantial share of these impacts is attributed to irresponsible consumer behaviour which, in turn, is driven by poor public knowledge and negative attitudes (Lee and Moscardo 2005). The issue has been recognised and the topic of environmental perceptions and pro-environmental attitudes among tourists is being increasingly scrutinised (Ballantyne, Packer, & Falk, 2011; Imran, Alam, & Beaumont, 2014; Lee & Jan, 2015). An urgent need to enhance pro-environmental knowledge and attitudes among tourists has been called for as these can translate into more environment-benign travel decisions (Eagles & Cascagnette, 1995) and ultimately determine the success of the sustainable tourism

development on a global scale (Chiu, Lee, & Chen, 2014; Jurowski, Uysal, Williams, & Nog, 1995; Laroche, Bergeron, Tomiuk, & Barbaro-Forleo, 2002).

Culture is often viewed as a major driver of human attitudes and behaviour (Craig & Douglas, 2006; Laroche et al. 2002). Although the effect of the cultural background of tourists on their holidaying patterns has been acknowledged (Moscardo, 2004), the issue remains under-studied (Kang & Moscardo, 2006). In particular, Nejati, Mohamed, and Omar (2015) argue that very little work has attempted to explore the overlap between national culture and pro-environmental tourist attitudes while there is evidence to suggest that it can be significant.

Language is a representation of cultural reality (Moutinho, 1987) which reflects common attitudes, beliefs, values and, eventually, behaviour (Kramsch, 1998). Language is not only the main communication medium, but also an influencer of cognitive processes (Harley, 2014). In this regard, the theory of linguistic relativity suggested by Benjamin Lee Whorf proposes that the structure of a language affects the way the speakers think about reality and

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may drive certain behaviours (Lucy, 1997). Proponents of strong linguistic relativity argue that languages form the whole patterns of thoughts and shape behavioural responses (Craig & Douglas, 2006). It has been further emphasised that certain grammatical features of a language, such as tenses that express time reference, can change the individual's perceptions and behaviour (Roberts, Winters, & Chen, 2015).

There have been attempts to study the effect of language on thoughts and behaviour (Boroditsky, Fuhrman, & McCormick, 2011; Chan & Bergen, 2005; Tse and Altarriba 2008). The study by Chen (2013) stands apart in this growing research domain as it has tested the influence of language on consumption. The study found that the languages that grammatically mark future events, i.e. so-called strong future-time-reference or FTR languages, may prompt their speakers to distinguish the present and the future psychologically, thus resulting in less future-oriented behaviours. This is because strong FTR language speakers clearly differentiate between the present and the future which implies that the future is seen as being distant and, therefore, the future rewards are devaluated. When applied to the savings habits, this suggests that speakers of strong FTR languages would save less since they are reluctant to bear current (often substantial) costs for the future (perceived as being remote and abstract) benefits (Chen, 2013).

While the study by Chen (2013) has revealed the important role of language in shaping future consumer behaviour, it has been carried out from an economic, rather than cultural, viewpoint. Furthermore, no in-depth comparative research has been conducted across cultures to validate its findings. This study extends the Chen's theoretical framework (2013) to the tourism context, aiming to critically evaluate whether tourists who speak strong FTR languages have less positive attitudes towards the environment and, subsequently, less inclination to reduce their environmental impacts when travelling, compared to those who speak weak FTR languages. Most environmental impacts from tourism (for instance, climate change) are long-term; they will inflict the largest damage in the future while the immediate effect of tourism impacts is often less visible (Coombes & Jones, 2010). Based on the Chen's (2013) propositions, speakers of strong FTR languages see the future as being remote and abstract; they should therefore have little intention to make their behaviour more environmentally-responsible. This is in contrast to speakers of weak FTR languages who will assign the immediate importance to the environmental impacts from tourism as the future will be associated with the present, thus willing to act urgently towards their mitigation.

Given that the environmental impacts of tourism are rising, it is pivotal to better understand the role of tourists in minimising these impacts. In this sense, it is critical to examine if the language which tourists speak, as a representation of their culture and cognition, may shape public attitudes towards the environmental impacts from tourism and determine the effectiveness of their mitigation. This has important implications for tourism management and policy-making because the results of such analysis can enhance understanding of how to encourage pro-environmental attitudes of tourists by considering their cultural differences instrumentally. This is where this study contributes to knowledge.

2. Literature review

2.1. Tourist attitudes, behaviour and culture

The behavioural model of Fulton, Manfredo, and Lipscomb (1996) pictures that fundamental values are most stable but abstract, which influences behaviour through higher order attitudes and beliefs. Ajzen (1991) explains behaviour in specific contexts; attitudes towards a specific behaviour and perceived control over

the behaviour can allow prediction of more accurate behavioural intentions. Accordingly, these intentions provide information about the key variables of behaviour; and the broad concept of consumer behaviour can be commonly defined as 'select, purchase, use, or dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and desires' (Solomon, 2013, p. 31).

This approach can be utilised in identifying patterns of tourist behaviour (Ajzen & Driver, 1991). Tourists display certain behaviours in the whole process of travelling, including before and after a holiday journey, which is described as 'tourist behaviour' or 'travel behaviour' (Van Vuuren & Slabbert, 2011). However, Stern (2000) stresses that tourist behaviour needs to be analysed at multiple or hierarchical levels. This is in line with Bowen and Clarke (2009) who assert that, in tourism, more specialised, tourist-centered models should be considered than the grand models of human behaviour. In response to this critique, Mayo and Jarvis (1981) developed a seminal tourism-specific model which outlines the following factors influencing individual tourist behaviour at the different levels or circles: psychological factors (the inner circle) and external or social factors (the outer circle). Similarly, Mansfeld (1992) pinpoints such key determinants of tourist behaviour as culture, physical/perceived environment and personal characteristics. Yet, Bowen and Clarke (2009) posit that all models that have been developed to understand tourist behaviour to-date lack an empirical base which calls for analysis of their practical applicability.

The study of tourist attitudes is becoming increasingly crucial as attitudes can drive specific behaviour (Leonidou et al. 2015). For example, Cohen, Prayag, and Moital (2014) emphasise how misbehaviour can be caused by customer dissatisfaction, negative attitudes and perceptions which need to be addressed in the tourist behaviour study. In fact, those negative attitudes and perceptions can bring about not only unexpected changes in travel behaviour, but also behavioural modification in the longer-term (Gössling & Hall, 2006). In this sense, culture represents an influential factor which can facilitate better understanding of tourist behaviour (Woodside, Hsu, & Marshall, 2011).

A number of cultural models (see, for example, Hofstede, 1980; Lewis, 2006; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997) have been introduced in an attempt to capture a set of core norms and values shared by the members of specific cultures that are reflected in individual behaviour (Magnusson, Wilson, Zdravkovic, Xin Zhou, & Westjohn, 2008). The feasibility of these cultural models has been scrutinised in various contexts; inter alia, they have been incorporated in the studies on tourist behaviour (see, for instance, Pizam & Sussmann, 1995; Money & Crotts, 2003; Gursoy & Umbreit, 2004; Kang & Moscardo, 2006; Xu, Morgan, & Song, 2009). To better understand tourist behaviour across cultures, some studies have considered particular cultural variables or dimensions (Reisinger, 2009). For example, the time perspective (Hofstede, 1980; House et al. 2002; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997) or the environmental perception (Schwartz, 1999; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997) dimensions indicate that certain cultures consider and value time or the environment differently, by which a particular attitude can be shaped and specific behaviour of a member of a culture can be influenced (Straub, Loch, Evaristo, Karahanna, & Srite, 2002). An example of such variable-based cross-cultural research is an analysis of international skiers regarding their attitudes towards the environment by Hudson and Ritchie (2001), where significant differences in environmental attitudes have been recorded across cultures. Another example is the study by Lord, Putrevu, and Shi (2008), where the varied perception of time across cultures has been found to affect a holiday type, its duration and means of travel to destination.

Among the different cultural attributes, Craig and Douglas