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POLITICALLY CORRECT TOURISM DISCOURSE IN AIRPORT WEBSITES GUIDELINES FOR INCLUSIVE TRAVELLING

Abstract

This work attempts to investigate inclusive discursive practices on the official websites of two European airports – namely Gatwick Airport and Orio al Serio International Airport – in order to explore how political correctness (PC), i.e. a contemporary sociolinguistic phenomenon pointing at transparency and inclusiveness in texts addressing disadvantaged categories, may influence tourism discourse. Chiefly, the analysis concerns online guidelines illustrating facilities for passengers with ‘special needs’, so as to shed light on whether and how undiscriminating language is employed to convey in the most neutral, accessible and thus persuasive way information to and about customers with ‘specific requirements’ within the realm of tourist communication. On this basis, the present study will be especially useful for pedagogical purposes, for professionals and students approaching the domain of tourism discourse and its discursive practices.

Keywords: political correctness, tourism discourse, airport website guidelines, inclusive travelling, passengers with special needs, unbiased language

1. Introduction

This work offers a linguistic analysis of the way political correctness (PC) – a supposedly inclusive social and discursive practice which has been influencing contemporary vocabulary and language usage – and tourism discourse mutually intertwine, especially within the realm of web communication. The main focus will be on guidelines for customers with special needs available on airport websites, wherein language neutralisation, transparency and inclusiveness do play a major role. The purpose is to provide evidence as to how ‘sensitive’ meanings are handled and codified in professional tourism contexts, which will be especially useful for pedagogical aims, for professionals and students approaching discourse usage in such contexts to effectively convey relevant information and, at the same time, mitigate possibly face-threatening acts.

Hughes (2010) has claimed that politically correct metalinguistic strategies and neutral referential lexis are mainly and primarily associated with academic discourse and specialised language meant for expert audiences. Tourism discourse, whose pragmatic function may vary according to the context, is also characterised by degrees of either specialisation or persuasiveness; despite targeting laymen, it is found to resort to strategies that are typical of specialised language (Maci, 2010, 2013), especially at the level of lexis and syntax. Among such resources, which typify specialised discourse both in terms of quantity and distribution, it is possible to list lack of emotion, conciseness, semantic evolution and premodification (Gotti, 2003). These are also distinctive features of the so-called politically correct language (Halmari, 2011; Hughes, 2010).

The industry of tourism, which has increasingly been boosting European and global economies, is widely associated with persuasive linguistic practices, especially when targeting the general public (Maci, 2010); yet, besides its inherently persuasive aspects and market-oriented aims, this economic sector has also been fostering more sustainable fair-minded responsible policies and strategies. The UN’s World Tourism Organization¹ aims at promoting tourism education and ethics to make the latter an instrument to encourage inclusive and accessible development and economic growth worldwide. Moreover, the social impact of ‘inclusive’ tourism, as both practice and discourse, has certainly been encouraged by digital communication, since the Net represents a source of information for ‘self-catering’ tourists, thus enhancing accessibility and dismantling ‘architectural’. As a matter of fact, the industry of tourism has been seizing and exploiting the wide range of possibilities provided by the web (Maci, 2010, 2013), targeting more independent and demanding potential visitors, who have become increasingly familiar with Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and its potential, as Mansfield (2006) and Mattiello (2014) claim, to gather information. Such sustainability and wide accessibility may even be reflected in the selection of ‘sensitive’ language referring to the holiday and travel experience of tourists belonging to target groups of people in need of special assistance, in order to avoid the risk of stereotyping, which might be perceived as an instance of discriminatory language.

This study investigates inclusive discursive practices employed on the official web-sites of two important European airports, namely Gatwick Airport and Orio al Serio International

¹ Retrieved from <<http://www2.unwto.org/content/who-we-are-0>> (15/03/2017).

Airport, to explore how PC may shape tourism discourse and, by extension, the tourist experience. More specifically, the analysis concerns those hypertexts meant to provide guidelines illustrating facilities and services for passengers with 'special needs'. The purpose is to evidence whether and how undiscriminating unbiased vocabulary is used to convey in the most neutral, accessible and thus persuasive way information to and about customers with 'specific requirements' and/or disabilities within tourism settings.

This is particularly interesting in that, in such contexts travellers may need to be given guidelines for safety in airports so as to receive special assistance, and these texts, besides providing relevant information, should at the same time mitigate the threatening potential of expressions addressing or describing 'sensitive' categories. On the other hand, resorting to more neutral fair-minded lexical and discursive devices to refer to disadvantaged users is nonetheless likely to bring about ideological implications by merely presenting target groups with 'special needs' as being different from those with no such needs.

For this reason, highlighting linguistic and metadiscursive strategies which are used in practical tourist contexts to convey and mitigate such meanings can be profitable for an effective pedagogy of such resources and to shed further light on tourist communication. This is also particularly relevant in that, promoting 'inclusive' fair-minded practices by means of PC lexis and metalinguistic elements may aim to help foster entrepreneurship in tourism discourse and, by extension, in the tourism industry, a sector that has been planning new strategies and seizing novel profitable realms of investment in order to deal with the recent financial crisis (Maci, 2010).

2. Premises and study background

2.1. Discourse and tourism

Jaworski and Prichard (2005) state that the domain of tourism has only recently become a fully fledged field of enquiry rather than being just one branch of specialised communication (Gotti, 2003). In recent years tourism studies have proliferated (Hollinshead & Jamal, 2001) and drawn attention from social sciences and discourse analysis, also owing to a greater emphasis on service economy and the accelerated processes of globalisation. Hence, exploring the realm of tourist may pave the way for further investigation on complex and multiple interpersonal relationships, identities and representations in this domain.

The development of tourism discourse is also related to the availability of the new forms of web communication, which have contributed to shape a new hybrid type of discourse in terms of degrees of specialisation, attention-seeking and regulatory objectives (Maci, 2010). Indeed, tourism e-communication caters independent demanding customers that have become more and more familiar with ICT and circumscribes as much as possible the risk of misunderstanding. Said level of persuasiveness or domain specificity may vary according to the pragmatic function of the texts that are taken into consideration (Gotti, 2003) and the target of such (hyper)texts, i.e. the general public or specialists, but it is indeed an aspect to be taken into consideration for an in-depth analysis of this form of communication. As a matter of fact,

the advent of the internet has deeply influenced discursive practices and genre conventions in the domain of tourism, since text types mutually and constantly intertwine (Bhatia, 1993). Therefore, the aforementioned field represents an important source of investigation from a linguistic and metalinguistic standpoint.

The present work intends to analyse regulatory digital guidelines targeting laymen with special needs with the purpose of demonstrating that various degrees of political correctness and specialisation – two aspects that, as anticipated above, share linguistic and metalinguistic practices, such as conciseness and denotativeness – play a major role in stereotyping and misinterpretation avoidance.

2.2. Political Correctness Language Usage

According to *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA), especially in the light of the contributions of Fairclough (1995, 2014), Fairclough and Wodak (1997) and Van Dijk (1989), language is both the reflection and the basis of social interactions and power roles in society, the very process of defining actions, actors and roles conveys in itself a representation of the world which is by no means unbiased. Hence, ideological implications are inherent in politically correct language usage, for instance in the selection of lexical elements to replace ‘improper’ ones or in the creation of novel ‘special’ sensitive vocabulary. Yet, as Garzone and Sarangi state (2007), in the specific case of tourism discourse, besides more overtly expressed ideological messages, other more covert contradictory ideologies may interweave in the very same discourse, be it concerned with tourism matters or PC targeting ‘disadvantaged’ groups.

PC refers to a sociolinguistic phenomenon of language sanitisation and ‘sensitive’ linguistic orthodoxy that has influenced different realms, from academic to professional and political, especially from the 1990s onwards, even though it originated within the domain of American politics in the 1960s, utterly marked by the cultural revolution, and feminist and racial debates (Minogue, 2005). PC further developed in American campuses, especially at Stanford University, at the end of the twentieth century, and was originated by the debate on whether to complement the canonical traditional curriculum of *Western Civilization* with a more ‘inclusive’ course of foreign literatures, *Culture, Ideas and Values* (CIV), characterised by a broader religious, racial and political perspective. According to some critics, such as D’Souza (1992), CIV multicultural approach represented a political attempt to introduce radical left-wing philosophy. Conversely, Rothenberg (1992) claimed that the traditional curriculum aim embedded gender-class-ethnic dynamics (Apple, 1982) to politicise knowledge (Buckingham, 1998; Carey, 1992).

On this basis, Wilson (1995) introduced a distinction in terms of *conservative correctness*, intended to maintain the ideological *status quo*, and anti-discriminatory *progressive political correctness*, aimed to sweep away prejudices. Dunant (1994) and Hughes (2010), however, have highlighted the contradictions of such a distinction and the related ideological implications, since the process of selection of discursive and behavioral practices is inherently subjective, culture dependent and necessarily biased. As a matter of fact, on the one hand, PC has been recognised as a decent-minded intervention to sanitise prejudicial language, on the other hand, the phenomenon may involve linguistic and behavioral proscription (Lessing, 2002).

The phenomenon of PC has progressively developed into a sociolinguistic attempt of language sanitisation (Andrews, 1996) to prevent sensitive categories from stereotyping, especially in the Anglophone culture, inherently and ideologically molded by the concept of democracy and equality. The term PC entered the American lexicon and mind-set in the 1990s to refer to inclusive discursive practices intended to avoid language and behavior “that might offend egalitarian political sensibilities in matters of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental capability and so on” (Allen 1995, p.111).

PC literature review has been quite enlightening in order to identify ideological perspectives, when it comes to resorting to a supposedly more inclusive vocabulary, and non-discriminatory linguistic and metalinguistic aspects. According to Hughes (2010) PC is always concerned with language neutralisation at different levels. As for the pragmatic level,, politically correct language is primarily characterised by rife euphemism to mitigate the illocutionary power of a statement, phrase or term; instead, from a lexical viewpoint PC tends to resort to neologisms or circumlocutions to avoid stereotyping or discriminatory language, which, however, according to Hernández (2008) and as Halmari (2011) has suggested, may lead to shine “extra light on what it seeks to conceal” (p. 13).

Nonetheless, discourse ideological covert and overt messages do not necessarily imply that all discourse is ideologically charged to the same degree (Fairclough, 1995). In this light, the present analysis examines the extent of ideological bias as well as the level of neutralisation that PC discourse may entail in the realm of tourism digital communication targeting ‘special’ categories. The aim is to identify possible distinctive traits and trace both linguistic and metalinguistic resources which may eventually be used for an effective pedagogy of sensitive matters and sensitive language in tourism communication.

As a matter of fact, as Haegele and Hodge (2016) have pointed out, diverse conceptualisations of disability are chiefly influenced by professional organisations and authorities within a particular realm and such forms of communication may shape the way abilities and disabilities are perceived even by the very same ‘sensitive’ categories. Despite the complexity of the framework of disability discourse (Mitra, 2006), over the past 50 years this discursive domain has been shaped by two prime models, i.e. the medical and the social. The former tends to create objective ‘non-PC’ categorisations by overtly associating individuals with their own disability, since these labels clarify the medical profile, type of impairment and, as a consequence, the patient’s needs. On the other hand, according to the more ‘inclusive’ social model of disability discourse, disability is considered a disadvantage worsened by societal restrictions, barriers and misconception of individuals with an impairment as ‘being less able’ (Goodley, 2001). Therefore, at the very least, owing to the limited corpus object of investigation, this study may also attempt to shed light on the ‘prevailing’ model of discourse disability in the analysed airport online guidelines.

3. Research and methodology

The present work covers a linguistic analysis of airport website guidelines provided by Gatwick Airport and Orio al Serio international airport for customers with special needs, at linguistic and metalinguistic level. The selection of these sources is motivated by the need

to evidence whether there is a different approach towards PC discursive practices in English and Italian cultures, especially when targeting 'sensitive' groups. On the one hand, we have selected a major international British airport, thus possibly having to deal with high numbers of customers with special needs; on the other, we have chosen a smaller Italian airport (yet quite important, being located near Milan), primarily relying on low cost flights and catering a remarkably inferior number of potential travellers. The selection of this second site was mainly due to the fact that Orio al Serio Airport can indeed be considered as an English as a lingua franca context, since guidelines addressing customers with special needs, despite being written in English, may not be produced or primarily read by native speakers of English. The hypothesis guiding the present study is that the range of realisations of PC language is likely to be noticeably different in such markedly diverse contexts.

The analysis of the way and extent PC language usage is employed to avoid stereotyping and to create a positive, caring context on the two websites will focus on both the referential and the metadiscursive level of its realisations. The referential level of the analysis concerns the ideological and sociocultural implications, in both Italian and British cultural contexts, and will focus especially on instances of pre- and postmodification employed in the lexical representation of people with special needs. Premodification, that is the strategy of combining adjectives/nouns to nouns (or, in morphological terms, modifiers to the head of the phrase) is a non-euphemistic way of presenting meanings in that the modifier has a labeling function with respect to the associated noun, i.e. *disabled people*. According to Halmari (2011) this is a potentially face-threatening and discriminatory instrument, especially when the modifier carries negative meanings or strong semantic connotations. Particularly, in adjectives referring to people with special needs premodification attributes 'negative' qualities to the referent rather than framing them with respect of a given group, i.e. *disabled people* vs. *people with disabilities*. However, this strategy, although 'non politically correct', seems to be the most frequent collocation found in everyday use and, in some cases, also in media discourse, in order to achieve conciseness and transparency especially in attention-seeking advertising and headlines.

On the other hand, postmodification, that is the strategy consisting of adding relative clauses or prepositional phrases to a noun, can be defined as a euphemistic way of expressing meaning in that specific words or phrases are used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression (Allan, 2001). For this reason, this is considered to be the privileged way of expressing problematic meanings (Halmari, 2011) in that stemming from an inclusive and comprehensive attitude towards the referent (cf. *people with special needs* vs. *disabled fliers*) in order to avoid stereotypes and stigmatisation.

The focus on such resources depends on the fact that both appears to be particularly strategic for the guidelines under investigation here, in that their pragmatic effectiveness stems from the conciseness of the information presented and the avoidance of discriminatory language in the wording of the meaning. As a matter of fact, in digital guidelines, information is meant to be displayed in a short and clear way to customers looking for 'special' assistance. Moreover, digital communication relies on conciseness also for the purpose of search engine optimization. Thus, said inherently contextual characteristics should be taken into account when investigating the level of PC lexical usage and discursive practices in the aforementioned context.

The second level of analysis will focus on some of the metadiscursive aspects singled out by Hyland (2005) that seem to be relevant in order to measure PC contribution, namely personalisation and epistemic modality markers, especially used to express deontic meanings. Personalisation refers to the use of first and second person pronouns (*I, me, we, you*, etc.) and possessives (*my, mine, our, your*, etc.), which is useful in order to determine or convey interpersonal meanings, for instance, by either increasing or downtoning the level of inclusion. In the specific case of airport guidelines, this resource may have the function to reduce the level of formality and detachment, which is implicit in performative regulatory genres, and emphasise solidarity and “audience-sensitivity” (Hyland, 2005, p. 4), thus favouring PC verbal behaviour.

Epistemic markers are expressions – namely, modals (*can, may, could, should* etc.), modifiers (*possible, probably, certainly*, etc.), phrasal expressions (*according to, what is important here*, etc.) – which are exploited to stress either certainty, validity and commitment, or uncertainty and possibility with respect to a given claim. More specifically, *hedges* are used as inclusive – hence PC oriented – strategies to mitigate the writer’s position towards given meanings and involve the reader in a potential open dialogue (Hyland, 2005). Conversely, *boosters* are used to “close down alternatives” (Hyland, 2005, p. 52), stress certainty, maximise the role of the writer and marking the passive role of the reader with respect to a given claim, which is the standard way of expressing deonticity (Gotti, 2003).

Deontic modality – the typical function of airport hypertexts addressed to disadvantaged travellers – conveys the degree of obligation, the way people are expected to behave and the speaker’s authority in terms of permission or necessity (Maci, 2010), thus entailing a certain level of face-threatening illocutionary force in a statement. Obligation is typically obtained by means of modals such as *must, have to, will, cannot*, etc. or the unmitigated use of imperative forms. However, through the use of epistemic markers, deontic meanings can be reformulated in order for them to be acceptable in PC terms, and may take the forms of permission, through formulations like *can, may, to be permitted, to be allowed*, etc., by which ‘orders’ are presented as ‘possibilities’ for the reader to do something. Necessity is also communicated through expressions like *should, it is necessary*, or *if*-clauses – meant to soften the force of a statement by framing it with respect to a given condition (Hyland, 2005; Sala, 2008). In this case the focus is switched from the reader to the action, i.e. from a direct appeal to perform a given action to the action which needs to be carried out. Recommendation is conveyed through verbs like *advise, recommend, suggest*, etc. or imperative forms preceded by expressions of the maxims of tact (Leech, 1983), like *please, if you do not mind*, etc., by which an order is presented as a polite invitation.

As we see, the balance of hedges and boosters in a text determines the extent to which the writer is willing to negotiate a specific meaning and is indicative of the writer’s consideration for the readers. This has been largely proved to be also crucial in politically correct language usage, whose aim (Hughes, 2010) is to reflect a certain degree of sensitivity towards the reader or listener.

4. Data and analysis

4.1. Gatwick Airport

The present section focuses on hypertexts devoted to catering potential travellers with special needs with assistance and facilities as they were found on the Gatwick Airport official web-page (see figure 1 below), the second largest airport in the UK. As already observed, the analysed hypertexts are primarily informative and regulatory; yet, they pertain to the domain of tourism discourse as they target potential travellers. Thus, the pragmatic aim is to promote and offer 'special' aid as well as direct customers to follow safety regulations and provide informative practical details and recommendations, such as contact numbers, how to book in advance, how to receive special assistance, walking distances, etc.). Furthermore, information is delivered in a concise and swift way in compliance with the discursive practices and conventions typical of digital communication (Maci, 2010; Mansfield, 2006).

Figure 1 below, illustrates the web-page that directs to eight different sections, i.e. 'request assistance', 'mobility assistance', 'help at the airport', 'other assistance', 'public transport', 'assistance dogs', 'disabled parking', 'special assistance.'

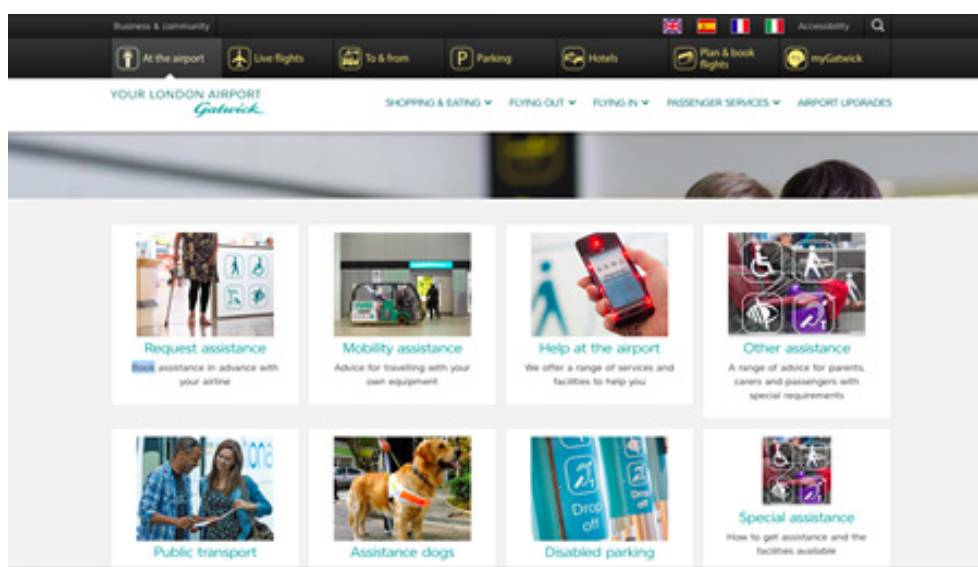


Figure 1. Web-page devoted to 'Special assistance' on the Gatwick Airport website².

As can be easily observed from the lexical material employed in the web-page, the term 'assistance' is remarkably frequent (5 out of 8 headings) and directs potential travellers to choose the type of help they need rather than directly address the 'special categories' of travellers, thus preventing from stereotyping or labeling.

From a linguistic and referential viewpoint, instead, we can see that 'special' customers are varyingly referred to on the eight different sections, as shown in table 1:

2 Available at <www.gatwickairport.com/at-the-airport/passenger-services/special-assistance> (6/06/2017).
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Premodified nouns	Postmodified nouns
Special assistance passengers (3)	Passengers with special needs (1)
Autistic people (1)	Children or adults with autism (1)
The partially sighted (1)	All those with disabilities or mobility difficulties (1)
Nervous fliers (1)	Passengers / A passenger with reduced mobility or disability (3)
Vulnerable passengers (1)	People with ADHD (1)
Vulnerable adults (1)	People affected by/with dementia (2)
8	9

Table 1. Frequency of premodified and postmodified nouns in the eight sections of Gatwick airport web-page.

By observing the data reported in the table above it can be noticed that both postmodification (9 postmodified nouns) and premodification (8 premodified nouns) are at stake when addressing 'sensitive' categories of travellers. On the one hand, premodification is mainly employed for the sake of brevity and owing to the attention-seeking pragmatic aim of the texts analysed, besides being the typical way for modifying noun phrases in standard English (Ballard, 2007). On the other hand, however, this tendency seems to be counterbalanced by 'PC' postmodification and the use of the preposition 'with' to refer to disabilities that people may have (as in *passengers with special needs*), rather than to how the disability itself affects and identifies them (as in *special assistance passengers*). As already observed, these linguistic devices prevent from creating a 'labeled' disadvantaged referent, as Halmari has suggested (2011).

As far as personalisation is concerned, the recipient is directly referred to by means of the 'inclusive' pronouns 'you' to imply potential travellers' autonomy as to whether to choose certain airport facilities or not, and, by so doing, it promotes passengers' self-confidence and responsibility on selecting travel options. The pronoun 'we', instead, always used in its exclusive function, provides customers with a greater sense of reliability and self-commitment of airport staff, as well as implying mutual collaboration when catering with special assistance (as in expressions like "We offer a range of services and facilities to help you").

As for the metalinguistic level of the current analysis, deontic modality has been taken into consideration, especially focusing on the way deonticity is conveyed either in terms of obligation, necessity and . The former appears to be rife especially in technical and instruction texts concerned with regulations and safety, as well as tourist guides when urging customers to identify and select what they may need among the facilities and services offered (Maci, 2010). In the eight different sections of Gatwick Airport website the use of modals expressing obligation and necessity – such as *will*, *must*, *need to*, imperatives and expressions like *to be necessary* – can be noticed, owing to the attention-seeking regulatory informative purpose of the text. Yet, *must* is used only twice, as can be seen in able 2 below.

Deonticity				
	Obligation	Permission	Necessity	Recommendation
Will	(2)			
Must	(2)			
To be necessary to				
Need to			(5)	
Should			(3)	
Recommend				(3)
Can		(12)		
May		(2)		
If-clauses			(29)	
Please + imperative				(16)
Imperative	(21)			
	25	14	37	19

Table 2. Frequency of mitigated and unmitigated deontic expressions on Gatwick Airport online guidelines addressing customers with special needs.

As table 2 illustrates unmitigated obligation – especially when expressed through imperatives, for the sake of brevity and clarity – even if quite frequent, is not the preferred resource employed to convey deontic meanings. In fact, modals such as *may*, *can*, and *should*, as well as *if*-clauses, adverbial expressions like *please* or the semantic verb *recommend*, all function as hedging devices, softening strong obligation. Overall, Gatwick Airport guidelines tend to resort to a high number of ‘sensitive’ politically correct forms, varyingly marking necessity (37 occurrences), which is a detached and depersonalised – yet tactful – way of signaling deonticity, or recommendation (19 occurrences) and permission (14 occurrences), both of which are more personalised and inclusive ways of conveying performative meanings, so as to create a positive welcoming context. Said pragmatic aim is also fostered by a certain degree of personalisation, owing especially to the use of the pronoun *you*, addressing customers directly, and by means of the extensive use of *we*, thus highlighting the idea of reliability and expressing a greater sense of commitment of the staff.

4.2. Orio al Serio International Airport

Orio al Serio International Airport is located in Italy, east Lombardy, and primarily deals with low-cost air transport, hence accommodating a more limited number of users than Gatwick Airport, thus having to cater even fewer potential travellers requiring special assistance. The hypertexts analysed are in English and allow us to see how politically correct tourism discourse is realised in lingua franca contexts.

Figure 2, below, shows the section of the airport’s website with information concerning ‘special’ assistance.

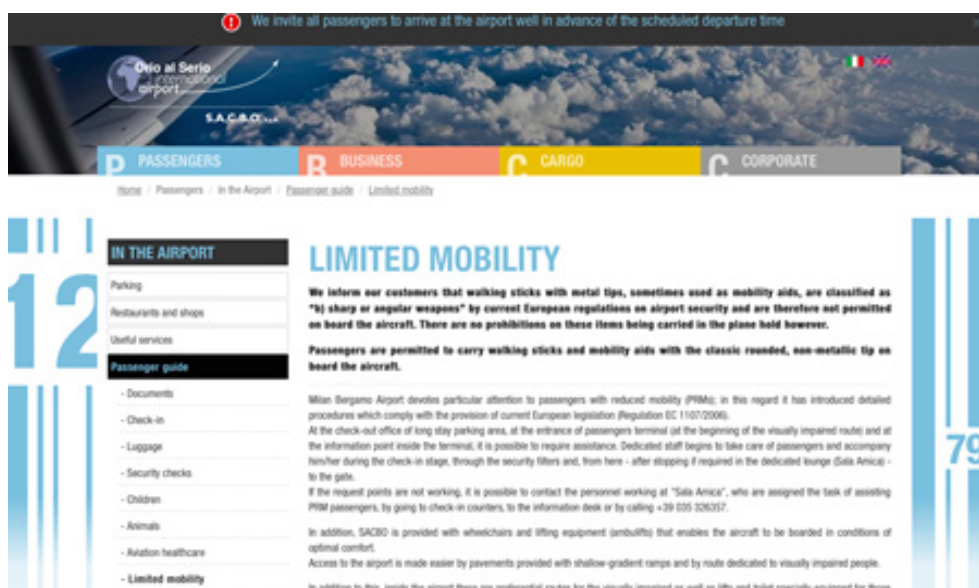


Figure 2. Web-page concerning 'Limited Mobility' on the Orio al Serio Airport website³

By observing the microlinguistic aspects of the text, we can see that, as far as lexis is concerned, the expression *limited mobility* is used in the headline of the aforementioned section; such lexical item seems to be at odds with politically correct sensitive language usage, even though the adjective 'limited' refers to mobility in general, without overtly making reference to potential travellers with special needs. Table 3 below reports how customers requiring special assistance are referred to:

Premodified nouns	Postmodified nouns	Acronyms
PRM passengers (1)	Passengers with reduced mobility (2)	PRMs (6)
Visually impaired people (1)	Those with walking difficulties (1)	
The visually impaired (1)	Passengers who need to be accompanied (1)	
Disabled drivers (1)	People with disabilities or reduced mobility (1)	
Departing PRMs (1)	Passengers with disabilities or reduced mobility (1)	
Arriving PRMs (1)		
6	6	6

Table 3. Frequency of premodified and postmodified nouns and acronyms on Orio al Serio Airport web-page for passengers with special needs.

3 Available at <www.gatwickairport.com/at-the-airport/passenger-services/special-assistance> (6/06/2017).

It can be noticed that both premodification (6 items) and postmodification (6 items) are high frequency linguistic devices, as in the case of Gatwick Airport website analysed in the previous section. Yet, in Orio al Serio Airport guidelines the acronym 'PRMs' (Passengers with reduced mobility) is extensively used (6), alone or with premodified nouns, in compliance with International Air Transport Association's classification of special assistance, which relies on a range of acronyms. Thus, in such cases, PC language usage appears to be disregarded for the sake of clarity and conformity to regulations, with clear reference to the current European and Italian legislation.

As for the use of pronouns, customers in need for 'special' care are not directly engaged but rather referred to by means of third person pronouns (*him/her, them*). The pronoun *we* is used only once with an exclusive function ('*we* inform our customers'), therefore said hypertexts lack a high degree of personalisation.

The frequency and distribution of the expressions of deonticity are shown in table 4 below.

Deonticity				
Modal/expression	Obligation	Permission	Necessity	Recommendation
Must	(4)			
To be permitted		(2)		
It is possible to		(2)		
Can		(1)		
May		(2)		
If-clauses			(2)	
Require/to be required	(5)			
Please + imperative				(1)
	9	7	2	1

Table 4. Frequency of mitigated and unmitigated deontic expressions on Orio al Serio online guidelines addressing customers with special needs.

As we can see, deontic meanings in Orio al Serio Airport guidelines are formulated predominantly in terms of obligation (9 occurrences) and permission (7 items) which tend to prevail and be prime to politically correct hedging expressions of necessity (2) and recommendation (1). Indeed, customers are for the most part urged to prescriptively follow regulations, for safety reasons, by means of *must* and the verb *to require*, either in the passive or active form. The use of formulations softening strong obligation is instead remarkably less frequent, with only very few occurrences of modals like *may* and *can* and the expression *it is possible* to codify the regulatory function in terms of permission given to customers by the airport staff. Necessity is also mitigated and conveyed by means of *if-clauses* (2) and recommendation, by the expression *please* followed by an imperative (1).

By comparing the data in table 1, 2, 3 and 4, it can be observed that Orio al Serio Airport's special assistance e-guide resorts to a higher degree of depersonalisation and prescriptive

discursive practices if compared to Gatwick Airport's web-pages targeting sensitive referents. In the former, PC linguistic and metalinguistic strategies are mostly disregarded, as can be noticed also in the overtly face-threatening expression *will be persecuted by law* used on Orio al Serio Airport guideline in order to urge customers to respect safety regulations. Conversely, on Gatwick Airport special assistance web-pages European or local legislations are not mentioned and the use of institutionalised formulations such as acronyms to address potential travellers is avoided. Since English is used on Orio al Serio Airport website in a lingua franca context (i.e. primarily produced and read by non-native speakers of English) adherence to a more institutional language can stem from the necessity to avoid any form of misunderstanding, for the sake of clarity when delivering regulations.

5. Conclusion

Given the limited corpus analysed in this work, at least the results may point to the conclusion that, in the light of what has been observed in the current analysis concerning Gatwick Airport's and Orio al Serio International Airport's special assistance web-pages, digital tourism discourse appears to draw from diverse discursive practices and conventions, particularly when addressing sensitive referents. Learners and researchers on this type of hypertexts should be aware of the fact that brevity of digital communication, informative attention-seeking pragmatic aims and PC language usage are very much interwoven. Moreover, we need to bear in mind that, whereas brevity and impact can be achieved in similar ways in different cultural settings, the realisation of PC is very much dependent on contextual and cultural parameters concerning how 'sensitive' contents are expected to be codified and what emphasis is to be conferred to such meanings with respect to others (such as formality, deonticity, performativity, etc.) which are typical of a given genre.

When teaching and learning the textualisation of deontic meanings addressing/concerning 'sensitive' referents in native language contexts, where English is the primary if not the sole language for communication, pragmatic effectiveness can be achieved, on the one hand, through conciseness, directness and semantic unambiguity; on the other, the emphasis on PC language to mitigate face-threatening act is especially vital when targeting people with special needs.

The need for immediacy, as we see in Gatwick Airport's hypertexts, legitimises the use of unmitigated resources like premodification or the expression of strong obligation, when such meanings are crucial. However, such directness, perceived as potentially threatening in English speaking cultures, especially in the UK and USA, should always be compensated by PC oriented strategies, also in compliance with the social model of disability discourse (Haeghele & Hodge, 2016).

Three of such discursive strategies seem to be helpful for this purpose. The first is personalisation, both referred to second person – targeting potential customers as independent decision-making (Maci, 2010) – and the first person – the pronoun *we* conveys a greater sense of reliability and self-commitment of airport staff, thus giving the idea of mutual cooperation and creating a more welcoming context. The second PC strategy is postmodification, by which people with special needs are 'described' (*people with disabilities*)

rather than 'labeled', hence stereotyped (*disabled people*). The third resource that learners should be aware of is the rhetorical diversification of the expression of deonticity; this can be effectively conveyed also through alternative forms, that is mitigating strong obligation (*do this / you must do this*) by expressing the same meanings in terms of necessity (*you need to/ should do this*), as permission (*you may do this*) or recommendation (*please, do this*).

In lingua franca contexts things are drastically different, in that, as evidenced in Orio al Serio's hypertexts, pragmatic effectiveness seems to stem primarily from the precision and unambiguity of the message, irrespective of the threatening potential of its formulation, whereas PC appears to be considered as a purely stylistic concern. Learners have to keep in mind that when writing for such contexts, the most concise and straightforward ways of conveying meanings are to be preferred. Therefore, premodification is not at all problematic and deonticity is best and unambiguously expressed as strong obligation rather than its mitigated variants. The redressing of face-threat remains a major concern, but in lingua franca contexts the most impactful way of softening the threat, rather than through PC formulations, is by resorting to fixed model or accepted and conventionalised ways of expressing meanings, namely, institutional and (pseudo)legal language. As a consequence, the problem of possible stereotyping related to premodification (and, marginally, also to postmodification) is bypassed by using formally accepted acronyms (like PRM). Such acronyms cannot be perceived as non PC in that, first, they are 'indicative' rather than semantically full (negative or problematic meanings are not wholly lexically represented since only the first letter of words referring to them is used), and, secondly, this is the way official regulations and laws use to express such referents. For the same purpose, references to norms and articles of the law and the avoidance of personalisation can be used to enhance the sense of an official and institutional communication.

The difference between the textualisation of the two web-pages under investigation here might be due to a variety of reasons which need to be assessed for an effective pedagogy of PC language in tourism contexts. One possible reason may be related to the level of linguistic competence of both producers and target users of such texts. Actually, in contexts where the semantic, rhetorical and stylistic properties of the language are accessible to all users, the pragmatic effectiveness of a text might benefit considerably by its linguistic richness and stylistic variation. Conversely, in non-native settings, semantic transparency and referential immediacy are likely to be better achieved by resorting to a limited and (relatively) circumscribed vocabulary, with few linguistic choices but associated to clearly recognisable referents, and where denotation (even when face-threatening) is preferred over connotation, mitigation or the expression of nuances of meaning. Learners have to remember that in such contexts a variety of expressions with similar meanings may be perceived as being possibly ambiguous rather than rhetorically refined, and will be effort-consuming for interpretation.

Another possible reason for such a differentiation concerns the concept of PC itself. PC, as we have seen, originated and eventually developed as a sociolinguistic phenomenon in Anglophone academic, professional and cultural realms. Therefore, PC language is easily recognised as an effective way to convey a wide range of meanings (from informative to promotional, to performative or normative ones) in countries where English is the native language. In addition to that, we must remember that, as far as normative language is concerned, in Anglophone cultures even specialised domains tend to adapt their way

of communicating and simplify intricate content in order to make specialised texts more accessible. The Plain Language Movement (PLM) was typically meant for this purpose, being mainly intended to reduce the complexity of legal documents (Mellinkoff, 1963; Sala, 2014), in which transparency is key, thus allowing non-experts to understand and use said documents. In Italian culture, instead, specialised texts or even institutional texts targeting laymen are expected to maintain a certain degree of depersonalisation and assertiveness, not only to avoid ambiguity, but also, and especially, for their specific pragmatic function (be it informative, normative, performative) to be easily recognised as such.

This is what makes the two texts under investigation effective in their own way (in semantic, pragmatic and also in PC terms), despite their noticeable differences. Gatwick airport's discursive practices tend to align to Anglophone PC standards, and are more inclusive, user-friendly and customer-focused, whereas on Orio al Serio Airport's website regulations are meant to be conveyed in the most precise and institutional way, in compliance with safety rules and legislation. The respect of such conventionalised standards even when expressing 'sensitive' meanings – i.e. by resorting, for instance, to acronyms rather than using euphemistic formulations – can be seen as an acceptable and appropriate way to avoid stigmatising people with special needs

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