



Language as a Lens: Italy's Tourism Promotion for International Visitors from the 1920s to the 1950s: the DIETALY project

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ABSTRACT: This article presents the DIETALY project, funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, which explores the intersection between language, translation and tourism promotion, highlighting how tourism is not only an economic sector but also a key player in the formation of cultural identities. Through a diachronic lens, the articles presented in this special issue explore the evolution of Italian tourism communication in English, focusing mainly on the work of ENIT, Italy's national tourism agency, from the early 20th century to the post-war period. The DIETALY project examines the transformation that institutional tourism communication has undergone during this historical period by analysing a range of media, including written texts, images and audiovisual content. Using an interdisciplinary and multimodal methodology, the project examines how visual and verbal elements were combined to convey the image of Italy as a tourist destination abroad, adapting to the challenges posed by the economic crises and the Second World War. It highlights the resilience and adaptability of the tourism sector, which is also expressed in the strategic use of language. An interdisciplinary approach that integrates tourism studies, linguistics and translation studies, and history is essential to understanding tourism promotion in all its facets. This framework promotes deeper insights into how language shapes tourism experiences and offers new research opportunities by examining past practices to better understand today's globalized tourism landscape.

KEY WORDS: Tourism Studies; Tourism History; Language Studies; Translation Studies; Interdisciplinary Methodology in Tourism Studies



TOURISM, LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN ITALY 1920S-1950S

The tourism industry is a highly complex and multifaceted field where socio-economic, political and cultural dimensions come together in a complex way. At its core, tourism is more than an economic activity; it plays a central role in the construction and projection of cultural identities. This process of identity formation occurs both internally, by fostering recognition and cohesion within a linguistically unified geographical space, and externally, through engagement with global audiences speaking different languages. Language is therefore not just a tool for communication, but a carrier of the cultural codes that define a community (Bielenia). The strategic use of language in tourism, particularly at the institutional level, highlights the deep interconnections between language, identity and tourism promotion (Hall-Lew, Lew; Cronin). As a result, the complex interplay between language and cultural representation in tourism has prompted linguists and translation scholars to explore how text, images, and other multimodal elements shape perceptions of destinations (Jaworski, Thurlow; Kress, Van Leeuwen).

Understanding this interplay is critical given the dual role of language in tourism: it can enhance the appeal of a destination, yet, if mismanaged, it can also contribute to the erosion of cultural authenticity and exacerbate socio-environmental pressures on host communities. As Katan (*Tourism* 343-344) has recently put it: “though tourism is grounded in discourse, it is not discourse with the destination community”, as translation is often used to make tourists to feel at home away from home, often by making the new too familiar. Easy access to popular tourist attractions, reinforced by strategic use of promotional language, has major implications for sustainability in cities such as Venice and Barcelona, where the excessive growth of tourism has recently triggered a wave of protests. Despite the importance of these issues, tourism studies have often neglected the linguistic aspects of intercultural interactions, leaving a significant theoretical gap, as will be explained in Section 5.

The articles in this special issue argue for the inclusion of linguistic and translational analysis in tourism research, particularly through a diachronic lens that examines the evolution of tourism communication practices over time. The project DIETALY (Destination Italy in English Translation Over the Years), financed by the Italian Ministry of Education as a project of national interest, or PRIN project, focuses on the genealogy of English-language tourism promotion by Italian institutions, mainly the Italian National Tourism Board (ENIT), from the early 20th century to the post-war reconstruction period. By analysing printed texts, images and audiovisual materials, this project seeks to uncover the nuanced and often overlooked dynamics of tourism communication.

This research does not seek to construct a linear history of Italian tourism communication in English. Instead, it aims to shed light on the multifaceted nature of tourism promotion and its impact on the shaping of Italian cultural identity. By examining the evolution of communication strategies over time, this study provides a



comprehensive view of the resilience and adaptability of the tourism sector. The diachronic scope of this research, covering the period 1919-1950s, is particularly significant given the rise of English as tourism *lingua franca*. Tracing the evolution of Italian institutional tourism communication in English is crucial to understanding its impact on the perception of Italy as a tourist destination in the international panorama. Moreover, charting these developments over such a turbulent historical period allows us to better understand how Italy's image has been adapted in response to both external and internal pressures, and how tourism communication practices have been transformed by crises such as the World Wars and their aftermath, demonstrating the sector's capacity to reorganise and innovate.

THE EVOLUTION AND IMPACT OF ENIT'S TOURISM COMMUNICATION

The articles in this special issue analyse the strategic use of language to deal with periods of political and economic instability. The 1920s and 1930s presented Italy with major challenges, including the rise of Fascism and the global repercussions of the 1929 economic crisis. This had a severe impact on tourism, which was then and still is a key sector of the Italian economy.

In response to these challenges, language became a crucial tool for managing the international perception of Italy. Institutions such as ENIT strategically crafted narratives about Italy's attractions to counter the negative effects of the political turmoil and economic crisis, with the aim of restoring the confidence of potential visitors and revitalising the tourism industry.

The DIETALY project represented in this special issue shows that ENIT's promotional strategies evolved significantly to meet these challenges, reflecting wider shifts in Italy's cultural and social landscape. Initially focused primarily on printed brochures and leaflets, ENIT's approach adapted to the changing demands of a market in constant search of innovation. During the Fascist period, tourism promotion became not only an economic necessity, but was also influenced by the political ideology of the regime. Tourism communication sought to project an image of stability, modernity and cultural richness to the outside world. By analysing these materials, we gain valuable insights into the ways in which Italy's tourism communication strategies balanced the projection of a desirable cultural identity with the need to respond to the commercial pressures of a fluctuating market. This research highlights the importance of viewing ENIT's materials not just as marketing tools, but as cultural artefacts that reveal how tourism communication strategies were used to balance the projection of an appealing cultural identity with the commercial pressures of a radically changing tourism market.

The DIETALY project, which forms the basis of the articles presented here, does not aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of the development of Italian tourism over the last century. The focus remains on the role of language, rather than on the evolution of tourism from an economic or socio-cultural perspective. Accordingly, the research



examines the various forms of communication used over the decades, from printed texts to visual media, including photographs and multimedia productions such as radio broadcasts. The articles in this special issue use multimodal discourse analysis to explore the interaction between visual and verbal elements in tourism communication, paying particular attention to how different semiotic modes interact in the production of promotional materials (Bateman). Integrating the methodologies of critical discourse analysis, corpus linguistics and multimodal studies, this interdisciplinary approach highlights the importance of language in shaping tourism communication and constructing cultural identity (Francesconi).

One of the main challenges of the PRIN DIETALY research, from its inception, was to locate ENIT's publications further back in time (see Mauro in this issue). The ephemeral nature of these materials, coupled with the complex history of ENIT, made it difficult to create a comprehensive collection. Over the years, archives, repositories and libraries have often been moved, reorganised or even destroyed, reflecting the many and varied historical vicissitudes of the agency. It is only recently that ENIT has begun to systematically digitise and reorganise its vast collection of documents. Since October 2022, access to some of these archives has been facilitated thanks to an agreement between ENIT and the Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Unfortunately, much material remains scattered, especially in small public libraries, where researchers continue to discover previously unexamined documents. Unlike ENIT's visual communication, which has been studied extensively and presented in exhibitions (Barrese; Ciafrei, Feudo), studies on verbal communication, especially in foreign languages, are scarce and Syrjamaa's is the only one to date. The DIETALY research group aims to systematise the collected material, focusing on ENIT's English language communication from the 1920s to the 1950s. This process of systematisation is underway, especially the historical dating and the definition of the textual genre, and the first results are presented by Podda and Mauro in this issue.

Archival research and document analysis are yet to clarify key questions about the processes of language mediation. It remains uncertain whether interlingual communication and translation tasks were managed internally or outsourced, and whether professional translators, language experts or other professional or semi-professional figures were employed (Katan *Outsider*). The issue of the invisibility of translators, which has been discussed extensively in translation studies (Venuti), is particularly evident in materials from the early 20th century. Very rarely do brochures or booklets, often classified as grey literature with a primarily commercial function, acknowledge their authors or translators, thus contributing to their anonymity (Suleiman). In contrast, some visual materials, such as posters and photographs, credit well-known artists and studios, highlighting the stark difference in visibility between textual and visual contributions.

Given all the above premises, it is clear that tourism communication is not limited to simple language transfer but involves complex decisions about which cultural



narratives to promote and how to present them. By integrating insights from linguistics and translation studies, the DIETALY research project aims to broaden the scope of tourism studies.

Therefore, the articles presented in this special issue have necessarily opted for a nuanced approach to tourism promotion, acknowledging the intricate interplay between text, image and cultural identity (Cronin and O'Connor; see also De Bonis in this issue). By tracing the genealogy of Italian tourism communication in English, DIETALY fills a critical gap in the panorama of the evolution of Italian culture and its interlinguistic and intercultural relations, offering new perspectives on the role of language in shaping the communicative practices that have historically defined and redefined Italy's cultural identity in an international perspective. It also aims to stimulate further research on the ways in which tourism communication can evolve to meet the challenges of an ever-changing tourism landscape.

ENIT'S BEGINNINGS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The diachronic perspective mentioned in the previous sections now needs a precise historical contextualisation. The creation of the Ente Nazionale Incremento Industrie Turistiche (ENIT) on 12 October 1919 marked a significant moment in Italy's involvement in international tourism policy. With the First World War having devastated Italy's tourism revenues, the government of Francesco Saverio Nitti (1868-1953) sought to revive the sector by creating a national body to promote Italy's image abroad. ENIT's mandate was to coordinate tourism promotion strategies, through advertising campaigns and publications in various European languages (see Podda in this issue).

The creation of ENIT followed the example of other European countries, where state organisations had already centralised tourism policies. For example, the French Office National du Tourisme, founded in 1910, served as a model for Italy. Meanwhile, at the local level, Italian tourism was supported by private committees and associations that managed promotional activities in regions such as Venice, the Western Ligurian Riviera and Tuscany, known for its spas and coastal resorts.

A prominent private organisation in this context was the Touring Club Italiano, which had been active since 1893 (Berrino 160-161). Although ENIT and the Touring Club Italiano had different roles, their objectives often overlapped, leading to both cooperation and rivalry over the decades. From its inception, ENIT enjoyed the support of key government ministries such as the Ministry of the Economy, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Enterprise. It also maintained a crucial partnership with the State Railways, initially managing railway ticketing services before handing them over to the newly created Compagnia Italiana del Turismo (CIT) in 1927. This move allowed ENIT to focus on promotional activities rather than commercial operations, thus strengthening its role in cultural promotion and tourism analysis. ENIT's collaboration with the State Railways was crucial to its early promotional efforts, as railway



distribution channels were used to disseminate tourism materials throughout Italy and abroad. The agency was aware that the success of tourism was closely linked to the development of transport, which underwent significant technological changes throughout the 20th century. Above all, ENIT was aware of the importance of effective advertising in influencing tourist flows, and this awareness shaped its strategies from the outset.

ENIT quickly established itself as a key player in the international promotion of Italian tourism, particularly in the 1920s. The translation of Italian brochures into several languages, focusing on the main scenic and cultural attractions, was the agency's first step into foreign language communication. Promotional materials were distributed to embassies, consulates and tourist offices in Italy and abroad, as well as on transatlantic liners, in the foreign offices of Italian institutions such as the Dante Alighieri Society, and through banks, chambers of commerce and professional associations.

By 1921, ENIT had opened offices not only in Europe but also in the United States, with a central office in New York. These offices were strategically located in prominent streets of foreign capitals, where posters, photographs and promotional material in several languages were displayed to attract international visitors. In the 1920s, ENIT also began to advertise in foreign magazines and to buy advertising space in international newspapers, a practice that would increase significantly after the Second World War (Bertarelli 66).

The 1920s saw increasing political instability across Europe, culminating in the rise of Fascism in Italy and Mussolini's dictatorship, which lasted from 1922 to 1943. While the Fascist regime had a significant impact on domestic tourism promotion, its influence on international tourism communication appears to have been more restrained, as confirmed by Syrjamaa and supported by DIETALY. Apart from specific cases related to special events (discussed for example by Rossato in this issue), ENIT's international activities were less influenced by fascist ideology than domestic tourism promotion. This discrepancy can be explained by the dual objectives of the regime: on the one hand, it wanted to gain credibility abroad and, on the other, it was dependent on foreign tourist income, which was crucial for the national economy. As a result, ENIT had to maintain a delicate balance between political propaganda and commercial tourism promotion.

A notable development during this period was the emergence of radio as a means of promoting tourism. In 1927, ENIT joined forces with the Ente Italiano per le Audizioni Radiofoniche to create the Radiogiornale ENIT, which broadcast tourist information in Italian and foreign languages (see Fina in this issue).

The Great Depression of 1929 dealt a severe blow to the Italian economy, including the tourism sector. During this period, tensions between ENIT and CIT escalated, leading the Fascist regime to tighten its control over the tourist industry. In response, the government created the Commissariato Generale per il Turismo (General Commissariat for Tourism), which centralised public and private tourism agencies under the supervision of the Giunta Centrale per il Turismo (Central Council for Tourism),



chaired by Mussolini himself. This move brought tourism activities under the direct control of the government, but despite the obvious growing influence of Fascist ideology in the late 1930s, our research seems to confirm Syrjamaa's thesis that ENIT tried to avoid overtly ideological messages in its promotion of tourism abroad, concentrating instead on the commercial marketing of Italy as a tourist destination (see Agorni in this issue).

ENIT'S DUAL LEGACY: BALANCING TRADITION AND MODERNITY

The Fascist regime's approach to tourism promotion was characterised by a desire to modernise Italy's image while preserving its ancient cultural heritage. ENIT's promotional materials of the period reflect this duality, combining references to modern architecture and transport with those to architecture, sculpture and classical art in general, and ancient Rome in particular. Thus, while the emphasis on modernity may have contained elements of fascist rhetoric, the overall narrative was more in line with the long-standing image of Italy as a cultural destination (see Mattei in this issue).

The Second World War marked a significant downturn for the tourism sector, but it also laid the foundations for a post-war transformation. Tourism had to evolve, freeing itself from the nationalist pressure of Fascist ideology and adapting to a radically changed socio-political landscape. A fundamental challenge of this period was to reconstruct Italy's international image while promoting democratic values, not least through tourism. The language used in tourism communication became central to this effort, both as a vehicle for cultural renewal and as a tool for attracting international visitors to Italy. This period marked a deliberate move away from the propaganda language of the late 1930s, with a renewed emphasis on the artistic heritage, culinary traditions and local customs of the various regions of Italy. The choice of words and images, the representation of people, and no longer just landscapes and works of art, were carefully studied to present Italy as a welcoming, culturally rich and peaceful destination, appealing to the sensibilities of a war-weary world.

The 1950s saw the emergence of the Italian 'dolce vita', coinciding with a period of economic recovery and renewed optimism. This period saw the creation of the Enti Provinciali del Turismo and the Aziende di Soggiorno e Turismo, under state control, which strengthened the role of tourism in Italy's economic rebirth. Tourism communication in this decade was thus characterised by the celebration of a relaxed and sensual lifestyle, embodied by the phrase 'dolce vita', which became a global symbol of Italian charm (Hom).

In 1959, the Ministry of Tourism and Amusement was created. ENIT's activities were revitalised, including a change of name: ENIT became the Ente Nazionale Italiano per il Turismo (Italian National Tourism Board), and its mandate was extended to include the management of all aspects of international tourism communication.

The analysis of ENIT's communication strategies presented in this issue highlights



the adaptability and effectiveness of language in responding to the changing needs of tourism promotion. ENIT's representation of Italy abroad has been carefully crafted to meet the expectations of foreign audiences, subtly shaping their perception of the country against the backdrop of constantly changing historical circumstances. This linguistic strategy was essential not only to maintain Italy's attractiveness as a tourist destination, but also to manage the complex interaction between the evolving historical-political climate and commercial objectives, to ensure that Italy remained an attractive destination and to manage the narratives that defined its image.

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF TOURISM PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL: INTEGRATING TOURISM STUDIES, LANGUAGE, AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The analysis of tourism promotion campaigns has traditionally been the domain of tourism studies, a field concerned with the economic, cultural and social dynamics that shape tourism experiences. However, as global tourism increasingly involves complex intercultural interactions, there is a growing recognition of the need for a truly interdisciplinary approach. This approach must integrate insights not only from tourism studies, but also from language and translation studies, as well as a deep consideration of historical contexts. Such a perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how tourism promotion operates across cultures and time periods, revealing the underlying power dynamics, cultural negotiations and identity constructions that are often at play.

Tourism is inherently an intercultural activity, involving encounters between people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Despite this, the material presence of languages and the processes of language mediation have often been overlooked in tourism studies. Research in this field has historically focused on the socio-economic aspects of tourism, with less attention paid to the crucial role that language plays in these intercultural exchanges (Agorni *Communication*; Agorni *Languages*). As a result, the complexities of language transfer, cultural mediation and the work of language professionals have remained a grey area in tourism studies. This seems to be not just a methodological oversight in tourism studies, but rather a theoretical gap that is particularly evident in the Anglo-American tradition of tourism studies, which strongly influences much of the research being produced globally today. The use of English and universal assumptions about language and translation prevail, often leading to a one-size-fits-all approach (Agorni *Languages*; Atelejevic, *et al.*; Katan *Tourism*).

What is becoming increasingly apparent is therefore the need for an interdisciplinary dialogue between tourism studies and language and translation studies. Language professionals, including linguists and mediators, play a key role in shaping how tourism is experienced and understood across cultures. They are



responsible not only for translating promotional materials, but also for ensuring that these materials are culturally relevant and resonate with diverse audiences (Katan *Cultures*; Katan *Outsider*). The absence of such considerations in much of the existing tourism literature suggests a significant theoretical gap that needs to be addressed.

In addition to insights from language and translation studies, a historical perspective is essential for a comprehensive analysis of tourism promotional materials. The development of modern leisure travel is deeply intertwined with historical developments, including the rise of nationalism, the expansion of transport networks, the growth of mass media and technological innovations. Travellers have crossed borders since time immemorial, and tourism developers have often borrowed ideas from other cultures to create attractive destinations. Furthermore, the promotion of different destinations has often led to the emergence of innovative forms of tourism communication in a variety of languages. Yet, tourism historians often write about their subject as if it were defined by obvious lines on a map, neglecting the transnational exchanges that have always shaped tourism. This oversight is particularly problematic when considering the role of language in tourism. The use of guidebooks, maps and promotional materials in multiple languages has been instrumental in shaping tourists' perceptions of different destinations, yet the processes of translation and language mediation are rarely discussed in historical analyses.

A historical approach to tourism promotion not only provides a context for understanding current practices, but also highlights how these practices have evolved in response to changes in the cultural and political landscape (Frew, White; Walton). For example, the relationship between tourism and national identity is a recurring theme in the history of tourism, with tourism shaping and being shaped by national narratives (Pitchford and Jafari; Zuelow). However, the analysis of language, or better the languages used to promote tourism not only domestically but also internationally, is rarely included in studies that examine the role of tourism in the formation of national identities; identities that today, as in the past, are defined precisely in transnational exchanges. It is only by incorporating historical research into the analysis of tourism promotional materials, and examining them from a linguistic and translational perspective, that we can better understand how these materials have been used to construct and reinforce collective identities over time.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of tourism promotional material requires an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates insights from tourism studies, language and translation studies, and historical research. This approach is necessary to fully understand the cultural, linguistic and historical dimensions of tourism promotion and to fill the theoretical gaps that remain in tourism studies. By fostering collaboration between these disciplines, scholars can create a more holistic framework for tourism analysis that recognises the central



role of language in shaping tourism experiences and the importance of historical context in understanding the evolution of tourism promotion.

The interdisciplinary approach proposed here not only enriches our understanding of tourism but also opens up new avenues for research. It challenges scholars to think beyond disciplinary boundaries and consider the ways in which language, culture and history intersect in tourism promotion. In doing so, we can develop a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the tourism experience, and it is precisely by analysing the past that it becomes possible to better reflect on the complexities of the globalised world in which we live.

The DIETALY project offers a fascinating insight into tourism promotion and allows us to study how Italy was presented to international visitors as a geographically and politically unified destination for the first time in history. The documentary sources available to us offer a significant collection of English-language content from the period under study, but it is important to remember that these materials were produced by people for people. The functions and roles of all actors involved in interlingual and intercultural communication practices deserve special attention, along with the issues of trustworthiness and reliability usually associated with human persons. Rizzi, Lang and Pym have identified trust as a kind of defence strategy against the degree of impersonality and uncertainty that characterises any translation activities. According to them, research based on the trust model enables scholars to gain insight into the mindsets and particular contexts in which the various agents involved in language and cultural transfer operations act.

While our research has allowed us to delineate both the commissioner, ENIT, and the recipients of these texts, i.e. the tourists—in terms of their language, nationality and, to a certain extent, social class and type of tourist experience they would potentially be interested in—critical questions remain concerning the agents of the linguistic mediation processes: Were they native speakers of English but non-professional mediators, or professional translators, or subject matter experts responsible for crafting these messages? More importantly, what degree of agency did these individuals have in shaping the contents? As noted in Section 2, biographical information on those who produced these texts is scarce, but analysis of the extensive English-language material we have collected and carefully contextualised offers fascinating insights into the strategies employed, and hypotheses about their aims form the basis of the articles presented here.

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