

# Accommodating the visitor: How museums connect with their present-day populations

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► **To cite this version:**

Linda Pilliere. Accommodating the visitor: How museums connect with their present-day populations. *Anglophonia / Caliban - French Journal of English Linguistics*, Presses universitaires du Midi, 2018, 10.4000/anglophonia.1409 . halshs-02112065

**HAL Id: halshs-02112065**

**<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-02112065>**

Submitted on 26 Apr 2019

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Version validée par le comité de lecture

Published version :

*Anglophonia* [Online], 25 | 2018, Online since 01 June 2018, connection on 26 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/anglophonia/1409> ; DOI : 10.4000/anglophonia.1409

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## **Accommodating the visitor: How museums connect with their present-day populations.**

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### RESUME

L'article propose l'analyse des stratégies d'accommodation employées par les musées au Royaume-Uni et aux Etats-Unis. Les années 1970 et 1980 sont marquées par une nouvelle conscience du rôle social des musées et de la nécessité de mieux communiquer aux visiteurs. Cet article examinera les différentes stratégies langagières employées dans les musées dans les différents supports écrits (notice d'objets, panneau d'exposition).

### ABSTRACT

This article analyses the different accommodation strategies to be found in museums in the United Kingdom and the United States. The seventies and eighties witnessed a change in museology towards a new awareness of museums' social role and the need to improve communication strategies for their visitors. This article will examine the different linguistic strategies that are used in museums in written texts such as labels and panels.

Mots-clés : museum, communication accommodation theory, communication, museum visitor  
Key words: musée, théorie de l'accommodation, communication, visiteur de musée

### Introduction

In recent years, museums have undergone profound institutional changes. As Knell (2007: 28) remarks "in the first half of the nineteenth century a pattern of scientific engagement based on private cabinets was replaced by one centred on private learned society museums, and this in turn was replaced by the system of publicly funded institutions we still see today". Traditionally, museums had been favoured by the social elite, and produced "a position of power and knowledge in relation to a microcosmic reconstruction of a totalized order of things and peoples" (Bennett 1995: 97). But there was a realisation in the seventies that museums had become socially exclusive (Sandell 1998) and that they reinforced "the established or official values and images of a society in several ways, directly, by promoting and affirming the dominant values, and indirectly, by subordinating or rejecting alternate values" (Ames 1986: 9). By choosing which artefact to display, and the place it has in relation to another in a display, museums present in effect a particular narrative or version of history (Vergo 1989: 54).

As museums have grown more self-reflexive about their social and political role, and in particular about how they might promote social inclusion and include the narratives of minority groups, their aims and outlook have changed and this shift in purpose has often been labelled a “new museology” (Mayrand 1985). The move away from museum curators as moral guardians (Hooper-Greenhill 1995: 224), to a more visitor-orientated approach has influenced how museums communicate with their local communities and the general public. No longer simply a storage place of cultural artefacts, museums have become more aware of the diverse sociocultural and economic background of their visitors (Falk 2006; 2009). As a result, they have had to accommodate their discourse in order to meet the requirements of their multicultural and multiracial audiences.

Using communication accommodation theory as a framework, this study will address the question of how a museum can adapt its discourse to interact both with the heritage of the past and to connect to its present-day population. After a brief presentation of museums as communicators and the role of visitors within communication models, the study will examine the various linguistic strategies employed by museums to accommodate their discourse to a wide audience. The analysis will focus for the most part on the use of interpretive labels in the Museum of London’s (MoL) exhibitions. As a city museum, the MoL has to address a multicultural, multi-ethnic population from diverse backgrounds. In its strategic plan for 2013-18 it claimed that it would be “putting audiences at the heart” of what it did and “engaging young Londoners” (Museum of London Strategic Plan 2013: 1). The labels that have been selected for this article illustrate how specific linguistic and stylistic choices enable the museum to interact with its wide-range of visitors and demonstrate that exhibition texts far from being simply informative, seek to accommodate their discourse for the many visitors that cross their threshold.

## **1. Accommodating the addressee: museums as communicators**

Early theories on museum communication tended to focus on visitors as passive recipients to be educated. Using the Lasswell model, Desvallées and Mairesse (2010: 28) refer to communication as “the action of conveying information between one or several emitters (E) and one or several receivers (R) through a channel”. The shortcomings of this linear model, where communication is presented as a one-way process, devoid of any ambiguity, and where all the passive receiver (or addressee) has to do is to decode the message, have been underlined by many linguists (Lecerle 1999; Harris 1996). For Desvallées and Mairesse (2010: 29), the museum’s role as a communicator was not initially obvious to museum professionals. However, as interest in visitor studies grew, so too did the consideration of a museum’s communication role. Visitors were no longer considered as “blank slates” but individuals with different needs, and it was recognised that museums needed to address the visitor and consider how personal, social and physical contexts interacted (McManus 1991; Falk and Dierking 1992). Hooper-Greenhill (1994: 50) presents a theoretical model that is more holistic in nature, one which not only acknowledges visitors as being active in the communicative process, but also presents the process as including “museum-wide elements” such as “the attitudes and activities of the museum staff, [...] the general atmosphere of the institution, [...] and the attention given to comfort, orientation and the general guiding of visitors through the experience of the museum.”

Adjusting one’s discourse to take the addressee into account, is a core element of communication accommodation theory (CAT). Krauss (1987: 96) goes as far as to claim that the addressee is “a full participant in the formulation of the message – that is, the vehicle by

which meaning is conveyed – and, indeed, may be regarded in a very real sense as the cause of the message”. The theory therefore has much to offer when considering how museums seek to communicate more effectively with their visitors.

### 1.1. Communication accommodation theory

Accommodation theory is based on oral communication, and the way speakers adjust their speech style, or accommodate how they speak, during social encounters (Giles 1973; Gallois et al. 1988). Trudgill (1986: 11-21) states, for example, that short-term accommodation normally takes place during face-to-face intervention encounters. However, in more recent years, the theoretical framework of CAT has been expanded to include other relational and identity processes (Coupland and Jaworski 1997; Giles et al. 2006; Griffin 2012). Gallois et al. (1995: 127) define CAT as follows:

A multifunctional theory that conceptualizes communication in both subjective and objective terms. It focuses on both intergroup and interpersonal features and, as we shall see, can integrate dimensions of cultural variability. Moreover, in addition to individual factors of knowledge, motivation, and skill, CAT recognizes the importance of power and of macrocontextual factors. Most important, perhaps, CAT is a theory of intercultural communication that actually attends to communication.

According to Gallois, Ogay and Giles (2005: 136-7), there are three underlying premises in CAT:

- Communicative interactions are embedded in a sociohistorical context
- Communication is about both exchanges of referential meaning and negotiation of personal and social identities
- Interactants achieve the informational and relational functions of communication by accommodating their communicative behaviour, through linguistic, paralinguistic, discursive, and nonlinguistic moves, to their interlocutor’s perceived individual and group characteristics

Accommodating one’s “communicative behaviour” calls into play two basic strategies: *divergence* and *convergence*. Giles, Coupland and Coupland (2005: 7-8) define convergence as a “strategy whereby individuals adapt to each other’s communicative behaviors in terms of a wide range of linguistic-prosodic-non-verbal-features” and divergence as “the way in which speakers accentuate speech and non-verbal differences between themselves and others”. It is often claimed that convergence occurs when speakers want to communicate more effectively and/or to gain approval (Thakerar et al. 1982; Giles and Powesland 1975; Giles and Smith 1979). However, convergence does not necessarily win approval (it can be perceived as ingratiating) and divergence need not necessarily cause disapproval. The motives for adopting one or other of these strategies are complex, and it is important also to bear in mind that “one does converge toward (or diverge from) the *actual* speech of the recipient, but toward (from) *one’s stereotypes* about the recipient’s speech” (Gallois, Ogay and Giles 2005: 126; italics in the original).

Communication is therefore motivated and within the framework of museum communication, we can hypothesize that museums will use convergent strategies, in part to create a positive impression – “crucial for the acquisition and maintenance of social power and influence, and hence for positive self- and group-esteem” (Ng & Bradac, 1993), but also to diminish the distance between themselves as an institution and the visitor. Both the museum’s and the visitor’s identities will be involved. How the visitor will perceive these strategies may of course vary. There can be a significant difference between the image a speaker wishes to project and how it is perceived. All three premises outlined above play an important role in the communication between museum and visitor.

However, before moving on to look at the linguistic strategies used by museums to communicate with their visitors, we need to reflect on who exactly the visitors are.

## 1.2 Museum visitors and their identities

If preserving collections and artefacts for future generations still remains a fundamental aim of museums, socio-economic and political pressures have meant that seeking the best way to present these artefacts to visitors is now of paramount importance.

Early visitor studies, which only really expanded in the 1960s (Hein 1998: 52), focussed on socio-demographics (Hein 1998; Kelly 1998): age, gender, education, class, socio-economic class. These surveys enabled museums to identify their potential target audience more easily, so that interpretative panels were written with such an audience in mind. Such studies, however, did not consider why people visited museums and what their motivations were. It was not until the 1980s that there was a shift towards investigating people's motivations for visiting museums and also towards tracking how visitors move through a museum. Falk's study on visitor motivation categorizes visitors according to five types: explorers, facilitators, professionals/hobbyists, experience seekers and rechargers. The explorer will visit a museum out of curiosity and general interest; the facilitator is seeking to meet the needs and desires of someone else, in particular children; the professional or hobbyist already has a strong interest in the subject area and is looking to develop that knowledge further; the experience seeker is at a museum for more recreational reasons and seeking to add the experience to the list of places already visited; and the recharger (originally named the "spiritual pilgrim" by Falk) is visiting to reflect, or "generally just bask in the wonder of the place". Falk (2006) hypothesizes that

most museum visitors "enact" a museum "identity" during their visit: an identity that characterizes their motivations for that visit. This identity is specific to that visit, on that day, and although this identity will be consistent with how that individual "defines" himself or herself, it is unlikely that this identity is the one that would provoke the individual to say, "Now I see who I *really* am".

These identities are fluid and all visitors will enact one or more identity at any given time in response to the physical and social context. If museums are to accommodate their discourse to their addressees then it is utmost importance that they identify the various motivations as well as the more "permanent" demographic identities of their visitors.

## 2. Accommodating the visitor – the role of interpretive texts

Writing an effective museum label that converges with the visitor involves being aware of a certain number of hurdles to overcome. Ekarv (1994: 201) underlines that

an exhibition text has to put up with more competition than most other written material. It has to compete with all the other material and tends to be the last thing to catch their eye when they stand in front of the exhibits. They have to read the text *standing*, probably after a tiring walk on hard stone floors. The light is poor compared to their reading lamps at home, and it is impossible to vary the reading angle as with a book or newspaper.

Accommodating the visitor implies taking these factors into account when writing an interpretive label. Museum professionals and scholars have written widely on the "best way" to write labels (Serrell 1996; Dean 1994; Marstine 2005) but few have actually analysed the linguistic strategies involved, with the notable exceptions of Ravelli (2006) and Coxall (1991; 1999). In the sections that follow, I will be using the term "interpretive label" as a general term to refer to various exhibition labels and texts.

## 2.1. Facilitating visitors' understanding

### 2.1.1. Organising the information

From a multimodal perspective, there are a number of ways that labels can be written to accommodate the visitor. The placing of the label, the various fonts and sizes all play a role. Bitgood, Benefield and Patterson (1990) underline that “placing a label on a railing in front of an object viewed is more effective than on the side of the exhibit”, while “larger point size and label background increase the attention-getting power” (Bitgood and Patterson 1993). In recent years, there has been greater use of the entry panel which serves to guide the visitor when they enter a gallery. This is illustrated by the panel in Figure 1, which is to be found in the introductory gallery at the Museum of London, Docklands:



Figure 1  
N° 1 warehouse  
Source: The Museum of London

Text corresponding to Figure 1:

#### No.1 WAREHOUSE

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You are standing on the top floor of one of London's oldest dock warehouses. A warehouse is a special type of building designed for storing goods.

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When it was in use as a warehouse, this space was often piled high with valuable cargoes. Men known as dock labourers – later as ‘dockers’ – unloaded ships, worked on quaysides, and trucked sacks and barrels to warehouses. Cargoes were taken directly into warehouses from the quaysides or hoisted to their upper floors. Trolleys and barrows were used to move goods to their allotted warehouse storage positions, or ‘stows’.

Most items coming into the warehouses had to be weighed and sampled. Customs and Excises Officers, dock managers and merchants all needed to know the quantity and quality of cargoes received. Everything was strictly controlled to guard against theft, fraud and cargoes being misplaced.

The overall shape and organisation of a text plays a key role in facilitating visitors' understanding and in engaging their interest. The size of the font in the introductory panel in Figure 1 means it can be read and seen from a distance. The information in the panel has clearly been organised into sections, thus making it easier for the visitor to read. The sections correspond to multiple levels of information and accommodate the discourse to the various visitor identities; it is possible to read just the title and the section to get a general idea of the gallery but for the visitor who wants to know more, it is possible to read on to the third section.

### 2.1.2 Using understandable language

Converging towards the recipient's speech implies making the language accessible for the various types of visitors. There are a number of linguistic strategies that can be used to achieve this. The first is to avoid jargon or technical terms, or to explain them, even though, it could be argued that in the case of the "professional/hobbyist", the use of some technical vocabulary is desirable. In the text in Figure 1, a definition of the main topic is given: "A warehouse is ...". New terms are introduced as a parenthesis "men known as dock labourers – later as dockers"; or they are juxtaposed using the coordinator *or*: "to their allotted warehouse positions or stows". As Ravelli (2006: 99) points out, the use of *or* can be a little misleading as the word that follows, in this case *stows*, is not necessarily a totally equivalent term. A *stow* is not always an allotted warehouse position, although for dockers it may well be. At other times, an explanation for a term may be added at the bottom of an exhibition label, rather like a footnote in a translation. Elsewhere in the gallery the term *dyeing* is explained in red in the bottom right-hand corner of a panel.

In recent years, the writing of museum texts, like many other types of technical texts, such as instruction manuals, legal documents, and so on, has been influenced by the Plain English movement, which aims to make a text comprehensible for a wide readership (Ravelli 2006; Blunden 2008). The Victoria and Albert Museum's ten point guide for writing exhibition labels follows many of the suggestions of the Plain English movement. They explain that

To write gallery text that is interesting, engaging and accessible for a wide audience is difficult but not impossible. In doing so, we do not have to "dumb down" our scholarship and collections. Instead, we have to recognize people's needs and interests, and use the devices of good writing to communicate our ideas.

As guidelines for good writing, they quote from Orwell's list of do's and don'ts in his essay *Politics and the English Language* (2000: 359):

1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print
2. Never use a long word where a short word will do
3. If it is possible to cut a word, always cut it out
4. Never use the passive when you can use the active
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday equivalent

6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright  
barbarous

Label-writing for museums has also been influenced by the Ekarv method, which again aims to make text accessible for the visitor. Writers are advised to use short sentences of approximately forty-five characters; to avoid subordinate clauses and complicated syntax; to break the text up into natural oral pauses; and to adjust the wording and punctuation of the text to mirror speech rhythms (Gilmore and Sabine 1994: 207). While the text in Figure 1 does not follow the layout advocated by Ekarv, it does avoid subordination in the first sentence, using two independent clauses instead of “You are standing on the top floor of one of London’s oldest dock warehouses which is a special type of building designed for storing goods”.

Although many of the above guidelines make sense if a museum is to accommodate its discourse to a wide variety of visitors, most museums do not blindly follow them to the letter. Orwell and Plain English may advise not to use the passive, but, as Figure 1 illustrates, the passive is still widely used in museum texts. In interpretive labels that need to convey a maximum amount of information within a small space, passives can make for clearer reading as they enable the writer to maintain a thematic focus. In short, as Pullum (2014) points out, the claims made about the passive in style and usage guides, and the suggestion that it is a sign of bad writing are not well-founded.

## 2.2 Creating interpersonal relations

In terms of communication models, there is obviously not the same interaction between the museum and the visitor as there would be in a normal face-to-face exchange. Visitors rarely “reply” directly except perhaps in visitor books, or in some of the more interactive displays; and the museum is not “physically present” as a speaker.

Nevertheless, museums accommodate their discourse to visitors in various ways and to varying degrees. At one end of the spectrum is the classificatory label that makes no effort to converge towards the identity of the visitor, unless that visitor is a professional or possibly an experience-seeker. The label in Figure 2 illustrates this kind of label and what I shall call the curatorial voice.



Figure 2

Corset - De Young Museum – label by Marshall Astor - Food Fetishist



The label names the object, gives the provenance, the date, material, the donor, but little other information. The label from the *Victoria and Albert* museum below, (Hoskin), shows a slight degree of convergence towards the visitor insofar as a technical term is introduced only after a more common term has been used. There is an effort to make the text more accessible. However, there is no attempt to adapt the discourse so that the visitor can relate to the artefact.

Bird organ or serinette, beechwood case with marquetry decoration, Leonard Boudin, Paris, French, about 1770 (V&A 629-1868)

Museums that are actively seeking to accommodate their discourse to visitors' experience and sociocultural backgrounds tend to link an artefact with a personal history. At the National Museum of American History in Washington DC, the "Many Voices, One Nation" exhibition, shows how the distinct peoples of the United States have played a role in shaping the nation. The exhibit in Figure 3 is a suitcase that is displayed precisely because it belonged to an individual:



Figure 3

Exhibit label, *Many Voices, One Nation*, National Museum of American History, Washington DC

Text for Figure 3:

Suitcase, 1948

People from around the world carry suitcases, trunks, and bundles as they come to the United States. After surviving the Holocaust, Camilla Gottlieb boarded the SS *Marine Perch* with this suitcase and journeyed to meet her daughter in New York.

As the text for Figure 3 shows, there is no mention here of the materials used to make the suitcase. The text moves from a generic statement, in the simple present tense, which relates to the visitor's present, and then to an individual's narrative. The overall aim is to engage with the addressee and to create a link between the visitor's everyday experience of carrying suitcases and a personal object belonging to someone else.

### 2.3 Creating empathy with the visitor

Brown (1987: 107) defines empathy as “the process of putting yourself into someone else's shoes, of reaching beyond the self and understanding and feeling what another person is understanding or feeling”. Work on CAT has suggested that empathy may be one of the driving forces behind convergence (Krashen 1981; Harwood, Soliz & Lin 2006). Empathy can function on two levels in museum communication. On one level there is a move on the part of the museum to try to understand and feel what the visitor may be feeling, and to accommodate their discourse accordingly; on a different level, as I shall demonstrate later, a museum may actively seek to encourage the visitor to empathise with a minority voice. In both instances, creating a shared framework plays an important role.

In face-to-face interaction, both speaker and addressee share the same time and space. Carter and McCarthy (1995) demonstrate that deixis is an important feature of spoken language and is used to refer to space, time and objects within the shared framework. Temporal adverbs such as *now* and *today*, spatial adverbs such as *here*, personal pronouns and demonstratives are all used to situate both speaker and addressee within the same frame of reference. In written communication shared time and space is rare. However, in order to create the illusion of shared time and space, the speaker can use adverbials of space and time that refer to the space and time of the addressee.

Interpretive panels will often make use of the deictic *this* to refer to the object on display, as if it were physically present and visible not only for the visitor but also for the absent speaker. Lyons (1977: 192) posits that a speaker will use *this*, *here* and *now* when “the speaker is personally involved with the entity, situation or place to which he is referring or is identifying himself with the attitude or viewpoint of the addressee”. Such use has been labelled empathetic deixis (Lyons 1977; Rühleman 2007).

The classic interpretive label in Figure 2 identifies time in absolute terms, in centuries, but not in relation to the addressee. The corset was a gift, but there is no way of knowing whether it belonged Mrs Wayland, or on what occasion, if any, she may have worn it. The label in Figure 3, on the other hand, makes use of the proximal demonstrative *this* to bring both text and artefact into the addressee's present. Similarly, the panel in Figure 1, brings the past (a warehouse used at the beginning of the nineteenth century for the West Indies sugar trade) into the visitor's present “this space”; in other words, the very building where the visitor finds themselves, at the present moment “you are standing”. In Figure 4, below, the interpretive label is found next to a policeman's helmet, in the *World City* gallery at the MoL, and once again the demonstrative *this* is used, accompanied by the temporal adverb *today*, which connects the object to the visitor's present:



Figure 4

Exhibit label, *World City* gallery, Museum of London

Note that the interpretive label in Figure 4 invites the visitor to feel the object, thus including sensory perception and making the visitor more sensitive to the context. Although the label does mention the material that the helmet is made of, this information comes last.

Interrogatives and imperatives are two other means used by museums to engage with the visitor and to create the illusion of shared discourse. Both can serve to hook the visitor's attention. In both instances the museum is in control of the exchange, either in the role of telling the visitor what to do, or in asking the question. Nevertheless, as Ravelli argues (2006: 75), such questions "decrease the power differences between the interactants, because the other person to the communication is invited to respond". Figure 5, from MoL Docklands, shows how such questions invite the visitor to reflect, and in the case of the "facilitator" (Falk 2009) invite the visitor to read the question out loud:

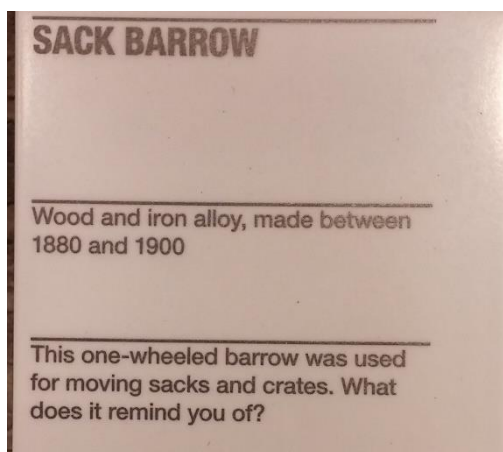


Figure 5

Exhibit label, N°1 Warehouse, Museum of London, Docklands

Once again, the text shows the museum seeking to accommodate its discourse to the image it has of the visitor's experience: "What does it remind you of?" Simultaneously, the visitor is invited to make a connection between their personal experience and the exhibit.

Seeking ways to link the visitor's present experience to the past, so that they can better understand exhibits, also illustrates the attempt made by museums to accommodate their discourse to visitors' sociocultural backgrounds. In addition to the strategies already mentioned, the MoL also uses analogy, as Figure 6 shows:

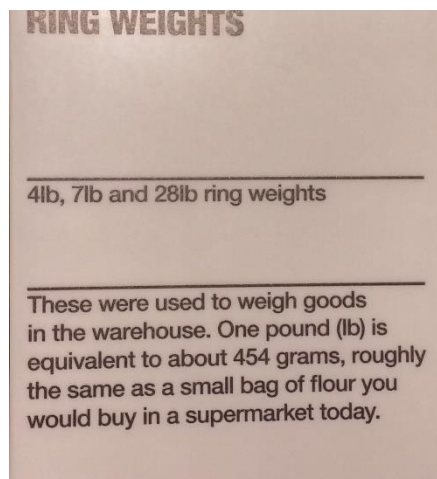


Figure 6  
Exhibit label, N°1 Warehouse, Museum of London, Docklands

Ring weights belonging to the nineteenth century are compared to a bag of flour in the twenty-first. Note, too, the use of deictics *today*, *these* and *you* which all contribute to creating an interactional framework.

### 3. The social role of museums – converging and diverging

As museums have become more conscious of the need to play a social role and to be more socially inclusive, they have become more aware of the need to converge with the voices of minority groups as well (Sandell 1998). This became especially visible in 2007, the two hundredth anniversary of the signing of the Act of Parliament that brought Britain's participation in the slave trade to an end. A number of museums organised temporary or permanent exhibitions for the occasion and important questions were raised about the repercussions of the past on the present and how this might have impacted perceptions of nation and identity. The Museum of London's *London, Sugar and Slavery* gallery illustrates some of the linguistic strategies employed to accommodate the museum's discourse with that of the African Caribbeans, in this case those in particular who were living in London and who were direct descendants of enslaved Africans. From the start, the museum sought to involve the local community by consulting them on the writing of the interpretive labels (Spence 2011). This gallery is where the museum's voice is most clearly heard, and where it seeks most clearly to establish interpersonal relations with the visitor.

The entry panel begins by using the first person plural and sets out to explain the choice of language used in the gallery, a relatively unusual occurrence:

We have tried to be careful in our use of language in this gallery. In particular we have tried to avoid using terms that strip individuals of their humanity – since this was a tactic central to the imposition of slavery.

The word “slave” for example, implies a thing or commodity rather than a human being. We have used the term ‘enslaved African’ wherever possible.

In the main we have avoided using the terms ‘Black’ and ‘White’, preferring ‘African’ or ‘European’. But in the Legacies section of the gallery we engage with the term ‘Black’ as it used to refer to the non-White post-war migrant settlers in Britain

The use of the second person pronoun, as in Figure 1, creates the impression of personal address, but it is rare for a museum to refer to itself. The use of the first person plural here creates a kind of intimacy (Ravelli 2006: 85), as if the museum is explaining its actions and implicitly asking the visitor to also reflect on the use of language. At the same time, there is a marked attempt on the part of the museum to separate itself from previous events and attitudes, as the conscious choice of the term “enslaved” as opposed to “slave” illustrates.

The gallery has two notable audiovisual displays that illustrate the museum’s awareness of the need to accommodate their communicative behaviour, “to their interlocutor’s perceived individual and group characteristics”. The first is a film *This is Your History* during which various speakers from a variety of ethnic and social backgrounds are depicted speaking the first-person narrative of the eighteenth-century enslaved African, Olaudah Equiano. The film ends with the words “this is your history, thereby directly addressing the visitor, and creating an interpersonal relationship. The idea of a shared history for all Londoners is thus emphasised: for the white British visitor it is a history of exploitation; for the African Caribbean visitor it is a history of enslavement. By playing on the ambiguity of the second person pronoun, *you*, the museum has sought to accommodate its discourse to both sets of visitors. The second display is an immersive sound and light show where the voice-over directly addresses the visitor as if s/he were newly enslaved Africans: “You will have no family; You will not have a home; You will not keep your children etc.” In this instance, as elsewhere in the gallery, the museum is actively seeking to make the visitor empathise with the history of the enslaved African Caribbean. The tone is more personal with the use of attitudinal lexis. Those responsible for slavery, and the act of slavery itself are qualified in negative terms such as “terror”, “brutality”, and “violence”. The moral judgements that are made reveal a subjective stance that was absent in Figure 2 and work on two levels. Firstly such terms, through their very subjectivity, contribute to the creation of an interactional framework and a desire to converge with the visitor, in particular the African Caribbean visitor. Secondly, their moral tone accentuates the museum’s divergence from the rhetoric of the past and also encourages the visitor to re-examine their view of historical events. This last point is underlined at the end of the gallery, where the museum uses an inclusive *we* to address the visitor:

Many Londoners are proud of the fact that their city has always been a diverse city. Our urban landscape with its galleries, museums and monumental buildings bears witness to the millions who sweated, both here and around the world, to make it the great city it is.

It was not only bankers, shippers and insurers who grew rich off the back of enslaved labour. Today we all benefit from the commercial and material success developed on that historical base.

In our everyday lives do we think about this, and remember that Africa beats in the heart of our city?

Contrary to the exclusive *we* used at the beginning of the gallery to refer to the multiple actors involved in the writing of the interpretative labels, the inclusive *we* at the end of the gallery clearly appeals to Londoners and residents in the UK: *our urban landscape ... we all benefit...our city*.

## Conclusion

Research has demonstrated that people’s motives for visiting museums can differ considerably. Their sociocultural backgrounds vary enormously as does their knowledge and previous experience of museums. Some visitors will come to an exhibition with prior knowledge of the subject; others will come for purely recreational reasons. Younger visitors will find technical texts difficult to understand. As Hooper-Greenhill points out “people come

to museums carrying with them the rest of their lives, their own reasons for visiting and their specific prior experience” (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995:5)

Museums therefore face a major challenge if they are to accommodate their discourse to each and every visitor who crosses their threshold. It is obviously an impossible task. Nevertheless, an analysis of the use of interpretive labels and other interactive displays in museums reveals that a conscious effort has been made by some museums to adjust their discourse in recent years. A more easily accessible text, the avoidance of jargon and complex syntax indicate that museums are seeking to accommodate their discourse to the visitor. Features of oral discourse, such as the use of deixis, create an interactional framework that is another way of bringing museum discourse closer to the visitor. Finally, the past is brought into the visitor’s present through a number of linguistic strategies.

In their socially inclusive role, museums use interpretive labels both to converge their discourse with minority voices and to accentuate their divergence from other social groups or beliefs. How successful museums are in their attempts to accommodate their discourse will finally depend on how the visitor interprets these texts.

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