

# Croc warning

By Ingrid Piller | December 4, 2009 | Language & tourism, Recent Posts

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I took a picture of this sign during a family holiday in Cairns. My then-six-year-old daughter noticed the German “Achtung” and so asked why it didn’t say “Warning” in her third language, Persian. Her father, the designated Persian-speaker in our family, quipped “because Iranians have enough common sense to stay away from crocodiles anyway. They don’t need a sign.” The same could presumably be said of the speakers of all the other

languages that haven’t made it onto the sign ... And what does this mean for the speakers of the three represented languages? I might be wrong but I do get the impression that British and German tourists are more likely than anyone else to be eaten by crocodiles and sharks or to get lost in the Australian wilderness ... Chinese and Japanese tourists seem to be a more sensible lot, though ...

It’s always interesting to see who the designers of a sign imagined their readers to be. The designers of a sign such as this one have tourism statistics to guide them and one would assume that it is the languages of the largest country-of-origin groups that make it onto warning signs such as this one. [Official arrival statistics for short-term visitors to Australia are available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) and it gets really interesting when you compare those figures with the languages on the sign. English is an obvious choice, of course, as there’s the national market and English is also the language of the three top countries of origin (NZ, UK, USA). 警告 does double-duty for the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> largest groups of arrivals (Japan, China) and probably also comes in handy for the Singaporeans (6<sup>th</sup>). Malaysia ranks 7<sup>th</sup> and they don’t get their own warning in Malay but are presumably assumed to be English-speaking. The really interesting story is between rank 8 and 10: Korea is ranked 8 and with 17,000 short-term Korean visitors to Australia in May 2008, they far outnumber German visitors (rank 10) with only 7,000 visitors. How come the Koreans don’t get a Korean-language warning but the Germans get a German-language warning? Because language choice in tourism is not only a rational choice based on market research but also related to the language capacities of the institution that set up the sign, and their language ideologies (as I showed in a paper about language choice in Swiss tourism, which is available from [our Resources section](#)).

Not only is it interesting to see which languages are in and which are left out in warning signs such as this one, it is also worth reflecting which bits of the message get translated. In this case, it seems that the information that appears in translation (“Warning”) is less challenging linguistically than the more substantial information on how to keep safe that is NOT translated into other languages.

All of which leads to the more general question whether the limited use value of this sign justifies putting such an ugly sign up in the first place? Is it not possible to think of a more linguistically inclusive and aesthetically less offensive way to keep visitors safe?

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1 - Adult (Lead Guest)

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