The interpersonal dynamics of call-centre interactions: Co-constructing the rise and fall of emotion

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Abstract
In this paper we investigate how speakers contribute to the interactive rise and fall of emotion in problematic interactions in a data set of in-bound telephone conversations collected from call centres in the Philippines. These interactions are between the Filipino Customer Service Representatives (CSR) and American clients who initiate the calls to seek information, clarification, or resolution to a problem. The study draws on Appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) to analyse the contribution of the caller and the CSR to initiating, maintaining and adjusting the interpersonal intensity of the interaction. Findings point to a limited reliance on explicit attitude on the part of both speakers, with attitude more often implied rather than expressed explicitly. Of note, too, is the interdependence of the attitudinal choices on the part of each speaker, and the role that concessive contractors such as *just*, *already, once*, *yet*, and *actually,* as well as moments of silence can play in the management of the emotive intensity. While we intend the outcomes to make a contribution to professional training in the industry, we also look beyond that context to contribute in theoretical and methodological terms to the analysis of interactions in other contexts where problems need to be resolved through talk.

Key words: call centre, spoken interaction, interpersonal meaning, appraisal analysis, systemic functional linguistics, concessive contraction

Introduction

There has been a very rapid expansion in recent years in what is referred to as Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) in the Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES). Customer service centres, contact centres, or call centres, as they are variously called, have dramatically increased in numbers globally with exponential growth in countries such as India, the Philippines, South Africa and China (NASSCOM, 2005; NASSCOM, 2007). Call centres are now a significant aspect of global capitalism and a major area of employment growth in many provider countries. The growth in this global, multilingual industry has in turn given rise to considerable theoretical discussion and an expanding interest in empirical research. There is an ongoing debate concerning the implications of globalisation and the impact of changes such as BPO on economic, political and cultural aspects of social life (Berardi, 2002; Flowerdew, 2002; Graddol, 2006; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2006, etc). From the domain of business, research has attended to issues of information systems, productivity, work organisation and measures of quality assurance

(e.g. Brooke, 2002; O'Neil, 2003; Amaratunga, 2002). Some studies are more sociological in orientation focussing on labour relations and the worker (e.g. Knights & McCabe, 2003; Mulholland, 2004; Taylor & Bain, 2005, 2007; Taylor, Hyman, Mulvey & Bain, 2002; van den Broek, 2004). From an applied linguistic perspective studies have also connected with issues of employment focusing on employee language assessment (Friginal, 2007); on training in employee accent neutralisation (Cowie, 2007); and in the recognition of problematic stages of interactions (Forey & Lockwood, 2007). From a sociolinguistic perspective, Cameron (2000a), for example, considers the impact of globalisation on the workers in the industry with language being a central concern. She explores an imposed 'styling' of employees' talk aimed at reducing variability and maximising productivity and argues that such styling has resulted in 'the valorization of "feminine" communication styles' (Cameron 2000a: 323).

Cameron's (2000a) study draws on a number of sources including interviews with management and workers in the industry in the UK, as well as documents such as assessment criteria, scripts and prompts. However, noticeably absent in her study, and in other key studies too (e.g. Cowie, 2007; Friginal, 2007) are analyses of actual instances of interactions between genuine callers and call centre representatives. This highlights one significant methodological hurdle in undertaking studies of communication in the industry and that is difficulty of access to data as either transcripts or sound files of authentic interactions. Nevertheless more studies are beginning to appear where researchers have negotiated this constraint. Some then favour corpus-based methodologies that explore frequencies and distributions of specific linguistic features (Adolphs, Brown, Carter, Crawford & Sahota, 2004), while others employ a conversation analysis (CA) approach where attention is paid to a localised level of interaction in the discourse. Applications of CA methods are evident, for example, in Bowles (2006) in analysis of calls to a bookshop, and in Baker, Emmison & Firth (2005) who explore how 'helping' is carried out in counselling calls. A third perspective represented in studies of actual calls is one that focuses on the structuring of the whole interaction at the level of genre, as in Forey & Lockwood (2007), Lockwood, Forey & Price (forthcoming).

To this picture of diversity in research motivation, focus and methodologies employed we can also add diversity in locations and languages. Cameron (2000a, 200b), and Adolps et al (2004), for example focus on call centres in the UK, where the CSRs are generally functioning in English as a first language, while Madfes (2007) analyses the discourse centres in Uruguay where callers and CSRs are speaking Spanish. Other studies focus on calls to and from offshore destinations such as India or the Philippines where CSRs are most often speaking in English as a second language (Cowie, 2007; Poster, 2007; Forey & Lockwood, 2007; Friginal, 2007).

The study reported here is positioned in a number of ways to complement the existing body of work in this domain. We draw on a subset of seven calls in a data set of approximately 100 inbound calls initiated from customers in the US to an off-shore call centre in the Philippines. The sub-set of seven represents calls that are problematic in that the issues prompting the call are not readily resolved. This results in calls that are longer and display some tension or dissatisfaction. We are particularly interested in the

expressions of emotion in such calls, in how levels of emotion rise and fall throughout the interaction, and in how it is that almost all the calls conclude 'civilly', even when outcomes originally sought may not have been achieved. Our interest therefore is focused on the ways in which the speakers negotiate information rather than on the kind of information that is negotiated. The latter remains relevant to the extent that the interpersonal dynamics of the talk will be responsive not only to perceived speaker roles or stances, but crucially too to what is at stake ideationally. In the case of this study the interpersonal stakes are heightened in that they relate to the financial matters of the callers.

Our analysis is informed by Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) theory. The approach we take shares concerns that have characterised much work in interactional sociolinguistics over more than two decades. However, there are important underlying distinctions. Of most significance is the question of the place attributed to interpersonal (interactive) meaning, that is, whether it is modelled as outside of or within a system of language. In interactional sociolinguistics (as articulated in, e.g., Gumperz 1982:89) interpersonal meanings are relegated to the domain of pragmatic interpretation of intention and perception. In SFL language itself is modelled as simultaneously ideational, textual and interpersonal. This is not just a theoretical question but one that necessarily impacts on research design and in this study orients us to linguistic analyses as systematically meaning-making in an interpersonal sense.

Methodologically our approach also offers a complementary perspective to both corpus-based and CA studies. Whereas corpus-based studies offer insights into patterns across whole registers of discourse, we approach the data through a close study of the ways in which meanings unfold in individual texts, enabling closer attention to the co-articulation and interdependence of linguistic choices. While CA attends to the micro context of interactivity in conversation, the aim here is make principled connections from patterns of language choices in the discourse to the context beyond the text.

Our orientation to language is from the stratum of *discourse semantics* (Martin; 1992; Martin & Rose, 2006). From this perspective meaning choices can be realised across different systems of lexico-grammar. So, for example, a discourse semantic option for expressing modality of obligation might be realised as a modal verb 'must', a noun 'obligation', a verb 'insist', and so on. These lexico-grammatical realisations are in turn realised by choices at the phonological stratum. However, as access to sound files was not available, we do not incorporate an analysis of phonological expression or voice quality in this paper, nor for that matter do we consider other modes of meaning such as gesture. We fully acknowledge that both would provide most valuable additional insights and that this represents a limitation of the study. In addressing the discourse semantics of interpersonal meaning we draw on Appraisal theory (Martin, 2000, Martin & White, 2005), which posits three general domains: ATTITUDE, GRADUATION, and ENGAGEMENT. The theory is represented as a system network in Figure 1. We will refer to two of these general domains: ATTITUDE and GRADUATION in our exploration of the dynamics of emotion, and each will be further explained below with exemplification from the data.

(For a detailed explanation of the underlying theory readers are referred to Martin & White, 2005).

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                          ┌─ monogloss
           ENGAGEMENT ──►─┤
                          └─ heterogloss

                          ┌─ AFFECT...
A                         │
P                         │
P                         │
R                         │
A          ATTITUDE ──────┤  JUDGEMENT...
I                         │
S                         │
A                         │
L                         └─ APPRECIATION...

                                  ┌─ raise
                     FORCE  ──►────┤
                                  └─ lower
           GRADUATION ────┤
                                  ┌─ sharpen
                     FOCUS  ──►────┤
                                  └─ soften
```
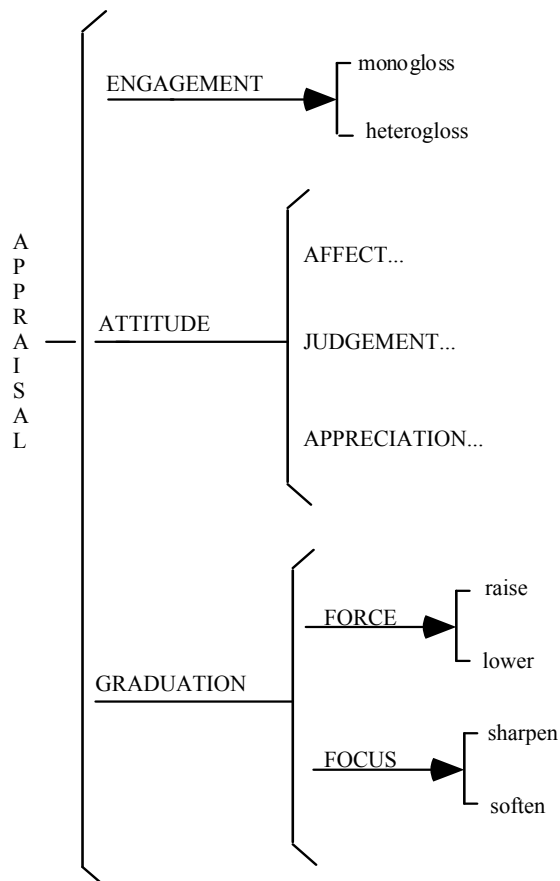
Fig. 1. The system network of Appraisal (from Martin & White, 2005:38).

One further relevant theoretical concept that requires some explanation here is that of prosody. In SFL theory each metafunction is understood to structure meaning in different ways: ideational meanings in particulate structures, textual in periodic waves, and interpersonal in prosodies (Halliday 1994, Martin 1992). While this notion of prosody was first applied by Firth (Palmer 1970) to refer to non-segmental features in phonology, it is since understood as applying to realisations of interpersonal meaning at other strata of language, in the ways interpersonal meaning spreads or diffuses across clauses and across longer phases of discourse (Martin 1996, Hood 2006).

Our initial approach to the analysis of attitudinal meanings in our data is a categorical and quantitative one as we focus on similarities and differences in the discourse of each speaker. This is complemented with a logogenetic perspective, one that makes a close study of the unfolding discourse of an individual text. From such an analytical approach we identify how meanings co-articulate, accumulate and pattern across the discourse, and

we explore the ways in which language choices on the part of one speaker interact with those of the other speaker.

Expressing ATTITUDE

Our initial focus is on expressions of ATTITUDE on the part of each speaker, and a first step is to identify instances of inscribed ATTITUDE, that is, [i]ATTITUDE that is explicitly expressed. To do so we identify wordings that carry an explicit positive or negative value, where the value can be graded up or down (Martin & White, 2005). So for example, in [1] instances of inscribed ATTITUDE are coded in bold. Both instances are graded up.

[1] (Text A)
Caller   OK well, in the meantime, what then I need to do is to make a call
           to Better Business Bureau and tell them exactly how, as a customer,
           I've been handled…and it's been **very crappy**. I've called up…I've
           talked to 12 people, 2 from Milwaukee, I cannot tell you how many
           from Texas, I cannot tell you how many from Illinois and this is
           absolutely pathetic.

Both *very crappy* and *absolutely pathetic* are instances of ATTITUDE expressed as negative JUDGEMENT, that is, they express an evaluation of the character or behaviour of a person/s. Here the JUDGEMENT is of incapacity on the part of the person/persons being appraised. Elsewhere in the data are instances of other kinds of ATTITUDE, for example, as AFFECT or the expression of feelings or emotion, as bolded in [2] and [3].

[2] (Text B)
Caller   … in reference to this practice that's causing **stress**

[3] (Text E)
Caller   I'd **love** to put someone in jail for this

The third category is a less personal kind of ATTITUDE in which the appraisal is of an entity of some kind. This is referred to as APPRECIATION. Instances in [4] include APPRECIATION in terms of negative reaction (*a crying shame*) and as positive and negative valuation (*so easy; so hard*).

[4] (Text A)
Caller   …the Insurance Bureau will hear about this because it's a **crying
           shame**… because it's something **so easy** that has been **so hard** for
           all these months

Given that this study focuses only on problematic interactions, it is perhaps surprising to find that there are relatively few instances of inscribed ATTITUDE in the data, and this is especially so for the more personal kinds of ATTITUDE, that is, of JUDGEMENT and AFFECT. Most instances of AFFECT are in expressions such 'thank you' and 'please', which

although weakly expressive of ATTITUDE, are acknowledged as largely formulaic. In our analyses they are considered to carry a minimal attitudinal weight. More expressive of ATTITUDE are a number of instances where speakers make use of lexical metaphor to provoke an attitudinal meaning (see Martin & White, 2005). Extract [5] provides an instance of lexical metaphor provoking ATTITUDE as AFFECT.

[5] (Text B)
Caller   …every time something happens they send me a termination which
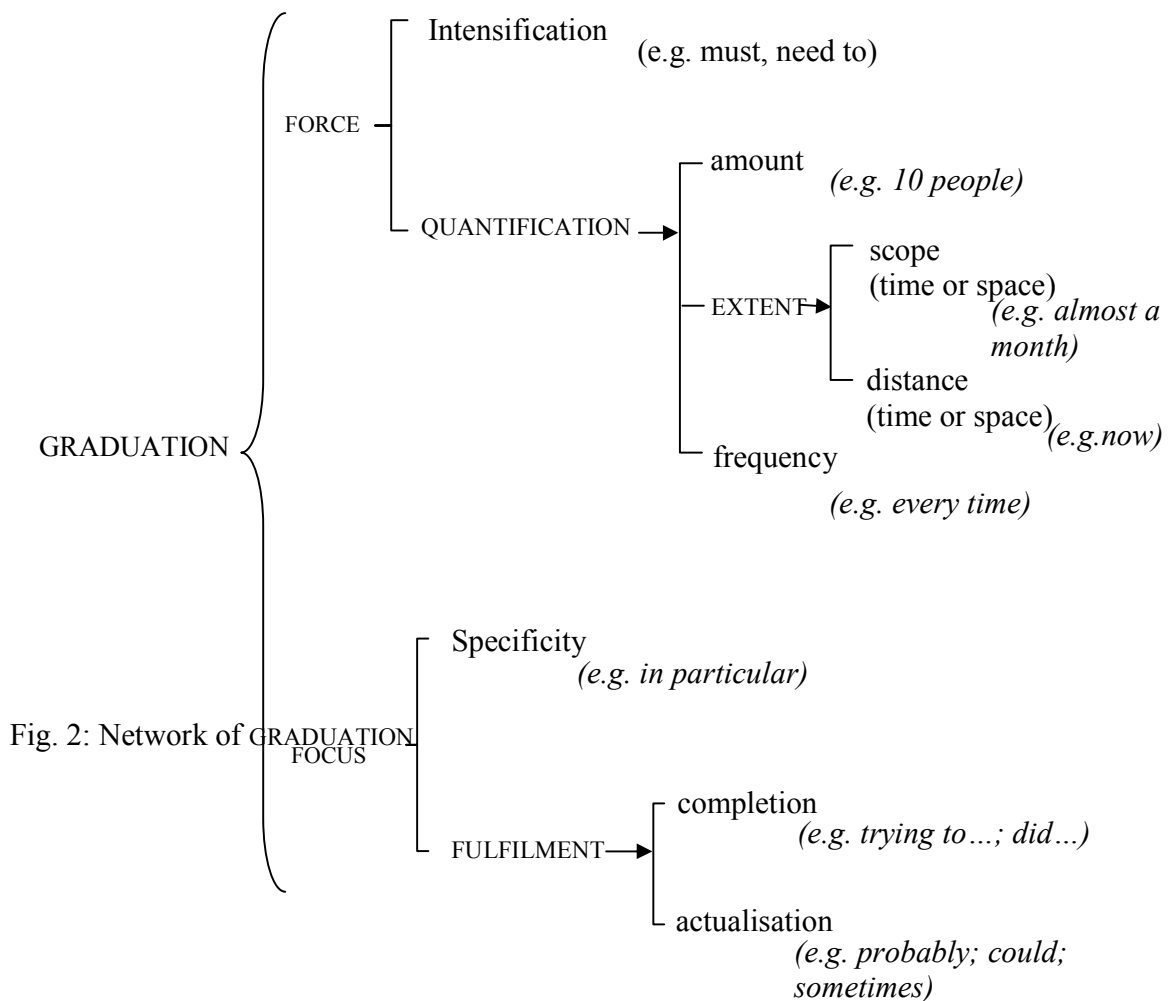   <u>sends my wife through the ceiling</u>…

Implying dissatisfaction

A review of the data reveals that no explicit negative AFFECT is expressed we may still interpret the caller as being dissatisfied or frustrated. Excerpt [6] represents the opening sequence of turns from Text A. The problematic nature of the interaction is quickly evident in spite of a lack of any explicit expressions of negative ATTITUDE on the part of either speaker. A degree of frustration on the part of the caller is interpretable at least from turn 8, and perhaps from as early as turn 4 or even turn 2.

[6] (Text A)

Turn	Speaker	Talk
1	CSR	Customer Services, this is Kxxx, how can I help you?
2	Caller	Caller: Hi there, I'm trying to reach Rxxxx Gxxxx
3	CSR	Um…er…
4	Caller	I'm told that it is either the operator or whomever that I called that they could you transfer me to her. I have been talking to her in regards to a policy.
5	CSR	OK is she an agent, maam?
6	Caller	I'm sorry?
7	CSR	Is she an agent?
8	Caller	I don't know what she is. I have been, you know, in contact with her and I've been told to call this number and that somebody would you know…

In explaining the interpretation of implied ATTITUDE in the extract above, we draw on a further dimension of Appraisal theory, that of GRADUATION (Hood, 2004; Hood & Martin 2007), as outlined in Figure 2.

GRADUATION

FORCE

- Intensification (e.g. must, need to)
- QUANTIFICATION
  - amount (e.g. 10 people)
  - EXTENT
    - scope (time or space) (e.g. almost a month)
    - distance (time or space) (e.g. now)
  - frequency (e.g. every time)

FOCUS

- Specificity (e.g. in particular)
- FULFILMENT
  - completion (e.g. trying to…; did…)
  - actualisation (e.g. probably; could; sometimes)

Fig. 2: Network of GRADUATION

The system network for GRADUATION provides us with options for adjusting meanings by degree. This can be done either by grading up or down the FORCE of that meaning, or by sharpening or softening the FOCUS of the meaning. We can grade *attitudinal* meanings as for example, from '*a problem' to 'a big major problem'*. However, we can also grade *non-attitudinal* or experiential meanings. Within the domain of FORCE, for example, we can grade quantity as amount (*many times*), as extent in time (*almost a month*), as distance in time (*within 24 hours)*, and as frequency (*very often*). We can also grade the *vigour* of a process ('*investigate* the matter' in contrast to say '*look at* the matter'), or the intensity of a whole proposal ('a form *needs* to be filled out' in contrast to say, '*ought to* be filled out'). Within the domain of FOCUS, we have options for grading the degree of specificity around an entity ('I spoke with *somebody… whoever*'), the degree of fulfilment of a process (*trying to reach*), or the degree of actualisation of a proposition (it is *probably* there'; does it *normally* take a week?; *actually*..).

Returning to the opening phase of Text A, we can begin to interpret the caller's frustration in turn 2. Here the caller chooses to express a degree of incompletion of a process through conation in the verbal group, in '*trying to reach*' (Hood, 2004). The grading of meanings in this way functions to invoke an evaluative interpretation, suggesting negative AFFECT of dissatisfaction or frustration. This tentative interpretation is then reinforced in coming turns with further instances of GRADUATION as FOCUS in turns 4 and 8. Here there is a softening of FOCUS as specificity in '*either … or whomever*'; '*don't know what she is*', and '*somebody*'. The ATTITUDE that is flagged in each instance is one of negative AFFECT, as dissatisfaction (encoded as lack of completion and lack of specificity) and the multiple instances across the phase of talk propagate a prosody of negative emotion (c.f. Lemke 1998). Excerpt [7] re-presents [1] with GRADUATION underlined.

[7] (Text A)

Turn	Speaker	Talk
1	CSR	Customer Services, this is Kxxx, how can I help you?
2	Caller	Caller: Hi there, I'm <u>trying to</u> reach Rxxxx Gxxxx
3	CSR	Um…er…
4	Caller	I'm told that it is <u>either</u> the operator <u>or whomever</u> that I called that they could you transfer me to her. I have been talking to her in regards to a policy.
5	CSR	OK is she an agent, maam?
6	Caller	I'm sorry?
7	CSR	Is she an agent?
8	Caller	I <u>don't know what she is</u>. I have been, you know, in contact with her and I've been told to call this number and that <u>somebody</u> would you know…

Similarly in [8] the initial indication of the caller's negative ATTITUDE comes in turn 2 where negative AFFECT is implied in multiple instances of the grading up of time.

[8] (Text C)

1	CSR	Thank you for holding Mrs. Hxxxx. My name is Lxxxx and I am the supervisor. How may I help you, maam?
2	Caller	<u>On the 26th</u> I called and <u>first</u> I asked the person I <u>first</u> talked to if she would send me the papers because I wanted to surrender my policy if I want to get the money from them. She said fine …I <u>still</u> have <u>not</u> received the paper work. I called <u>the following Monday</u> and the guys said 'oohh they sent it <u>on the 28th</u>' which was <u>3 days later</u>. <u>Now</u> I want these papers sent to me by Fed Ex- I want to get them <u>by tomorrow</u>. You've <u>already</u> held them <u>for over a week</u>…and I understand it's gonna take <u>at least 3-6 weeks</u> for me to get the money <u>once</u> you get the paper work and I want the paper work <u>now</u>.

Comparing the contributions of the caller and the CSR

The contrasting roles taken up by the caller and the CSR could be expected to generate different linguistic choices (Eggins, 2000) and this is very evident in the problematic calls analysed in this study in relation to the resources of Appraisal taken up by each speaker. Table 1 identifies contrasting choices in Appraisal choices on the part of each speaker in Text A. The contrasting degree and nature of instantiations of inscribed ATTITUDE, lexical metaphor, and GRADUATION invoking ATTITUDE, provide insights into the ways in which the speakers interact attitudinally in the talk.

	Caller:	**CSR**
ATTITUDE: APPRECIATION	correct; the big dilemma; this mess cleared up; a crying shame; so easy; so hard	verify
ATTITUDE: AFFECT	please; want; expect; appreciate; expect; thank you	please; thank you; you're welcome
ATTITUDE: JUDGEMENT	not right; very crappy; absolutely pathetic; very pathetic; help	help
Lexical metaphor	nobody is doing their homework; get your hands on something; like a tennis ball being hit from one court to another; sends my wife through the ceiling	
GRADUATION as FORCE	**Increased amount** 12 people; the 12th person; 12 people; 2 from Milwaukee; I cannot tell you how many from Texas; I cannot tell you how many from Illinois; also; again; the last time; the last time	**Decreased amount** just; just; just; just
	Extended past time almost a month; how long; Nov 18th; that long; Nov 20th; at the beginning; how long; back in Nov 18th; since Nov 18th; for all these months	**Reduced past time** already; yesterday; already; already; already; Dec 3rd; already
	Reduced future time within 24 hours; take 24 hours; within a week; within a week's time; within a week; now; within a week's time	**Reduced future time** once; once; once; once; a week; in a week; once; just
GRADUATION as FOCUS	**Incompleted processes** I am waiting for; I've been waiting for; I'm trying to	**Completed processes** actually; actually; did
	Diminished specificity don't know what she is; either …or	

	whomever; somebody; don't care who; anyone; somebody; somebody; somebody	

Table 1: Categorising and quantifying ATTITUDE by speaker (Text A)

Evident in this text and typical of the problematic inbound calls in this study is that the caller uses more instances of AFFECT and JUDGEMENT than does the CSR. Beyond formulaic ATTITUDE in 'politeness' expressions, the only explicit ATTITUDE expressed by the CSR is APPRECIATION, and in this case the term (*verify*) borders on technical terminology for the financial field in which the discourse functions[ii].

The callers and the CSRs also select very differently in terms of resources of GRADUATION. In Table 1 we can see that the caller in Text A frequently grades up expressions of amount, amplifying this meaning in both specific instances (*12 people*) as well as in the accumulation of instances over the discourse. The ATTITUDE that is flagged in these expressions is one of dissatisfaction. In contrast, the CSR who does not avail himself of these resources at all. He does, however, work to decrease expectations of amount in the relatively frequent use of the concessive contractor *just*. Also marked are the different representations of past time. The caller extends distance and duration in past time dates (*November 18th*; *November 20th*, *for all these months*). The CSR makes different choices, reducing past time in *December 3rd* and *yesterday*, and in multiple instances of the concessive contractors *already*. In relation to future time we can see that both speakers refer to reduced time: the caller in demanding action in the short term (*within 24 hours*), and the CSR contracts the expectation of further delays (*just; once*). In almost all categories of GRADUATION as FORCE, there is a counter balancing of the attitudinal choices of the caller and the CSR. One grades up in FORCE, the other down. And in this respect concessive contractors such as *just*, *already*, *once* and *yet* appear to play a crucial role, an issue that will be further explored shortly.

Within the realm of FOCUS, the caller frequently softens categorical boundaries around people and roles, coding them as unspecified (*whomever; somebody*). She also signals incompletion of processes (*I'm trying to; I'm waiting*). In both cases there is a resultant flagging of negative ATTITUDE, implying feelings of dissatisfaction, perhaps frustration and confusion. Such choices are absent from the talk of the CSR who contrastingly sharpens FOCUS in coding fulfilment of processes in his use of the concessive contractor *actually,* and in the explicit use of the past tense temporal finite *did*. Once again the CSR's talk functions as a kind of attitudinal counter-balance to that of the caller, working to re-establish a kind of attitudinal equilibrium in interaction with the caller.

Tracking the dynamic flow of emotion

While categorical and quantitative analyses as illustrated in Table 1 provide a synoptic picture of overall difference and contrast, they do not address the question of the dynamic accumulation and interaction of the attitudinal choices turn by turn. A first step in this

regard is to develop a means for mapping the dynamic flow of emotion across the interaction based on a measurement of the emotional 'weight' turn by turn. Here we consider both the relative explicitness of expressions of ATTITUDE, together with the relative intensity of the encoded value (c.f. Hood, forthcoming, on degrees of commitment in evaluation). An inscription of ATTITUDE (e.g., *ridiculous*) is considered the most explicit form of expression is given a weighting of 3. Instances of lexical metaphor provoking an attitudinal interpretation (e.g., she treats me *like an animal*) are given a value of 2, and formulaic 'politeness' expressions (e.g., *thank you*; *please*; *welcome*) are considered minimally explicit of ATTITUDE and are given a weighting of 1. Instances of GRADUATION as FORCE that grade ideational meanings of amount, extent of time, frequency, (e.g., *by tomorrow),* or of FOCUS that soften or sharpen categorical boundaries of entities or processes (e.g., *whoever; trying to*), and in the process flag an attitudinal interpretation, are also given a value of 1, as are the concessive contractors on these dimensions of GRADUATION (e.g., *once*; *already*; *just; actually*). In the case of the intensification of ATTITUDE, an additional weighting point is added. So amplification of inscriptions (e.g., the most *ridiculous* thing) and provocations (e.g., *she went through the ceiling*), are given a weighting of 4 and 3 respectively. The scale of attitudinal weightings illustrated in Table 2.

Resources of Appraisal	Examples	Attitudinal weighting
GRADUATION invoking ATTITUDE	it's gonna take *at least 3-6 weeks;* I want to get them *by tomorrow*	1
Concessive contractors	*once* it is reconciled we're *just* looking at it	1
Formulaic attitude in politeness expressions	Can I *help* you? *Thank you* for your time	1
Lexical metaphor provoking ATTITUDE	she *treats me like an animal;* nobody is *doing their homework*	2
Lexical metaphor provoking amplified ATTITUDE	she *went through the ceiling*	3
Inscribed ATTITUDE	so I don't have to *worry* about this; you *screwed up*	3
Amplified inscribed ATTITUDE	a *big major problem*; the *most ridiculous* thing you could tell me	4

Table 2: Weightings resources of Appraisal

The tool provides a useful means to consider when and how phases vary in terms of degrees of explicitness and intensity in attitudinal language across the interaction. We could consider this as providing a profile of attitudinal weight. It also reveals the relative responsibility of one or other speaker to the creation of this profile and how speakers respond turn by turn. A resultant graphic representation for Text A is represented in Figure 3.
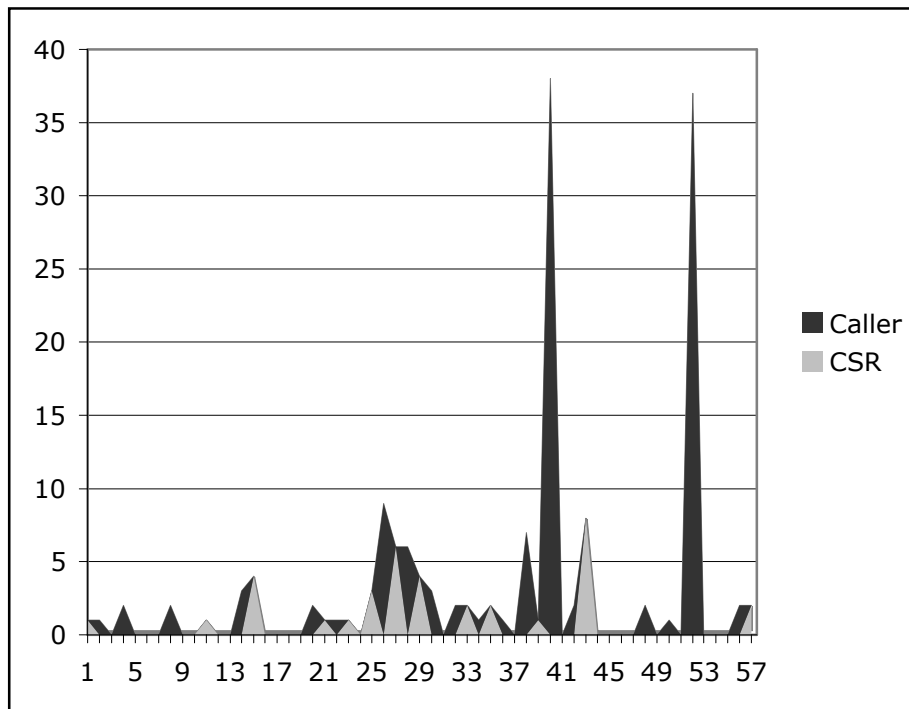
Figure 3: Profile of attitudinal weight (vertical axis) by turn (horizontal axis) for Text A.

The graphic profile of the flow of ATTITUDE in Text A reveals phases of relative low weighting (eg 1 -24 and 31- 37), the first of which corresponds to the initial identification of people and purpose, phases of more moderate levels (e.g. 25-31), and two major peaks beginning two-thirds of the way through the interaction (40, and 52). In much of the interaction the attitudinal weight of corresponding turns by caller and CSR tend to approximate each other, although the attitudinal intensity of CSR turns, when in response to caller turns, rarely reaches the height of the preceding caller turn. The higher attitudinal weighting of caller turns is in part a consequence of those turns being typically longer, reflecting the nature of the calls as inbound, that is, caller initiated. The longer turns allow for the accumulation of attitudinal weight through multiple expressions as well as through amplification in individual instances. We note that the highest points of intensity reflect turns by the caller. While it is not evident in Figure 3, in both cases this is responded to by a short period of silence from the CSR. So not only does the CSR choose not to respond attitudinally, but chooses momentarily at least not to respond at all. This is discussed further below.

The pattern of relative mirroring at a lessened intensity, as well as the instances of marked contrast in amplified peak followed by silence, suggest the need for a closer examination of the language choices in these corresponding turns and how these choices can be seen to relate, one turn to the next. In the following section we analyse several specific phases of talk representing different stages of an interaction and different levels of emotional intensity.

Interacting resources for managing emotional intensity

The graphic representation in Figure 3 shows a phase of moderate attitudinal weighting mid way through the call where relatively similar levels are reached by both speakers, with the exception of a slightly heightened turn by the caller in turn 26. This phase of the interaction begins with after the preliminary identification stage and once the general purpose of the call has been established. The weight is within the range from 0 to 9. While in phases of low and moderate intensity there are apparently less marked differences in the respective levels of emotion for the caller and the CSR, a closer look at these phases of talk reveals the different choices on the part of each speaker in the ways in which ATTITUDE is expressed. A close analysis of the unfolding discourse enables us to consider how the speakers work to manage their levels of attitudinal weighting in response to each other. The excerpt of the interaction is in [9]. Instances of GRADUATION as FORCE and FOCUS are italicised and concessive contractors are underlined.

[9] Text A

23	CSR	Yes, maam. This is regarding a letter that you sent out *on November 18th*?
24	Caller	Yes…Um
25	CSR	<u>Actually,</u> maam, we <u>already</u> did your phone number here 111 111111 it's <u>just</u> the…
26	Caller	*I'm waiting* for an underwriter to call me and it's going to be *almost a month* because <u>nobody</u> has called me. I've been corresponding with Rxxxx Gxxxx and I've said to her – this is *absolutely* – you're going to be *the 12th* person that I've talked to. Now that's **not right**. <u>All I want</u> is why are we not endorsing the original policy to the amount…the face value…we're dropping it from a million to a half million.
27	CSR	I understand that it's <u>already</u> in the letter, maam. It's <u>just</u> that we're <u>just</u> looking at the details of this and we <u>already</u> got a call back request here. <u>Once</u> it's processed or <u>once</u> it's been reconciled on the record, we're going to call you at 111 111111.
28	Caller	Well let me ask you something, *how long*? Because they told me when I called to Rxxxx Gxxxx *the last time* and then she put me on to an underwriter that wanted to know why I was calling and talking to him and he told me… he said I'm going to pass it on and *somebody* will call you *in 24 hours* and that was *November 18th*. Does it take *that long* for an underwriter to call? I don't think so.
29	CSR	I don't know about it, maam. You have a request here as of *December 3rd* when you talked to one of our representatives here…she <u>actually</u> *did* forward this to be recorded as a call back so that <u>once</u> the record is reconciled it will be calling you at the number…
30	Caller	*Also* do you see on the screen as far … *the last time* I talked to

		Rxxxx was *November 20th*?
31	CSR	Let me see if there is a record that she put on.

Of particular note in this phase of interaction is the almost total lack of explicit ATTITUDE. The attitude of the caller is nonetheless apparent, carried along in the multiple instances of GRADUATION on the part of the caller propagating a prosody of frustration through expressions of amplified quantity, extended time, and lack of specificity. The talk of the CSR on the other hand is peppered with the frequent use of concessive contractors including *already*, *actually*, *just*, and elsewhere *only* and *yet*. These resources function as *concessive* in that they signal counter-expectancy (c.f. Thompson & Zhou, 2000; Martin & Rose, 2006, Weltman, 2003) They differ, however, from concessive conjunctions (such as *but* or *however)* in that they do not establishing contrary circumstances that shift the prosody from one polarity to another (Hood, 2006; c.f. Antaki & Wetherell, 1999). Such a polarity shift around a concessive conjunction can be seen, for example, in extract [10] where '*but'* functions to flip the prosody from negative to positive, and in [11] where the shift is from positive to negative.

[10] Text A

33	CSR	I don't have a note from Rxxxx, maam. <u>But</u> we're going to forward this again.

[11] Text C

3	CSR	I understand Mrs Hxxxx, <u>but</u> we don't have an overnight for this type of form...

Concessive contractors such as *already* and *just* do not establish a contrastive relationship in this way. They work against the propagation of prosodies of ATTITUDE, but they function to limit or contract the propagation of the prosody, rather than to counter it in polar terms.

This is very evident in the interaction from turn 26 to 27 in Text A. In turn 26, a negative prosody of frustration and implied negative JUDGEMENT of incapacity propagates around excessive time (*almost a month*), excessive amount (*the 12th person*), minimal amount (*all I want*; *nobody*) and lack of fulfilment (*I'm waiting*).

In turn 27, the CSR responds to the accumulating weight of the negative prosody by applying forces of contraction along similar dimensions to those employed by the caller. Both instances of the concessive contraction *already* in turn 27, in [12], contract along the dimensions of lack of fulfilment (*I'm waiting)*, establishing that actions have been completed. They also contract along the dimension of excessive time (*almost a month*), establishing that the actions have been completed sooner than expected. In other words '*already'* adjusts down GRADUATION as FORCE and as FOCUS. In the process, the implication of a problem on the part of the caller shifts is diminished by the CSR.

[12] Text A

27	CSR	…I understand that it's *already* in the letter, maam, (…)… and we

already got a call back request here

There are other concessive contractors also evident in this short turn. The CSR twice uses the concessive contractor '*just*' (see [13]).

[13] Text A
27   CSR   It is *just* that we're *just* looking at the details of this…

Here he counters the implication of inaction and hence incapacity propagated in instances of GRADUATION as FORCE (*nobody*) and as FOCUS (*I'm waiting*; *all I want*) by specifying the actors (*we*) and sharpening the FOCUS on the action (*just*; *just*). '*Just*' in other instances can function to downgrade FORCE, in which case it might be used with another indication of time, as in '*just* now', or place, as in '*just* here'.

Finally there are two instance of '*once*' in turn 27 as in [14], functioning to contract the propagation of extended time in turn 33 (*almost a month*).

[14] Text A
27   CSR   *Once* it's been processed or *once* it's been reconciled on the record, we're going to call you…

The instances of *once* function to lessen the negative prosody around past time by proposing reduced time in the future.

'*Yet*' functions in a similar way to '*once*' in that it adjusts the expectation of time, in this case extending time beyond that which has been expected, and with the implication of pending completion, as in [15].

[15] Text A
43   CSR   we have *not yet* reconciled the records yet, maam

If we consider turn 25 in extract [9] we find one further example of a concessive contractor in '*actually*'. It comes as a response to a negative prosody building over previous turns on the part of the caller (in *trying to reach*; *whomever*; *I don't know what she is*; *somebody*; *12 people already*). In turn 25, the CSR counters the implication of incapacity by challenging the truth-value of the suggested inaction. '*Actually*' seems to come a degree closer to the function of concessive conjunction, in that it tends to be more contrastive in function than the contractors identified to this point. We could consider this further by substituting one for the other and observing the impact of the substitution in interpersonal terms (see [16]).

[16] Text A
25   CSR   *Actually*, maam, we already did your phone number here…
*25   CSR   *But*, maam, we already did your phone number here…

'*Actually*' appears in this context to concede more ground to the countered expectation of inaction, once again functioning to constrain it, rather than to present an oppositional stance. It functions to adjust by degree the truth-value or 'actuality of the proposition' (Conrad and Biber, 2000: 59).

A second instance of 'actually' is found in turn 29 in [17]. In this case, too it functions to contract the propagation of negative values implied in expressions of lack of fulfilment or actualisation (Hood and Martin, in press for 2007; Conrad and Biber, 2000).

[17] Text A

36	CSR	…she *actually did* forward this to be recorded as a call back

In the examples above the CSRs use the concessive contractors in response the prosodies of negative values being propagated in prior turns by the customer. However, in some cases the CSR uses concessive contractors as a kind of pre-emptive strike, to counter an anticipated amplification of FORCE or softening of FOCUS on the part of the caller. This is evident in the instance of *just* turn 15 in [18].

[18] Text A

11	CSR	And what is your name please?
12	Caller	Robowsk
13	CSR	You're Sxxxx Rxxxx?
14	Caller	That's correct
15	CSR	How about Axxxx? What's his date of birth? *Just* to verify this.
16	Caller	8.1.50

Here the CSR has asked the caller a series of identification questions in a phase of text that follows some initial indications of frustration. '*Just*' functions to sharpen FOCUS, implying a limit to this line of questioning. Resources for concessive contraction can therefore be seen to function both retrospectively and prospectively.

To this point we have focused on the talk of the CSR in response to that of the caller, but the interaction is of course continual in the discourse. We need also to consider ways in which the caller's talk is being constructed in response to that of the CSR.
In the phase of talk in [19] we note a moderate peaking of attitudinal weight in the caller's turn 26.

[19] Text A

23	CSR	Yes, maam. This is regarding a letter that you sent out on November 18th?
24	Caller	Yes…Um
25	CSR	Actually, maam, we already did your phone number here 111 111111, it's just the…
26	Caller	I'm waiting for an underwriter to call me and it's going to be almost a month because nobody has called me. I've been corresponding with Rxxxx Gxxxx and I've said to her – this is

absolutely – you're going to be <u>the 12th person</u> that I've talked to. Now that's <u>not right</u>. <u>All I want</u> is why are we <u>not endorsing</u> the original policy to the amount…the face value…we're dropping it from a million to a half million.

If we look back to the turns immediately preceding 26 we find potentially some explanation for this peak. There are three instances in turn 25 in which the CSR contracts the prosody of values being propagated by the caller. These counter-expectancy resources challenge the actuality of the caller's implied propositions of incompetence (in *actually*), her claims of excessive time and lack of fulfilment (in *already*) and suggestions of incompetence in terms of lack of FOCUS (in *just*). The caller is in effect being closed down before she has had an opportunity to fully express her frustration. This turn on the part of the CSR is then responded to with a flurry of negative ATTITUDE in turn 26.

Peaks of emotion and silence

Finally we want to take a closer look at the two instances of heightened peaks of emotion in the interaction evident in Figure 3. , The first occurs in turn 40 (see [20]) and the second in turn 52. In contrast, to phases where there is a degree of mirroring of levels of emotion, these exaggerated peaks are responded to very differently by the CSR. The immediate response is in fact an initial period of silence. In turn 41, the moment of silence is followed by a quietly spoken 'yea, maam'.

[20] Text A

| 40 | Caller | OK, well, *in the meantime*, what then I *need* to do is to make a call to **Better** Business Bureau and tell them exactly how, as a customer, I've been handled…and it's been **very crappy**. I've called up…I've talked to *12 people*, from *Milwaukeee*, I *cannot tell you how many* from *Texas*, I *cannot tell you how many* from *Illinois* and this is **absolutely pathetic**. I **expect** a call back *within a week's period of time* and **all this mess cleared up** and *I don't care who* you tell *or who* you write down but I **appreciate** that this *will be done within a week* because I *have been waiting since November 18th* for a call back and *nobody* is <u>doing their homework</u> |
| 41 | CSR | Silence …..(very softly) Yea, maam |

In these instances, the response on the part of the CSR is not to echo the intensity of the caller, but instead to markedly contrast that level[iii]. The strategy appears to be successful one in contracting the emotional intensity in this interaction.

Conclusion

The seven calls analysed in this study were all deemed to be problematic in that there was no ready answer to the caller's query or solution to their problem, resulting in expressions of frustration by the caller. Nonetheless, in each case the speakers were able to reach a point where they could conclude the call in a 'civil' manner. Typical is the conclusion in Text A, where the CSR and caller exchange polite closing moves.

[20] Text A
| 56 | Caller | OK Kxxx **thank you** for your time and your **help** |
| 57 | CSR | OK **thank you**, maam,…you're **welcome**. |

The calls in the data set all display a number of features in common, that contribute to that possibility. Where explicit ATTITUDE is expressed, it is more often expressed by the caller rather than the CSRs. However, both the CSRs and the callers restrict their use of explicit ATTITUDE[iv] and rely instead on resources of GRADUATION to flag ATTITUDE. They thus avoid the dichotomising impact of explicitly positive or negative values (Hood, 2004, 2006). Importantly we found the callers and the CSRs select differently from the resources of GRADUATION. The callers frequently grade up FORCE in references to time taken, or number of contacts, and soften the FOCUS around achievement of outcomes and specificity of personnel. The CSRs show a strong preference for resources of counter expectancy but as concessive contractors such as *already, actually, just, already, yet, and only,* rather than concessive conjunctions such as *but*. The relations established through concessive contractors are relative, not dichotomous, and in this way the CSRs are able to limit and constrain the propagation of negative prosodies of complaint by the callers, returning the call to a reduced level of emotional intensity without setting up oppositional positions. The concessive contractors can all be seen to function in relation to the semantic dimensions of GRADUATION (Hood & Martin, 2007) as either contracting dimensions of FORCE or FOCUS.

It is important to note that this study is limited to data collected from one location. While the data reveal a number of commonly employed strategies that impact on the dynamic construction of emotion in the calls, the extent to which such strategies are employed, or employed to the same extent or effect in other cultural contexts is yet to be investigated.

As a final note, while we see a potential for this research to make a contribution to educational programs in the call centre industry, through drawing attention to the potential for CSRs to manage the emotional intensity of interactions, we also look beyond that context to theorise in a way that may also throw light on other locations of conflict-resolution and consensus in talk, contributing to the body of research on, for example, counselling sessions (c.f. Munitgl, 2004), courtrooms (c.f. Korner, 2000), or talkback radio (c.f. Thornborrow, 2001). In these contexts, as in the context of call centre interactions, additional research is needed to add include considerations of voice quality into the kinds of tools deployed and developed in this study (c.f Wan forthcoming).

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[i]

[ii] Terms such as *reconcile* in our data are interpreted as having crossed into technicality,

as have nominalisation such as '*Authorized Resolution Department'* (c.f. Iedema 1995).

[iii] Note that silence may be motivated by different factors. It sometimes indicates that

the CSR or caller is preoccupied with some task such as checking of information.".

[iv] Explicit verbal confrontation was very occasionally evident in a survey of the much

larger corpus of texts.

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