Englishes in the Philippine Business Processing Outsourcing Industry: issues, opportunities and initial findings

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In Ma. Lourdes S. Bautista and Kingsley Bolton (eds) 2008. *Philippine English: Linguistic and Literary Perspectives*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Introduction

In the context of the rapidly expanding Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) Industry in Philippines, issues relating to diversity and convergence in the way that English is used become strongly foregrounded.

Essentially, the BPO industry comprises a variety of back office functions, support services and call centres which are outsourced to sites that are more economical to run than those at home. In the Philippine context, most of the call centres are the customer services departments of banks, insurance companies, retail outlets, IT support and travel agencies with head offices, and until recently call centres, in the US, the UK and Australia. Through telecommunications, speakers are brought into contact from diverse socio-economic, geographical and ethno-linguistic backgrounds in this globalized workspace. Complex information and services must then be negotiated within the constraints of the telephone and screen through English, as a common language.

Language proficiency and standards of performance have increasingly become the focus of industry and government discussions in a site where English language capacity is seen by many as a key factor for future expansion and sustainability (SGV and Co., 2006), and where customer satisfaction is closely dependent on the success of communication between participants (Forey and Lockwood, forthcoming). While current market forces exert pressure on the language to correspond to a standardized variety of English, the various stakeholders – be they overseas clients, their customers or local staff – come to this situation with differing understandings and expectations of English as the working language.

To date, little research has been carried out to identify the language and communication issues in offshore call centres. The limited number of applied linguistic studies that have been published tend to focus on call centres based in the

UK (Adolphs et al., 2004; Cameron, 2000a, 2000b). Few, if any studies, focus on the language training within the call centre industry and the need to develop a pedagogic approach based on authentic resources. Researchers have commented on the high stress and pressure experienced by the customer service representative (CSR) in call centre work (see Cameron, 2000a; Taylor and Bain, 1999). However, workplace studies of the environment and Human Resource (HR) issues of call centre work tends to be focused on call centres which are based onshore, where the CSR is more likely to be a speaker of the same variety of English (Mulholland, 2004; Rose and Wright 2005; Witt et al., 2004). Likewise, the research that is available on offshore call centre destinations tends to focus on features not related to language. In offshore destinations the language may be another added pressure, especially if the CSR is operating in a second or third language.

In terms of broader research on English language usage in the Philippines, a large body of work over the last three decades has been building up a picture of many of the features of Philippine English (PE), as a localized dialect of English realising one of the 'outer circle' varieties of Asian Englishes (Kachru, 1997), where English has 'second' rather than 'first language' status. The descriptive focus of PE has been on lexical and grammatical features (e.g. Llamazon, 1969; Gonzalez, 1985; Bautista, 1997, 2000, 2004a; Bolton and Butler, 2004), and distinct phonological features across various socio-economic groups (e.g. Llamazon, 1997; Tayao, 2004, this volume) – i.e. at phoneme, word and sentence-level, rather than the mapping of patterns across larger stretches of spoken text between interlocutors.

Tupas (2004) has noted that these studies of PE have largely been concerned with English as it is spoken (or written) between educated Filipinos in localized, urban settings. The exception to this would be published studies such as Bautista's in 1982 and 1996, identifying certain linguistic features of the 'sub-varieties' of English usage by Filipino maids and bar-girls, and the work of Llamazon (1997) and Tayao (2004) on variation in PE phonology across socio-economic groups. In local speech communities, meanings tend to be commonly shared by all participants, and code-switching strategies are available to further extend the meaning potential through the use of Filipino or other shared dialects and languages – semantic resources that are unavailable in the call centre interaction.

Hence from an applied linguistic and social perspective, the expanding workplace of the BPO industry offers critical opportunities for research and intervention. Firstly, we can study the dynamic interface between English as it functions in a localized context, i.e. in 'outer circle' multi-lingual Filipino speech communities; and as it functions in a trans-global context, i.e. with diverse interlocutors from predominantly 'inner circle'

countries where English is spoken as a first language (Kachru, 1997). The acquisition of new registers and dialectal shifts by the CSR can also be researched through longitudinal studies and corpus-based analysis of call centre discourse from novice through to seasoned agents. Secondly, the offshore customer service call, as an emerging genre, can be analysed to provide a better understanding of the discourse features of service interactions – ones that increasingly influence the way in which personal business is processed across the globe.

Thirdly, in terms of applied linguistics and workplace training, the apprenticeship of the novice CSR also creates many challenges for language teaching and assessment practices in a workplace that must perform under considerable pressure and time constraints. A survey of approaches to such training and assessment in the BPO industry can reveal the underlying attitudes and beliefs about English language that are held by the various stakeholders. A clearer understanding of these perspectives and motivations can inform future initiatives and educational policy.

In this chapter we will firstly provide an overview of some of the current practices and issues relating to English language and communication in this new context, based on our research in the BPO industry since 2004 (Forey and Lockwood, forthcoming), and other studies in this area. Secondly, we will report on our study of call centre discourse from the Philippines, describing preliminary findings relating to features of these interactions and communication problems commonly faced by CSRs.

In doing so, we will start to consider what the language implications of this globalized movement offshore are, and what kind of research could inform the development of language support programs for its workforce – initiatives that can better respond to and accommodate the diversity and complexities of the BPO context.

An overview of language issues and trends in the Philippine BPO industry

Perceptions of language training needs

Cost is not the only factor when choosing a BPO destination. Excellent English language skills, post secondary qualifications and a service culture are all draw cards for this fast-developing outsourcing industry (see NeoIT, 2004). Outside perceptions of good levels of English and education, its service culture and its high population (good scalability) have hence contributed to the Philippines becoming a favoured site for relocation, especially for the North American client (SGV and Co., 2006). For such companies, the country's perceived affinity with American culture has also been used as a rationale to set up BPOs there, the assumption being that after a long history of American presence in the country, Filipino staff will already be familiar with the

expectations and behaviour of the stereotypical American client and their customer.

Such perceptions of association have led to misconceptions about the language background of the potential workforce. Certain US organisations that were in the process of establishing an outsourced centre reported that they believed English to be the mother tongue of the Philippines. While many sociolinguists would argue that PE is now 'functionally native' to the Philippines due to its dispersion through all levels of society and wide range of uses in the country (Bautista, 2000), this variety of English not only differs linguistically from the Standard American English (SAE) of US organizations, but it is also spoken as a second or third language by the majority of its speakers. Another misconception relates to the Austronesian languages and dialects spoken in the Philippines, with Tagalog generally viewed from outside the Philippines as the mother tongue of *all* Filipino CSRs. This is clearly not the case for many who have moved in from the provinces to Metro Manila or those in sites in the Visayas or in the Ilocos region of Northern Luzon whose mother tongue is Cebuano or Ilokano, etc. As pointed out by Bautista (2004b: 199), the Philippines is a country where over 100 languages are spoken, where inhabitants typically speak two or more languages, where English as a colonial language was adopted as a second language within only a few generations, and where switching between languages is common.

Hence many US based companies setting up call centres in the Philippines have been slow to appreciate that comprehensive English language training and support will be required to ensure its agency workforce meet the service level requirements of US clients (Lockwood, 2006a; Lockwood and Forey, forthcoming). This lack of understanding of the language support needed for the offshore destination is reflected in the type of training programs offered by such organisations to new recruits. In our experience during consultancies undertaken in Manila with large 3rd party call centres (2003-2006), only American accent training and ad hoc remedial work on points of English grammar tend to be provided, along with basic customer service skills (i.e. what is referred to as the 'soft skills' – for example, formulaic company greetings, empathy and rapport building with the customer, etc,). Following this brief communications training, a more substantial account-specific product training is given.

The 'soft skills' materials that are used have often been designed for American trainees, and hence they neither support the specific areas of language building that are usually required for new Filipino CSRs, nor do they provide an explicit description of culturally specific practices in the US context. 'Cross-cultural training' is often in the form of a lesson in American geography. In many cases during the recruitment or training process, language examples may be taken from literary texts

and other unrelated written texts that involve very different discourse and lexico-grammatical patterns compared to a successful customer service encounter through the medium of the telephone. Re-recordings and transcripts of complete spoken texts taken from the workplace itself are rarely used as linguistic models, and the reinforcement of relevant listening skills is lacking in the curriculum. Generally speaking, in the majority of call centres we experienced that the language training did not appear to have been informed by applied linguistic research or practice, nor was it facilitated by individuals with a formal background in English language training.

Recruitment for an expanding industry

The rapid expansion of the call centre industry in the Philippines, while providing attractive employment opportunities for graduates in their home country, is now placing huge demands on recruitment, with 100,000 jobs offered in the call centre industry in 2005 and continued growth forecast (ECCP, EON, Inc and PEP 2006). Cu (2006) has suggested that the revenue generated by call centres in the Philippines will grow from 1.2 to 3.1 billion US dollars from 2005 to 2008. Senator Mar Roxas, Chairman of the Senate committees on trade, commerce and economic affairs, proposed that by 2009, over 300,000 Filipinos would be employed in call centre companies operating in the country (Roxas, 2006). Recent figures from the Business Processing Association of the Philippines, as shown in Figure 1, illustrate the present situation and the forecasted growth of a five-year compound annual growth rate (CARG) of 38%. A major part of this growth will be in the call centre industry (SGV and Co., 2006).

Figure 1. Forecast revenues in ITES services 2006-2010 in US$ Million

(SGV and Co., 2006:1)

Service level agreements between the host company and the providing company, (in this instance, an outsourcing organisation in the Philippines) for the more complex, high-end accounts increasingly located in the Philippines require high quality customer service and skilful spoken communication. Recruiting enough staff to fill the seats in new and existing sites is an ongoing problem for HR Departments and agencies, and in 2005, recruitment rates in Manila call centres slumped to 1-1.5% (Greenleaf and Ferrer, 2006), with the lack of English language competence being cited as the main reason for staff shortages (Dominguez, 2006). Senator Roxas has also drawn attention to the lack of English language proficiency as a major threat to predicted levels of future expansion. In a recent paper by the European Chamber of

Commerce of the Philippines (ECCP), Stakeholder Relations Firm EON, Inc., and PEP (2006: 8) it was stated that "250,000 jobs are to be provided in 5 years, an opportunity that will be lost if candidates can't be found with sufficient level of English Proficiency".

In this paper, ECCP et al. (2006) highlight that the major problem for business development for the call centre industry in the Philippines is the standard of English. They state that 95% of the 400,000 college students that graduate every year do not have a high enough standard of English to be employed by the call centre industry. They add that there is a need to "create a sense of emergency and hope" centred around English and to convince the Filipino youth that "English is their ticket to the future" (ECCP et al., 2006:11). Domingues (2006) reinforces the message that the HR factor, specifically a lack of proficient English speakers, is 'the single most pressing issue facing the Philippine e-service sector' (Dominguez, 2006:17). In an attempt to improve the standard of English in April 2006, the ECCP and EON, Inc. spearheaded a 5-year English advocacy campaign, "English is Cool!", whose key message reads: 'Be proud. Be bilingual. English is cool!". This particular marketing strategy is based on their belief that: "there is also a cultural hindrance to the practice of English among the youth: many lack the self-confidence to speak English because they are afraid to make mistakes, and English is now perceived as elitist. In other words: it is perceived as yet another obstacle to social success and integration rather than a means to achieve it." ('English is Cool' website, 2006).

In response to the problems with matching jobs and language skills, in March 2006 President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo earmarked P500 million ($9.8 million) for outsourcing industry training. Part of the scheme involves vouchers for tuition at government-accredited HR institutions. 3rd party providers are increasingly implementing additional English language programs for 'near-hires', supported in part by the recent government funded scheme. Universities and colleges of continuing education are also slowly implementing the development of vocational training courses to support the industry.

Standards and varieties of English – the global politics of English in the workplace

In these industry discussions about language standards in the Philippine call centre, performance is appraised in relation to external standards or norms – typically SAE. From this perspective, localized patterns of communication in English in the call centre might be characterized by the presence of a foreign accent, evidence of consistent grammatical errors, use of a restricted range of structures, the absence of

certain lexical resources, the insertion of non-English terms, and problems of comprehensibility for 'native speakers' of English outside of the region. In other words, English is implicitly seen as a homogeneous and fixed system that is privileged by native speakers located elsewhere, an approach to language use that Kachru has attempted to debunk as 'the native speaker idealization myth' (1997:10). The diversity of forms that English takes, and how these forms are put to use across the globe in different social settings by different speakers is rarely addressed in industry discussions.

Closely linked to the concept of language standards is the relationship between language use and perceptions of national identity. This is evidenced when a client decides that their Filipino CSRs must acquire a convincing American accent and invests in intensive American accent training to achieve this, rather than advocating a globally comprehendible accent as a more neutral position. However, in our experience, while the Philippine location will not be automatically signalled by the CSR in the greeting stage of the call, most companies have a policy of transparency and the CSR must state their offshore location if queried by the customer. On identifying an 'Asian-sounding accent', American customers will sometimes assume that they are calling India. Stories of racially abusive callers are not uncommon in interviews with CSRs, supporting press reports over the last few years in relation to the Indian call centres (Ahmed 2006; Gentleman, 2005; McPhate, 2005). This may be in the form of explicit racial slurs or may take the form of sarcasm and derogatory statements about the CSR's competence, in a more insidious way. Certain callers will demand to speak with 'an American' not 'a foreigner'.

In contrast to this view of the privileged status of SAE is the notion of the inherent validity of localized varieties or dialects of English. PE has been treated by many sociolinguists as a dialect in its own right (see Bautista, 2004b for a comprehensive review of PE studies across three decades). Such Asian varieties are defined by their own habitual and widespread patterns of 'indigenous' usage that have developed over time from a complex array of socio-economic and historical factors (see accounts by Gonzalez, 1997, 2004; Bolton, 2000; and Tupas, 2004).

In a World Englishes paradigm, PE is seen as a coherent, dynamic and creative system that functions successfully to convey meaning in a range of social contexts from the everyday to the creation of literature, to the extent where PE can be seen as 'functionally native' to the Philippines (see Kachru, 1997a; and Bautista, 2000a). What might count as a systematic error from the point of view of 'standard English' might be seen as a stabilized pattern in this variety that has its own form and/or

function. From this perspective, when communication breakdowns do occur over the phone in the offshore call centre, rather than see these as the result of deficient language on the part of the CSR, this could be seen as a lack of correspondence across different varieties of English and the inexperience of both the CSR and the overseas customer to negotiate meanings together.

Taking a stronger ideological position, in his discussion of the politics of Philippine English, Tupas (2004) has argued that the majority of scholars of PE have optimistically adopted a positivist approach for PE, assuming linguistic and sociolinguistic equality for this variety as a *post*-colonial phenomenon that symbolizes independence and new beginnings. He counters this view at length, arguing that despite the polycentric rhetoric of globalization, with its notions of 'interconnectivity' and 'the global village', etc. – the reality is that the Philippines is experiencing a *neo*-colonial period. The notion of linguistic liberation and polycentricity are unrealistic in a country where most individuals are acting under 'conditions of severe restraint' and where the agenda of Philippine education is still to supply the world market economy with "a cheap and docile labour force who are trained in English and the vocational and technical skills required by that economy" (Ordonez, 2000:51). Tupas adds: "It is one thing to say that Filipinos are able to, and should, change the forms and meanings of English, and it is another thing to say that such appropriation is socially and politically accepted. In the words of Bautista (2000a:17) 'realistically speaking, for many Filipinos, there will still be a "standard of standards" and that will be Standard American English.'"(Tupas, 2004: 53).

Stakeholders' motivations and new initiatives

In many ways, therefore, this emerging BPO context in countries such the Philippines and India strongly reflects the politics and tensions around English as a global language. However, for most who are working to solve communication problems within the industry, the question of what kind of English should be spoken is largely a pragmatic one, with commercial rather than ideological motivations (though these two things cannot really be separated out, of course). The customers of their accounts tend to be American, British or Australian speakers of English and the expectation is for consistent mutual intelligibility, and coherent and confident communication from the CSR. Practically speaking, without these things in place, customer service will inevitably be compromised, and costs will escalate for the third party providers who provide the local services for overseas clients. If standards are not met then the outcome may well be that accounts, and hence jobs, will be lost to other operators, potentially outside of the Philippines.

For the hundreds of new applicants queuing each day across Manila and provincial sites for interviews, many of whom are fresh graduates with no employment opportunities in their prior area of study, the CSR position signifies a highly competitive local salary and the opportunity to gain product expertise, access to new technologies and to develop communication skills that may provide them with a competitive edge for an uncertain future. The BPO industry encourages a pathway of internal promotion and incentives to build on new expertise and retain staff. For some, the alternative to this may be a long separation from families and children for unskilled domestic work in Hong Kong, Brunei and the Middle East.

The current reality is that most individuals walking in off the street for their HR interview and language screening are falling short of the kind of advanced language competencies that are required to cope with the challenges of 'high-end' financial service and complex technical support. As will be discussed shortly in our study, the role of the Philippine CSR requires the acquisition of new skills and competencies that go beyond patterns of everyday spoken English language in a local context, and these need to be supported all the way through the process from pre-hire vocational training to coaching on the call centre floor.

As noted earlier, clients, providers and industry bodies alike are becoming aware of the need for more expertise and support in the critical area of language and communication, to develop their workforce and ensure sustainability. Educational institutions are also realizing the need to provide tertiary level support for their students in the area of English language training for the workplace. One well-known Institute of Technology has just spent two years revamping and extending its English language curriculum, retraining its English faculty in current communicative approaches to English language training and putting in a comprehensive language assessment tool to ensure their graduates leave with good enough levels of English for employment in the BPO industry. Other post-secondary providers are also anxious to improve their English language and teacher education programmes in line with the needs of the BPO industry. Requests have been made by members of the industry for tertiary institutions to contribute to the development of English language in the students that graduate and the courses they offer at an undergraduate and postgraduate level (see Dominguez, 2006; NeoIT, 2005). In addition, after a recent keynote address (Lockwood, 2006b) a plea was made from the floor for tertiary English providers, such as universities, to participate in the research and training agendas that will improve levels of English communication for the BPO industry. To date there has been reluctance from some of the best universities to promote this industry within the ranks of their graduating students, as it is perceived to be employing bright young people at a level below their capabilities regardless of their English language

proficiency.

So from many perspectives, the BPO industry creates challenges, concerns and enormous opportunities, in theoretical, ideological and the most pragmatic of terms. Underpinning the development of an English language communication training agenda for this industry is the need for more research into the spoken discourse of call centre transactions. Such findings can inform approaches to language support for the industry, but they may also point to areas for future social research. To date, our experience of conducting research in the Philippines has shown a very positive response from both the educational institutions and industry members, with ongoing support for applied linguistic research. In our research in the Philippines we are developing a forum for partnership and collaboration with an aim to improving educational and industry pedagogy, through the sharing of findings and good practices (see http://www.engl.polyu.edu.hk/call_centre/default.html). Issues with access to sensitive data and sharing of information need more consideration and development, but these problems can be overcome through non-disclosure agreements and the removal of identifying information prior to analysis.

In the next section, we report briefly on some initial findings that have emerged from our data, focusing on aspects of communication breakdown that commonly occur in customer service calls.

A preliminary study of areas of communication breakdown in the call centre interactions

A study was undertaken in 2004 of the discourse structure and selected language features of over 500 hundred authentic transactions that took place in a range of US call centres operating in Manila. The call centres in the study came from a range of industries such as insurance, information technology support, travel, banking and other financial services. Our research has focused on inbound calls, i.e. where the customer initiates the call to get service or to make a complaint, etc; rather than outbound calls that tend to be sales or marketing focused. These inbound centres are usually considered to be places of high stress and pressure for the CSR as there is no way of predicting the precise nature of the caller's problem (Taylor and Bain, 1999; Mulholland, 2004).

In this chapter, we will focus more specifically on the findings from one large US outsourced call centre, and report on the general structure of the call flow and the some areas of communication breakdown we identified in our data. For the study,

over 100 selected calls were transcribed. All original names, dates and sensitive details were removed from the data and made anonymous.

While every call is unique, we found that a clear pattern emerged across the data in terms of core stages, as illustrated in Figure 2 (Forey and Lockwood, forthcoming).

This flow chart shows the typical stages found in our data and also indicates which stages tend to be obligatory and which tend to be optional in the majority of calls. As can be seen, the basic call flow involves 6 key stages – opening^ purpose^ gathering information^ purpose^ service^ closing (^ denotes "followed by"). All stages appear to be obligatory and the feature we identified as being optional was the statement of a problem or complaint. Our findings also suggest that if problems occur during the call that these tend to happen during the purpose or service stage of the call.

(Insert Figure 2 about here)

The framework for this kind of generic analysis was based on a Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) model of language (see Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004; Martin and Rose, 2003). In recent years within SFL a number of studies have identified texts as having a recognisable generic structure (e.g. Macken-Horarik, 2001; White et al., 1994; Eggins and Slade, 1997). Having established the basic components in a text, which can be used as a working model, the description can be further extended to show more delicacy within each of the stages. In terms of the call flow, the model can be further developed for different kinds of account by identifying the conversational 'moves' that typically make up each stage of the call or can be modified to map out a variant call flow for a non-typical account. It can also be used as the basis for profiling the typical linguistic patterns of each stage of the call flow to inform training.

This is particularly relevant for the problematic stages of 'purpose' and 'service', as will now be described, in relation to difficulties with communication.

Areas of problematic communication

In terms of problematic communication, we were interested in finding out what was happening during the phases where there appears to be some type of breakdown. In addition, we aimed to investigate the key lexico-grammatical features that could be identified in these stages of the text.

In the present study, the inbound calls are considered to be from a 'high end',

complex account. Generally the data showed that the customers often had enquiries about complex products and consequently, more sophisticated servicing needs. Newly recruited CSRs were not only dealing with new product and systems knowledge, but also with the novelty and the demands of communicating with Americans, who were often elderly, from low socio-economic groups and/or spoke with the regional accents of the Southern US states. It is not surprising, therefore, that feedback from the US regularly reported communication breakdown, especially in the early weeks of the CSR working on the phones. Although the product training was intensive, the language training tended to be limited to accent neutralisation and discrete grammar items (Forey and Lockwood, forthcoming).

In order to distinguish between different aspects of spoken communication, the discussion is divided into four domains: i. phonological aspects of communication, ii. language accuracy and range, iii. discourse competence, and iv. interactive and socio-linguistic competence.

The last two categories are broadly based on Canale and Swain's (1980) descriptions of different areas of language competence that go beyond the limits of grammar, in its restricted sense. By 'discourse competence' we refer to the ability to connect messages in stretches of spoken language and to form a meaningful whole out of the series of utterances. 'Interactive competence' refers to the ability to maintain ongoing, fluent communication with the other speaker and to build on relationships through language over the course of the interaction. Sociolinguistic competence involves an understanding of the socio-cultural conventions of language and discourse, such as the expression of politeness, humour, and appropriate turn-taking behaviour.

As discussed earlier in relation to language diversity, for the Filipino CSR (as an 'outer circle' speaker of English) all of these aspects of spoken communication are potentially problematic in the context of the telephone interaction with an 'inner circle' American customer. And in each area, strong receptive skills (listening) as well as productive skills (speaking) are needed for successful communication by both the CSR and customer.

As noted above, the data suggested that the majority of the communication problems occur in the stages of 'purpose' and 'service' of the call flow, i.e. the points where the CSR has to exercise excellent listening skills to understand the purpose of the call; where the CSR needs to provide clear and logical servicing information; and where the CSR needs to interact and build relationships with the customer. Other stages in the text appear to be more straightforward, follow a standard pattern and usually flow in a smooth manner, unless the caller is already irate before they are connected with the CSR.

Phonological aspects of call centre communication

Example 1 highlights one customer's response to a CSR, drawing attention to the phonological differences of a dialect.

Example 1

CSR: I'm explaining it to you Ma'am, it's for privacy purposes, it doesn't show here in my system but you do have a beneficiary it's just not showing in my system but I can request a letter indicating for you who your beneficiary is…

Caller: *Well, you know you're not very plain. You have an accent, right? I'm having trouble understanding you, right.* Are you saying it does not show a beneficiary? Are you saying that? Are you saying that?

Tayao (2004) draws critical attention to the marked variation in phonological patterns across different PE speakers, relating to social-group membership, geographical location and first language background. In her study, Tayao distinguishes the use of PE in three socio-economic groups, following Llamazon (1997) – the *acrolect* (whose speech style closely approximates formal General American English), the *mesolect* (whose speech exhibits divergences from American English but this does not generally affect communication), and the *basilect* (whose speech is heavily affected by their native language).

The kind of distinctions that are made and the phonological characteristics of each 'sub-variety' described by Tayao are highly relevant to the call centre context. In our experience, typically, new hires are in the 'mesolect' category, but many new applicants are at the lower end of this band and aspects of their speech style would affect communication in the challenging context of the call centre. For the high-end accounts, however, speakers ideally need to be in the 'acrolect' category. As was discussed earlier, many call centres even require their Filipino CSRs to sound like native speaker Americans. Our experience has shown that for many call center agents, a shift in dialect naturally occurs as they move from novice to seasoned CSR, through the process of listening to and mimicking their customers eight hours a day. This is to the extent where certain individuals may acquire the phonemic and prosodic features of a convincing American accent, including a marked nasal twang, reduced vowel sounds and stress-timed rhythm, etc.

For CSRs that display phonological features of the basilect and mesolect categories, there are, however, specific phonological problems encountered on the floor. Arguably, these are due to both the customer's lack of exposure to Filipino speakers and the distinct phonological features of PE, and the unfamiliarity of the CSR with a

customer's speech style. Requests for repetition are frequent and misunderstandings arise from a lack of comprehensibility, in both directions.

Tayao (2004) has described in detail the phonemic system of PE, with its reduced consonant and vowel system, increasingly noticeable in 'broader' varieties of PE, for example the lack of consonants /f/ and /v/ and the persistent hardening of the *th* sounds to /t/ and /d/. Some phonemes that are still present in the system may be articulated differently, such as the /r/ and /t/ sounds. Vowels may be reduced from the eleven sounds of SAE to an approximation based on the five options in Filipino.

Such features can create confusion for non-Filipino interlocutors as they struggle to place the words they hear in context, with the lack of other cues over the phone line.

Tayao (2004) has noted in her survey of PE studies that most researchers would agree to the syllable-timed nature of PE (where equal stress is given to all syllables and reduced syllables are absent), which contrasts with the stress-timed nature and distinct rhythm of Standard English. Coupled with the reduced range of phonemes described above, confusion may occur when words such as *reinstatement, recommendation, information*, **ba**sically, *procedural* and *computer* are pronounced with equal stress on each syllable and the lack of a reduced vowel sound in weaker syllables.

Example 2

Caller:	I'm sorry, could you repeat Sir…I'm sorry…hello?
CSR:	I'm going to put this into our reinstatement department [pronounced as *rye* – as in rye bread – rye instatement]*
Caller:	Which department
CSR:	reinstatement [pronounced as *rye*] and check the record if they could put the policy back in force again.
Caller:	(laughs)
CSR:	so there's a letter here so there's a justification – we need to review the documents here to see if they are already sufficient.
Caller:	So it's going to which department?
CSR:	Reinstatement department [pronounced as *rye*]
Caller:	State department?
CSR	Reinstatement [pronounced as *rye*]
Caller:	Statement?
CSR:	R-E-I-N-S-T-A-T-E-M-E-N-T [CSR spells out the word letter-by-letter]
Caller:	alright re – reinstatement?
CSR:	You've got it correctly now, Sir.
Caller:	Thank you…

In terms of prosodic features across utterances, Tayao (2004) makes reference to studies that suggest that no distinction is made in the final intonation pattern of 'Wh' questions and 'Yes/No' questions in PE. This appears to be supported by instances in our data, where the CSR may use a rising intonation pattern for *all* question types. In SAE, if this pattern of rising intonation is given to WH questions, it indicates the speaker's surprise or their need for clarification. This can hence lead to misunderstanding of the speaker's intention and create confusion.

Intonation and other paralinguistic features of speech play a crucial role in exchanging interpersonal meaning, and are part of the system for conveying attitude, nuance, intention, emotion, etc. There are frequent examples in our data where subtle shifts in the customer's intonation and stress patterns, conveying irony, puzzlement, etc. are lost on the CSR and communication breaks down.

As noted by Tayao (2004) more work on the prosodic features of PE still needs to be carried out to identify intonation patterns across whole utterances and to see which parts of the utterance are given extra emphasis and focus by pitch movement and volume, etc. This is another opportunity for extending our understanding of how these features work across varieties through corpus-based research from the call centre context.

Language accuracy and range

In terms of lexical and grammatical aspects of language, the kinds of non-standard patterns identified in the literature for PE (see Bautista, 2004a) can commonly be found in the call centre interactions, for example: the lack of agreement between subject and verb, pronoun switching, non-standard use of prepositions in phrasal verbs, altered use of tense and aspect (e.g. use of past perfect for recent rather than distant past, overuse of the future continuous *will + ing form*,); and most notably, the restricted use of modality.

An example of this is the tendency for the CSR to overuse '*would*', as shown in Example 3 below. This provides further evidence to support Bautista's findings (2004a) on the use of *would* in place of *will* to refer to certain future, which she identifies as a stabilized pattern in PE, echoing findings from Svalberg's research on Brunei English (1998, cited in Bautista, 2004a).

When we queried CSRs on why they do this, the speakers say that they feel that '*would*' sounds more polite. This also supports Bautista's hypothesis for this pattern

representing an example of the kind of 'simplification' that has taken place in Asian Englishes, as second languages, for areas of complex semantics such as English modality, tense and aspect.

Example 3

CSR: it **would** contain all… it **would** containing all in that one form, sir.

Caller: Ok…um…just for my edification then can you tell me what I have paid so far? Or I can put in my tax returns?

CSR: Actually I can only access the…um…the interest paid and the um…taxes paid would that be ok?

Caller: ar…well…well…I got those two already, they gave me that on the, the automated message, what I'm looking for is points paid.

CSR: I see sir, well…um…I…I…I do apologize sir, but I cannot verify the   ar…amount for you, sir, but I **would** assure you that it **would** be indicated in the statement to you receive, sir.

What does appear to be the case though is that small 'errors' or differences in lexicogrammar, such as subject/verb agreement or the lack of past tense marking are rarely the cause of major breakdowns in communication. In our experience, pointing out the common differences in the grammar of PE and that of SAE can be very useful during training. From interviewing the trainees, we have found that although such patterns are habitualized and systematic in their own speech patterns, trainees are usually able, on reflection, to explain the use of tense, aspect and modality of SAE text and to produce these structures in practice sessions. This kind of meta-awareness can help in the negotiation of meaning over the phone across diverse speakers.

Again, there is huge potential in this context for future research into the lexicogrammar of PE in different social groups in the context of global exchanges, and this would benefit from case studies of language use and acquisition, and a corpus-driven approach that will reveal key tendencies across the industry.

Discourse and strategic competence

The novice CSR also needs to acquire communicative competence in terms of understanding: i. the predictive stages of the call flow, ii. how transitions are made across stages and moves in the text, and iii. how to organize information in a way that is easy for the customer to follow over the phone, without the benefits of face-to-face communication. Discourse capability is a hidden problem in the language use of the CSR, as evidenced in the absence of training in this area in the programs we reviewed. All CSRs go through 'product' training in order to understand the range of products

that callers may be concerned about. Once the training is finished, the CSRs are tested to ensure they have understood the product information. However, understanding the information is one thing – being able to explain it to others requires different skills. Whist one would expect 'novice' CSRs to experience difficulty explaining product details at the beginning, it was interesting to note that even very experienced CSRs were having difficulty explaining their products clearly and unambiguously.

The problem with following a linear 'problem – solution' discourse structure could be related to potential differences in the rhetorical structure of Filipino communication that is influencing features of Philippine English at both the macro-level and at the clause level – features that create local cohesion and coherence across a spoken text.

Thus, we suggest that there may be something in the discourse structure of Philippine English that is, at times, incompatible with conventional discourse patterns in SAE. This manifests in claims by customers and clients that the CSR sounds as if they are '*beating around the bush*' or '*long-winded*' in their explanations.

This area requires further research to avoid stereotypes that are often used in relation to Asian culture/language relating to the inherent 'circularity' of discourse, in contrast to a 'Western' linear organization of ideas. As argued by Kubota and Lehner (2004), a critical position needs to be adopted concerning the relationship between discourse structures and cultural factors. Recent research, for example Brew and Cairns (2004), shows that the context of an interaction will greatly affect the choices made within a text. In the case of a call centre interaction, the globalized context, i.e. a customer service interaction with an American customer concerning a product or service from an American organisation, may override the inherent cultural norms of the Filipino context. An investigation of a corpus of call centre discourse can reveal such diversity in discourse level patterns and display how different expectations can cause confusion and frustration, as evidenced in the call sample below.

Example 4

CSR: Actually we don't have it in our system, the one you provided me, um when was the charges declared to you? When were the charges made?

Caller: What?

CSR: When was the charges were made?

Caller: I'm not calling about when was the charges were made, I want a different credit card bill, in the future, do you understand?

CSR: Yes I do understand, that's difficult however, we already have it in our system the one you just provided to me.

Caller: OK, GET IT OUT! God....what do you have to do is to get it out?

CSR: it's already....it's already err ....removed in our system, Mr B...

Caller:	ok…
CSR:	So I think don't worry about this one. Would you mind give me again your telephone number please, so that I can double-check that one, Mr B?
Caller:	1111 1111
CSR:	I apologize but could you repeat that for me, please.
Caller:	1111 1111
CSR:	Thank you. Actually it's already removed from our system for you Mr B, let me um…double check for you.

[on hold, 10 secs]

CSR:	When was the charges was made Mr B? Because actually in our system you're already, we're already don't have an account that is provided for your Visa Card the one that you've just mentioned to me.
Caller:	Sir, I don't understand what you're asking me, I mean I'm just trying to change the credit card number, that's all I'm trying to do.
CSR:	Actually, sir your credit card has already been updated to the one you provided to me, would you like to change your Visa card? Because your Visa card has already been updated with that, Mr B…
Caller:	With what?
CSR:	With the one that you've told me earlier the last 4 digits, the first credit card that you provided to me, are you going to change…change to another card, sir?
Caller:	oh……ok…you're making this difficult, I ask you to cancel the credit card that 111111 111 and put my new credit card on 2222 2222….
CSR:	I see…ok, yes, I would be happy to do that for you, I'm going to update and change the new credit card, may I have the new credit card number again, I'm sorry I didn't get it err…at first. I'm sorry…
Caller:	Sir, can I talk to somebody else? This is not working…ok…this is ….this is not working and it's taking too much of my time [...]

As shown in Example 4 the interaction between the CSR and caller appears to be problematic, due to a lack of call control, and direct responses and questions. It is difficult at this stage to say that such features are habitual in PE call centre interactions and further research is needed in this area.

Interactive and sociolinguistic competence

The interactive capability of the Filipino CSR appeared to be highly problematic at times, especially in situations where the customer was getting angry. This appears to be both cultural and linguistic in nature. Whilst Filipinos are very service-oriented and out to please the customer, equally they have difficulty in being able to diffuse anger, irritation and frustration on the phone. The flip side of a service orientation can also be a reluctance to deal with confrontation. This often resulted in the CSR retreating

into silence or resorting to formulaic responses to arrest the anger (see Forey and Hood, 2006).

Hood and Forey (2006) in their analysis of interpersonal meanings of a call have been able to illustrate the prosodic patterns, i.e. peaks of frustration and intensity, and smooth, calm exchanges from both the CSR and caller. Appraisal analysis (Martin and White, 2005) was used to map interpersonal meaning in a sample of call service interaction texts. In their study, they found that, typically, the caller was not using language which explicitly expressed frustration and intensity, e.g. '*very crappy service*'; rather, the caller tended to use far more implicit language to express their frustration, e.g. '*this is the twelfth person I've spoken to*', '*they promised to get back to me in 24 hours*'. In many cases, the caller would use dates, numbers, and other forms of what are called 'graduation' within Appraisal System (Martin and White, 2005) to imply that they were angry and unhappy.

Another observation made of the Filipino CSR has been the lack of strategic problem solving applied to problems raised by the customer. This obviously will relate to the amount of experience the CSR has, but may also relate to the cultural issue of hierarchy and decision-making skills. Many CSRs do not feel it is their role to anticipate problems and to come up with creative solutions. This is a much-valued trait in Western cultures, but it requires confidence, a sense of authority and expertise, and very good language skills.

Conclusions

From an applied linguistics perspective, the Philippine BPO context is a site that provides a unique opportunity to investigate the nature of English language communication, as it is exchanged in a globalized context across diverse speakers. However, as outlined in our earlier discussions, the study of authentic language in the workplace creates a number of theoretical, ideological and pedagogical challenges for the applied linguist.

From a theoretical and descriptive perspective, the industry offers complex sites for the investigation of World Englishes as they come into contact and transform in the global workplace. As we have noted, ideological issues concerning language use become foregrounded in this industry. So as well as building on the descriptions already made of Philippine English, the research provides insights into how businesses and their customers perceive and respond to this 'outer-circle variety'. A key task for the applied linguist is in educating such businesses in prioritising 'comprehensibility' and resourcefulness in the speech of the offshore CSR, rather than

reinforcing their expectations of creating an 'on-shore' linguistic identity for their agents.

Pedagogically, the apprenticeship of the novice CSR creates challenges for curriculum design, methodology and language assessment. Training needs to be provided for new recruits that factors in the development of specific competencies for the CSR in the practice of customer service, while at the same time acknowledges the linguistic diversity of English in the global workplace. Important contributions to all these areas can also result from applied research studies.

With the kind of figures for projected growth that have been forecast for this industry, there is a real need for further collaboration, research and discussion between stakeholders, language practitioners, educationalists and linguists to provide the basis for informed solutions that provide the space for innovation and the development of local potential. Future research into how English is adapting to these new functional requirements of the Philippine call centre may in fact be the study of a new variety of Philippine English. The characteristics of such a variety, as it develops over time, will reflect the tensions and pressures and opportunities that we have described.

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