



“*I’d love to put someone in jail for this*”: An initial investigation of English in the business processing outsourcing (BPO) industry

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Abstract

In the global workplace, there has been tremendous growth in business processing outsourcing (BPO). Many industries are establishing call centres, back offices and other offshore enterprises in developing countries in an attempt to reduce costs. This development has far-reaching implications for language in these offshore destinations. Despite complaints about the communication skills of non-native English speaking (NNES) agents in these outsourced destinations, the language of the calls has not been well-researched. This paper focuses on one area of the BPO industry, call centre communication. We limit the discussion to calls in the insurance industry, in one offshore destination, the Philippines. In this paper, we outline the development and problems faced in offshore outsource destinations. Based on an analysis of a sample of call centre interactions, we outline their generic structure, and we investigate some of the reasons for breakdowns in communication. We use some examples from the data and discuss the linguistic realisations to illustrate what is happening in such breakdowns. The findings from the analyses are important for the development of the industry, for the training of customer service representatives, and could help us understand why frustration is experienced by many.

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1. Background

The business processing outsourcing (BPO) industry is one of the fastest growing industries in Asia. Essentially, the BPO industry comprises a variety of back office functions, support services and call centres that are cheaper to run overseas, and provide better service quality than in the country of origin. Most of the call centres are the customer services sections of English-speaking banks, retail, insurance companies, travel agencies, IT support and outbound sales. Until recently this industry was domiciled in the US, the UK and Australia.

In recent years, outsourced BPO's have diversified their services beyond routine inbound customer services into a range of professional services such as architectural design, radiography reports, mortgage preparation, and medical and legal transcriptions. O'Neil (2003) projects that 5,000,000 financial service jobs will leave the USA for offshore destinations by 2008. The reason for this offshore development is the growth in globalisation driven by cost effectiveness and improved quality of service.

Cameron argues that globalisation will have 'far-reaching, transnational, economic, social and cultural changes, and has implications for patterns of language-use, linguistic variation and change' (Cameron, 2000a, p. 323). This global development in Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES – the industry name for this developing business) has given rise to what could be termed an innovative 'discourse'. Customer service encounters had, until recently, been the domain of shops, and limited telephonic enterprises such as credit card and directory enquiries. However, what do we know about the discourse when the customer or client speaks to a customer service representative (CSR)? The CSR and customer/client are faced with a new discourse about which little is known. In an outsourced context where the CSR is a non-native English speaker (NNES) the cultural as well as the linguistic demands of the interaction must be significant.

The major issue in outsourcing to NNES destinations is the demand for English speakers in developing countries where call centres are growing. What are the social, political, economic and language implications of this globalised outsourced movement? What kind of research can inform the development of language support programmes for call centre agents servicing native speakers of English in a language and culture that is not their own? It should be pointed out that BPO's function in all languages: for example in the North of China, Dalian, there are a number of BPO's established for the Japanese and Korean markets, and the CSRs tend to be Putonghua or other Chinese dialect speakers.

There are two types of call centres, inbound and outbound. Inbound call centres are those where the customer calls in for service or information. They are usually considered to be more demanding places to work as there is no way of predicting precisely the nature of the call, and often the agent is dealing with complex customer concerns. Inbound call centres account for most of the outsourced work in NNES destinations such as India and the Philippines. Outbound call centres on the other hand, are concerned mostly with tele-sales, surveys and selling. They tend to be of a more routine and predictable nature. This article investigates the language of inbound insurance based calls from USA to CSRs in the Philippines.

India, the Philippines, Malaysia and China are some of the areas where there has been an intense growth in the call centre industry. Whilst these Asian destinations selected for ITES set-ups have reasonable standards of English, they are NNES

destinations, i.e. English is a second, not a first language, for the employees. This is a fact that is not fully appreciated by Western businesses outsourcing their services. The present paper illustrates the need for a better understanding of language and communication in the industry.

The Philippines is the third ranked BPO destination. India is the leader of the industry, followed by Canada (Cu, 2006). Following these market leaders are China, Mexico, Central and Eastern Europe and a few others. The call centre industry in the Philippines is growing fast with the sector expected to generate 25,000 jobs in the next year (Kammerer, 2004). Senator Mar Roxas, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Trade Commerce and Economic affairs, said that by 2009, over 300,000 Filipinos will be employed in the call centre companies operating in the country (Ramos, 2004). Roxas has also pointed out that the biggest concern is the growing lack of qualified new graduates with adequate English proficiency skills who can fill the call centre job requirements. The declining and problematic levels of English communication skills are threatening the expansion of the industry in the Philippines. Currently, recruitment rates in Filipino call centres have slumped to 1% in 2005, with the lack of English language competence being cited as the main reason (Greenleaf & Ferrer, 2006). In a recent visit to one call centre in the Philippines, we were informed that the organisation received 400–500 applicants per week, and only 1–1.5% had a suitable standard of English. A further 3–4% of applicants were what has become known in the industry as ‘near-hires’, i.e. their English requires some development through training courses before they are ready to serve native speaker customers, but their proficiency levels are reasonable. Regardless of such difficulties, the outsourcing industry in the Philippines is projected to continue its growth. The turnover for the industry in 2004 was \$8.2 billion, in 2005, \$17.4 billion and it is estimated to reach \$42.2 billion by 2008 (Cu, 2006). So what specifically, are the English language needs of this industry; where does communication breakdown and how can such research inform language assessment and training for this industry?

One of the reasons for experiencing difficulty in recruiting CSRs with good communication skills is that, typically, HR (human resource) personnel do not know how to properly identify proficient speakers of English who are either ready or almost ready (near-hires) for the call centre. There are many anecdotes of HR personnel being flown in from the USA with the mistaken belief that the qualification of being a native speaker of English can ensure the ability to identify suitable CSR candidates at the recruitment stage. When interviewed, a US native English speaking (NES) recruiter said that she selected candidates based on whether the CSRs ‘sounded’ American and whether she liked the candidate’s response to the questions asked in the interview. Clearly this is not an acceptable, accurate or adequate measurement. In addition, English language training packages have been designed and delivered with no research into the nature of the call centre transaction and where communication typically breaks down. This lack of research and information means that, often, the English training packages are little more than ‘accent neutralisation’ and the teaching of discrete grammar points.

Such observations echo the concern of earlier studies, which have reported on a great disparity between pedagogic practices and real world events of the workplace (Berry, 1995; Bilbow, 1997; Charles & Charles, 1999; Forey & Nunan, 2002; Forey, 2004; among others). A great deal of research in applied linguistics has focused on written rather than spoken communication. A number of studies have investigated spoken communication in the workplace (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1997; Bilbow, 1997, 1998; Charles, 1996;

Coulthard & Sarangi, 2000; Crosling & Ward, 2002; Eggins & Slade, 1997; Peres de Souza, 1994; Scheres, 2003). These studies are extremely revealing and generally linked to specific genres such as casual conversation in the workplace (Eggins & Slade, 1997), or meetings and negotiations and/or specific professions such as healthcare workers (Coulthard & Sarangi, 2000). Like these studies, we suggest that the English language training provided in BPOs does not match the demands of the job and is inadequate in the linguistic preparation of agents for the work required. Although studies related to workplace English have increased in recent years, as Swales (2000) points out, the existing body of knowledge related to workplace discourse is still rather limited compared to many other well-researched applied linguistic areas of study.

Much of the research into call centres is in the discipline of business and management, and little is known about the language needs of call centres in terms of English competency. Although communication is seen as the heart of call centre operations, and as a crucial element for success, research to date has tended to focus on labour relations, unionisation, control, systems information, quality measures and emotional labour (Taylor, Hyman, Mulvey, & Bain, 2002). Limited studies have specifically focused on call centre discourse (Adolphs, Brown, Carter, Crawford, & Sahota, 2004; Cameron, 2000a, 2000b). Cameron (2000a, 334) discusses the language of call centres and the use of ‘women’s language’ as a model for discourse. Adolphs et al. (2004) focus on a corpus linguistic analysis of British National Health Service Direct (NHS Direct) telephone interactions. Both studies took place in a native English-speaking country (the United Kingdom). An interesting book edited by Baker, Emmison, and Firth (2005) discusses, from a conversational analysis perspective, helpline interactions. These studies, whilst relevant to the present study, focus on native English speaking client to counsellor interaction. Limited information is available concerning non-native English speakers working in English speaking offshore call centres.

As the ITES service industry develops in Asia and other NNEs destinations, the quality of call centre professionals will greatly affect the organisation’s ability to communicate within the global economy and to offer a competitive service. Improvement in the quality of communication, and in particular, raising the standard of English within the business world through improved knowledge about the discourse and improved pedagogy, will be one of the main factors which will help to maintain and enhance Asia’s status as an international service centre.

The present paper discusses the findings of a linguistic analysis of authentic call centre transactions in 2004–5, in a large US based insurance claims call centre in the Philippines. We focus specifically on analysing the generic structure and areas in the discourse flow where there is a communication breakdown. We also discuss a number of lexico-grammatical features found in call centre discourse. The paper starts by investigating the problems associated with call centre discourse in the Philippines. Then we move on to present the specific details of the study and the methodology adopted. In the present study, we follow a systemic functional linguistic (SFL) theory of language (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), and this theory of language is presented in the methodology section below. We present some of the more salient linguistic features emerging from the analysis of the transcribed interactions. We discuss how an understanding of the generic structure and key linguistic features inform the breakdown in communication. The implications of the findings are discussed in relation to how they can inform pedagogy and training in the call centre industry.

2. The problem

For those involved as front-line workers in call centres, research in this area is extremely beneficial in terms of informing who to recruit, how to train and what to assess in the communication. As pointed out by Cameron (2000a, 324) the ‘talk’ of call operators and the language of the call centre is part of the ‘corporate branding’ and are all part of the service offered. The ‘talk’ is key to offering a successful service. The discourse of the CSR is increasingly complex and demanding as the servicing assignments from the host companies become more sophisticated. Host companies are keen to assign higher order servicing to save more money. Outsourcing ‘knowledge’ processing e.g. the reading of X-rays and compiling radiography reports, financial analysis, palliative care, and others are services standing in line.

There is a consensus in the area of business and management research about the stressful nature and high pressure felt by those at the front line (Irish, 2000; Knights & McCabe, 2003; O’Neil, 2003). Taylor and Bain point out that

The pressure is intense because she [the call operator] knows her work is being measured, her speech monitored, and it often leaves her mentally, physically and emotionally exhausted... That the labour process is inherently demanding and frequently stressful is incontestable.
(Taylor & Bain, 1999, 115)

Taylor and Bain (1999), and others believe that it is precisely this level of stress, compounded by excessive levels of surveillance, the repetitive nature of the job and the lack of promotion or job advancement which leads to a high level of attrition within the industry (Cameron, 2000; Hutchinson et al., 2000; Knights and McCabe, 2003; O’Neil, 2003). The stress is also augmented because of an increase in customer expectations (Knights & McCabe, 2003). Some call centres use scripted or semi-scripted texts in order to alleviate some of the stress experienced by the CSR to maintain control and quality levels. However, Knights and McCabe (2003) suggest that when operators are ‘spoon-fed’ with such scripts, this causes problems as it is difficult for the operators to think for themselves. In the present study, we suggest that the industry has identified and accepted that scripted calls have their limitations, and due to the increasing demands on the CSR, there is a need for flexible discourse in many call centre interactions. The nature and the demands of call centres are such that a flexible approach in dealing with interactions is needed. In addition, we argue that the stress experienced by NNES CSR is also due to the distinct lack of appropriate training material, which should focus on the text at a discourse level to provide well-focused language support.

These issues of stress, surveillance and scripted texts in a call centre environment are not investigated in this study, but form a ‘back drop’ to the nature of the call centre transaction.

In the present study, we have found that whilst the USA generated comprehensive training programmes for call centre work, this training material was generally limited to product knowledge, behavioural expectations and systems processes. This is not surprising, given the native speaker training audience in the USA. For the first time however, US companies need to think about a ‘communications’ focus for destinations such as India and the Philippines. The first generation language training used in many of these non-native English speaker call centres has tended to focus on accent

neutralisation, grammatical accuracy and the teaching of idiomatic expressions. Often companies provide agents with discrete grammatical item drills as a way of increasing their English communication skills. US companies in the main, however, have neglected to offer training related to intercultural or discourse issues. Language and communication materials for call centre agents have been under-researched and poorly put together. Non-language training specialists, training the CSR on product knowledge, have unwittingly found themselves in the role of ESL teacher in these new globalised destinations and do not have the knowledge or skills to make the communications training effective.

For example, one company in the Philippines was seen to be teaching the Filipino participants not to use the word *sorry* on the phone. When asked why this was taught, the American product trainer explained that it was perceived to be too ‘informal’ and might communicate insincerity. NNES CSRs were therefore encouraged to say *I do apologize* in all contexts. The obvious problem with this approach is that it discourages the CSR from making appropriate contextual choices. One unpredictable outcome of this directive was when a CSR was heard to respond to a bereaved caller by saying *I do apologize for the death of your husband*. The issue of language choice and modality was completely misunderstood by the participants in this training program and eventually complaints filtered through from the clients in America that the call centre CSRs were not apologising and empathising with customers effectively. As established by work within SFL on the Appraisal System (see for example, [Martin & Rose, 2003](#); [Martin & White, 2005](#)) features such as modality are of paramount concern in the construal of interpersonal meaning.

In addition, a greater understanding of the culture and mother tongue of the CSR will aid the development of training material. Within the field of contrastive rhetoric there has been a tremendous amount of work on the effect the mother tongue has on the learning and use of a second language (see [Connor, 1996](#); [Panetta, 2000](#)). However, within the ITES industry and applied linguistics, little, if any attention, has been given to the diversity of the Filipino language. Many organisations setting up call centres in the Philippines fail to acknowledge the complexity of the different Filipino languages and dialects. There are some eighty major Filipino languages and another two hundred dialects ([Smolicz & Nical, 1997](#)). Tagalog is often seen as the mother tongue of all Filipino CSRs, and this is clearly untrue. Some US hosting companies were reported to have believed that English was the mother tongue in the Philippines.

In the data analysed in this study, the problems and issues emerging are that the main problem for CSRs is not grammar or English pronunciation. This does not mean that they never make pronunciation or grammatical errors, as such errors do exist and we outline some examples below. However, the main difficulties seem to appear elsewhere, i.e. in understanding the complete text, the interaction and cultural issues. The value of the present study lies in providing better information about exactly what the language and communication needs are in outsourced NNES destinations and to inform recruitment and quality assurance (QA) processes and training provisions. In 2004–5, we listened to over 500 call centre interactions and selected a cross sample of approximately 13 authentic transactions based in a US call centre operating in Manila. The 13 calls we draw on in this paper were carefully selected as they represented the range of calls received in this particular call centre. A study of the discourse structure, the generic stages, and language features was then undertaken.

3. The study

In a typical in-bound call centre there are teams of CSRs who assist customers with a range of service enquiries. For example, in the particular context where this research was based, and specifically focusing on one particular case, an insurance company, the calls ranged from very routine, e.g. requests for a change of address form, to highly complex enquiries, e.g. a call about detailed policy knowledge. The callers ranged from middle-aged to old and infirmed, often bereaved, upset, and/or irate, American native English speakers from all over the USA and non-native English speakers residing in the USA. Before the CSRs are allowed to deal with phone calls, they are required to go through intensive product and system training, which typically lasts about one month. Currently, these agents do not undergo systematic language and communications training as part of their program as they are perceived to be 'proficient' in English language communication skills.

These newly recruited agents are not only dealing with new product and systems knowledge, but also with the novelty and the demands of communicating with Americans on the phone. It is not surprising therefore that customer feedback from the USA regularly reports communication breakdown, especially in the early weeks of the CSR working on the phones. After analysing a number of authentic calls, it appeared that the communication breakdown was not generally related to discrete grammatical features, or to the accent of the agent. The problem seemed to appear more at the discourse and/or intercultural awareness level. With this in mind, the present study posed two research questions:

1. What is the generic structure of inbound call centre transactions?
2. Is it possible to identify where specific language and communication problems occur during the interaction?

In addition, we were interested in analysing lexico-grammatical features which appear to emerge as relevant features of this new discourse type. It is only possible to briefly discuss some of the lexico-grammatical features identified within the space allowed. A more detailed analysis of specific lexico-grammatical features will be the focus of another paper.

4. The methodology

As the quality assurance process in the call centre dictates all calls must be recorded and archived for six months, it was not hard to collect authentic data. The calls are recorded on software called Nice Logger. Permission was sought from customers prior to the recording and transcriptions preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of the individuals and organisations involved. The sample from the data included 13 transcribed calls (9888 words) which were a cross section of routine and complex calls. In the 13 transcriptions, the average number of turns was 58.6 (a turn refers to the speaker completing a turn, e.g. the caller asking a question and pausing to wait for a response would be one turn). The lowest number of turns was 15 and the highest 153. This data set is part of a larger corpus of call centre interactions transcribed for a more comprehensive study of call centre interactions in Asia (see our website for details: http://www.engl.polyu.edu.hk/call_centre/default.html).

Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) was the theory of language adopted, as SFL views language as complete texts construed within a specific context (see Halliday & Matthiessen,

2004 for a detailed description of SFL). The present study analyses language from a ‘bottom up’ approach, where lexico-grammatical choices within the clause are used to interpret the discourse, semantic and contextual meanings of the genre. Following an SFL approach, the present study applies the notion of genre as a *staged goal-oriented process* (Martin, 1997; Martin & Rose, 2003). In analysing the generic structure, the lexico-grammatical features can be used to identify and recognise the boundaries of stages in a text. The generic structure of each transcribed call was then analysed for emerging patterns in the lexico-grammar. When a breakdown in communication was identified, we focussed on the lexico-grammatical features realised in this section of the text.

5. Results

5.1. Analysing a breakdown in communication

After an initial analysis, we were able to assert that many calls were unproblematic. However, even in our small cross-sample of 13 calls, five (38.5%) were identified as having communication problems.

Difficulties included the CSRs’ inability to deal with customers who were complaining and frustrated; customers who were vague and rambling; customers who were aggressive and demanding; and customers who had complex problems and were confused. In such situations, agent responses ranged from long silences to formulaic and unhelpful responses, to rudeness, to confused and contradictory responses. In summary, problematic calls resulted in the agent ‘losing control of the call’ and the average handling time (AHT) soaring to unacceptable levels for the providers of this service. The problems identified are listed in Table 1.

Let us now consider communication areas that appear to cause problems for the agent and the customer. We analysed the texts and the choices made which appeared to cause concern at three specific levels – phonological, clause level (focusing on interpersonal lexico-grammar) and discourse level.

1. *Phonological and lexical choices*: (An ability to use phonological and lexico-grammatical choices of the target language effectively), i.e. an ability to construct meaning using appropriate lexico-grammatical and phonological choices that are easily understood by

Table 1
Problems identified in call centre discourse

Caller	Agent
Complaint	Silence
Frustration	Vagueness
Vagueness	Jargonistic
Clarification	Personalization
3rd Party	No feedback
Demand	No apology
Personalization	Technical language
Intensification: threat, sarcasm, foul language	Formulaic response
Reiteration	Phonological clarity
Silence	

the customer. These features include recognisable intonation and word stress can carry appropriate meaning in accents that are globally comprehensible. In addition, the lexico-grammatical choices used should be at a comprehensible level for the listener, where technical language and company jargon are avoided.

2. *Clause – interpersonal choices*: This is directly related to the choice of language which develops and constructs appropriate interpersonal relationships (Martin & Rose, 2003; Martin & White, 2005). The aim of such choices is to enhance the intended meaning of the text, i.e. an ability to interact well, and build relationships with customers, as well as to gauge how the caller is feeling and how best to service the caller. In addition, the agent needs to ensure that they maintain control of the call by positively asserting and steering the direction of a call. For example, the agent should recognise if the caller rambles or becomes angry and should be equipped with the linguistic choices to repair the situation. This also involves an ability to understand the context and intercultural nuances of the language, as well as an ability to make and understand culturally specific language choices, such as recognising the difference between *hold on!* (an interpersonal metaphor displaying anger or dissatisfaction) and *if you just give me a minute there, I'll be able to pull up all your details... would you mind holding on while I do this?* (a request to wait a moment).
3. *Discourse choices*: The choices at this point are related to the overall construction of a text, i.e. the agent should be able to construct a text in a way that is understandable to US customers. In addition, the CSR needs to be able to listen, understand and link the main purpose of the call with other stages construed in the call. The CSR needs to paraphrase and reconstruct what has been said in order to achieve a clearer message. The discourse structure of a text is a common problem facing Asian speakers of English as they tend to construct texts in a non-linear organization¹ (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). This results in native speakers feeling as if the CSR is either incompetent or 'beating around the bush'.

Naturally many of the linguistic features and choices discussed above overlap, and such features occur simultaneously. We are simply discussing these features independently as this permits a closer analysis of the way language constructs meaning.

5.2. *Generic structure*

In the process of listening to a large number of call centre transactions, patterns started to emerge in relation to how the texts were organised. Some of the generic stages appeared to be obligatory, whilst others appeared to be optional. The obligatory stages are essential stages necessary to construct this particular text type; while optional stages are not seen as essential features of the genre (see Halliday & Hasan, 1976, for a detailed discussion of obligatory & optional elements). The specific linguistic features evident in the calls transcribed related to each of the stages as shown in Table 2.

¹ However, the discussion of circular versus linear discourse structure has been criticised as being 'reductionist, deterministic, prescriptive, and essentialist orientation' (Kubota & Lehner, 2004, 10). We do not necessarily agree with this oversimplistic divide and believe that discourse, and in this case call centre interaction needs to be investigated further from a critical contrastive rhetorical perspective (see Kubota & Lehner, 2004; Pennycook, 2001).

Table 2
Generic stages of call centre discourse

Generic stages	Function of stage	Example
Opening (obligatory)	Greetings used with appropriate phonological features; offering assistance.	CSR: <i>Customer Services, how may I help you?</i>
Purpose (optional)	To identify the purpose of the customer's call	C: <i>I was calling to see whether or not this policy was still...wasn't cancelled.</i>
Gathering information (obligatory)	Collating information; checking information is correct; asking for clarification; probing for further information; explaining reasons for gathering information; expressing problems with information provided	CSR: <i>OK what's the policy number Maam?</i> C: <i>MT 0013860</i> CSR: <i>And how can I help you with this policy Maam?</i>
Establishing the purpose (obligatory)	Clarifying points; probing for further information; empathizing, apologizing	C2: <i>Is this policy still not cancelled yet, 'cos I'm late in sending out the payment.</i>
Servicing the customer (obligatory)	Providing clear explanations and descriptions; apologizing; empathizing; asking for further information; giving good and bad news; agreeing and disagreeing	CSR2: <i>Yes, you're late sending out payment but you're still under the grace period, so you can still send in your check as long as we receive payment by 18th, policy's OK.</i>
Summarizing (optional)	Summarizing, restating key points	C2: <i>OK, I'll send it out today.</i> CSR*: <i>If you could send it out today that would be fine.</i>
Closing (obligatory)	Closing	C: <i>Thank you.</i> CSR*: <i>Not a problem, glad to be of assistance. Thank you and have a good day.</i>

(C is the customer and CSR refers to the customer service representative – this is an authentic text except those utterances marked with an *).

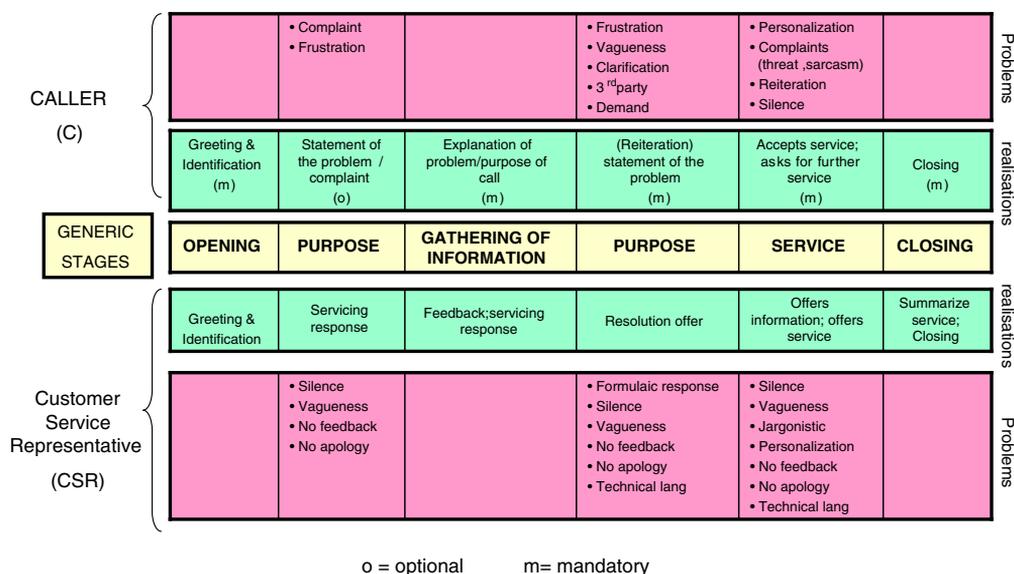


Fig. 1. Generic structure: call centre transaction.

In addition to the generic stages identified, the findings suggest that certain features, such as a breakdown in communication, occurred during particular stages. Fig. 1 shows generic stages of the call centre discourse, features related to each specific stage, and how the problems tended to occur during the *purpose* and *service* stages.

Fig. 1 illustrates that the generic structure of this initial data set is: opening^ purpose^ gathering information^ purpose^ service^ closing (^ denotes followed by). The linguistic realisations of the caller and agent are described in the column next to the centre, and the outlying column represents the problems identified. As suggested earlier, the findings show that the majority of the communication problems occur in the stages of *purpose* and *service* i.e. the points where the agent has to exercise good listening skills to understand the purpose of the call; where the agent needs to provide clear logical servicing information; and where the agent needs to interact and build relationships with the customer. These are considered individually in the discussion below.

6. Discussion: analysing what goes wrong

In the call centre communication under study, the exchanges are both transactional (i.e. information is provided) and to a lesser extent interactional (i.e. where customer relationship is established). The research demonstrated significant problems in both the transactional and interactional skills of NNES CSRs. The caller interactions which appear to cause difficulties for the agents are the complaint itself, frustration, reiteration, vagueness, silence, demands, and requests for a third party's interaction (see Fig. 1). From an initial analysis it appears that some of the specific problems which need to be investigated further are the CSRs' responses, such as no feedback, no apology, silence, overuse of technical language and formulaic responses, personalisation, vagueness and others may also emerge after a more detailed analysis.

6.1. Phonological and lexico-grammatical choices and the NNES agent

In the data, there appeared to be some misunderstandings of phonological features, complex grammatical features, vocabulary and idiomatic expressions.

Phonological: These included inappropriate intonation patterns; syllable stress; consonant sounds; inability to hear phonological patterns that carry meaning. These can result in non-native English speakers not picking up on attitudes conveyed by native speakers through the deliberate use of phonological patterns e.g. flat intonation, deliberate slowing down, non-contraction of verbs and putting equal stress on all the vowels e.g. *I will say this one more time* (customer) carries a meaning well-known to the NS that the customer is unhappy and impatient. However, the interpersonal metaphor construed in this clause is not understood by the agent, and is taken by the agent to literally mean the caller will repeat themselves.

There were a number of examples in the 13 transcripts where the NNES agent pronunciation caused confusion. Example 1 shows the syllable stress caused problems for the agent.

Example 1. [Transcript 3]

Agent: *Is this for Richard*

Customer: *It's Richard... yes that's right*

The vowel sound of the agent's pronunciation of reinstatement caused difficulty for another customer.

Example 2. [Transcript 11]

Agent: *I'm going to put this through to our reinstatement department*

Customer: *Which depart...which department?*

Agent: *Reinstatement. And they'll be the one to check the record if they could put the policy back in force again.*

Customer: *So it's going to which department now?*

Agent: *Reinstatement department*

Customer: *Statement department?*

Agent: *Reinstatement department*

Customer: *Statement?*

(Agent then spells what he is saying.)

However, phonological problems were not the main difficulty identified. Many of the agents spoke using a standard North American pronunciation.

Lexico-grammatical choices: If the NNES does not have a good understanding of the genre and the register choices associated with the genre, then this restricts the range of appropriate responses they may offer. This may directly affect the ability of the NNES CSR to construe a positive interpersonal relationship with the customer. The NNES is limited to the language training they have been exposed to, which has a tendency to focus on discrete features and not the text within a specific context. For example, NNES agents may have learned the form of English grammar tenses and modal verbs (*ought to*, etc.) at school, but some may fail to manipulate them to build effective relationships with clients. As shown in [Examples 3 and 4](#), the agent has a tendency to overuse the modal finite *would*, and in [Example 5](#) the CSR uses *will* incorrectly.

Example 3. [Transcript 11] (Overuse of would)

Agent: *Mrs. Jones.OK. **I would need** to ask you to stop shouting because I am trying to...*

Example 4. [Transcript 13]

Agent: *If you **double check** your bank record, **it would show** there...*

Example 5. [Transcript 8]

Agent: *If you **will ever want** to draw on this amount in the future, you will need to fill out a form*

These modal finite operators were seen to be key factors in call centre discourse ([Adolphs et al., 2004](#)). The lexico-grammatical choice of modal finite greatly affects the interpersonal relationship developed in a text.

6.2. Interpersonal choices and the NNES agent

Interpersonal choices in the call centre transaction are important features; as well as being diverse and complex. The demands on the agent to understand and be able to construe interpersonal language are crucial for the success of a text. The demands of interpersonal language rely on more than just a proficient understanding of English grammar and vocabulary. A successful text relies on the agent being aware of the context of each call; the agent must appreciate:

- the **field** of the call – **what** is the purpose of this call, and **what** is it that I need to explain to solve the problem?
- the **tenor** – **who** is this person on the end of the phone
- the **mode** – **how** should this call be structured to best service the organisation and the caller? (for a detailed discussion of field, mode and tenor see [Martin, 1997](#); [Martin, 2001](#); [Painter, 2001](#)).

Thus the connotative relationship of the linguistic choices which are influenced by choices in the field, mode and tenor of the text jointly construct the text.

The development of the tenor in the text therefore refers to the ability of the agent to listen for the variations in register choices by the customer, and to mirror, manoeuvre, or deal with this appropriately in the responses the agent construes. The tenor therefore is highly dependent on the agent's linguistic resources, and the choices they make in the lexico-grammar to build customer relationships. The interpersonal language choices ultimately influence the agent's ability to effectively construe a positive interpersonal relationship with the customer.

Language competence therefore relies on much more than knowing about grammar and pronunciation. The NNES needs to know how to construe language in the context of the call which is influenced by the caller's and agent's culture. In this case the caller and agent come from very different cultural backgrounds. In the transcripts analysed, there were a range of interpersonal problems. [Example 6](#) represents one of the key problems identified.

Example 6. [Transcript 9]

Customer: (very frustrated and towards the end of the call) *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 Andrea Carlton and I've said to her...this is absolutely – you're going to be the 12th person that I have talked to, two from Milwaukee, 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 but I appreciate this will be done within a week because I've been waiting since November 12th and nobody is doing their homework.*

Agent: *Yes Maam.*

[*Silence*]

There were no acknowledgements or empathetic statements throughout this call.

The long silences that often occur in NNES agent call centre interaction are partly caused by an inability to choose the right interactional response, as shown in [Example 7](#).

Example 7. [Transcript 11]

Agent: *Let me just check that one Maam. One moment please. I'm seeing Tim Bond, the servicing agent.*

Customer: *Then I need his telephone number – I will call him myself.*

[Silence]

Customer: *Oh I'd love to put someone in jail for this.*

Rather than respond to the call and deal with the customer's frustration, the CSR remains silent. This silence was a major point where frustration built up in the texts. The caller is faced with no other cues except the lack of response from the CSR, and at the point where silence is realised, the customer becomes more frustrated. In face-to-face interaction the customer would be able to see the action of the agent and would appreciate that they perhaps physically doing something and are trying to help. However, this work is not visible through the telephone and the customer's problems need to verbally acknowledged and responded to by the CSR. Often the CSR could overcome some of the frustration by simply responding or feeding back to the customer by saying something like *I'm checking the files now* [pause] *I'm still checking*. Or in the case of **Example 7**, the agent could have offered an honest reply such as *I'm sorry but I do not have access to Tim Bond's number*. However these choices are not made, and silence is a common response in this situation.

6.3. Intercultural choices and the NNES agent

Although many NNES agents in the Philippines seem acculturated to American ways, this judgement can be misleading. Filipino culture, like many Asian cultures, is based on non-confrontation, submission and a desire to please, (see Hofstede, 1980; Moris & Schindehutte, 2005; Lustig & Koester, 2006). Whilst this means that the service attitude is often excellent in a routine and non-confrontational situation, an ability to take control and deal with an aggressive caller in a complex situation is lacking. In a confrontational situation, the NNES agents either respond with silence or they fall back on formulaic responses that they hope will stem the hostility. Thus, they demonstrate that although they understand American ways they often revert to what could be interpreted as another example of culture-bound behaviour. Sometimes, neither of these strategies work, as shown in **Example 8**, where the agent does not acknowledge the frustration and anger of the caller.

Example 8. [Transcript 11]

Customer: (after several minutes of expressing upset due to a check for a large amount of money having been sent to the wrong address and cashed in by an unknown person) *OK I already told you I live at 452 Meadow Lane... I n-e-v-e-r received a check* (said deliberately to make the point again to the agent for the 3rd time)

Agent: *Ok, well the most I can do is to have this one sent over for further research because we are seeing here the cancelled check with a signature on it.*

Customer: *OK, give me a copy of that check back so I (emphatic) can send it through to a lawyer or somebody because somebody cashed it in and I never got it* (said with worried and rising pitch)

Agent: *OK. May I have your daytime phone number Maam?*

Customer: *Area code 371 654 7987*

Agent: *OK I'll have this sent over to the proper department for research. Is there anything else I can help you with today?*

The CSR here appears to be ‘protecting’ herself from the anger of the customer by hiding behind routine and formulaic responses and not addressing the frustration of the customer.

6.4. Discourse choices and the NNES CSR

An understanding of how spoken texts are organized, i.e., understanding the flow and the predictability of certain routine texts, is essential for the CSR. In the transcripts analysed, there are constant linguistic cues heralding what is to come, e.g. transitional phrases used by the customer e.g. *well let me tell you something else...*

Discourse choices relate to the ability the CSR has to organize explanations and descriptions in a clear and linear fashion. It also relates to ‘thinking ahead’ and predictive listening in the call centre transaction. Often the NNES agent gives circular explanations which may mean they are translating from a Filipino language such as Tagalog (Andres, 1997).

Example 9. [Transcript 6]

Customer: *How does an XYZ policy work?*

Agent: *This XYZ policy just really depends on how much...even if you've been a member for some time...it depends on how much you're sending in. It depends if you've been making payments. If you've missed out on payments ... uh...a portion of that will be deducted from your cash value...do you know exactly how much you cash value is Maam?*

Customer: *Sorry, can you go through that again...how does it work? I mean why would my husband buy this policy...*

Silence

In Example 9, the customer is expecting a linear, procedural response walking them through the steps of the policy. The response given, however, is vague. The customer is still left with no clear understanding of the manner in which the policy functions. The question posed by the customer *how does this policy work?* could in fact mean *why would my husband choose this policy?* as stated in the customer rewording of the question in her second utterance.

Increasingly, outsourced call centres in NNES destinations, such as the one in which this research was based, are experiencing training and quality frustrations that they do not fully understand.

Whilst there may well be product and systems knowledge gaps in the call centre transaction, as well as lapses in attitude and behaviour, middle and senior managers report that training and QA processes that work in the US with native English do not appear to work so effectively with the NNES agency workforce in the Philippines. However, due to limitations of space, quality assessment and their application in the ITES industry will have to be discussed in subsequent papers.

7. Conclusion

The initial analysis undertaken on this set of Filipino and American call centre transactions reveals a definite generic structure and, in general, a number of predictable linguistic features. The results of the analyses provide an opportunity to capture the generic features of this innovative and evolving genre, and an insight of communication breakdown between the agent and the customer. It appears that communication failure has less to do with the traditional notions of poor language skills, i.e. poor grammatical knowledge and poor pronunciation, and more to do with poor interactional discourse skills and cultural appreciation.

The call centre transaction is very demanding in terms of customer relationship building and servicing, which occur most of all in the stages of *purpose* and *service*. The present study supports the work of Gimenez, who stated that e-mails and other overtly interpersonal texts are becoming more dependent on “flexibility, informality and efficiency” and that the tradition of teaching formulaic writing to students needs to change (Gimenez, 2000, p. 249). Gimenez’s arguments are also applicable to call centre discourse, where the pedagogy needs to reflect the flexibility, demands and interpersonal nature of the genre. The notion that call centre discourse is scripted and predictable is outdated. The agents we observed needed to be flexible in their transactions and to have choices at their fingertips.

These findings raise the question of the further research required across different industry types and across other outsourced NNEs destinations to compare the spoken textual and linguistic qualities. The present study has been limited to one outsourced destination, the Philippines, and to only inbound calls in the insurance industry. Other industry groups are also outsourcing their services and these include consumer and retail groups; technical support for computers and a range of technical/electronic equipment; banks and credit card facilities and travel, hospitality services and many more. Higher end services, such as legal, medical and financial, are following on the success of these earlier outsourced services. Outbound sales and survey groups also require investigation. The importance of this, and further studies, cannot be overstated, as there appear to be significant language and communication problems that are poorly understood by the English-speaking BPO industry and their training departments. Other NNEs destinations to be investigated include India, Costa Rica, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and China.

In addition, further in-depth research needs to be undertaken into the range and nature of the interactional exchanges that take place in call centre transactions. For example, the interpersonal construal of meaning could be investigated in detail by applying Appraisal theory (Martin, 2001; Martin & Rose, 2003; Martin & White, 2005). A detailed analysis of intercultural and sociolinguistic features could be undertaken where the differences between the agent and the customer, and/or the differences between English-speaking customers from USA, Australia, UK and elsewhere, and/or the differences between call centres functioning from different destinations e.g. Canada, India, Philippines, Ireland, and elsewhere could be compared.

This research can contribute to the BPO industry in a number of very important ways. First, the research can form the basis of the design of language and communication training materials and programmes for NNEs call centre agents. Integrated into the product training programmes, NNEs agents can also receive comprehensive language and communication training on how to deal with the NS customer calling in from abroad. Second, this

can inform how language and communication assessment processes may be improved at the point of recruitment into a call centre. At present, ad hoc and highly subjective decisions are being made principally on attitude and accent. Thirdly, this research can inform call centres quality assurance processes. As currently, US companies are bemoaning the fact that the wholesale transfer of training programmes and QA processes does not seem to be working. Whilst QA scorecards have been effective within the NS group of agents in assessing performance on the phone, these same measures are incomplete when assessing for the language and communication of NNES agents.

This research strongly suggests there are fundamental language and communication problems faced by NNES agents in the recently outsourced call centre context. The outcomes of this, and further research, need to be systematically built into the recruitment, the training and the evaluation of NNES agents in outsourced NNES environments.

A caveat that we feel needs to be added to the discussion presented in this paper is that we are not evaluating the growth of globalization or the effects of globalization on what Ritzer (2004) calls McDonaldization. Globalization can be viewed from two positions. First, it can be viewed as a great evil in the world causing unemployment at home, exploitation of developing countries, inequality, poverty, environmental degradation and cultural imperialism. Or else it can be viewed as a key source of economic and human development in developing countries, cost-saving at home, high productivity and even democratization. We appreciate such dilemmas caused by globalisation, however our aim in presenting the discussion above is to assist those who seek to fight poverty and are at the front line as faceless information givers and service provider, faced with the daily stressful experience of dealing with customer/clients in this new era of communication.

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