
‘Thank you for calling’

Asian Englishes and ‘native-like’ performance in Asian call centres

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Introduction

The use of English as an international language in call centres in India and the Philippines has the potential to illuminate a range of issues relating to World Englishes as well as a number of other questions concerning bilingualism, second-language acquisition, and sociolinguistics. The background to this is that, since the early 2000s, large numbers of clerical, data management and other jobs have been exported from ‘native’ English-speaking societies, such as the UK and US, to societies such as India and the Philippines, where there are now sufficient numbers of proficient language users able to perform tasks previously reserved for American and British employees. For the last two decades, many linguists have made the claim that English was no longer the sole possession of Britain and America, that it was truly a world language. Now it seems that such a claim is being vindicated, even at the cost of tens of thousands of jobs in the US and UK, as these have been exported to India, the Philippines and elsewhere. In the early 2000s, this development not only caught the attention of the world’s press, but it also gave rise to a series of debates in both the developed world and in those developing countries, such as India and the Philippines, where ‘linguistic outsourcing’ was becoming a key strand in the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industries that were being established in such locations as Bangalore, Chennai, Mumbai (in India) and Manila (Philippines).

One influential book that appeared shortly after such news reports began to appear, and was widely cited in business and political circles, was Thomas L. Friedman’s *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (first published in 2005). Both the title and the content of his book were stimulated by a visit Friedman made to the Indian information technology companies Infosys and WiPro in Bangalore, India, in 2004, where he witnessed the work that these companies were doing in writing computer software for US and European businesses and running the back offices of multinational companies, all of which involved such disparate tasks as computer maintenance, high-tech research, answering customer calls from all over the world and dealing with a range of other BPO operations. After its publication, Friedman’s bestseller drew a hail

of criticism, with the *San Francisco Chronicle* dubbing Friedman the ‘High priest of free-trade fundamentalism’ (Sirota 2006), and *The Economist* taking Friedman to task for his ‘imprecision’ and ‘sloppiness’, and the ‘dreary failure’ of his book (*The Economist* 2005: 81).

The links between Friedman’s analysis and issues related to World Englishes are somewhat indirect, but overall it seems clear that the use of English as a global language is essential to many of the processes Friedman describes. In his account of the workings of an Indian call centre, he provides the following description:

There are currently about 245,000 Indians answering phones from all over the world or dialling out to solicit people for credit cards or cell phone bargains or overdue bills. These call center jobs are low-wage, low-prestige jobs in America, but when shifted to India they become high-wage, high-prestige jobs. The esprit de corps at 24/7 and other call centers I visited seemed quite high, and the young people were all eager to share some of the bizarre phone conversations they’ve had with Americans who dialed 1–800-HELP, thinking they would wind up talking to someone around the block, not around the world.

(Friedman 2006: 24)

Friedman goes on to report that the call centre he visited, aptly named 24/7, received about 700 applications a day, but accepted only some 6 per cent of applicants. One major feature of the training of new recruits is the ‘accent neutralization class’, and Friedman describes how the teacher ‘dressed in a traditional Indian sari’ conducted the class, and ‘moved seamlessly among British, American and Canadian accents’ (2006: 27).

The role of English as a world language in assisting globalization is highly contested, and a great deal has previously been written on this topic. It is perhaps important to note, however, that one crucial reason why the role of language in call centres has attracted attention is that in many respects the call-centre and BPO industry provides a testing ground for a range of theories and approaches to language and globalization, which in turn calls into question the relationships between such constructs as ‘World Englishes’, ‘globalization’ and ‘global English’. The operation of English language call centres in India and the Philippines provides important sites for the investigation of language and globalization, in a region where localized varieties of Asian Englishes (e.g. Indian English, Malaysian English, Singapore English and Philippines English) have become established and have gained recognition, particularly over the last four decades or so (Bolton 2006, 2008). In order to investigate the impact of international call centres on the sociolinguistics of Asian societies, detailed fieldwork was carried out by the author of this chapter in India and the Philippines between 2006 and 2008. The context for this was the participation of the author in a research programme initiated by Stockholm University on ‘High-level Proficiency in Second-language Use’, in which I was responsible for an individual project entitled ‘Linguistic Outsourcing and Native-like Performance in International Call Centres and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) operations’ (funded by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Fund, Riksbankens Jubiléumsfond, Dnr M2005–0459, whose generous support is gratefully acknowledged here). In the following discussion, I present a number of initial results drawn from this research (see also Bolton forthcoming).

Researching native-like performance in Philippine call centres

As stated earlier, the broad aim of the project on linguistic outsourcing was to describe the linguistic practices of selected international call centres and BPOs (Business Process Outsourcing), particularly in the Philippines and India, and to investigate the extent to which ‘native-like’ linguistic behaviour is regularly expected of, and achieved by, call-centre staff (or ‘agents’) in such locations. More specific research questions included the following: (i) What expectations do employers have of native-like performance from their staff? (ii) How is such performance defined (and judged) by employers? (iii) What is the profile of successful call-centre agents (in terms of language background, education, etc.)? (iv) What strategies do agents use to pass as native users of the language? and (v) What are the characteristics of successful versus unsuccessful communication in such contexts?

The methodology adopted for this study involved a broad-based sociolinguistic research methodology, including extensive interviews with call-centre managers and trainers and call-centre staff; attendance at call-centre industry events; as well as the collection of recorded call-centre conversations. After initial exploratory visits to both India and the Philippines, it was decided to concentrate the initial stage of research on call-centre operations in the Philippines. The main reasons for this were essentially practical and pragmatic. During my two visits to Bangalore, access to call centres in the city was found to be heavily restricted, and despite having colleagues in the city with industry contacts, it was difficult to gain access to call centres during my stays there in 2007 and 2008. This was not the case in Manila, Philippines, where I gained relatively easy access to a number of Manila call centres and call-centre agents, and, eventually, obtained a substantial corpus of actually occurring telephone conversation data.

The linguistic data collected were of two broad types. First, a series of semi-structured interviews were carried out with call-centre agents or ‘CSRs’ (customer service representatives), as they are most commonly referred to. These interviews surveyed call-centre employees on their personal backgrounds, as well as details of their training and work experience. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Second, a corpus of authentic telephone conversations – involving a total of 1,413 telephone conversations in all – was obtained from a major Philippine call centre. These telephone conversations have now been transcribed, and the next stage of research will involve further analysis of this data. A number of initial findings relating to this research are discussed in the following sections of this chapter.

Initial findings of research on the Philippine call-centre industry

In a society where unemployment is endemic and where currently some 10 per cent of the population work abroad as OFWs (Overseas Foreign Workers) in jobs as engineers, technicians or seamen or as nurses, carers and domestic helpers, the growth of the BPO industry has been hailed as a ‘sunshine industry’. The Philippine BPO industry has developed very rapidly since the late 1990s, and by 2008 it was estimated that the sector employed some 300,000 workers, placing the Philippines in second place after India as an international outsourcing destination. BPO operations in the country include not only call centres, but also ‘back office’ work as accounts, engineering design, legal and medical transcription, software development, and animation. Currently, there are ambitious plans to expand the BPO industry from revenues of US\$ 3.3 billion in 2008

to 13 billion by 2010–11, and to increase the numbers of employed from 300,000 to 900,000 in the same period (Sañez 2008). Such jobs are low paid compared with their equivalents in North America or the UK, but, in Manila a starting salary of 15,000 pesos (approximately US \$320) per month is comparable to that received by a bank clerk or management trainee.

Within the telephone call centres, operations are typically of two kinds. Usually, staff are deployed to handle either *inbound* calls or *outbound* calls. As the name suggests, *inbound* refers to answering incoming inquiries, dealing with various aspects of customer service for a wide variety of products and services, ranging from financial services to various kinds of technical help. In those call centres that were visited by this researcher, the majority of call-centre staff (some 80–90 per cent) were involved in handling inbound calls. By contrast, *outbound* calls essentially involve calling customers or potential customers for sales and telemarketing purposes or even for matters of billing and debt collection. Outbound calls are much less popular among call-centre staff, as handling such calls often involves high levels of stress dealing with rather angry customers.

The English language is relatively well established in the Philippines, where it has a wide range of functions in this outer circle society, including its use as a co-official language of government, law, and education, as well as its extensive use in the business sector, mass media and entertainment (Bautista and Bolton 2008). However, the story of English in the Philippines is one greatly coloured by the effects of colonialism and its aftermath. Indeed, the Philippines experienced almost 400 years of colonial rule, first from Spain from 1565 till 1898, and then from the US from 1898 to 1946. American colonial rule started with a brutal war which was then succeeded by the establishment of the first system of mass education that the Philippine islands had known, with elementary schools established throughout the length and breadth of the country. The medium of instruction in all schools was English, and, remarkably, as early as 1918, some 47 per cent of the population claimed to be able to speak English. In the period following Philippine independence from the US in 1946, English-medium education in the schools gave way to a bilingual system, made official in 1987, which persists to the present. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, a large proportion of Filipinos claim to speak English, with some 76 per cent reporting they understand the spoken language and 75 per cent claiming to read in English.

The linguistic features of Philippine English (PE) have been described in some detail in the research literature, and these include distinctive features at the major levels of language, including phonology, lexis and grammar. Phonological features include the devoicing of sibilant consonants in words like *beige*, *pleasure*, *seize*, *bees*, and *cities*, which are articulated as /s/; the rendering of ‘th’ sounds as /t, d/, in words such as *this* /dis/, *thin* /tin/. With vowels, other features may occur including a loss of distinction between long and short vowels in such pairs as *sheep/ship*, *full/fool*, *boat/bought*, etc.; the /æ/ vowel, in *bat*, *cat*, *fat*, *hat*, etc., may be replaced by the central low vowel /a/; and many speakers deploy a reduced vowel inventory compared with American English. At the supra-segmental level, intonation is typically ‘syllable-timed’ with distinctive patterns occurring in words such as *eligible*, *establish*, *ceremony*.

At the lexical level, Philippine English has borrowed extensively from Spanish (*asalto* ‘surprise party’, *bienvenida* ‘welcome party’, *despedida* ‘farewell party’, *estafa* ‘fraud, scandal’, *merienda* ‘mid-afternoon tea’, *querida* ‘mistress’), and Tagalog (*boondock* ‘mountain’, *kundiman* ‘love song’, *tao* ‘the common man’). Loan translations are also

widely used, including *open the light/radio* for ‘turn on the light/radio’, *joke only* ‘I’m teasing you’, and *you don’t only know* ‘you just don’t realize’. Local coinages include such items as *to carnap*, *high blood*, *hold-upper* and *topnotcher*, while archaic items derived from late nineteenth-century American English include *comfort room (CR)*, *solon* and *viand* (Bolton and Butler 2008). At the grammatical level, we find variable third-person singular marking, the over-use of the progressive, the variable use of articles, and variation in tense and aspect as in *We have done it yesterday* (versus ‘We did it yesterday’) and *He lived here since 1996* (compared to ‘He has lived here since 1996’). Other features include variation in transitivity and the use of prepositions (Bautista 2008).

However, the frequency and distribution of such features varies greatly according to social class and education, and linguists have long noted the existence of ‘edulects’ in Philippine society. *Acrolectal Philippine English* is associated with academics, bilinguals from English-speaking homes, and English majors at university level. Thus, acrolectal Philippine English is perceived as approximating to ‘near-standard’ American English. *Mesolectal Philippine English* is spoken by professionals who are non-English majors and who mostly use English in the workplace, and who display a noticeably Philippine accent. *Basilectal Philippine English* is said to be spoken by such people as janitors and taxi-drivers, and is associated with a broad Philippine accent and a rather low level of education (Tayao 2008).

Typically, in the observations and interviews that were carried out by this researcher, my judgement (and the judgement of Philippine linguists I discussed with) was that call-centre staff typically spoke varieties of English that ranged from mid-level to high-level ‘mesolectal’ Philippine English, and that the majority of call-centre agents interviewed spoke English with what might be perceived as a distinctive Philippine accent, including the characteristic stress timing associated with Philippine English speech. However, despite the existence of the *de facto* norm of educated PE in use by many call-centre agents, a great deal of time and effort was spent in providing new recruits to the industry with courses on ‘accent neutralization’, which in practice meant instructing new staff in the basics of American English phonology. Other elements in induction training included grammar practice; an introduction to American culture and society; and a course dealing with customer service management.

After training, the performance of individual CSRs within the call centre is continually monitored by their superiors, who are identified by such job titles as ‘team leader’, ‘line manager’ and ‘supervisor’. The ability to deal with customers on the telephone quickly and efficiently in English is highly valued by the employers and CSRs who score highly in the various metrics applied to their work are often promoted rather quickly to positions of greater authority. In this, a high proficiency of English is a key merit, although it is not the only criterion involved in staff assessment.

Authentic call-centre conversations

As noted above, the types of data collected by this researcher included two varieties of recorded data. The first type of data was collected from interview research with a group of 50 CSRs working for call centres in Manila, the characteristics of which are discussed below. The second type of recorded data was secured in May 2007 from a major telephone company in the Philippines, which comprised recordings of more than 1,400 telephone conversations from a leading call centre. From mid-2007 until early 2009, these telephone conversations were systematically transcribed and a corpus of this material organized.

An examination of the specific characteristics of the dataset indicate that in total there are 1,413 complete interactions in the corpus. The vast majority of these, some 980, are inbound conversations where US customers are dealing with Philippine CSRs with queries regarding such goods and services as cable television subscriptions, cameras, computer parts, computer printers, computer software, credit card charges, digital cameras, hotel reservations and laptop computers. What is noteworthy from the initial investigation of the corpus is that in only very few of the calls are there breakdowns of communication between customers and CSRs. In the vast majority of cases, the linguistic and communicative skills of CSRs are sufficient to deal with customers' inquiries, product orders and service requests. The transcription below of an inbound query about a cable television bill is not untypical of a standard call-centre interaction in this particular call centre. In this interaction, the CSR is a speaker using an educated variety of Philippine English, approximating to that style of speech associated with an upper-range speaker of mesolectal PE. Her caller is someone with a Southern US accent, who is calling to query a billing statement that he has received for a cable television service. The telephone call is quite short, and lasts 5 minutes 30 seconds. The line numbers next to the speaker identifications indicate the line number of the transcript for purposes of reference.

Transcript: incoming call querying a billing statement for cable television

- 1 CSR: Thank you for calling —. My name is Faye. Can I have your first and last name?
- 2 Caller: —.
- 3 CSR: Thank you. Can I have your telephone number, please?
- 4 Caller: My phone number is——.
- 5 CSR: Thank you. And how may we help you today, Mr——?
- 6 Caller: Well, uh ... I ... I've got this kind of bill here ... and ... and ... I mean, we ... we get this card in the mail and we paid ... uh ... like ... what ... 69 dollars or something to start with or whatever. And when I hooked it up and then we ain't had it hooked up two weeks and ... uh ... anyway we get this rebate we ... we just got ... we got the mail in here [?] but then, our first two months was supposed to be free. We're supposed to get like 59 dollars back, from that 60 something that we paid to begin with. And we've already got a 31 dollar bill ... 31.40 cents.
- 13 CSR: Okay, I'll be glad to assist you with your concern today, Mr——. So you got a bill for 31 dollars and 47 cents, and this is for two months from April 11th until June 10th. Well, we got a payment from you of 49 dollars and 99 cents and this ...
- 16 Caller: We are supposed ... yeah, they said we will get that back.
- 17 CSR: Yes, it did. On page two of your bill, you will see that you were credited for 49 dollars and 99 cents.
- 19 Caller: Page two? Page two? I don't ...
- 20 CSR: Yes.
- 21 Caller: I can't figure ... I don't even ...
- 22 CSR: On the back of page one.
- 23 Caller: Uh ... okay, let's see. (sighs). Credit ... Uh, where would that be ... I don't know ...
- 24 CSR: Do you see ... yes.

- 25 Caller: Uh. ... I see credit adjustment ... 49.99. Okay, and then ... all right. So where's ... all right. So what was it all together ... to start with ... 87 ... what's this 87.95?
- 27 CSR: Okay, that is if you'll include the 49.99. But your monthly charge is 58.97, but you have to less 12 dollars and 99 cents for this part because this part is free until July 10th, and then you have to less 5 dollars and 99 cents for the home protection plan because this is free for 18 months. So your total monthly rate is 39 dollars and 99 cents, and you mentioned a while ago that you already have the redemption form. And you have 60 days from installation to send it back together with a copy of your first bill and the first 10 dollar credit will kick in after eight to ten weeks after you have submitted the redemption form. So if you'll apply the 10 dollar credit to your account for ten months, your monthly rate will be 29 dollars and 99 cents.
- 36 Caller: Uh ... 29.99?
- 37 CSR: Yes, that's right.
- 38 Caller: Okay, I thought it was ... uh. I thought it was ... according to that ... to that card ... that flyer, the card we got in the mail, it was supposed to be like 19.99 a month or ...
- 40 CSR: Well you can ... that is only for the America's Top 100. The regular price of the America's Top 100 is 29.99.
- 42 Caller: Right, but I mean, wouldn't it be 19.99 for the first ten months? With rebate?
- 43 CSR: Well, you, because you have other charges. So the America's Top 100 with rebate will be 19 dollars and 99 cents, plus 5 dollars for your local channels, plus 5 dollars for the additional receiver fee. So that would be 29 dollars and 99 cents for ten months.
- 46 Caller: Uh ... okay. Well, we was misled, so ...
- 47 CSR: I apologize for that.
- 48 Caller: Uh ... I guess that happens. Uh ... so, so we owe this is for three months, 31.47?
- 49 CSR: That's correct. So, if you'll pay 31 dollars and 47 cents, then that will make you good until June 10th.
- 51 Caller: And we won't get a payment for June 10th, right?
- 52 CSR: That's right. And the next bill will be sent out on May 26th, but that will cover from June 11th until July 10th.
- 54 Caller: And that'll be 29.99?
- 55 CSR: That's correct. Uh ... no, it would be 39.99. It will only be 29.99 once the 10 dollar credit will ... begins to appear on your bill. So you have to submit the redemption form for you to have 29.99.
- 58 Caller: Well, that will be sent out tomorrow morning then.
- 59 CSR: Okay. So don't forget to include a copy of your first bill. Just a copy, don't include your payment with it.
- 61 Caller: Don't include your payment with it ... just a copy of the first bill.
- 62 CSR: That's right and would you like to take care of your bill now, Mr——?
- 63 Caller: Uh no, not right at this point.
- 64 CSR: Okay, not a problem.
- 65 Caller: All right. Well, I just needed to know what was going on.

- 66 CSR: Okay, is there anything else I can help you with?
 67 Caller: No, thank you.
 68 CSR: All right, so are we good now?
 69 Caller: Yeah, I guess we have to be. Ha, ha! So thank you very much.
 70 CSR: You’re welcome. Thank you for calling. Have a nice day.
 71 Caller: Uh huh.
 72 CSR: Bye bye.
 73 Caller: Bye.

In analysing this conversation, it is interesting, not least for purposes of exemplification, to apply the discourse-based approach suggested by Forey and Lockwood (2007), who have analysed ‘generic’ call-centre conversations in terms of such ‘stages’ as ‘opening’, ‘purpose’, ‘gathering information’, ‘establishing purpose’, ‘servicing the customer’, ‘summarizing’ and ‘closing’. An application of their approach to the above conversation then indicates that lines 1–4 comprise the opening stage; lines 5–12 the purpose stage; 13–16 gathering information; 17–25 establishing purpose; 27–53 servicing the customer; 54–61 summarizing; and lines 62–73 closing. In general terms, at least, Forey and Lockwood’s generic stages in call-centre communication seem to fit quite well the discourse of this particular conversation. However, if we are concerned to see the extent to which the speech of the CSRs approximates to a ‘native-like’ command of English, a number of points might be made.

It is interesting to note that although the caller is quite evidently a native speaker of US English, his speech is nevertheless marked by a number of non-standard features at the grammatical level. These include the non-marking of *get* for past tense in line 7, the use of *ain’t* in line 9, and *we was* in line 46. By contrast, there is only one comparable deviation from Standard English in the speech of the CSR, which occurs in line 28, when Faye uses *less* as a verb (instead of ‘subtract’). Otherwise, at the grammatical level, Faye’s speech is generally faultless, although her intonation is syllable-timed throughout.

Otherwise, what is noticeable from this call and many others in the corpus is the skill and professionalism of the call-centre agent in dealing with a rather complex inquiry relating to the bill of the customer. Throughout the conversation, the tone of the CSR is helpful and polite, as she quickly and efficiently navigates a rather bewildered and initially disgruntled customer through the details of a complicated billing procedure. One emblematic exchange here comes in lines 17–22, when Faye directs the caller to page two of his bill, and when he protests at not being able to find the page in question, she gently points out that it is ‘On the back of page one’. After having provided a further clarification and dealing with the customer’s inquiry, she is able to diplomatically close the conversation by asking ‘All right, so are we good now?’, which succeeds in evoking a conciliatory ‘Yeah, I guess we have to be’, and a chuckle from her now-mollified customer.

The corpus of 1,413 call-centre conversations represents an important dataset for the study of international call centres, and it is anticipated that further analysis will help reveal a rather rich set of results, relevant not only to the specifics of business communication in call centres, but also to the investigation of high-level proficiency in second-language use.

Interviews with call-centre agents

In order to discover more about the background and working lives of individual agents, a total of 51 detailed semi-structured interviews were carried out with call-centre employees

in Manila, Philippines, between 2007 and 2008. The questions asked in the interviews covered a wide range of topics, including agents' personal histories, on-the-job training, the agents' experience of working in call centres, the use of American (and other native-like) accents, difficulties in handling calls, health issues, attitudes to the call-centre industry, and the perception of gender-related issues.

These interviews yielded a number of very interesting results. In broad terms, it appears that from the data, the 'typical' Philippine call-centre agent is a female graduate in her mid-twenties, who has attended private schools and college or university, and who comes from a lower-middle or middle-class family. Interestingly, many of these call-centre agents reported having started learning English at a relatively early age (i.e. having an early onset time in the learning of English as a second language). Of this group of 51 CSRs, some 38 per cent reported learning English before the age of five, and 82 per cent before the age of seven, with the vast majority reporting having come from bilingual and multilingual homes. A clear majority of those interviewed also expressed positive attitudes to English and also to the industry in which they were working, expressing opinions such as the following:

I think it's a big help ... if you are a graduate of a four-year course and you don't have a job for now it's always an option ... just go to a call centre. You apply, for sure you'll have a job. So I think it it's a big help somehow.

(CSR7, female, 24 years)

It is [positive] because it's a money-making industry ... [and] I see right now at least people are getting reacquainted with the English language although some patriotic people or nationalistic people are gonna say that we're not using our language properly any more but then again we just have to be realistic. English is a universal language.

(CSR40, female, 22 years)

[The] call-centre industry can help our economy uh to boost so that's the important thing right now, and uh it could provide uh jobs to people ... as long as we can speak English, I mean we have we have plus points to have or to ah to enter a call-centre industry. So basic skills, basic computer skills, you know how to speak English then you have a way of a having a work in a call-centre industry so that's it I mean it boosts our economy and then it helps many people here in the Philippines to have a job. A decent one. That's the important thing.

(CSR12, male, 25 years)

I think uh we contribute a lot to the economy ... I think we can contribute and there's a lot of opportunity ... I'm just a housewife but I got the position, so there's a lot of opportunity with call centres.

(CSR4, female, 38 years)

Not all comments from CSRs were totally positive, however, and a number of those interviewed discussed the stresses and strains of night work, and the resultant health problems that occur as a result of prolonged employment in the industry. Some of those interviewed also expressed clearly ambivalent views on their work conditions, and cited problems with sleep, health issues and family life. Cameron's (2000) comments

concerning the gendered nature of call-centre communication also emerge from such interviews, when female agents discuss the ways in which they often need to placate irritated or ‘irate’ (a much-used adjective) callers.

The ambivalence of life in a call centre also finds expression in a recent song recorded by the Philippine pop band Cambio, entitled ‘The call centre song’. The video of the song shows a scantily-dressed young female walking the streets of Manila on her way home having finished the night shift in the call centre, while the first stanza of the lyrics expresses her less than enthusiastic motivation for having accepted such work, declaiming that:

Now let’s get one thing straight, I don’t really want to work this way, but I get paid for my American accent, I got money to pay the rent.

The second stanza notes the importance of speaking good English in order to get such work, but also underlines the strongly material motivation for employment in the industry:

Now let’s get one thing clear, I don’t really want to be here, but they pay me for my perfect diction, I got money for my addictions.

This latter reference to addictions is also ambivalent, as there have been some suggestions that work in call centres has also increased drug use by night workers in this industry, who have taken to using various ‘pep pills’ on occasion. A less sinister interpretation would simply be her ‘addictions’ would be limited to the consumer goods that money can buy in a society where some 40 per cent of the population live on less than US\$ 2 a day. Nevertheless, the song’s video has a sultry girl walking the streets under the predatory gaze of male bystanders and it is difficult to escape the implied and partly visual catenation of *call centre, girl*, and *call girl*. Finally, the girl gets home in the early morning, where her boyfriend is waiting, and she tells us, *I party all morning, work all night, get my honey in the broad daylight*.

Some of the most interesting interviews, however, were with neither the female call-centre employees nor the males, but actually with three interviewees who identified themselves as ‘gays’. The use of ‘gay’ here, however, is not uncontested, as, in the Philippines, the term is often used to conflate homosexuality, transvestism and transgenderism. The use of this term here is largely motivated by the fact that the interviewees, two of whom were participants in transvestite (or *bakla* culture), actually referred to themselves using the English word ‘gay’. These three CSRs were not only gay, but also visibly, and proudly, so. The first of these, Joey, explained that the call centres provided a space for cross-dressing Philippine gays to gain work and to express themselves in work. And, he asserted, the gay workers in the industry were proving very successful:

We gays are performing well ... I think it’s because we are more confident, we are more spontaneous, and we could express ourselves more clearly ... if you’ll be visiting – you’d see a lot of cross-dressers, gays who are very confident with their sexuality. ... we are like natural-born actors and actresses, so it’s very easy for us to make a connection or establish rapport with the customers. Unlike with women, or with straight women, or men. That’s why if you would really look deeper into our industry, the people who are getting the top posts would be gays.

(CSR36, Joey, gay, 23 years)

The second gay call-centre CSR interviewed was Chris, who was equally as positive about the abilities of gay call-centre agents, asserting that gays were ‘more eloquent’ and ‘more expressive’ than either straight men or straight women. Chris explained this with reference to the trials and tribulations experienced by gays in dealing with the macho prejudices of mainstream Philippines society.

We’ve been through a very rough time and we have this motivation and ... call-centre jobs are the cream of the crop ... we’ve been through a lot of challenges growing up ... and we’re up for the workload ... we seek for a place in which we’re widely accepted. And we find it very amusing to work in a call centre, because anything goes. We are not prejudiced by being gay. All we have to do is to just meet our metrics. And that’s why a lot of gays are doing their best to be in this job that we’re currently at. Because we are not threatened ... we can act naturally. We can say our thoughts. We can express. We can talk to people.

(CSR26, Chris, gay, 26 years)

Chris also asserted that gays were emotionally better equipped for call-centre communication:

Because we have the best of both worlds. We are a man, or we are men. Or we are women trapped in a man’s body. So we understand the loopholes or the emotions of both men and women. We have fears of growing old, that’s why we can easily adopt with elders, elder customer. We experience being young, and that’s why we could connect with younger people who are fun-loving. So we could cater all ... we are able to connect with people of all ages, of all gender, because we are all in one package. Different emotions, like men here, women there. Getting older here, younger experience, being younger there ... we’re conversant, we’re good. And we’re courteous, we’re nice.

(CSR26, Chris, gay, 26 years)

The third gay interviewee, James – like Joey and Chris – also came from a provincial town outside Manila, and had also achieved a great deal of success in his call-centre job in Manila. Before joining the call centre, he had worked as a night club performer and in the theatre, explaining that earlier his dream had been ‘to become a performer in Japan’, but that immigration restrictions in Japan had decided him to pursue a career in call centres. He reported that his experience of performing had helped him in his call-centre work:

Because when you’re in a performance you build discipline, self-confidence, as well as you uhm you become more responsible and in a call centre ... in a call-centre environment you need a lot of values and one of that is self-confidence because you will be talking to a lot of different people. You need a lot of courage and ... as well as confidence to say the things you need to say to the customers.

(CSR37, James, gay, 25 years)

Like the others, James spoke very articulately about his work in the call centre, and the ways in which he had learnt to master the ‘emotional labour’ (although this was not a term he used) required in call-centre interaction at work:

Well, usually when dealing with irate customers you need a lot of patience. You need to go down to the deepest cause of the problem, you need to pacify them ... You need to put yourself in the shoes of your customers ... you need a lot of patience and a lot of charisma ... when it comes to irate customers I have handled them very positively because I know for sure that I'm also a customer and I say 'Ma'am you're not the only customer, I'm a customer too ... we're here to help you, we're not here to argue with you.'

(CSR37, James)

Another interesting aspect of James' work in the call centre was that he usually used a female name, 'Sunshine', when talking to customers, which he found immensely useful in calming down angry clients, who often assumed that he was a Latina living in the US.

It's 80 per cent sometimes they think that I'm Latina. Which is a good thing that I don't sound like a Filipino, because ... they hate Filipinos. But usually I sound like American 80 per cent, 'cause when in calls my voice sounds soft and modulated and they don't know ... that I'm not a Filipino ... they call me Ma'am. And they don't know that I'm a boy ... sometimes they won't even know that I'm a guy. Sometimes they always call me like B-I-T-C-H!

(CSR37, James)

James was proud of his success, and also proud of the achievements of other gays in the call-centre industry, explaining their success in terms of the special quality that only Philippine gays could bring to the job.

At the bottom line the gays play a very vital role in the call centre because first, you know, their bodies like they're physically able, they're like men, but they have a heart of a woman. They can easily cope up and sympathize and empathize with the customers. They know how to work well with the English language ... and it's only gays and girls who has the capacity as well as the determination to explore more about the language, the English language. Because usually men, straight men, they're not into that.

(CSR37, James)

What is easily retrievable from the discourse of the three call-centre gays quoted here is not only their own atheoretical, individually personalized descriptions of their call-centre experiences, but also the inflections of critical and cultural theory that rise to the surface in their impressively articulate and self-aware reflections. In the extracts above, for example, James directly links his performance in dance and theatre to the performativity of his call-centre work and the abilities of 'Sunshine', his stage self, to 'pass' as female, and to 'cross' linguistic and cultural boundaries. Such discourses thus link not only to Piller's (2002) insights on 'passing' and second-language acquisition, but also to other theorizations of 'crossing' and 'performativity' that have had a major impact on various branches of cultural studies and linguistics in recent years. Thus, for Piller, 'passing is an act, something they do, a performance that may be put on ... a performance that is typical of first encounters, often service interactions, and each new encounter may present a new challenge to test one's performance' (Piller 2002: 191). For Auer, '[c]rossing is a particular kind of code-switching in which speakers "transgress"

into a language or variety which ... is not generally thought to “belong” to them’ (Auer 2006: 490; Rampton 1995). Finally, in her hugely influential work on gender performativity, Butler explains that ‘There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ... identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results’ (Butler 1990: 25).

Commentary and conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to provide an overview of a wide range of questions that connect to the sociolinguistic investigation of the use of English in Asian call centres, with particular reference to the Philippines. What emerges, I would argue, from this overview of the research terrain, is the awareness of multilayered possibilities to researching language use in the call-centre context. Thus, it may be argued, research on call-centre communication may provide new insights not only for World Englishes, but also for such other branches of language studies as business communication, intercultural communication and second-language acquisition.

From Thomas L. Friedman’s journalistic mapping of global business, knowledge and linguistic outsourcing, we move to the role of English as a language of modernity and economic development in Asia’s dramatically developing economies, from the dynamics of Asian Englishes to critical discourse analysis, to the individual lives of young call-centre workers in the capital of the poverty-blighted Philippines. One important insight from the Philippine experience is that in fieldwork, the rhetoric of globalization gives way to a consideration of lives lived locally, as Philippine men and (especially) women adjust their lives to secure what in many Western societies would be regarded as low-paid and low-status work in the global economy. The issue of call-centre work as a gendered occupation is highlighted not only by the numerical predominance of women in this sector, but also, and interestingly, by the liminal, yet highly successful, role of Philippine gays in the Manila call-centre industry.

In ‘The call centre song’ from the Philippine pop group quoted above, the lines from the girl declaiming that *I get paid for my American accent ... they pay me for my perfect diction* resonate with Bhabha’s description of mimicry in colonial discourse as twinning not only mimicry with ‘mockery’, but also, if obliquely, with ‘resemblance and menace’ (Bhabha 1994). By extension, the Tagalog concept of *gaya* (to imitate or mimic) plays a central role in the culture of a Philippine gay community where transvestism is a dominant strain. As Tolentino (2007) has pointed out:

The concept of *gaya* (imitate, mimic) foregrounds the transvestite’s operation of mediating and transforming high and low. *Gaya* comes from the word *gagad*, meaning *uliran* (model). The concept points to a copy as gauged through the model; and as mentioned above, the model usually is western or American-based.
(Tolentino 2007: 184–5)

For Tolentino, *gaya* culture is essentially subversive, involving ‘performative, portable, transportable, and transgressive attempts at identity formation’, although, ironically, while ‘copies approximate the model, these can never be the model itself’ (Tolentino 2007: 186). In this context, despite the brute power of capitalism in its transnational mode, and the power of English as the international pidgin, sociolinguistic research can serve

to uncover individual local experiences and linguistic practices that reveal fresh new insights into World Englishes as well as the locally negotiated dynamics of language and globalization.

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