

World Englishes and international call centres

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ABSTRACT: Call centres (or telephone ‘contact centres’) of various kinds have become an increasing fact of life for many people in Europe, North America and other developed economies. Although telephone contact centres may be dated back to the 1960s and 1970s in the US, their intrusion into the lives of British and US consumers has grown exponentially since the 1980s. Since the early 2000s, however, a significant number of call centre operations have been outsourced to such destinations as India and the Philippines, thereby raising a number of issues relating to language and globalisation and the politics of English as an international language.

INTRODUCTION

Just over a decade ago, the British and US media began to highlight a rather new phenomenon that had begun to impact the daily lives of consumers in western societies, one that would catch the imagination of social commentators and the media in both societies. This phenomenon was essentially the export of a wide range of clerical, data management, and other jobs from countries such as the UK and US to societies such as India and the Philippines, where there were apparently enough proficient users of English able to take over clerical positions previously performed by US and British workers. This new phenomenon was most dramatically visible, it appeared, in the case of international telephone call centres in places like India, where, one UK newspaper noted (Ringshaw 2003: 8):

A telephone call to a British bank or insurer is as likely to be answered in Delhi as Reading by staff with flawless British accents. The level of sophistication in some call centres is remarkable: US callers are routed to operators with American accents, British callers to those with British tones.

Many other similar news articles appeared around the same time, although later reports were often to focus on dissatisfaction and complaints of UK customers with the service provided by Indian call centres and the shortcomings and alleged perils of dealing with such call centres overseas. Since then, however, many UK and US consumers have become accustomed to dealing with call centre agents overseas, very often in India and the Philippines, whose staff now routinely handle a wide range of consumer queries in matters relating to banking, computers, credit cards, media consumption, travel and many other matters.

This new outsourcing of back-office clerical work also caught the imagination of such established social commentators in the US as Thomas L. Friedman and Susan Sonntag. Part of the inspiration for Friedman’s best-selling book, *The World is Flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century* (first published in 2005), was inspired by visits Friedman made to the Indian information technology companies Infosys and WiPro in Bangalore,

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India, in the early 2000s. Here, 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 business process outsourcing (BPO). Following a visit to the '24/7' call centre in Bangalore, Friedman (2006: 24) noted that:

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.

One major feature of the training of new recruits, he added, was the 'accent neutralisation 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' Friedman (2006: 27).

A few years earlier, the renowned literary and social critic Susan Sontag had also been moved to refer to this new currency for a globalised version of English in the 2002 The St. Jerome Lecture on Literary Translation, entitled 'The World as India', that was subsequently published in the *Times Literary Supplement*. In a thoughtful essay, Sontag noted that in India and elsewhere, the 'global preeminence' of English had been reinforced by the popularity of computers and English media, which contributed to the 'unique success' of English, noting that: 'English is now advancing in every part of the world, through the dominance of English-speaking media – which means media in which English is spoken with an American accent – and the need for business people and scientists to communicate in a common tongue' (Sontag 2002). For Sontag, Indian call centres were interesting because they raised questions concerning authenticity in more than one language, and here (at some intellectual distance from literary translation), Sontag mused on the Indian call centre, where telephone inquiries to companies like IBM, American Express, GE, Delta Airlines, and numerous hotel chains were now being handled by young Indians:

From large floors of office buildings in Bangalore or Bombay or New Delhi, call after call is answered by young Indians seated in rows of small booths [...] each equipped with a computer that allows them to summon with a few clicks the relevant information to make a reservation, maps to give information about the best highway route, weather forecasts, and so forth. [...] Nancy, or Mary Lou, Betty, Sally Jane, Megan, Bill, Jim, Wally, Frank – these cheerful voices had first to be trained for months, by instructors and by tapes, to acquire a pleasant middle-American (not an educated American) accent, and to learn basic American slang, informal idioms (including regional ones), and elementary mass-culture references (TV personalities and the plots and protagonists of the main sitcoms, the latest blockbuster in the multiplex, fresh baseball and basketball scores, and such), so that if the exchange with the client in the United States becomes prolonged, they will not falter with the small talk and will have the means to continue to pass for Americans. (Sontag 2002)

Some ten years on, the views of many western commentators in the UK and US on the international call centre phenomenon are far less sanguine than those early thoughts of

both Friedman and Sontag. In the US, the outsourcing of clerical, back-office and telephone voice work to Asia has become bundled together with a swathe of issues related to the outsourcing of US manufacturing industries overseas and the decline of 'middle-class' jobs in the US economy. In the UK media, call centres have been adversely associated with consumer difficulties in contacting retailers or service providers, as well as prolonged delays in telephone calls, where the consumers themselves have to foot the bill for prolonged waiting times.

From an academic perspective, however, the use of English in international call centres and BPOs also connects with several other debates on such issues as the 'language and identity', 'language ideologies', 'language politics', 'the native speaker', and 'world Englishes'. The operation of English-language call centres in India and the Philippines thus provides important sites for the investigation of language and globalisation, in a region where localised varieties of Asian Englishes, for example, Indian English, Malaysian English, Singapore English, and Philippines English have become rather firmly established over recent decades.

ASIAN CALL CENTRES AND CALL CENTRE RESEARCH

Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, many European and American businesses have outsourced a range of back-office operations to off-shore locations through the strategy of business process outsourcing (BPO). A significant part of outsourcing has concerned call centres that deal with customer inquiries by telephone and email, although outsourcing can also take a variety of other forms, including back-office operations, data entry, engineering design, legal and medical transcription, technical computer support, and even film animation. Until recently, India was the world leader in BPO and call centre services with around 700,000 people employed in this sector in 2008 (Reuters 2008). Multinational companies who have had call centres there include American Express, America On-Line (AOL), British Airways, British Telecom, Cap Gemini, Citigroup, GE Capital, HSBC, Swiss Air and American Express. In the last two years or so, however, India's position as the leading destination for outsourced call-centre operations has been superseded by the Philippines

In the Philippines the industry has mushroomed over the last decade or so, from 1,000 employees in the year 2000 to 40,000 employees in 2004, 100,000 in 2005, and approximately 300,000 in 2007 (Sañez 2008). Currently, it is estimated that the country had around 636,000 BPO employees in 2011, a figure projected to rise to 900,000 by 2016 (BPAP 2013). The range of services provided by Philippine call centre companies includes call-in queries, technical support, travel and consumer services, and medical and legal transcription; while many Indian centres specialise in banking and financial services. The economic background to the operation of international call centres in India and the Philippines thus involves the rapid emergence of BPO activities from the late 1990s, and their crucial economic importance to these two developing countries, where English is largely learnt as a second language, predominantly through education and schooling. The main driver of such job outsourcing, of course, has been economic. Both India and the Philippines are developing societies, with widespread poverty, unemployment, and under-employment, where call-centre staff can be employed at a fraction of the cost of their counterparts in Europe and North America.

Until recently, relatively few studies of international call centre communication in India and the Philippines had been carried out from a linguistic perspective, with such notable exceptions as Cowie (2007), Friginal (2007), and Forey and Lockwood (2007). Cowie's 2007 paper on accent training in Indian call centres examined the ways in which training centres promote a range of different accents as synonymous with a 'neutral' accent. Cowie found that older trainers favoured an educated Indian accent with British resonances, younger trainers promoted an accent approximating to American English. Friginal's study based on his (2008) PhD research, focused on the effectiveness of training methods employed at a Philippine call centre, and concluded that the 'interplay of product knowledge, intercultural communication skills, service personalities and language skills' was more important than 'high-level English' in this type of work (Friginal 2007: 344). Perhaps the greatest number of linguistically-detailed studies of international call centre communication hitherto carried out have been those of the Hong Kong-based research team led by Jane Lockwood, including Forey and Lockwood (2007) and Lockwood et al. (2008). In these two papers, Lockwood and colleagues, using a systemic-functional approach to discourse analysis derived from Halliday, endeavour to identify and describe a 'generic model' of a call centre interaction. Even more recently, Forey and Lockwood have also published an edited volume, *Globalization, communication and the workplace: Talking across the world* (2010), which provides an overview of current linguistic and sociolinguistic research in this area.

PHILIPPINE CALL CENTRE RESEARCH

My own research on call centres in the Philippines, which was carried out from 2007 to 2008 included extensive interviews with call centre managers and trainers and call centre staff.¹ These interviews surveyed call centre employees on their personal backgrounds, as well as details of their training and work experience. In a society where unemployment is endemic and where currently some ten per cent of the population work abroad as overseas foreign workers (OFWs) in jobs as engineers, technicians, seamen or as nurses, carers and domestic helpers, the growth of the BPO industry has been hailed as a 'sunshine industry'. 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 (approx. US\$320) 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 in the initial stages of research 2006–8, the majority of call centre staff (some 80–90%) 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.

Typically, in the observations and interviews that were carried out by this researcher, my judgement (and that of Philippine linguists I discussed this 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 marked by 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 neutralisation’, which in practice meant instructing new staff in the basics of American English phonology. Other elements of induction training included grammar practice; an introduction to American culture and society; and a course dealing with customer service management. As is standard practice in the call centre industry worldwide, the performance of individual customer service representatives (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.

A number of interesting findings came out of the interviews. 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, and around 38 per cent of these 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 (Bolton 2010). 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 it's a big help . . . if you are a graduate of a 4 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. (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 anymore but then again we just have to be realistic. English is a universal language. (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 center 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. (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. (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 staff also expressed ambivalent views on their work conditions, and cited problems with sleep, health issues, and family life.

As I have discussed elsewhere, however, some of the most interesting interviews I recorded at that time were with young transgendered call centre staff who identified themselves as 'gays' (Bolton 2010: 559–62). These explained, that for them, the call centres often provided a permissive space where even cross-dressing Philippine gays might gain employment, express themselves through their work, and take pride in their success:

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. (Joey, 23 years)

One of these interviewees, James, had even 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, where very often he performed as a female agent, adopting the *nom de plume* of 'Sunshine', to customers who often assumed that he was a Latina based in the US.

It's 80% 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%, '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! (James, 25 years)

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, explaining that 'they have a heart of a woman', and 'they can easily cope up and sympathise and empathise with the customers' (Bolton 2010: 559). Thus in the interviews, James/Sunshine links his experiences in dance and theatre to the performativity of his call centre work, and his ability to pass as female, and to cross linguistic and cultural boundaries, thus providing insight into the local vernacularisation and humanisation of what might otherwise be seen as a globally-determined script for telephonic business transactions.

CONCLUSION

Once upon a time, in the nostalgic memories of those old enough to have experienced earlier realities, we had more opportunities to communicate with the business folk of our communities. In the days when small shops still had a presence on UK high streets or US Main Streets, we routinely had relationships with business folk, shopkeepers and local doctors. We could even call the local bank in the expectation of talking to someone we knew, instead of the impersonal and often inefficient call centre routing that is typically standard

in the UK, Europe and the US today. The majority of the call centre communication that takes place in the UK and US, it should be pointed out, takes place with domestically-based call centre staff. In the UK, for example, it is now estimated that more than one million people are employed in call centres (or 'contact centres') in the UK, accounting for 3.5 per cent of the entire UK workforce. The UK call centre industry is typically dated from the mid-1980s, when the Direct Line insurance company established its first centre. Since then, the industry has expanded rapidly, and has often spread most in areas previously associated with heavy manufacturing such as Scotland, the North East, Yorkshire and the North West, where the demise of traditional industries since the 1960s have provided a pool of relatively low-paid employees, working in conditions that some see as modern-day sweat shops (BBC 2011).

At the heart of call centre operations is the rationalisation of work processes, through the implementation management procedures referred to as 'Taylorism', after the work of F. W. Taylor (1964), the noted advocate of 'scientific managerialism'. The systematic routing of customer inquiries and communications through banks of telephones located in specially-designed spaces (i.e. 'call centres' or 'contact centres'), engineered to facilitate surveillance and monitoring, was motivated by the desire to cut costs and maximise profits. By the early 2000s, cost-cutting also came to promote outsourcing, and the transfer of call centre work from western societies to sites in India and the Philippines. Taylor and Bain problematise several aspects of the Indian call centre industry, including the predominance of night work, working conditions, workplace culture, and the stress placed on many call centre staff when they are required to deal with western customers. Specifically, they note that, '[t]he widespread adoption of anglicized pseudonyms, of having to conceal their Indian locations, and the obligation to speak in "neutral accents", or even emulate their customers' dialects, contribute greatly to a pressurized working experience' (Taylor and Bain 2005: 273), quoting one call centre manager thus:

If agents are taking 150 calls a night from the east coast, from the west coast [of the US], it puts even more pressure on them if they have to change from call to call to speak in the accent the customer uses. Customers can see through false accents. (Taylor and Bain 2005: 273)

A recent article by Hultgren (2011) points out a key salient point that is sometimes forgotten or lost in discussions of the call centre phenomenon worldwide. In brief, her argument is that call centres, as an 'organizational prototype' were first developed in the US from the 1960s onwards as a means of rationalising customer service interactions across a range of industries. As a result, operational procedures, staff protocols, and the industry's technologies are typically derived from US sources, and, additionally, the very scripts that are applied in such centres are also of similar origin. This in turn has contributed to a particular approach to controlling and 'styling' such interactions across many societies in the world, where style may then be vernacularized to a greater or lesser extent as a genre that cuts across language boundaries (Cameron 2000). Elsewhere, the US historian Victoria de Grazia in her 2010 volume *Irresistible empire: America's advance through twentieth-century Europe* demonstrated how US business techniques in the 1950s and 1960s imported the stuff of consumerism, including refrigerators and supermarkets, into the European context, thus leading to a comprehensive Americanisation of everyday European life. Within the call centre industry today, managers and trainers may emphasise such attributes as empathy, friendliness, and rapport, but the bottom line for the call

centre industry as a whole is cutting costs, and maximising efficiency and profits, in a fashion pioneered by US business managers. Thus, as part of this, the globally prescribed speech style derived from the US call centre industry has now been exported worldwide, although its instantiation in practice, and across languages, may vary greatly (Hultgren 2011: 60). Interestingly, one might also add, this very speech style often manages to contrapuntally combine attributes of interactional style that mimic warm personal contact with technological and procedural scaffolding that distanced businesses and their clients in ways (returning to our nostalgia for the earlier golden age) unimaginable in the past.

NOTE

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