"SOUNDING PHONEY": AN INVESTIGATION OF OPERATOR TRAINING IN AN ITALIAN CALL CENTRE

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Résumé

Cet article analyse les perceptions des employeurs et des employés d'un programme de formation dans un centre d'appel. Nous comparons des données extraites de manuels d'entreprise et des entretiens avec le directeur du personnel d'un centre d'appel d'une compagnie aérienne italienne avec les résultats d'observations et d'entretiens avec un groupe de stagiaires italiens. Nous analysons le degré et le type des réticences exprimées par les opérateurs par rapport à leur formation et à leur travail ultérieur. Nous proposons deux hypothèses pour rendre compte de la « résistance » dont font preuve les opérateurs : premièrement, que les opérateurs doivent suivre les schémas linguistiques bien délimités qui ne correspondent pas forcément aux schémas que l'on rencontre lors d'appels réels ; deuxièmement, que certains aspects du langage imposé aux opérateurs créent des conflits potentiels pour les opérateurs masculins. Nous proposons des explications pragmatiques interculturelles et liées à l'identité sexuelle pour éclaircir ces conflits.

Abstract

This study analyses employer and employee perceptions of a call centre training programme. Data from company manuals and interviews with the personnel director of an Italian airline call centre are compared with the results of participant observation of, and interviews with, a group of Italian trainees. The level and type of resistance expressed by operators with regard to their call centre training and subsequent work are analysed. Two possible types of conflict are hypothesised to account for the "resistance" shown by operators - firstly that the operators are required to follow regulated patterns of language which do not necessarily

correspond to the patterns of language to be found in service telephone calls and secondly that aspects of the language which operators are required to follow creates potential conflicts for male operators. Intercultural pragmatic and gender-related explanations are given to account for these conflicts.

Introduction

Given that call-centres are organisations whose workings depend to a large extent on the way in which their employees use language, linguists are starting to take interest in the linguistic behaviour of call centre employees. However, the perspective from which such behaviour is being studied is now rather different from the way in which service encounters were studied before the advent of call centres.

By the 1990's the influence of the conversation analysis (CA) perspective on the study of service encounter talk had already been considerable. Early CA studies of service telephone talk, such as calls to emergency services (Zimmerman 1984, 1992) concentrated on the turn-taking system and sequential organisation of different parts of the service phone call. In this respect analysis of the role of context in institutional talk was limited to the interactional behaviour of the participants in the talk.

The emergence of the call centre as a workplace in the last 15 years has meant that linguists now need to combine interactional approaches with insights from studies using other kinds of methodology. Social science researchers, for example, have provided their own analyses of the call centre as a place of work and these offer valuable approaches and insights which linguists need to take account of. Van den Broek (2004), for example, has recently argued that managerial control attracts varying levels of *resistance* among call centre workers. In the same vein, Hultgren (2005) cites business and management studies such as those by Knights and McCabe (1998) to argue that call centres are typically "Taylorist" organisations in which strict rules of working behaviour are established which are then reinforced and maintained by tight company *control*. In the light of this argument she illustrates the possible consequences of linguistic regulatory practices in a British call centre. Sociocultural studies (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996) have illustrated the linguistic working practices that have been generated by these types of organisation.

One of the most important issues arising from these studies then is the degree of overt *linguistic control* exerted by a call centre on the behaviour of its operators – a notion which has its counterpart in the idea of *linguistic agency*, or the individual's ability to use language in a free and unconstrained way. Cameron (2000, p.341) has noted that "new linguistic demands on workers may in practice entail new (or at least newly intensified) forms of control over their linguistic behaviour, and thus a diminution of their agency as language users." She argues that this kind of "top-down" linguistic regulation of call centre workers is on the increase and that "there has been a significant intensification, both of the desire of organisations to control employees' language use and of their ability to do it with some degree of effectiveness (in the case of call centres by high-tec surveillance)".

Historically, the question of control/agency in institutional talk has not been allowable as an object of study by conversation analysis. From a methodological point of view, CA studies concentrate on the nature of talk-in-interaction rather than

context. Consequently, the nature of the workplace involved in the service call, i.e. whether it takes place in a call centre, business or retail outlet, has been considered irrelevant unless orientation to context is revealed by the participants themselves (Hutchby and Woofit, p.146-148).

Current linguistic investigation of call centres thus suffers from a contrast in methodological approach. On the one hand, the CA approach argues that the "institutional" aspect of the talk cannot be investigated as an independent variable unless participants in interaction specifically show themselves to be orienting to it during the interaction. The sociolinguistic approach on the other hand argues that the CA approach is too limited in scope and that specific regulation of talk by an institution limits the freedom of participants to design their talk. These regulatory kinds of practice, argues Cameron, "are increasingly common realities, which the study of talk at work must have something to say about in the future (p.342).

The present study attempts to combine these two perspectives. It investigates the problem of *agency* and *resistance* in call centres by looking at the relationship between the prescribed speech style of a call centre and operators' own attitudes to that style. In so doing, however, it will take account of the *patterns of speech* indicated in CA studies. Although CA studies of telephone talk do not distinguish between call centre talk and other kinds of service call talk, there is no doubt that the patterns and sequences that have been consistently identified in service telephone calls in a range of different languages and workplaces have been a useful source of data for call centre management in shaping their language policies. Thus the way in which CA data on service calls might relate to the call centre as a place of work is a legitimate object of investigation and one which might yield interesting results.

1. Aims

The literature on call centres described above strongly suggests that there is a problem of control/agency for call centre operators and that there is a general need to describe the nature of this conflict in terms of both *consequences*, e.g. what operators' attitudes to the conflict are and whether their reactions may have specific linguistic realisations, and *causes*, e.g. whether linguistic or other non-linguistic factors may be involved. The aim of this study is to look further at these two general questions of agency and control from the perspective of operators working in a call centre training programme. The following specific questions are addressed:

- What are operators' attitudes to their training programme and working behaviour?
- What linguistic and non-linguistic conflicts do these attitudes reveal?
- How can these conflicts be classified in relation to the linguistic and non-linguistic literature on call centre?
- What suggestions can be made for dealing with these conflicts?

2. Method and data collection

The method of investigation involved collecting and analysing data regarding the way in which the call centre was organised, the way in which working behaviour was developed by the centre in its training courses and how the centre's training policy was perceived by operators who had been through the programme.

Data collection was carried out over a 6 month period in three stages - 2 interviews with the managing director and information collecting (stage 1), observation of the call centre training programme (stage 2) and a separate interview with each of 8 working operators (stage 3).

Stage 1: The two interviews with the managing director were semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour each (endnote1). The format of the interviews was based on a set of prepared questions covering the areas under investigation, although the interviewers asked unprepared questions if they felt that an answer needed further explanation. This enabled the maximum amount of information to be obtained within the time permitted. The first interview concentrated on the structure and organisation of the company and the second interview was concerned with company policy regarding the selection and training of personnel. Access to company documents was allowed for the purposes of consultation but not for photocopying.

Stage 2:   The period of classroom instruction and the period of work placement were then observed. As regards the week of classroom instruction, a researcher was allowed to sit in on the course for the full week; no recordings were possible and it was only possible for the researchers to take notes. The same applied to the period of work placement. 4 trainees chosen at random were observed for an average of two hours per day working on inbound calls.

Stage 3: 8 working operators (4 male and 4 female) were interviewed for approximately 15 minutes each using the same semi-structured interview technique used for the managing director. Researchers used a set of prepared questions backed up by further spontaneous questioning about particular answers if it was considered to be required. Again, interviews could not be recorded and note-taking was used.

Access was also allowed to company literature, which included basic information about the company, the company training manual and assessment grids. This material was analysed and compared with the data from the interviews and observation sessions.

3. Results

In this section we look at the background information on the call center and training programme yielded by the data (3.1.), how the training programme was managed (3.2.) and how operators perceived the training programme (3.3.).

3.1. Background information

Interviews and company literature yielded the following background information on the call centre and the training programme

3.1.1. The call centre

The call centre we investigated was a call centre for tourist services based in Italy, dealing with the telephone booking operations of two airlines, a car hire company and an international hotel chain. The kind of information and services provided were primarily bookings, pricing information and ticket sales. As regards the management structure, there was a managing director, 6 operator supervisors and up to 40 operators operating in shifts, as well as secretarial and accounting staff.

3.1.2. Training programme

The call centre training programme was divided into two parts. The first was a week of classroom instruction for all the trainees together and the second a 3-day period of work placement for the trainees known as "shadowing" in which trainees sat alongside working operators and observed what they were doing. After the training programme were given an overall evaluation and selected trainees would become fully fledged operators, subject to the company's standard monitoring system.

Monitoring of trained operators was carried out by a monitoring system which worked on three levels. First, there was a color coding system in which supervisors were alerted to the length of time being spent on a call by each operator. The "alerting time" for supervisor intervention was 4 minutes; calls going beyond 4 minutes would flash red on the operator switchboard and an operator would intervene. Secondly, supervisors could listen silently to operators and offer intervene directly if necessary. Thirdly there was external assessment by outside evaluators who would regularly call the centre pretending to be clients and report back to the call centre management on the quality of the service being offered

In order to restrict the analysis of the considerable amount of data which was collected, analysis focused on what may be broadly regarded as training in

"communication skills. By "communication skills" is meant areas of communication such as language proficiency, specific telephone skills or dealing with problems in verbal interaction with clients, which might be considered to be of particular importance in a call centre training programme. This kind of "communication skill" data was examined with regard to both the way in which the company managed the training of personnel and the way in which the training was perceived by the trainees themselves.

3.2. Management of training by the company

Turning to the way in which the company managed its training programme, the manual, the training programme and operator perceptions will be analysed separately.

3.2.1. The company manual

Much of the company manual was written by the managing director of the call center himself. The manual contains all the necessary basic information (both technical and pedagogical) needed for the didactic units. The most interesting aspect of the manual for the purposes of the present paper is the 5-stage procedure for telephone call management which was used as a template for staff training. It is difficult to establish an exact source for this procedure. During his interview the managing director claimed that the procedure was based on "his own experience" rather than directly copied from other sources. This procedure is shown in figure 1 below:

Figure 1

5 stage framework for making calls

Stage 1 – Company greeting
- Message of greeting by the company (automatic)

Stage 2 - Opening
- Greeting by the operator
- Introduction by the operator
- Offer of help

Stage 3 – Receiving information
- Listen carefully and actively to what is being said
- Summarise what has been said (feedback)
- Check that the information received is correct

Stage 4 – Giving information
- Explain the terms of the situation
- Explain the solution
- Check forconfirmation that the information has been understood

Stage 5 – Closing
- Summarise what has been said and the decisions that have been made
- Thank the caller
- Say goodbye

Source: call centre training manual (my translation)

In her analysis of the type of material supplied to trainees by call centres, Cameron (2000 : 330) distinguishes between *scripts*, *prompt sheets* and *staging*, describing a script as "the provision of a full specification for every word uttered by the operator", a prompt sheet as specifying "what interactional moves the operator should make in what order" and staging as the provision of general guidelines for interaction. The procedure shown in figure 1 is thus a prompt sheet rather than a script.

The use of the prompt sheet raises a number of questions, particularly its correspondence to the phone call sequencing found in the CA literature and the extent to which it generates frustration among the operators. These questions will be addressed in 4.0 below.

3.2.2. The company training course

As regards the actual training course, only one of the twenty didactic units involved communication skills, with the rest being devoted to technical aspects of the job – understanding the rules of air transport, the pricing system, the booking system and management of the operating systems. The single didactic unit on communication skills was a theoretical lesson in which the trainer illustrated what the company expected from their operators from a communicative point of view, illustrating the 5-page procedure in the form of a frontal lecture ("this is what we would like you to do") but without offering trainees the chance to practise using the procedure or even to discuss how the procedure was to be put into practice; instead trainees were asked to "revise" the particular pages of the company manual containing the 5-stage procedure for homework.

As regards evaluation of trainees, the assessment grids which call center supervisors had to fill in for each trainee show that they were graded on the following skills: approach (courtesy, style), ability in maintaining interpersonal relations, flexibility, cooperation and psychological self-control. It should be noticed that there is no specific requirement in the grid to assess communicative skills in telephone call

management, presumably because the training course had not yet dealt with this aspect of the job.

A similar picture of reduced communicative training emerges with regard to the 3-day period of work placement, called shadowing, in which trainees were assigned to a working operator and required to observe the operator at work. Again there was no possibility for the trainees to put into practice what they had been told during the training programme.

After the 3 days of shadowing, trainees were required to begin answering their own calls from real clients. This "real life" experience of answering calls was supervised but only to the same extent that other working operators were supervised. In other words young trainees were given no special supervisory treatment after they had completed their shadowing week. Moreover, the form of supervision adopted for operators and trainee operators alike was a form of supervision which might be termed "passive supervision", in which operators could call up a supervisor only if they had a problem they could not deal with themselves.

In sum, the results of the communication skills analysis shows that the first part of the training programme offered trainees no practice in interacting with clients, no simulations of typical call center scenarios and no assessment of the trainees' ability to manage telephone calls. Trainees did not get any actual practice in fielding telephone calls until their first day of work and there was no assessment of their telephone communication skills. If we look at the programme as a whole it would seem that the focus of the training model was on making trainees' aware of "how the company works". In other words this particular company policy appears to be to tell its trainees how it thinks they ought to communicate but to leave the details of the communication up to the operators themselves. This attitude-based policy was confirmed by the managing director, who described it in the following way:

> *This (the first part of the training programme) is an essentially theoretical part of the course in which we offer guidelines that the operator should follow during interaction with the client. We particularly emphasise the kind of attitude the operators should have with the client, the importance of tone of voice and how to manage the conversation in a way which reaches our main objective, which is a sale.*

3.2.3. Voice training

With regard to the question of voice training, the manual gives sets of instructions as to the tone of voice that trainees are supposed to use. The imperatives for voice training used in the manual are "use a polite tone", "use a positive tone", "be clear and calm" and "allow for pauses". These instructions regarding voice were also repeated during the 2 hour didactic unit but without specific demonstrations or opportunity for practice by trainees. Trainees were thus "made

aware" of voice requirements but were not necessarily able to produce them themselves.

3.3. Operators' perception of company training policy

Information on operators' perceptions of the call centre's training programme was derived from the interviews with the operators. It should be stressed that during interview operators were somewhat guarded in their responses, thinking that perhaps the interviews might not remain confidential, and were reluctant to go into details on many topics which they felt directly related to their relationship with the company management. The present account only relates to responses which revealed operator attitudes to the training programme.

A first set of questions and responses related to the question of technological control. Interestingly, none of the respondents felt constrained by the technology and there is no evidence in our interviews to suggest that operators felt inhibited or frustrated in their speech by the demands of the technology.

A second set of questions related to whether operators actually followed the 5-stage company procedure. Operators were asked to what extent they tried to follow the procedures outlined in the manual and explained during the training course. If operators mentioned any difficulties in this area they were encouraged them to try to explain exactly what the difficulties were, how they felt about them and what their reactions tended to be. 5 of the 8 operators reported that they found it difficult and at times frustrating to follow the company instructions. When asked to expand on this, each of the operators independently replied that it was a general feeling which had something to do with wanting to achieve a feeling of independence in their jobs and not wanting, as one of them said, to "take orders".

Trainees were also asked about their attitude to the company policy with regard to voice training. We asked particularly whether the operators followed the speech style described in the company literature, in particular the "positive tone of voice". All 8 working operators said that they were aware of the instructions regarding voice contained in the company literature and the 5-stage procedure and did their best to follow them. We did not press them on what they meant by "followed" but instead we concentrated on how this following of the instructions created some kind of conflict for them. Interestingly, when pressed on what areas of the instructions, if any, they were referring to, 3 of the respondents were quite specific and claimed that they found the prescriptions of the company to "show a positive attitude" particularly annoying and 3 also claimed that they found it hard to find the sufficiently polite "tone of voice". One of them said that at times the requirement of being constantly polite "sounds phoney" (endnote 2).

4. Discussion

Cameron argues that operators' criticisms of call centres are largely directed at the scripts they are asked to follow:

> *"The main issue …. was the artificiality, the inauthenticity, and in some cases extreme subservience, of the persona imposed on them by scripts and styling rules (Cameron, 2000 : 340)*

This finding was confirmed by the operators we examined. Our results show that 5 out of 8 operators reported a general feeling of difficulty at the idea of following routines for phone calls, of whom 3 specifically mentioned company prescriptions regarding attitude and voice as being a particular cause of frustration. However, in order to analyse the causes and consequences of this frustration we need to look more closely at operators' responses. Analysis of the responses reveals two types of conflict.

The first type of conflict appears to be *between reconciling the requirement to follow the 5-stage procedure with what actually happens during a phone call.* An example of this conflict can be seen if we compare the first 3 stages of the 5-stage framework above with what the CA literature on telephone calls tells us about opening sequences.

Starting from Schegloff (1986) and Hopper (1992), CA studies have shown that the four main components of the phone call (service or otherwise) are Summons-Response, Identification-Recognition, Greetings and Initial inquiries. As regards the call centre we studied, the first three of these four components (Summons-Identification-Greeting) correspond to the first two stages of the 5-stage framework. Problems with these sequences were not reported by our interviewees. Problems, however, were reported from the fourth component (i.e. stages 3-5) onwards. One operator reported saying that "we all know that a lot of phone calls just don't work out the way the procedure says they should; that's not our fault but you can't help feeling that you've done something wrong". Another said "the procedure is just a guideline; I often don't follow it, it depends a lot on what the client wants."

In seeking an explanation for these comments, two findings of CA research with regard to service telephone calls may be helpful: firstly, the CA literature shows that even though one can detect sequences in service calls which strongly suggest a standardised pattern of interaction, these same calls are still "locally managed". In other words, although it is certainly true that telephone call openings contain certain specific routines which need to be accomplished, it is also equally true that there is more then one way to accomplish them (Hutchby and Woofitt, 1998). Secondly, there is a growing body of cross-linguistic CA literature, such as the collection of papers by Luke and Pavlidou (2002) and Thune and Leonardi (2003) which suggests that initial enquiries in service calls are differently managed by callers in different languages. A

recent study of an airline call centre by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2005) has shown that opening requests produced by NS Greek callers ringing an airline's call centre were significantly more direct than the requests produced by NS British English callers. By contrast Deriu (2003) has shown that the presequencing strategies shown by NS British English callers in the reason-for-call sequence are more direct and less varied than those of Italian callers. Varcasia (2005) has also shown some culture-specific patterns for British, German and Italian inquiries by callers to small businesses. If it is the case, then, that different language and cultures generate different types of caller/operator orientations in service calls, it is likely that a single "one size fits all" prompt sheet derived from a culture which is different from that of the language in which a particular operator is working is likely to conflict with the turn-taking and sequencing strategies used by that operator in his/her L1.

There are thus two possible explanations for this first type of conflict. On the one hand it may be a general consequence of a situation in which standardised routine and local management need to be reconciled; on the other hand, conflict may be a consequence of applying a monocultural format for service calls which does not correspond pragmatically to the way service calls are usually conducted in a particular language.

A second type of conflict is a specific conflict *between the company's requirement to follow the verbal routines on the one hand and the requirement to "be positive" on the other*. As one respondent put it, "How can I be positive when I am saying the same thing all the time?" This type of conflict, then, is caused by operators' awareness that their voice intonation is not as "positive-sounding" as it might be because they are using the same speech patterns on a regular basis. There is ample evidence in the literature that when we repeat the same utterance on a number of occasions so that it becomes a routine, our intonation patterns tend to flatten out and that it requires extra effort on the part of a speaker to maintain a positive tone if we are repeating the same kind of routine time after time.

There is evidence from our operators that there may be a gender-based explanation for this type of conflict regarding "tone of voice". Out of the 4 male and 4 female operators we interviewed, a total of 5 operators said that they encountered difficulties dealing with the company's instructions. Of these 5 operators, 4 were men. As only 4 men were interviewed this means that all 4 men who we interviewed independently described the same general problem of "difficulty" and "frustration". More specifically, the three operators who described a particular problem with "being positive" and "finding the tone of voice" were all men. The problem here is that if difficulty in maintaining an authentic speech pattern in a repetitive routine-based type of discourse is something which affects male and female speakers alike, why should 3 men and no women be claiming this to be a problem?

Although our statistics do not entitle any strong claim to be made it is possible that the reason why "finding the right tone of voice" is a problem for the male operators is because of the type of "voice" that is being required by call centres. Cameron (2000)

has argued that the speech style adopted by call centre workers is essentially a gendered, symbolically feminine, speech style which has been commodified in the new globalised service sector." According to Cameron the voice characteristics which call centres encourage operators to use in their regulatory practices are "smiling" and "using expressive intonation" (p.334). These, she argues, contribute to the projection of a particular kind of style:

> *… a style of service which is strongly affective – that is, not just neutrally polite and efficient, but based on the expression of positive feelings towards the customer. Again, it has been argued that overt displays of positive affect, or of any emotion other than anger, are culturally coded as 'feminine' rather than 'masculine' (Gervasio and Crawford, 1989).*

The difficulty with "staying positive" encountered by the male operators in this study suggests that their frustration may be gender-related. Although the actual words "smiling" and "expressive" were not used in the company manual or on the training course we observed, the voice instructions used in the manual and repeated during teaching ("use a polite tone", "use a positive tone", "be clear and calm" and "allow for pauses") are broadly suggestive of those analysed by Cameron.

The difficulty expressed by male operators in this study may therefore have two possible explanations. On the one hand it is possible that operators may experience a conflict between their construction of masculinity on the one hand and the requirements of the feminine speech style on the other – a hypothesis taken up by Hultgren (2004) in an experimental study. Alternatively, the requirement to use a positive tone of voice may simply be more difficult for the male operators because they are unused to using the wider pitch range commonly adopted by female speakers – "it just doesn't come naturally", as one male operator commented.

To sum up, our results suggest that there may be two types of conflict at work which help to generate the phenomenon of resistance among call centre operators. The first is a general conflict between the requirement to follow regulated patterns of language which do not correspond to the patterns of language to be found in telephone calls. In this case the problem appears to be not the imposition of a routine, i.e. the fact that regulation is "top-down", but the nature of the routine itself and the fact that the routine does not always match what operators are required to do. The second is the problem outlined by Cameron of the "symbolically feminine" language which operators are required to follow, which creates potential conflicts for male operators.

Conclusions and suggestions for future research

Cameron has argued that operators' sense of frustration is the consequence of the regulation of spoken language through rules of styling such as the imposition

of scripts; she uses the term "corporate verbal hygiene" (p.341) to describe this type of regulation. However, it is possible that it is not necessarily the imposition of a regulated procedure that is causing the conflict but the fact that the regulated procedure that is imposed by a call centre does not fit in with the procedures of service phone call practices in a particular culture. In this respect, the resistance shown by operators is not a resistance to regulation *tout court* but to a certain type of regulation which imposes unfamiliar practices.

A number of recommendations can therefore be made for both call centre training programmes and future linguistic research. As regards training, it would seem that the key element of a training programme would be to stress the importance of flexibility for operators. It is true that "flexibility" was one of the parameters used by our call centre in its evaluation of trainees but it is a parameter which conflicts to some extent with the requirement to stick to the 4-stage procedure. One respondent commented on the fact that the ability to use different registers is extremely important and cited the example of how operators need to adopt an extremely relaxed, informal style and use technical jargon when talking to a travel agent. This kind of flexibility needs to be applied to the teaching of sequences. During training programmes companies should perhaps stress to trainees that it is important a) to know that a routine does not mean saying exactly the same thing (i.e. the same form of words) every time and b) to feel that they can be flexible with their routines, in other words that there is more than one way to successfully negotiate the opening. Above all, it seems important for operators to develop a personal style in responding to calls. This is something which operators may indeed be doing anyway, whether or not their training programme encourages it.

As regards future linguistic research, four particular areas seem to be of particular interest. Firstly, more research is needed into the "enquiry negotiation" sequence of the call. CA research has concentrated to a considerable extent on telphone call openings and closures but less research has been devoted to the actual negotiation of the call. Since this is the area with which operators' expressed greatest degrees of frustration more research in this area of the call is needed.

Secondly, more work needs to be done on applying culture-specific norms for NS-NS service calls in specific contexts. As has already been shown, culture-specific norms for service calls are starting to emerge in the literature and this kind of study needs to be extended to different languages. Since there is little evidence that the norms emerging from the literature are being considered in applied fields such as training programmes, databases which make research results available to trainers need to be set up.

Thirdly, more investigation is needed into intercultural telephone calls. In the same way as cross-cultural investigation leads to the identification of culture-specific norms, it is important to investigate NS-NNS calls in which the call centre operator is using the language of the caller and NSS-NSS calls in which both caller and operator are using a lingua franca. In this largely unstudied area of intercultural

communication it is likely that NS-NSS calls will reveal their own specific characteristics.

Fourth, research is needed on the way in which resistance is expressed by individuals during calls on individual strategies for expressing resistance. It is possible that operators are already coming up with their own individual strategies to overcome the problem of "sounding phoney". It could be, for example, that operators are using their own "signature opening" as a way of reconciling their need for an independent voice with call centres' need to standardise their calls. In order to investigate this possibility, it is important to evaluate the degree of linguistic variation used by individual operators during their routines. It would be interesting, for example, to look at variation in individual callers' use of the formulaic routines that they are being required to use. This kind of "individual" data would also be useful because it would enable us to compare in a triangular way what call centers want their operators to say with what operators perceive themselves as saying and with what operators actually say.

In sum, the background research on linguistic regulation in call centres and their training programmes needs to be supported by linguistic analysis of what actually happens during the calls themselves. If we are to alleviate the problem of "sounding phoney", the recent research on "top-down" call centre management can only be confirmed or refuted by further "bottom-up" analysis of linguistic data from the calls themselves.

ENDNOTES
1. Interviews with the managing director and observation of trainees were carried out by two undergraduate students, Luisa Pisoni and Sara Sinis, as background research for degree theses on call center training. The author conducted the follow-up interviews with the call center operators.
2. The word "phoney" here is my translation of the Italian word "falso".

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