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Dealing with Angry Western Customers in Asian Call Centres: A Cultural Divide?

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Introduction

New customer services representatives (CSRs) recruited to work in Asian call centres often express great anxiety as they prepare to take their first calls from native speaker customers, and dread, in particular, the angry and sometimes abusive native-speaker calls. The biggest challenge for trainers and coaches in the call centres is assisting CSRs to recognize such anger and deal with it appropriately and with professional confidence. Customer anger on calls is not only expressed by raising the voice, but is also reflected in the complex use of certain prosodic features of English (see for example Wan 2010), such as deliberately slowing down

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the rate of speech, and repeating if necessary, as if talking to a child, the use of particular intonation and word stress patterns, and in the judicious choice of lexico-grammatical resources. It was also found to be reflected in the use of sarcasm, interruptions and rhetorical threats as evidenced in the calls analysed for this chapter. Such nuances in anger expression are culturally and linguistically based; they are hard to detect and they commonly appear to cause communication failure.

We argue that even though CSRs have good levels of spoken English, there is a noticeable variability of norms in intercultural communication, which may lead to some of the communication breakdowns. By applying linguistic and intercultural theories such as pragmatics to a small sample of authentic exchanges from a specialized corpus of call centre interactions, we may uncover some of the possible explanations as to why these breakdowns occur. We also argue that a better understanding of the strategies used by both parties in these exchanges will assist businesses in training and coaching their CSR workforce.

Background

The business processing outsourcing (BPO) industry in India and the Philippines has been growing rapidly over the last decade, with the call centre sector now claiming to employ over a million CSRs in these two countries alone (Trestle Consulting Group 2010). CSRs are employed by offshored multinational companies (MNCs) who recruit locally and these local worksites are called 'shared services'; alternatively, local employees are recruited by a 'third party' to MNCs who are responsible for the 'outsourced' service. Justifying the deployment of MNC call centres to developing countries such as India and the Philippines has put great pressure on MNCs to demonstrate the good quality of customer service at a vastly reduced cost. Onshore business management often complain, however, about communication breakdown and low customer satisfaction scores (CSATs) in these outsourced Asian destinations.

Teams of CSRs work on specific accounts and generally provide their telephone service to native-speaking customers onshore in the UK, USA, Australia and New Zealand. Typically, CSRs work in teams of 12 and

have specific goals to meet on a daily and monthly basis. For example, a CSR working in the collections account of a credit card company may need to make 50 calls a day with a certain monetary collection goal each month. Currently, the call centre industry invests heavily in recruiting the right people, in training them not only in the account product and processes before they start work; once on the floor, they also invest in regular coaching sessions using the CSR's own recorded calls for diagnosis and feedback. However, despite this investment, communication problems on the phone persist, particularly in the difficult situation where the customer becomes angry and frustrated.

In this chapter we explore how anger and frustration are expressed by customers who use Asian call centres and how we found a small sample of CSRs respond. By better understanding this type of exchange, improved communications and intercultural training and coaching in call centres may mitigate failure in this context.

Literature Review

In general, there has been a growing literature over the last decade on the nature of global call centre communication both onshore and offshore. Most of these studies have been done looking at the use of English communication, although some notable exceptions have looked at other language call centres (see for example Alferoff and Knights 2002; Heller 2003) as well as multilingual call centres (see for example Woydack 2014). Within the studies recently completed, most relate to offshored/outsourced call centres, although Cameron (2000) and Hultgren and Cameron (2010) have also explored the nature of the exchange onshore from a sociolinguistic perspective, looking specifically at issues to do with power and gender. Others have also explored how call centre work, both on and offshore, is closely monitored and routinized, resulting, they claim, in workplace stress and discontent (e.g., Bain et al. 2001; Taylor and Bain 2005).

This review will first explore studies already completed in call exchanges showing linguistic and intercultural causes of communication breakdown in Asian call centres. Whilst this literature is growing, little has

been done on a specific analysis of how anger and frustration are dealt with in the communication exchange on the phone. A number of studies have used different linguistic frameworks and approaches to reveal the nature of communication breakdown in the exchange. These approaches have ranged from corpus linguistic analysis and the use of specialized corpora (e.g., Friginal 2008, 2009); conversational analysis (e.g., Clark et al. 2008) to systemic functional linguistic analyses (e.g., Hood and Forey 2008; Forey and Lam 2013; Forey and Lockwood 2007; Hood 2010; Lockwood et al. 2008). Outcomes of these different analyses have commonly shown that where the CSRs are second language speakers, the lexico-grammatical resources chosen within this unfamiliar cultural milieu become very challenging.

> The research demonstrated significant problems in both the transactional as well as the interactional skills of the non-native English speaker customer services representatives. The caller interactions which appear to cause most difficulties are the complaints themselves that result in frustration, reiteration, vagueness, silence, demands and requests for a third party's assistance. (Forey and Lockwood 2007, p. 318)

Further and specific studies on pronunciation and prosodic challenges in Asian call centres (Wan 2010; Cowie and Murty 2010) have also revealed the problems in employing appropriate meaning-making resources on the phone when building customer relationships. Wan (2010) reported on a number of features which emerged from her data as key resources used by the customer to construe particular meaning including breathiness, neutral or plain tone, loudness of voice and rhythm. Misunderstanding the underlying meaning of these was seen to cause communication breakdown. Additionally and in relation to the pronunciation training needs of the CSRs, Friginal (2007) concludes:

> Additional training on prosody could possibly improve the quality of support by Filipino CSRs. Non-native intonation, pitch and volume, and rate of speech can negatively affect perceptions and impressions of customers as to how a transaction is being handled by the CSR. Effective prosody carries with it the service-oriented personality of the CSR, which connects very

> well with a customer in need of support. The influence of L1 in intonation could sometimes create an unintended message that might be misinterpreted by American customers. (p. 344)

Because many of these studies have taken a broad sociolinguistic approach where the situational and cultural contexts are critical to meaning making, this body of literature positions culture in a linguistic framework where language and culture are integrated and equally important elements in communication (Halliday 1985; Martin and White 2005; Norton and Toohey 2002). Intercultural theorists (Byram 1997; Early and Ang 2003), however, have also explored how intercultural communication success is grounded in sociolinguistic communicative competence.

Additionally, many pragmatic studies may have implications for intercultural communication breakdown. For example, the variability of pragmatic norms makes it difficult to determine and evaluate 'cultural appropriacy' (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984) due to non-universal acceptability of pragmatic norms. Their study on cross-cultural speech-act realization patterns, especially in requests and apologies, states that:

> One of the basic challenges for research in pragmatics is the issue of universality: to what extent is it possible to determine the degree to which the rules that govern the use of language in context vary from culture to culture and from language to language? (p. 196)

This statement has possible implications for the causes of intercultural breakdown between CSRs and customers in cross-cultural telephone service encounters where they go on to say:

> ... second language speaker's pragmatic failures have been shown to be traceable to cross-linguistic differences in speech act realization rules, indicating in Widdowson's terms (Widdowson 1978) that learners are just as liable to transfer 'rules of use' (having to do with contextual appropriacy) as those of 'usage' (related to grammatical accuracy). (p. 196)

This perhaps sheds light on the fact that CSRs, who are L2 speakers of English and who are communicating to native-speakers customers, will

not necessarily share nor accept the same sociolinguistic competencies. The method by which Asian call centres measure and train English communication skills needs to consider this carefully in order to improve performance through well-thought-out training and coaching. The underlying causes of intercultural breakdowns could possibly stem from theoretical claims made in studies such as the one conducted by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), which look at the cultural assumptions occurring when making requests or apologies. They further report:

> ... the realization of speech acts in context may stem from at least three different types of variability: (a) intra-cultural, situational variability; (b) cross-cultural variability; (c) individual variability. Thus, these might be systematic differences in the realization patterns of speech acts, depending on social constraints embedded in the situation. For example, requests addressed to superiors might tend, in a given culture, to be phrased in less direct terms than requests addressed to social inferiors, or vice versa. On another dimension, within the same set of social constraints, members of one culture might tend to express a request more or less directly than members of another culture. Finally, individuals within the same society might differ in their speech act realization patterns, depending on personal variables such as sex, age, or level of education. (p. 197)

This study provides a useful methodology for uncovering the variability in pragmatic norms that could be applied to call centre interactions in order to determine possible reasons behind intercultural communication breakdowns. Other studies, such as one carried out by Ogiermann (2009), looks at politeness and indirectness strategies across cultures (notably English, German, Polish and Russian) and reveals how culture impacts communication; this is also highly relevant to this chapter where her study was:

> ... to show that the relationship between indirectness and politeness is interpreted differently across cultures. Hence, the analysis focuses on the difference between direct requests, which have been said to play a central role in Polish and Russian, and conventionally indirect requests, which are the most frequent request type in English and German. It further shows that the examined languages exhibit culture-specific preferences for

> syntactic and lexical downgraders modifying the illocutionary force of the request and, thus, reducing the threat to the hearer's face (p. 189).

Managing threats to the hearer's face, as we will see in the findings of this chapter, tends to be culturally specific, and this is no exception in a call centre context particularly since CSRs need to mitigate their way through telephone interactions by using a number of rapport-managing strategies which are not necessarily universal. Ogiermann goes on to state that:

> The culture-specific meanings and politeness functions conventionally associated with certain expressions and grammatical constructions in a given language become apparent through comparison with other languages (2009, p. 190)

Building on studies completed to date, this chapter explores specifically how CRSs respond in the service encounter on the phone where the customer becomes angry; we describe the response and evaluate it in terms of linguistics and /or intercultural competency.

Research Questions and Methodology

The research questions therefore specifically addressed in this chapter relate to the following:

(i) How do native speakers express anger and frustration in the call centre exchanges?
(ii) How do non-native speaker CSRs respond to angry and frustrated native speaker calls?
(iii) How might the responses be accounted for in terms of intercultural and linguistic listening and speaking competence?

After reviewing over a hundred call centre exchanges from a corpus of customer service interactions recorded in Philippine call centres, five angry and frustrated calls were transcribed for further analysis and two have been selected for detailed reporting. This corpus has been provided

by FuturePerfect, Manila, a communications consultancy company in the Philippines specializing in call centre communication improvement. This particular corpus contains inbound retailing, insurance and banking, telecommunications, information technology and the oil industry call exchanges. All corporate and personal information has typically been deleted before the release of the data and further checks have been carried out to ensure the confidentiality of the companies and customers, in line with the requirements of the non-disclosure agreement (NDA). Whilst the call exchange lengths differ according to the account type and customer need, the average call length of a routine enquiry is around 2–3 minutes and average handling time (AHT) is a common quality measure. It was of interest that the two calls selected for analysis exceeded the AHT norm.

The identification of the communication strategies used by customers and CSRs in highly stressful and angry call centre exchange situations was revealed in an earlier study analysing 500 calls (see Forey and Lockwood 2007). It was found that contrary to perceptions in the industry, the causes of communication breakdown resided in an inability of the CSR to properly understand the anger strategies being used by frustrated customers, nor make appropriate language choices to respond. Interestingly, apart from the lexico-grammatical choices made in the language, it was also found in this study that both customers and CSRs employ a range of prosodic strategies for meaning making, including slowing down in an exaggerated way, increasing the volume of voice, use of intonation and word stress and even the use of silence as a resource. Other strategies including repetition and asking for repetition, rhetorical threat, sarcasm, interrupting and highly formulaic responses. We therefore build on these previous findings and categories for our own analysis, and coded and counted these categories together; this was done manually.

The two examples discussed in this chapter reveal a range of customer strategies to express anger and frustration and also reveal a range of CSR responses. In order to answer our first two research questions, we read the transcripts as we listened to the recordings of the calls. The communication strategies denoting customer anger and communication strategies denoting CSR response to this anger have been counted and tabulated manually; these tables included the findings for each of the calls below,

with each call lasting for approximately 7 minutes. In the next section, the two calls are first contextualized and the customer problem explained in full in order to better understand customer and CSR exchanges.

Results

Two calls have been transcribed and analysed for both quantitative and qualitative evidence of customer anger and frustration and problematic CSR responses in two Philippine call centres situated within two separate accounts (or particular type of service support); one an American book distributor and the other a British petroleum company with outlets throughout the UK. The customer anger and frustration appear to be manifested in a range of behaviours from shouting, to exaggerated word stress and to sarcasm—some of which are well understood by the CSR and some which are not. The CSR response behaviours range from silence to the use of rehearsed formulaic and other inappropriate retorts. We argue that such response behaviours are very prevalent in the Philippine call centres where CSRs are second-language speakers of English and are not well acculturated to UK and US transactional and interactional norms. They therefore appear to rely heavily on formulaic responses taught to them in call centre communications training sessions before they start work; some of these responses are even scripted (e.g., "*I apologize for the inconvenience, sir, I will make sure to help you with that*"). Alternatively, they naturally resort to their own intercultural norms when in a threatening encounter and remain silent, some CSRs report even putting their calls on 'mute' when customers start shouting. Just as problematically, the CSRs sometime agree to unreasonable and truculent requests in order to exit the call as soon as possible.

The First Call: ReadUS

For the purposes of this chapter, this first call takes place within an account called ReadUS, which is a pseudonym for a well-known American book distributor. ReadUS uses a third party customer service provider in Manila,

Philippines. This means that the CSRs do not work directly for ReadUS but report directly to the third party Filipino employer that manages the ReadUS account. CSRs are provided with product training, typically from account trainers, before they start taking calls, but this is often limited to training them in the kinds of resolutions they are permitted to offer and in the routine types of exchange problems. Unusual types of service problems are not extensively covered in the initial training, although unusual calls may be used later for coaching on the floor to improve performance.

In this example, the CSR is a young Filipina (Connie); she is in her early twenties with approximately one year's experience on the phones, but not with this account. The customer is a middle-aged African American woman (Veronica), who is calling from an unknown location in the USA. Pseudonyms are used for privacy purposes. The circumstance of this call is a common one that often results in anger; the customer has been offered a 30-day ReadUS trial subscription but rather than expiring at the end of this period, it has automatically started billing. In this situation, it is the customer who is technically at fault, because if she had read the terms and conditions, she would have understood that it was her responsibility to cancel the subscription with the company. The customer claims she had originally thought that the cost of the newspaper was USD 19.00 **a year** including the purchase of the electronic reader, nook (which is USD 69.00). However, when she went online she discovered, before she purchased it, that the combined deal was USD 19 **per month**, obviously a much higher annual expense than a normal purchase of the newspaper and the nook device. She therefore claims that she took the combined offer out of the shopping cart because this deal did not represent value for money. Somehow however, the deal went through, and the CSR suggests Veronica may have accidentally 'clicked on the offer'. From the start of the call the customer is noticeably angry and confused as to why this deal went through when she had decided not to purchase it.

Table 7.1 shows the distribution levels of the communication strategies of each party, most of which have been discussed previously. The 'other inappropriate responses' as a CSR strategy relates for example to misunderstanding and answering the wrong question, responding literally to remarks made by the customer and not providing empathy when cued by the customer.

Table 7.1 ReadUS customer and CSR communication strategies

ReadUS: Customer strategies	Number	ReadUS: CSR strategies	Number
Slowing down	4	Silence	5
Increasing volume—shouting	5	Asking for repetition	2
Sarcasm	1	Formulaic response	8
Intonation and word stress	12	Other inappropriate responses	3
Lexico-grammatical choice	8		
Repetition	1		
Rhetorical threat	3		
Interrupting	3		

Throughout the call the customer speaks at a slow pace, putting stress on key words and using a loud voice denoting anger; furthermore, there is in her voice and lexico-grammatical choices, a suggestion that she has been tricked into this purchase. The CSR, in contrast, speaks quickly with a high pitch, suggesting that she is anxious to resolve the issue (being the cancellation) and finish the call; she therefore does not listen well and does not appear to fully understand the nuances communicated by this upset customer and therefore fails to provide sufficient empathy and understanding. The call starts:

CSR: Thank you for calling ReadUS. My name is Connie. How can I help you?
Customer: (slow, deliberate and angry voice; equal stress on all the words) I need to cancel this order. It was never meant to go through.
CSR: Alright, I do apologise for the inconvenience caused. Let me go ahead and check that for you.

Connie to some extent picks up on the immediate anger, which is made in Veronica's two strong introductory declarative statements; however, Connie responds in a formulaic manner which may be inappropriate because the customer is obviously angry and upset. Veronica therefore immediately reiterates her anger, this time in a raised and angry voice:

Customer: I wanna cancel this order. It was never meant to go through. I was cancelling it and it went through anyway!

Again, Connie does not respond to the anger evident in Veronica's statement. Typically on these calls, the CSR has to verify the identity of the caller and in this case as Connie elicits the customer's details, Veronica interleaves her responses with anger, finally requesting again a cancellation of the subscription:

CSR: Do you have an order number?
Customer: 36596926. It's for the Chicago Times. Please cancel it. That's too much money.

Connie then continues with the process of cancellation but she still does not acknowledge the upset; Veronica then says very explicitly:

Customer: I'm mad at ReadUS.

This utterance again is not acknowledged by Connie who perhaps feels she does not have the skills to deal with this more overtly expressed anger and responds:

CSR: Allright so, ummm, let me just verify as well, was this subscription coupled with the device combo?
Customer: Yeah I took it out of the shopping cart … so I don't know how it ordered.

Connie then cancels the subscription and suggests that perhaps Veronica *'accidentally clicked on it'* which she denies and again complains about the poor value of what ReadUS was offering:

Customer: I don't understand this (the fact that she thought she had taken the deal out of the shopping cart) I took it out of the shopping cart coz I saw it wasn't worth the money!

Veronica strongly implies that she was tricked into purchasing this expensive combined deal at USD 19 per month for the nook and the newspaper.

Customer: And the nook is USD 69. So what was I doing? I wasn't helping myself. I don't understand how this could have happened!

Connie continues to cancel the combined subscription, however as she is doing this, Veronica shouts very loudly:

Customer: I didn't purchase no nook

Connie has difficulty in acknowledging and defusing this overt anger and suggests in a flat and rather formulaic tone, that they ask for the assistance of the 'technical team':

CSR: Oh OK, so, ummm, I'm sorry to hear that but let me go ahead and give you or make a report about that, so our technical team can take a look further with regards to this concern. Is that alright?

However, Veronica clearly felt 'fobbed off' and this finally triggered her to make the following rhetorical threat:

Customer: I don't even know what card it went to, this is the crazy part! I'm gonna cancel my membership too with ReadUS, in a minute. … I'm gonna cancel that too.

To which Connie responds literally:

CSR: Oh I'm very sorry to hear that but do you have your membership number? So that I can cancel it for you?

Connie has misinterpreted the subtler underlying meaning behind the caller's words and this provides a good example of how the meaning behind what is said in a cross-cultural interaction may not be shared. The rhetorical threat is completely misunderstood by Connie. The call finally ends with the customer reiterating her complaint that she was somehow tricked into purchasing the combined deal and says:

Customer: … that bothers me, I mean they (ReadUS) did it, and I didn't OK it, I didn't even keep going, I took it out of the shopping cart. How do you order something after somebody takes it out of the shopping cart?

Again the CSR does not respond to her emotional upset and puzzlement over the charges and says in a formulaic way:

CSR: So anything else I can help you with today?

The customer then makes a final effort to elicit empathy and reassurance:

Customer: No I'm really disturbed, OK?

And without even waiting for a response, Veronica finally closes sarcastically by saying:

Customer: Thanks so much, have a good day.

The CSR again responds inappropriately, not wanting to open up any further exchange by saying,

CSR: Oh I'm sorry to hear that. Thank you---see you as well. Thank you for calling read US and have a good day.

This call provides a rich example of how the native speaker customer ultimately felt 'unserviced' by the Filipino CSR, not because the transactional nature of what occurred as the cancellation was affected, but because of the interactional failure. The CSR consistently failed to engage empathetically with the upset the customer was feeling. This is very common in this call centre context in the Philippines and is surprising as Filipino CSRs appear very willing and eager to assist. The cause of this failure seems to have an intercultural component, in Connie being unable to deal with this particular kind of anger and frustration that manifests itself in sarcasm, shouting and rhetorical threats. As the call proceeded the anger strategies became stronger and the service increasingly ineffectual.

The Second Call: TankUS

Unlike the example above, this call is taken from a shared services account, which means that the CSR handling this account is directly employed by the company, although the service is based in Manila. This exchange takes place in a major petroleum company referred to under the pseudonym, TankUS. Typically the customers using TankUS are heavy vehicle drivers and the Filipino call centre mostly deals with enquiries and complaints from mostly middle-aged male customers based in the UK. The CSR is again a young Filipino female (Anna), probably in her mid to late twenties with over two years of experience in this account. Whilst she has more call centre experience, she is unable to understand and deal with this particular

concern. The customer (Harry) is from the north of England and is a manager of a trucking company that has a TankUS account for diesel purchases. Harry is upset because one of his drivers filled up with fuel costing GBP 50 at the same time as another customer filled his vehicle with GBP 120, but the cards got accidentally swapped. This customer is not as overtly angry as the previous example but he is very insistent that the quality of professional care shown by the sales assistant is poor.

The problem of 'card swapping' is a common occurrence and would be a familiar part of the initial product training; therefore, Anna would know how to resolve this complaint. However, the main concern for Harry is that the swapped card was a temporary one and the TankUS shop assistant announced, in a crowded filling station, that therefore account (Harry's company) was 'on stop'. This would imply, although Harry did not make this explicit to Anna, that his trucking company was not paying its bills. This was humiliating to Harry and, therefore, he felt that the shop assistant had not behaved in a professional manner. He also said he was concerned, but to a lesser extent, about the actual amounts credited to the cards (it would appear his company is GBP 70 out of pocket); he knew however that this would get sorted out eventually with the presentation of the relevant receipts which he had kept. Table 7.2 shows the distribution strategies of the two parties.

Harry presents the problem at the beginning of the call:

Customer: Um I've got quite a serious problem … .my uh, one of my drivers has been to one of your franchise service stations in South West London to fill up his vehicle. He's put GBP 50 worth of diesel in it. Now the sales assistant has mixed up the two cards and debited our fuel off someone else's fuel card and then they took GBP 120 off our card, but looks like it's been done with a temporary card … now the sales assistant then told the owner of this card that our account is 'on stop' … the sales assistant has told them in the shop that our account is 'on stop', is that true?

Anna then responds to what she understood to be the main concern:

CSR: Ah well as of the moment, the account is already active but let me check if there's a list here of the accounts being put on stop. Pause. I don't see any problem with the account.

Table 7.2 TankUS customer and CSR communication strategies

TankUS: Customer strategies	Number	TankUS: CSR strategies	Number
Slowing down	2	Silence	0
Increasing volume—shouting	1	Asking for repetition	2
Sarcasm	1	Formulaic response	2
Intonation and word stress	9	Other inappropriate responses[a]	5
Lexico-grammatical choice	7		
Repetition	12		
Rhetorical threat	1		
Interrupting	8		

[a]e.g., not addressing the main customer concern

Customer: No, well, I've just had, I've just had … the person whose fuel whose whose I paid for their fuel has just been in here and told me that my account is on stop, told to him by a customer at a TankUS garage by an assistant at a TankUS garage that my account is on stop. That's why they used this temporary card machine card won't go through 'cause it's on stop. (umm hmm). I'm obviously £70 out of pocket for fuel
CSR: Okay, well …

Customer: (interrupts agent) I don't understand how this can happen.
CSR: Well, I'm sorry if you were told that the account has been put on stop but I don't see any problem with the account, Mr. Smith. So …

Anna is not proactive in being able to suggest how Harry would like this to be dealt with, so it is Harry who suggests:

Customer: (interrupts CSR) May be you could ring you could ring your franchise or sales whatever you call them and explain to me why I've just been, you know, had one of my accounts just got told in a in a shop full of people that my account is 'on stop' with TankUS because we haven't paid the bill. And then I need to understand and someone needs to tell me how I'm going to get the £70 back off this person for the fuel that they put on my card.
CSR: Okay, so you saying, Mr. Smith that there's been a mix up for … May I have the card number in this transaction?

It then transpired that Anna was not able to check this transaction as the system needs 24 hours to show what has happened. Harry then explains again that the main issue for him is how the shop staff announced that his card was blocked as follows:

CSR: Okay. Would you be able to provide us with a copy of those receipts so we could verify this with the site?
Customer: Yeah, the uh, the other receipt is uh very uh faded but I'm not particularly concerned about the money 'cause I understand that that can be dealt with but what I am seriously concerned with is that your sales representative, telling customers in the shop that my account is on stop (umm hmm) which I' m really not happy about.

Again Anna fails to deal with the main cause of Harry's upset and focuses on an issue of less importance, being the process of establishing whether the account was blocked or not:

CSR: Um, did you notice that they called customer service at that time, because they don't have means of checking if the account is on stop if they have not called the customer service …
Customer: No, I don't know how they are doing it but that's what they told, that's what they told the person who … with the card mix up.

Harry is very embarrassed about this situation, but Anna, despite the number of times Harry mentions this, does not address his embarrassment nor take responsibility to follow up this issue with the offending party. He then reiterates his key concern in the ensuing exchange:

CSR: (okay) so we just need to confirm this with the site and we need documentation as well to support the …
Customer: (interrupts agent) yeah, yeah, I mean my main concern is is uh is them telling people that my account is 'on stop' when it isn't
CSR: Alright … can

Customer: (interrupts agent) That's my main concern.
CSR: Yeah, most likely what …
Customer: (interrupts agent) I mean if you can speak to them and get to the bottom of that, that would be helpful.

Anna persistently fails to address this major concern and does not commit to dealing with this in any specific way. She speculates, however, on why the accidental swap may have happened, again avoiding the cause of the upset and the desired action:

CSR: Okay, what I'm guessing Mr. Smith I'm not yet sure, most likely what happened was when they tried swiping the card, um, it was actually declined by the system and then they only guess that um that the card is on stop. That's why they put the transaction on the manual voucher but I'll have …

Harry finally responds by dismissing this explanation, interrupting her and saying yet again that the sales assistant's behaviour was unacceptable.

Customer: (customer interrupts) Yeah yeah, that is not good enough though, is it? It's not fair you know, that' actually not good enough.
CSR: Yeah, I will have to verify it …
Customer: Okay! Thank you.
CSR: … to be sure.
Customer: Cheers for that. (sarcastic tone)

In these last few seconds of the call, Harry feels this issue will not be addressed and ends the call in an angry and sarcastic dismissive tone, cutting off the CSR when she begins to give another formulaic and non-committal response.

In this call, the agent has followed processes correctly and resolved the customer's surface needs which was for the card swap to be rectified and the money reimbursed, and she has even established that the sales assistant could not know for sure that the card would have been put 'on stop'. However, Harry ended the call as dissatisfied as when it started, and appeared in the last exchange to be a great deal angrier. Anna ultimately did not appear to understand Harry's concern about the unprofessionalism of the sales assistant saying publicly that his truck company's account

was 'on stop' and she consistently failed to address this concern. In the call, Harry reiterated this concern 11 times. This is perhaps an unusual situation, but one nonetheless that Anna should have recognized and addressed. Her responses were formulaic and evasive, and there was a notable lack of empathy about the humiliating experience.

Harry wanted Anna to truly empathize with him in a genuine and sincere manner and go out of her way to compensate him for the embarrassment caused to him by perhaps saying that she would file a specific complaint about how this transaction appears to have been handled by the sales assistant. The miscommunication on this call may be related to intercultural issues in how Harry expressed his concern and how Anna failed to recognize the upset, even though he became increasingly more explicit about this as the call progressed.

Similar to the first call, as this exchange progressed and the native speaker customer strategies for expressing anger were not acknowledged and dealt with, he resorted to different strategies. In both calls sarcasm came towards the end of the call and this was coupled with a rhetorical threat in the first call. These later strategies, however, had no impact on the CSR response, which remained limited to safe formulaic retorts and dealing with less important side issues. Businesses and quality managers have named this common type of response behaviour as 'robotic' in the Asian call centre context. Such behaviour, however, may well mask intercultural and linguistic inadequacies in the way CSRs approach their work.

Discussion

Previous studies (see for example Forey and Lockwood 2007; Lockwood et al. 2008) have highlighted business concerns in the UK and USA, that whilst Filipino agents have good attitudes regarding customer care and good levels of spoken English, communication breakdown and poor quality service are common. Previous studies have shown that sociolinguistic competence and intercultural understanding of the nuances of the exchange between the native speaker customer and the Filipino CSR are often lacking. This becomes particularly acute, as illustrated in the two exchanges above, where unfamiliar and threatening native speaker

behaviour such as the raising and slowing down of the voice, the use of sarcasm and rhetorical threats are enacted. However, such strategies for expressing anger and frustration are not well understood by the Filipino CSR where the typical responses are formulaic retorts, invoking help from somewhere else (e.g., technical team or another department), dealing with secondary issues of importance, silence, lack of empathy and concern and an overall concern to exit the call as soon as possible to escape the situation that is unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

When dealing with angry callers, many Asian CSRs are not accustomed to addressing directness. What was interesting in both these calls was that the customer, despite complaining throughout the call, did not explicitly tell the CSR what s/he wants done about it. Rather the customers were expecting the CSR to pick this up and provide them with a proper and tailored resolution. The CSRs seemed to be bound by a number of factors including limitations on their intercultural and linguistic capability to both understand and respond to the distress that the customer has faced; consequently the resolutions provided were not adequate. Furthermore, the CSRs may also feel bound by the cultural variability of customer expectations. For many Western businesses, 'the customer is always right' and this is heavily promoted in many Asian call centres where keeping the customer happy is a business mantra. Throughout the call, the customer continues to complain, but the CSR stalls; the customer is hedging for something more without explicitly saying it, and this exacerbates the situation and the caller gets increasingly frustrated. However, this expectation of customer service is not universally shared, which could impede the CSR's ability to recognize this. The idea that 'the customer is always right' is so embedded in the Western customer's mind that it sometimes becomes an automatic assumption that the CSRs are going to go above and beyond the process to accommodate customer needs.

The illocutionary force behind the words of an L1 speaker of English in these two calls was not interpreted accurately by the L2 CSRs from the Philippines. It can be argued here that this is caused by the variability in language norms. Specifically, variability in how different cultures use the language. Sarcasm and rhetorical threats such as the ones made by the customers are often misinterpreted by CSRs in Asian call centres mainly due to the fact the CSRs themselves are not accustomed to expressing

these meanings in the same way. What is happening on both of these calls may be closely related to the Ogiermann study (2009) on politeness strategies in different cultures. The fact that such breakdowns are common in Philippine call centres could also be related to underlying cultural implications and the interpretation of roles in a customer service interaction such as this where the roles between the customer and the CSR are always going to be asymmetrical with greater power given to the caller.

Additionally, the distance between the interlocutors is great, as they are strangers. Linguistically, this imbalance of power and vast distance between the interlocutors tends to create a gap in communication and understanding. Furthermore, the language choices we make are greatly affected by this as well, and the different cultures will adopt various different communication strategies in order to mitigate this imbalance of power and vast distance. Asian cultures are more hierarchical than most Western societies and therefore will make different language choices when talking to someone who is perceived as being in a higher position of importance in society. This often translates into diminished confidence and robotic responses from Asian CSRs speaking to angry Western callers rather than sounding accountable, assertive and reassuring. The issue of gender differences in this Asian offshored context may also offer further explanation and may be an area for further research, although little has been done to date.

This very small-scale study shows the distribution across the two calls were distributed in different ways, and it would be of further research interest to do a much larger-scale distribution study to see what patterns may emerge.

Conclusion

It is often the case when call centres are migrated to Asian destinations, the training and coaching support packages are not adapted by the onshore company to meet the needs of the second-language English-speaking CSRs. Huge assumptions are made by onshore management in the recruitment of Filipino CSRs about their Asian CSRs' intercultural understanding and abilities to deal with native speaker customer

concerns, particularly where the customer becomes angry and frustrated. High levels of spoken English language proficiency at recruitment do not equate with high levels of intercultural awareness nor an ability to deal with unusually angry calls with native speaker customers. Both CSRs in this study appeared to understand the surface concerns of these customers, but not the underlying and more important concerns that made them so angry. For Veronica, she felt 'tricked' by a deal that was not good value for money and could not believe that when she thought she had cancelled the deal, it was unsuccessful. Her concern about this should have been addressed right at the beginning of the call by offering an immediate cancellation; this action would have perhaps defused the situation. For Harry, he felt humiliated on behalf of his company because of the public announcement of his company's account being 'on stop'. Again, picking up on this as his priority concern and framing it back to the customer with some kind of a solution would have defused the situation early on in the call.

Such a study as this provides an agenda for both training and coaching support on the floor where listening for key customer concerns and strategies for dealing with these, even though it may mean confronting anger early on in the call, may improve quality performance. This study strongly suggests that onshore management has much to gain from applied linguistics studies such as this, which reveal not just the symptom of the communication problems, but perhaps also the cause. Adapting communications and soft skills training and coaching packages used on shore to the particular linguistic and intercultural requirements of the Filipino CSRs may ultimately lead to better quality business performance in the call centres.

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